Summary

Bilbo Baggins, a forty year old hacker-slash-bookshop proprietor, found some measure of relief when he found his way back to his parents' estate in the countryside in the wake of a sudden sweeping viral apocalypse. However, in Bag End he finds only ghosts, and he soon realizes that relief is a far cry from fulfillment or closure. Enter a surprise visit from his mother's attorney and his ragtag group of foreigners led by an honest-to-God king (who may or may not be exactly Bilbo's type). According to Gandalf, they may somehow have the solution to Europe's current pesky zombie problem. For his and the world's sake, Bilbo can only hope.

[A fairly epic length modern AU retelling of the Hobbit as the worst road trip in history, featuring motorcycles, slow-burn romance, and zombies. Yeah, I know.]
Uuuuhhh so yeah. Hi. This sure is....something. I started this fic just before I graduated high school, and now I'm two years out of college in an adult office job working for the state government and somehow I found it again after 6 years of thinking about it nonstop. Full disclosure, I went to college for STEM, so I don't know how to write.

TW for gore, denial, poor overall mental health, guns, mentions of big game hunting and animal death
Almost a year after Durin's Day, Bilbo Baggins found himself living back in his parents’ estate in the country, waking up in his childhood bedroom to the shrill ringing of a wind-up alarm clock.

His eyes snapped open, hand shooting out to curtly slap the alarm off with more force than was probably strictly necessary. As the heavy silence blanketing the old house was restored, his eyes quickly adjusted to the slivers of pale morning light that streamed between the slats of his boarded up, eastern-facing window. A part of him thought about rolling over and catching a few more hours of sleep, like he had done many a spring morning in his own bed in London, back before all the madness started.

He stared at the alarm clock, sighing loudly. Mickey Mouse gazed back dispassionately with a black-eyed stare, his contorted arms letting Bilbo know that it was just past six-thirty in the morning. There was no use in dawdling. Waking up just simply wasn't the slow affair it had been once upon a time. Nowadays when Bilbo woke up, he was unfortunately up. He liked to chalk it up to age, or the natural effect of growing up in the countryside, or really any reason other than the constant mobility he had until recently been forced to adopt in order to avoid the infected, cannibalistic hordes that now terrorized the countryside.

(On the bright side, that wasn’t so much of a problem now that he finally had returned to the family estate, and the restlessness certainly helped in motivating him to get things done around the house.)

Bilbo rolled out of bed with little difficulty, reaching out for the clock and thoughtfully re-winding it. He supposed that he really should shower and dress before heading downstairs, just so he could start the day as a productive member of what little society was left, but he decided a spot of breakfast could come before chores. He felt entitled to such liberties in these uncertain times. It was the apocalypse, after all.

Instead of dressing, he put on his father’s old slippers and wrapped his favorite patchwork dressing gown snugly around himself, loath to lose the cozy feeling of his warm bed to the draftiness that came with any old mansion. He then grabbed his mother's old elephant rifle, an antique Weatherby Mark V, from where it leaned reliably against the nightstand and hoisted it under his arm as one might do with the Sunday paper. He stepped out into the empty corridor, heading toward the stairwell.

The shuffle of his feet on the hardwood floor echoed eerily in the vast stillness of Bag End. Bilbo did his best not to wince when the soles of his slippers squeaked loudly on the hardwood. He didn't mind the silence, not really, but being the sole occupant making noise in this big of a house made all other sounds slightly more sinister. He knew it was silly, especially considering that he was the only occupant of the estate while his parents were out. As long as the doors remained locked and the windows boarded over, Bilbo could be reasonably certain that all spooky sounds were either caused inadvertently by him, or by the fact that Bag End was an old house prone to settling.

Still, he shamefully jumped every time the loose third stair creaked. Suppressed a yawn, he shuffled into the kitchen, which in its former glory had been a bright, airy place with a large picture window and a skylight. His father could usually be found putting
around, baking this or whipping that, rolling out homemade pasta while stirring soup over the stove with a pinched expression borne of concentration. The kitchen had been the center of Bag End when Bilbo was young, receiving more guests and family than both the drawing room and parlor combined. Meals were rarely taken in the formal dining room except for either special occasions, or when they had so many dinner guests that there simply wasn’t enough room. Even with a tarp over the skylight and plywood over the windows, when Bilbo lit the kerosene lamp and the few candles littered about the room, he supposed the kitchen resembled a sort of homey cave. Of course, it wouldn’t have been quite up to Bungo’s standards, but then again very few things rarely were.

Bilbo shivered as he finally registered the spring morning chill that had settled into the house. He leaned his rifle against the wall in its customary corner (weapons never go on the table, Mum always said) and fumbled in his dressing gown pocket for his matchbook.

"Tea," he muttered to himself, striking a match and bending down to light the old wood stove, "Tea and porridge, to rid us of this cold."

He fiddled around for a bit as the stove warmed the room, filling the kettle and a small pot with water from the sink. He thanked the universe—though it was Mum who deserved most of the credit—for the umpteenth time for the on-property water well and the solar-powered pump.

Bilbo left both of those on the stove to boil, pulling out his pipe and cursing the pitiful state of his good tobacco supply. At least that was one of the only things that were running out; his father had left a very stocked pantry of non-perishables and despite some neglect, Mother's greenhouse was still very productive. He lit his pipe with what was left of the Old Toby Father thoughtfully left for him, puffing silently and blowing smoke rings to amuse himself as he waited on the water.

Soon enough the kettle was whistling, and Bilbo ate his breakfast with gusto. He chased the cardboard taste of instant porridge with a mug of tea whose lack of milk was nothing short of tragic. He cleaned his dishes in the sink with practiced efficiency and then went back upstairs to take the cold shower he had avoided earlier.

He dressed in a comfortable pair of trousers and a tattered cardigan, and after some light cleaning and careful watering of his last surviving philodendron, he wandered back to the kitchen with a book picked from the limited portion of his library that remained at Bag End over the years. It was something fanciful from his childhood, a book about adventure and hardship and dragons, but it was leagues more entertaining than, say, the dusty, out-of-date computer manuals about coding in Unix or old Apple operating systems that had been irrelevant even back in 1996.

Settling into the comfortable armchair he had dragged in from the drawing room down the hall, Bilbo basked in the routine of it all. It was peaceful keeping house as he waited for his parents to return. Sure, it might be a bit quiet, and the utter solitude may smart sometimes (despite the fact that he had always been a bit of a loner), but in moments like these it almost felt like he was back in grade school, reading by the fire in the drawing room with Mum while Father played the piano in the parlor.

He didn't realize he was actually trying to listen for the soft notes of the piano until the sound of blood rushing in his ears had risen to a dull roar.

"No, you stop that right now, Bilbo Baggins," he scolded himself, once again taking out his pipe and stuffing it obstinately into the corner of his mouth. "You're a pudgy, bookish recluse on the wrong side of forty, and it won't do to be going off the deep end, especially when your grip on reality is the only redeeming quality you have in this world."
He tried his hardest not to get into the habit of talking to himself, as it certainly wasn’t very proper, but some things just needed a little bit of verbal reinforcement. Bilbo continued to grumble to himself for a few minutes, before lighting a match and taking a few angry puffs on his pipe until he finally settled into his book.

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About two hours later, while Bilbo was busy in the middle of making a meager lunch out of a can of beans, there was a knock on the kitchen door that led out into the rear yard.

Like a startled rabbit who had just heard the screech of a nearby hawk, Bilbo froze mid-stir, eyes impossibly wide. He stood like that for a long moment, wondering if he had finally gone off the deep end.

The knocking sounded again, still somewhat polite. Bilbo continued to do nothing, utterly paralyzed. The beans boiled angrily.

"Bilbo Baggins! I know you're in there! Open up this confounded door before I resort to breaking it!" a gruff voice called from the outside.

The politeness quickly waned, and the knock turned into an impatient rapping that demanded to be answered, which brought with it a fresh surge of terror that suddenly jolted him into action. Bilbo grasped the elephant rifle (which until that point had been leaning in its usual nearby corner with all the docility of an umbrella) and brandished it in front of him, edging toward the door. He didn't think it could be an infected, since in Bilbo's experience they don't usually go politely knocking on doors when looking for an unlucky soul to devour, nor did they usually call him by name. The knocking only grew in volume and frequency until there was nothing Bilbo could do but try to peek out through a gap in the plywood slats he had nailed over the window.

What he saw on the other side of the door was not what he was expecting.

To be fair, he wasn't exactly sure who or what he was expecting to see, considering the last time he had encountered another coherent human who hadn't been determined to chew on him in some fashion was well over five months ago. However, Bilbo knew that if he had somehow been forced to bet on who was now open-palm rapping on the back door, he had a whole list of folks he would have put his money on before his mother's attorney, of all people.

Gandalf Greyhame—whom he hadn’t heard from in almost a decade, if Bilbo's recollection was correct—was standing on the back porch next to the slowly liquefying remains of an infected that Bilbo shot four days ago with the elephant gun from a second story window in a last ditch effort to keep it from breaking into the house. It had been what Mum would have proudly dubbed 'a beautiful shot,' but the evidence of it was now in a particularly juicy stage of decay that Bilbo tried his hardest not to think about, lest his stomach revolt. No, it was best not to think about neither that, nor the fact that the thing on the porch with nigh three-quarters of its head blown off had once been the gardener's boy, Hamfast.

If Gandalf was at all bothered by the putrefied corpse accompanying him on the porch he showed no sign of it. Instead, he only wore a painfully familiar expression of long-suffering impatience that, even with the decade-long hiatus in communication, prompted Bilbo to quickly unlock the door and open it.
The Weatherby was still under his arm, and Bilbo registered that he must look vaguely silly with his huge rifle and slippers. While the cardigan was certainly cozy, his current outfit was a far cry from his typical repertoire of put-together outfits, which were usually styled in luxe fabrics and just on the side of what many of his acquaintances would resort to calling 'dandyish.' Not that Gandalf looked exactly like he recalled either. The man nonchalantly standing next to the pulpy remains of poor Hamfast looked very different than the tall, composed solicitor posing next to his mother in the large photo on the mantle of the drawing room.

While he surprisingly didn't look much older (though he must have been pushing 70 by now), he had let his previously short-cropped gray beard and well-groomed eyebrows become unkempt and bushy, along with allowing his hair to grow long. Bilbo remembered Gandalf always calling on Bag End well groomed and dressed in a neatly pressed charcoal suit and tie. He had even worn one in the photo on the mantel, despite it having been taken in a wildlife park in Tanzania, where he stood demurely next to a freshly dispatched two ton cape buffalo and the triumphant Belladonna herself, who in contrast was dressed in sensible safari gear and carried the very rifle Bilbo currently clutched for dear life. A far cry from his solicitor’s kit, Gandalf now wore what could only be described as modified combat fatigues that had faded to the point of grayness, accompanied by a wide-brimmed felt sun hat that sat plopped haphazardly on his now shaggy head. He also held a gnarled walking stick in one hand, making the whole ensemble reminiscent of one of the mad wizards that populated Bilbo’s collection of childhood fantasy novels. But in Bilbo’s opinion, it was neither the fatigues, nor the hat, nor the lapse in grooming, nor even the walking stick that came even remotely close to being the most conspicuous part of Gandalf’s new, ridiculous apocalypse getup.

"Good afternoon," said Bilbo in dazed politeness, staring unabashedly at the very large broadsword now strapped to Gandalf’s hip. Bilbo squinted his eyes as the sword glinted in a way that was almost hard to look at, reflecting onto the once cheerful green paint of the kitchen door that was now peeling something dreadful. He stepped out into the blinding light of the midday sun of the back patio and tried not to gag on the cloying stench of rot.

Gandalf's bushy eyebrows rose.

"And what do you mean by that?" he replied, his impatient expression lightening somewhat into something more mischievous. "Do you wish me a good afternoon, or mean that it is a good afternoon whether I want it or not; or that you feel good this afternoon; or that it is an afternoon to be good on?"

"All… all of them at once, I suppose."

The familiar strangeness of his mother's friend and the sheer experience of simply conversing left Bilbo feeling strangely winded, almost like he was stretching a muscle after a long period of disuse. Gandalf broke into a full smile, though the corner of his eyes still held a bit of impatient tension.

"My dear boy, are you going to invite me in for a drink, or are we going to keep young Hamfast company out here for a while longer?"

"O-oh yes of course!" Bilbo said in an overwhelmed rush, almost tripping over himself to invite his guest inside. "Please wipe your feet on the mat."

"I see the spirit of Bungo Baggins is alive and well," Gandalf muttered. He wiped his feet anyway.

In between closing the door and fussing to get the old solicitor situated and comfortable at the table, Bilbo somehow managed to make tea without noticing.
“My apologies, I’m afraid milk’s long since gone, and I’m saving the tins of the evaporated stuff for a special occasion,” Bilbo said, wringing his hands after pouring two cups of his favorite Darjeeling mix into his mother’s best china.

Gandalf grumbled but did accept his offer of sugar while Bilbo’s mind continued to reel. Gandalf sipped his tea, deeming it, "Passable, but I would really have appreciated a reintroduction to your father's collection of fine vintage reds."

"I'm dreadfully sorry," Bilbo replied, only having a vague idea what he was apologizing for.

"No, no, don't mind an old man's grousing. It's just been a long time since I've had a fine glass of wine," Gandalf said, his tone almost wistful. "Your father certainly knew his wine when he was alive. Your mother would drink any old swill that would pass under her nose, but that was Belladonna Took for you! Bungo on the other hand..."

Bilbo was suddenly struck with a memory of his parents and Gandalf sitting at the very table they were at. His father and Gandalf were sipping a deep red wine and laughing while Belladonna knitted and told all about her latest foray, something about flower arranging. The memory felt disconcertingly real; no longer was Bilbo forty years old and standing in his makeshift cave but fourteen again, pretending to have his nose buried in a book—something about computers, or maybe travel—while he listened to the idle chatter of the adults in the room. A breeze passed through the open window out the screened in back door, the smell of fresh blackberry tarts permeating the room. Gandalf said something that made his mother laugh brazenly, eyes sparkling in the sunlight. Bungo smiled indulgently. The pages of the book felt warm in his hands. Apropos of nothing, the normally reserved Bungo ruffled his curls, his hand resting heavy and comforting on Bilbo’s head.

"...Bilbo? Are you feeling alright? You look pale," Gandalf said, snapping Bilbo back to reality. His eyes weren't so much concerned as they were assessing. It put Bilbo on edge.

"I'm fine," Bilbo said. He tried to smile, but it had been so long since he had last attempted it probably looked extremely pathetic. "It's just been a while since I’ve had company, is all."

"I have been wondering about that. When did you finally arrive at Bag End?"

"About a month now," Bilbo replied. In reality, it had been exactly 34 days since he had arrived back at the estate, but who’s counting? "It's been a pretty long road."

"I should think so," Gandalf said, sipping his tea thoughtfully. "Am I correct in assuming that you left your flat soon after Durin’s Day?"

"The day after, actually. When all the reports started coming in about those that were infected."

“Good heavens! That’s quite a while ago, Bilbo. And you have only been here for a month?”

"Yeah," murmured Bilbo, something sour tightening in his gut. "Mum called me... said that Dad had come down with the flu. I don't think she had heard what was going on in the cities yet, and even though Dad and I aren't on the best terms, I needed an excuse to get out of London."

"That was a wise decision on your part, Mister Baggins," Gandalf said.

"I closed up my shop and took a couple of my employees with me who also wanted to leave the city but didn't have anywhere to go. I mean, why not, right? Look at this place. It could use some life," Bilbo joked humorlessly. He tried to keep his tone as lighthearted and conversational as
possible, but found himself failing miserably. He didn't know why he expected anything otherwise, hating the pitying look Gandalf shot him from over the rim of his teacup.

"You don't have to tell me any more, I quite understand," said Gandalf, setting his tea down and reaching out to gently steady the rattling tea set in Bilbo's hands. Bilbo shook his head, because he found that once he started talking (to an actual person!), he didn't exactly want to stop.

"It was mayhem trying to get out of London," Bilbo said, forcibly choking out words around the lump in his throat. "We made it two miles before somebody rear-ended our van. My employees and I got out in the middle of traffic to have it out with him. I'm glad we did, actually, because we saw the swarm of infected coming our way before anybody else. We ended up having to ditch the van in order to escape, but in the confusion, we lost all our luggage and supplies. And then we were on foot." He sighed. "But you know how fast the infection spread. It was in the suburbs within days. There wasn't even any time for panic."

Bilbo remembered the surreal feeling of walking in an empty neighborhood on a crisp autumn afternoon, freshly fallen leaves crunching merrily underneath his and his companions’ feet as they kept to the sidewalks for no reason other than habit; there hadn't been a single car on the road, other than the few that were parked at haphazard angles along the curbs, most of their windows already busted out. The sun had glinted pleasantly off the unboarded windows of the cozy brick cottages they passed. Birds chirped merrily as they fluttered from branch to branch, and the occasional cat could be seen darting from behind the trimmed hedges. There had been no real signs of mayhem or disorder—other than the thick, acrid smoke that had begun to rise ominously from the horizon at approximately the location of the city center, where his flat and business used to be. In the immediate vicinity however, there was a surprising lack of burning cars or people rioting in the streets.

It had been as if every living soul had just vanished, softly sweeping out of the world and onto better things. But even then, Bilbo had known better. If anyone was still alive and lucid, they had either barricaded themselves in their houses or had moved on to the countryside. The infected tended to not make any movements until nightfall.

Gandalf sat with incredible patience as Bilbo silently recalled all this, sipping his tea. Bilbo sucked in a few ragged breaths, composing himself.

"The supermarkets were cleaned out, though. We did what was necessary, we were constantly on the move, always keeping our heads down. We didn't know what the bloody hell we were doing, though. We didn't know how to steal cars when there was still petrol, or loot someone's house, or even defend ourselves properly. Whenever we saw infected people, we ran. And after the first couple of times, after those men... whenever we saw people-people, we ran. We barely covered any distance each day. And then it started getting colder, yeah? And food was getting harder to come by. We realized we had to find a place to winter, because we couldn't go on and we hoped that the cold would kill whatever was controlling the infected. Ha! What fools we were," said Bilbo sardonically. "Eventually I made it here."

"And now you are alone in Bag End," Gandalf said.

"Yes. To be honest, I was hoping my parents were still going to be here, but it seems they've moved on for the time being. I'm hoping they've just gone to Primula and Drogo's down in Buckland and got stuck."

Gandalf's eyebrows rocketed to his hairline. "Bilbo, surely you must know—"

"Bag End is far enough in the country and well supplied enough that I thought they would be able
to camp out until this whole mess blew over," said Bilbo, tone carefully blithe.

"Bilbo," said Gandalf gently.

"But, after seeing poor Hamfast, I suppose it was only logical that Mum and Dad—"

"Bilbo—"

"—temporarily took their leave—"

"Bilbo!"

"They might have gone over to the Old Took's place," Bilbo continued, ignoring Gandalf, "or perhaps to the Sackville-Bagginses', but I doubt Lobelia would have took them in without their good silverware in hand—"

"Bilbo Baggins! I will not have you take me—or yourself, for that matter—for a fool! " Gandalf roared, the scrape of his chair echoing in the cavernous acoustics of the kitchen as he launched out of his seat.

Bilbo let out an ungraceful squeak, shocked into silence. He retreated further back into his chair as Gandalf loomed menacingly over the table, which was quite a feat for a man who looked for the most part like an itinerant vagrant in a sunhat. Taking in Bilbo's frightened expression, Gandalf sighed and ran a hand over his unruly beard.

"You can't expect me to believe that you don't have an idea of what happened to Belladonna and Bungo," he said, his tone a shade gentler.

Silence was Bilbo's only response. Gandalf breathed heavily through his nose.

"You cannot stay alone in this house forever, Mister Baggins. But what are you going to do when the infected inevitably find you are here, and they come in numbers and completely overwhelm you? Sit here with your manners and respectability and waste away, or God forbid, get eaten, as you wait for loved ones that you know will never return?"

"There is no guarantee they will never return," said Bilbo softly, staring into his teacup. "I didn't find any bodies."

Gandalf threw up his hands in disgust.

"Curse the stubbornness of Tooks! I thought I knew you, Bilbo! You were never one to just sit idly by. Come now, and to think I was just about to tempt you with a proposition!"

"A proposition?"

"What, did you think I came all this way to discuss Belladonna’s estate?" Gandalf sniped, grumpiness coloring his tone. "Yes, a proposition! One that may result in doing some good in this world, because Lord knows it needs it."

"Doing some good," Bilbo parroted, thinking about the broken world outside Bag End and the hilariously pathetic idea that someone like him could do anything to fix it. "And what would that entail, exactly? Because I'm quite... small, to put it mildly."

"Small?" repeated Gandalf. "Well, yes, I do suppose you're a bit on the short side, but I am not sure how—"
"In the grand scheme of things, I meant!" Bilbo interjected, flushing in annoyance. "And I will have you know that 5' 6" is a perfectly respectable height!"

"Now that is the Bilbo Baggins I know!" Gandalf crowed cheerfully, face lighting up in a smile.

Bilbo ran a ragged hand through his curls, letting out a deep breath. "Oh, just get on with it, Gandalf."

"Ah yes, about this proposition. As far as it goes, all it really entails is a bit of adventuring and surviving, along with some of that cybersecurity expertise that MI-5 and Cambridge were so fond of. All things I'm sure you're quite familiar with."

Bilbo’s heart plummeted.

"No," barked Bilbo immediately and without embellishment, his tone as firm as he could make it. Gandalf’s expression immediately shuttered, leaving his face a craggy landscape of frustration.

"Bilbo. I urge you to give this even a moment’s consideration," he said.

"No. No adventures. Nasty, disturbing things. I'm quite done with all that! They make you late for breakfast, to put it mildly," said Bilbo. He thought about the days they had gone without food, half-starved and in constant fear of always being prey. He suppressed a shudder at the memory. "And as for surviving, I'm doing quite well on my own, actually. I have a full pantry and a productive greenhouse and my armchair and plenty of books. Really, the only thing I really have to complain about is my dwindling tobacco supply! Also, may I remind you that I'm retired from all that hacking business! If anything, I'm a bookshop owner. And seeing as how it's the apocalypse right now, I would consider my skills from both of my former professions to have been rendered pretty obsolete.

“Plus,” he added, curling his small hands into fists and staring resolutely at the table, “who will keep the house in order until my parents return? I can’t go running off while there’s a chance Mum will come back and box my ears if the greenhouse is left to run amok and Hamfast is still on our back porch. And Dad...” He trailed off into a pregnant pause.

After a moment, Gandalf said, "I'm sorry to hear that, Bilbo."

"I'm not," he replied with no shortage of bitterness.

Gandalf stood from the table and gulped the last of his now lukewarm tea. "Then I'm afraid this is where I will have to take my leave. I have some associates waiting for me that I must report back to. May I ask for one last favor, though?"

Bilbo was childishly tempted to cross his arms and refuse, but looking at Gandalf so sorely reminded him of his mother that it was nigh on impossible.

"I suppose," he said, puffing his cheeks in frustration.

"My companions and I have been travelling for several weeks, and we've been spending the past few nights in, shall we say, less than stellar accommodations. Seeing as how you have this whole grand house at your disposal, I humbly ask that we use Bag End as a place to rest our heads for a couple of days in order to recuperate. I do hope you understand," said Gandalf apologetically, though his face was decidedly less so.

If he was being honest with himself, the thought of more people in his house after such a long period without human interaction completely terrified Bilbo. But then he thought of how his
mother would often invite the neighbors or the old Gaffer Gamgee, the gardener, and his large brood of children for dinner, and how Bag End seemed to glow with the addition of more life within its walls. Saying yes… it’s what Mum would have done.

That thought alone gave Bilbo courage.

"O-of course," he found himself saying. “What kind of Baggins would I be to refuse guests in need of lodging?"

"Splendid!" said Gandalf, hopping up from his seat and strapping that absurd sword back on his hip. He was suddenly much more cheerful than before, and Bilbo’s mind reeled at the quick change in demeanor. Bilbo automatically grabbed his rifle and followed Gandalf to the door.

"We shall most likely be arriving early tomorrow morning, given that everything goes well. Please do expect us!"

And with that he opened the door and set out down the path into the back garden without another word, neatly sidestepping the gory remains of Hamfast as Bilbo looked on, so stricken dumb that he forgot to say goodbye.

Chapter End Notes

So. Imagine you're me. You started a fic in 2013 and it's haunted you for over six years. Imagine that you've gone to college, then graduated college and blown through 3 laptops in the meantime, moved cross country twice, moved out of your parents' house, moved back into your parents' house, gotten an office job, and you STILL think about this dumb zombie apocalypse-Hobbit retelling fic you started when you had just barely turned 18. Then you plug in an external hard drive and lo--there's the first chapter.

Anyway, if you're me, you go FERAL. Like full on detrimental hyperfocus. TBH I don't think I've written a single thing since I started this fic the first time around, so excuse any errors or missing words or incoherent sentence structure. I didn't even have an AO3 account before I decided to post this, since my last foray into published fanfic was back in the days of ff.net. So, long time lurker, first time poster, I guess.

Music that goes with this chapter:
Sprawl I (Flatland) - Arcade Fire
Disloyal Order of Water Buffaloes - Fall Out Boy
Wayfaring Stranger - 16 Horsepower
GOD'S GONNA CUT YOU DOWN

CHAPTER 1
THE END OF THE WORLD, AFTERWARD
Inauspicious Meetings

Chapter Summary

For the second time in a day, Bilbo is forced to entertain unexpected guests. It's so, so much worse this time around.

Chapter Notes

Well, I was going to sit on this for a while before editing it, but then I realized I should get it out before got too in the weeds with planning the rest of this fic. (and I've gotten very, very into the weeds. Practically disappeared into it, actually.) I'm much more satisfied with the quality of this chapter than the last, probably because I wrote it mostly from scratch lmao. I may go back and edit the first chapter sometime, but tbh I'm too excited to move on.

and for clarification, the explanation for Dwalin's use of Russian will probably be in the next chapter. It's part of the bramble I've utterly lost myself in.

anyway, enjoy bilbo having a bad time. sorry for all the italics.

TW for guns (of which i know nothing), MAJOR gore, unreality/a disassociative episode, and my utter lack of knowledge of what a paragraph entails

Night fell on Bag End. Bilbo retreated upstairs after spending most of the day staring at the kitchen door, half-expecting Gandalf or even his parents to come bursting through with the news that the past ten months or so had all just been an excessively horrible nightmare.

He was exhausted but his heart still pounded wildly in his chest, causing him to feel like his whole body was vibrating. It was the same jittery feeling he had suffered from on some mornings while conducting research at Cambridge during his postdoc, the result of who knows how many double espressos after countless sleepless nights of working through novel coding schemes or programming solutions to firewall vulnerabilities.

He had tried to pick up his book again in order to calm himself, and when that didn’t work—the wizard in the story reminded him just a little too much of Gandalf—he took the risk of dashing across the yard to do a little pruning in the greenhouse. While he was there, he also took the opportunity to feed his surviving chickens, having rounded them up and relocated their coop to the safety of the enclosed space shortly after returning home. It was ultimately futile, but at least now he had some fresh tomatoes and spinach with which to make an omelette in the morning.

(He hadn’t yet had the chance to make one so far. Most of the hens were worryingly skinny and half feral, having run wild in the yard for who knows how long. However, with his care and gentle coaxing, a couple of them were encouragingly starting to lay again. It made Bilbo feel inordinately hopeful. If you asked him, there was nothing more cheerful or satisfying than a just-slightly-runny
fried egg.)

Nothing else he had tried after that had worked either. Even the act of smoking his pipe, a calming activity if there ever was one, couldn't keep his hands from shaking. He nearly spilled ash all over the rug for his efforts, which would have been a dreadful pain to clean up without the use of a vacuum.

Bilbo was just about to climb into bed and conduct what was probably a pointless attempt to sleep when he heard rustling outside. He frowned and did his best to tamp down the fear that stabbed at his gut. He climbed into bed, making an effort to tuck himself in and fluff the pillows.

He stared at the ceiling. Hands folded neatly on the bedspread, he waited for sleep to come. From the alarm clock, Mickey Mouse gazed at his rigid form impassively, ticking away the seconds until the time tomorrow morning when it would sadistically remind him that he needed to get up. He didn’t even bother snuffing the candles.

The rustling continued outside, followed by the loud metallic clatter of what were probably the bins tipping over. He resolutely refused to jump or startle. It was probably a stray dog rummaging around, he reasoned. Just one of many former housepets that had lost their owner since Durin’s Day, nothing to get upset about.

He looked to the elephant rifle that lay just within easy reach. The light from the candles flickered on the smooth metal of the barrel.

"Just ignore it, Bilbo Baggins," he muttered, rolling out of bed and reaching for the rifle anyway. "It’s probably nothing. You were the one that just got through saying that you didn't want any more excitement."

He slowly shuffled over to the boarded-over window and jimmied off the bottom-most piece of plywood, loosened from the handful of other times he had done this exact thing since first nailing it on. Setting it aside, Bilbo slid the glass up with practiced ease, peering out into Bag End’s moonlit rear yard with resigned dismay. There were only a few infected out in the yard tonight, ghastly specters of former village residents who had wandered blindly into the once-neat hedgerows and raised vegetable beds that dotted the lawns of Bag End.

They had most likely been attracted by the lingering smell of Bilbo’s and Gandalf’s warm, alive presences in the garden from earlier that day. In contrast, the only aroma Bilbo could make out on the night breeze was the rot of Hamfast Gamgee, whose putrefied remains rested just below Bilbo’s bedroom window. He should really get to disposing of them soon, if out of respect more than anything else. Though, he did find that the stench helped to mask his own living smell. The infected had stopped clawing at and trying to open the kitchen door at night once Hamfast had found his final resting place.

Bag End proper aside, they did still try to break into Bilbo’s greenhouse about twice every week or so. The heavy chain and padlock on the door were usually more than enough to keep the mindless hordes from getting in, but there had been one close call where an undead neighbor had somehow cracked one of the glass panels, dangerously close to running amok and destroying Bilbo’s only remaining source of fresh veg and protein. While the infected were decidedly preferential to the other white meat, he had seen them go after all sorts of animals if they got hungry enough. He remembered one incident with a horse on his journey back to Bag End that he would just as soon try and forget.

True to form, one of the infected seemed to be sniffing around the entrance to the greenhouse a little too closely for comfort. He looked like to have once been a strapping young man in his late
twenties, a clerk at the local market if the tattered remains of his yellow uniform polo were anything to go by. His flesh was an unhealthy gray color and half his face seemed to have sloughed off, which revealed the muscle and stark white bone of his jaw. Most of his right eyeball bulged out of its socket.

Bilbo loaded a new magazine into the clip and poked the muzzle of the firearm out the window, resting the barrel on the sill. He engaged the bolt as quietly as he could, not wanting to alert any of the six or seven infected milling around the yard, let alone his target. Bullet stripped from the magazine and safety off, Bilbo peered down the scope and put the head of the infected straight into his crosshairs.

He let out a breath. His finger rested lightly on the trigger.

The sound of a vintage Weatherby Mark V safari rifle is hard to describe, especially if it is fired in the absence of any other noise. The sound it made in the countryside of western Cornwall on a night almost a year after English (and quite possibly the world’s, for all Bilbo knew) society had been abruptly murdered was nothing short of biblical. The crack of the firing pin ejecting the .316 caliber bullet from the barrel sounded akin to the sky itself being rent to pieces. Bilbo imagined it echoed across the countryside for miles.

There was a split second where the garden was shocked into stillness. Then the former grocery clerk’s head promptly exploded in a fountain of viscera, blood and brains splattering across the unkempt grass. Droplets even made it as far as the glass wall of the greenhouse, a good meter and a half away.

In lieu of all his other skills having been rendered obsolete after the end of the world, Bilbo Baggins had made the welcome discovery that he was, to his utter surprise, a ridiculously good shot. The caliber and resultant firepower of the Weatherby may have been overkill, but Bilbo decided that being sure was better than being eaten.

Meanwhile, the rest of the infected whipped themselves up into a froth at the sound, which Bilbo had expected. They ambled toward the remains of their dead companion, unbothered by the bits of cranium that littered the surrounding lawn. Bilbo pumped the bolt again, ejecting the empty shell casing and stripping a new bullet just in case. He looked down the scope, not knowing yet if he intended to find a new target in the newly formed cluster of undead. They were busy giving their fallen comrade a couple of curious bites. If Bilbo was lucky, it would hold their attention for the rest of the night until they retreated back to... wherever it was they went to when the sun was up.

It was then that something strange wavered in his peripheral vision.

The once nicely pruned hedge in a far corner of the garden rustled briefly before a large, burly figure emerged from seemingly inside it. Bilbo swung the rifle in its direction, peering down the scope to get a better look. The man—for it was a man, living and breathing just as Bilbo himself was—assessed the situation for a second before sprinting as quietly as he could to the back door. Bilbo saw the pate of his bald, tattooed scalp gleaming in the pale moonlight. The man looked straight up at Bilbo, seeming to lock eyes with him through the scope. He scowled through the combination of his thick beard and moustache, jerking his head roughly at the door as he ran.

Bilbo stared dumbly at the figure for a moment before his brain caught up with the situation. He leapt up from his sniper’s perch, flipping the safety back on the rifle and darting down the stairs to the kitchen door. Had he been more aware of himself, he would have patted himself on the back for not even flinching as the third stair squeaked. However, the only thing on his mind at that moment was his hope to meet the intruder before he did something drastic, like breaking down the door and getting them both eaten.
The kitchen was pitch black when he entered. Bilbo found the back door mainly by feel, fingers trembling as they rushed to unlatch the deadbolt. Instead of flinging it wide, he opened the door just enough to fit the muzzle of the rifle and the front of the scope through. Moonlight spilled through the cracked door, creating a rectangle of silvery light that splashed against the tile and worn paisley doormat, illuminating Bilbo’s bare feet and the bottom of his pyjama pants. The man had made it past the cluster of infected and arrived at the edge of the porch, where he slowed to a jog and eventually stopped next to Hamfast. He regarded the elephant gun that was pointed directly at his sternum with a disconcerting coolness.

“Nice distraction,” said the stranger, tone gruff. His voice was pitched low and was colored with a vague glottal accent Bilbo couldn’t place. “Now, if you would lower that overpowered peashooter and let me in, that would be very helpful.”

“Who are you?” whispered Bilbo, refusing to budge despite his slight discomfort at pointing a weapon at another (living) human being.

“Don’t you think we could have that conversation inside?” replied the man in a low murmur. He sounded annoyed, but his eyes darted worriedly to the group of infected not five meters away.

“Certainly not!” Bilbo hissed.

The man glowered, his expression becoming more intense as the infected began to grow agitated. They began to realize that their fresh meal was actually not so fresh, and that there was the scent of live meat on the breeze. Loud groans puncturing the quiet night air, they furiously tore apart what was left of their fallen comrade in a matter of seconds. Meat and guts were flung across the grass as they howled in rage.

“The old man sent me,” the stranger rumbled, edging closer toward the door. “I swear, on the blood and spirit of my fathers, I mean you no harm. Now let me in.”

There was no masking the desperation now. Bilbo glanced past the stranger and at the undead, the herky-jerky motions of their heads and bodies signaling that they had gotten bored of disemboweling and had definitely caught the scent of fresh blood. While they were generally slow, if the infected whipped themselves into enough of a frenzy they could swarm and rush in the direction of the scent. If that happened then they would both be done for. Bilbo had only a moment to decide.

“Gandalf sent you?” asked Bilbo, slowly starting to retract the gun.

“For Mahal’s sake, yes. Now let me in the thrice-damned house!”

The stranger took advantage of the slight weakness in Bilbo’s guard, forcing the door open just enough to allow his tremendous bulk to pass through. He quickly shut it behind him and latched the bolt, sending the room back into pitch darkness.

Bilbo trembled and backed away blindly, his backside colliding painfully with the edge of the dinner table. It slid, and the scrape of the wooden legs on the tile echoed painfully in the still room. It sent Bilbo into even more of a panic, certain that those infected outside had heard it. Frightened beyond reason, he brandished the rifle blindly in front of him, finger on the trigger and thumb resting on the safety.

“W-who the hell are you?” he stuttered out into the darkness.

There was a click and a small whoosh, a pinprick of illumination lighting a tiny portion of the
room. The stranger held his small steel lighter aloft, casting dramatic shadows across the jagged planes of his scarred face.

“Dwalin, at your service,” the stranger said. He quickly spotted the kerosene lamp on the table and lit it, bathing the rest of the kitchen in relative brightness. “Now stop pointing that thing at me. You’re making me nervous.”

With the added illumination seeming to physically clear the shadows from Bilbo’s mind, the reality of the stranger’s—Dwalin’s—words started to sink in. Slowly, he lowered the rifle, feeling like he had run a mile. The man sat down heavily at the table and kept his distance, seeming to appraise Bilbo in silence.

“I… I’m Bilbo Baggins. At yours, I suppose,” said Bilbo after a moment. The tension started to drain out of him as Dwalin continued to act in a reasonably non-hostile manner and not make any sudden moves.

“Mind if I smoke?” asked Dwalin, though he had already fished a black cigarette out of the breast pocket of his grimy combat jacket and stuck it in his mouth.

“...Go ahead?”

As he lit up, Bilbo saw that the lighter was inscribed with a sort of script he couldn’t quite make out; to his untrained eye, it looked sort of like runes. He could also see the same sort of script tattooed across Dwalin’s hands and knuckles along with some intricate geometric patterns and a bit of Cyrillic. He had similar tattoos on his scalp.

The tattoos had been the first thing he noticed about the man as he had darted across the lawn. The next, which Bilbo realized now that he was sharing space with him, was the fact that Dwalin was massive. Though not particularly tall by English standards (but certainly taller than Bilbo, who despite his protestations was definitely on the short side), Bilbo could tell that even under his bulky travel and combat gear, Dwalin was intimidatingly large. It was compounded by the fact that he had the ramrod straight posture and bearing of a career soldier. He seemed to be in possession of a deathly serious air that magnified his already intimidating presence.

Within minutes of meeting him, Bilbo could already tell three things about Dwalin of which he was almost certain. One, that he was a man of few words; two, that he smoked clove cigarettes; and three, that he probably did not have much patience for nonsense. Which is why Bilbo couldn’t help but stare at perhaps the most conspicuous—and absurd—thing about his person: The two giant, two-handed axes that he had strapped to his back.

Bilbo rubbed his temples, trying to cross the headache he felt creeping on off at the pass. Leaning the rifle against the counter, he reached up on his tiptoes to a high shelf in order to retrieve the abalone shell Mum liked to use as an ashtray (she had caught it herself of course, free diving off the coast of Northern California). He set it on the table in front of Dwalin with a conspicuous clatter.

Dwalin grunted in a way that Bilbo decided to interpret as a heartfelt thanks.

“Is there anything I can get for you?” Bilbo ventured, falling into the role of polite host strictly out of habit.

“Coffee,” Dwalin replied curtly, exhaling a large cloud of spicy, botanical-smelling smoke.

“Ah. No coffee I’m afraid. Ran out of that about a week ago. Tea?”
“Nah.”

“Okay.”

They stayed like that for a long moment. Bilbo stood dumbly in the middle of the kitchen, wringing his hands as Dwalin smoked silently and glowered into space. Though Bilbo knew intellectually that it was a perfectly proper size, the chair looked slightly too small for him, especially with the two huge axes.

It was unbearably awkward.

“So… I take it you’re one of Gandalf’s colleagues,” said Bilbo, haplessly grasping for conversation.

“Aye. Was scouting ahead for the rest of the group when I got pinned down in your hedge. Thanks for that, by the way.”

Bilbo shrugged weakly. “You’re welcome, I suppose.”

Dwalin tapped his excess ash into the abalone shell, looking thoughtfully at the rifle.

“You sure you know how to use that thing?” Dwalin asked, gesturing in its general direction. “Peashooter like that has an awfully big kick for such a little man.”

Bilbo bristled, mouth opening despite himself. “Yes, well! This little man certainly saved your hide with that ‘peashooter’! You have some nerve, especially for someone who barges in here uninvited and that comes with axes of all things strapped to their b—”

Bilbo was abruptly cut off by a loud banging on the door, too paralyzed by fright from the sudden sound to gain any sort of satisfaction from Dwalin’s startled yelp, quiet though it was. They stared at each other for a long moment, neither daring to move a muscle as the banging continued.

“Turn the light down, lad,” Dwalin hissed, shoving the cigarette between his lips.

Bilbo scampered to the table, turning the kerosene lamp down so the room was bathed in what he supposed to be the dimmest light it was still possible to see by. Dwalin stood up with practiced deliberation, making sure not to jostle the chair and make any sudden noises. His hand traveled slowly to the huge bowie knife Bilbo now noticed was strapped to his hip, edging towards the door. He took up a position just to the side of it, one hand on his knife and the other on the deadbolt.

The banging continued at a frenetic pace, this time accompanied by what Bilbo supposed were a few guttural words in a language he couldn’t place. Dwalin stiffened and immediately unlatched the door, hand flying through the opening to haul who or whatever it was inside.

In the new dimness Bilbo could not properly see whoever Dwalin had dragged into his kitchen, just that Dwalin was now quickly patting them down—Bilbo couldn’t tell if it was for weapons or for injuries—and exchanging words in that same unknown language. Bilbo didn’t recognize it, but concern colored Dwalin’s tone.

“Turn that light up!” barked Dwalin in English. Bilbo rushed to comply, despite the stab of ire at both being bossed around in his own home and his own seeming compulsion to follow orders.

Now that Bilbo could see properly, he saw that the newcomer was indeed another man. Despite being slightly shorter than Dwalin and looking considerably older, they bore a striking
resemblance, though most of it was hidden underneath the worrying amount of fresh blood that had splattered across the broad expanse of his nose and matted into his silver hair and beard.

“Oh dear,” said Bilbo.

“Nothing to worry about, laddie,” the newcomer remarked, his friendly tone colored by the same vaguely guttural undertone that Dwalin had. “Most of it isn’t mine. Balin, at your service.”

Dwalin sighed almost imperceptibly in relief, though Bilbo hardly noticed.

“I see,” Bilbo replied, slightly mechanically. “Bilbo Baggins, at yours.” Even though he knew it was rude, he was unable to look away from the gore that spattered Balin’s face.

Balin smiled anyway, seemingly charmed. There was blood in his teeth.

“Before we get down to business, I must apologize for my brother,” he said, sending an exasperated look toward Dwalin. “He’s not exactly what you would call, ah, a particularly sparkling conversationalist.”

“Didn’t do anything,” Dwalin muttered, sitting back down and smoking obstinately.

“My point exactly. I imagine you didn’t explain a single thing to our host,” said Balin. “The poor man looks frightened half to death.”

Dwalin said nothing. To Bilbo’s fascination, he looked almost sheepish.

“While I would love to let you into the loop, Mister Baggins,” he continued, “I’m afraid we do not have much time. Am I correct in assuming that gunshot I heard earlier was your doing?”

“Oh, yes. I suppose that was me,” said Bilbo mildly, though flashes of his earlier kill were starting to flash discomfitingly in his mind’s eye. While it had been in defense of his food supply, it was starting to not sit so well. Bilbo thought Balin’s skin seemed to become slightly ashen, the gore standing stark against his flesh.

Seeming not to notice Bilbo’s ogling, Balin turned to Dwalin.

“Did he hit anything?” he asked.

“Just a head that burst like an overripe melon,” replied Dwalin, words wreathed in tobacco smoke.

“Clean?”

“Aye.”

“Oh good,” Balin said with a cheerful little smile. “While I worry about the amount of attention from the infected—”

“Zombies,” Dwalin interjected.

“—infected,” Balin insisted, “that the noise is going to draw, I’m afraid that we have an immediate need of your marksmanship skills, Mister Baggins.”

Bilbo’s attention, which had somehow wandered off without his permission, suddenly snapped back at the sound of his name. “Oh, well,” he said, not quite sure what they were talking about, “I don’t know…”
“I have men—well, boys, really—still out there,” said Balin gravely.

“Mahal!” exclaimed Dwalin, sitting up straight in his chair. “You can’t be serious!”

Balin imperiously stroked his beard, a silver curtain of hair that hung elegantly on his chin despite its relative unkemptness, smearing some of the blood. He proceeded to grimace and wipe his hand on his pale-yellow jacket, leaving a rusty smear. Bilbo stared.

“We were unexpectedly overrun at our previous lodging, so I’m afraid we’re going to have to impose on you a bit earlier than expected. The boys and I became separated from the rest of the company on our way over here. When we stumbled upon a group of particularly agitated infected stalking around your back garden, the boys decided to circle around and draw their attention so I could make a run for the door—quite without my input or approval, I might add,” Balin said with an exasperated sigh, though it was said with a certain amount of affectionate indulgence.

“Those—urgh—those эбаные идиоты. Sounds par for the course for them,” Dwalin remarked, dragging a hand down his face.

“Oh, most certainly,” agreed Balin. “Well, I suppose the proper course of action now would be for two of us to provide cover fire for the boys while another one mans the door. Though, I’m afraid my eyes aren’t quite what they once were, especially in the dark. Which reminds me, may I bother you for a towel, Mister Baggins? This blood is starting to drip something awful.”

Bilbo blinked, nodding slowly. Balin turned back to Dwalin and continued to say something else. His cheerful smile was still fixed firmly upon his face as if he was talking about something innocuous, like the weather. Bilbo couldn’t hear it above the loud ringing in his ears.

Instead of joining the conversation which he could barely follow, he robotically retrieved one of his mother’s good tea towels, wetting it in the sink for good measure. He handed it to Balin without a word, trying not to think of how there was blood everywhere.

“Running water! What a splendid place you have here, Mister Baggins,” Balin exclaimed.

“Thanks.”

Bilbo dabbed at his face, ineffectually mopping up the slowly congealing blood that was starting to run into his eyes. Bilbo propped himself against the sink, breathing heavily through his nose. Balin handed back the towel, its delicate floral embroidery now stained beyond repair. Bilbo could only stare at it helplessly.

What. Was. Happening?

“—ggins. Mister Baggins!”

Bilbo’s head snapped up from where he had been gazing blankly at his slippers, the pale moon of Balin’s crimson-smeared face wavering in his field of vision. The hand gripping the tea towel hung limply at his side.

“Yes?” he asked dazedly.

“Are you feeling alright?”

“Quite,” he said, his voice sounding strangely far away to his own ears. “Now what is it that needs to be done again?”
“I need something that shoots straight so you and I can go upstairs to blast apart some zombie heads and save some idiot kids with a death wish,” said Dwalin brusquely.

“Now Brother, you know we don’t use the z-word,” chided Balin. Dwalin rolled his eyes.

He registered that something didn’t feel quite right, like he felt slightly disconnected from his body. But the vast majority of Bilbo’s mind seemed awash in static, simply too overwhelmed to make coherent thoughts. Images of Balin and the grocery clerk superimposed themselves over each other in his mind’s eye.

“Right then. I suppose I should show you to my mother’s gun locker,” he babbled. “She was quite the hunter in her day, you know. Africa, big game and all that.”

“Hm. You ever go with her on one of her trips?” asked Dwalin.

“Oh, heavens no. Awful waste, it seemed. Never had the stomach for it.”

“So you can shoot a zombie, but not an animal. Got it,” Dwalin snorted. He threw a meaningful glance toward the rifle that was still leaning innocuously against the counter. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“Oh. Right.” He quickly grabbed the Weatherby and stalked out of the kitchen, not bothering to check if Dwalin was following.

“Let’s hope you actually know how to use that thing and that wasn’t just a lucky shot.”

“Yes, let’s,” Bilbo muttered.

“Good luck lads!” called Balin, taking a seat by the door.

Bilbo shuffled down the dark hallways of Bag End, his eyes adjusting to the darkness as his feet made the journey to his mother’s study by memory. Dwalin followed him about a foot behind, the loud thump of his heavy soled boots the only thing signaling that he was keeping pace. Bilbo was suddenly, mortifyingly reminded that he was still barefoot and dressed in his pyjamas. The realization seemed to shock something in his brain.

What am I even doing? he thought in a wild moment of lucidity. With barely any time to ponder that particular question, they arrived at the grand French doors that marked the entrance of the office. Bilbo unlatched them with sad reverence, wondering why he was letting this gruff, rude stranger into his mother’s private space.

Like the rest of the house, Bilbo had boarded up the great veranda windows that once looked out over the garden. While admittedly laid back and somewhat flighty, Mum had always been particular about how things were arranged in her private spaces, so he had left the room otherwise untouched.. Their steps sent up a fresh layer of dust, which caused Dwalin to sneeze.

“Take it you don’t come in here often, then,” he said nasally.

“Not really,” Bilbo replied, padding over to the big armoire in the corner. “Can I have a light?”

Dwalin flicked open his lighter, casting a dim glow over the surrounding area. The lighter illuminated the solid mahogany desk and matching dusty cabinet filled to bursting with a collection of various porcelain dolls and Precious Moments figurines. Dwalin looked at them askance.

“You’ll have to excuse my mother, she’s a bit of an eccentric,” said Bilbo, fiddling with the
combination padlock on the armoire, once again thanking his lucky stars that his mother didn’t trust electronic locks. (Or the power grid for that matter, which is why the water pump ran on solar, which in any other circumstance would have been a laughable addition to a home in cloudy old Britain.) Soon enough, the lock clicked open, and Bilbo removed the chain keeping the armoire shut. He yanked the doors open, revealing the full extent of Mother’s armory.

If you asked Bilbo, it was, in a word, overkill. The barrels of antique rifles, automatic pistols, revolvers, and other menacing firearms glinted lowly in the firelight. The matte black finish of some more powerful weapons, some that frankly made Bilbo nauseous just to look at, gave off a similar glow. Dwalin let out a low whistle.

“What was it your mum did again?” Dwalin asked, running a reverent hand over the barrel of a brand-new Kalashnikov that Mum had gotten as a gift from one of her Russian friends.

“She’s a housewife.”

“Ah, that explains it,” muttered Dwalin, though his tone made it clear that it most certainly did not. He shot a doubtful look at Bilbo’s Weatherby. “All these options and you decide to use that?”

Bilbo flushed.

“It’s sentimental,” he said defensively.

“Sentimentality isn’t going to keep you alive,” Dwalin grunted, hefting out a newer self-loading rifle with a state-of-the-art scope mounted on it, along with a magazine. Bilbo chose not to dignify that with an answer. Dwalin appraised the gun for a moment.

Seemingly satisfied, he said, “Well, let’s get on with it before the boys get themselves killed.”

“Right.”

Still piloting on automatic, Bilbo led them up the stairs—“Watch that step, it squeaks,” he warned—and directed Dwalin down the hall to a guest room with a window he found had a slightly different vantage point than the one in his bedroom. Bilbo padded into his own room, not thinking very hard about what he was doing or why he was doing it. He once again taking his post at the window. What he saw in the back garden made his heart sink.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake! My greenhouse!” he moaned aloud in despair.

Peering through the scope to get a better look, he could spot two sprightly-looking figures that had somehow clambered up and balanced precariously atop the greenhouse’s roof while a crowd of eleven or twelve infected swarmed around them. The undead rattled the glass paneling, which was the only thing keeping them from ravaging Bilbo’s prized veg and chickens. He couldn’t see any cracks yet, but it was only a matter of time.

One of the figures seemed to be firing a crossbow into the surrounding horde to little avail, the sloping angle of the roof blocking most of his shots. The other, whose golden hair glinted in the moonlight, seemed to be in turns actively taunting the infected and encouraging their companion. Bilbo groaned at the idiocy.

A sharp crack rang out across the garden, causing Bilbo’s finger to twitch on the trigger. A spout of dark, half-congealed blood erupted from the neck of an undead where one of Dwalin’s bullets had caught. It collapsed with a dying gurgle. A whoop erupted from one of the figures on top of the greenhouse.
“Nice one, Mister Dwalin!” they cheered.

Suddenly, Bilbo’s resolve hardened. Abruptly overcome with fury, Bilbo engaged the bolt on his Weatherby and lined up a shot. He aimed for the head of another nearby infected, against his better judgement hoping to repeat his horrific performance from earlier that night. Not thinking, he let out a breath and squeezed the trigger. It burst like it had been shot by a cannon, showering its infected compatriots with bits of half-rotten brain matter. Another whoop sounded from the greenhouse roof and Bilbo felt his adrenaline spike, eclipsing the churning stomach he had originally expected to have. Focus starting to sharpen, he and Dwalin started firing in turn, picking off the undead one by one. Most shots found their target, though Bilbo found he missed more times than his ally.

Grip tightening on the gun and blood pumping, he lined up his next shot. Through his scope, he saw an infected that he realized with a shock had once been Daisy Proudfoot from down the lane. In the fog of surprise, he somehow pulled the trigger.

Something about the scope must have been off, he later reasoned. Or perhaps it could have been the rifling in the barrel finally giving way, given the Weatherby’s advanced age. Whatever the case, Bilbo’s next bullet only grazed his target. While it was enough to take out a nice chunk of the-creature-that-had-once-been-Daisy’s head and solidly put it down, the bullet ricocheted off her skull and sailed straight through the tempered glass wall of the greenhouse, where it immediately shattered in perfect synchrony with Bilbo’s heart.

“Fuck. Fuckfuckfuckfuck,” Bilbo swore, flinging himself away from the window and landing squarely on his bottom. To his horror, tears were welling up in his eyes. The rifle clattered as it fell to the ground.

Reluctantly, he glanced back out the window, what little remained of his heart plummeting into his stomach. It seemed that the panel he had shot had been one of the walls of his makeshift chicken coop, as six panicked domestic hens suddenly scattered across the yard in a flurry of feathers.

Dreadful as the sight was, it proved an effective enough distraction for the remaining three infected that the two figures on the roof could jump down as silently as possible and sprint for the back door. Bilbo turned away, burying his head in his hands to muffle a sob. Three more shots fired off in succession. A door slammed somewhere. The yard and house were suddenly utterly silent. Bilbo squeezed his eyes shut, hoping to stem the flow of tears. The glass, the chickens, Daisy Proudfoot’s destroyed cranium—Bilbo sat there for what seemed like an age trying to rid himself of the images flickering behind his eyelids. Then he heard a clatter directly below him, which reminded him that he was not alone in the house.

Abruptly, something in his brain seemed to click back into place. His thoughts cleared as the calm of rage settled itself over him.

Bilbo stood up, swiping at his eyes and hoping to God in heaven that they weren’t puffy, because that would sorely detract from the absolute righteous fury he was about to unleash on his uninvited house guests. Refusing to look through the window behind him, Bilbo stalked to the kitchen, stomping loudly on the squeaky stair to announce the inauspiciousness of his arrival. He could faintly hear Balin’s voice drifting up the stairwell as he talked to the newcomers.

“—strange, but well-mannered,” he said, talking in a somewhat hushed tone. “Nervous and excitable as a jackrabbit, to be sure; probably has to do with living alone in this great big house of his. So, Kili, I need you to be polite.”

“I’m always polite!” a new voice whined. It had yet to shed the slight wavering tenor that came
with youth.

“Sure you are,” said another sardonically.

“That goes for you too, Fili,” chided Balin.

“Now where is this Mister Boggins, I should very much like to see what all the fuss is ab—” the first voice said, cutting itself off as Bilbo appeared in the doorway of the kitchen.

Bilbo felt the inferno of fury descend coldly to the bottom of his stomach as four pairs of eyes turned to him simultaneously. To his utter horror, he felt himself shrink under their combined weight.

“There you are, Mister Baggins! We were thinking you had gone to bed after that splendid performance!” greeted Balin, cheerful and friendly as ever. He seemed to have availed himself to more of the running water, because his face looked a lot less bloody, though some stubborn rusty spots still clung to the silver strands of his beard.

Bilbo looked over to the two newcomers in dismay. Balin and Dwalin had been depressingly accurate in their decision to call them boys instead of men—they were exceedingly young. The brunette, whose hair was a wild tangle pulled back into a low bun, couldn’t have been more than nineteen underneath the blood, grime, and what seemed to be the first attempts at stubble. Bilbo realized that he had been the one ineffectually firing crossbow bolts. The other, blonde with a short-cropped beard and hair resembling a lion’s mane, couldn’t have been much older, twenty or twenty-one at most.

Of course, Bilbo thought exhaustedly, only two dumb university kids would’ve had the grand idea of climbing on top of a greenhouse to escape a horde of zom—infected.

Before Bilbo could answer, or say anything at all for that matter, the brunette had rushed up and started pumping Bilbo’s hand in a decidedly one-sided handshake.

“Kili, at your service!” Kili exclaimed with no shortage of ebullience. “Those were some great shots, Mister Boggins! You almost matched up with Mister Dwalin, though not quite! Is it true you were using an antique safari rifle? And that you have an arms cabinet here to rival those gun nuts in America?”

“Kili,” Dwalin warned.

“I would love to see it when you have a moment,” continued Kili obliviously.

Bilbo tried and failed not to jump when a heavy, muscled arm slung itself across his shoulders and a blonde head entered his peripheral vision, far too close for decorum, let alone comfort.

“Oh, lay off him Ki,” said the blonde, with a grin that Bilbo supposed was his sincere attempt at roguish. “Fili, at your service. That was a fine idea with the chickens, Mister Boggins.”

“Fili! Kili! Give Mister Baggins some air,” Balin barked, his expression suddenly becoming stern. He spoke a few unintelligible sentences before adding, “Can’t you see the poor man is on the verge?”

Bilbo let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. He shrugged Fili off with borderline violence and yanked his hand from Kili’s aggressive handshake, who had still been holding it in a tight grip. Neither of them looked contrite in the slightest. Instead, they shared twin looks of mischief, communicating silently like it was all some sort of joke that only they were in on. At that, Bilbo
felt his anger abruptly return, which only intensified as he saw the crossbow, Dwalin’s twin axes, and a sword of all things cluttering his kitchen table.

He couldn’t help it. He exploded.

“No weapons on the table, please!” he exclaimed in an almost-yell that sounded exceedingly shrill, even by his own standards. Bilbo found he didn’t much care.

The kitchen suddenly fell silent. Fili and Kili looked at Bilbo strangely, his outburst having seemingly interrupted them in ribbing each other about their recent misadventure.

“Mister Baggins, are you feeling well?” asked Balin for the second time that night, not unkindly.

“Oh yes, just peachy,” said Bilbo sarcastically, tone dripping with venom. “Who wouldn’t be after a night like this? Being forced to murder neighbors—one of whom was a friend of my father’s, I might add—in defense of strangers whom I’ve never met, though now I suppose I’m expected to host them as house guests! No, I’m just fine, especially after you all went about endangering my food supply and my chickens and my father’s heirloom tomatoes. And now there are weapons on my table, breaking the one rule my mother holds most dear in this house! Oh yes! Everything’s just WONDERFUL.”

Bilbo’s voice cracked on the last word, and he suppressed a little sob as he scrubbed a hand down his face. He all but collapsed into his armchair. Silence rang in the kitchen following the outburst, time stretching indeterminately as Bilbo attempted to compose himself.

“Your mum had a rule about weapons on the table?”

“Kili, you sodding idiot,” Dwalin grumbled, tweaking one of the boy’s prominent ears.

“Ow! What did I say?” he whined. Fili shot him a withering look.

“What did I say about being polite!” Balin rumbled, though he also shot Bilbo’s slumped form a queer look that made Bilbo desperately want to flip him off, sheer propriety being the only thing holding him back.

“I was being perfectly polite! I was just asking a question!” Kili argued, rounding on Balin.

“You never know when you stick your foot in your idiotic mouth,” Fili quipped, while also side-eyeing Bilbo. “Though to be fair, it was Mister Boggins who shot his own greenhouse—”

“Fili,” Balin warned, though he already sounded halfway to conceding Fili’s point.

“What! It’s true!” said Fili defensively. Balin groaned and Kili let out a hoot of laughter. An argument suddenly erupted amongst the three of them, while Dwalin looked on in exasperation.

Bilbo was done.

“THAT’S IT!” he snapped, though it seemed that the other occupants of the room hardly heard it over the steadily rising voices trying to talk over each other. He jumped out of his chair, ready to do... what, he didn’t exactly know, but something. “I want you all out of my house this instant—”

For what seemed to be the umpteenth time this night, the room was startled into silence by a knock on the kitchen door. Dwalin and Balin shot each other simultaneous nervous glances before eyeing Bilbo warily. It was infuriating.
“Oh, don’t get up,” huffed Bilbo, stomping over to the door and carelessly flinging it open before anyone could tell him otherwise, zombies—because Bilbo didn’t have any patience left to call a duck anything other than a duck—be damned. “Hello, I’m dreadfully sorry, but I’m not running an inn service and we are absolutely full up to… night…” Bilbo trailed off, voice failing him as he registered the sight on the porch.

“Ah, well I’m sorry to hear that,” said Gandalf with no shortage of humor. “But surely you can make an exception for a very old friend. Who also may have brought some friends of his own.”

There, much as he had just this morning, stood Gandalf Greyhame, sunhat on and broadsword still strapped to his hip. This time however, he had brought along a crowd of about eight or nine other people who were shuffling restlessly on the porch and eyeing the darkness, and Hamfast, warily. Bilbo gaped helplessly, words failing him.

“My dear boy, whatever happened to your greenhouse?” asked Gandalf with concern. “It looked to be in absolute peak condition this morning.”

“We caught a couple of your chickens for you!” a cheerful voice with a thick Eastern European brogue called from near the back of the group, triumphantly holding a terrified fowl over their head. He couldn’t really see the person, just their tattered fur-lined trapper hat.

Bilbo’s vision began to tunnel.

“Bilbo? Is something the matter?” Gandalf asked worriedly. His voice sounded far away, and his face was the only thing Bilbo could see.

“Oh dear,” Bilbo croaked.

“Don’t put your weapons on the table! He hates that!” he heard Kili cry.

Then his knees buckled, and he promptly fainted.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, and thank you so much for all the kudos and words of support! I’m honestly shocked any of you like it, haha. Just a quick note on update schedule: there is none at the moment. I guess it depends for now on inspiration, of which I have plenty.

Translation notes:
ёбаные идиоты [yobanye idioty] -- fucking idiots

Music that goes with this chapter:
One of These Nights - Eagles
Self Control - Laura Branigan
Chapter Summary

A bad dream, some conversation, and then one last visitor arrives.

Chapter Notes

Wow !!! I can't believe what lovely feedback I've been getting on this fic ! I honestly can't believe it, I'm bonkers grateful.

This is the first in kind of a three-part expository chapter arc, so unfortunately, uh, not a lot happens. And not a lot is going to happen by way of heart-pounding action for the next couple chapters. But who doesn't like some exposition, character interaction, and internal emotional drama, amirite? Imao. I swear I will explain language stuff and everything else in the next couple chapters, but I hate writing paragraphs of just exposition (it's boring to do and I'm afraid it's boring to read), and anything that can't be explained in dialogue is torture for me. So thank you so much for your patience. Also, mentions of past Beorn/Bilbo, which will also come up later though not in any material way, which is why I haven't tagged it. And guess who shows up ????

TW for dream sequences/unreality, overt implied homophobia (not from any of the company, nor will it ever), standard gore, mild/mentioned alcohol use, and a lot of standing around and talking as I try and juggle fourteen distinct characters in a single scene

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Dad, I’ve met someone.”

On an intellectual level, Bilbo knew that this must be a dream. He knew logically that it had been years since he’d been to Oxford proper, let alone the tiny, freezing studio flat he had occupied during his postgrad days in the early aughts. What’s more, it had all the hazy qualities that came with dreams based in memory, including the vague feeling that he knew exactly what was to come but was otherwise unable to keep it from happening.

The flat in his dream was just as Bilbo remembered it: In short, dismal. Having refused to dip into the trust fund that had recently become available to him, Bilbo was living mainly off his Ph.D. stipend (which was a pittance) and the money he earned working the morning shift at a local independent bookshop. The heat barely worked, the floors creaked awfully, and the roof leaked from time to time. There was barely enough space between the desk and small kitchenette for a queen size mattress to be plapped straight onto the bare floor. And speaking of the mattress, it was currently occupied by a gigantic, softly snoring lump burrowed into the blankets.

“Oh dear,” Dad sighed from Bag End, his voice sounding tinny on the other end of the phone line. “Well I suppose it had to happen eventually. Is it serious?”
Bilbo glanced in the direction of the mountain on his bed. He remembered his heart swelling full to burst at the sight the first time around, but now all he felt was strangely detached. It snuffled, shifting toward the warmth of Bilbo’s recently vacated side and away from the window, which Bilbo had recently taped over so the biting November rain wouldn’t seep in through the cracks of the frame. It seemed to be working well enough today, but it still let the cold in something awful.

“Yeah, I think so,” Bilbo heard himself say, mouth moving of its own accord in a script he would analyze and agonize over in years to come. “We’re thinking we’d like to come to Bag End for Christmas, if that’s alright.”

“Oh my, it must be serious then,” Dad replied wryly. “What’s her name?”

He’d anticipated what his father was going to say, but Bilbo’s heart froze all the same. He clutched the phone cord in a white-knuckled grip, twisting it around his fist agitatedly.

“Beorn,” he said.

“Beorn? What sort of a name is that?”

“A cognate of Bjørn. It’s Norwegian, Dad,” said Bilbo, deliberately misinterpreting the question.

“Norwegian!” Dad crowed—or well, as much as he could crow in that markedly reserved way of his. Bilbo could just imagine him giving a few proud puffs of his pipe, the Bungo Baggins equivalent of slapping his thigh in joy. He was no doubt picturing the daughter-in-law of his dreams, some sort of quintessential blonde Scandanavian beauty that Bilbo had somehow managed to woo against all odds.

“Good on you, Bill. And here your mother and I were worried you were spending too much time in that computer lab to get out and meet any nice young ladies.”

The part of Bilbo that knew he was dreaming, knew exactly how this conversation would end, screamed at him to hang up the phone, laugh it off, and go back to bed with his great bear of a bedmate. Perhaps they could sleep until the holidays were over, or better yet, dip into his trust fund after all and make plans to go to Fuerteventura and spend Christmas on the beach. He urged himself do literally anything else but continue the conversation on its current trajectory and to just keep his huge gob shut.

“Actually,” his traitorous mouth supplied, “Er, Beorn is...well. Beorn is. Beorn’s a man, Dad.”

Silence rang loudly from the other end of the line. If it weren’t for the lack of dial tone, Bilbo would have thought his father had hung up on him.

“You mother would love it if you came home for Christmas, of course,” said Bungo, as if he hadn’t heard him, “but you’ll have to let us know soon, in case we do have to offer your room to Adalgrim.”
“I don’t know. I’ll have to see.”

“Good lad. Well, I should be letting you go then. You must be very busy building computers or doing whatever it is you do.” Bilbo, in fact, did not build computers. He was actually more of an applied mathematician, but it wasn’t worth correcting.

“All right, Dad,” said Bilbo tightly. Then, a little desperately and perhaps somewhat out of character, he added, “I love you.”

“...Right then. Good-bye.” Bungo hung up with a click.

Bilbo stared at the receiver.

“Where has my little bunny gone to?” a sleepy voice called from the bed. “It is so cold without him that I fear my balls should freeze off!”

Bilbo forced a smile on his face, hanging the phone back up on its wall mount.

“Coming,” he said softly.

And this is where the dream usually ended, with crushing sadness and the feeling of realizing that something precious may have been broken beyond repair. But not this time. Instead, it continued, and Bilbo found himself at a loss. He didn’t know, couldn’t remember, what happened next. Dazedly, he crossed the short distance from the phone’s spot in the kitchenette to the bed.

“I’m so cold,” Beorn groaned.

He was still underneath the covers, but had begun to shiver so violently that the mattress began to shake. Bilbo’s mouth went dry. Strangely, he felt his thick woolen socks suddenly become soaked, as if he was standing in a puddle. Slowly, he peeled back the comforter.

It wasn’t Beorn.

Gore erupted from the bed, soaking Bilbo head to toe with viscera. He fell backward, landing hard on his bottom in a pool of what he now knew was blood. Pale hands clawed at him, hooking around his ankle and dragging him through the slop to the bed. Terrified beyond reason, he followed the source of the hands to their owner, realizing he was now face to face with the undead shop clerk. He stared at Bilbo with one icy blue eye, the other hanging all the way out of its socket.

“I’m sooo cold,” the clerk wheezed. Flesh seemed to slide off the bones of his face as he spoke. Another set of hands tore at his hair from behind him. Bilbo struggled, twisting around to see that it was Daisy Proudfoot. Half her head was gone, her brain dribbling onto the floor. “How could you do this to me, Bilbo?” she screeched through what was left of her jaw, which was only loosely connected to her head. She scratched at his face with sharp nails, making deep gouges. “What would your father think?”

“I’m sorry,” he sobbed, choking on bile.

“You killed us!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“You’re such a disappointment.”
Bilbo cried, waiting for death as they jostled and tore at him. Suddenly, blessedly, he felt teeth at his neck. There was pressure and—

Bilbo sat up straight with a yelp, feeling like he was in the throes of a heart attack. He clutched at his chest, launching himself to the cold ground in an effort to get away from his attackers. Suddenly there were hands on him, which caused Bilbo to struggle even harder.

“—ilbo! Bilbo!” a familiar voice called, though he heard it like he was underwater. Slowly, he began to realize that he was not being eaten alive in his postgrad Oxford flat, but rather curled into a ball on the floor of Bag End’s kitchen.

“Bilbo,” said Gandalf, who had crouched down to rub his back soothingly. “It’s alright, my boy. You’re quite safe.”

Bilbo rested his forehead on the cool tiles and willed his breathing to slow down.

“Did anybody else see that?” he asked the floor, mortified.

“No, we’re alone for now,” said Gandalf, utilizing the gentlest voice Bilbo had ever heard from him.

It made him feel foolish, as if he were a scared child that had to be soothed from a nightmare rather than a grown-ass man who had just been slightly startled by a dream. A hot flash of embarrassment jolted down his spine, but not as badly as it would have had anybody other than Gandalf been in the room.

“Well, there’s a bright side at least,” he said, willing his muscles to unlock. Gandalf gently helped Bilbo up and placed him back into the plush recesses of his armchair, which he had apparently thrown himself out of.

“I take it you had a pleasant dream then,” he remarked, puttering around the kitchen.

“On the condition you think *Nightmare on Elm Street* is a wholesome family comedy,” grumbled Bilbo.

Gandalf strained the contents of a teapot into a cup and brandished a can opener, which he used to add a splash of evaporated milk from a tin. Bilbo didn’t have the energy to remind him that he had been saving it. He also stirred in some sugar and what looked to be a dash of powdered nutmeg he had seemingly magicked from somewhere. Bilbo accepted the tea set Gandalf handed to him without protest, breathing in the floral scent of chamomile. It calmed him somewhat, though he regarded Gandalf’s addition of milk and other fixings a little dubiously.

“How long was I out?” he asked.

“Only about twenty minutes. Long enough to make tea and get everybody settled in the drawing room. It wasn’t easy, you know. You caused quite a fuss when you blacked out,” said Gandalf.

“Yes, well. It’s been a long day. Where did you get this?” Bilbo asked, holding up the teacup filled with a chamomile blend that he realized upon first sip was of much higher quality than his own, even under all the additives. He usually didn’t take his chamomile with anything, but with the thickness of the condensed milk and the added sugar and nutmeg, Bilbo supposed it reminded him of a sort of soothing herbal latte.

“I’m beginning to see that,” said Gandalf, taking a seat at the table. "And one of my companions—Dori, I think his name is—provided it. He is apparently quite the gentleman connoisseur, or at least
enough of one to bring his own tea assortment with him on a quest to save the world from a plague of the undead."

"Right. Is that what you’re doing,” said Bilbo dryly, taking another sip. He supposed the drink was rather good. Still a bit too hot, and maybe heavier than what he normally liked, but good.

“I thought you didn’t want to hear about it,” said Gandalf with an implacable smirk.

“I don’t!” Bilbo took a resolute gulp of his tea-latte but ended up scalding his tongue.

Gandalf laughed openly at him, and it took everything Bilbo had not to stick out his burnt tongue at the man. The moment of levity soon passed, however. Bilbo was left to pensively stare into his cup, thinking about the dream.

“Do you want to talk about it?” asked Gandalf softly, as if reading his mind.

“There’s really not much to talk about. Just the standard anxieties that turned into a nightmare a little too topical for comfort,” he replied. Then Bilbo paused, silently waffling. The minute seemed to stretch, the only sound in the entire kitchen the clatter of Bilbo’s cup on its saucer.

“Dad was there, I think,” he said finally, taking much more care while sipping this time around.

Gandalf remained quiet for a moment, considering this. As if carefully weighing what he was about to say, he had a few false starts before he finally settled on the words. His clear blue gaze laid heavily on Bilbo, who shivered.

“You’re not well, Bilbo.”

“What does 'well' mean anyway?” asked Bilbo with an ironic grimace. "Can any of us really be well nowadays?"

Gandalf's expression pinched in concern. “Yes, but I talked to Balin shortly before you woke up. He seems to think you’re a polite enough fellow, if not a little… unhinged.” He said this with no shortage of delicacy.

“I’m sure I would have made a better impression if they hadn’t made me shoot my chickens,” Bilbo muttered.

Gandalf ignored him. “When was the last time you talked to Bungo?” he asked instead.

Bilbo balked. “Oh, so you’re my therapist now?” he sneered, tone perhaps a little bit sourer and a little bit meaner than he had strictly intended it to be. He set down his tea cup on the saucer with an audible clatter. “Going to ask me about my relationship with my dad and psychoanalyze me, are you?”

“It was just a question, Bilbo,” said Gandalf sharply, expression growing cloudy. “I know you two have been on rocky ground for years. Lord knows I had to hear enough about it from Belladonna.”

Bilbo laughed humorlessly.

“Well then, you should know that the last time Dad and I saw or spoke to one another was during a disastrous attempt on my part to come home for Mum’s birthday about three years ago,” said Bilbo. "Even then he barely said three words to me, two of which were exclusively related to asking me when I was going to get married. And when I reminded him that I hadn’t exactly been in a position to look for the past couple years, he used the last to try and set me up with a Brandybuck
girl almost half my age.”

Bilbo remembered the occasion with no shortage of bitterness. It had been the last time he returned to Bag End before the start of the pandemic. In a way, it had felt good to go home after so long and to be in the place where he had grown up. And he certainly always adored seeing Mum, even in the worst of circumstances—such as Bungo trying to pawn him off in an attempt to twist Bilbo into something he deemed worthy of respect. However, it had really only served to stir up memories of earlier, happier times. In some aspects, it hadn't been so different from how it was nowadays, though if given the choice Bilbo would much rather take a tense, unhappy Bag End over an empty one. Even if it had been a bad time, he decided that household discord was better than the loneliness that had been haunting him as of late.

Gandalf had the tact to look chastened.

“I’m sorry,” said Gandalf, who to his credit did sound sincere. “Yes, I do remember that. Your mother and I tried our hardest to convince Bungo that he was acting awfully toward you, but… well. You know how he was better than most.”

“Yes, I suppose I do,” said Bilbo, stirring the drink that he couldn't rightfully call tea.

Gandalf sighed. “You remind me of him, you know. You take more after Belladonna in many ways—probably for the better, I might add—but still. You have a lot of Bungo in you.”

Bilbo stared at a spot just past Gandalf’s shoulder, unable to look the old lawyer in the eye. It would have been somewhat of a lie to call Gandalf and Bungo close friends. As a general rule, Bungo really only kept acquaintances, Bilbo's mother being the sole exception. Meanwhile, Gandalf had focused singularly on Mum in a way that Bilbo only otherwise recognized from his father, to the point where Gandalf usually wouldn't come calling on Bag End unless Belladonna was around. But she was usually around, and Bilbo remembered him always drifting in and out of the house at will, often absconding with her and traveling everywhere and anywhere around the world, from Kathmandu to Cusco, Nursultan to Nairobi. Visual evidence of their adventures dotted the walls and mantels of Bag End, scattered among Bilbo's unfortunate school pictures and various family wedding photos.

By contrast, Bungo was a homebody who hated going anywhere, something that Bilbo thought from time to time that he had unfortunately seemed to inherit. However, Bilbo’s father adored Mum and all her little quirks, and he lived for being able to indulge his wife in all manner of ways. From little things, like picking up flowers from the market every Friday, to grand gestures such as building her a house as a wedding present (of which Bag End was the result), he attempted to provide for her every want or whim. The only thing it seemed he wasn't able to satisfy was her sense of wanderlust, especially since he was the sort of person who thought that Brighton was exotic.

That’s where Gandalf had come in. Bungo apparently hadn't taken issue with his wife spending so much time with another man, or at least not with Gandalf specifically. Bilbo knew the villagers in Hobbiton liked to spread rumors about the home life of Bag End, but he knew what was and wasn't true. He knew that Mum and Bungo were still mad for each other even after decades of marriage, and that Gandalf and Bungo's relationship was of the sort one had with an affectionate, if somewhat distant, brother-in-law. What the three of them had was not quite friendship, but something based on a mutual respect bound by trust and maybe a little bit of love. Bilbo liked to call it family when he was being maudlin.

While Gandalf and Mum were off wandering, Bilbo would be left at Bag End with Bungo, where they would while away most of their days in quiet companionship awaiting their return. While
Bilbo’s father had always been stubborn and emotionally reticent (except for when it came to Mum, of course), he also had the greatest capacity for gentility and kindness, particularly to children and animals. Bilbo had adored the time he spent alone with his father as a child, quiet and unsentimental though it was. It was a time of warmth, a time before things had become complicated by an adulthood Bilbo could never successfully mold into the precise shape of what was expected of him, in spite of his best efforts.

Looking back on it like this, Bilbo’s childhood seemed for all intents and purposes to have been something like idyllic. Maybe his memory of it was perhaps a bit too rosy. But as he thought about that time with his father and what Gandalf had said, his heart physically began to hurt. He clutched at his chest, face crumpling.

“I miss him, Gandalf,” said Bilbo, breath quietly hitching. “Even for all his faults, I miss him. I miss both of them. God, I miss them so much.”

“My dear Bilbo,” said Gandalf softly, leaning forward and resting a comforting hand on his knee. Bilbo tried to hold it in before he realized that he had already cried so much already that day, so what was the point of holding back, really? The tears came once more.

“I miss the way things used to be,” he hiccuped, sniffling pathetically.

And he did, on the tacit condition that what he truly longed for were the days before that disastrous phone call in Oxford. He missed speaking to Dad on the phone, conversing about recipes or about how Mum’s new project had gone disastrously (but hilariously) awry. He missed having lunch with Mum when she would come to the city for a visit, discussing how Dad’s tomatoes were coming along. He missed the simplicity of home life, of just having a family. And the worst part was that it hadn’t even been a fucking zombie apocalypse that had torn that apart for Bilbo. No, he had done it all by himself.

Bilbo let out one last indulgent blubber before attempting to rein himself in. There was still hope, he thought. They could still come back. Bilbo could try and repair what they once had, his unfortunate quirk of sexuality aside. While he knew that it was impossible to try to ignore or deny it—on the contrary, he certainly wasn’t ashamed of being gay—he could still hope that these new, admittedly very scary circumstances would be enough to remind them all of their affection for one another, because that sort of feeling never just went away completely. It was an unconditional Bagginsean emotion concerning love for family that Bilbo knew was still among the three of them somewhere. Not gone, only long since buried by petty old squabbles that didn't matter anymore.

All that needed to happen was for Belladonna and Bungo to come back to Bag End. And Bilbo had to be there waiting for them.

Gandalf gazed at him with something between pity and empathy, which Bilbo hated. He reached into one of the many pockets of his fatigues and pulled out a neatly embroidered handkerchief, handing it to Bilbo. He took it gratefully and dabbed at his eyes.

Almost by accident, he breathed in the scent that still clung to the fabric, a soft floral fragrance reminiscent of lavender and roses. It brought a fresh wave of tears to his eyes. It was the same perfume Mum wore almost every day without fail. Then he noticed the monogram: Two small letter B’s had been stitched neatly into one corner, flanked by two bell-shaped purple flowers. Bilbo’s heart stuttered as his grip tightened on the handkerchief.

“Is this one of Mum’s?” he asked, running a reverent thumb over the stitching. Gandalf glanced at it, raising his wild eyebrows in surprise as if he too was just now noticing the detail.
“Oh, why I do believe it is, actually. You can keep that, then,” he said. Bilbo supposed the remark was meant to be nonchalant, but even Gandalf couldn't keep the slight waver from his voice. The old lawyer quickly turned his head away, and Bilbo swore that he saw his eyes become misty.

Since returning home, Bilbo hadn’t felt closer to his mother than he did at this particular moment, even in comparison to the entire past month he had spent ostensibly surrounded by her things. He clutched the handkerchief, knowing full well that the seemingly casual act of relinquishing the item wasn’t nearly as light for Gandalf as he made it out to be. He and his mother were something close to best friends, after all, having been nearly inseparable companions throughout all of Bilbo’s childhood and adolescence.

“Thank you,” he said, carefully tucking it into his pocket.

Gandalf waved him off. “Think nothing of it. Forgot I had it, actually. Are you finished with your tea?”

“Yes, if you can call it that,” said Bilbo with a condescending sniff, this time making an actual effort to pull himself back together. He set the tea cup and saucer aside on the arm of his chair, trying to regain some semblance of composure. Gandalf smiled through his bushy beard at Bilbo’s snark.

“Well, I’m glad to see you’re feeling better. Shall we go join the others and make some introductions?”

Bilbo slumped back into his chair.

“Do we have to?” he muttered, thinking about the wonderful first impression he no doubt had made by swooning at the first sight of newcomers.

“Come now, Bilbo. What sort of proper Baggins would you be if you didn’t at least make some superficial overtures of being a polite host?” asked Gandalf, who was obviously holding back a chuckle.

Bilbo cursed Gandalf for knowing just what to say to needle him to action. He was nothing if not a proper Baggins, he thought, heaving himself from the armchair. However, the shock of his bare feet on the tile violently reminded him that he was still dressed in his pyjamas, which consisted of ratty tartan sleep pants and an ancient t-shirt from the University of Exeter that had conspicuous holes in the collar. Bilbo felt the blood drain from his face.

“Gandalf. I cannot go out there looking like this,” he wheezed, clutching the hem of the shirt as if to rip it off himself then and there.

“Nonsense,” said Gandalf, forcefully grabbing him by the shoulder and steering him out of the kitchen with a strength that utterly belied his advanced age. “If I do recall, you’ve already received four whole guests in your sleepwear. What’s a few more?”

“That was different!” protested Bilbo, despite having already given up struggling against Gandalf’s iron grip. Instead he opted for frantically smoothing his unruly bronze curls as he was dragged down the dim hallway toward the drawing room. It emitted a faint glow into the corridor, the brightness of which grew commensurate with Bilbo’s dread as they traveled closer. Gandalf ended up all but shoving Bilbo into the room in front of him, where, on first count, eleven pairs of eyes turned to him simultaneously. Bilbo quailed.

The atmosphere was, to put it in the lightest possible terms, tense. There were people scattered all
over the room, and (conspicuously not on the coffee table) was an assortment of axes, swords, a crossbow, a sledgehammer, and what seemed to be a mattock leaning neatly in a line against the far wall. Bilbo didn’t know exactly what to make of this, so he ignored it. His uninvited house guests had built a roaring fire—he could only hope that they had opened the flue the proper amount—and thrown off the drop-cloths he had draped over the furniture right after he moved back in, piling them in a wadded bunch in the corner. They had then proceeded to drape themselves over the furniture instead, along with raiding the liquor cabinet and wet bar to avail themselves of what looked to be Mum’s good vodka. They had apparently made themselves very much at home, yet the mood was as if somebody had just died.

They were a ragged looking bunch, to be sure. Bilbo noticed they were all either bearded or mustachioed in some way, and a good portion had hair that was far longer than what Bilbo’s parents would have deemed proper. None of them had deigned to take off their muddy boots, almost certainly tacking in dirt and who knows what else. That is, all except for one fellow perched on the edge of an ottoman, whose feet were shod in what looked like thick, hand-knit socks. In possession of a bowl cut and little billy-goat beard, he somehow looked even younger than Kili. He was the only one not looking at Bilbo, and instead stared uneasily into the fire, in front of which sat both Fili and Kili directly on the hearth. Heads tilted closely together, they sipped their vodka in what Bilbo already knew was uncharacteristic silence.

Gandalf cleared his throat from somewhere behind Bilbo. He startled, and the room continued to stare at him in expectation.

“Hullo,” said Bilbo, hyper-aware of the feeling of his bare toes flexing nervously in the high pile carpet.

Silence was his only response. Dwalin, who was the only one who didn’t seem to be drinking, shot him an irritated glare. He was still smoking like a chimney, apparently trying to single-handedly fill the room with clove-smelling smoke.

After a few long, awkward moments, Bilbo was about ready to excuse himself to go upstairs and bury himself under his comforter. If he ignored these intruders long enough, they would go away, right?

Suddenly there was a sigh.

“Oh, come on lads, can’t you see the poor bloke’s trying his hardest to be friendly?” one of the men said finally.

Bilbo recognized the trapper hat he wore as belonging to the person who had triumphantly held up one of his chickens. He had a cheerful face adorned by a robust horseshoe moustache, and was in possession of a thick accent that sounded vaguely Eastern European but with the same glottal undertones present in Balin and Dwalin’s. His hair was certainly of a length that was longer than normal, braided neatly into two tidy black plaits on either side of his head. He turned to smile at Bilbo, and though it still held an undercurrent of anxiety, it did cause the corners of his glinting dark eyes to crinkle in a way that most would consider handsome.

“Bofur, at your service,” he said, sticking out the hand that wasn’t holding his vodka glass. Bilbo took it warily, thoughts traveling to Kili’s earlier assault. To his relief, the handshake was firm but curt.

“Bilbo Baggins, at yours,” he replied tersely.

“Can I interest you in a drink?” asked Bofur with a wink, as if he wasn’t in Bilbo’s own house
offering him a sample of some of Bilbo’s own booze. "No need to be so on edge, Mister Baggins, we don’t bite! That’s really more the M.O. of our friends outside than ours.”

“I’m fine, thanks,” said Bilbo, tone brusque in an attempt to convey his annoyance at the man’s presumption. And in any case, the last thing he needed right now after a night of being so maudlin was alcohol, though he did spare a longing thought for the top shelf, aged single-malt scotch he knew his father kept in the bar.

Bofur shrugged good-naturedly, saluting him with his tumbler and smiling. “Suit yourself, then. This really is good stuff, you know! Never thought Polish vodka could beat the swill that comes out of Moscow; you may have converted me! Here, let me introduce you to the rest of the lads,” he said cheerfully. "I understand you’ve already met Balin and Dwalin and the boys.”

None of the men in question made the slightest attempt to acknowledge Bilbo. Even Balin, who earlier had been unwaveringly polite, stared into his vodka glass with a pinched expression. Bofur’s smile became slightly strained.

“Right. Well, over there we have Oin and his brother Gloin,” he said undeterred, gesturing to two men sitting close together on the sofa.

“What?” called one of the men loudly, cupping his hand around his ear. He seemed to be almost of an age of Gandalf, in possession of a long shock of thick silver hair and a beard to match.

“Turn your hearing aid on, Old Man,” said the other, who looked to be somewhat younger. His mop of flaming red hair had not yet begun to fade to gray, but he was certainly older than Bilbo. He had a scar just above his left eyebrow, which with the red hair gave him something of a fierce look. Though, it didn’t come close to rivaling Dwalin.

"What’s going on?" said the first man, leaning closer to the other.

“Bofur’s introducing us to that mousey-looking fellow in his pyjamas,” the man with the red hair replied. Bilbo felt his ears turn pink, wishing to death he had thought to get dressed at some point in the night.

“Oin’s got a bit of a hearing impairment. He doesn’t like to turn his aid on when he doesn’t need to, saving battery and all that,” explained Bofur as the one called Oin seemingly fiddled with something near his ear. Bilbo assumed it must be a cochlear implant hidden by all the hair. He smacked the side of his head, suddenly turning his attention to Bilbo.

“Right, that’s better. What did you say your name was?" he asked.

“Bill, I think,” said Gloin before Bilbo had the chance to speak. It was all just as well, because Bofur quickly moved on.

“And over there we have Dori, Ori, and Nori. All half-brothers,” he said, pointing in the direction of the young man on the ottoman, who perked up nervously.

The wing-backed chair that accompanied the ottoman was occupied by a much older man—probably in his mid-fifties, even—who had neatly coiffed white hair and a handlebar moustache, visibly in contrast with the relative scruffiness of the rest of the room’s occupants, Bilbo included. Despite his heavy-set face, he was, by sheer objectivity, elegantly beautiful in a sort of dignified way. Interestingly, he had a large engraved silver cuff clipped to the shell of one ear, though it only seemed to add to his appearance rather than distract from it. He nodded at Bilbo.

“How do you do. Dori, at your service,” he greeted politely. Even his accent, which was for all
intents and purposes the same thick Eastern European stock as Bofur’s, seemed to be somehow more refined than the rest of them. He did indeed seem like the sort of person who would carry around his own tea assortment. The thought must have been evident on Bilbo’s face, because Gandalf huffed out the beginnings of a laugh, which he quickly covered with what passed for a cough.

“This is Ori,” continued Dori, gesturing to the boy on the ottoman while simultaneously shooting Gandalf a look of sincere concern. ”Mister Gandalf, are you quite alright?"

Gandalf waved him off, only wheezing harder.

Ori jumped up from the ottoman, determinedly straightening his jumper and quickly striding over to Bilbo to shake his hand with an impressively firm grip, but not overly so. Bilbo was beginning to realize with relief the aggressive handshake that Kili had subjected him to earlier was in fact his own quirk, and not some sort of un navigable cultural difference inherent in these foreigners of indeterminate origin.

“At your service. How do you do,” said the boy, parroting his much older brother a bit shyly, in spite of his outward bravado. Up close, he looked to be about eighteen.

“About as well as I can be, I suppose,” replied Bilbo, charmed despite himself. He could see Dori beaming with pride from behind Ori, who looked back at him as if in confirmation of something.

“And that would make me Nori. At your service,” said a voice close to Bilbo’s ear.

Bilbo jumped with a strangled yelp, whirling around to face a man he hadn’t yet seen.

He had long copper-colored hair that was half pulled back into a high ponytail, the rest of it falling down loose to frame a roguish face adorned by a very elegantly styled beard. He was very much like his brother in this instance, and Bilbo could only wonder how Dori and Nori kept themselves so well groomed given the circumstances. Bilbo hadn’t seen Nori upon his first assessment of the drawing room, so he supposed that there were in fact twelve people gathered around the fire. Fourteen, if you counted Gandalf and Bilbo himself.

“Nori!” cried Dori, aghast. Ori scrubbed an exasperated hand down his face.

“Sorry lad, did I frighten you?” laughed Nori, not sounding sorry at all. His glottal accent wasn’t nearly as pronounced as the rest of them, not even compared to Fili’s or Kili’s, which sounded more Northern or Scottish than anything else.

Bofur scowled, a look that didn’t sit well on his face.

“Me âsnân tada Mahal duhû kansu tah,” he spat gutturally at Nori, who just laughed harder. While Bilbo was pondering where he may have heard the language before, Bofur laid a gentle hand on his shoulder and steered him away. The vodka in his tumbler sloshed dangerously, and Bilbo prayed it didn’t splash onto the wood of the coffee table.

“Sorry about him. He wasn’t raised the right way,” sighed Bofur, before perking up again.

“Anyway, I’ve saved the best for last! Mister Baggins, meet my cousin Bifur, and my brother Bombur.”

His hand still rested on Bilbo’s shoulder, but he was too polite to shrug it off. These people seemed to be much more comfortable with casual physicality between strangers than Bilbo, who had been raised in a fairly reserved household. Bilbo tried his best to psychically project his discomfort, but it didn’t seem to be working.
“Bombur, at your service,” an improbably rotund man said softly from where he was seated on the chaise lounge. He had a kind face, with balding, short-cropped auburn hair and a thick walrus moustache. He sipped his vodka demurely.

Standing next to the chaise was what Bilbo could only describe to be the definition of a wild man. If Gloin’s fierceness of visage was soundly eclipsed by Dwalin’s, then this man blew the both of them out of the water. Two wide, frenzied eyes peered out from beneath a thick, unkempt bush of black hair that was streaked with pure white. Seeming to mesh seamlessly into his hair and leaving only enough open space on his face to see his eyes and nose, the man’s beard was very much the same. Overall, he gave the distinct impression of a feral, black-haired Santa Claus.

“Selâm,” he croaked in a gravelly voice, as if it was rough with disuse. He pounded his fist on his chest, which only helped reinforce Bilbo’s overall impression of untamed ferocity.

“You’ll have to excuse Bifur,” said Bombur sadly. Bilbo had to forcibly drag his eyes away from the man in question in order to pay attention to what he was saying. “I’m afraid he had a head injury while fighting the Russians in Crimea a few years back. It dented part of his skull near his frontal lobe, which seems to have brought on a touch of aphasia. He can understand what you’re saying perfectly well, but in terms of speaking he can only manage a few words in the Crimean dialect of Turkish. Really though, he’s very kind and capable in every other capacity except speech.”

Bifur nodded vigorously, as if in confirmation.

“It’s... It’s very nice to meet you both,” said Bilbo, doing his best to sound sincere. It must have worked, since Bombur blushed while Bifur smiled and pounded his chest again. Bofur beamed.

“Well then, that’s everyone it seems!” he said, slapping Bilbo on the back.

“What do you mean everyone, you kakhuf inbarathrag,” Dwalin roared, suddenly on his feet from where he had been perched on the sofa arm. Bofur and Bilbo whirled around as one as all the eyes in the room turned to Dwalin in tandem. Bilbo was too startled to even be annoyed at how Dwalin scattered ash on the carpet.

“There’s no need for such foul language, Mister Dwalin,” said Gandalf, frowning.

“How can you say something like that when he’s still out there?” continued Dwalin roughly, ignoring the older man and striding up to Bofur.

The atmosphere, which had lightened considerably as Bilbo and Bofur made the rounds, once again became crushingly morose. Bilbo watched the transition happen in real time as Bofur’s smile slid off his face and he hung his head in shame.

“Burushruka igbulul e,” he murmured, downing the rest of his vodka. Dwalin grunted, seemingly appeased.

The fire crackled loudly as Fili and Kili began to mutter amongst themselves. Bilbo wandered back over to Gandalf’s side, tugging on his sleeve to get the lawyer’s attention.

“Are we waiting for someone else?” asked Bilbo quietly, not quite sure if he was ready for the thought of more uninvited company.

“Yes, just one more,” replied Gandalf in a low whisper. “We got separated on our way here. I was actually hoping he would beat us to Bag End and arrive with Balin and Fili and Kili. I normally wouldn’t be one to worry about our missing comrade, but I’ll admit he has a notoriously
abominable sense of direction.”

“That’s it,” announced Fili abruptly, standing up on the hearth.

“We’re going out to find him,” added Kili, joining him. Dwalin let out a low growl.

“Чёрт побери, ты - нет!” he barked, looking ready to strangle the both of them. Balin sighed heavily through his nose and started chugging the rest of his vodka.

“Sorry Mister Dwalin! My Russian may not be that great, but thank you anyway for the no doubt ringing endorsement,” said Kili cheekily before collecting his crossbow and the quiver of bolts that lay beside it. Fili twirled a knife that had suddenly appeared in his hand. Where he produced it from, Bilbo hadn’t the foggiest.

Dwalin’s face turned an interesting shade of purple. “Do you two think that this is some sort of game? There must be dozens of undead out there by now, given all the noise we had to make to save you and your brother’s fool asses!”

This seemed to deflate their bravado somewhat, but they looked no less determined.

“If it is a game we’re going to win it,” said Fili, voice strangely tight. “And winning includes bringing everyone back alive.”

“Oh, for the love of—”

“Wait!” cried Ori, springing back up to his feet from his recently reclaimed spot on the ottoman. “Did anybody else hear that?”

The room suddenly fell silent, all fourteen pairs of ears straining to hear any sort of odd sound they could. Bilbo thought he might have heard a faint thumping from down the hall, in the direction of the kitchen. It paused briefly, sending the room back into silence save for the dull roar of the fire. Then suddenly it picked back up in earnest, sounding louder than before.

“Mahal,” swore Dwalin.

He darted out of the room, hand on his foot-long bowie knife. Fili and Kili, for all their gusto, seemed too stunned to react.

The sounds of a small commotion drifted into the room. No doubt it was from Dwalin tripping over a chair or bumping into the kitchen table in his haste scramble to get to the door, a far cry from his practiced deliberation of movement from earlier. There were a few unintelligible words in what might have been Russian, along with what sounded strangely like a squawk. Then a door slammed, and then there was silence.

Bilbo wrung his hands apprehensively, wondering what exactly he should do with himself in this situation. Everybody’s eyes seemed to be trained on the entrance to the drawing room, waiting with baited breath. Out of the corner of his eye, Bilbo could see Bofur gripping the tumbler so hard that he was worried the crystal might shatter in the man’s hand. Gandalf, for his part, was the only one who seemed to be experiencing any sort of calm. A serene little smile played on the edge of the old man’s lips.

Dwalin soon appeared unannounced in the doorway, his huge frame blocking the view behind him. For the first time that night, he looked well and truly exhausted. He sighed and ran both hands over his bare scalp.
“Found him,” he announced bluntly.

The whole room let out a collective sigh so great Bilbo swore he could materially feel the air pressure change, the principal tension snapping so quickly it almost gave him whiplash. Dwalin dragged his feet to the sofa and threw himself down upon it, seemingly utterly spent. Dori considerately handed him his nearly full tumbler, which Dwalin promptly guzzled the contents of like he was about to get his leg sawed off.

Soon enough, a newcomer appeared in the doorway. Upon seeing him, to Bilbo's utter horror, his mouth became alarmingly dry.

The stranger appraised the room, assessing everyone in turn before his piercing blue eyes landed squarely on Bilbo, who was immediately acutely, appallingly aware that he was still barefoot in his schlubby pyjamas. He was suddenly grateful for having forgone Bofur's offer of booze, not wanting to think of what sort of unspeakable indecent impression he would have made if he was both slovenly dressed and slightly tipsy.

“What does a man have to do to get a drink around here?” the newcomer asked in a rich, sonorous baritone, echoing the theme of Bilbo’s silent ruminations while simultaneously making his knees turn to jelly.

God.

On second thought, he could really, really use some of that scotch right about now.

Chapter End Notes

Translation notes:
Me asnân tada Mahal duhû kansu tah -- [Khuzdul] You're proof that Mahal has no sense of humor.
Selâm -- [Crimean Tatar] Hello
kakhuf inbarathrag -- [Khuzdul] piece of goat shit
Burushruka igbulul e -- [Khuzdul] I am truly sorry
Чёрт побери, ты - нет [Chyort poberi, ty - nyet!] -- [Russian] Like hell you will! (lit. 'damn you - no!')

As an aside, the reason I focus so much on accents and language is because I think it's a interesting way of implying history without explicitly saying anything; so really it's just for me, and I hope it's not too distracting. (Also thanks to the Dwarrow Scholar for all the resources on Neo-Khuzdul.) Also, just for what it's worth, I absolutely do not think that Bilbo's relationship with his father is worth the angst or the prospect of reconciliation, which is impossible anyway since Belladonna and Bungo are most certainly dead. But Bilbo is the de-facto narrator here and it's his internal world that shapes the narrative, so.

Anyway, I have most of the next chapter roughly written already, so the update should be pretty fast. In any case, I also made a twitter specifically for bagginshield and writing this fic, so if you want you can follow me there @hobbitknife.

Thanks for reading as always!
Music that goes with this chapter:
We All, Us Three, Will Ride - Palace Music
Misty Mountain Hop - Led Zeppelin
Chapter Summary

In which Bilbo is formally introduced to his newest and last guest, he sticks his foot in his mouth, and all around it's not a super great time. What's worse, this man is unfairly beautiful, and also a king.

Chapter Notes

EDIT: god i had such a hard time writing this chapter that i put it up without editing it thoroughly. Most errors should be fixed now.

Well ! I said this would be quick. Anyway, this chapter sucked to write for some reason. Nothing came out right at first and it took a lot of substantial edits and tweaking to get it to a point where I felt I could post it, though I'm still not really satisfied. Anyway I'm glad to get it out there so I can move on lmfao.

As always, thank you for all your kind words of support, the kudos, and the bookmarks !!! It's frankly insane lmao

TW for alcohol use and comments that are construed within text to be prejudicial. Not many warnings this time, Bilbo's too busy being scared but also horny.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bilbo stared at the stranger in dumb captivation, hoping beyond hope that he wasn’t gaping like a fish.

While the man’s piercing blue eyes had landed on him briefly, they quickly skipped over Bilbo like he was no more than a piece of low-lying furniture. Bilbo was torn between feeling relieved and offended, though he supposed either way it gave him the chance to try to subtly scoot closer to the bar for some of that scotch.

Having concluded his assessment, the newcomer’s attention turned fully to Balin, who had appeared by the man’s side with another crystal tumbler and the bottle of Mum’s good Polish vodka in hand. Though the nods they exchanged were solemn, Balin looked to be in a notably much better mood. The man cordially accepted the glass.

"Shamukh, sakhmi astū galikh," said Balin quietly, smiling and tilting the bottle toward the newcomer.

"Kasamhili. Lo sullu batazzinin luzun," the man grumbled by way of reply.

Balin stared at him. He seemed dumbfounded for a moment, before releasing a startled snort, which soon broke into a boisterous guffaw. He clapped the stranger companionably on the
shoulder, who outwardly did nothing in response except perhaps slightly lifting the corners of his lips in a bit of a smirk.

In contrast, the rest of the room almost simultaneously erupted into a variety of hoots and cackles. Bilbo saw Bofur slapping his knee and wiping away a tear he was laughing so hard. The newcomer remained straight-faced, but in a way that clearly signaled that he was in on the joke.

The group closed ranks on each other, and Bilbo, feeling sorely left out and a little bit forgotten in his own house, observed the interaction with bewildered incomprehension.

The newcomer had the sort charismatic presence that absolutely filled a room, akin to a sudden high pressure system appearing over a piece of normally drizzly countryside. From where it had been despondently listless only moments before, the mood was now relaxed and jocular. This mysterious newcomer evidently acted as the epicenter of that good cheer, despite his apparent stoicism. Bilbo didn’t need to know the language they spoke in order to understand that, at least.

Given the circumstances, it was really only natural for Bilbo to helplessly ogle him, no matter how hard he tried not to. While he was uncomfortably reminded of how much he had involuntarily stared at Balin upon first meeting him earlier that night, this particular situation was clearly different. Balin certainly hadn’t caused a swarm of butterflies to spontaneously bloom in his stomach, after all. No offense to him of course, but this man was something else.

Bilbo could only describe the newcomer’s appearance as deeply aristocratic. Accompanying broad shoulders that perfectly filled out the upper part of his worn shearling jacket, his intense, deep-set blue eyes burned out from below a strong brow, which sloped into high cheekbones and a prominent aquiline nose that fit neatly on his striking face. Denoting an age that could have passed for anything from a tired looking forty to a well preserved fifty-five, streaks of silver accented his dark brown hair, which he wore long and pulled back into a low, wavy ponytail. Rather than actively aging him, the silver only served to make him look in a way that Bilbo would describe as ‘distinguished’. Though, age certainly had no bearing on the heart-poundingly strong jaw he possessed, which was attractively decorated with a dark, close-cropped beard.

He was, perhaps, the most handsome man that Bilbo had ever laid eyes on.

“I’m happy to see you’ve returned to us in one piece,” remarked Gandalf as Balin cheerily poured the newcomer a hefty drink, only capping the bottle once the tumbler was nearly full. Gandalf alone seemed to ignore the earlier exchange, though Bilbo could only be half sure the old man could understand the words at all.

“Gandalf,” the man rumbled discourteously by way of acknowledgement. Any previous subtle signs of a smile quickly dropping from his face, he regarded the older man with a slightly waspish expression before turning back to the open fireplace. He bizarrely splashed some of the vodka into the flames, which jumped with a low roar and cast the newcomer’s face in what were, in Bilbo’s opinion, really very comely shadows. Then the man tilted his head back and downed the still impressively full glass in one go, in spite of the fact that this particular vodka was obviously meant to be for sipping.

Good lord, Bilbo thought hysterically, transfixed by the way his adam’s apple bobbed against the long line of his throat. His own constricted in sympathy. That should have been illegal. He tried not to whimper as the man wiped at his beard with the back of his hand, handing the tumbler back to Balin with a low murmur of thanks.

“It was hell trying to get here,” the man continued, turning back to Gandalf with a scowl. “You made such a ruckus with that gunfire that I’m certain the orêk all the way up in Glasgow could...
hear you. I had to circle around five times before I could make a run for the door, they were so perturbed. What in Mahal’s good name were you thinking?"

“Really! Now see here,” blustered Gandalf.

“Oh, just admit you actually got lost,” called Dwalin impudently from his recumbent position on the couch. Face flushed and accent slightly thicker than normal, his tongue had evidently been loosened by drink. “Tell us the real story, and don’t spare details! I personally like the one where you almost tripped over a chicken when stumbling through the door.”

The newcomer’s shoulders became rigid as some of his companions sniggered once more, though at a much quieter volume this time around. All except, of course, for Fili and Kili, who apparently thought this was hilarious and did nothing to hide that fact. To his credit, the man suffered through this with an admirable amount of dignity.

Splayed out on the other end of the sofa from Oin and Gloin, Dwalin slumped deeply into the cushions and rested Dori’s empty tumbler on the shelf of his wide chest. It was an amusingly far cry from the rigid military bearing he displayed earlier. Bilbo had rather thought that Russians and other similar Eastern Europeans were supposed to be prodigious at holding their liquor. Apparently, Dwalin proved to be the exception to the stereotype.

The man in question waved his glass toward his brother, silently demanding another drink. Balin scrubbed a hand down his beard in exasperation, but topped off the glass anyway.

“За короля," toasted Dwalin. He took a much more moderate swig of his vodka before adding, "Besides, be sure to ask your halfwit nephews what happened before you start slinging accusations. They have quite a story to tell, don’t you lads?"

Without missing a beat, the dark-haired man swiftly rounded on Fili and Kili, seemingly more willing to pursue that particular conversational thread rather than admit to his own apparent lack of directional sense. Or the fact that he had stumbled over what was very likely one of Bilbo’s escaped hens.

The boys, having visibly relaxed at the newcomer’s entrance and seemingly gone back to their usual good-natured selves, stiffened where they were still standing on the edge of the hearth. They sent each other panicked glances before fixing the newcomer with identical mournful stares, as if they had somehow tacitly agreed at a split-second’s notice that acting pathetic was the best tactic to use in relieving some of the man’s ire.

Not impressed, he crossed his arms over his broad chest in a silent demand for an explanation, the soft leather of his coat creaking with the action.

“Uncle, you have to understand! It wasn’t our fault!” cried Kili, clutching his crossbow in front of him like a security blanket. He had yet to relinquish it since heroically announcing that he and Fili were going to fetch who Bilbo now knew to be their uncle.

“Yeah! We were only trying to save Mister Balin from being eaten!” said Fili, in what Bilbo was beginning to learn was the boys’ idiosyncratic joint method of speaking.

“Mister Dwalin and Mister Boggins were the ones that made all the noise,” added Kili.

The man pinched the bridge of his regal-looking nose and let out an impressively put-upon sigh.

“Right. And what the hell is a ‘Mister Boggins’?”
Bilbo’s entire body stiffened in alarm at the sound of his name (or rather, the approximation it) being said in the stranger’s rich baritone. Since his arrival, Bilbo had felt very much like a silent spectator, one who was on the outside looking in. Undecided as to whether he should feel particularly grateful about suddenly being included, he looked down at his feet.

“Er. It’s Baggins, actually,” said Bilbo quietly, fidgeting the hem of his ratty t-shirt. He noticed Gandalf do a short little double-take in his direction.

“Oh, yes!” interjected Gandalf, straightening as if he too had failed to remember Bilbo was in the room with them. It only hurt Bilbo’s feelings a tiny bit. Gandalf placed a firm hand on Bilbo’s shoulder as if to discourage him from running away, an option which Bilbo would be a dirty liar to say he wasn’t considering.

“This is my good friend and longtime client, Bilbo Baggins,” said Gandalf, turning both of them in time to face the stranger head-on. "Out of respect for my close acquaintance with him and his family, he has very graciously offered to open his lovely home to us for the next day or two. I suggest we stay here as we await the fervor outside to die down.”

Bilbo quickly realized that the passing glance the stranger had grazed him with previously was nothing compared to what it was like to bear the full brunt of his attention. He did his best not to tremble too noticeably, as his heart suddenly jackhammered under the sizzling electricity of the man's gaze.

“Bilbo,” said Gandalf, voice possessing the same amount of casual politeness it would when introducing Bilbo to a member of his weekly cribbage club, “may I introduce King Thorin II Durinul, ruler of the Sovereign Kingdom of Erebor.”

Bilbo extended a sweaty hand and nodded at him. “It’s a pleasure to meet y—”

All of Bilbo’s thought processes simultaneously ground to a screeching halt. The man was a what?

A king?

“Gandalf,” the apparent monarch said lowly, brow furrowing as he stared at Bilbo’s hand. It hovered awkwardly between them after Bilbo’s midway-aborted attempt to offer it in a handshake.

At the sound of his voice, Bilbo’s brain summarily scrambled to goop. He snatched his hand back as if it had been burned, mind skittering as he attempted to understand why a beautiful, real-life king was just standing there in his dusty drawing room, dirtying his carpet with his muddy motorcycle boots.

And what on God’s green Earth was Bilbo even supposed to say to him?

He knew that there was probably a right answer to that somewhere. Unfortunately, he opened his mouth anyway.

“Erebor?” he blurted before he could really think about what he was saying. “Wasn’t that the source of the plague?”

Bilbo registered the answering shocked silence, and his mind, in an outstanding testament to the resilience of the human brain, finally began to pull itself back together and assess the situation at hand. All the blood promptly drained from his face as he paled in abject horror, suddenly realizing the absolute insensitivity of what he just said.

Erebor. Bilbo had certainly heard of it. While the results regarding how the disease had originally
proliferated (other than through the obvious vector of a bite) were inconclusive, there had been at least one concrete item that Britain’s top virologists and epidemiologists had learned during what little research they could do before conditions had deteriorated: That the virus had unquestionably originated in Erebor, an isolated little kingdom tucked deep in a remote region of the Carpathian Mountains. Bilbo was under the impression that the country had been in a state of civil unrest for the past number of years, though the exact nature of the turmoil remained unknown. This was exacerbated by the fact that before the pandemic, the kingdom enforced strict border policies which made it extremely difficult to get in or out of the country—a policy that more than likely probably contributed to internal political strife.

Though the plague struck too quickly for the populace or any governing bodies to do much about it materially by way of official quarantines, riots, or mass exodus, there was a fair amount of media attention paid to its spread in the beginning, especially since there had been about two weeks of laytime between the disease's appearance in Britain and its first official recognition outside of Erebor’s borders. The attention took the form of a panicked media frenzy à la *Ebola zaire*, which after a few days took on a decidedly xenophobic spin, in which various right-wing pundits took the opportunity to, once again, demonize immigrants that hailed from Poland eastward. This was, of course, clearly in spite of the fact that the first recognized British case had occurred in a young Welsh teacher who had just returned from a vacation abroad to Prague and Vienna, neither of which were even in Eastern Europe. No matter how one looked at it, public hysteria aggravated by ethnic prejudice was almost certainly the reason why the remaining anchors on the BBC had referred to the day on which the UK announced its nationwide state of emergency as ‘Durin’s Day’, after who, Bilbo soon learned, had been the first king of Erebor.

And now here Bilbo was, standing not four feet away from the man who may very well be the last king of Erebor. Who was glaring daggers at him.

It was just his luck that the first thing that had come out of his big fat mouth wasn’t any sort of polite ‘How do you do?’, or a coquettish ‘Wow, I’ve never met a king in real life before.’ No, it wasn’t even in the realm of ‘Can you please take off your boots, you’re dirtying the carpet and my vacuum doesn’t work,’ which was the sort of comment Bilbo would have normally considered committing seppuku over due to its sheer directness.

Instead, in a mindless moment of pure word association, he had gone and mentioned what was most likely an extremely sore subject, especially coming out of the mouth of an Englishman. It was a supposition that he was beginning to realize with each passing second held an unfortunate amount of merit.

The room was deathly quiet. Even the fire seemed to mute itself in secondhand embarrassment. Thorin continued to glower, and Bilbo desperately wished for the floor to swallow him whole. Or better yet, for a meteor to hit the house, killing him instantly. It wouldn’t have mattered if one did; the situation was already a fiery crater.

“Er. I mean. I. I didn’t—you know—” he stuttered, throat seizing up in mortification.

Unfortunately, it seemed like the king wasn’t in the mood to receive whatever message it was that Bilbo so desperately tried to communicate. Thorin’s expression somehow became even more thunderous.

“This is who you drag us all the way here to see?” the man—king, Bilbo reminded himself in despair—spat at Gandalf. “A man with no sense of tact or respect for those who have suffered, and who looks as if he has never seen a moment of hardship in his life?”

“I am so sorry,” gasped Bilbo, finally finding the words to express how appalled he was at himself.
“That was a truly dreadful thing to say. I have no idea what came over me.”

“Your Majesty, go easy on Bilbo,” said Gandalf placatingly. He squeezed Bilbo’s shoulder in sympathy, which made him crave even more for death. “You can’t fault him for speaking the truth, even if it was during an unfortunate attack of foot-in-mouth disease. He’s had a trying night; I’m sure he didn’t mean it in bad faith.”

“That may be so,” said the king, eyeing Bilbo like he was something unsavory, which Bilbo didn’t exactly blame him for, “but you know how these Westerners think. That Erebor willfully caused the plague, when in fact we were the first and hardest hit!”

“I swear, I didn’t mean for it to come out that way,” said Bilbo disconsolately. “I sincerely apologize, Your Majesty. Even if I didn’t mean to offend, it was terribly rude of me all the same—I have no excuse.”

“Come now, Thorin,” said Balin, laying a pacifying hand on His Majesty’s shoulder. “The lad’s obviously sorry. Just look at how miserable he is.”

Bilbo must have been better at looking wretched than either Fili or Kili, because while Thorin didn’t relent exactly, his body language slowly shifted from overly aggressive into something more calculating. He crossed his arms and sighed.

“What was it that Gandalf said your name was, again?” he asked, tone only slightly less combative.

“Baggins. Bilbo Baggins,” he said meekly, desperately willing to grasp on to any conversational thread that would put distance between him and his awful gaffe.

“What about melee weapons? A crossbow? Hand to hand?”

Bilbo blinked in confusion. What?

“Ah. I’m afraid not,” he said for lack of anything else.

“Can you run for any particular length of time? Carry twenty-five kilos over a long distance? Swim continuously for a mile with weight?” asked His Majesty in quick succession.

Bilbo goggled at the king. "Excuse me?"

Face masked in a thoroughly unreadable façade, Thorin ignored Bilbo and went on to steamroll him with a barrage increasingly oblique questions, all of them seemingly having to do with Bilbo’s survival or physical skills. Or rather, his assumed lack thereof. While not particularly fond of
physical activity, Bilbo knew from experience that he could do pretty much anything an average human being could do, probably more if he was being chased by zombies. And as for surviving, well, the proof was all around that he was making a pretty good go of it, though he failed to see what that had to do with anything.

“Have you any experience orienteering? Do you know what orienteering is?”

Bilbo tried his best to politely answer as many inquiries in Thorin's stone-faced interrogation as possible. He would be the first to admit that it was to mixed results, though he was fairly certain that orienteering had something to do with maps and compasses. The king's expression never wavered in its severity, and Bilbo grew progressively more bewildered as the interrogation continued in steadily increasing intensity. Thorin loomed over Bilbo, slowly invading his personal space as if to back him into a corner. Miserably, Bilbo found the proximity more intimidating than sexy.

Bilbo couldn’t prove it, especially since neither the king’s tone nor his expression betrayed a single thing, but he suspected His Majesty might be having a bit of sadistic fun at his expense.

“Have you ever ridden a motorcycle?” asked Thorin after a slightly offensive question about Bilbo’s presumed inability to make a campfire. The king had presumed right of course, but it was the principle of the thing.

Bilbo balked. Alright, this was just becoming ridiculous.

“Are you being serious right now? Do I look like I’m the sort of person who rides a motorbike?” he demanded, albeit a bit waveringly, but while literally putting his foot down as he gestured to all of himself. He tried to pull himself to his full height and gain whatever ground back he could, but now that they were standing in close proximity to each other, Bilbo realized with interested dismay that Thorin had almost an entire head of height on him and who knows how many pounds of muscle.

This drew a few quiet snickers from the peanut gallery. They were no doubt thrilled by what was turning out to be a lively verbal tennis match, albeit one where the king was channeling Serena Williams and Bilbo was forced to play as himself after having just twisted an ankle. Bilbo felt his headache from earlier in the evening returning with a vengeance.

“Then what exactly is it that you do, Mister Baggins?” said Thorin, obviously needling this time.

This, out of all Thorin’s questions, was the one that really stopped Bilbo short. Even in spite of it being an obvious goad, he really didn’t know how exactly to answer it. There were a couple of things he could rightfully say, so in the end he decided to stick with the one that felt was the most truthful.

“Oh, well,” he said, only prevaricating slightly, “I suppose I’m a bookshop owner.”

Thorin looked at Gandalf in withering accusation, as if he had heard all he needed to know. In turn, the old attorney sighed and looked hard at Bilbo like he was being willfully obtuse. He stroked his scraggily beard in irritation.

In that moment, Bofur evidently decided that Bilbo could probably use at least the illusion of somebody on his side, even despite his faux pas, since Thorin had obviously gone on the offensive and wasn’t relenting. He sidled up to Bilbo and positioned himself in a way that forced a little bit of distance to form between Bilbo and His Majesty. Bilbo was so grateful to Bofur he could have kissed him.
Bofur clapped Bilbo hard on the back, smiling encouragingly.

“I suspect that the pandemic must be bad for trade then, eh?” he said, cheeks dimpling.

“Q-quite,” Bilbo said, coughing slightly and rubbing his shoulder where Bofur had smacked it. He appreciated the sentiment, but it was definitely going to bruise. “It’s been hell on small business, actually. People seem to tend to lose interest in reading after they’ve started eating people.”

In terms of jokes, it was definitely one of Bilbo’s weaker efforts. However, Bofur threw his head back and laughed like it was the funniest thing he’d ever heard. Bilbo was confident it wasn’t.

“Oh, don’t sell yourself short, Bilbo,” grumbled Gandalf, obviously annoyed despite his superficially encouraging words. Then, in a way that Bilbo probably wasn’t meant to hear, he muttered, “Do I really have to do everything around here?”

Gandalf turned to the room at large and gestured grandly to Bilbo, much to his utter embarrassment.

“Mister Baggins here is in possession of a Ph.D. in computational cryptography from Oxford,” the old lawyer announced. “He worked full time in research at Cambridge for a number of years, and then with British Defense Intelligence as one of their top analysts in their digital counterterrorism and cybersecurity division.”

The occupants of the room stared at Bilbo in varying degrees of dumbfound. Even Thorin looked to be at a loss for words. Bilbo took a certain amount of vicious pleasure in that, despite Gandalf’s sudden irritating decision that Bilbo’s battles apparently needed to be fought for him.

Bofur was the first to recover, whistling lowly.

"Wow, Oxford and Cambridge? That's quite an impressive resume, Mister Baggins!" he said, elbowing Bilbo companionably. "Or should we be calling you Doctor Baggins?"

Bilbo grimaced. "No, no, Mister is fine. Doctor Baggins is my father." And it was—Bungo was quite the accomplished dermatologist.

"Noted. Why the career change, if I may ask?” asked Bofur.

Gandalf looked sharply at Bilbo. "Mister Baggins, as your solicitor I implore you—"

"You may, actually," replied Bilbo in exhausted defiance. Gandalf’s mouth shut with a satisfying click. While it may have been untrue in his past life, Bilbo wasn’t really in the business of keeping many secrets anymore. If Bofur and the rest of them wanted to know, then he would certainly tell them.

“If you must know, the reason I switched careers was because I was fired from my job at MI-5 after I used proprietary information to commit a felony," he said bluntly. "Then I was placed under house arrest with a court order barring me from even touching a computer for almost two and a half years."

Bofur stared at him, wide eyed. The rest of the room did as well in varying degrees, with Fili and Kili gawking at him openly.

“You’re… you’re joking,” said Bofur with a strained little laugh. “Certainly a fellow like you couldn’t hurt a fly!”
“Can cert'nly kill a zombie,” slurred Dwalin. Balin shot him a look, presumably over his use of the z-word.

“Oh, it was nothing like that,” said Bilbo flippantly. “And honestly, it wasn’t that bad. I was even let off early for good behavior; my sentence was commuted from three years to just two and a half. Really, all I did was use a proprietary government cipher—one that I had designed, by the way—to decrypt the fraudulent banking records of a politician who was pissing me off at the time. I just couldn’t stand to look at him anymore. One of those blustery types that go on about how immigrants are ruining the economy and climate change is a myth and all that, you know? It was sloppy, really. I should’ve known they’d use the cipher to trace the hack back to me.”

Bofur was still staring at him, but now with a look that seemed to be something close to awe.

"...Wow. Takes a lot of guts to do that," said Bofur. Bilbo felt the tips of his ears flush slightly. Out of his peripheral vision, he saw Nori seemingly appraising him with new eyes from a slightly shadowy corner, having positioned himself behind the withered remains of what used to be a moderately-sized potted fig tree. Bilbo felt his ears burn hotter.

"In any case, over two years stuck inside your house without access to Netflix or Google really encourages one to start thinking about making a substantial career pivot,” he said.

Two years without regular access to the outside world certainly had for Bilbo at least. He had started drafting the plan to open his own independent bookshop while still confined in his flat in Soho, first as a way to while away the time and later as a more serious venture.

When his penance was finally up, he had substantially dipped into his trust for the first time, supposing that even if he had been able to use the internet, Bilbo probably wouldn’t have had much luck finding many investors willing to fund a convicted felon’s dream of breaking into the dying industry of brick-and-mortar neighborhood bookstores. And when that proved to not be quite enough to cover all of the expenses, he had borrowed money from Mum. This act was of course to his father’s considerable outrage, who at that point still hadn’t gotten over the scandal of Bilbo’s arrest, among other things. The event had driven the already substantial wedge even further into their tempestuous relationship, and Bungo had made it implacably clear that he was certain the venture would fail.

But on the contrary, Bilbo broke even after only a year of losing money. With this new windfall, he was able to hire a few employees and live a quiet, and by most accounts perfectly respectable, existence as a shop proprietor. Then firmly ensconced in his new life, he had resolutely refused to think about how his previous career as a moderately successful cybersecurity analyst had been ruined simply because he possessed the sheer arrogance to think that he could moonlight as a hacker, and one who didn’t thoroughly cover his tracks at that. To add insult to injury, he couldn’t even blame it on the idealism-slash-stupidity of youth. He had just turned thirty-five when he was sentenced at the conclusion of his speedy trial, positively ancient in the skewing ever-younger world of political hacktivism.

“Mister Baggins, remind me to have a conversation with you about your rights regarding disclosure of felony convictions in the near future,” Gandalf sighed.

“Gandalf, I pled guilty,” said Bilbo, like that explained everything.

“Yes, I do recall,” he replied tiredly. He turned to address the rest of the room.

“Let me be clear, if Bilbo hadn’t refused my, I add for the record, pro bono services at the time, and supposing the charges were not dropped altogether—which I highly suspect they would be,
had I been involved—I assure everyone that Mister Baggins’s punishment would have been even easier than the already extremely light sentence he ended up with.”

He was deliberately looking straight at Thorin as he said this, whose eyes had narrowed in Bilbo’s direction. The pointed comment seemed to have the opposite of the intended effect, for the king rounded on the attorney in rage, blue eyes cold as ice.

“You bring me and my men four hundred miles out of the way to show me an self-admitted sloppy, disloyal, want-to-be hacker with absolutely zero survival skills—”

“I prefer the term hacktivist,” said Bilbo quietly.

Thorin sneered.

“And what’s worse, he's a craven one at that! Who else but a coward would roll over and capitulate at the first sign of trouble? What good will this do us?” He waved a hand in Bilbo’s direction, making it crystal clear that the spittingly disdainful ‘this’ was explicitly in reference to Bilbo.

“Your Majesty!” boomed Gandalf furiously, almost shaking in wrath. It stunned Bilbo, who had never seen Gandalf even remotely this angry. “I assure you that Doctor Baggins is among the best and brightest in his field! And even if he wasn’t, are you really in the position to be picking and choosing your necessary computer expert?”

“We have Nori,” argued Thorin hotly, as if that was rebuttal enough.

Acting as a single entity, the entire room's attention suddenly slid to Nori, who was still slightly hidden behind the remnants of the potted plant. It looked like the last thing he wanted to do was get involved. Bilbo wouldn't have wanted to either, though as the unwilling subject of conversation, he didn't have much of a choice. In any case, none of that mattered because His Majesty was boring holes into Nori with his gaze, and one just simply didn’t ignore a king.

“Don’t look at me, I’m in active counterintelligence,” he muttered, putting hard emphasis on the word active while seeming to shy away from their eyes. He gave off quite a different impression when he was under scrutiny, acting far more apprehensive than the laughing, confident man Bilbo had met only a few moments earlier. Of course, this was something Bilbo had to process in tandem with the fact that Nori was pretty much admitting to being some sort of spy.

The room continued to look at him expectantly. Recognizing that having to give his worthless two cents was probably unavoidable, Nori added, “That translates to fieldwork by the way, not sitting behind a desk staring at computers. I can only do basic decryptions good enough to brute force my way into terminals for purposes of raw information gathering. It’s not really my job to analyze it further.”

Apparently unsatisfied with Nori’s answer, Thorin disregarded it and continued on as if the man hadn’t said anything at all.

“I cannot bring a soft, inexperienced канцелярская крыса with no formal training into the wild!” he thundered. Bilbo didn't know what the king had called him, but it sounded offensive. Thorin suddenly reached down the neck of his sheepskin jacket, pulling out what looked to be a fairly run-of-the-mill black USB drive hanging on a heavy gold chain around his neck.

“I already have the key Gandalf, the key to stopping all of this once and for all. All we need to do is break through a firewall, which Nori already said he could do.”

"Not really!" Nori protested.
"Take care not to think your task is at all as simple as pulling up Windows Defender and disabling the appropriate settings, Your Majesty," said Gandalf coldly. "Remember that this is one of the most advanced security systems in the world we're talking about—your security system, may I remind you. And who knows what pitfalls or redundancies have been added to it since your exile."

Bilbo was now thoroughly lost, the flow of conversation careening wildly out of the realm of anything he had context for. But he did know an awful lot about firewalls and digital security systems, and Gandalf made it sound like Thorin needed to break into an absolute fortress of one. Where they were going to find a working computer though, Bilbo could only guess.

"Yes. It is my security system," growled Thorin. "And because it is mine, I will not be responsible for him."

Okay. That was it.

Bilbo knew from experience that there was whole a host of reasons as to why men who looked like Thorin did would treat him poorly. That he was too short, too shy, too fat, too fem, not feminine enough, too much of a felon, or even just too gay. It was just an unfortunate fact of life for someone like Bilbo Baggins, especially now that he was on the wrong side of forty and had more or less come to terms with the notion that he would be, without any winking or cheeky double entendre, an actual confirmed bachelor for the rest of his life.

But even then, that sort of treatment was usually in the context of a letdown, in times when Bilbo had somehow gathered enough courage to convince himself that he couldn’t possibly be that much of a creepy, desperate idiot and to shoot his shot in an attempt to play in a league far above his own. Thorin on looks alone was in probably the highest, most exclusive professional league of unattainably good-looking men out there, not to mention being royalty on top of it all, but Bilbo hadn’t even so much as exchanged two normal human sentences with him, let alone bat his eyelashes and try to flirt. He was fairly certain that there was absolutely no reason he should be receiving this amount of vitriolic rudeness from the man, even taking his earlier horrid misstep into consideration. For heaven’s sake, he had apologized! Very sincerely!

“How dare,” he started.

And then he stopped. Thorin may very well be a king, but it was Bilbo who was the master of Bag End now, for better or for worse. Simply put, this was Bilbo’s house and Thorin was Bilbo’s guest, and an uninvited one at that. And in this day and age, with all that was going on, did titles even really matter? Bilbo certainly didn’t have to take this.

Without a word, he turned on his heel and stalked out of the drawing room.

“Mister Baggins!” called Balin.

“Bilbo, where are you going?”

Ignoring Gandalf, he wandered into the darkness, his feet seeming to take him to Mum’s study of their own accord. He slammed the door behind him, sitting down heavily at the desk. Not knowing exactly what to do now, he simply sat in the dark, feeling empty.

After what felt like three hours but was probably closer to ten minutes, there was a tentative knock on the door.

“Bilbo?” called Gandalf.

“Go away. I’m quite done entertaining visitors tonight.”
Gandalf, the prick, opened the door anyway, carrying a small battery-powered camping lantern that illuminated the room just enough to see by. The blinding LED light washed him out so completely that it looked as if a faded gray ghost of legal meetings past had come to haunt his mother’s office. Gandalf set the lamp on the desk and settled down in a chair on the opposite side of the desk as Bilbo.

He suddenly registered that Gandalf must have done this many times before, only with Belladonna sitting where Bilbo was now. Bilbo sardonically wondered if any of their professional conversations had ever included discussions of the awful incivility of the king in the other room.

“You must forgive His Majesty,” said Gandalf quietly. “He has suffered a tremendous amount of loss recently.”

Bilbo snorted derisively. “Unlike the rest of us?”

“You do have a point,” conceded Gandalf, seemingly having nothing to add to that.

Bilbo’s expression tightened as he looked down at his hands. He sniffed derisively as he thought about the men in the other room, their unfairly attractive leader in particular. The king’s looks certainly had no bearing on his revolting attitude.

“What kind of ruler is His Majesty?” he asked Gandalf after a moment of silent contemplation, thinking back to the vague rumors he had heard about the unrest in Erebor. “Is Thorin a good king?”

“Well, I suppose that remains to be seen. I suspect Thorin himself would like very much to find out the answer to that question,” the older man replied.

“Huh?” said Bilbo intelligently. "What do you mean?”

“Well, he certainly hasn’t been king for very long. Two weeks at the most by my calendar.”

Bilbo blinked owlishly. Interesting. It certainly spoke as to why some of his companions treated him so cavalierly, something that Bilbo was just now beginning to wonder at.

“How can that even be possible?” asked Bilbo, curiosity piqued.

“Well, it wasn’t until only recently that the previous king, Thorin’s father, had been traveling with us as well,” explained Gandalf.

“What happened to him?”

Gandalf shot him an incredibly patronizing look in response, as if to say What do you think happened to him, Bilbo.

“Oh,” he replied, not knowing quite what else to add. He really should have seen that one coming.

Gandalf snorted, continuing, “For that matter, before his untimely demise, Thrain had not been king for a very long time either. Up until all the mess started, it was Thorin’s grandfather, Thrór Durinul, who had been the ruling king of Erebor ever since the royal family and their supporters ousted the Soviets from Erebor nearly thirty years ago.”

Bilbo’s eyes grew wide. “The Soviets?”

“Ahh. Forget I said anything, that is not my story to tell,” said Gandalf, mouth narrowing to a thin
line below his beard. “Surely you’re aware of how deeply Erebor regards its privacy.”

“Right. Of course,” Bilbo replied. He had indeed been aware of it, in a vague sense. While disappointed that Gandalf wouldn’t give him an answer, Bilbo was now certainly intrigued. He filed that little tidbit of information away to mull over later. Perhaps there was an old encyclopedia set hiding somewhere that he could do a little research with.

Instead of pursuing the topic, he asked, “Was Thrór a good king, then?”

Gandalf leaned back into his comfortable guest chair, as if choosing his next words carefully.

“It seems there have been decidedly mixed reviews about the effectiveness and quality of Thrór’s rule,” he said after a moment of seeming indecision. “It appears he and Thorin disagreed strongly on a number of issues. For one, the current His Majesty was evidently fiercely in favor of constitutional reforms to the monarchy.”

“So, he’s not a despot then. With how he was acting, I was beginning to wonder,” snarked Bilbo.

“I don’t blame you. But with everything that has happened and the amount of pressure he is under, the king is admittedly in a rather fragile state of mind right now, though he tries to hide it. I’m sorry he chose to take it out on you,” said Gandalf, sighing heavily through his nose. "Though I will say that you didn't exactly do anything to endear yourself to His Majesty tonight, what with your comment about the plague."

“I’ll accept the apology when he says it to my face,” snorted Bilbo petulantly, slumping down in his chair and crossing his arms. He didn't need to be reminded of his screw-up, which he was still fretting over intensely, and probably would be for the near future.

Gandalf sighed again. “All that aside, I made it abundantly clear to him and his company that you have no intention of joining us, and that you are only opening your home as a favor to an old family friend. Should we make it to Erebor, the most likely outcome will probably be as Thorin described, that the key will work as intended and let us through the security system and into the central defense and infrastructural mainframe, where we will be able to complete our task.”

This reminded Bilbo of the part of the conversation he had no context for, though he at least gathered that it probably had been one of the main reasons as to why he was suddenly paying host to thirteen strangers and his eccentric, enigmatic lawyer. They needed to break into some sort of computer, and apparently there was a working terminal in Erebor. For what reason though, Bilbo hadn’t the foggiest.

“How did you even get involved in... whatever it is your doing?” asked Bilbo.

“Shouldn’t it be obvious? My firm represents the interests of Thorin’s family outside of Erebor,” said Gandalf simply, smirking slightly. “Or rather, what little of those interests are left.”

“Has anybody informed you that you can be infuriatingly cryptic?” replied Bilbo, rolling his eyes. Gandalf chuckled. “It’s perhaps come up once or twice. But you of all people should understand attorney-client privilege.”

Bilbo didn't bother to deign that comment with a reply. Instead, he thought to the USB drive currently hanging around Thorin’s neck, considering its implications.

“Why do you even need to get into Erebor’s mainframe at all?” he asked. “What could be so important that you need to travel across the entirety of Europe when hordes of the undead
“Do you really want to know?” the lawyer asked, leaning forward and folding his hands on the desk. He gazed intently at Bilbo in the pale fluorescent lamplight, blue eyes flashing. “Because I cannot tell you if you have no intention of at least considering traveling with us. It’s not my place to do so.”

Curiosity gnawed at Bilbo, but then he thought of how Thorin had treated him in front of all those strangers without even knowing him. He thought of Bag End, of his armchair. Of his greenhouse, his books, his chickens.

He thought of all the horrors of the road; of the blood and the muck and the death he had to crawl through, at first with others and then horribly alone; of those friends he had lost on his way to regain these small comforts. Thorin had been wrong, grievously so, in at least one of his snap-judgements of Bilbo’s character: He had certainly known hardship.

Then, as they were wont to these days, his thoughts circled back to his parents. Who, if there was even a single chance they were still alive somewhere, somehow, he would wait for until the end. He thought of his father in equal parts bitterness and hope. He thought of Mum, who if anybody was going to survive a zombie apocalypse, it would be her.

Bilbo decided.

“No, I don’t think I do,” he replied.

“Then so be it,” said Gandalf in resignation. They stared at each other, seemingly coming to an understanding of sorts.

“I do have one question, though,” said Bilbo after a moment. “How are you going to even get there? To the continent, I mean. Because last time I checked, Great Britain was an island. I don’t suppose you all will be taking a ferry to France.”

“My dear Bilbo, that’d be preposterous,” said Gandalf, voice perfectly even and expression neutral. “Where do you think we’d even find a boat in these circumstances? Of course we’re taking the channel tunnel.”

Bilbo scoffed, but Gandalf remained deadpan.

“Right,” said Bilbo, a little uncertain. Then, thoroughly against his will, he yawned hugely. In stark difference to the restless, jittery energy he started off the night with, he realized that after all the shooting, and the fainting, and the introductions, and the social gaffes, that he was absolutely, utterly exhausted. Body suddenly leaden, he rather felt like he could pass out right then and there at the desk.

“Dare I ask what time it is?” he said.

“I haven’t the slightest clue,” replied Gandalf. “But I know it is late, and that you’ve had quite the exciting day.”

“Most exciting I’ve had in about a month,” hummed Bilbo in agreement, eyes heavy. Gandalf smiled.

“You should get some sleep, Bilbo.”

“Oh, I can’t yet,” he said, straightening up in his seat and moving to get up. “I need to turn down
the beds in the guest rooms and put out fresh towels if all these people are going to be sleeping here tonight.”

“You most certainly do not,” said Gandalf, leaning over the desk and urging Bilbo to sit back down. “Of course you decide that now is the best time to be a proper host, after you’ve already had it out with royalty.”

“I’m always a proper host!” protested Bilbo.

“Go to bed,” insisted Gandalf. “I’ll take care of it all and get everyone settled. If you recall, I practically lived in Bag End at one point or another. Get some rest, I know where everything is.”

Bilbo considered this. He supposed he was rather tired, and his bed did sound very inviting.

“If you’re sure…” He yawned once more.

“Good night, my friend.”

Bilbo nodded. They both stood up, Gandalf opening the door for Bilbo as they exited the room. They walked down the hallway together a ways before they split up, Gandalf heading back to the drawing room while Bilbo stumbled up the stairs. The candles were still burning in his room, as he had forgotten to snuff them in his panic to get down the stairs and meet Dwalin at the kitchen door. Luckily nothing had happened, but they had burnt down to nubs in the meantime. Bilbo found he was too spent to care.

He picked up the alarm clock, looking at the time.

“Jesus,” Bilbo muttered. Mickey painfully indicated that it was just about ten minutes ’til two in the morning.

He set the clock down. Then he quickly blew out the candles before collapsing into bed on top of the covers, passing out the moment his head hit the pillow. If he had unsettling dreams about blue eyes that night, well, then he certainly had the undead shop clerk to blame for that. There was nothing more to it.

Chapter End Notes

Translation Notes:
Shamukh, sakhmi astû galikh -- [Khuzdul] Glad to see you've finally found us (lit. 'Greetings, I'm so glad you have arrived')
Kasamhili. Lo sullu batazzînin luzun -- [Khuzdul] Please. Not all who wander are lost orêk -- [A variety of Turkic languages (Orek/Өрәк/Örek/Öräk), a word which I modified to conform with Khuzdul plural, which presumes the singular as being 'ork'] literally means zombie. I am not making this up.
За короля [za korolya] -- [Russian] To the king (a toast)
канцелярская крыса [kantselyarskaya krysa] -- [Russian] desk jockey (lit. 'stationery rat')

Again, thanks to the Dwarrow Scholar for all the resources on Khuzdul. I swear by next chapter Bilbo will hopefully at least attempt to leave his house. As an aside, I was so, so against using the word orc in this fic, but then I found out as I was writing and
doing research that the word orek exists and I almost threw my computer into the wall. So I guess it's happening now. Also, part of the way I plan this fic is by making a playlist for it, so I've gone ahead and added the specific songs that accompany each chapter. The one for this chapter is below, and I've added the ones for previous chapters in their end notes.

As always, thanks so much for reading!

**Music that goes with this chapter:**
People Are People - Depeche Mode
Highly Proprietary and Sensitive Information

Chapter Summary

It's just 14,000 words of expository dialogue. Sorry. Worldbuilding, it's what the people want, right????

Chapter Notes

HEY! So. Big meaty chapter alert, but unfortunately not much happens. However, this is the last big exposition chapter and we're starting to get into it plot and action-wise, which is cool. I just wish I had the ability to be more concise in my writing, but seeing as how I'm writing this mainly during breaks at work and for a couple hours every night when I get home, I really don't have the patience to cut it down. My internal vision for this story is VERY cinematic and uuuuuuh, it shows lol. For what it's worth, I had so much fun writing this. I'm VERY serious about worldbuilding, if you couldn't tell ;; I have like, six thousand disclaimers about everything though, which I'm adding to the end chapter notes. I suggest you read them AFTER you read the update if you care about spoilers. If not, do as you please! I'm actually sort of worried all this comes off as uuuuhhh, pretentious... but I'm taking the chance to put it out there anyway bc I'm honestly really enthused. Let me know if you have any specific questions!!! I'm dying to talk about it.

In any case, I just want to thank you all again for the bonkers support and kindness I've been getting. It really blows me away, truly.

TW for blood, Balin having to explain ethnicity, and irresponsible document signing (seriously, read EVERYTHING in a contract before you sign it, kids. Don't be like Bilbo)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The alarm woke Bilbo with a start.

“Oh fuck off ,” he growled, utterly freezing and slapping the entire clock off the nightstand with a fury he was sure he hadn’t felt since the early days of his arrest. It fell to the hardwood with a metallic clatter. The sound of it hitting the floor was akin to a gunshot in the quiet stillness of the morning, but in the end it did the trick in that the clock was blissfully silenced.

Then Bilbo properly shuffled himself under the covers, rolled away from the early morning light streaming in through the window, and promptly went back to sleep.
He woke up some time later to a commotion outside.

The late morning sun blazed through the window he had forgotten to close the night before, blinding him the second he unburied his head from the pillow. Leaving it open had been a mistake for sure, but not a very serious one. Bilbo was fairly certain the undead could not climb or jump that high. If they could, he would just go ahead and let himself be eaten because frankly, he had no interest in living in that sort of reality.

Struggling to wrestle off the covers, he grasped his rifle and ran to the window. What he saw made him do a double-take and stick his head fully out of the opening to get a better look. In the process, he somehow managed to wedge his shoulders and part of his torso out over the sill, squeezing through the gap made by the ledge and a piece of plywood that still covered the top half of the window.

“What in heaven’s name are you doing?” called Bilbo, thoroughly baffled.

Kili was dashing around the yard, attempting to catch one of Bilbo’s chickens that had somehow survived the night. He looked to be having a rough go of it. Meanwhile, Bifur was directing Fili with a combination of grunts and pantomime in an effort to replace the greenhouse’s shattered glass panel with some large scraps of wood, which they had no doubt found lying around somewhere near the shed in the far corner.

Kili paused in his pursuit, doubling over and resting his hands on his bent knees.

“Good morning, Mister Boggins!” he called with a cheerful little wave, turning toward the upstairs window and sounding quite breathless.

“G-good morning,” replied Bilbo.

“Did you know chickens are very hard to catch? How did Bofur manage it with all the orêk running around last night?” he remarked, eyeing his quarry warily. It had since gone back to innocently pecking at the ground a few feet away.

“That’s easy, Ki. Mister Bofur simply has more wits than you,” said Fili, who was steadily hammering away at a piece of particle board. He gentled when Bifur let out a sharp warning grunt, as one of Fili’s strikes had come dangerously close to cracking the flimsy wood and ruining the whole project.

“Says who!” cried Kili indignantly.

“Says me!”

Kili didn’t answer, instead choosing to take advantage of the moment and pounce upon the now-unsuspecting fowl in a surprise assault. It darted away before he could get his hands on it. He landed bodily in the dirt, fall cushioned by grass that had long since gone uncut.

“Ha!” cried Fili, pausing to take the opportunity to crow in his brother’s direction. “Exactly my point!”

Kili said nothing as he dramatically lay face down in the grass, utterly defeated. The chicken clucked and pecked at a spot near his head. Bilbo didn't quite know how to explain it, but the bird somehow seemed smug.

“Şoküş,” said Bifur crossly, miming swinging a hammer.
“Yeah, yeah. I get it, back to work,” sighed Fili. He looked back up to where Bilbo’s upper body still hung out the window. “I think most of the company is in the kitchen, Mister Boggins. Dori should be finished with making brunch soon.”

Brunch? Bilbo thought yearningly to hangover-afflicted late Sunday mornings, filled with heaping piles of eggs and french toast accompanied by mimosas that were more wine than orange juice. The thought alone made Bilbo’s heart clench and stomach growl angrily.

“Oh. Okay. Well, good morning Fili, Mister Bifur. Er, good luck Kili.” said Bilbo, wriggling back inside.

Kili sent him a defeated thumbs up as he slid the glass back down. Bilbo gazed out a little while longer, long enough to see Kili’s hand morph from a thumbs-up to flipping the bird, which he directed at his brother. There were a few probable not so politely exchanged words before the dark-haired young man heaved himself up and returned to stalking the stubborn, erstwhile hen. Bilbo could see that two or three chickens had also survived and already been caught, visible through the hole in the greenhouse wall and penned in a makeshift coop that looked to be fashioned out of spare chicken wire and tomato cages. He turned away with a disbelieving shake of his head.

He quickly dressed in a pair of nice slacks, which he matched with a crisp button-down that he rolled to the elbows, along with his only remaining suit waistcoat. It was the one he had initially arrived at Bag End in, a dapper little number made of maroon tweed and adorned with burnished gold buttons that he had gotten as a ‘congratulations on your parole’ gift from Mum. Which reminded him; Bilbo quickly scooped up his sleep pants and retrieved his mother’s handkerchief, adding it as a de-facto pocket-square with the floral monogram peeking out over the top.

Satisfied that he would make a much more proper impression, one that would hopefully erase the indecorous memory of him in his pyjamas, he crept down the stairs. He didn’t know why he was trying to be so unobtrusive, as he was constantly reminding himself that this was his house and thus was free to make as much noise as possible. Sounds of domestic activity drifted up from the kitchen. The clatter of pots and soft laughter made Bilbo pause, suddenly afraid.

He shook himself. He was so tired of being afraid.

Once again purposefully stomping on the creaky third stair, Bilbo strode to the kitchen, but he stopped short as he crossed the threshold. The tarp had been dragged down from the skylight, letting the morning sun filter in and illuminate the space with natural light for the first time in over a month. The scene in the kitchen painfully echoed how it once had been, full of life and people and chatter. Bilbo rubbed at his chest.

“I’m worried about the dam,” Bilbo heard Bombur murmur lowly to a group huddled around what looked like two creased AA road maps spread over the kitchen table. One seemed to be of Britain and the other of the continent, both marked and scribbled on within an inch of their papery lives.

The group consisted of Thorin, Balin, Dwalin, and Bofur. Gandalf sat slightly off to the side, smoking a pipe. Ori occupied Bilbo’s armchair, furiously scribbling in a sketchbook while Dori and Nori stood over the very cluttered stove, apparently cooking enough food to feed fifteen grown men, three of which were under the age of twenty-two and no doubt still ate each meal like it would be their last. Dori seemed to be doing most of the cooking, while Nori mainly just tried to sneak various bites. However, his fingers would unavoidably be rapped with a wooden spoon for his efforts every single time, as he was apparently unable to dodge Dori’s eagle eye.

“It’s земляной плотины, and an old one at that,” Bombur continued, stroking his moustache anxiously. “I’m worried about infiltration, seepage… I heard it only barely passed muster last year,
and it was supposed to be due for another inspection this August. The consensus in the office seemed to be that the department engineers would have to coordinate major repairs this time around.”

“Well, it only needs to hold for a little while longer,” said Thorin, voice strangely gentle as he scribbled something in one of the few blank spaces on the margin of the map of the continent. “Once we get the more pressing issues out of the way, then we can worry about the dam. Thank you for bringing it to my attention.”

Bombur nodded, seemingly growing more confident at Bofur’s enthusiastic smile. He gave a shy little bow towards Thorin, who looked supremely uncomfortable at the display.

*That’s right*, thought Bilbo. He was a king, wasn’t he.

“Bilbo, good morning!” said Gandalf, cheerfully doffing his pipe at him.

The rest of the huddle looked up at him. Bilbo made an effort to square his shoulders and to try and exude confidence. Bofur smiled exuberantly at the sight of him while Thorin only scoffed, looking pointedly back down at the maps.

“Nice of you to finally join u—*‘aish!*” Thorin yelped, sounding as if he had just been kicked in the shin. He shot an accusing glare at Balin, who by all accounts looked utterly serene. Dwalin hid a smile behind what Bilbo had to assume was just one in a long chain of cigarettes.

A king. *Right.*

“Oh, Mister Baggins! Good morning! Excuse me!” said Ori frantically, scrambling in an attempt to gather his supplies and vacate the armchair. He only succeeded in accidentally scattering them around himself further.

“Oh no, don’t get up Ori,” said Bilbo, boldly taking a seat at the table directly across from Thorin. “I’m quite fine sitting over here.”

Thorin didn’t look up from the maps. Really, what had Bilbo been thinking last night with all that nonsense about the king being *the* most handsome man he had ever seen? The king must have one of those faces that look better in the dramatic illumination of firelight than in the plain light of day, which yes, was absolutely a thing.

Sure, he was good-looking, but he certainly wasn’t more handsome than, say, Idris Elba. Above average, even striking maybe, but *People* magazine’s 2018 Sexiest Man of the Year levels of gorgeous? Bilbo thought not. (He may or may not have impulsively purchased that particular issue from a newsstand selling international periodicals in a moment of weakness, only to subsequently squirrel it away in his London flat for safekeeping. And oh, how Bilbo hoped that Elba wasn’t walking around as a particularly ruggedly handsome zombie and eating people somewhere. He was still holding onto the rather impossible dream that he might be able to watch *Luther* series five someday.)

“I take it you slept well, Mister Baggins. You’re looking much more… put together this morning,” said Balin tactfully.

Bilbo felt his face flush. “Yes, well. I wasn’t really at my best last night, I’ll admit.”

“Oh, you were fine. Except for that one comment, of course, but we all know you didn’t mean it that way,” said Bofur, reaching over to squeeze Bilbo’s shoulder in a manner he was sure Bofur thought was reassuring. It wasn’t.
“Thanks,” said Bilbo with a tight smile, politely shrugging him off.

Ori went back to sketching as Thorin, Balin, and Dwalin conversed lowly in what Bilbo thought he recognized as Russian. He took the opportunity to study the maps and their various scribbles, though Bilbo couldn’t decipher most of it given the vast majority was either in Cyrillic or the same type of runic script that decorated Dwalin’s hands and scalp. Ignoring the writing, his eyes were drawn to a prominently circled location on the map of the continent, right at the junction of Poland, Ukraine, and Slovakia.

“Is that Erebor?” he asked, pointing it out to Bofur.

“Aye,” the man said, eyes shining.

The table jolted as Thorin abruptly jumped out of his chair, the sudden scrape of its wooden legs on the tile silencing the chatter of the room.

“Abrâfu shaikmashâz,” the king said icily. He glared at Dwalin with a wrath that rivaled the sort he had directed at Bilbo last night. Dwalin said nothing, only blowing smoke out his nose and returning the gaze head-on. They glowered at each other in what seemed to be a silent battle of wills, before Thorin growled and stormed out of the kitchen in a huff.

Balin clucked his tongue. “You shouldn’t have mentioned Frerin, Brother.”

“Yeah,” Dwalin said, tapping his clove cigarette into the abalone shell at his elbow, which they had used to weigh down one of the map’s corners that was curling slightly. “But even you have to admit he’s being a damned idiot, and don’t give me that shit about him being grumpy because something woke him up at the crack of dawn this morning. Even if we only have so much time to get home, we have to weigh all our options. The Chunnel is a bloody deathtrap, and you know it.”

“Wait, you aren’t seriously considering taking the channel tunnel to France, are you?” asked Bilbo, noting that the Eurostar route from Folkestone to Calais had been highlighted on the travel map of Great Britain.

Bilbo looked sidelong at Gandalf, who was still puffing on his pipe without a care in the world. The lawyer leaned comfortably into the dining chair, for all intents and purposes looking very relaxed. However, Bilbo knew from experience that he was watching the exchange intently.

Balin, Dwalin, and Bofur looked uneasily at each other, like they were silently debating something. Bofur stood up from the table.

“I should go retrieve His Majesty. Mister Dori will be done cooking soon,” he said, eyes darting between Bilbo and Gandalf. Without waiting for acknowledgement, he scurried out of the kitchen, presumably in search of Thorin.

As Bilbo watched him leave, he also saw Bombur murmuring lowly to Ori in what Bilbo could only assume was the native Ereboran language. Ori nodded enthusiastically and tore out a few blank pages of his sketchbook, handing them to Bombur with a smile. He also gave the older man a few pencils out of his case. Bombur beamed sunnily and thanked him, following Bofur out of the room.

Balin turned to Bilbo, hands folded and expression shrewd.

“How much did Gandalf inform you about our mission?” he asked carefully, staring hard at Gandalf.
Bilbo wrung his hands frantically, remembering what Gandalf had said about the Ereboreans and their privacy. “Oh no, nothing really! He just mentioned something about the tunnel last night is all.”

Balin and Dwalin communicated silently once more before breaking out into harsh whispers of what Bilbo was now fairly confident was Russian, occasionally shooting glances at Gandalf. They seemed to be arguing, and Bilbo started to sweat. Before long, Dwalin shut his mouth with a click, obstinately shoving his cigarette back between his lips. As the ostensible victor of the debate, Balin turned to Ori, looking determined.

“Ori. Be a good lad and get me the document, will you?”

Ori’s hand froze mid-page, looking up at Balin with a wide-eyed expression. Dori and Nori stopped bickering over the stove and, having turned to face the group, watched the proceedings with the exact same look on their faces. It was a striking family resemblance, thought Bilbo absently.

“But Mister Balin, I thought—” said Ori.

Balin cut the boy off with a wave of his hand. “Yes, but I think Mister Baggins might be more amenable to changing his mind if he was making an informed decision. So please, the document.”

Still, Ori wavered. “I-I don’t know about this. His Majesty…”

“Will be fine,” Balin insisted, sounding exasperated. Dwalin remained stone-faced, crossing his arms and saying nothing. Balin held out his hand in Ori’s direction.

“Ori, just listen to Mister Balin. You won’t get in trouble. He’ll make sure of it, won’t he,” said Dori, looking significantly at Balin.

Balin seemingly got the memo and gave a slight nod in the other man’s direction. Evidently satisfied, Dori turned back to the woodburning stove, somehow managing all the various pots and pans scattered on the burners with all the deft coordination of a conductor leading a symphony. If Bilbo was being honest, he was insanely jealous at his skill. Nori sent Bilbo a wink before turning back to the stove as well, avowedly to continue in his quest to hassle Dori to death.

Meanwhile, apparently satisfied with the permission he had received from a person he seemingly held in higher authority than Balin, Ori leaned over and dug deep into the guts of a tattered green Jansport. He rummaged around for a strangely long amount of time, despite the fact the bag really wasn’t that big. He eventually produced a thick, unmarked manila envelope bound with string. Uncrossing his legs, he climbed out of the chair and padded over to the table in his heavy wool socks, handing it to Balin.

Without thanking the boy, Balin quickly unbound the envelope and emptied it onto the table over the maps, revealing a huge sheaf of legal sized paper. He quickly thumbed the pages for a moment before turning it around and setting it in front of Bilbo.

He looked at it uncomprehendingly.

“What’s this?” he asked, picking it up and beginning to leaf through it. His eyes crossed at the sheer amount of legalese staring back at him.

“A standard non-disclosure agreement,” said Gandalf, scooting his chair closer to Bilbo’s and shifting into what Bilbo recognized as ‘lawyer mode.’ “While it’s a little unorthodox, seeing as how I am the solicitor of both parties, I’ve gone ahead and made the necessary changes to protect your rights and your interests under both UK and international law, Mister Baggins. In essence, it’s just a
modified version of a regular British-based international corporate NDA, which in its basest form
simply bars you from discussing either proprietary or sensitive information with people who have
not also signed similar agreements.”

“Right,” said Bilbo, having absolutely no idea what he was talking about.

“Details about what is considered ‘sensitive’ or ‘proprietary’ are detailed in Section 5C.” Gandalf
flipped to a page in the middle of the nearly ten centimeter thick stack, pointing out the appropriate
subheading.

Bilbo looked at it dazedly, scanning some of the words on pure instinct.

5.C.6. The signee will agree to non-disclosure regarding the discussion or unauthorized
translation of the Khuzdul language to persons not under similar nondisclosure agreements, as
Khuzdul is heretofore considered proprietary information under the auspices of non-disclosable
information outlined in this contract.

His head spun, flipping the NDA back to its cover page in a futile effort to get an impression of
what exactly it was they wanted him to sign. He tried to make sense of what he was reading. How
could a language be proprietary?

“Why on Earth do I need to sign this?” asked Bilbo, utterly dumbfounded.

“I told you that Erebor deeply regards its privacy,” reminded Gandalf. He looked almost gleeful,
which was never a good sign. “If you want to hear anything about Erebor or our mission, you’ll
have to sign the agreement.”

“I was rather under the impression that ‘privacy’ was meant to be in a ‘confidential state secret’
sort of way,” replied Bilbo in distress.

“For what it’s worth, Mister Baggins,” said Balin sympathetically, leaning over the table and
patting the hefty document, “almost everything in Erebor is considered a state secret, and it’s been
that way almost since the initial formation of our kingdom almost eight centuries ago. Non-
disclosure agreements like this are considered a stipulation of citizenship. We effectively sign them
when we’re born.”

Bilbo leaned back in his chair, stunned. It sounded too preposterous to be true.

“How is that even legal?” he asked, scandalized.

“It’s just the way it is, unfortunately. You could even say it’s somewhat religious. We are fighting
to change it, though recent events have certainly put our plans on hold,” replied Balin, a little sadly.
“For the record, we certainly haven’t been holding ourselves to the strictest letter of the agreement
since we’ve arrived here at your home.”

Bilbo considered this. While his guests certainly referred to things in oblique terms without
explaining much, they certainly hadn't kept completely mum when Bilbo was in the room with
them. And if the language was so proprietary, it didn't exactly make sense that he had heard so
much of it in such a short amount of time. Really, there were only a few things that Gandalf had
absolutely refused to discuss, probably indeed due to their sensitive nature. Perhaps signing the
contract was more a cultural formality than anything.

“What happens if I do break the NDA?” he asked out of pure curiosity. It was a valid question.
While he wasn’t sure if he was willing to sign who knows what away in the name of sheer
inquisitiveness, he did have an official track record for using classified government information to
“Well, the traditional punishment is execution. Sometimes lifetime imprisonment if it was a lesser infraction,” said Balin.

Dwalin snorted at Bilbo’s no doubt horrified expression. He looked imploringly at Gandalf, who, for someone who was purportedly his lawyer, seemed shockingly unconcerned. Gandalf folded his hands on the table, angling himself toward Bilbo.

“Mister Baggins, as your solicitor and as your friend, I encourage you to sign the agreement. It will clear up many of the questions you have, and I think you’ll find the current king much more liberal regarding matters of state than those that have come before him in the past. I made sure to stipulate that formal execution was decidedly off the table in terms of retribution for breach of contract,” he said, producing a fountain pen from one of the many pockets of his fatigues. It was the marbled type that lawyers always seemed to favor, accented with gold and probably costing well over two hundred pounds.

Bilbo took the pen, shocked despite himself at the weight of it. Yep, it was certainly expensive. He looked dubiously at the contract, noting that Gandalf had already flipped it to the last page. He saw the line where he was supposed to sign, demarcated with a little highlighted 'x' next to it. Underneath it were three more signatures, the top in the runic script he kept seeing, the middle in what was presumably indecipherable Cyrillic, and the bottom in neat Latin-letter cursive that Bilbo could read perfectly.

Thorin II Durinul Khan

Bilbo wondered at that final appellation, but figured that nobody would tell him what exactly it meant unless he signed the agreement. Nor probably would they tell him anything of note, for that matter.

He thought about how even though execution was off the table, if he slipped up that probably meant he would be imprisoned for life, and not in the comfort of his own home this time. But then he also thought about how Thorin would probably absolutely hate it if he did sign it, and really, who was he going to tell anyway? Hamfast? His parents?

The last thought sent a chill down Bilbo’s spine. No, better not to think about that. His parents were alive, after all.

Until they showed up, however, Bilbo truly had no one to talk to. Except for Gandalf that is, but he had obviously signed an NDA of his own—from which he had probably managed to excise both the execution and the imprisonment clause, if Bilbo knew the slippery lawyer at all. So really, what was the harm? He certainly wasn’t going to go off traveling in the zombie-infested wasteland of Europe with them, but he was admittedly very curious, and the thought of doing something that would annoy the king made him feel strangely giddy.

“Oh, bugger it all,” he muttered, signing his name on the line with a flourish.

Gandalf beamed smugly as Balin snatched back the NDA, flipping through it until his eyes came to rest on his signature. He looked up at Bilbo in astonishment.

“Your legal name is actually Bilbo?” he asked, face cracking in a surprised smile. Bilbo could see Dwalin smirk behind his cigarette.

Bilbo stiffened, face flushing in angry humiliation.
“Of course it is!” he said, perhaps a bit shrilly. “It’s an old family name, if you must know.”

Balin held up his hands in supplication, still smiling widely. “Peace, Mister Baggins. It’s just an unusual name for an Englishman.”

He straightened the papers and shoved them back into the envelope, rebinding it with the string. He cleared his throat to grab Ori’s attention, who took it back while looking at Bilbo with something like awe.

“So, about the Chunnel,” said Balin.

"The food's almost ready!” called Dori, cutting Balin off mid-sentence.

As if on cue, Fili and Kili burst through the door like excitable puppies, with Bifur trailing behind them in the role of their thoroughly exasperated trainer. Their eyes gleamed as they beheld the variety of items on the stove, crowding Dori with their gangly bodies as they inspected it.

"Right on time, lads. You can help Ori and Mister Baggins set the table," said Dori, brandishing his spoon like a fencing foil and using it to bat them away, as if he were a swashbuckler à la Errol Flynn. With his dashing looks and perfectly waxed moustache, he honestly didn’t do a half bad job.

"Excuse me?” said Bilbo as Ori, Kili, and Fili let out triplet groans.

He looked to the boys and their dejected faces, feeling very much like he had been put on babysitting duty. Or, even worse, relegated to the kids' table. Gandalf chuckled into his pipe, and Bilbo wrinkled his nose in annoyance.

"You best be getting on that," said Dwalin. "Dori can be a right cranky bastard when he wants to be. You don't want to find yourself on the wrong end of his spoon."

"I didn't hear that!” said Dori loudly.

Balin cleared his throat softly, beckoning Bilbo's attention.

"Is there a place we can continue this conversation in private? After we eat, of course," asked Balin, voice pitched low.

"Yes, of course," replied Bilbo in an equally quiet voice. He found he really did want to continue speaking with him, especially after going to the trouble of literally signing his life away. "Meet me in my mother's study, ask Gandalf to show you the way if you can't find it."

"Excellent. Dwalin and I will meet you there."

Bilbo looked at the large, intimidatingly tattooed man—who obviously was not much of a conversationalist when he wasn't drinking—and wondered if Balin wasn't bringing him as some sort of inscrutable powerplay. He would have much rather talked to the man on his own; Bilbo found him fairly agreeable overall, even if he was a little vague and had a tendency to railroad. But then again, that could have also easily described Gandalf, and Gandalf could be a right bastard when he wanted to be.

Naturally, Dwalin said nothing and remained impassive either way.

"That sounds good," he said, unable to find it within himself to argue.

"Mister Baggins, can you show us where the plates and cutlery are?" asked Ori dutifully, though he
did wear a toned down version of the sour expressions Kili and Fili sported at the prospect of having to lay out the table.

Bilbo sighed in resignation. They really were kids, weren't they.

"Right then. I suppose we should move to the dining room if all fifteen of us are going to be eating. The plates are in the cabinets there, and the silverware is in that drawer. Not the one next to it, that’s the good silverware, nice enough that some dreadful cousins of mine keep conspiring to steal it. Ori, my dear, make sure to grab enough napkins from third drawer on the right. It doesn't matter if they match. I'll grab the cups. And lads, try not to break my mother's good china."

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In contrast to Bilbo's far-fetched dreams of french toast and mimosas, brunch was actually a fairly simple affair. However, this was made up for by the sheer amount of food Dori had made, which he had somehow convinced Gandalf, Dwalin, and Bifur to help haul to the table. Though to his credit, he carried the largest and obviously heaviest pot himself with an incredible seeming lack of effort. While Bilbo was grateful he didn’t have to cook for fifteen, thirteen of which he had no idea of their preferences or dietary restrictions, after seeing the sheer vastness of the spread he found he was reluctant to look into the state of his pantry.

The meal was mainly rice and bean based, though Dori had made use of Mum's surprisingly prodigious spice rack in a way that Bilbo wouldn't have thought of on his own. It was augmented with a salad of arugula and tomatoes, which Dori had presumably helped himself to from Bilbo's greenhouse. Bilbo couldn’t find it within himself to be annoyed, too charmed at the prospect of actually being cooked for. Once the salad had been served, Dori had physically leaned over Ori and watched him like a hawk until the boy had reluctantly finished all of his greens.

The absolute centerpiece of the meal, however, was by far the batch of triangular pastries stuffed with spiced potatoes and onions, apparently courtesy of Bombur. While he had obviously made use of the eggs and condensed milk Bilbo had been saving, Bilbo had no clue how he managed to make the pastry without butter. Vegetable oil? He made a note to talk shop with him later.

Nobody said much of anything about Bilbo's signing of the non-disclosure agreement during brunch. All except Oin, who blustered about tradition and the importance of keeping secrets from outsiders. Gloin looked terribly embarrassed, qualifying his elder brother's statements left and right. It seemed they didn’t share this particular viewpoint. However, no one else felt particularly compelled to contradict Oin, which made Bilbo a little uneasy. Bofur may have spoken up once or twice, but it was nothing like the gallant show he put on the night before in his defense against the king.

For his part, Thorin only thunderously menaced his plate in silence, aggressively pushing his food around and pointedly not looking at Bilbo—or Dwalin either, for that matter. The bald man didn't even pretend to eat, and he had stared unblinkingly at Thorin for the entirety of the meal like he was trying to set him on fire with his mind.

Once it seemed like everybody was done eating, Bilbo had quickly bolted away from the table, booking it to the study in order to avoid being conscripted into dish duty. He needn’t have worried, since it seemed like Dori was too busy forcing Nori and Bofur to clear the table. Balin and Dwalin soon found the tall double doors nestled in the side hallway and joined him. Dwalin carried with him three triangular pastries wrapped in a napkin, doubtless since he hadn’t actually eaten
“So, where were we? The Chunnel, was it,” said Balin seriously, settling himself into one of the office guest chairs and eyeing the cabinet full of dark-eyed Precious Moments figurines warily. Dwalin chose not to sit, instead munching on one of the pastries and wandering back to the armoire in the corner, seemingly to give Mum’s guns a closer inspection. Bilbo hoped he didn’t leave too many crumbs.

“Hold on a moment,” said Bilbo, leaning forward in Mum’s comfortable ergonomic office chair. “Before we get started, I think I deserve to know exactly what you are getting yourselves into. Even if I may not want to go, Gandalf is seemingly set on traveling with you. Against my better judgement, I’ve unfortunately been afflicted with a terrible fondness for him, one that makes me prone to worrying about his safety.”

“Yes, I can certainly respect that. You two seem very close,” said Balin, smiling slightly.

“Why are you going to Erebor?” asked Bilbo. He decided that since he’d signed the form, it was well within his rights to just go ahead and be blunt about it.

Balin didn't look particularly surprised at the brusqueness of his inquiry. Expression becoming serious again, he folded his hands on the desk and looked at a spot just over Bilbo's right shoulder, seemingly contemplating what exactly he was going to say next. Out of the corner of his eye, Bilbo saw Dwalin still studying the firearms, but he got the impression that the man was listening intently.

“We're going to Erebor in order to stop the plague,” said Balin finally, stroking his beard somewhat nervously.

Bilbo reared back slightly, somehow still surprised even though it was exactly the kind of answer he had been expecting.

“What? Like a cure?” asked Bilbo, brow furrowing. He honestly thought it wasn't possible, though he didn’t say as much.

“Not a cure, exactly. But a way to halt its spread,” replied Balin.

“I’m fairly certain it’s too late for that,” Bilbo scoffed.

“On the contrary, it’s far from too late.”

Though he said this, Balin didn't sound particularly hopeful or convinced in himself of the words. Bilbo didn't know whether he should be worried or not.

“I’m afraid I don’t follow.”

Balin sighed heavily. “How much do you know about the virus, Mister Baggins?”

“Only the symptoms,” said Bilbo, now a little unsure despite the fact that they were otherwise pretty straightforward.

The immediate first days of infection consisted of nothing more than flu-like symptoms, not unlike those a person would have if they had caught a mild cold with fever. It’s not until after about two or three days of being sick that an infected person starts to go into unprovoked rages and attack others. After a few days to weeks of this, the person dies. And then after that, they evidently decide that’s not really going to work for them after all, and they start trying to eat people instead.
Though, research had indeed been spotty as to whether the disease was airborne or not, since it seemed like some cases in the beginning had happened spontaneously without direct contact from an infected person. But, after nearly a year of living in the reality of a viral apocalypse, the lack of research didn’t bother Bilbo so much. By now, it seemed as though that if one wasn’t already in a specific stage of the disease at this point—mostly the eating people stage—a bite was the only surefire way to get it.

“Sorry, that was a foolish question,” said Balin, face screwing slightly in a frown. He absently ran a hand through his thick silver hair, thinking. “Perhaps I should start again. How much do you know about Erebor?”

“Didn’t we just get done talking about how everything related to Erebor is a state secret, for which I have to sign an NDA?” said Bilbo, just a tad exasperated. Really, he had signed Balin’s stupid contract, why couldn’t he just get to the point?

Balin’s frown deepened, seemingly starting to get frustrated. “Yes, but that doesn’t mean information doesn’t leak out occasionally. You certainly know who Durin Khan is, I gather.”

“Yes, I suppose,” said Bilbo, thinking back to the state of emergency that was enacted on his eponymous day. However, the epithet Balin used gave him pause.

“By the way,” he said, “why do you use the name ‘Khan’ for him? I saw it in Thorin’s signature as well, and I wondered then, too. To be frank, the only Khans I know of are Ghengis and the Star Trek villain.”

Balin leaned back and pinched the bridge of his nose, fixing Bilbo with a thoroughly vexed expression. A shot of panic went through Bilbo at that, worrying about what he could have possibly said wrong. The man looked for a moment like he was going to ignore the question.

“...It’s a fairly widely used title, actually,” said Balin, seeming to resign himself to the direction the conversation was going. “It’s common among a variety of peoples and ethnic groups who were once ruled by the Kipchak Empire.”

“The what?”

“You may know them better in the West as the Golden Horde.”

“As in the Mongols who invaded Eastern Europe?” asked Bilbo, now thoroughly confused.

“Precisely. Though, most people in the empire were in fact some form of Turkic and-or Mongol mix. That’s what we, the historical inhabitants of Erebor are: Khuzd Turks,” said Balin.

Bilbo digested this piece of information for a moment. He didn’t quite know what to make of it. While he admittedly hadn’t thought too hard about the possible ethnicity of his guests, with all the Russian-speaking and the vodka drinking he had rather assumed that they were some form of Slavic. Bilbo didn’t suppose they quite looked like what he would consider to be Turkish. But then again, when he tried to call up a mental image of what a Turkish person might look like, he only got pictures of Ottomans in fezes like the ones in documentaries on World War I, or in an Agatha Christie novel.

Balin seemed to read his mind in the silence and glowered. Bilbo thought he heard Dwalin chuff out a low laugh.

“Do you know what Tatars are?” asked Balin, seemingly at the end of his patience.
Bilbo suddenly recalled images of Polish and Lithuanian Muslims he once saw in a human interest story on the news. A large portion of them had been in possession of more stereotypical ‘western-looking’ features, such as blue eyes and red or blonde hair. He remembered now, they had been some sort of Turkish! Or Turkic, rather.

“Yes!” said Bilbo, desperately grabbing hold of the memory. “They were once part of the Golden Horde too, weren’t they?”

That had been a total guess, but apparently it was correct enough, since Balin started to look somewhat relieved.

“Yes, you understand,” he said, though his wispy brows remained slightly furrowed in vexation. “We’re fairly closely related to the Tatars in an ethnic sense, particularly the population in Crimea.”

“Are you Muslim then?” Bilbo asked, though he already had his doubts. He thought about how he had heard the name ‘Mahal’ invoked on more than one occasion, but never Allah. But then, thinking back to earlier disastrous missteps, he frantically added, “Not that that’s an issue, of course!”

Dwalin let out an abrupt cackle, apparently done with pretending he wasn’t listening. He sat down in the other receiving chair, kicking his feet up onto the desk. At least he wasn’t still wearing his boots.

“Geez, you are so British, aren’t you?” laughed Dwalin, shoving the last pastry into his mouth.

“I’m sorry,” Bilbo said miserably. He wished he knew more about these things.

Balin seemed to take pity on him, letting out a deep breath that released a bit of his subtle frustration.

“No, no. It’s fine,” he said, relenting. “It’s a legitimate question, and I suppose if we wanted Westerners to know, we wouldn’t have a cultural policy of secrecy.”

Bilbo hardly felt better, but he gratefully accepted the probably undeserved olive branch.

“So is the secrecy really religious, then?” he asked, remembering Balin’s earlier comment.

“In a sense,” said Balin. “It really has to do with the circumstances of how our kingdom was founded, our culture, and our religion all working together in tandem.”

“Buckle in, lad. You’re about to get a lecture,” said Dwalin.

Balin sent his brother a stinging look. Dwalin just shrugged it off, evidently more than used to it. Bilbo decided that the warning was very much warranted, because the older man proceeded to tell a story that sounded very practiced, like he was reciting it from memory.

“As you may have assumed, the Khazâd, or Khuzd Turks, were originally once part of the Kipchak Empire,” said Balin. “It was the western arm of the great empire originally founded by the infamous Mongol conqueror Genghis Khan. When the Great Khan died, he divided his empire into four fiefdoms, and the Golden Horde went to his son, Batu Khan.

“Our ancestors had settled at the headwaters of the Gabilân, or the Great River, on the absolute westernmost frontier of the empire. Having not yet perfected certain arts gifted to us by our creator, we lived a quiet life herding and hunting until the nephew of one of Batu Khan’s descendants, Öz
Beg Khan, assumed the throne at the beginning of the 14th century. He then set out on a campaign to convert the so-called ‘pagan religions’—namely shamanism, Tengrism, and Buddhism—to Islam.”

“Is that why the Tatars living in Poland and Lithuania are Muslim? And the people in Central Asia?” asked Bilbo, leaning forward on the desk and desperately trying to sound informed.

“Yes, as are the groups of Tatars living in Crimea and on the Volga,” replied Balin, seeming to become more relaxed. “Ethnically Turkic and Mongol people once practiced a variety of religions, but because of Öz Beg, they’re now mainly Muslim. Now, our religion is rooted in our belief in—oh, what’s the word in English. Анимистические сущности. Dwalin.”

“Polytheism,” said Dwalin, brushing the crumbs out of his beard and fishing in his breast pocket for his pack of smokes.

“Well, yes. But that’s not quite what I was looking for.”

“Spirits.”

“Right. Thank you, Brother.”

Dwalin didn’t reply.

“We’re a principally shamanic people, you see,” continued Balin, unfazed, “and historically we’ve been very proud and protective of that fact. We had lived several generations on the land by the time Öz Beg Khan came calling. It was rich with spirits that had been incredibly hospitable to us, not to mention it now held those of many of our ancestors, who tend to hang around for a bit to spend more time with family before retreating to the Halls of Waiting. To put it lightly, it would have been incredibly rude to ignore them after all their kindness, so you could say that at the very least we were not happy with this campaign to convert the empire.

“We resisted, retreating to the slopes of the tallest, most forbidding mountain in the region; a rugged peak that jutted straight out of the land with almost nothing else around it. We had originally thought it housed an evil spirit that was wicked and unfriendly to humans, and so had called it Ozodl’ Bulnd, or ‘the Wicked Mountain.’ But in actuality, it turned out to be the home of our great ancestor, Mahal. He had been waiting for us and welcomed us with open arms, and from there on taught us the art of craft, both metal and war. With his tutelage, our leader Durin the Deathless, or simply Durin Khan, led a campaign of only a handful of warriors to repel Öz Beg’s army, which was said to be 300,000 strong.”

“Those seem like quite... impossible odds,” said Bilbo delicately. Dwalin snorted.

“I imagine there was a bit of exaggeration somewhere along the line,” Balin conceded. “Anyway, after Öz Beg’s forces retreated, we renamed the mountain Erebor, which roughly translates to ‘The Lonely Peak,’ and built our homes straight into the rock using our new mastery of stonecraft. However, under pain of death, Mahal urged us to keep our knowledge secret, and to use it only to benefit the Khazâd and their close, intimate allies. In return, he blessed us with earthen riches beyond compare, along with unending prosperity.”

This seemed to be the conclusion of the tale, as Balin delicately settled back into his seat and folded his hands once more, having made great use of them during the recitation. Bilbo tried to wrap his head around all this and connect it to the current zombie apocalypse. He couldn’t.

“Well, that’s a very nice story,” he said as diplomatically as he could. Balin smiled encouragingly.
“It is, isn’t it? Very historical,” replied the older man.

Dwalin seemed to cough on his clove cigarette, though to Bilbo’s ears it sounded suspiciously like a laugh. He got the distinct feeling they were messing with him.

Feeling courageous, he asked, “Do you really believe that’s what happened?”

Balin leaned back in his chair once more. He seemed to be unoffended, much to Bilbo’s unending relief. Dwalin remained outwardly inscrutable, but he gave off the atmosphere of being amused.

“Me, personally?” asked Balin lightly. “Oh, I have no idea if it anything actually happened exactly the way the story goes, if it happened at all. Though to be fair, I’m admittedly not very religious. But it certainly provides context to most of our more unusual customs. And with the signing of the NDA, under our religious law you are technically now one of those aforementioned allies, Mister Baggins. So tread carefully.”

Bilbo was suddenly struck with the significance of what he had earlier done so blithely, even half out of spite. God, would he ever not mess up around these people?

“Ah, duly noted,” he said, suitably humbled and thinking back to Oin’s earlier invective at brunch. Something the man had said suddenly stuck out to Bilbo.

“Mister Oin seemed to think that the plague was a curse. A punishment of some kind,” he said.

Balin scoffed, physically waving the notion away with his hand. “Oh, Oin is just a staunch defender of the old ways, which is especially rich considering that Gloin is almost certainly a free market capitalist. He wants to do away with the monarchy altogether and open our borders to the whole world on a completely open basis.”

“Does the king know that?” asked Bilbo, taken aback.

“Oh, he does. He just doesn’t say anything because he believes everybody is entitled to their opinion. Thorin is surprisingly willing to work with dissenters. He spent some time in America as a young man, you see. Apparently it made some sort of impression, though I fail to see how it could have been any good.”

Dwalin face morphed into a strange sort pained of expression, as if reliving an unpleasant memory. Bilbo observed the change in fascination.

“In the case of Oin, however, I’m afraid that he fancies himself some sort of diviner-slash-shaman’s-reincarnation, or something like that. He’s stuck in the past, devoted to the monarchy in its traditional form, and hates being away from Erebor for any reason. Which is ironic, considering that he’s a military doctor who was almost constantly working out of the country at one point or another during the Soviet Era,” said Balin with a slight scoff to his voice.

“Maybe he didn’t like coming home to all the communists out corrupting the local youth and swaying them from the old ways,” rumbled Dwalin, looking pointedly at his brother. The other man only sniffed superciliously in reply.

“So there was a Soviet Era,” said Bilbo.

Balin turned back to Bilbo, blinking as if the thought that Bilbo wouldn’t know this hadn’t occurred to him.

“Oh yes,” he said. “That’s partly why Oin is so worked up about you signing the NDA. He thinks
the virus is some sort of retribution from Mahal for the Khazâd allowing ourselves to be invaded just after the conclusion of World War II. As if we had a choice! It wasn’t like Stalin was just going to let us alone with our happily monarchical form of government, not while we were surrounded on all sides by the USSR and the rest of the Eastern Bloc. Even with our defensive military might, we were no match for the sheer numbers of the Red Army.”

“Right, that makes sense,” said Bilbo. It certainly explained as to why about half of the older men seemed to speak such good Russian. “But if Mister Oin hates being away from Erebor so much, how did he end up in Britain after the plague broke out—if it truly did start there, I mean. Or any of you, for that matter?”

“It’s not relevant to our discussion,” said Balin flatly, expression shuttering.

Dwalin glowered unnervingly, silently encouraging Bilbo to drop the subject. He seemed about half a step away from intimidatingly cracking his knuckles. Ah, Bilbo thought, this must have been why Balin brought him to the meeting.

“Right,” he grimaced.

“Politics aside,” said Balin, “I came of age during the Soviet Era at its peak, at a time when our religion was suppressed and forced out of the public sphere for both ideological and cultural reasons. Our father styled himself a sort of quasi-shaman, but I worked closely with the Communist bureaucracy in the last days of the occupation, which certainly colored my relationship to spirituality. But even taking my own biases into consideration, I’m about ninety-nine percent certain that the plague isn’t a curse from Mahal.”

“Ah,” said Bilbo, not knowing quite what to say. Dwalin rolled his eyes.

“I was even a Party member, you know,” Balin added, somewhat boastfully.

Bilbo’s eyes grew wide. “You? I can’t exactly see you being a Communist.”

Dwalin scoffed loudly in disbelief, wordlessly as if to say, You mean this guy? Bilbo felt he was getting quite proficient at interpreting Dwalin’s various grunts and grumbles.

Balin looked askance at him, and Bilbo realized to his chagrin that he must have said something terribly Western again. To his relief, the older man only ended up just waving him off.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m quite, er, reformed, if that makes you feel any better,” said Balin. “I’m very loyal to Thorin now, as are we all. Everyone in the company believes very much in Thorin’s ability to be a good king to the Khazâd, and to bring us fully into the twenty-first century. Thrain was fine, I suppose, but it’s Thorin who was and still is our best hope.”

Bilbo wondered as to what it was that Thorin possessed, other than sheer charisma, that seemed to inspire such confidence in him from people who seemed to be at such wildly disparate ends of the political spectrum. From what Bilbo had seen so far, he could say with confidence that he wasn’t very impressed. Dwalin seemed to echo this sentiment.

“Yeah. Just when he’s not going off in a royal strop the second someone disagrees with him,” he muttered.

“Oh, will you stop that!” exclaimed Balin, turning bodily in his chair toward his brother. He leaned forward, looking at Dwalin with an intense sort of eye contact. “You need to apologize to him. Nothing productive ever comes of you two bickering like an old married couple.”
“I don’t need to apologize about anything,” the other man protested loudly. Dwalin’s voice sounded rather like a bellowing of a black bear when he raised it.

A thought struck Bilbo that had him suddenly looking at Dwalin in a new light. Were he and Thorin—?

He internally shook himself, cutting off that train of thought. No, surely that would be preposterous.

...But what if? They did seem to be much closer than king and subject, and Dwalin had been extremely agitated last night at Thorin’s late arrival, and at Bofur’s unintentional exclusion of him. Interesting. But he could think about that later.

“Was it hard during Soviet times?” asked Bilbo, trying to get the conversation back on track. He didn’t know exactly where the track was leading, but he could at least take the opportunity to learn, especially since he was starting to become certain that even if he did find an encyclopedia somewhere, it wouldn’t have much useful information in regards to Erebor’s history.

“Oh!” said Balin, straightening in his chair and looking enthusiastic about having the chance to brag. “On the contrary, Erebor was quite good at being communist. Our penchant for secrecy certainly lent ourselves to the Soviet brand of it, and our pre-World War II social and political infrastructure was actually fairly similar to that instituted after the establishment of Soviet rule. We just had a king, a royal family, and a council of advisers instead of a Party Secretary and political and industrial ministers. After the roughness of the initial transition, things were actually very stable during the occupation.” He exuded a sense of pride, while Dwalin remained neutrally sour.

“Huh,” said Bilbo, who as a Brit wasn’t entirely used to hearing either magnanimous or even fairly neutral depictions of life under Communism. Most of what he had heard about were things like bread lines and gulags.

“However, I’ll admit as a people we did chafe at outside rule,” continued Balin, tone bitterness slightly. “This is especially in consideration of how at first, the USSR only wanted Erebor as an ideological statement. And what a statement it was for the Soviets, how the Russians had ousted the last bourgeois ethno-religious monarchy in Eastern Europe and then turned all its former subjects into model communists, seemingly almost effortlessly. But then, after they had moved in and won their philosophical victory, they only wanted us for our resources.”

“Resources?” said Bilbo. What resources? He thought that Erebor sat on a rocky piece of unproductive land and was currently wracked by poverty.

“Mister Baggins, am I correct in assuming that you’re under the impression that Erebor sits upon a piece of rocky, worthless land and we’re all suffering from post-Communist poverty?” asked Balin, eyes narrowing.

“Er,” said Bilbo intelligently.

His tone must have conceded the point, because Balin sent him a fairly withering look. However, he continued, “Well, you’re only half right, Mister Baggins. Let me just tell you straight away that on paper, Erebor is actually a very rich country. It’s just that we’ve historically been very picky about who outside of our borders we choose to share our wealth with. We only have two historical trading partners, but our mountain sits on top of one of Europe’s—and perhaps indeed one of the world’s—richest and most diverse mineral deposits. We had kept it a secret until the Russians decided to move in, after which we had to ‘spill the beans’, as you Westerners like to say. And that
wasn’t easy, since our mineral wealth was and still is our greatest gift from Mahal. That more than anything contributed to the overall sense of general Khuzd disgruntlement with the Soviet in Erebor.”

“I see. What sort of minerals are we talking about?” asked Bilbo.

“Iron, coal. A little bit of gold and a whole lot of silver and copper. Aluminum. Rare earth metals used in electronics. A wide variety of gemstones. Frankly, I’ve lost track of the whole list. It’s quite the geological anomaly,” said Balin.

“You’re forgetting one,” said Dwalin.

Balin looked about ready to kick him in the shin at the reminder, much as he did with Thorin earlier.

“What is it?” asked Bilbo, perhaps a bit too innocently because Balin turned away from Dwalin to pierce him with a sidelong gaze.

“I feel the need to reiterate that this information falls decidedly under the ‘proprietary and sensitive information’ clause of the non-disclosure agreement,” said Balin tersely.

A bolt of courage shot through Bilbo. “You’ll kill me in the name of your god if I tell anybody about it. Got it,” he replied, tone bravely cavalier.

Balin blinked, lips turning up in a grin seemingly in spite of himself. He shrugged.

“May I remind you that we technically can’t kill you, Mister Baggins, but we can imprison you and leave you to rot. Or does throwing you to the infected count?”

“Dunno, I guess we’re going to have to take it up with the king,” remarked Bilbo.

Seemingly in truly good humor for the first time since the conversation started, Balin laughed easily. Even Dwalin didn’t bother to hide his grin.

“We’ll have to see then,” he said, still smiling. “Anyway, just after the royal family was restored to power, we started prospecting in earnest again, this time going deep into the heart of the mountain. It was deeper than we had ever been able to go before, due to the upgraded mining technology that had been installed by our former overlords in the Kremlin.”

“I take it you found something,” said Bilbo.

“Yes. What we found was a heretofore unknown element, one that exhibited strange properties almost in between metal and nonmetal. Pure molecules formed almost organic structures, though it wasn’t quite carbon or silicon. It was quite unlike anything that any human had ever encountered before. The Khazâd lauded it as a gift from Mahal, a sign of his blessing after the expulsion of the Soviets and an indication of the legitimacy of Thrór’s rule.”

“Wow, it must be something special then. What exactly can it do?” asked Bilbo.

“Oh, a number of things. It’s allowed us to build some extremely advanced defensive technology, along with making numerous strides in the realm of quantum computing.”

“Really,” said Bilbo, suddenly extremely interested.

Balin smiled smugly, as if he had anticipated that reaction from him. “Yes. The things you’ve
heard thus far about our security system being extremely advanced haven’t been hyperbole, Mister Baggins. I’d say our medical technology, not to mention our defensive capabilities, are about fifty to seventy-five years ahead of our nearest competitor.”

“That’s… shocking,” said Bilbo, stunned. “Really hard to believe, actually.”

“Yes, well, it’s very real. We were also thinking it may have clean energy potential as well, but our research on that was halted when the plague struck.”

The mention of the current pandemic abruptly sobered Bilbo, who had been dreamily fantasizing about working encryptions on an actual quantum computer ever since Balin mentioned it might be real.

“Right. And what does the virus have to do with all this, exactly?” he asked. He had certainly learned a lot about Erebor in the past half hour or so he had spent talking with Balin (and Dwalin, though to a much lesser degree), but they still hadn’t gotten around to how this all related to Europe’s pesky zombie problem.

Balin became also became serious. “We think it was a calculated attack made by an outside party to seize our mineral resources that had gone wrong.”

“Or, perhaps it was one that worked too well,” said Dwalin lowly.

“Like a bioweapon?” asked Bilbo incredulously.

“Exactly. We think the key to stopping it lies within Erebor’s borders, but our security system, as you well know, is highly advanced and none of us have anything remotely in the way of proper training when it comes to computers. Which is why we need your help, Mister Baggins.”

Bilbo felt rather like he was being given the Mission Impossible speech. Your mission, should you choose to accept it... But the simple fact of the matter was that he just wasn’t Tom Cruise, and he never would be. He was just Bilbo Baggins, a forty-year old confirmed bachelor and convicted felon from Cornwall.

“Why me?” he asked, holding his hands out in desperate supplication. “Surely you can find another wannabe hacker alive out there somewhere who would absolutely love to brave the wasteland in order to play with a quantum computer.”

To his surprise, Balin seemed rather cross at that. “I’m sorry Mister Baggins, but Gandalf spoke extremely highly of you, to the point that we had assumed we wouldn’t have to go out searching too hard for a computer expert. And now that we’re here, we don’t have time to go looking for another... what was it Gandalf said you were again? Computer cryptologer?”

It was close enough that Bilbo didn’t feel the need to correct him. And damn that Gandalf! He felt his aforementioned fondness of the man sharply wane.

“Is that why you need to go through the channel tunnel? Because it’s the most direct route to the continent?” asked Bilbo, finally circling back around to his very first question.

“A bloody mistake is what it is,” said Dwalin grumpily.

“Unfortunately, it may be our only route,” said Balin, sighing. “We don’t have many options, and we need to get to Erebor before Durin’s Day.”

“That’s in two months! Surely that’s not enough time!” Bilbo squawked, aghast.
“No, lad, he’s talking about the actual Durin’s Day. The Khuzd New Year. It starts on December 20th this year,” said Dwalin.

Bilbo flushed in mortification. Of course that’s what they were talking about, not the anniversary of the UK state of emergency. Stupid!

“Yes, well,” he said, trying to recover, “that’s still not a whole lot of time. It’s already the end of March!”

“Aye,” said Dwalin gravely.

“Why do you need to get there before then, anyway? Surely there isn’t a hard time limit regarding a cure or anything like that,” said Bilbo in uncertainty.

“Technically yes, but do you remember that clean energy research I mentioned earlier?” said Balin.

Bilbo only nodded, unsure as to where this was heading.

“Durin’s Day this year is an extremely auspicious one by our calendar, given that it coincides with the winter solstice. With that in mind, King Thór had scheduled it to be the day that the automated systems regulating our kingdom’s nuclear power reactor would shut down,” said Balin grimly, which made Bilbo gasp audibly. “It was supposed to be the first day of our official switch to the new mithril reactor, a lucky date to usher in a new era of self-sufficiency that had been gifted to us from both Mahal and Erebor itself. As it stands, the plant is the only thing still providing power to Erebor and is currently single-handedly keeping the mainframe online, which is our only real tool in stopping the virus. And perhaps more importantly, the systems controlling the water pumps are supposed to switch to manual mode on Durin’s Day, in preparation for the decommission of the plant. I’m sure you can guess what will happen if the core doesn’t get the cooling it needs.”

“Excuse me, what?” exclaimed Bilbo.

“We need to get there in time to keep ol’ SMAUG from melting down,” said Dwalin, as if it was the simplest thing in the world.

Bilbo felt a hysterical giggle bubble up in his throat at the thought of irradiated zombies. It was like something out of a bad horror movie. He thought he had watched one like that once on DVD while under house arrest, just one of the many, many movies he had people drop off for him in order to pass the days away. And really, a nuclear reactor, in a former Soviet state near Ukraine no less, called ‘smog’? Wasn’t that just a little on the nose? If this had been the plot of one of his DVDs, he would have given it a below-average review in his journal that night.

But Balin and Dwalin were looking at him with dead seriousness. Bilbo was starting to suspect they weren’t joking, which somehow made the whole situation even more absurd.

"Aside from halting the pandemic, we cannot allow the reactor to poison our mountain. It's absolutely untenable to us, the Khazâd as a people. Erebor is the center of the —our universe," Balin said with nothing less than pure emotional conviction. For all his purported secularity, he certainly seemed convinced of this fact.

“And how are you even going to go about doing anything about that?” Bilbo asked, trying to keep it together.

“Mister Bofur is a nuclear engineer. He had just taken over for the Soviet Era nuclear energy minister and was set to direct the decommission of the plant before all the mess started,” explained Balin.
Bilbo was abruptly rendered speechless, though it shamed him a little bit to have done so. He thought about the jovial, unpretentious man who had been nothing but kind to him so far. Why couldn’t he be a nuclear physicist? People certainly didn’t seem to peg Bilbo as a hard numbers guy all too often, either.

“Really? He seems… awfully young for such a high ranking position,” he said for lack of anything better. But honestly, he couldn’t have been more than, what, thirty-five?

“Wouldn’t know it just by talking to him, but he’s a genius,” gruffed Dwalin.

“By my last count, I think he’s thirty-nine?” said Balin, voice lilting at the end in a way that made it clear he was uncertain about this fact.

So, older than Bilbo had originally thought, but not by much. “Still, that’s awfully young to be the director of a whole country’s nuclear power program.”

“Well, it's like my brother said. The man is a genius at what he does,” said Balin. “And besides, we’re a small country, and we were about to get rid of our nuclear energy program anyway.”

Bilbo looked shrewdly at Dwalin, eyeing him anew. “Mister Dwalin, I don’t suppose you’re actually an award-winning microbiologist and you just didn’t inform me?”

Dwalin actually laughed aloud at that.

“Nah.”

Balin sighed, rolling his eyes skyward. “I sent him to the most prestigious prep school in Moscow, and he thanked me by buying tapes of The Clash on the black market and choosing to swing axes for a living once he got home.”

“Military,” said Dwalin with a smirk, confirming Bilbo’s initial assessment of him.

“I know it’s a big ask, Mister Baggins,” said Balin quietly, “especially since you have ensconced yourself here so nicely, and in such comfort. But unfortunately you’re our last best hope. I know His Majesty is confident in the key that his father bequeathed to him before he died, but my brother and I have our doubts. I would much rather have a contingency plan in place in case things take an unexpected turn.”

“I…” said Bilbo, truthfully unable to find anything to say.

“I don’t expect you to say anything right this second, but I urge you to decide quickly. Thorin plans for us to depart at first light tomorrow morning; he’s unhappy we’re wasting a day’s travel here at all. We have a strict schedule to keep, as you now very well know,” said Balin.

“That’s putting it rather lightly,” replied Bilbo.

“Yes, I suppose.”

Bilbo didn’t know what to say to that, so he stood up from the desk instead. He had a lot to think about. Balin and Dwalin quickly followed suit. Seemingly understanding Bilbo’s dilemma, they chose not to say anything. They all quietly filed out of the study in quick succession without a word passing among them.

***
His Majesty was back in the kitchen, holding court with Gandalf, Bofur, Oin, and Gloin, so Bilbo’s feet took him to the drawing room. The company had kept the boards over the windows through the night and morning, much to Bilbo’s relief, and instead were using the kerosene lamp from the kitchen and Gandalf’s small camping lantern for illumination. Bombur was sitting cross-legged on a pillow on the floor, having wedged himself in between the coffee table and the sofa. He was using his vantage point to utilize the coffee table as a hardback in order to scribble something on the paper he had borrowed from Ori earlier.

Bilbo delicately perched on the sofa near the auburn-haired man, taking the chance to casually lean over and see what he was working on so intently. Bombur hadn’t noticed him, too involved in marking a crisp, straight line with a perfunctory flourish, using the cover of a book as a straight-edge.

What he saw made him gasp in shock. Instead of scribbles, they were actually carefully designed architectural drawings of what looked to be the interior and exterior elevations of a dwelling that was to be built straight into a rock wall of some kind. Bedecked in colonnades and geometric design elements, the meticulously shaded schematics depicted a home that made use of the natural geologic features of the rock, while also providing enough space for what seemed to be a fairly sizable family. Notes were scrawled here and there, but Bilbo couldn’t make heads or tails of them, as they were all in the runes that Bilbo was now pretty sure was the written form of Khuzdul.

“Mister Bombur, these are wonderful!” Bilbo couldn’t help but exclaim.

Bombur jumped in surprise, rattling the table and whipping his head in Bilbo’s direction. For a moment, he looked as if he was going to throw the entirety of his sizable body over the coffee table in an effort to conceal his work, though Bilbo hadn’t the faintest idea why. In any case, he looked thoroughly embarrassed, moustache twitching as blotches of color appeared high on the apples of his cheeks.

“I’m sorry, am I interrupting you? Should I go?” asked Bilbo. He was suddenly unsure of his sincere comment of praise, given how it had been received.

“No! I apologize, you merely startled me,” said Bombur in that soft voice of his. “This is your house, Mister Baggins. You can come and go as you please.”

Bilbo frowned at that, as it ran counter to his deeply ingrained host’s sensibilities. However, he decided he could at least take advantage of the sentiment.

“Then may I have a look at what you’re drawing?” he asked in reply.

“...Go ahead.”

“Hum,” said Bilbo, inspecting the illustrations once again, a little closer this time. Bombur’s body language remained rigid, as if at any second he was going to snatch the paper off the table and tear it up in front of him.

“They’re not very good,” said Bombur tersely.

Bilbo made a high noise of disagreement. “On the contrary! You have incredible skill! Are you an artist like Ori?”

“Hardly,” said Bombur, flush deepening. “Far from it, actually. I’m a structural engineer. I inspect dams for a living. Or, well, I used to.”
Bilbo eyed him dubiously, thinking the man should probably have more confidence in himself. “Yes, well. I’m not one to tell anybody how to live their lives, but I think you have some real talent as an architectural designer.”

“Thanks,” said Bombur, ducking his head in a small, shy smile. “I’ve actually always wanted to be an architect, but I never had the scores or the skill to make it into the Builder’s Guild. My second choice was to be a baker—”

“Of course!” exclaimed Bilbo, too excited to realize how rudely he cut the other man off. He leaned forward, thinking back to Bombur’s contribution to brunch in fond remembrance. It was by far the most delicious thing he had eaten in nearly a year, and the mere thought of consuming more fresh baked pastry was enough to bring a tear to his eye.

“You made those delicious, er, what were they called?” asked Bilbo.

“Ôsposmak,” supplied Bombur, seemingly growing more confident as he beheld Bilbo’s most likely truly rapturous expression.

“Right, osh-ôsposmak,” said Bilbo clumsily. “How did you manage to make the pastry without butter, by the way? I’ve been wondering about it since brunch.”

“Vegetable oil, actually.”

“Ha! I knew it.”

“And it’s actually supposed to use sour cream instead of milk, but the evaporated milk did the trick in a pinch,” said Bombur, seeming to settle back down into a more relaxed posture as they conversed about something he was obviously more confident about. “I’m glad to know that you thought they were delicious. I was worried, given the limited supplies, but I was craving them too much not to at least try.”

“Well you certainly succeeded. You’re a man of many talents, Mister Bombur,” said Bilbo, looking at the drawings significantly. Bombur flushed anew.

“Oh, I doubt that. I’m afraid I wasn’t good enough to get into the Baker’s Cooperative, either. So dams were really my last option in making a living to support myself and my family.” He suddenly got a dreamy, far-away look in his eye. “But. Ah! I’ve always wanted to create beautiful things. Dams are beautiful in their own way, I suppose. But they certainly aren’t art.”

“Are these designs something for your family then? Or are you just doing it for fun?” asked Bilbo, scooting closer to Bombur and the drawings.

“Oh, these are just ideas I’ve been kicking around for a while now. Haven’t had much time to sit down and draw them out with all the traveling we’ve been doing, so I decided to take advantage of the downtime we’ve had here. They are indeed for a new house for my family and I to move into— if we can all make it back to Erebor someday.” replied Bombur, a little wistfully.

“Oh, that’s lovely. My father built Bag End for my Mum as a wedding present, you know,” said Bilbo, internally proud of how his voice didn’t waver at the mention of his parents.

“Then your father and I have something in common,” said Bombur. “This really is a lovely home you have, Mister Baggins. Quite inspirational. I figure if I can’t build great pavilions or forum halls for the monarchy, I certainly can at least build a house for my wife.”

“Oh! So I assume there’s a Missus, er, Bombur, then,” said Bilbo, stumbling over the last part. He
realized that nobody except Thorin had provided any form of last name.

“Heh,” snorted Bombur, otherwise doing nothing to correct Bilbo’s wording. “There is indeed. A missus and seven beautiful children.”

“Seven!” Bilbo croaked in disbelief.

“Aye, five girls and two boys. They’re the joys of my life, why I’m going on this fool’s errand in the first place. Other than to look after my brother and our cousin, of course.”

Bombur’s casual mention of the company’s suicide mission dragged Bilbo’s mind back to the dilemma at hand. His stomach flipped anxiously at the thought, but he also possessed a little bit of empathy for the man. Despite his own reluctance to get involved, Bilbo could certainly respect Bombur’s motivations for wanting to provide a safe home for his family.

“Where are they now, if I may ask? I notice you talk about them in the present tense,” said Bilbo, trying to move onto a lighter topic.

“Back up in Scotland with the rest of them,” said Bombur, smiling, “hiding out in the Highlands until all this blows over. Or until we die, of course.”

Right. So much for lighter topics.

“So there are more, er, Khazâd living in Britain?” asked Bilbo, hoping to death that he was using the word right. He must have been, because Bombur beamed at him.

“Yes, living in a compound originally leased out to us by the Scottish government up in the Cairngorms. Most of the Khuzd expats living in the British Isles made it there once word came from Erebor that the plague had struck. It’s the historical place of exile for the royal family, you see,” explained Bombur.

“Oh my,” said Bilbo, horrified to think about the hard journey they must have already made if they had come all the way from the Highlands to Cornwall. He didn’t think it was possible to make that distance on foot.

“Would you like to see a picture of my children? I have one right here,” Bombur said, shifting to reach into one of his back pockets.

“Of course!”

Bombur pulled out a thick black leather wallet, which was emblazoned with a geometric design that almost looked like some sort of tree. He excavated a creased photograph from among a wealth of old receipts and five pound bills, handing it to Bilbo. The picture had been taken in what looked to be a beautiful glen in the Highlands. A large group of people were gathered in the foreground, all clothed in what looked to be colorful traditional regalia. Most of their fur-lined, heavily brocaded dresses and jackets were embroidered with the same sort of geometric patterns Bilbo kept seeing.

The only people in the photo he recognized Bifur, Bofur, and Bombur. Standing next to the latter was a strikingly beautiful woman with black hair. He noticed her and Bombur's joined hands, and Bilbo realized with a start that she must be Bombur’s wife. She was positively dripping in jewels. Gems glinted from her intricately braided hair, her dress, her hands and wrists, even her shoes. Bilbo noticed that actually they all had some sort of jewelry on, though for the men it was mainly relegated to jeweled silver hair clips and barrettes in their equally elaborately braided hair, and ornate rings on their fingers that were inlaid with precious stones. Surrounding the four adults was
a large gaggle of children whose ages ranged from a single infant to a few older teenagers, a couple of whom Bilbo thought didn’t exactly look related to the rest of them.

“This was taken the last Durin’s Day before the pandemic,” said Bombur, just a tad sadly. “There’s my wife, Mira, of course, and these are my children.” He pointed out seven of the children in the group, including the baby, a few preteens and adolescents, and one of the older teenagers, a girl of about seventeen who took much more after her father in looks than her mother.

“Who are the rest of them?” asked Bilbo.

“Oh, just some kids of family friends who also wanted to be in the picture,” said Bombur with a laugh. He pointed out another mousey looking girl in a bright blue fur-lined dress, whose arm was looped through the eldest girl’s, the one who looked like Bombur. “This one is my eldest daughter Ilnara’s significant other, Frai. She’s up in Scotland too. My eighth child, I call her.”

Oh.

“Well, you certainly seem to have created something beautiful,” said Bilbo, staring at the beaming girls’ linked arms. The warmth of the image was severely undermined by how utterly gutted he felt.

“Aye. That I have, Mister Baggins,” said Bombur. He seemed not to have noticed Bilbo’s change in mood, only gazing at the photograph with a painfully tender expression. “Speaking of which, is there a Missus Baggins out there somewhere?”

Bilbo shook his head, forcing out a laugh. “Only my mother, and she’ll probably remain as the only Missus Baggins, at this rate.”

“Give yourself time, Mister Baggins. It’s never too late for love or family,” said Bombur.

“I do hope so,” said Bilbo, feeling strangely muted.

“Family, you say?” a boisterous voice exclaimed, causing both Bilbo and Bombur to look toward the entrance of the drawing room in surprise.

Gloin swept into the room in a whirl of ginger hair, plonking himself down on the sofa on the other side of Bombur and extracting a similarly thick billfold from one of his pants pockets. “Have I shown you pictures of my beautiful Gimli yet, Mister Baggins?”

He flipped the wallet open, and in the process unfolded a half meter long, double-sided accordion of wallet-sized photos. They all were seemingly of the same red-headed boy at different ages. In the most recent one, he looked to be about fifteen.

“I’m sorry, who is this?” asked Bilbo, looking at the huge wallet insert in shock.

“My darling son Gimli, of course!” Gloin said proudly, shoving the photos closer to Bilbo. They draped over the coffee table, scattering Bombur’s drawings.

“Isn’t he handsome!” said Gloin. It wasn’t a question.

Bilbo took hold of the wallet insert and inspected the most recent photo. A slightly chubby, freckle-faced boy with the first beginnings of a patchy strawberry blonde beard glowered back at him. Bilbo supposed he may yet have the chance to grow into his features once he lost the baby fat and his beard came in fully.
“Oh yes, he is quite handsome,” Bilbo lied politely.

“Ach, isn’t he though? Jewel of my life, sun in my sky. I miss him dreadfully,” said Gloin, seemingly overcome with emotion. To Bilbo’s alarm, the man nearly looked as if he were about to cry.

“Mister Baggins, I just remembered,” said Bombur in a carefully measured tone of voice, looking at Bilbo significantly, “one of the towels Mister Greyhame supplied me with last night had a very large hole in it. I wasn’t going to say anything, but now I think I’d much rather prefer a fresh one. If it’s not too much trouble, could you find me another?”

Bilbo flushed with relief, overcome with gratitude at Bombur’s immense kindness in giving him such an obvious out.

“Oh dear! Yes, of course! I should get on that right away, before I forget,” he said.

“But I have more pictures! You haven’t even seen my wife yet!” objected Gloin.

“Perhaps another time, Mister Gloin,” said Bilbo, feigning regret as he stood and smoothed his waistcoat of wrinkles. He supposed it was rather sweet, this fierce-looking man being so obviously besotted with his family. But Bilbo found he really wasn’t much in the mood for more pictures, something sour twisting in the pit of his stomach.

“Thank you so much for the lovely conversation, Mister Bombur,” he said with utmost sincerity, which made Bombur flush once more. He nodded at Gloin. “Excuse me.”

Bombur and Gloin continued their conversation as he strode off. Gloin had all but shoved his wallet into Bombur’s hands before he noticed the family photograph that Bilbo had left lying on the table.

"Oho! Look at Ilnara and Frai! In the first blush of love they were back then! When do you think they’ll get married?” Bilbo heard Gloin remark as he was leaving the room.

"They’re only nineteen. And with all that’s going on, I’m sure marriage is the last thing on their minds,” sighed Bombur, as if he had reiterated this fact many times before. "Plus, I’m sure Ilnara wants to get married in Erebor."

Bilbo lost track of the exchange as he wandered up the stairs, throat strangely tight.

Bilbo didn’t know if Bombur was actually being serious about his towel having a hole in it, but the thought of it being true was simply too horrifying to leave to chance. He checked the linen closet in the hallway for a spare, which was empty. Then he checked in the closet of one of the guest bedrooms (which was currently being inhabited by a particularly messy individual, if the state of the unmade bed and the spare clothes that had seemingly erupted from a backpack laid haphazardly in the middle of the floor were anything to go by) where they stored old and unused linens. It had also been picked clean.

Bilbo looked at the bare shelves with his hands on his hips, pointedly ignoring the mess and wondering if there was a way out of this quandary. It seemed that Gandalf had appropriated every last large towel in the house, save for the ones in Bilbo’s own bathroom, which were dirty. He supposed he could supply Bombur with an extra hand towel instead, but over the course of their conversation, he had honestly grown to like the man so much that it felt like a cheap cop-out.

Bilbo thought for a moment, a sinking feeling settling into his gut.
Well. There might be one place he might find an extra clean towel.

Bilbo had studiously avoided approaching the master suite during the past month. It wasn’t anything out of the ordinary, really. Bilbo didn’t think he had even stepped foot in there since he was a child young enough to sneak into his parents’ bed in the middle of the night, and he definitely never had as an adult. It was the one place in the whole huge house that his parents had been intensely particular about. Even upon returning to Bag End only to find it empty, it just hadn’t felt right to go snooping.

He stood silently in front of the empty closet, chewing on his lower lip. Bilbo’s instincts as a host warred with his deep respect for his parents’ privacy. He sighed, thinking hard as he absentmindedly started picking up and folding some of the clothes on the floor, perhaps in spite of his better judgement.

In the end, his instincts won, because he knew his father would have his ear if he didn’t bend over backwards and do everything he possibly could for guests. He had to at least poke his head in and make sure he had exhausted every available option.

After setting the now folded shirts and pants in a neat pile on the messy guest bed, Bilbo trepidatiously made his way down the dark, cloistered hallways that led to the north wing of the estate. He did most of his living on the south end of the building, where his childhood bedroom and many of the guest rooms were located near the back stairs that led to the kitchen and the less formal drawing and dining rooms. The north side downstairs had been almost exclusively for entertaining, and even when he had lived in the house as a child, it had not been used much by the family. The upper floor was taken up entirely by the huge master suite, which also doubled as Bungo’s study—another reason why Bilbo didn’t feel entirely comfortable waltzing around in there.

The corridor that connected the two wings emptied out into a wide atrium on the north side of the building, on an interior balcony at the top of the main staircase that overlooked the grand foyer. Like the kitchen, this part of the house had also once been light and airy, until Bilbo had boarded up what windows he could and had secured tarps and heavy cloths over the ones he couldn’t. He had discerned upon an initial inspection from the exterior of Bag End that the heavy velvet curtains in the master suite had been pulled tight over the windows, so he hadn’t particularly felt the need to waste energy and wood boarding them up.

The one window he just couldn’t reach or do anything about was the huge stained-glass transom over the main entryway. The sun streamed through it, sending irregular mosaics of light jaggedly skittering here and there, making it look as if the area had been strewn with colorful pieces of broken glass.

Bilbo darted to the other end of the balcony, trying to keep his footsteps as soft as possible. He disliked how open everything was, much preferring the homier closeness of the south wing. The entrance to his parents’ bedroom was blocked by a pair of arched double doors, framed in dark wood and that matched the banister of the wide main staircase and the balcony railings.

The atrium was utterly still, dust motes circling quietly in the multicolored light. The light from the window painted the otherwise white doors in a scattered riot of red, yellow, and green. Cobwebs whispered through the banister railings and in the corners of the crown moldings. If he strained his ears hard enough, Bilbo thought he could hear the faintest possible noise of the company from the other end of the house, but it may just have been the sound of his own blood roaring in tandem with his heartbeat. It was otherwise totally, utterly silent. Bilbo measured the speed of his own breathing, trying to quell the pounding thump of his heart in his chest.
To quote a movie he had watched many times under house arrest, he had a bad feeling about this.

Bilbo stared at the doors for a moment, suddenly unsure. They loomed ominously above him, and for a second it was like he was a child again, scared stiff from a nightmare but yet still unsure if he would be welcome to seek comfort. He always was, but the anxious fear never went away. It was the same fear he felt now.

His heart beat loudly.

“Good Lord, you're a grown man. Get a grip,” he castigated himself. He grabbed hold of one of the brass handles and pushed the door inward with a sharp creak.

The room was pitch black. Bilbo took a step in and felt something crunch under his foot in the carpet. He looked down, blood going cold.

Old picture frames lay scattered across the floor, having been knocked from the walls and their shattered front glass strewn on the ground. He had just stepped on an old school picture of him from Year Six, his own adolescent face grimacing up at him from under his foot. An antique Tiffany lamp lay smashed near the doorway, its stained glass glinting in the carpet in an eerie echo of outside. Its brass base was strangely bent.

And then, as his eyes adjusted, he registered the blood.

It was everywhere.

The room was empty, but there were obvious signs of what surely had been a tremendous struggle. Or, perhaps more likely, a slaughter. Dusty feathers from shredded down pillows littered every available surface like snow, and what wasn’t covered in feathers was coated in a thick layer of congealed arterial fluid. Droplets even clung to the feathers' soft serrated edges, clumping the plumes together. Blood stiffened the rumpled bedclothes, painted the walls, splattered all over the inside of the french doors.

_God_, Bilbo thought as a visceral, acrid rush of bile rose in his throat. It was even on the _ceiling_.

He couldn’t speak. He couldn’t scream. He couldn’t even breathe. So he did the only thing he could do.

He ran.

Chapter End Notes

Translation Notes:
Şoküş -- [Crimean Tatar] a word for hammer, but the kind that shoots a bullet out of a gun. This is on purpose.
земляной плотины [zemlyanoy plotiny] -- [Russian] earth-fill dam
Abrâfu shaikmashâz -- [Khuzdul] You descendant of rats!
Анимистические сущности [animicheskiye sushchnosti] -- [Russian] animistic entities
Öçpoçmaq -- [Kazan Tatar, transliterated into Khuzdul as Ôsposmak] literally means triangle; pastry filled with mince, onion, and potato
Alright, BIG disclaimer time. I'm trying SO HARD to be careful and respectful while trying to graft dwarves as a fantasy race/culture onto the modern world, especially while contrasting the quintessential Englishness depicted in hobbits by jolkien rollkien rollkien, but without falling into orientalist tropes. I also hope it comes across that Bilbo is sincerely trying, he's just forty years old and very, very white. I was originally going to make the dwarves just straight up Slavic, but I had a hard time because I wanted so badly to incorporate jir't's themes of Dwarvish mythology, and imo the Slavs are just too embroiled too far back in orthodoxy to do so. It ended up being SO stupid easy to make them Turkic, I was honestly really shocked. Like literally, just look up Orkhon (ancient Turkic) runes and tell me that doesn't look like proto-Cirth.

The Tatars/Turkic peoples are SUCH a wide ranging ethnic group, with such a varied history wrt dispersal, religion, etc that it was by far the best fit. My depiction of the company as people of Turkic descent closely related to the Tatars of much of Eastern Europe and Central Asia is pretty superficial, based on some aesthetic and phonetic similarities between modern and historical Tatar people and language, and is By No Means meant to be a depiction of contemporary or historical Tatar life or struggle, especially in Crimea, Lithuania, the Volga, and Poland, where many ethnic Tatars were subjected to deportation & genocide under Soviet rule, and in recent times wrt rampant Islamophobia & the illegal Russian annexation of Crimea, which IS going to be featured in this story as a set piece. I want to disclaim that the Khazâd DO NOT id as Tatars, but as a separate break off group that formed their own identity and racially mixed ethnicity after 800 years of relative isolation.

I AM going to incorporate some elements of semi-universal/ancient shamanic & Tengric elements to the Khuzd religion, most of which can still be found alive and well in practice in the contemporary Turkic & Mongol ppls of Central Siberia. This is NOT intended to give the Khazâd a mystical sort of exoticism, but to flesh out their practices (since jir't's p vague abt it iirc) and ground them in the contemporary reality of people under the broad umbrella I'm adopting--I will be the first to admit that I'm taking a lot of inspiration from real life and history, principally the history of the Lipka Tatars, the Golden Horde, and the practices of the contemporary Even people of Siberia, both in their specific traditions and as a model for syncretization of shamanic tradition with Soviet and modern thought. But I am not going to draw equivalencies or say that the Khazâd are specifically [x], except for the (afaik, PLEASE correct me if I'm wrong) relatively vague descriptor of "historically shamanic people of Turkic descent."

With that being said, I also want to address my use of the USSR as a set piece. This isn't something I take lightly, and it's going to inform a lot of the world I'm building with regard to Erebor. I want to stay fairly neutral in terms of "is communism good or bad," which is why I'm going out of my way to show a lot of different viewpoints and exp. Balin was a career communist, so you can take his assessment of Soviet rule with as much salt as you would like. I'm sure Oin would have something much different to say about it. If you want to know more about the mixed reactions of indigenous cultures to Soviet imperialism, I HIGHLY suggest the book The Reindeer People by Piers Vitebsky. It's so good. It's also a major source of inspiration for me wrt how I'm fleshing out the Khuzd culture.

Anyway, if you read this far and you haven't been bored to tears by this chapter, thank you so much!! If you were bored to tears but still read it, thank you even more!!!!!!
Music that goes with this chapter:
This chapter doesn't actually have a song on the "soundtrack" so instead I'm going to go ahead and plug the fact that there's a huge wealth of extremely good Turkic and Central Asian folk & metal music out there on Spotify. Yuve Yuve Yu by The HU, Öd Tengri Yasar by Yaşru, and Kargashai by Mamer all own particularly hard.
Bilbo runs from the walls of Bag End, in the process discovering Thorin in the middle of a majestic sulk, along with a more sinister find.

Chapter Notes

Ah! Short update this time. I'm toying with the thought of breaking up chapters that are getting long (this was originally the first half of one that broke 10,000 words again orz) and just updating on a more regular basis? idk, let me know I guess lol. In any case I was polishing it in chunks anyway, so I thought why not just throw it up and see what happens. I'm a very visual person, and I need to remind myself sometimes that the content of each chapter doesn't necessarily need to be equivalent to something that fills a 30 minute episode of tv.

I know I say this in the author's note at the beginning of every chapter, but still, I'm so blown away from the immense kindness you all have shown me in this wild attempt to make something. From your words, to your bookmarks and subs, to your kudos. I genuinely really, really appreciate it. I'm really glad to hear that some things that I write seem to ring true to life according to some of you !!!! That's absolutely incredible to me, so thank you.

Anyway, TW for blood and gore, BIGASS WARNING for emetophobia/vomiting, panic attacks, and the inability of Thorin and Bilbo to communicate properly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bilbo took two tremulous steps away from the gruesome scene in the bedroom, eyes wide and expression fixed in a silent scream of terror. He stumbled backward over the threshold, using the momentum to turn tail and run like he was being chased by the devil himself. He didn't know exactly where he was going or what he was running to. All he knew was that he had to get away. He had to get out.

He bolted down the grand staircase, kicking up a thick layer of dust as he did so. It made his eyes burn, forcing tears to involuntarily spill over his cheeks. The dust also restricted his already shortened breathing and caused him to choke as he stumbled down the stairs. With the dust and the tears and the kaleidoscopic lighting from the stained-glass window, Bilbo could hardly see what was in front of him. Even with the impairment, he somehow managed to maintain his balance when one of his socked feet slipped out from under him on the hardwood, causing his ankle to roll with a worrisome crack and a sharp spike of blooming pain.

Still, his legs continued to pump of their own accord as he hit the bottom landing, making for the back of the house and the door to the garden that he knew was there.

In a remarkable display of pure adrenaline, he tore off the large piece of plywood that he had nailed
over the back entrance with his bare hands, splintering it in the process. Bilbo absently registered his hands becoming slippery as he clumsily fumbled with the deadbolt. He left smears of dark red liquid behind where he had touched it, and he let out an involuntary sob of panic at the sight.

Eventually the door was forced open. Bilbo burst out into the blinding late afternoon sun in an agitated, desperate scrabble, nearly tumbling into the grass as his senses were overwhelmed by the sudden explosion of light and color.

Bag End was situated at the top of a winding private road that ended at the base of a large hill. While the land had originally been purchased by Bilbo’s grandfather during the interwar years, the house itself hadn’t been built until the mid-1970’s, just after Belladonna and Bungo had gotten married. Bungo had built it to look exactly like, for all intents and purposes, a slightly smaller version of the opulent country houses that exemplified the Georgian regency era—no doubt as a way to try and impart some of the trappings of legitimacy that came with old money onto the decidedly *nouveau riche* Bagginses.

Bungo had dug into the hill somewhat, grading the large back garden to be a flat expanse of lawns and carefully trimmed hedges. It was maintained by a retaining wall and dotted with raised vegetable beds, a grapevine or two, and a koi pond lined with concrete. The latter had long since gone dry during the winter after the outbreak. Above the retaining wall sat the feature that had inspired Bungo’s father to buy the land in the first place: A squat stone barrier dating back to Roman times, which wound down from the forested overgrowth of the hill and ended at the back gate of the garden. Eroded and covered in moss, it marked out a footpath that traveled deep into the wood above.

All Bilbo knew was that he just had to get as far away from the house under the hill as possible. To his thoroughly boggled state of mind, the footpath seemed by far the best option available to do so, despite the fact that the sun was starting to hang dangerously low over the horizon.

He sprinted across the yard, heedless of the fact that all he had on his feet were a pair of thin cotton socks. Worse, his ankle smarted dreadfully with each step he took, but he couldn’t stop now.

Vision still somewhat blurry, he almost tripped into the dry koi pond, catching himself on the copper structure of a dead fountain at the very last second.

Bilbo could barely register how relieved he was, too petrified by the sight in the concrete pit. It was filled with the corpses of the previously-undead that he and Dwalin had dispatched the night before while rescuing Fili and Kili. They were haphazardly stacked on top of one another in a sickly pile of flesh and viscera, limbs and protruding guts tangling around each other like vines in a thorny bramble. The bodies had been no doubt placed there by the company for burning overnight, as a way to dispose of them and to ward off other undead who may come wandering.

A hand that had formerly belonged to a young woman reached up to Bilbo in a supplicating display of rigor mortis, as if begging to be saved from the potent horror of the pit. Eyes glared at him accusingly from the loose sockets of destroyed heads. The sight only served to make Bilbo even sicker and more terrified. He whimpered, low and pained in the manner of a wounded animal, clutching at his head and smearing blood further into his eyes and hair.

Heart pounding anew and stomach roiling, he made for the gap in the hedge that backed up to the retaining wall. He darted blindly past Fili and Kili, who had since been joined by Ori and Nori. They were all just now putting the finishing touches on the replacement wall of the greenhouse.

“Mister Boggins!” cried Fili worriedly, no doubt quite confused by the man who seemed to be running for his life, ostensibly in the opposite direction of safety.
“Where are you going? Has something happened?” added Kili, right on cue after his brother.

“Lad, are you alright?” Nori called after him, taking two aborted steps in his direction before apparently deciding it wasn’t worth trying to follow him, bloodied and crazed as Bilbo certainly was. Ori only gripped his hammer tightly with both of his hands, seeming to be at a total loss for words.

Bilbo paid no attention to them, scrambling to unlatch the gate with his blood-soaked hands. They were sickeningly slick on the iron, but he managed to open the bolt and book it up the steep grade of the footpath. He disappeared into the brush, running away from the garden and the judgmental eyes of the men there.

His socked feet slid and slipped on the wet leaves covering the path, which painfully jostled his swelling ankle as he dazedly kept on going up the hill. The wood spun and rushed around him even as he began to slow down against his will, gripping the uneven stones of the low Roman wall for support as he continued to limp as fast as he could. He eventually came upon a familiar clearing, which was populated by a stone bench and a dilapidated outbuilding he had once used as a de-facto clubhouse when he was a boy. He found he couldn’t even make the few steps to the bench, as his knees buckled immediately upon reaching relatively flatter ground, his body finally forcing him to stop.

He fell to the floor of the footpath with a painful retch, his white-knuckle grip on the barrier being the only thing keeping him from collapsing entirely into a boneless heap. His nails dug into the moss wedged in the gaps between the stones, no doubt embedding a mix of blood and dirt deeply beneath them.

He emptied what little of brunch that had remained in his stomach with a tremendous heave, splattering vomit and not an insignificant amount of stomach bile onto the leaves in front of him. His throat and nose burned awfully at the violent expulsion, while his ankle throbbed in time to the agonizing pummeling of his irregular heartbeat against his ribcage. Blood rushed in his ears, blocking out all the other sounds of the forest as he hyperventilated, all before he gagged once again.

Bilbo tightly squeezed his eyes shut against the tears leaking from his eyes, just wishing for it all to end. For himself to end.

Out of nowhere, a pair of large, warm hands appeared on his back, rubbing it in soothing tenderness as Bilbo dry-heaved. Bilbo just about jumped out of his skin at the unexpected touch, eyes popping open. He quickly turned his head away from whoever it was, so they would not be able to see the terrible state of his no doubt blotchy, blood- and snot-covered visage.

Touch starved as he was though, Bilbo wasn’t really in a state to refuse the kindness, even if it came from a stranger. To his relief, the hands didn’t force him to do anything. They only petted comfortingly down his spine, occasionally brushing limp, sweat-slick curls away softly from his face as he simultaneously continued to sob and retch nauseously.

If Bilbo had to hazard a guess, the hands probably belonged to Ori. Bilbo could tell he was a particularly kindhearted, if not somewhat shy, lad; one for whom it probably wouldn’t be entirely out of character to go out of his way and check on a stupid, distressed old man purely out of polite concern for his host. He did have a sort of a puppyish quality about him, with large hands and feet that didn’t quite fit the rest of his body. They hung off him a bit awkwardly, as if the boy had yet to grow into their size.

One of those sizable hands lifted itself from where it softly rested at Bilbo’s lower back, ostensibly
to reach for the breast pocket of his waistcoat. Bilbo frantically realized that it was probably going for the handkerchief that was poking out of it. Alarmed, he slapped the hand away, a little rougher than he actually meant to.

“Don’t touch that please!” he croaked out shrilly, his voice sounding tinny and far away to his own ears, as if he were listening to himself from the other end of a mobile phone call with a bad connection.

The last thing he wanted to do was get vomit all over the last remnants of his mother. If he got it too dirty, he would have to wash it, thus erasing the last of the remaining perfume smell.

The hand withdrew. The other remained resting on his back, occasionally traveling up and carding itself with utmost gentleness through the matted hair at the base of Bilbo’s neck. Bilbo was too far gone to do anything but unabashedly lean into it. The appendage was a burning source of comforting heat that bled through the layers of Bilbo’s waistcoat and shirt, all the way to his skin. It anchored him, reeling him back to reality as the irregularity of his pulse began to subside. His breathing gradually evened out over the course of what may have been only several moments or as long as an hour. Time had no meaning to Bilbo in his present state.

Eventually, he registered that his socks and pants were almost soaked through, chilling him to the bone. The sounds of the forest slowly returned. A raven cawed high in the canopy above him, and the tree branches creaked loudly in the cold March breeze. Bilbo leaned heavily on the Roman barrier, forehead digging painfully into the rock as he slowly came back to himself.

The hand appeared in his line of vision again, this time holding an oil-stained bandana that must have passed for Ori’s version of a handkerchief. Bilbo sniffed and looked at it dubiously, but took it anyway.

“Thank you,” he murmured quietly, eyeing the mess puddling at the base of the wall with intense embarrassment. He quickly unfolded the cloth, wiping at his eyes and scrubbing at the rest of his face, trying to rid it of the blood that he could feel was already beginning to flake off. Finally, he dabbed at his mouth, clearing away the last remnants of sickness. He also rubbed futilely at the torn skin of his hands, but they still oozed despite his best efforts.

Once he thoroughly dirtied the already grimy makeshift handkerchief, he folded it back up as best he could with his shaking hands and thrust it blindly behind him.

“Thank you again,” Bilbo said wetly. The hands left their comforting positions on his back and shoulder, one retreating and the other pushing the bandana back toward Bilbo.

“Keep it,” said the owner, their voice a deep baritone that decidedly did not belong to Ori.

Bilbo’s whole body went rigid as he slowly, deliberately craned his head to the side. He peeked out over a stiff shoulder, hoping beyond hope that it hid the majority of his horrifically blotched face.

Intense, electric blue eyes stared back at him from beneath a deeply furrowed brow. Bilbo blinked in dumbfound shock, immediately wishing he could sink straight into the ground right then and there.

Slightly behind Bilbo, crouched down in the leaves, was the king. His face was far too close to Bilbo’s own for comfort, the chill-induced fog of their breaths mingling in the short space between them. Even now, he looked unfairly lovely, with his hair hanging loose around his face and silhouette backlit by the late afternoon sun dappling through the trees. Bilbo let out a mortifying little squeak and quickly turned back toward the wall, clutching the bandana to his chest.
“Yes, well. Thank you, Your Majesty,” Bilbo said once more to the stones, voice strained and more than a little hoarse.

Thorin only grunted dismissively. He heard the rustle of damp forest litter as the king shuffled away, and Bilbo sensed that the strangely intimate moment had passed the minute the king stood up fully. He now only hovered over Bilbo in a supremely awkward silence, both of them seemingly incapable of broaching the topic of what had just occurred.

It was beyond uncomfortable.

“Did you follow me?” asked Bilbo after a long, tense moment. His heart began to pound anew.

Thorin snorted. “On the contrary Mister Baggins, it was you who followed me. I’ve been here the entire time. You only failed to notice while you were in the midst of your... episode. Your panic attack.”

“Oh. Was that what that was,” he replied quietly. He had experienced anxiety episodes before, but what he had just gone through felt more like a heart attack or a grand mal seizure than anything. What was worse, it had apparently originated entirely from his own head. He didn’t know if it was actually possible to die of embarrassment, but he was about to give it his best shot.

“Are you feeling better now?” asked Thorin in reluctant politeness, his discomfort and harsh judgement of Bilbo’s disheveled appearance clearly evident in the tone of his voice.

“Oh yes, I’m quite fine. I was just a bit startled, is all,” gasped Bilbo, desperately trying to get his legs back under him by slowly crawling hand-over-hand up the wall. He carefully avoided the puddle of sick, the smell of which was thankfully mostly covered by the wet musk of decaying leaf litter and forest.

Thorin seemed to accept this obvious lie at face value, standing back and saying nothing as Bilbo continued to struggle. He was strangely grateful for Thorin’s coolness. He didn’t know how he would respond if the king suddenly decided to be nice to him.

By the sheer grace of God, Bilbo finally found his way back to his feet, even if his legs were still perilously wobbly. Toes flexing uncomfortably on the damp ground, he felt completely drained and utterly soaked, both by sweat and the moisture wicked up by his clothes. He hastily attempted to smooth out his hair and clothes, before slowly turning around to face the king. He made sure to carefully position his body in a way that blocked the evidence of his episode.

Thorin stood a few feet away on the other edge of the clearing entrance, staring at him in impassive stoicism. Surrounded by the etheriality of the moss-covered forest, with the sun illuminating the silver strands of his hair, Bilbo supposed he did have a sort of regal majesty about him.

“So, what brings you all the way out here?” asked Bilbo in a manner reminiscent of one discussing the weather, still clutching the bandana and trying to put distance between the current moment and his earlier humiliating display.

It was apparently the wrong thing to ask.

“I fail to see how that’s any of your business,” snapped Thorin, turning his head away and staring off into the clearing. A part of Bilbo couldn’t help but appreciate the impressive sight of the chiseled profile, even if its owner was acting like a petulant child.

"Did you have it out with Mister Dwalin again?" asked Bilbo, voice gentle.
He knew a thing or two about spats between close friends. *(Lovers? Partners?* The thought that there might be something more between them crossed his mind again.) Navigating personal drama had practically been the main part of his job at the bookshop. It simply came with the territory as the employer and manager of a close-knit staff comprised almost entirely of emotional twenty-somethings. Maybe he could help these two, much as Thorin had just helped him.

“Were you startled by the bodies in the pool?” asked Thorin, brusquely dodging the question.

“It’s a koi pond, actually,” Bilbo replied with a frown. “And I fail to see how that’s any of your business.”

“I’m a king. Everything that may affect my men and I is my business,” rumbled Thorin, expression turning stormy.

"And I should think everything that occurs in my house just so happens to be mine!" Bilbo shot back, incensed.

As payment for his barb, Thorin sent him a look that could have killed, but only if Bilbo had been in more of a mood to care about it. As it was, he had slightly bigger things to worry about than the impotently petty ire of a foreign king—like how he was going to pick broken glass out of shag carpet without the use of a vacuum, for instance.

The forest whispered around the two men, dry leaves rustling as the breeze danced through them. Thorin brushed his hair back and looked sidelong at Bilbo, as if considering him.

"Your house. That’s all you care about, isn’t it? It’s just as well that you are not joining us, Mister Baggins. I doubt we could have use for someone that becomes so violently ill just after seeing a few dead bodies," said Thorin venomously.

"Oh, for the love of—!" exclaimed Bilbo, throwing up his hands in exasperation. He felt precariously out of balance, thrown off by Thorin’s maddening hot-and-cold routine. In one moment he had tenderly assisted Bilbo out of his panic attack, while the next he seemed to be back to his old habits of hurling personal insults and vitriol.

"And your nosiness! Does it know no bounds, Mister Baggins?" continued Thorin, turning back to face him.

"E-excuse me?" stammered Bilbo. Thorin's frown deepened.

"Are you truly so bored by your miserable little life? The one you seemingly prize so much that you refuse to even lift a finger to help those in need, but with which you’re so evidently dissatisfied that you feel the need to disrespectfully pry your way into other people’s affairs?"

Bilbo recoiled, as if he had been physically struck. His stinging palms were starting to itch as they still bled sluggishly, further wetting the bandana as he wrung it nervously in search of a response. The worst thing about that particular attack was that some of the king’s words had rung shamefully true.

Thorin continued on his rampage. “Am I correct in assuming that it was you who took the liberty of barging into my room and folding my clothes, apropos of nothing? Why, never in my entire life have I ever been entertained by a host suffering from such presumption!”

Bilbo froze like a deer in the headlights, eyes going wide. That had been *Thorin's* messy room?
How absolutely mortifying. The king smirked at his stunned expression, which infuriated Bilbo enough to recover himself and reply.

"Well, if you respected my house enough to not leave your things everywhere, maybe I wouldn’t feel the need to clean up after you! And besides, the only reason I went in there at all was to find something of mine so that I could properly cater to one of your men."

Thorin didn’t seem to have anything to say to that. He only glowered down at his boots instead, hands shoved deep into the pockets of his sheepskin coat. Bilbo sighed.

“Look, Your Majesty,” he said after a moment, suddenly feeling very, very tired. “I think we may have gotten off on the wrong foot.”

“Do you make it a habit of snooping through other people’s things?” asked Thorin, ignoring Bilbo’s attempts at reconciliation and cutting him off mid-sentence.

Bilbo groaned. The last thing he wanted to do was continue the current thread of conversation, if one could even call it that. “I just told you —”

“Ha!” jeered Thorin. He looked down his nose at Bilbo, much as he had the night before. “The absolute nerve. Listen closely, Mister Baggins. Just because you signed the contract, that does not mean that you are entitled to anything my company or I have to give. You are not Khuzd, nor will you ever be. You will always be an outsider among us.”

He spat the word ‘always’ with the sort of definite finality that Bilbo found hard to argue with.

Bilbo reared back, hurt in spite of himself. He balled his fists at his sides, biting his lip as he looked anywhere but at Thorin.

“I know that. You don’t have to put it so bluntly,” he said quietly.

Thorin didn’t answer him. Bilbo waited a few moments for a response before daring to look back and gauge the king’s reaction. Much to his surprise, Thorin wasn’t even looking at him, instead staring intently at something over Bilbo’s shoulder. He felt his temper flare dangerously.

“What in heaven’s name are you looking at!” Bilbo huffed. The words died in his throat as he spun on his heel, seeing exactly what it was that had, for once, rendered Thorin completely speechless.

Staring back at Bilbo were the dark voids of empty eye sockets. They belonged to a skull sitting on a little rise on the other side of the wall, whose stark whiteness could not be hidden completely by grime or underbrush. Bilbo saw, with no small amount of dread, that bits of mummified flesh and a patch of long, dark hair still clung to what once had been the person’s scalp. Bilbo’s stomach rolled over once more, and it took everything in his power not to retch anew.

He noted absently that a few more bones of unidentifiable origin were scattered here and there. But Bilbo couldn’t tear his eyes away from the head, lying in the leaves like a misplaced ivory cue-ball. Placed haphazardly on its side, it peered curiously out at him from under the scramble of a wild blackberry bush.

“...We best be getting inside,” said Thorin lowly after a moment, though Bilbo could hardly hear him over the roar in his ears. “The shadows are growing long, and the ôrek will be out soon.”

“What does that even mean?” asked Bilbo without thinking, still frozen.

Thorin didn’t answer. In his peripheral vision, Bilbo saw the king start back down the path without
waiting for Bilbo to follow. His boots crunched on the leaves and gravel until the sound totally faded away, His Majesty presumably having retreated back into the garden proper.

Bilbo didn’t know how long he stayed there, staring. He grew increasingly more chilled as the sky got darker and the temperature dropped. Only until the shadows of the forest had completely obscured the bones did he finally shake himself out of his stupor. He realized he was still gripping Thorin’s bandana, expression morphing into something strangely complicated as he remembered the kindness of the gesture and the reassuring quality of the hands on his back.

It seemed that Thorin was more than capable of gentleness—just not with Bilbo. Not when he was in his right mind, at least. It made him feel a peculiar form of wretched.

But even more disappointing than that, he just felt deeply, intensely sad. His ankle ached, sending out a sharp signal of discomfort every time he shifted his weight. He scrutinized the brush in the direction of the bramble, straining to see if he could make anything else out. He could not.

After a while, Bilbo eventually found the will to turn away. He limped back down the path after Thorin, leaving the bones to their rest.

Chapter End Notes

No translations this time :^(

Okay, don't judge Thorin too hard; Bilbo's a very one-sided, fairly unreliable narrator, so let's part the curtain a bit and see the sparknotes version of what Thorin's been going through the past couple chapters.

Thorin: Comes in from getting lost in a zombie-infested forest and takes one look at this short bookish looking guy and immediately has his misgivings about Bilbo's abilities, is intensely concerned for his ability to keep him safe in the wild. Said guy goes on to accidentally insult Erebor, it doesn't end well

Gandalf: Yeah well he's not going to come anyway so don't worry about it.

Thorin: What do you MEAN he's not going to come?? Nori can't break into a computer.

Gandalf: Oh my god

Bilbo: Starts asking what would culturally be considered extremely nosy questions, still gives no indication that he'll be joining them

Thorin: Well fuck that guy. I'm going to go be sad about the fact that Dwalin and I are fighting now.

Bilbo: Interrupts his brooding session in the woods while in the throes of a violent panic attack

Thorin: Oh fuck oh no shit are you okay? Holy shit. Here, have my bandana, you need it way more than I do.

Bilbo: Ok I'm fine now. Anyway, how's your fight with Dwalin going? Pretty good, it
doesn't seem.

Thorin: Okay. Fuck this [lays into him]

**Music that goes with this chapter:**
Cae Cae Cae - Le Parody
I Am A Man of Constant Sorrow - Norman Blake

Honorable mention for Blood On My Name by The Brothers Bright! It was brought to my attention by blue_writes and I think it fits :^

I revamped my tumblr! You can find my personal blog at knife-em0ji or my fanfiction/bagginsshield specific blog at nazghoulz. I post a lot of inspo and just stupid asides there, if anybody would be interested in that. I also made some cover art for this fic and its various chapters. I'll embed the one for this chapter below, along with the ones for the others in their end notes. You can find the actual post I made with the summary and the spotify soundtrack link here, just for ease of access.

Anyway, thank you so much for reading!!! I hope to update with the rest of this chapter very soon.
“I believe ôrek is the Khuzdul term for ‘undead.’ Plural of ork, if I do recall,” said Gandalf, dabbing antiseptic onto one of the many scrapes littering Bilbo’s palm.

Bilbo hissed in displeasure, but Gandalf only tsk’d unsympathetically. He had found Bilbo walking dazedly down the footpath just as the sun was setting, still wandering about even as it became dangerously close to nightfall. He supported Bilbo as he limped back to the mansion, walking past the newly-repaired greenhouse and the crackling bonfire that now burned in the empty koi pond.

“For some reason I didn’t think that they would have their own word for zombie,” replied Bilbo.

The word honestly sounded a little Dungeons & Dragons to him. But then again, what the hell did he know about it. He was starting to realize that he actually understood very little about the wider world.

His foot was propped up on another one of the kitchen table chairs, raised on a pillow and wrapped tightly in an Ace bandage as Gandalf slowly patched him up with a first aid kit they had found in an out-of-the-way cupboard. Bilbo sorely wished that he had some ice, but he supposed ibuprofen would just have to make up for it in the meantime.

“On the contrary. Many cultures around the world have legends and folklore regarding dead who rise and walk the earth. The Khuzd are merely one of them,” said Gandalf, perfunctorily snipping off a piece of gauze and taping it to the back of Bilbo’s hand.

“How rise and walk the earth expressly to eat people?” asked Bilbo. He flexed the fingers on his right hand to test the security of the wrapping. It wasn’t too bad—Gandalf was strangely good at this. The old man motioned for his left, which Bilbo gratefully extended.

“Yes, Bilbo,” said Gandalf in exasperated condescension while he inspected the damage, “dead who rise and walk the earth expressly to eat people. Hmph, this one is going to need glue.”

He rummaged around in the weathered tin kit, extracting an old, half-dry bottle of super glue. Gandalf uncapped the bottle and shook it roughly over Bilbo’s hand. After a moment of this, he eventually squeezed it hard enough that a bit of glue eked out of the tip, which he then smeared
over one of Bilbo’s worse cuts. He had a deep gash near the bottom of his left palm that was still bleeding sluggishly even hours after the initial injury.

“Hold that,” said Gandalf, pinching the skin together so it formed a tight seal to stop the flow of blood. Bilbo complied, leaning forward to take over for Gandalf as he moved on to disinfect the rest of Bilbo’s hand.

Gandalf pushed his spectacles further up his nose. He bent lower over Bilbo’s injured palm, straining to see in the low light of the kerosene lamp. The tarp had been fastened back on the ceiling of the kitchen to cover the skylight, the sun having fully set since Gandalf had shoved him into the bathroom so he could take a freezing cold shower to wash all the blood and grime off. With the bonfire roaring outside, Bilbo hoped that the garden would stay relatively quiet overnight.

“So. Are we going to talk about it?”

Bilbo stiffened. He would have angrily snatched his hand back were it not for Gandalf’s iron grip on it. Gandalf only looked witheringly at him over the rim of his glasses.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” said Bilbo shiftily, leaning back as far as he could.

“*Bilbo,*” said Gandalf. He tugged on his hand and looked significantly at the glued over cut.

“Don’t ‘Bilbo’ me,” the eponymous man grumbled impotently, leaning forward and once again pinching the ragged skin closed.

“I honestly don’t know whether you are in a severe state of shock-induced denial, or perhaps just being willfully obtuse,” said Gandalf. He didn’t look up from his work, seemingly deep in concentration, but Bilbo swore he was being a little bit less gentle than the first time around.

“I *still* didn’t find any bodies,” Bilbo said stubbornly.

While he refused to think too hard about the implications of the scene in the master suite, it was true that his find on the footpath didn’t prove anything one way or the other. He and Mum shared the same natural hair color, and the long black hair that was left on the skull didn’t match his father’s quite exactly in shade either, let alone in length.

“You can’t tell me that you plan to stay in this house after you know what happened upstairs,” said Gandalf, tone gentling somewhat.

“That’s just it, though. I can’t know what happened in there, not for sure,” replied Bilbo, voice rough. “There’s still a chance.”

“Curse the stubbornness of Tooks,” harrumphed Gandalf, referencing Mum’s notoriously willful side of the family. Finally shooing Bilbo’s other hand out of the way, he slapped a band-aid over the cut once he determined that he was satisfied with how the glue had dried. “I’m not even going to dignify that with a response. I’m sure you know my opinion on the matter well enough.”

“All too, I’m afraid,” replied Bilbo matter-of-factly. He sat back as Gandalf wrapped the rest of his left hand in gauze, much in the same way as he had the right one.

“So, can I assume that there is nothing I can possibly say that will convince you to join us?” asked Gandalf, releasing Bilbo’s hand.

“You would be correct in that assumption,” said Bilbo.
Though, he was admittedly less sure than he would like. The thought of possible nuclear disaster gnawed at him, even if he was positive that there was very little he could do about it either way. Gandalf just gazed at him, the hard line of his mouth easing into something truly melancholy.

“What happened to you, my friend?” he asked sadly, voice excruciatingly soft. “I can’t say that I’m not terribly disappointed.”

Bilbo tried not to let on just how much the comment absolutely gutted him. He sniffed, flexing his hands and admiring Gandalf’s very competent work.

“Unfortunately, I’ve always been disappointing, Gandalf,” said Bilbo, with no shortage of cynicism. More quietly, he added, “And besides. This is the only home I have left. I can’t just up and leave it for what is obviously most certain death.”

Gandalf looked at him severely before sighing. “No, I suppose that is a rather large thing to ask of you. It’s just, well... I have to admit that it worries me, Bilbo. About you being here in this dark house all by your lonesome.”

Bilbo forced out some semblance of a lighthearted chuckle at that, but even to his ears it rang terribly false.

“Oh, don’t you bother yourself about that. I have Hamfast for company, after all,” said Bilbo in a poor attempt at cheek. Even so, Gandalf still snorted in surprise, covering his mouth to suppress a laugh.

“See, this is why I worry about you, Bilbo. All this time by yourself has clearly impaired your brain-to-mouth filter,” said Gandalf, though he smiled as he did so.

“Mum always said I should express myself more,” said Bilbo, countenance becoming a bit glum at the truth of it. Gandalf also seemed to catch onto this downturn of mood, becoming serious once again.

“That she did,” he said.

Bilbo didn’t say anything to that, instead choosing to stand and test how his weight held on his wrapped ankle. It was okay, actually. The bandage helped and the ibuprofen seemed to have kicked in. It wasn’t a bad sprain, thank goodness. Bilbo didn’t know how he would cope if he had to be laid up for a week or more.

“Good?” asked Gandalf, also getting up. He held out his hands, ready to catch Bilbo should he fall.

“I think so,” he replied, taking an experimental step. It hurt, but it was definitely manageable. He let out a tired yawn, suddenly drained.

“I think I should head to bed,” said Bilbo. Though, if he was being honest with himself (which he very rarely was, had he been self-aware enough to admit it), he was reluctant to go back upstairs.

“Hum. It’s still early, but perhaps you’re right,” sighed Gandalf, taking a half step toward Bilbo. Then, without any warning, he suddenly swept Bilbo into a thoroughly unexpected hug.

Bilbo squawked in surprise, arms flailing as Gandalf’s spindly arms wrapped around him like two sturdy bands of iron and proceeded to crush him to the other man. He froze for a moment, unsure exactly of what to do, before his instincts kicked in and he abruptly clutched back. His fingers dug into the back of Gandalf’s soft gray shirt like claws as he buried his face into his chest, eyes suspiciously wet.
They stood, embracing in silence for a good long minute, where Bilbo clung to Gandalf perhaps a bit too tightly. With the patience of a saint, Gandalf wordlessly endured the assault with admirable grace, only breaking the mutual hold once he felt Bilbo’s arms start to loosen.

“Thank you for indulging an old man in his maudlin whims,” Gandalf murmured, though Bilbo rather felt he should be the one thanking him.

“No, no. It’s quite alright,” said Bilbo with a despondent sniff. “More than, actually. After all, who knows when we’re going to see each other again?”

“Longer than I would certainly like,” sighed Gandalf. The simple comment made Bilbo’s heart swell more than it probably had reason to.

“Should I say goodbye to the others?” asked Bilbo, suddenly remembering that there were thirteen other people staying at his house with them, who were also going to be leaving at first light tomorrow morning.

“I suppose that would be the polite thing to do,” said Gandalf, giving his scraggly beard a thoughtful stroke. “It would be a very Baggins thing of you, certainly. I think they’ve all gathered in the drawing room for a nightcap.”

“Of course they have,” sighed Bilbo, resigned to the fate of his wet bar.

They made their way to the drawing room, Gandalf shortening his strides in thoughtful consideration for Bilbo’s slight limp. Once there, they came upon a scene that was much the same as the night before, with all of the company occupying similar places while holding crystal tumblers of vodka in varying fullnesses. Thorin sat on the corner of the hearth, furiously tuning what seemed to be some sort of three-stringed, long-necked lute with a kind of wild goat or bighorn sheep carved into the head. Bilbo noted that he seemed to be as far away from Dwalin as a person could get while still ostensibly being in the same room.

As Thorin angrily fiddled with his instrument, the aura of the room seemed to be unusually subdued. It was not the same sort of desperate tension that had suffused the room the night before. Rather, it reminded Bilbo of the anxiety one felt as a child whose parents were fighting, but were also staunchly refusing to talk about it.

“Baggins! There you are!” called Dwalin, seemingly the only person who hadn’t noticed the strained atmosphere. He was once again sprawled on the end of the couch, seemingly deep (or perhaps not so deep, considering the display of his tolerance the night before) into his cups.

“Hullo,” said Bilbo nervously, wary of the depressed mood exhibited by the majority of the company. “I was just about to go to bed, and wanted to come say my goodbyes.”

“Goodbyes? What do you mean goodbyes?” cried Bofur in distress. Evidently crestfallen, he sprung up from his spot on the chaise lounge next to his brother, rushing to Bilbo’s side. Bofur clasped his arm tightly.

“Surely you’re coming with us,” he said, a note of desperate urgency in his voice that left Bilbo slightly confused. He tried not to wince at Bofur’s firm grip, hoping he wouldn’t leave bruises in the shape of his fingers on his upper arm.

“Ah, I’m afraid not,” said Bilbo, carefully extricating his limb from the other man’s grasp. He tried not to look at any of the company’s faces, which to a certain degree all seemed to wear expressions of disappointment. Bofur looked completely shattered, whereas Balin only seemed to be tiredly
resigned.

“Is that your final decision, then?” the older man asked sadly.

“Yes,” said Bilbo, eyes resting on Thorin since he was the only one in the room not acknowledging his shortcomings for once, either silently or otherwise. “It was very lovely meeting you all, though. I’m sure it’s a story that I’ll tell my grandchildren.”

Nobody responded to that right away. The only sound that filled the room was that of the crackling fire and Thorin’s tuneless twanging. Bofur just nodded sadly.

“Ach, it’s a shame to hear that. Truly,” he said, sounding sincerely gloomy.

“I don’t know how much help I could have been, honestly,” said Bilbo with a hapless shrug. “Besides, you of all people seem to be much more qualified than me to face the specific problem you’re currently dealing with, Doctor.”

If Bofur was surprised that Bilbo knew his title, he didn’t show it. As it was, he looked like he didn’t want to agree with Bilbo’s statement purely on principle; but in the end, facts were facts, and even the ever-optimistic Bofur had to concede them.

“Aye, well. It is what it is, I suppose. Let me pour you a nightcap then, so you can sit with us a while,” he said, looking soulfully at Bilbo. “His Majesty is just about to regale us in a song.”

“A song?” parroted Bilbo in confusion. For some reason, he didn’t exactly peg Thorin as the musical type.

“He will, if he can get that blasted thing in tune,” said Dwalin, which caused Thorin to pluck one of the strings so hard that he almost broke it. The instrument let out a tortured wail in the process. The rest of the room seemed to wince as one, tension thickening to the point where Bilbo was sure he could cut it with a knife.

“Be patient, Brother,” said Balin placatingly. He sent a worried glance toward the king. “You know His Majesty is just only beginning to learn the tog’shûr.”

That didn’t exactly inspire Bilbo’s confidence in Thorin’s supposed musical abilities. He wondered if this was the sort of exercise usually put on by royalty, the kind where a noble would display an extremely mediocre skill for people who couldn’t say no, who then in turn would be forced to praise them on end for their supposed mastery of it. He’d read about it in many a period novel, and the thought of it happening in real life seemed excruciatingly awkward.

Well, Bilbo certainly wasn’t one of Thorin’s subjects. Thankfully, he of all people would be free to save himself some embarrassment and leave should the king prove to be too horrible.

“Here, let me get you that drink,” Bofur muttered lowly. “Vodka?”


Bofur grinned, dimples making their appearance as he gave Bilbo a mock salute. “Sir, yes sir. Anything for our lovely host.”

Bilbo felt his face heat as Bofur made his way over to the bar. He took a seat on the very edge of the chaise, leaving enough space so the other man could come back and sit between Bilbo and his brother. Bifur leaned up against the wall, eyeing him warily and grunting lowly in acknowledgement. Bilbo could only nod slowly in return, otherwise at a loss.
“Are you sure there isn’t anything we can do to convince you to travel with us?” asked Bombur softly when he sat down. He looked almost as disappointed as Bofur. Bilbo’s heart clenched, unwilling to admit how close the sweet man’s morose expression was to swaying him.

“I’m afraid so. My place is in Bag End, unfortunately,” said Bilbo, with regret that he didn’t even have to feign.

“Ah. Well, best of luck to you,” said Bombur, the corners of his moustache lifting in a tremulous smile. It made Bilbo want to cry in sympathy and comfort him, despite only really having talked to the man once.

“Thank you. You do the same,” he said sincerely.

“Here you go,” said Bofur, shoving a tumbler full of beautiful caramel colored liquid into Bilbo’s waiting hands. He sat down heavily in the space Bilbo had left for him, vodka sloshing in the glass that he had evidently refilled for himself as well.

Bilbo took a sip of the aged scotch, savoring its smooth texture as it slid warmly down his throat. Oh, now that was heavenly. He was just about to take another, before Thorin suddenly cleared his throat and whatever little noise there was in the room once again quieted into silence. Everybody seemed to be on the edge of their seats. Even Gandalf, who had taken post near the entryway, was listening intently.

“Finally,” groused Dwalin. He was shushed harshly by his brother.

Thorin gave the lute an experimental strum. A clear percussive sound rang out into the room, sounding somewhere between a traditional guitar and a banjo.

Bilbo braced himself, unsure of what he was about to hear. Fili and Kili looked rapt, for once keeping absolutely silent. Dori cleared his throat slightly, signaling that it was time for Ori to put down the pencil he was sketching with. Oin fiddled something on the side of his head, no doubt turning on his hearing aid. Or perhaps he was turning it off. Bilbo certainly couldn’t tell.

Then Thorin opened his mouth, and all of Bilbo’s thoughts promptly flew out the nearest window.

“Ô, ’azgu malasul ʿabad nibzurul,
"Iskhira narid u marub nadadê,
"Ra muneb id-manl taslami ya ʿurs ra shar,
"Ishira ruk dashshat Durinul."

Shock was Bilbo’s first reaction. Thorin had one of the sweetest voices that Bilbo had ever heard, his deep baritone rumbling out the normally guttural sounds of Khuzdul with an incredible resonant quality. He smoothed them out and fit the syllables to the melody like the language was only meant to be sung, not spoken. The sound of it filled the room, sweeping Bilbo away on a tide of dark, rich music in spite of the fact that he didn’t know the meaning of any of the words. He thought he recognized the word ‘Durinul’, but that was only because it was the same as Thorin’s apparent last name.

In any case, his jaw must have been on the floor because Bofur softly elbowed him with a quiet chuckle.

Bilbo quickly brought the tumbler back to his lips, taking a desperate gulp as Thorin began to
deftly pluck the strings of the lute-like instrument as accompaniment for the second verse. He certainly didn’t seem like a beginner to Bilbo’s admittedly untrained ear. The song had a mournful, lament-like quality to it, and Bilbo realized with a twisting feeling in his gut that it must be about Erebor.

His mind’s eye was suddenly filled with visions of rocky peaks and clear, singing rivers. Peculiarly, it almost made him feel homesick in a way, despite the fact that the farthest he had ever been from the UK was Dublin.

A strange warmth extended itself through Bilbo’s body, starting from deep in his core and gradually radiating out to his fingers and toes. It made him feel slightly lightheaded, and he wasn’t sure if he could entirely blame it on the two sips of alcohol.

He couldn’t look away from Thorin. The man was intently focused on singing and playing at the same time, his expression of pure concentration belied by the seeming ease of his voice and the clarity of the notes. He was backlit by the fire, which enveloped him in a warm halo not totally unlike the one Bilbo had attributed to him in the forest earlier in the afternoon. With substantial grace reminiscent of a concert pianist, his long fingers danced along the neck of the instrument, effortlessly finding the proper place to make the appropriate tone. Thorin’s clear baritone made both Bilbo’s brain and his limbs turn to mush, and he was intensely glad he had chosen to sit down instead of lean against a wall.

Then Thorin’s eyes lifted from the strings and happened to lock onto Bilbo’s, and the rest of the world fell away.

Suddenly, it was like nothing existed except the two of them. Bilbo was sitting on the edge of a void, he on one end of the chasm and Thorin on the other, while the rest of the room faded around them. The gap seemed to grow smaller as Thorin sang, with Bilbo almost irresistibly drawn to him. He had to check that he was physically still in his seat and not walking mindlessly toward the fireplace like one of the undead, though he was leaning his body so wholly in Thorin’s direction that he was almost in danger of falling off the chaise.

Eventually, other voices from around the room joined in for what was most likely the chorus. Bilbo admittedly only had ears for the king, though he thought he heard Bofur singing lowly next to him. While his voice was good, it was certainly not on par with His Majesty’s.

Thorin’s eyes didn’t look away from Bilbo’s for the entirety of the rest of the song—except for once, when he glanced down briefly to check his finger placement on the neck of the instrument. His thick, dark eyelashes fanned over his cheeks, giving his vibrantly blue eyes a hooded quality that almost made Bilbo whimper. Then they snapped back up to Bilbo, which forced him to take a huge gulp of his scotch so he didn’t do anything else to embarrass himself further than he already had today.

All too soon, the song came to an abrupt end, with both Thorin’s voice and the instrument silencing themselves on the same note. Bilbo blinked, as if coming out of a long stupor. Thorin maintained eye contact with him for a few more seconds, before he too seemed to shake himself out of something, pointedly turning his head away.

“Wow. Haven’t heard the king play like that in a long while,” remarked Bofur, sounding just as awed as Bilbo felt. He spoke quietly, as if reluctant to break the spell that Thorin had cast over the room with his voice.

Bilbo couldn’t help but look at His Majesty in a slightly new light as his nephews pounced upon him, once they too had shaken themselves of the remnants of whatever Thorin had enchanted them
“Uncle, that was amazing!” Kili fawned as he practically hung off of Thorin, which the king allowed with a surprising amount of patience. Fili wrestled the (topshuur? Tovshur?) lute out of the king’s hands and gave it a few experimental plucks, looking intently at the carved ram at its head.

“When are you going to teach me to play the tog’shûr, Uncle?” the blonde asked, tracing the intricate geometric designs on the instrument’s rhomboid body.

“When you can prove to me that you can focus on something other than volleyball or getting your brother out of trouble,” said Thorin as he wrested the lute— tog’shûr, Bilbo’s mind supplied — back out of Fili’s grip, apparently to inspect it for damage while Kili let out a noise of protest. However, the motion seemed to be purely for show, because when Bilbo actually followed the direction of Thorin’s gaze, it burned a hole straight into none other than Dwalin.

Ah, thought Bilbo, something in his chest deflating a bit. Right. If he thought about it logically, he and Dwalin were situated in about the same general direction from Thorin. Maybe the king hadn’t been focusing on Bilbo after all. It certainly made more sense that way, he reasoned.

He didn’t know why the realization disappointed him so much.

“His Majesty played wonderfully, don’t you think, Brother?” asked Balin loudly, looking significantly at Dwalin before shifting his eyes in Thorin’s direction.

“‘S’alright, I s’pose,” slurred Dwalin mutedly, staring into his mostly empty glass. Thorin frowned at him for another moment, before turning his attention back to his obsequious nephews.

Feeling like he had just gotten off a particularly intense roller coaster, Bilbo downed the rest of his drink in a way he was admittedly very practiced at, throwing the liquor back so smoothly that it hardly touched his throat as he swallowed around it effortlessly.

“Wow,” said Bofur in open admiration, as Bilbo let the now empty tumbler come to rest in his lap. “Remind me to do some serious drinking with you sometime. That move could have put the soggiest of Russians to shame. Can I get you another?”

Bilbo released the tiniest of giggles as the alcohol settled warmly in his gut. “Ah, that’s certainly high praise coming from someone that hails from the east of Europe. But I think I’ll have to take a raincheck on that. The scotch really did me in, I’m afraid.”

Bilbo stood from the chaise, fully intending to make the rounds and say his final goodbyes before he retired for the night and never saw any of them again. However, he was stopped by an insistent hand that had clasped tightly but carefully onto his own, mindful of the bandages wrapped around his palm. He turned to see Bofur looking up at him with a painfully earnest expression.

“You mean it, right? If everything goes to plan, we will see each other again, won’t we?” the man asked, his normally cheerful voice marked with a sober sort of seriousness that Bilbo found hard to brush off.

He faltered for a moment. Bofur’s hand only gripped onto his even tighter.

“...Yes, of course,” said Bilbo finally, brow furrowing. “You know where you can find me. Gandalf certainly has my address. And my email, on the chance that either of us will have internet in the near future.”

In spite of Bilbo’s own confusion, Bofur looked thoroughly relieved, like a huge weight had been
taken off his shoulders. His cheeks dimpled again, dark eyes flashing.

“Aye, well. That’s all right now, isn’t it. I’ll be seeing you then, Mister Baggins,” the man said.

He adjusted his grip, turning it into something that to an untrained eye could have passed as just an especially familiar handshake. But to Bilbo, it felt much more personal.

He flushed, eyes wide. Bofur couldn’t possibly—

_Could he?_ Bilbo’s heart stuttered. In a moment of wild, reckless abandon, Bilbo was sorely tempted to try his luck and invite the nuclear engineer up to his room under the pretext of another drink.

But then he thought better of it. Even with the Ereborians’ seeming acceptance of same-gender relations, he didn’t know how well it would be received if he tempted fate and it turned out that he had totally misinterpreted the signals. It certainly would not have been the first time. The rational part of his brain abruptly kicked on, listing all the reasons why it would have been a tremendously bad idea.

Bilbo was already fairly certain that there might be something between Dwalin and the king, even if they did seem to be arguing at the moment. What were the odds that almost a quarter of those in the company would turn out to like other men? And even then, what were the odds that even one of them would be attracted to _Bilbo_ of all people? If he was being honest, Bilbo wasn't particularly in the mood to risk rejection at the moment. He was still feeling strange from his sorely mistaken assumption that he had been the one that Thorin looked at so intently during his performance, not to mention the overwhelming events of the day on top of that.

But, really, this was no time for thinking about things like that. Pushing all his angst aside with a hard mental shove, Bilbo smiled warmly, squeezing Bofur’s hand a bit before retracting his own. The man in the hat was certainly was a kind enough fellow, and Bilbo was a little sad to see him go.

“Please, call me Bilbo,” he said kindly.

“Bilbo,” said Bofur, his brogue wrapping warmly around the syllables as he tested the sound of it. For a second, Bilbo was sorely tempted once more to throw caution to the wind, but he quickly tamped the urge down.

“I like the sound of that,” the other man added lowly. “It was a pleasure to get to know you, Bilbo. I hope I get the chance to do it again someday.”

Bilbo’s words caught nervously in his throat for a minute, but he quickly recovered. He nodded.

“...Likewise. Good night, Mister Bofur.”

“Good night, Bilbo.”

“Good night, Mister Baggins! It was lovely to meet you!” said Bombur, leaning almost entirely into Bofur’s space as if to remind them both that yes, he was there too.

Bilbo let out a bark of startled laughter as the unusual intimacy of the moment passed, ephemeral as a soap bubble that had been abruptly popped.

“Good night, Mister Bombur, Mister Bifur. Safe travels to all of you,” he said sincerely, smiling.
Bifur nodded after him as he went to make the rounds as he had originally planned. Dori was quite cordial in his goodbye, thanking him profusely for the use of his pantry and his greenhouse. Ori’s was a bit shyer, but just as sincere, shaking Bilbo’s hand with the same confident grip he used the night before. Nori only nodded at him from his post behind the dried fig tree. He looked unusually grumpy, though it was presumably because Bilbo’s declining to travel with them meant that if anything went wrong with the computer, it would be on him to fix it. Bilbo only felt a little bit guilty.

Oin sniffed and refused to shake Bilbo’s hand. Bilbo was under the clear impression that the man simply feigned not being able to understand what he was saying, waving a hand near his ear and citing his apparently turned-off hearing aid. Gloin apologized profusely, and promised that Bilbo was welcome to their home in the Cairngorms at any time if he found himself up in the Highlands in the future. Bilbo highly doubted he would, but he appreciated the sentiment all the same.

Balin’s mouth had thinned to the point that it only appeared as a narrow line on his face. He gazed at Bilbo with regretful disappointment, and Bilbo found he was quite unable to look the older man fully in the eye. Still, they shook hands politely. Dwalin, on the other hand, only glowered.

Fili and Kili didn’t seem as distraught at the prospect of ‘Mister Boggins’ choosing not to join them than Bilbo had originally expected, though he didn’t exactly know why he thought that in the first place. They only waved at him good-naturedly, wishing him pleasant dreams.

Then Bilbo turned to Thorin. He cleared his throat, which caused the king to look up from where he was absently plucking out a tune on the tog’shûr.

“Er. Well, I suppose this is goodbye,” said Bilbo, realizing he didn’t know what to say.

Thorin snorted. “Yes, I suppose it is. I can’t say it’s been terribly interesting or productive, Mister Baggins.”

Bilbo flushed in anger, the liquor sitting in his belly making him grow reckless. What the hell, he thought. He was never going to see the man again anyway.

“You may have the voice of an angel, Your Majesty, but you certainly don’t have the manners of one,” he retorted.

The room grew quiet as Thorin blinked in surprise, mouth falling open a bit. Bilbo counted it as a victory, though he braced himself for the violent backlash that was sure to come.

“Oh? And what sort of manners do you suppose I have?” asked Thorin, voice neutrally even.

“Like those of an ornery water buffalo,” replied Bilbo. Even he was surprised at his own audacity.

One could hear a pin drop in the ensuing silence. It took everything that Bilbo had not to fretfully rescind his words on instinct. The king gawped at him, the lute just barely hanging from his limp fingers.

However.

Slowly, miraculously, a small semblance of a close-lipped smile wormed its way onto Thorin’s face, crinkling his eyes in a way that made Bilbo’s stomach flip.

Oh, dear.

“Good night, Mister Baggins,” he said softly, turning his gaze back down to his instrument in a
way that almost made him look demure.

“G… good night,” said Bilbo, feeling dangerously off kilter.

“Look at that!” crowed Dwalin. His face suddenly split into a bright grin, which caused his thick, black beard to ripple. It looked exceedingly strange.

He raised his glass in Bilbo’s direction. “The lad’s got some backbone after all! За встречу! G’night, Baggins!”

“Good night,” replied Bilbo dazedly, wandering out of the room on autopilot.

Gandalf followed him out and walked him to the stairs, shaking his head in amused disbelief. They embraced one last time before Bilbo made his way up to his bedroom. The bottom section of plywood was still pried off the window, and the glow of the bonfire in the koi pond-turned-crematory death pit suffused the room. Despite his best hopes, there were still a few undead out in the garden that night. Though, they seemed to be drawn to the fire like overgrown moths rather than harassing the greenhouse, so Bilbo decided they were not worth bothering about.

He slowly made himself ready for bed, picking up the alarm clock from where it was still lying face down on the floor and winding it so Mickey would remind him to get up at his usual time. Making sure Mum’s elephant gun was in easy reach, he slid himself under the covers. Tossing a bit, he stared at the ceiling and willed himself to become tired, much as he had been just earlier in the evening.

However, Thorin’s haunting melody stubbornly wound its way through Bilbo’s imagination, coloring every absent thought that crossed his mind. It kept him awake long into the night.

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Ten months after the UK State of Emergency, and one day after his mother’s lawyer had appeared on his doorstep, Bilbo Baggins once more found himself in his parents’ estate in the country, waking up in his childhood bedroom to the shrill ringing of his wind-up alarm clock.

His eyes snapped open, hand shooting out to curtly slap the alarm off with more force than was probably strictly necessary. As the heavy silence blanketing the old house was restored, his eyes quickly adjusted to the square of pale morning light that streamed across his face through the large gap in his otherwise boarded up, eastern-facing window.

Bilbo rolled out of bed with little difficulty, reaching out for the clock and thoughtfully re-winding it. Instead of dressing, he put on his father’s old slippers and wrapped his favorite patchwork dressing gown snugly around himself. He then grabbed his mother’s old elephant rifle from where it leaned reliably against the nightstand and hoisted it under his arm like one would the Sunday paper, just as he had many mornings before.

The sound of heavy footsteps in the yard and the slam of the iron back gate made him pause mid-routine. Bilbo glanced briefly over his shoulder before resolutely shaking his head. He stepped into the empty corridor, heading for the stairwell. Bilbo did his best not to wince when the soles of his slippers squeaked loudly on the hardwood, echoing in the vast stillness of Bag End. He supposed he should be grateful for the eeriness of the sound, as it was hard evidence of Bag End’s return to the silence that he always told himself he didn't mind so much.
He jumped when the third stair creaked.

Bilbo shuffled into the kitchen. It had once more been restored to its status as a sort of homey cave, the activity of yesterday morning seeming as distant a memory as those of his childhood.

The spring chill permeated the air. He dug his matchbook out of the pocket of his dressing gown, but instead of lighting the lamp, he simply flipped it over in his hands, feeling strangely sullen. He sat down heavily in his armchair, only to shift uncomfortably when he felt something hard under his bottom. He reached under it, extracting one of Ori's artist's pencils.

"Oh dear," he murmured to nobody in particular. "I hope he doesn't miss this."

Bag End didn't answer, merely groaning mournfully as it settled on its foundations. Against his will, Bilbo was suddenly viscerally reminded of the scene in the north wing upstairs. He shook his head, staunchly refusing to think about such an unseemly thing so early in the morning.

"I should put on the kettle," he said to the empty air.

Bilbo didn't move from his seat. He gripped the pencil hard, the wood digging deep into the bandages on his hand. His eyes strayed to the kitchen table, and he noted for the first time an opaque container covered with a plastic snap lid that he didn't remember taking out last night.

Slowly, he heaved himself up, wincing as he put weight on his still sore, unwrapped ankle slightly wrong. Shrugging it off, he made his way to the table, picking up the folded note addressed to Mister Baggins that lay on top of the container. The paper was slightly warm as Bilbo flipped it open, reading its contents.

Bilbo,

_I hope this note finds you well. Thank you for your hospitality and the lively conversation. I do hope to see you again someday! Gandalf gave me your email :)_ 

_Fondly, Bofur_

And then, underneath Bofur’s messy scrawl:

_Mr. Baggins,_

_Please enjoy these. Remember, it’s never too late._

_- Bombur_

Bilbo felt heat prick behind his eyes as he ripped the lid off the container. Steam wafted up from the mouth of it, revealing a set of four freshly baked _ôşposmak_ lying daintily on a paper napkin to soak up the moisture. Shakily, he lifted one of them to his face, inhaling deeply as he took a big bite. The pastry and its spiced potato and onion filling were still piping hot, but he was too involved in the heavenly taste to notice that his mouth was burning.

He finished the treat, licking the remnants of oil from his fingers as the roof of his mouth began to throb. He stared at the note, reading it again and again.

_it’s never too late_

Something cracked inside Bilbo. If he were to be honest with himself—really, truly honest, just this once—he would have to admit that he wasn’t the same man he had been just a day ago. It was as if
something in the past twenty-four hours had pried apart the iron bars shackling his heart, just enough so that some of the dark, painful emotion he kept carefully locked away there slipped free of its harsh confinement.

Bilbo seized, shoving the matches and the pencil into the pocket of his dressing gown. A burst of manic energy suffused his entire body. Before he could change his mind or think about his injured ankle, he sprinted from the kitchen.

Slippers squeaking, he skidded past the drawing room. It had been restored to its original orderly state, though the wet bar seemed to be minus a bottle of lower quality vodka. He ignored the apparent theft, running further down the hall until he arrived at a lesser-used closet in which he knew Mum kept her various camping supplies. Throwing open the door, Bilbo furiously dug through the disorganized pile of gear that threatened to spill out into the corridor the minute he opened the door. He eventually excavated a large rucksack, along with a tightly packed bedroll used for backpacking, which he stuffed through a strap at the base of the bag. He also threw in some other supplies his frantic brain absentmindedly registered might be useful, like a sewing kit and a package of iodine tablets that he hoped weren’t expired.

He also dug for a pair of hiking boots he had bought almost twenty years ago but had only worn once because they gave him blisters. Bilbo found them with a triumphant cry. They were quite ugly, colored bright red and branded something French. He honestly didn’t care much about what they looked like, just that they would give much-needed stability to his mildly sprained ankle.

He darted back to the kitchen, filling a water bottle and stuffing it into a mesh side pocket. He replaced the lid on the container of ôsposmak and threw that into the rucksack as well, along with the first aid kit that still rested on the table.

Bilbo bounded up the stairs, taking them two at a time. He exploded into his bedroom in a proverbial whirlwind, stuffing an extra change of clothes and multiple pairs of socks and underwear into the steadily filling bag. In his haste, he also accidentally threw in the Mickey Mouse alarm clock as well, though it was quickly buried under a pair of old jeans.

He dressed quickly, ripping the gauze off his hands and hastily wrapping his ankle in the Ace bandage while dry swallowing four ibuprofen. Bilbo put on the shirt and waistcoat he wore yesterday along with a fresh pair of trousers, yanking the clothes from where he had draped them neatly over a desk chair. Patting his chest forcefully, he confirmed that his mother’s handkerchief was still in his breast pocket. Finally, he indiscriminately scooped his toiletries off his bathroom counter, wrapping them in a towel and stuffing them at the top of the bag, somehow forcing the zipper closed around the load that threatened to burst it at the seams.

He then dug deeply into his closet and retrieved the only piece of technical outdoor wear he owned at the moment: An ancient, dark red Patagonia raincoat circa 1996 that barely had any insulation left to its bright purple lining. He pulled on an equally mid-nineties fleece pullover decorated with a particularly garish pattern before putting on the jacket, feeling slightly like a smaller version of the Michelin Man underneath all the layers. Bilbo decided that it would just have to do. At least he would be warm and wouldn’t get wet if it rained.

Bilbo shrugged on the rucksack and almost toppled backward at the weight of it, but he didn’t have the time to go back through the bag and decide which things he should keep and what he should leave behind. He would have to sprint to catch up with them as it was.

Fastening the bag’s waist and chest straps—which he had never actually done before in his life, though he had used plenty of other bags that possessed them through the years—he bolted back down the stairs, pausing only to return to Mum’s study one last time and empty her armoire of
ammunition for the elephant gun. He scrambled back into the kitchen, sitting down heavily on the edge of one of the chairs and stuffing his feet into the hiking boots, fingers trembling as he tried to lace them up as fast as he could.

Once they were double knotted, he scooped his key ring from a small dish by the back door and shoved the old Weatherby through some of the rucksack’s extra straps that he wasn’t quite sure were for. In any case, he found it secure enough for the moment.

He then burst out into the chill of the morning, pausing only briefly to lock the deadbolt behind him and survey the scene in the yard. The fire in the koi pond had gone out overnight, leaving nothing but singed concrete, ash, and bones. His gaze then swung to the greenhouse, and he suddenly remembered.

“Oh Hell, the chickens,” Bilbo groaned, his breath puffing visibly in front of him.

Bilbo quickly unlocked the padlock chaining the greenhouse door closed, throwing the door open. He dismantled the impromptu coop, letting the chickens run free.

“Sorry Kili,” he muttered, watching the birds escape back out into the garden.

Bilbo hardly had time to spare a thought for them. Locking the greenhouse behind him, he took off for the path. His boots crunched on the frosted grass as he unlatched the iron gate. Much as he had yesterday afternoon, he mindlessly sprinted up the footpath along the low Roman wall. His shoulders began to ache from carrying the heavy rucksack, not to mention the strain the running put on his ankle, but his only thoughts were of meeting up with the group.

He just had to catch up with them. The thought of anything else, of staying in that house by himself, was untenable.

He sighed in relief as he came to the clearing where the ground flattened out, lungs burning as he continued to run as fast as he could. Adrenaline kept him moving as he dodged around rocks and clambered over fallen logs, sheer dumb luck the only thing keeping his feet under him and preventing further injury.

He ran until he reached the edge of the wood, which emptied out into a large field shrouded in a low, thin fog. The old low wall continued through it, disappearing over a rise near the horizon. Bilbo paused, his body forcing him to take a breath. But he only sucked enough wind to scream a single word.

“WAIT!”

The hoarse shrillness of his voice echoed out over the meadow. Almost a mile away at the other end of it, a large group of people stopped dead in their tracks. He hopped frantically, waving his arms and hoping his red coat was visible in the reedy morning mist among the muted gray-greens and browns of the surrounding foliage.

“—ilbo?” a far-away voice called back. It might have been Gandalf.

“Yes!” Bilbo cried desperately, wiping the sweat off his brow. “Please, wait for me! I’m coming with you!”

He started to jog towards the group, legs threatening to turn to jelly with each step now that he could finally see his goal on the horizon.

“I’m coming, I’m coming, I’m coming,” he chanted in a frenzied mantra, just so he would remind
himself to keep drawing breaths. He saw one tall, gray figure peel itself off from the group, running toward him with surprising speed.

They met in the middle of the meadow, and it was everything Bilbo could do not to completely collapse into Gandalf arms as the man threw down his walking stick and reached out for him.

(Well, maybe he collapsed just a little bit.)

“My dear Bilbo!” the old man cried in wonder, gripping Bilbo’s forearms as he heaved for air.

“Gandalf,” Bilbo wheezed, clutching back at him.

“You never cease to surprise me, my old friend,” Gandalf said warmly as he waited patiently for Bilbo to recover. His face was lit with joy. “What made you decide to change your mind?”

“I… I don’t know, actually,” said Bilbo truthfully.

He really didn’t. While it certainly had been the ôsposmak that ultimately jolted him into action, he had no idea what exactly it was that gave him the urge to leave the house so abruptly. It had just been a feeling, mostly. A feeling of terrible suffocation, of hopelessness. Of loss.

The thought of what may have happened in the master suite scared him.

The thought of dying in Bag End, alone and forever waiting on ghosts, absolutely terrified him.

“What about your parents?” asked Gandalf softly, as if he sensed where Bilbo’s thoughts had headed.

Bilbo paused, breathing slowly through his nose. The action burned in the aftermath of his overexertion, but he couldn’t find it within himself to care.

“I… I can’t say that I don’t believe they may still be alive somewhere,” started Bilbo slowly, his pulse starting to die down to something more regular. He looked at his friend meaningfully, eyes shining. “But that doesn’t mean you’re not also some of the only family I have left, Gandalf. I couldn’t bear the thought of sending you out here all alone with only these strange foreigners and their terribly rude king for company.”

It was a facetious echo of Gandalf’s sentiment from the night before. The old lawyer recognized it, letting out a hearty laugh in the process. He bent at the waist, sun hat dipping so it obscured most of his face.

“Oh, Bilbo,” chuckled Gandalf, “what-ever am I going to do with you?”

“Take me with you, I suppose,” he replied. He was going for playful sarcasm, but he ended up somewhere in the realm of uncomfortable sincerity, tinged with a bit of doubt at the state of his welcome after nearly two days of staunch refusal.

Gandalf seemed to sense this. He peered out at Bilbo from under the wide brim of his powder blue hat with a long-suffering fondness.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” he murmured, straightening and clapping Bilbo on the shoulder. “Now come, let us get reacquainted with the group.”

Bilbo looked past Gandalf to the company of thirteen men, who were all standing at the other end of the field and watching them intently. Thorin stood a little apart from the group. Bilbo thought he
caught the king’s face morph into its customary majestic brooding expression, staring at him with icy intensity. Bilbo suddenly felt nervous, but Gandalf only smiled reassuringly.

“Oh, don’t second guess yourself after you’ve come all this way! You’re part of the mission now, whether you like it or not,” he said jovially, shoving Bilbo forward in that irritatingly presumptuous way of his. “Welcome, Mister Baggins, to the Company of Thorin II, the Once and Future King of Erebor.”

Bilbo gulped, a large lump suddenly lodging itself in his throat as he and Thorin suddenly made eye contact from a distance.

Oh goodness.

He was really in for it now, wasn’t he.

Chapter End Notes

Translation notes:
Tovshuur/topshur -- [Mongolian, transliterated into Khuzdul as tog’shûr] A two-stringed lute native to Mongolia; just imagine it's a remnant of long-ago cultural diffusion that's been retained by and subsequently evolved through isolation
За встречу [Za vstrechu] -- [Russian] To our meeting! (a toast)

The lyrics are literally just the first verse of I See Fire by Ed Sheeran translated into Khuzdul. It's actually very pretty! Rebekah Mui sings it here

Welp!!!! Bilbo finally did the dang thing. And yes, there will be drama. I highkey love mess, especially with characters who will all staunchly refuse to acknowledge drama is a thing.

With regard to Thorin's lute, the instrument I actually imagine him using looks more like the modified three-stringed electric tovshuur used by Temuulen Naranbaata of The Hu (pic, it's the one on the left, the right is the morin khuur, also inspiration for the design of the instrument), and sounds more like a Kazakh dombra (example) or even just a more conventional mandolin. If you want a good example of what the dombra sounds like accompanied by a baritone, I suggest listening to this song by Mamer. (;^) I imagine Khuzdul sounds a lot like Kazakh, so it's an extra good example.

All that aside, this is a major, major milestone for me in terms of like, sheer volume of something I've written and the wider readership it's gotten, so I'm absolutely floored by every single positive comment and reaction. I'm actually very insecure about the clarity/engagement of my prose, since I, uhhhhhh, barely read fiction lol (I read a lot of nonfiction lmfao). But genuinely, writing and making things for this fic is probably the most fun I've had just fucking around in like the past... decade probably. I haven't had a hobby in so long, tbh!!!! So thanks for sharing it with me. Next update might be a little bit slower--I'm trying to figure out the pacing for the stuff that's ahead. Things will pick up! No more of this "seven chapters and over 50,000 words later and we're just now getting into it" sort of stuff.
Anyway, thank you so much for reading!!! I hope I can deliver on what this story has promised already. I have plans. :^) I’m admittedly going to take a lot of cues from the movies and the books in terms of like, the skeleton of a plot, but hopefully all the other stuff wrt personal and emotional drama and adaptation to the world I’ve built is enough to keep it interesting.

**Music that goes with this chapter:**
Send Me on My Way - Rusted Root
Sprawl II (Mountains Beyond Mountains) - Arcade Fire

Catch me on tumblr at both [knife-em0jii](http://knife-em0jii.tumblr.com) for my personal blog and [nazghoulz](http://nazghoulz.tumblr.com) for my fanfic/lotr blog
Gandalf picked up his walking stick and ushered Bilbo across the remainder of the meadow, leading them in a beeline directly for the company. While the lawyer laid his hands on Bilbo's arm and shoulder under the guise of supporting him as he caught his breath, Bilbo felt less like he was being helped and more like he was being frog-marched toward the jurisprudence of a hostile court. It took everything that he had not to mulishly dig in his heels into the damp ground as the company gradually solidified in the mist.

Now that Bilbo could clearly see their faces, he registered that Balin wore an expression of supreme smugness, his lips curling satisfactorily like a cat who had just gotten the cream. Bilbo quickly averted his eyes, deciding instead to carefully observe the placement of his boots with each step he took. As a general rule, he was exceedingly embarrassed by any sort of attention, good or bad.

However, the thought he might be welcome amongst at least some of them did settle some of the anxiety that was squeezing mercilessly at his chest.

"Look who's decided to join us!" Gandalf announced grandly, which Bilbo absolutely hated.

While he hadn't thought too hard about how exactly his meeting with the company was going to play out, Bilbo's fantasy best-case scenario involved all of them moving on without fanfare, or without really any meaningful reaction to his arrival. He would have liked very much to be treated as a sort of friendly ghost; barely there and only acknowledged when needed.

Of course, things never seemed to go exactly as Bilbo hoped.

Ever the difficult one, Gandalf chose to deposit him directly in front of Thorin, who wore an expression of supreme waspishness. Bilbo's shoes sank in the soft mud as Gandalf shoved him in
front of the king, who somehow seemed taller and more intimidating than Bilbo had previously remembered.

His Majesty’s hair was pulled back again, neatly braided in a plait that hung over his shoulder in a way that Bilbo would have found charming were he not quaking in his hiking boots. Still, he saw with some small feeling of vindication that the king had also buckled the waist and chest straps on his bag. Bilbo hadn't known if that was actually a thing people did, and he wasn't exactly jumping at the chance to display his woeful inexperience in any legitimate form of cross-country trekking.

Thorin crossed his arms across his chest, once again glaring down the length of his nose. The carved head of the lute peeked out over one of his broad shoulders, the eyes of wooden ram also glowering menacingly at Bilbo.

He was suddenly viscerally reminded that no longer were they on Bilbo’s own territory in Bag End. Having just crossed over the property line, this was, for all intents and purposes, the wild. And going by His Majesty’s confident bearing and proud countenance—not to mention the large sword he wore at hip—Thorin was in his element, looking to be every inch the king he actually was.

"Mister Baggins," he rumbled.

"Y-your Majesty," stuttered Bilbo.

There was a long, tense stretch of silent eye contact between them as he desperately fished for something to say. Thorin wasn’t any help, appearing perfectly content to watch Bilbo struggle.

"All right, you lot! You all owe me a lot of money," said Nori from somewhere behind him.

There were a few grumbles as money apparently changed hands, with Nori cackling the entire time. Bilbo flushed with mortification as he realized what exactly those words implied.

"You took wagers? On whether not I would come?" asked Bilbo in horrified indignation. He glanced to Gandalf, feeling about ready to turn on his heel and stomp back to Bag End.

"Oh Bilbo, it's nothing personal. I, for one, had utmost faith in you," said Gandalf, looking significantly at the king. "And I now believe it's time for His Majesty to pay up."

Thorin continued to maintain hostile eye contact with Bilbo as he wordlessly reached into his back pocket for his wallet. Opening it with the tell-tale rip of Velcro, he whipped out a fifty pound note and held it away from himself between two fingers like it was something disgusting. Gandalf snatched it away with a good-natured chortle, stuffing it into his breast pocket.

"Not that paper money means much at all these days, but we all need our diversions," he said, sounding like he felt himself to be wholly sublime.

Thorin re-Velcroed his wallet and stuffed it back into his jeans, his pursed expression looking very much like he had sucked on a lemon. Bilbo could relate.

"We will not tolerate any more distractions, Mister Baggins," said the king after a moment, still scowling. "If you can't keep up, we will be forced to leave you behind."

Bilbo would have been lying if he said the thought of walking all the way to Kent on his sprained ankle didn't immediately make him consider turning around right then and there. But Gandalf was looking at him hawkishly over Thorin's shoulder, giving off the distinct impression of a hypercompetitive pageant mum silently coaching her preteen to say exactly the right thing to the judges. Bilbo's own force of will simply couldn't compete.
"...Right. Duly noted," he said haplessly, trying not to make eye contact with either the lawyer or the king.

His Majesty snorted, turning on his heel. "Then let’s get going. We still have five miles to go before our first stop."

He then stalked down the path in a way that would have been very imperious indeed, had his boots not squelched in the mud with every step.

Bilbo looked after him, utterly discomfited. Fili and Kili quickly jogged after their uncle like lost ducklings, pausing to slap Bilbo hard on the shoulders as they passed on either side of him. Dori and Ori soon followed, with Dori granting him a courteous nod while Ori waved cheerfully. Nori sidled up to him, triumphantly waving a fat stack of twenty and fifty pound notes in front of Bilbo's nose.

"Thank you so much, Mister Baggins," he crowed, peeling a few twenties from the stack and tucking them into the strap at Bilbo's chest with a patronizing grin. "Here, for your troubles."

Bilbo's mouth fell open as he made an incoherent noise of outrage, ready to chew Nori out and throw the money back in his self-satisfied face. But by the time he could react, Nori had already caught up to his brothers just out of earshot. Bilbo’s chin dropped to his chest as he gazed dumbly at the bills, the queen's crumpled visage staring back at him.

"Mahal's arse, what a bloody cunt," huffed Bofur, who had approached Bilbo just as Nori sped off. His hat was pulled down low over his ears to ward off the chill of the morning, which was slowly starting to lessen as the sun began burning a hole through the fog. He planted his hands on his hips, glaring down the path after the other man.

"Oh, you're only sore because you lost money to that old reprobate like the rest of us," said Balin, stopping on Bilbo's other side.

Bofur stiffened, glancing guiltily in the shorter man's direction. Bilbo could only shrug, extracting the bills from the strap and folding them neatly before stuffing them in one of his trouser pockets.

"Mister Baggins, I—" Bofur started. He sounded distraught.

"Don't worry about it," he said, voice clipped. "Besides, I thought I told you to call me Bilbo?"

Bofur didn’t look entirely satisfied, but his guilt visibly lessened. "Aye, that you did. Still, I apologize for doubting you, Bilbo. Never been quite so happy to be wrong, to be honest."

Bilbo felt himself soften at the apology. Really, could he blame Bofur for betting against him? Just over an hour ago, he himself hadn't thought he would leave Bag End for an adventure either. Right up until he had run out his kitchen door, the prospect of him staying home had been a supremely sure bet.

"I'm glad to see you come along as well, Mister Baggins," said Balin with a droll little smile. "I was starting to become worried about our prospects."

Whatever relief Bilbo felt at his welcome was soon replaced by a vague sort of dread. He suddenly remembered that the whole point of his coming along was that, on the off chance they even made it all the way to Erebor, he was expected to break into a highly advanced quantum computer. Who knew what Nori’s motivations were for wagering in Bilbo’s favor, but he had a feeling that it had something to do with the fact that betting otherwise would be tantamount to admitting that he was up to the task of being responsible for the technical aspects of the mission, which Nori had
emphatically assured the company that he was not.

The small problem with all that, however, was that Bilbo wasn’t quite sure if he was up for it, either.

"I'd still be worried, if I were you," he muttered.

"Nonsense!" said Gandalf, apparently still in extremely high spirits. "We all hold your skills in the highest regard."

Dwalin scoffed as he tromped past them, axes once again strapped to his back and making for the front of the group near Thorin. It didn't do anything for Bilbo's sense of foreboding.

"Are they still fighting?" Bilbo asked Balin, wary of the potentially messy atmosphere he had just stepped into.

Balin let out a ragged sigh, running a hand through his beard. "Unfortunately. This is the largest argument they've ever had, if I recall correctly. I'm starting to think that it's too big to just be about the best way to get to France."

“Oh, well, that’s good to know,” said Bilbo, just a touch sarcastically.

The rest of the group shuffled past them, calling out greetings to Bilbo with mixed degrees of friendliness. Bombur smiled at him sunnily, while Bifur only grunted and nodded. Oin didn’t even acknowledge him at all, stomping past him like he didn’t exist. That was honestly just fine with Bilbo.

“I should catch up to my brother and His Majesty. Who knows what will happen when Dwalin inevitably tries to redirect the king to keep him on course,” said Balin, evidently having the dubious honor of acting as their buffer. He sounded very annoyed about it.

Gandalf chuckled and trailed after him, seemingly unbothered by the prospect that their leader had no sense of direction, or even about the apparent brewing power struggle. Bofur didn’t say anything about it either, only rolling his eyes like it was simply business as usual.

The man unclipped his own backpack and let it fall to the ground with a thump, shedding his outer layer in response to the day’s growing warmth, though he still kept his fur-lined hat on. Bilbo took this as a cue to do the same, sighing in relief as he shucked the red rain jacket and tied it around his waist. The sun had fully broken through the cloud cover, and he felt like he was baking under the impermeable material of the coat.

As he re-clipped the straps of his rucksack, he looked up to see Bofur staring at him, eyes wide.

“What? Why are you looking at me like that?” he asked, suddenly awash with nervousness.

“I’m only admiring your extremely fashionable sweater,” Bofur wheezed, choking down a laugh.

Bilbo looked back down at himself, stomach dropping in humiliation as he registered the fleece he had hastily pulled on in his rush to leave the house. It was indeed quite hideous, with a terrible multicolored mid-nineties tribal pattern that wrapped around the entirety of Bilbo’s torso. His fingers itched to rip it off himself, but he knew that if he did so, he would quickly freeze. Instead, he narrowed his eyes at Bofur, going on the offensive.

“Says the man carrying around the mattock! What, are you planning on going prospecting?” he retorted, gesturing to the large pickaxe Bofur had strapped to the side of his pack.
Bofur only snorted heavily behind his hand, which made Bilbo bristle even further.

“If you must know, I didn’t have much time to pull together a decent outfit, and beggars certainly can’t be choosers,” he sniffed, treading heavily down the path while ignoring the twinge in his ankle.

“Hey now! I didn’t mean any offense,” said Bofur, now laughing openly and jogging to catch up. He laid a gentle hand on Bilbo’s elbow. “It’s cute. Matches your boots.”

Bilbo flushed again, half in embarrassment and half in… something else. He pulled his elbow away uncomfortably, adjusting his heavy pack.

“Where are we going, anyway? His Majesty said we had five miles before the first stop,” he said, changing the subject as his ankle grew increasingly sorer, obviously over-exerted from his earlier run.

“Oh, back to the house we had to run from the other night,” said Bofur, shrugging as he fell into step beside Bilbo. He shortened his strides to match Bilbo’s own, which was only sort of annoying. “We left a bunch of supplies there in our haste to flee. Hopefully the ôrek haven’t messed with them too badly.”

“I see,” said Bilbo, trying not to limp. Bofur’s brow abruptly furrowed.

“Are you alright?” he asked. The other man had apparently noticed the way Bilbo was suddenly gritting his teeth, much to his dismay.

“Oh yes, I’m quite fine,” Bilbo lied, pausing to glare down at his traitorous foot. “I just rolled my ankle yesterday and it’s starting to act up. Can you reach into my front pocket there and get my package of ibuprofen?”

“This one?” asked Bofur. He tugged on one of Bilbo’s zippers.

“Yes, it should be near the top.”

There was a moment of silence as Bofur set about the awkward task of digging in Bilbo’s backpack while he was still wearing it. Soon enough though, the other man found the package with a small noise of triumph, presenting it to Bilbo with a chivalrous flourish. Bilbo brusquely thanked him before quickly popping four pills out of the foil and dry swallowing all of them at once.

“Do you need any water?” asked Bofur, eyebrows rocketing toward his hairline.

“It’s fine,” repeated Bilbo. He handed the package back to Bofur so he could put it back where he found it.

“Are you sure you’re okay? That was a lot of medicine you just swallowed,” Bofur said, voice irritatingly soft. He re-zipped the pocket, giving Bilbo’s pack a pat to signal that everything was secure.

“Yes,” Bilbo insisted, stubbornly taking a few painful steps to illustrate his point. Bofur didn’t exactly look convinced, but he shook his head and didn’t say anything more about it.

They started walking again, trailing a ways behind the rest of the group. The going got slightly easier as the warm sun dried the mud beneath their feet, which had been unrelentingly sucking at their boots with every step they took. The remaining mist quickly burned off, illuminating the meadow in a warm golden light. The bright blue dots of wild morning glories slowly started to
unfurl in the glow of the spring dawn.

The sight made Bilbo’s breath catch. It was almost as if that in the month he had spent cooped up in Bag End, he had forgotten that such beauty existed.

Further down the path, walking slightly behind Balin and Dwalin, Thorin turned abruptly, his visage cast in the same golden glow as the rest of the meadow. He stared past the rest of the company, straight at Bofur and Bilbo. Bilbo’s heart thumped as Thorin raised one imposing eyebrow before turning back, a smirk hidden in his beard.

“Looks like your sweater has another admirer,” ribbed Bofur.

“Oh my God,” moaned Bilbo, hiding his face in his hands. He had already forgotten.

“Were you awake before we left, then?” asked Bofur, still smiling. “You said you didn’t have much time to dress or pack, but you caught up with us fairly quickly.”

“No, I had just woken up as you went out the back gate,” said Bilbo. “It took a lot of scrambling to get myself together to follow you all, not to mention digging into parts of my closet I don’t think I’ve touched since secondary school.” He gestured to his dated pullover and worn coat in example.

“Not big on hiking then, I take it,” said Bofur, tone wry.

“No—well, yes. But that’s not the reason,” said Bilbo, desperate to try and explain away his bad fashion choices. “Bag End isn’t really my house, technically. It’s my family home. I actually live full time in London; most of my clothes are still there.” And on the side of the M25 in several pieces of scattered luggage somewhere, but Bilbo didn’t bother mentioning that.

“Is that where your bookshop is then? Did you leave after the outbreak?” asked Bofur curiously.

“Yes. I was hoping to meet up with my parents back home, but it seemed like they had already moved on by the time I arrived,” explained Bilbo. He became slightly somber at the thought.

“Any idea where they might be?” Bofur’s voice was gentle, using that same pitying timbre that Gandalf always used when talking to Bilbo about his parents.

Bilbo scowled, suddenly feeling piqued.

“No idea,” he snapped, frustrated at both Bofur’s tone and at his own instinctual denial. He had a pretty good idea as to what may have happened to his parents, actually. He simply wasn’t ready to admit it quite yet.

“Sore subject, got it,” said Bofur apologetically, which only made Bilbo madder at himself. “So if you’re not big on hiking, and you had just woken up when we left, how did you catch up with us so fast?”

“Oh,” said Bilbo, blinking away his momentary annoyance, “I ran the whole way.”

Bofur stopped short. Bilbo glanced behind him to see that the other man was staring at him again with a wide-eyed expression. He paused, noting with pleasure that the ibuprofen was starting to kick in as the pain in his ankle abated somewhat.

“What? Is it my fleece again?” teased Bilbo, forcing his tone to remain light.

Bofur shook his head, face splitting into a huge grin. “No, Mister Baggins. You’re just surprising,
is all.”

“Huh.” He didn’t know what to say to that.

Bofur jogged the few steps to catch up with him, slinging an arm companionably over his shoulder as they began walking again. Bilbo didn’t shrug it off this time. He felt warm, in the good way that wasn’t from the sun—almost like he had somehow made a friend.

“Bofur! Baggins! Keep up!” barked Thorin, eyes narrowed at them from the front of the line.

The rest of the company glanced back at them, a few of them raising eyebrows at the two’s newfound familiarity. Gandalf wagged his in their direction, which caused Bilbo to stiffen in chagrin. Bofur squeezed Bilbo’s shoulder before retracting his arm, evidently to noticing the change. He gave the king’s back a dark look once Thorin had turned back toward the path.

“We should catch up,” said Bilbo quietly, steps quickening. “Don’t want to get left behind.”

As fast as it had disappeared, a smile rapidly found its way back onto Bofur’s face. He shoved his hands into his pockets and shrugged, keeping his pace deliberately leisurely. “I don’t know about you,” he said, “but I know for a fact that I’m too important to get left behind. You know, since I’m the only one who knows how to handle the reactor and all.”

Bilbo felt the corners of his mouth tick up despite himself, shaking his head as he hastened his pace to close the gap between him and Oin and Gloin, who were also trailing behind. Gandalf paused to wait for him, and they eventually fell into step beside each other. The old man walked with one hand on his walking stick and the other on his medieval-looking broadsword, which Bilbo eyed warily.

“Are you sure you know how to use that?” he muttered, not sure if he wanted to be around Gandalf when he inevitably tried to swing it.

Gandalf laughed lowly, running his thumb lovingly down the sword’s utilitarian leather grip as they picked their way carefully through the meadow. They followed the path along Roman wall as they crested over the top of a hill, which overlooked a large valley dotted with abandoned crop fields and country houses that were all probably older and much more authentic than Bag End. Bilbo could see that the wall ended at a ruined battlement, near where the horizon was obscured by the crest of another forested hill.

“You’d be surprised, Mister Baggins,” said Gandalf. He didn’t bother explaining further as he gazed out thoughtfully into the valley, which was typical.

Bilbo suddenly realized why Gandalf was wearing the sun hat, as he too looked out into the valley. They were walking due east, and the sun glared directly into his eyes in a way that forced him to squint. He put a hand over his brow, trying to peer at whatever Gandalf was looking toward. If it was anything in particular, he couldn’t see it.

A couple of butterflies flitted through the tall grass, and Bilbo was shocked to see the red fur of a fox darting across the path some distance ahead of them. Some daffodils were already peeking their sunny heads out of the cold ground along with a few sweet violets, both unaffected by the previous night’s frost. Bilbo could imagine that soon, the hillsides would be carpeted in a colorful riot of wildflowers.

“Beautiful, isn’t it,” murmured Gandalf, sensing Bilbo’s train of thought. The sun was bright enough in the sky that he knew there wouldn’t be any undead wandering out and about as they
walked, which meant that this was a scene that could be enjoyed without any latent worry.

“Yeah,” replied Bilbo, voice soft. “Makes you almost forget.”

“Indeed,” said Gandalf. He carefully began to make his way down the hill, while Bilbo paused to admire the view.

“Baggins! What did I say!” called Thorin, who was already near the base. His deep voice echoed through the valley, bouncing off the stone wall and through the dips and ditches of the surrounding countryside.

Bilbo sighed, shaking his head as he followed Gandalf, remembering to be mindful of his injured ankle down the relatively steep slope. Well, he could at least enjoy the scenery while he walked. The sun was shining, his ankle didn’t hurt at the moment, and he had maybe, just maybe, made a friend. He could at least pretend for the moment that he was simply going on a long, leisurely hike with some acquaintances. No zombies, no apocalypse, no looming nuclear disaster.

Bilbo smiled to himself. Perhaps this wouldn’t be so bad after all.

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Bilbo wasn’t wrong, per se, but the illusion certainly didn’t last long.

Gandalf soon sped up and rejoined the king near the front of the company, leaving Bilbo to hike by himself for a bit before Bofur caught up with him and they started chatting again. They didn’t have a whole lot in common, barring their backgrounds in academia and their mutual taste for the Anglicized version of Indian takeout, but Bofur had seemingly been charmed by his almost encyclopedic knowledge of movies and television—an unfortunate side effect of being trapped in his flat for over two years straight and only having cable and DVDs for company most of the time.

Bofur had also been very encouraging when Bilbo confessed that he had always wanted to write a book. One that wasn’t about computers or code-breaking, that is. He had already written plenty of books on that particular topic, and he wasn’t especially keen to start another one. However, Bilbo didn’t even know where to begin with regard to writing a novel. He may have written a fair bit of bad poetry while under house arrest, but he couldn’t think of anything that could constitute the plot of an adventure story.

But while he tried to banish it, the thought refused to leave his mind for the rest of the five-mile long hike. Even when he and Bofur moved onto other topics and then into companionable silence as Bilbo became more and more focused on putting one foot in front of the other, the thought of writing an escapist fantasy like the ones he had enjoyed as a child, with dragons and magic and plenty of sword-fights, had stayed firmly glued to the back of his mind.

The company marched for almost three hours without a break as the sun climbed high in the sky, and by the time they reached their destination, Bilbo was completely shattered. His ankle was starting to throb something awful, and he could feel blisters starting to form on the sides of both of his pinky toes and on the back of his right heel. Not to mention that his stomach was beginning to grumble loudly from his almost nonexistent breakfast, and his water was running dangerously low.

He almost collapsed in relief when Thorin finally signaled for them to stop at the edge of what was obviously a property line using heavy foliage in lieu of a privacy fence. They had long since passed the crumbling battlement that marked the end of the Roman wall, and Bilbo had been somewhat
worried, since it seemed like the directionless Thorin had been their sole leader through the otherwise featureless Cornish countryside.

Instead of walking by Thorin, Dwalin had hovered somewhere in the middle of the pack, where he lightly bickered with Nori the whole way. Or rather, Nori kept needling the bald man while Dwalin resolutely ignored him, which only made Nori poke at him more. According to Bofur, this was unusual. The vast majority of the time, apparently both Thorin and Dwalin led the group during treks on a joint basis, with Dwalin doing most of the directing and wayfinding.

"Orienteering," Bilbo’s mind ruefully supplied. From what he had gathered, it didn’t seem like Thorin had any skill in it, either.

Dwalin pushed through the company, most of the group having formed a small crowd as they gathered on the edge of the wood. They murmured anxiously amongst themselves in Khuzdul, but the bald man ignored them as he strode straight to Thorin, who peered intently into the scrub.

"See anything?" muttered Dwalin, almost too low for Bilbo to hear.

"Not yet," replied the king. He signaled to Kili, who perked up and bounded over to his uncle.

"Want me to scout it out?" he asked. He sounded almost frighteningly eager.

Thorin nodded. "Climb that tree over there and take a look into the yard," said the king, pointing out a large oak on the edge of the property. "I don’t expect there to be much in this light, but we don’t know about the house. Report back if you see anything through the windows."

"Yessir," said Kili, dropping his pack to the ground with a heavy thud.

Securing his crossbow and his quiver to his back, he darted toward the tree and took a running jump. With surprising agility, he used one foot to springboard himself off the trunk and grab hold of one of the oak’s thick lower branches, where the brunette effortlessly hoisted himself up with all the grace of a well-practiced gymnast. He sent the company a cheerful wave once he was straddling the bough, nonchalantly swinging his grubby trainers in the open air as he did so.

Well then, thought Bilbo in amazement. That certainly explains how he and Fili made it on top of the greenhouse.

"Do you want me to go with him, Uncle?" asked Fili, looking expectantly in the direction of the tree. He seemed to be almost vibrating with the need to follow his brother.

"No, you can stay here," replied Thorin, sending a sidelong glance toward his older nephew. Fili deflated perceptibly, looking down at Kili’s abandoned pack with a pensive frown.

Leaves having yet to unfurl from where they had started budding on the branches, Kili was perfectly visible as he scaled the rest of the oak tree. Like a particularly large monkey (whose prominent ears only added to the illusion), he hoisted himself from branch to branch until he found a twisted bough near the top that looked as if it would only barely hold his weight. He tested it gingerly before dropping to his belly, wrapping his limbs around it scooting forward so he could brandish his crossbow in front of his face. He peered down through the scope, sweeping it left and right for a few silent, anxious minutes before starting the climb back down.

Bilbo fidgeted nervously as Kili carefully descended, wincing as the young man decided to simply jump down the rest of the way once he came to a point that Bilbo wasn’t quite sure was low enough. Even so, he landed lightly on his feet, jogging back toward the group with a thumbs up.
“All clear,” he said, sounding a little winded but no less cheerful. “Here, Uncle. Catch.”

He tossed something small directly at Thorin’s face—overhanded, like he was throwing a baseball. Bilbo flinched as he waited for the object to peg the king directly between the eyes, but Thorin’s reflexes were almost inhumanly fast, and he snatched the object straight out of the air with his hand much like a hungry frog catches a fly with its tongue. Nobody else seemed surprised by this, so Bilbo quietly kept his awe to himself.

The king opened his palm, cupping it slightly as he regarded the object. In the middle of it sat a weathered brown acorn that must have been left over from the previous autumn, hidden somewhere between the boughs.

Despite having caught it quite spectacularly, Thorin only stared at the nut, confused expression soon morphing into one of pure rage. He looked up threateningly at Kili, somehow madder than Bilbo had ever seen him.

“What is the meaning of this?” he seethed, closing his broad hand around the acorn and squeezing as if he meant to crush it. A strange heaviness suddenly blanketed the company. Bilbo glanced around, but he couldn’t find clues in any of their expressions as to why.

Kili faltered.

“It was an oak tree,” he started, voice hesitant. “You know, like—”

“Mahal, Kili. If you know what’s good for you, just shut up,” said Fili angrily, roughly shoving Kili’s pack back into his arms. Kili let out a little oof as he almost toppled over at the weight of it.

“Sorry,” he said softly, clearly contrite.

Bilbo glanced back at Gandalf, who only shrugged and shook his head like it was better not to ask. So Bilbo didn’t.

Thorin let the acorn drop to the ground with a glare of pure disdain, looking like he wanted to stomp it under his foot but couldn’t because it would not be very majestic of him to do so. He turned back to Kili, who was meekly pulling on his pack.

“The yard was clear. What about the house?” the king asked. His voice was tight with barely suppressed ill humor.

“I didn’t see any movement, and those windows are huge,” replied Kili, too cowed to make eye contact.

Thorin considered the miserable look on his nephew’s face and sucked in a deep breath through his nose, closing his eyes like he was silently counting to ten.

“All right,” he said after one long, terse moment. He swept his gaze across the company and sounded much calmer, though he still carried a tension around his eyes that revealed the true nature of his temper. He extended his hands, as if to illustrate what he was about to say.

“The yard and the main part of the house are clear, but that doesn’t tell us anything about the upper floor or the garage. We’re going to stick together as we approach the house, and then break off into pairs to sweep the building. I want two groups on the main and ground levels, and four on the upper floor. Fili, Baggins, and I will take the garage.”

His Majesty clapped his hands together with a finality that left little room for argument.
“Excuse me?” squawked Bilbo, just as Dwalin let out a sharply bellowed, “WHAT.”

“Am I being punished?” asked Kili, sounding small and sad.

Fili took pity on him, his earlier irritation dissipating as he ruffled his slightly taller brother’s hair. “No, you’re not being punished. I’m sure Thorin has a reasonable explanation,” he said, glaring daggers at the king.

“Yes, I’m sure he does,” said Gandalf. “Please, do tell, Your Majesty.” He leaned heavily on his gnarled walking stick, looking openly doubtful.

Thorin’s eyes narrowed, squaring his shoulders and pulling himself to his full considerable height. Bilbo noted he was even slightly taller than Dwalin, though he was sure if Gandalf ever deigned to lift himself out of his near-perpetual stoop, his willowy figure would have them all beat. As it was, the king cut quite the intimidating figure, silencing any grumbling amongst the group.

"Are you questioning your king?" growled Thorin.

"Oh, not at all," replied Gandalf, "seeing as how you are not mine king. Nor are you Bilbo's, for that matter."

"I would rather not get involved," Bilbo wheezed. He flapped his hands in front of him nervously, as if to ward off any undue regard.

Thorin looked sharply at him anyway. "And that's exactly my worry. I don't know this Baggins, I don't know what he is—or isn't—capable of," he said. "I want to keep an eye on him before I send him to watch the backs of one of my men."

“I assure you, I am perfectly capable of looking out for Bilbo,” blustered Gandalf.

“My eye, Tharkûn,” insisted Thorin. Gandalf didn’t even blink at the epithet, so Bilbo figured it must not have been offensive.

“Don’t I get a say in this?” asked Bilbo, unappreciative of the fact that they were talking about him as if he wasn’t there.

“I thought you didn’t want to get involved,” piped Nori from the back of the group. He was quickly shushed with a quick whap to the back of the head from Dori.

“Then it’s settled then,” said Thorin, though in Bilbo’s opinion it most certainly was not. The king waved a hand to silence any more unwarranted comments or concerns. “Let’s move. Dwalin, you’re taking point.”

Dwalin grunted in reluctant acquiescence, once again sounding very much like an irritated bear. He unclipped one of his huge, ornate axes from his pack, holding in front of him defensively as he stomped loudly into the brush. Thorin remained outwardly stoic, but he closed his eyes once again in obvious irritation.

The king then unsheathed his own sword, revealing an elegantly curved blade that could have easily been a prop in some sort of fantasy movie about elves. It somehow didn’t look out of place gripped in Thorin’s calloused hand, even though he was currently using it as a machete to bushwhack his way into the untamed brush behind Dwalin.

Bilbo took a moment to suck in a breath through his teeth and admire the way Thorin’s shoulders moved beneath his jacket. Then he retrieved the elephant gun from where he had haphazardly
strapped it to his rucksack and checked the magazine. It still had a few bullets, and digging out the rest of his ammunition from his pack would take precious time and slow the group down. He decided that he would just have to be judicious in his shots, should he even have to make any.

Gandalf laid a gentle hand on Bilbo’s shoulder as he gripped the gun. The action stilled Bilbo’s hands, which he hadn’t realized were shaking.

“For all his bluster, I will admit that the king is very capable,” murmured Gandalf. “You’ll be quite safe with him and the prince.”

Bilbo’s eyes snapped to Fili, who was fussing with one of his brother’s straps while Kili tried to push him away in protest. The blonde had pulled out a long machete that Bilbo hadn’t noticed him having before, keeping it tucked under his arm in order to free his hands. Bilbo took in the young man’s wild hair and the patched jean jacket he wore over his holey university sweatshirt, assessing him with new eyes.

“Hum,” he said consideringly. “I suppose if Thorin’s their uncle, that would make the lads princes then.”

“You’re just realizing this now?” asked Gandalf in disbelief. Bilbo shot him a withering look, which of course the lawyer ignored with a quiet snort.

“Let’s get a move on, Mister Boggins!” called Fili, seemingly satisfied that Kili was now ready for whatever may come at him.

Bilbo sighed, clutching the Weatherby to his chest as he followed the rest of the group in making their way through the path that Dwalin and Thorin had cut for them.

The scrub was still mostly dormant, as it was too early in the spring for anything to be in full bloom except for a few hardy grasses and bulb flowers. As it was, the brush was mainly a thorny bramble of dry branches and vines, and every single one of them tried to rip at Bilbo’s sweater and trousers in a supremely irritating fashion. He felt himself gain a few scratches on his cheeks and on the backs of his hands, all of which stung hotly as he picked his way through the path. Though, strangely, the new fresh pain did distract him somewhat from his various other discomforts.

When he broke free of the scrub and finally stumbled into the back garden of the property, Bilbo couldn’t help the shocked gasp that escaped him.

While Bag End was a fairly new house that had been built to look old, this was obviously a new house that had been built to look like it came from the future. Three storeys tall and built to conform seamlessly with the terraced hillside, the building was all smooth clean lines and whitewashed stucco, with a rather luxurious looking pool patio that stood adjacent to the entrance of a large walk-out basement. Even Bilbo, whose tastes admittedly ran more on the traditional side, had to admit that the house was very beautiful. Kili had also massively understated the size of the windows. They were positively gigantic, almost taking up the entire back wall of the main floor so that it was hardly a real wall at all.

Bilbo forced himself to shut his mouth before he could catch flies. Which, upon closer inspection, seemed to be an actual hazard. The rotting remains of about half a dozen well-dressed corpses were scattered about the yard, littering the colorful Spanish tiles of the patio and lying at the bottom of the dry pool. He gulped upon seeing them, gripping the Weatherby tighter.

He hastily shuffled toward where the rest of the Company had huddled in a tight ring around Thorin, who was going over the plan one last time. Fili nodded at him as he got closer, beckoning
Bilbo over to a spot slightly apart from the group.

“Mister Baggins,” said Fili quietly once he arrived at the prince’s side. He was strangely serious, using Bilbo’s actual name for the first time in memory, which made him blink in surprise. “I know you think that my uncle has some sort of vendetta against you, but I need you to put that aside for the moment.”

Bilbo sputtered. “I don’t believe he has a vendetta against me! How could you even think that, we barely know each other,” he protested, lying through his teeth. Fili shot him a look that reminded him far too much of the king for comfort.

“Look, I don’t care if you hate my uncle, or he hates you, or whatever. What I do care about is staying alive, which is why I’m asking you to please listen to what Thorin has to say while we’re doing our sweep,” said Fili anxiously, running a hand through his wild mane. “I, for one, know you’re at least somewhat capable. I’ve seen it. My uncle, on the other hand, has not.”

Bilbo stared at him, stunned at this sudden shift in the young man’s character and the absolute sincerity he was exuding.

“Yes, of course. I’ll try my best,” he promised weakly.

Then Fili grinned, his face transforming back into its mask of youthful, carefree indifference. He clapped Bilbo hard on the shoulder.

“Right on, Mister Boggins!” he said breezily, sauntering back to the pack gathered around Thorin.

Bilbo dizzily rubbed at his shoulder, feeling extremely battered. All of these men were so strong, and so, so physical. He actually would have to check for bruises later.

The huddle finally broke, with members of the company pairing off into their assigned teams. Balin and Gandalf, swords drawn, headed for the entrance to walk-out basement.

“Be sure to take care of my hacker!” Gandalf called sternly to the king, who waved him off.

Bofur sent him a quick thumbs up as he and Bifur scrambled up the hill to a side door off the main floor. Soon, the rest of the teams also dispersed, leaving only Dwalin and Kili with Fili and the king. Both of the former looked extremely downcast, though Dwalin was much better at hiding it.

The bald man sighed. “Come on lad,” he grumbled, tapping a morose Kili on the shoulder and leading him gently away toward the main entrance. “Looks like we’re both being punished today.”

Bilbo watched the both of them go, something like guilt twisting in his gut even though he knew he had nothing to do with whatever their drama was. Fili frowned after them, serious once again. Thorin turned toward Bilbo and jerked his head roughly toward the far side of the house.

“This way, Baggins.”

Bilbo nodded, sparing one last glance for the rotted bodies in the pool. Black blood and chewed entrails splattered the tile, their bare limbs twisted crookedly in unnatural directions. He shuddered, uncomfortably reminded of the koi pond at Bag End as he scurried to catch up with the king and the prince.

“Alright?” asked Thorin quietly, casting a meaningful glance toward the pool. Bilbo flushed, remembering their argument in the woods.
“Yes, I’m fine, thank you,” he squeaked, cheeks heating in embarrassment at Thorin’s concern. The king examined him for a moment before nodding.

“Alright. I’ll take point, Fili will bring up the rear. Stay in between us at all times, Mister Baggins,” Thorin stressed. “And keep your rifle pointed down if you’re not aiming it at an ork.”

“I know that!” Bilbo snapped. Belladonna had made sure he was well versed in the world of gun etiquette.

“A-hem!” interjected Fili, clearing his throat loudly behind him as Thorin’s eyes narrowed slightly. Bilbo let out a long breath, willing the indignation to leave him.

“Right. Will do,” he sighed. Thorin nodded slowly, turning and leading them the long way around the other side of the house. Bilbo glanced over his shoulder, where Fili shot him an encouraging smile.

The three of them crept slowly around the north end of the house, scaling the rocky slope in a way that was murder on Bilbo’s throbbing ankle, though he refused to say anything about it. They soon summited the incline, which emptied out into a narrow side yard lined with what had clearly once been carefully maintained geometric topiary. The hedges were now fully overgrown, having long since lost their original shapes. They branched out into elongated, grotesque versions of their previous selves, casting sinister shadows across the unkempt lawn. The sun continued to beat down on them from high in the sky, warming the chill air to a more manageable temperature. Bilbo knew that with so much sunlight, there was almost no chance of meeting one of the undead outside, but that didn’t stop him from peering cautiously around every dormant rosebush.

Thorin directed them with a series of wordless hand signals that Bilbo quickly got the hang of. They stepped through a flower bed covered in gravel, which crunched loudly under their boots in the quiet of the late morning. Even the birds seemed to be muted to Bilbo’s ear as the three shuffled their way through the garden. They eventually made it to the wide carriage driveway at the front of the property, padding silently as they could to the huge detached garage that was almost half the size of the house itself. With its gigantic bay door, it seemed to Bilbo more like a hangar than anything else.

Thorin headed for the side of it, crouching down by a plain wooden door that denoted a single side entrance. Bilbo and Fili quickly followed. They knelt in the dirt on the other side of the door, Bilbo deliberately keeping the muzzle of his rifle pointed toward the ground.

“Baggins. How many rounds do you have in there now?” asked Thorin lowly.

“Three. Two in the magazine, one in the chamber. I have more ammunition in my bag, though,” Bilbo replied.

“Hm. It should be fine,” said Thorin. “I don’t necessarily want you shooting in there, anyway. Too close quarters, too many flammables. Fili.”

Bilbo jumped as the shining blade of a machete suddenly flashed in front of his face. He whirled around, twisting his body as best he could with the large pack on his back. Fili grinned at him, deftly flipping the weapon and offering it to Bilbo handle first. He noted that it was a different blade than the one Fili was already carrying.

“Where on Earth are you keeping these?” Bilbo hissed, leaning the Weatherby against the garage wall.
“Don’t worry about it,” said Fili, smile widening. Thorin coughed behind Bilbo in a way that sounded suspiciously like a laugh, but when he whipped back around, the king’s expression was carefully blank.

“What do you expect me to do with this, exactly?” he asked, taking the machete and puzzedly turning it over in his hands. He held it gingerly in front of him, like he half-expected it to bite. Thorin stared at him in abject disbelief, while Fili only snorted.

“Look, Mister Boggins. Machetes are easy, much easier than your fancy elephant gun,” said the prince, taking the blade back from Bilbo’s hands and giving it a few demonstrative swings. “Just swing it and hope the sharp side hits something undead.”

“Oh, but that requires me to be much closer to them than I would normally like,” said Bilbo, horrified at the thought.

“Alright, new plan,” said Thorin in exasperation, though Bilbo was admittedly fuzzy on whether there had even been an original plan. “Fili, you and Baggins circle around the front and lift the front bay door. I will enter through this door here, and you and I will meet and perform a sweep while Baggins covers the front entrance with his rifle. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” said Fili. Bilbo only nodded, still a little unsure.

“On my signal,” said Thorin as both he and Fili stood up and shed their packs, dropping them heavily to the ground. Bilbo scrambled up as well, fumbling with the straps on his.

“Don’t worry about it, Mister Boggins,” said Fili gently, laying a placating hand on Bilbo’s clumsy fingers. “You’ll only be guarding the door. But here, take this just in case.”

He passed the machete to Bilbo, who once again took it with utmost caution. The prince smirked, pressing the Weatherby into his other hand.

“Yes, can’t be forgetting this,” said Bilbo dazedly, hoisting it under his arm.

“Fili,” called Thorin, looking serious. He held out his hand, extending his arm at the elbow. The prince’s smile dropped from his face, eyes going wide. Hand shaking, he reverently clasped Thorin’s forearm just below the joint right as Thorin did the same. The king roughly pulled the prince in, butting their foreheads together.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” the king murmured. “Your mother will kill me if anything happened to you.”

Fili leaned back, face slack in awe. “Of course, Uncle,” he said seriously.

Bilbo averted his eyes from the intimate familial display, feeling intrusive. He scuffed his feet in the dirt as they let go of each other but continued to make intense, meaningful eye contact.

The ground really was fascinating, wasn’t it.

“Let’s go, Mister Baggins,” said Fili, sounding extremely determined.

“Right,” said Bilbo. He turned on his heel, feeling strangely unable to look at the king right then.

They made their way to the front of the garage, each of them taking a position on either end of the bay door. Fili crouched down and wedged his fingers in a small gap beneath the bottom of the door
and the concrete ground.

“We didn’t close it all the way when we left the last time,” explained the prince as Bilbo took a knee instead of crouching, mindful of his ankle. “It should open with no problem.”

“Okay,” replied Bilbo, feeling uneasy. Much as when he opened the door to his parents’ bedroom, he had a bad feeling about this.

A loud knock sounded from the side of the garage. Fili looked toward Bilbo, raising his eyebrows expectantly. “Alright, that’s the signal. On three, now. One, two, three—!”

Bilbo and Fili heaved upwards. The door rose about four inches off the ground before it abruptly stopped with a rattling groan, metal screeching on metal. Both Bilbo and Fili toppled backwards, startled by the impact.

“Oh, for Mahal’s sake,” groaned Fili, hopping back to his feet and crouching down again. He stripped off his jean jacket and pulled up the sleeves of his hoodie, revealing a pair of freckled, well-muscled forearms. Bilbo took a little while longer to right himself, feeling very much like a turtle that had been turned on its back.

“Should we try again?” asked Bilbo, wiping the sweat from his brow with the patterned sleeve of his pullover.

“Yeah,” said the prince, already in position.

They tried once more, but to no avail. The garage door would not budge. Fili looked like he wanted nothing more than to kick it.

“We have to go tell Thorin about this,” he sighed. Unfortunately, Bilbo had to agree.

They gathered up their things and trekked back around the side of the building, where Thorin was waiting for them impatiently. His face morphed into something like worry when he saw them trudging back in defeat.

“What happened?” he asked.

“The door’s jammed,” replied Fili with a frown.

“Mâkk an e ha’ak,” cursed Thorin, pinching the bridge of his nose. “This just became much more complicated than it needed to be.”

“Do we really need to check the garage?” asked Bilbo. He unclipped his straps and let his pack fall to the floor so he could give his back a much needed rest. “It seems like the house would be more important, if you ask me.”

“Our transportation is in there, Mister Baggins,” said the king, sounding like he was at the end of his patience. “Unless you were under the impression that we were going to walk the whole way.”

“Oh,” said Bilbo, who had actually been under the impression that they were going to walk the whole way. Gandalf hadn’t said anything otherwise.

“Oh, indeed,” said His Majesty, turning around and bending at the waist to rummage through his pack. Bilbo quickly averted his eyes, ears going slightly pink as he tried his hardest to think pure thoughts. It didn’t help that Thorin’s jeans were sinfully well-tailored.
The king mercifully straightened and turned back toward them, hands full from carrying a torch, a couple of handheld flares, and a bright orange pistol that looked like it could have been bought from the toy aisle. This he tossed to Bilbo, who thankfully caught it.

“What’s this?” he asked, examining the pistol dubiously. It looked like something out of an old cartoon.

“A flare gun,” supplied Fili helpfully.

*Well, that certainly solves the what, but not exactly the why of it,* thought Bilbo.

“Fili and I will both be entering through this door. It will be dark, and if anything goes wrong I need you to fire a flare upwards, to signal our distress so the rest of the company can come to our aid,” explained Thorin. His blue eyes peered at Bilbo shrewdly, as if he had been reading his mind.

Bilbo certainly hoped not. He would kill himself on the spot if Thorin ever found out he had been ogling his very majestic arse, especially at this highly inappropriate time.

“R-right. G-got it,” stammered Bilbo, face flushing bright red. Thorin looked at him strangely, which allayed some of Bilbo’s highly irrational concerns.

The king raised a brow at him. “Are you sure you’re up for this, Baggins?” asked Thorin, tone vaguely snide.

Bilbo bristled at that, his hands balling into fists at his side as he stuffed the flare gun into the back of his belt. He brandished the machete, channeling his anger into bravado.

“I think I can handle covering one lousy door,” he said, jaw set.

“Mister Boggins, don’t take this personally,” said Fili, trying his hardest not to smile, “but you don’t exactly cut an intimidating figure when you look like an outdated throw-pillow with a head.”

“I’ll have you know that this pattern was the height of fashion when I purchased it!” Bilbo cried defensively.

“Yeah, before I was born,” replied Fili, laughing.

“Fili, stop antagonizing Baggins,” rumbled Thorin, which Bilbo found especially rich. The king didn’t exactly sound sincere. He was even smirking, the utter bastard.

“Don’t we have something we need to get done?” growled Bilbo, gesturing toward the door with his machete. The two royals suddenly sobered, turning toward the entrance. They nodded at each other once, Thorin handing the torch to Fili.

“You take left, I take right,” said Thorin.

“Affirmative,” replied Fili. He clicked on the torch, slowly turning the handle to the door.

It opened with a creak, revealing a featureless black hole that to Bilbo seemed to stretch on forever. The garage was windowless, so the only light in the entire room came from the side entrance, which due to the angle of the sun only extended a few inches past the threshold. Bilbo’s insides froze in primordial terror, jumping almost a foot in the air when something clattered deep in the darkness. The noise echoed in the cavernous hangar.
“What do you suppose that was?” muttered Fili, taking an instinctive step back.

“Probably nothing,” said Thorin, though he didn’t sound nearly as sure as Bilbo would like.

“Well, only one way to find out, I guess,” said Fili, edging his way toward the door and the darkness that lay beyond. Standing right outside of the entryway, he swung his torch this way and that. The bright paint of the first few in what looked to be a long line of hideously expensive classic cars glinted back at them. He paused in his sweep, the flashlight hovering on the winged hood ornament of a vintage Bentley. Bilbo faltered. Certainly they weren’t taking *these* to Folkestone?

Thorin lit one of the flares, holding it aloft as he stepped lightly over the threshold. All was quiet.

“Baggins,” he said sternly, not bothering to turn around. “Whatever happens, keep covering the door. If anything goes wrong, immediately signal the company and stay put. Do I make myself clear?”

“Crystal,” said Bilbo, for once too anxious to argue.

Fili shuffled in behind his uncle. Thorin made a gesture with his hand and they split apart, Thorin walking toward one end of the line of cars, and Fili to the other. Bilbo watched nervously from the entrance as their respective circles of light became smaller and smaller as they walked further into the blackness. He tried to squint as hard as he could so as to make out anything other than the silhouettes of the automobiles directly in front of him. He thought he saw something large and irregularly shaped in the middle of the room, but it could have also been his eyes playing tricks on him.

Then suddenly, a loud creaking groan bounced off the high ceiling and who knew what else. A few similar moans answered it, all sounding too different to simply be an echo. Fili dropped his flashlight somewhere deep in the bowels of the garage, the metal clattering loudly on the concrete floor. Still more voices joined in the cacophony, the noise rising to a low howl. Bilbo froze in the doorway, paralyzed with fear.

“Thorin!” cried Fili, sounding panicked.

“Fili!” Thorin called back. “Baggins! You know what to do!”

That jolted Bilbo into action. He stumbled back from the entryway, whipping out the wide-barreled pistol and pointing it straight upwards. He cocked the hammer and pulled the trigger, arm vibrating from the recoil as the flare launched itself into the air.

Bilbo watched in dumb fascination as it caught fire. It burst into a bright red phosphorescence that was starkly visible against the baby blue of the sky, followed by a trail of white smoke. It hovered in the air for a few moments before disappearing.

Bilbo stared.

That was it?

Nobody emerged from the house right away. There were no immediate effort of rescue, of the rest of the company pouring out of the house to come to their aid. The sounds of growling and clattering only got louder, and soon, Thorin’s flare went out as well. Bilbo turned his gaze from the sky, back to the darkness of the hangar. He fidgeted with the hem of his pullover, anxiously biting his lip and unsure of what to do.

Thorin had told him to stay put. That this was all he could do. Bilbo’s hands balled into fists, rage
suddenly coursing through his entire being.

Well, fuck Thorin. Fili had even said it himself—Thorin had no idea what he was capable of.

For the second time that day, Bilbo had a burst of manic energy. He dug into Thorin’s pack, privacy and propriety be damned, digging out another flare for the gun, which he shoved in the barrel before tucking the pistol into his belt. He then tore into his own pack, flinging away anything that wasn’t useful. His toiletries and extra clothes scattered around him, and the Mickey Mouse alarm clock fell to the ground with a metallic thud. Bilbo stared at it.

The clock gave him an idea. It was an extremely stupid idea, but it was the only one he had.

He scooped up the clock, frantically winding it. He also dug out his headlamp, one of the few actually useful items he had excavated from the camping closet. He snapped it around his head, brandishing the machete he had no idea how to use. It couldn’t be that hard, could it? Sharp side in the undead thing?

Bilbo paused on the edge of the threshold, sparing a single thought for the fact that he was going into battle with nothing but an alarm clock and an oversized Bowie knife, all on a sprained ankle and while wearing the universe’s ugliest pullover.

“Oh, bugger it all,” he muttered. He had an unconscionably rude king and a foolish prince to save.

He plunged into the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Translation notes:
Mâkk an e ha’ak -- [Khuzdul] Son of a bitch (lit. 'son of a she-dog' ; I'm actually not so sure about this one, since I got it from a dictionary on wattpad, lmao. But who cares. It's Khuzdul.)

God's Gonna Cut You Down, or the hobbit AU where everything is the same except Bilbo wears this sweater the entire time. It's apparently a very rare print, and I really, really want it Imfaq. Why add such an extraneous detail you ask? Well I went to the Jojo's Bizarre Adventure school of storytelling, so anything I find interesting or fun just kind of gets shoved in there Imfaq. Which includes Bilbo being a useless gay with a size kink.

A quick note on terminology: I'm not sure how awkward/effective my, er, Britishisms are since I am.....decidedly not British. I decided to use them in order to couch the narrative more in Bilbo's voice, but if it's too contrived I can definitely just go back and change stuff. I'm not bothering to put 'u's at the end of my words though, because that would be just too much.

Anywho, like always, thanks so much for reading! Hopefully everything turns out okay with the alarm clock :^)

Music that goes with this chapter:
Graceland - Paul Simon
Wanderer - Johnny Cash feat. U2 (please listen to the Zooropa album version for the
Like always, catch me at my personal tumblr and my fanfiction/lotr shitpost tumblr. Also here's a link to the full soundtrack, even though it's a work in progress, just because. ;^)

Also, just an idea I'm kicking around, but I'm thinking of perhaps splitting this fic into two parts just shearly on the basis of length, since you can obviously tell that I am....verbose. I DO have this plotted out to the end, and I can actually think of a pretty good point to split it up. Idk, I'm playing this very by ear, so we'll see I guess lmao.
Chapter Summary

Bilbo rushes in to save the prince and the king, but things don't exactly go to plan. Hopefully this is the last time that happens.

Chapter Notes

TW for blood and gore, alcohol mention, car wrecks, and opioid use, though it's prescribed by a doctor and used to treat pain.

The moment Bilbo stepped over the threshold of the garage, he was having second thoughts.

What had he been thinking, believing he could go in and act the hero to save two people he barely knew, especially one who wanted nothing to do with him and the other he was fairly certain only tolerated him out of a mix of amusement and gratitude for his earlier help. It was lunacy!

His thoughts skittered in a frantic jumble as he second guessed himself, but Bilbo unfortunately didn’t have much time to dwell on it. The light of Thorin’s next incandescent flare flashed deep within the recesses of the garage, from behind what looked to be a large piece of scaffolding that spoke to the irregular shape Bilbo had thought he had seen earlier in the darkness. Now that his eyes had adjusted, the flare thinly lit a great deal of the cavernous hangar, and Bilbo realized with paralyzing horror that the place was absolutely crawling.

About two dozen zombies were gathered on the other side of the scaffolding, seemingly shuffling back from Thorin’s frightfully bright flame. A few others milled about in between the cars, dragging their feet on the concrete floor and gnashing their ruined teeth agitation. They were absolutely furious.

He gripped the handle of his machete and tucked the alarm clock close to his chest as it snicked in his hand and Mickey’s (presumed) right arm slowly made its way around the face. Right. He only had a few moments before his phenomenally ill-conceived plan was put into motion. He set out toward the light.

However, Bilbo only took about three steps before he was set upon, an undead woman with blood matted in her hair and smeared over her ruined face suddenly lunging at him from behind a teal sports car. Bilbo yelped, stumbling backward and unconsciously swinging the machete like he had seen a character do in an episode of Miami Vice.

He missed. The blade whoiffed in the air just inches from the dead woman’s nose, sailing into the driver’s side window of a bright yellow Lotus, which shattered with a thunderous crash. Cubular pieces of tempered safety glass rained to the floor.

“Baggins?! What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” yelled Thorin from across the room. His
voice echoed, which drew more groans from the infected.

“Helping?” replied Bilbo, doing his best to fend off his attacker. They were of a height, and she had a noticeable limp, which helped as Bilbo scrambled away from her questing fingers and ran to put the Lotus in between them. Her ankle was bent in a strange way, though that didn’t stop her from dragging her ruined foot—still clad in an expensive-looking stiletto—as she tried to claw at him. Bilbo could only wince in sympathy, his own ankle smarting as he darted to her other side. She pursued him, savagely screeching as she lurched around the car.

“Well, stop helping! We have this under control! Signal the company like I ordered you to!”

Bilbo grit his teeth, suddenly angry again at Thorin’s sheer presumptuousness. “I already did,” he yelled, punctuating the last word with a vicious swing of his blade. It caught the infected woman right in the neck, just above a clunky-looking stone necklace that glittered in the dim red light of the flare. Bilbo recoiled in panic as he felt the machete hit bone, narrowly avoiding a fountain of dark, half-congealed blood that poured from her jugular. The body fell to the concrete with an audible thump, gasping for breath with the blade still lodged in her windpipe.

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God,” chanted Bilbo, feeling lightheaded. “Jesus.”

Thoroughly shaken to his core, he looked down at her. His headlamp acted as a sort of spotlight for her ruined visage, though her stringy blonde hair covered most of her face.

“What have I done?” he breathed, utterly nauseated.

Then one of her hands shot out and grabbed at his bad ankle, trying to drag him down to the ground with her. Bilbo shrieked and kicked out instinctually, his boot making contact with her head and whipping it around with a sickening crunch. Her grip fell limp.

Bilbo looked down at the now-dead zombie, eyes wide. It certainly wasn’t his first kill, but it had been by far the most intimate. His stomach roiled uncomfortably.

The tick of the clock rattled against his sternum and he shook his head. He had no time to dwell on the death of something that had just tried to eat him. He dashed in between the cars, wildly swinging the machete every time something got too close. Every few swings he would hit something, but he didn’t pause to check if he was doing any real damage. He was starting to limp noticeably as he came upon the scaffolding, which he suddenly realized wasn’t scaffolding at all. Rather, it was an old World War I biplane, the kind with an open cockpit and covered in aluminum armor. What Bilbo had originally thought to be platforms were actually the plane’s two sets of wings stacked on top of each other. He gaped. The garage really was a hangar.

He shook his head as he ducked under the wings, the red glare of Thorin’s flare bouncing off the plane’s aluminum hull as he approached the frighteningly large huddle of undead.

Fili and Thorin were backed into a corner near a workbench. They thankfully seemed more or less unharmed, though Fili had a large dark stain across his forehead that might have been blood. They both held lit flares in their hands, the light so bright that Bilbo almost found it hard to look directly at them. Thorin brandished the flame in front of him with one hand and his sword in the other, slowly forcing the infected back as they hissed in displeasure. Every time one got too close, Thorin would strike out at it with lightning-quick precision, cleanly slicing through limbs or even necks, lopping whole heads off in the process. Fili was clearly holding his own as well. If not as gracefully, then just as efficiently, hacking at reaching fingers and teeth with his machete much more effectively than Bilbo had in his race to help them.
He faltered, stopping near the ring of zombies. Even backed into a corner, the two seemed to be have it fairly well under control, all things considered—just as Thorin had said. The pile of dismembered bodies and limbs grew around them, creating somewhat of a buffer between the two and their attackers.

Still, the undead pressed on, clambering over the corpses of their fallen comrades like vicious, hungry rats.

Fili glanced up, nearly getting bit at the last second as his eyes widened in Bilbo’s direction.

“Mister Baggins, behind you!” he warned.

Bilbo spun around just as another infected attempted to pounce on him, its right arm hanging by a thin thread of tendon from where Bilbo had presumably chopped at it in his haste to get to the other side of the hangar. Blood oozed from the wound, the stark white of jagged bone shining in the crimson lighting. Bilbo squeaked, holding the pointed end of his machete up near his face in desperate panic.

The zombie sank down onto the blade headfirst, fluid bursting around the metal and dripping down to Bilbo’s hand as the tip punctured the roof of its mouth into what was left of its brain. He dropped the machete in disgust, hysterically trying to shake the blood off in frenzied terror. He looked up, realizing with dismay that the rest of the horde had still been milling about was starting to amble toward them.

“There you go!” Fili cheered from behind him, voice calling out above the foul sound of the hack of metal through flesh. “Sharp end through the undead thing!”

“Baggins!” Thorin yelled sharply, “Get your arse back to the exit! Now!”

Bilbo looked down at the clock he still somehow held tightly in his hand. The cartoon mouse peered up at him in understanding through the gore-splattered clock face. Bilbo nodded, feeling somewhat like he was sacrificing a slightly annoying, but still steadfast companion. Mickey’s noodly arms ticked serenely.

Bilbo whipped off his headlamp, wrapping the elastic strap twice around the clock before setting it face up on the ground. Bright white light blazed skyward toward the corrugated roof, creating something of a searchlight effect.

“What in Mahal’s good name are you doing?” barked Thorin, sounding inordinately frustrated even as he elegantly pirouetted, gracefully disconnecting a head from a body in one fluid motion of his sword.

“I suggest you prepare yourself for something loud!” yelled Bilbo. He gave the clock a sharp kick with his good foot and sent it skittering it off into the darkness. The headlamp marked its path as it slid a good six or seven meters in the opposite direction, under the body of the plane and through several rows of cars. It finally came to rest as it collided with the tire of a shiny new Maserati. It attracted the attention of some of the undead who had followed Bilbo, and they veered off course to follow the light as he had hoped.

Thorin roared as he chopped savagely through an unfortunate zombie who happened to be standing just a little too close to him. “So help me, if you don’t get yourself killed, I am going to wring your neck when this is ov—”

The king did not have the chance to finish his threat, as he was abruptly drowned out by the shrill
ringing of the alarm clock. It pierced the air with a squalling wail, bouncing off the walls and the cars as it constructively resonated with itself, filling the entire echoing chamber with the sound of Mickey Mouse dutifully signaling to Bilbo that it was time to wake the fuck up.

The man in question clapped his hands over his ears in shock, eyes wide as he stared in the direction of the headlamp. The acoustics of the hangar amplified the noise much more than he had anticipated, creating an almost deafening assault on both him and the zombies. He glanced back to see Thorin and Fili do the same as the swarm sharply paused in its attack, the undead turning this way and that as they furiously attempted to figure out the source of the ear-splitting sound. Some broke off and prowled toward the light of the headlamp to investigate.

Thorin’s mouth fell open, eyes bugging in shock. However, he took advantage of the undead’s momentary distraction, just as Bilbo had hoped. He dropped his flare to grab Fili roughly by the collar, dragging him as he hacked his way through the temporarily confused bodies. The prince soon recovered himself as well, assisting Thorin in breaking through the throng.

They somehow emerged relatively unscathed, though the two were positively covered in gore when they popped out on the other side of the horde. Bilbo let out a sigh of relief, shocked that his ridiculous plan had somehow worked.

The relief was short lived, however, as a few of the infected in the swarm cottoned onto the fact that there was still fresh meat to be had close by. Mickey still rang with a blaring caterwaul, and Bilbo was beginning to be overcome with the first stages of sensory overload as he dithered in front of the plane.

Fili sped past him, shoved forward by Thorin and ducking under the wings of the biplane toward the exit. Jolted into action, Bilbo quickly turned to follow him. In his haste, he spun on his bad foot.

That, of course, is when his ankle finally gave out.

Bilbo toppled to the ground as the joint turned. Thankfully, he had the presence of mind to tuck his limbs to his body and somehow avoid further injury from smacking his head against the concrete. He rolled over on his back, just in time to see another undead man in a ripped brown sport coat bearing down on him. His still-perfect veneers glinted in frenzied hunger as he lunged teeth-first.

Bilbo closed his eyes, sighing in resignation and perhaps just a bit of relief. Well, that was that then, wasn’t it.

He waited for the end to come, for pain and the sensation of his flesh being ripped apart as the undead clawed for his warm insides. But all he felt was the splatter of something wet on his face, along with the thump of something heavy hitting the floor next to him.

Bilbo’s eyes popped open just as the headless corpse of the infected man’s body crumpled to the ground. Thorin stood above him, breathing heavily and absolutely furious as he gripped his dripping sword with both hands. His hair was in wild disarray around his face, escaping from its neat braid as he glared down at Bilbo, eyes blazing in the crimson light.

Bilbo’s jaw dropped. He was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the zombie’s shining veneers gleaming at him on the opposite side of Bilbo from its body.

His attention quickly turned back to Thorin, who looked far too incensed to form words. Bilbo’s
eyes widened as he glanced past the king’s shoulder.

“Your Majesty, move!”

Without thinking, Bilbo’s hand shot to his belt, whipping out the flare gun and aiming it straight at the king. Thorin dove to the side just as Bilbo cocked the hammer and fired it, catching the infected that was about to lunge at Thorin straight in the chest. The projectile exploded in a burst of crackling flame, and caused the zombie to tumble backwards into the two others who were just behind it.

Thorin landed heavily on the ground next to him with a thud, rolling quickly onto his back as his bloody sword skittered out of reach, leaving a dark streak on the concrete. Bilbo could only observe helplessly as the remaining horde advanced.

“This is your fault! What were you thinking?” Thorin growled over the racket, which came both from the seething zombies and the discordant ringing of the clock.

“I was saving your life!” replied Bilbo as they both started half-crawling, half-crab walking backward as best they could, trying to find refuge underneath one of double wings of the biplane.

“We had it under control!” argued Thorin hotly. “We were just buying time until backup showed up!”

“Didn’t look like it to me!” fibbed Bilbo as he disconsolately watched the swarm climb over themselves in order to get closer.

Suddenly, the jarring screech of metal-on-metal tore through the cacophony, and a burst of blinding light flooded the hangar as the bay door was forced open. The sharp crack of a high caliber gun sounded above tumult as the head of a nearby zombie was promptly liquified in front of them, blood vaporizing into a fine mist as it exploded. Bilbo tasted copper as he accidentally breathed it in, though he couldn’t find it in himself to be disgusted. He was far too relieved.

A few crossbow bolts erupted from the foreheads of some others, and Thorin and Bilbo turned around as one to see the great big form of Dwalin standing in the hangar doorway, silhouetted against the blazing noon sun and pumping the bolt of what could only be Bilbo’s elephant gun. Kili kneeled next to him, peering down the scope of his crossbow and firing arrows into the throng on either side of the plane. Dwalin fired again.

Much as it had that night with the greenhouse, the sight on the scope must have been slightly off, since the bullet seemed to travel lower than intended. Instead of hitting one of the swarm, it skipped off the airplane's aluminum hull and ricocheted upwards, sailing through the fabric that covered the top tier of one of the wings and hitting the thin joist that secured one of the heavy high bay lights to the ceiling. It ripped through the metal like it was nothing but paper.

Both Thorin’s and Bilbo’s heads snapped up as the metal groaned, sparks flying as the light broke free and plummeted downwards. Bilbo squeezed his eyes shut, flinching as he prepared for the light to tear through the aluminum body of the plane, crushing both him and Thorin. He reached out frantically, whether to grab Thorin’s arm or push him out of the way to safety, he didn’t know. He simply waited to die, sending off a quick prayer apologizing for all the things he had done wrong over the years.

But instead of metal, he suddenly found his face squished against grimy wool and soft leather as the king used his preternaturally fast reflexes to lurch on top of him. Thorin rolled them both painfully to safety as the lamp careened through the wing and the whole right side of the biplane,
crashing down to where they had lain only a half second before. A cloud of dust rose up from the site, making Bilbo cough into Thorin’s chest. He felt completely winded, battered from where his side and back painfully hit the concrete.

Wait.

He was alive? They were both alive?

Bilbo blinked his eyes open, only to find his nose merely inches away from the sweaty dip of Thorin’s collarbone and the scruffy underside of his chin. He could smell the heady musk of the king’s scent as he desperately tried to look anywhere but at him, which was very difficult since Thorin so completely eclipsed Bilbo’s much smaller form. Thorin looked down at him, wild blue eyes and chapped lips far too close to his own for the pounding of his heart to solely be from adrenaline.

They stared at each other for a moment, panting hard. Bilbo could feel the puff of Thorin’s hot breath on his sweaty forehead.

“Okay?” gruffed Thorin finally. Bilbo felt more than heard the word, the vibration of the king’s deep baritone rumbling through where their chests were pressed tightly together.

Bilbo nodded wordlessly, even though he really wasn’t. He squinted his eyes in the blinding sunlight, wanting nothing more than to bury himself into Thorin’s chest and remain there. He vaguely registered that his whole body was trembling.

They stayed like that for a second, Thorin catching his breath and making sure Bilbo was indeed uninjured, laying steadying hands on his shoulders as his shaking eventually subsided. Satisfied, the king heaved himself off of Bilbo, who could only continue to lie there as he took more time to recover.

“Watch where you’re shooting that thing!” Thorin snapped as Dwalin pumped the bolt on the rifle once more, the ejected shell bouncing onto the ground with a soft *tink*.

“Apologies,” said Dwalin, not sounding very sorry at all. “Bloody thing’s old. Rifling must be off.”

Thorin grumbled as the remaining undead retreated back into the far corners of the hangar, clinging to the areas that were still shrouded in shadow. They hissed gratingly as the alarm finally stopped ringing. The rest of the company streamed in through the hangar door, weapons brandished in front of them as they set about dispatching the last of the swarm. Bilbo hardly noticed their boots tromping past him as the ceiling spun circles far above him. He still lay spread eagle on the concrete.

Gandalf’s shaggy gray head suddenly popped into Bilbo’s line of vision. He was also spinning.

“Bilbo? Are you alright?” he asked, face pinched with worry.

“Ungh,” Bilbo replied eloquently.

Gandalf’s frown deepened. He gently helped Bilbo prop himself up into a sitting position, legs splayed out in front of him. Gandalf urged him to tip his head back and open his mouth, pouring water out of his metal canteen and forcing it down Bilbo’s throat, which was actually quite parched.

“I told you to take care of my hacker!” Gandalf barked angrily, whipping his head around to stare angrily at the king.
Thorin only sneered as Kili handed him a bandana to wipe at his face with. The commotion on the other side of the hangar finally started to die down as the company rapidly dealt with the rest of the horde. Working together like a wolf pack, they cornered and dispatched the infected with an awe-inspiring level of ruthlessness.

“He was fine until he decided to disobey my direct orders!” His Majesty shot back.

“He did try to save our lives, Uncle. Very nearly succeeded, too,” said Fili quietly, though his voice carried with the acoustics. “You can’t fault him for that.” He impatiently rubbed at the grease-stain on his forehead as Oin patted him down for injuries, of which he had none. Thorin didn’t bother to reply.

He turned to Dwalin, where they started a conversation in Russian that almost instantly seemed to grow heated. Their faces grew closer and closer the angrier their voices got, before Dwalin menacingly grabbed at the collar of Thorin’s jacket, looking like he was about to cock his fist back and punch Thorin in the jaw, king or not. However, before it could come to blows, His Majesty roughly slapped the tattooed hand away, giving Dwalin’s chest a hard shove and sending him stumbling backward a couple of steps.

“Do not touch me like that again,” he seethed icily.

Dwalin only stared stubbornly at him from under his heavy brow, jaw set like he wanted to say something biting in reply.

“Brother! Your Majesty! Прекратите эти глупости!” yelled Balin as he made his way back around the wreckage of the biplane, looking irate.

Thorin and Dwalin froze, suddenly remembering that they had an audience. They took two deliberate steps away from each other before separating, Dwalin to help in the clean-up while Thorin turned to speak lowly to Kili, slowly easing out of his temper. The young man beamed as Thorin laid a gentle hand on his shoulder, preening at the attention. Fili crossed his arms and smirked in amusement. Apparently all was well between the king and his nephews again, at least.

There were a few more wet whacks from near the other end of the hangar before all the squeals of the undead were eventually silenced. Bofur bounded out from that direction, appearing from behind a Lamborghini and looking none the worse for wear. He effortlessly spun his mattock as he skidded to a halt on Bilbo’s other side, opposite where Gandalf was still kneeling.

“Bilbo!” cried Bofur worriedly, crouching down and taking Bilbo’s bloodied face in his hands, turning it this way and that to check for injury.

Bilbo came back to himself as the world finally ceased to spin. “I’m fine, I’m fine,” he croaked, waving Bofur’s hands away. It wasn’t even his blood, after all.

Bofur smiled, sighing in relief. “Gave me a right scare just now! Sitting there all bug-eyed and bloody like that.” He ruffled Bilbo’s matted hair. Bilbo leaned away, slightly annoyed and not quite in the mood to be patronized.

“I heard there was an injury,” said an authoritative voice from somewhere above Bilbo. He looked up, squinting as Oin’s squat figure blocked the light from the garage entrance and cast a shadow over him.

“Er, you must be mistaken. I didn’t actually get hurt,” said Bilbo, though his ankle was beginning to throb. He wished he had some of his ibuprofen.
Oin looked sharply to Bofur, who looked sheepish.

“I may have mentioned your ankle while we were clearing the house,” he admitted. Bilbo frowned at him, rubbing at his swollen joint.

The older man squatted down, gesturing authoritatively for Bilbo’s injured foot. Bilbo drew it back toward himself in order to unlace his boot, but apparently Oin was impatient. The medic yanked the boot wordlessly toward himself, which would have sent Bilbo straight onto his back had he not caught himself with his hands. Gandalf snickered lowly beside him as Oin unknotted the laces with precise fingers. He pulled it off roughly and peeled off Bilbo’s sweaty sock for him, throwing it back at Bilbo’s chest. Bilbo could only clutch at the sock, too mortified to say anything.

Oin clucked disappointedly at the state of the bandage Bilbo had hastily wrapped around his ankle that morning.

“Amateur, simply amateur,” he muttered, undoing the wrapping with much more care than he had when he pulled off Bilbo’s boot.

“I did it myself,” said Bilbo, sucking in a breath as Oin palpated around the goose-egg swelling on the outside of the joint. The medic just glanced up witheringly at him.

“Like I said, amateur. You should have iced this,” he said.

“With what, pray tell?”

Oin didn’t seem to have anything to say anything to that. He efficiently re-wrapped the bandage in a way that felt much sturdier and more secure than what Bilbo himself could manage, or even how Gandalf had done the night before.

“Well, it’s not broken, and you can obviously walk on it. You’ll be fine. Here.” He shoved an unmarked pill bottle into Bilbo’s slack fingers, which rattled with the sound of oblong white pills bouncing against the sides of it. “These will do the trick in an emergency when ibuprofen or paracetamol just won’t cut it.”

“What are these?” Bilbo looked at the bottle in wonder, turning it so he could get a better look at the pills. Balin had said something about Ereborean medicine being highly advanced.

“Vicodin,” answered Oin, deadpan. Bofur snorted as Bilbo’s face visibly fell. “You don’t have any allergies to any medications, do you?”

“No,” he replied, tone slightly bitter. “Thank you.”

Oin nodded brusquely, his wild mane of hair flapping around his face. “Right. Remember, emergencies only. Though you can take one now if you like, just to get the swelling started down.”

“Got it.” Bilbo uncapped the bottle and shook out one of the pills, eager for the pain to go away. He swallowed it with some water from Gandalf’s canteen. Oin sat back on his heels, considering Bilbo for a moment.

“You know, you got some big feet for such a small man,” he said, tone suddenly conversational. “You know what they say about large feet?” The medic’s face split into a huge smile, his salt and pepper beard waggling as he tried to contain his laughter from his own joke.

Bofur groaned as Bilbo turned about as red as his shoes, spluttering. "I beg your pardon!"
"Big shoes!" Oin crowed, pushing the bright crimson hiking boot roughly into Bilbo's chest. Bilbo gripped it tightly as Gandalf, the traitor, let out a bright peal of laughter.

Bofur dragged a hand down his face, pulling his hat over his eyes in sheer mortification. "We need to have a serious talk about your bedside manner, old man."

Bilbo put on his sock and quickly shoved his foot back into his boot, lacing it as he resolutely ignored Oin's and Gandalf's laughter at his expense. He jumped a little as his pack dropped to the ground beside him. He looked up once again, seeing that Bombur had considerately retrieved it for him from outside. He had also evidently taken the Weatherby back from Dwalin, as it was stowed securely in some straps at the bottom of the rucksack.

"Grabbed this for you," the auburn haired main said kindly, his moustache ticking up in a smile. "It looked like some sort of animal may have gotten into it. Hopefully I gathered up everything."

"I'm sure you did. Thank you so much," said Bilbo, voice slightly strangled. He unzipped the main pocket, seeing that Bombur had thoughtfully placed the container of food right at the top.

"Well, there’s bad news," announced Nori, just as Bilbo was about to tuck into the slightly soggy ôspomak in an attempt to sate some of his gnawing hunger. (This was, of course, in clear spite of the fact that the garage was literally scattered with dead and dismembered bodies. Let it be known that very little could keep Bilbo Baggins from enjoying any sort of meal, good or bad.)

Nori’s voice rang clearly in the acoustics of the hangar that had so amplified the alarm clock. He seemed a bit discomfited at this, but continued on anyway. "The door was definitely tampered with. I don’t see any logical reason as to how it could have gotten jammed like that on its own. Mister Bifur agrees." Bifur, who stood slightly behind Nori, nodded over the man’s shoulder in confirmation.

A solemn hush fell over the company as the implications of this pronouncement set in, the mood turning abruptly sour. Bilbo chewed anxiously on his cold potato and pastry, swallowing and wondering what on Earth he had just gotten himself into.

"So this was a trap," said Thorin, expression pensive. "I was wondering how so many ôrek had gotten in here with the door closed. I was expecting maybe a few, but not a whole swarm."

"It may also explain how they overran us in the first place," murmured Balin, stroking at his beard. The rest of the company seemed to silently agree, all gripping their weapons a bit tighter as they went back on the alert.

"What, like somebody was using the undead as a means of sabotage?" asked Ori nervously, adjusting his hold on the short halberd he carried. How had the lad even come across something like that? Bilbo ogled it, beginning to feel distinctly out of place with his relatively modern weapon.

Thorin and Balin didn’t answer him directly, but their expressions said it all.

Gandalf used his walking stick to hoist himself off the ground, deathly serious as he regarded Thorin. "Your Majesty, have you any idea who may have done this?"

"Of course not!" insisted Thorin, perhaps a tad defensively. Gandalf did not precisely seem satisfied by this answer, but for the first time since Bilbo had known them, Dwalin presented a united front with the king. He glowered menacingly at the lawyer over His Majesty’s shoulder. That was enough to make Gandalf drop the subject for now, albeit reluctantly.
Thorin turned back toward the two men. “Nori, have you and Mister Bifur checked the bikes yet?”

Bilbo’s whole body stiffened at the mention of bikes, a new sort of panic suddenly blooming in his chest. Gandalf regarded him carefully with a sidelong glance.

“Not yet, Your Majesty. We wanted to let you know about this first,” replied Nori.

“You were correct in doing so. But this is dark news,” said Thorin, reflecting the sober mood that had suffused the company, “and I would like for us to move on sooner rather than later. Has everyone retrieved the rest of their things from the house?”

Bilbo noticed for the first time that a small pile of luggage had appeared near the main entrance of the hangar. Dori and Gloin were busy sorting out a long row of twenty-liter jerrycans, lining them up like soldiers in a small red army.

“I think we have enough to top off before our next stop, Boss,” called Gloin.

Thorin nodded. He and Balin followed Nori and Bifur to a far corner of the hangar, where a crowd of undead had found their overdue demise at the hands of the company. They stepped carefully over the bodies, shoving a few out of the way with their boots in order to clear a path toward a few large tarps. They had been draped over something and carefully weighed down with things that had apparently just been lying around, which included anything from a rusty toolbox to an entire engine block. Bilbo absentely wondered who on Earth had lived here, and how they were able to afford all of this.

Together, they shoved what they could off the tarps and pulled them to the ground, revealing a fleet of about fourteen extremely scrappy looking motorbikes.

Bilbo balked, his eyes bugging out as his blood ran cold as ice at the sight. He suddenly realized why Gandalf had failed to mention their precise mode of transportation to Erebor. These were what they were supposed to travel all the way to France and beyond on? They barely looked as if they would make it out the door. The motorbikes' dinged and rusty frames clashed horrifically with the sleekness of the millions, perhaps even tens of millions, pounds worth of classic cars they shared the hangar with.

He grimaced as he polished off the last of the ôsposmak, carefully stowing the container back inside his bag. Clambering to his feet and waving off Bofur’s polite attempts to help in the process, he tugged on Gandalf’s sleeve, beckoning the man’s attention.

“Gandalf, I am not even stepping near one of those things, let alone getting on and riding it,” he whispered frantically to the lawyer, feeling somehow more distraught than he had when facing down an entire horde of zombies. “Are they even road legal? They aren’t, are they. They don’t look it. Oh my Lord.”

“Oh, hush,” said Gandalf in exasperation, seeming to have expected this reaction from Bilbo. “The 250cc motorbike almost single-handedly makes the world go round. Your mother and I used them almost exclusively when we traveled through East Africa and South Asia. They’re exceedingly fuel efficient, and not very fast. You have nothing to worry about.”

“Hrmgh,” Bilbo mumbled incoherently. He clawed at his face in dismay as visions of twisted metal and burning wreckage clouded his mind. His stomach coiled in a tight knot of anxiety, dangerously close to retching up his freshly eaten lunch.

Oblivious to Bilbo's inner turmoil, the four men in the back of the garage made short work of
inspecting the bikes. Bifur unfurled a small tool roll from his belt, going on to systematically check
the hoses and tire pressure on each of them, cranking down a few loose nuts and bolts in the
process. The rest of the company collectively held their breaths until the man eventually signaled
an all-clear, confirming that the bikes had not been tampered with. Thorin made one final
inspection, before also giving his approval.

At the king’s word, the company sprung into action. They all seemed to have a role, working with
all the efficiency of a particularly well-ordered beehive and streaming around Bilbo like he wasn’t
even there. Fili and Kili set about hauling the jerrycans to the back of the hangar and refueling the
gas tanks with Dori and Gloin, while Thorin, Balin, and Dwalin consulted their marked-up road
map of Great Britain. The rest began picking up luggage from the pile and securing them to the
motorbikes in a variety of highly dubious ways, using anything from cargo nets to bungee cables in
order to strap duffles and canisters to the rear and sides of the vehicles. Some even secured packs in
between the handlebars, on the few that didn’t have any sort of low windshield. The bikes sagged
together lower and lower on their shock absorbers as bags were piled on them to precarious heights. The
sorry sight made Bilbo want to cry.

Giving Bilbo’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze, Gandalf strode confidently toward the epicenter of
the activity. In contrast, Bilbo dragged his feet as he followed him, slipping his rain jacket back on
as he reluctantly prepared to move out against his better judgement. The lawyer stopped by an old-
looking motorcycle with a bright white fuel tank and shiny chrome detailing. It looked to be in
slightly better condition than the rest of them, though the design was considerably less than
contemporary.

“Am I supposed to ride with you then?” asked Bilbo, eyeing the motorbike in trepidation.

“Oh, no,” replied Gandalf matter-of-factly. “I’m afraid old Shadowfax can’t handle two people and
luggage comfortably.” He seemed to be completely without sympathy.

Bilbo gulped, edging away from the motorcycle like it was wont to explode at any moment. “Are
you sure it’s not possible for me to just sort of, er, walk beside all of you?”

“So, you can walk at thirty-five miles an hour, can you? And on a bum ankle?”

“...No.”

Gandalf rolled his eyes, before turning to secure his sword and his walking stick to a holster that
ran along the length of his bike.

“You can ride with me, Bilbo,” called Bofur. He leaned against a dark blue motorcycle with a rust
eaten front fender. “I’m sure we can rearrange some things to make it work.”

“But I thought that Mister Baggins was supposed to ride with Dori,” Ori said absently while
attempting to wrangle a handful of obstinate bungee cords.

Bofur made a face, shooting the lad an inscrutable look that Bilbo couldn’t even begin to decipher.
He looked over to Dori, where the man was currently busy securing a set of waterproof saddlebags
to a sleek black motorbike that looked just slightly burlier and more taken care of than the rest of
them. Still, the thought of climbing on the back of it made Bilbo quail.

“We stick to the plan,” announced Thorin, securing a matte black motorcycle helmet over his
neatly re-braided hair. “Mister Dori is riding the on the king’s old motorcycle, which is by far the
most suited for two people.”
Bilbo’s brow furrowed. “But I thought you were the king?” he asked, confused as to why Thorin was referring to himself in the third person.

“Bilbo,” warned Gandalf.

“The former king of Erebor, Mister Baggins,” growled Thorin. “My father. Who is dead.” He angrily flipped down his visor and turned away. Bilbo clapped a hand across his mouth as he flushed in shame. He had totally forgotten.

“Will we ever be able to extract that stubborn foot from your big mouth?” mused Gandalf.

“Shut up,” he moaned.

He looked at Thorin guiltily, whose expression was obscured by his visor. The king swung a leg over his own motorbike, which was black and had mint green detailing along the fuel tank and the wheel rims. He sat down heavily, crossing his arms and most likely glaring into space.

Bilbo’s gaze then swung back to Dori, who was just now putting on the finishing touches in securing what to Bilbo looked to be an exceedingly dangerous preponderance of luggage for one tiny motorbike. How on Earth was it also supposed to manage him and his very heavy pack?

"I am not getting on that thing, Gandalf," hissed Bilbo.

"Bilbo, be reasonable—"

"The closest I have ever gotten to riding on a motorbike was my ex's Vespa, and even that was horrifying."

Beorn had owned a clunky scooter that he had puttered around town on whilst he and Bilbo had been seeing each other. It was something he had gotten to travel relatively short distances with, so he wouldn’t have to squeeze into his tiny Prius whenever he wanted to visit Bilbo during his shift at the bookstore in Cambridge. Every single time Bilbo had climbed on the back had been an exercise of pure terror, even if Beorn thoughtfully always drove at least ten miles below the speed limit whenever Bilbo joined him. It had been a sweet form of consideration for his fear, but Bilbo was the sort of person who was even uneasy in his mother’s Mini Cooper convertible, which he felt sat too close down to the road and handled far too much like a go-kart—which he also despised—for comfort.

"Bilbo Baggins, if you do not climb aboard that motorbike this instant I will tie you to it like a piece of luggage," harrumphed Gandalf, voice hard in an authoritative way that reminded Bilbo far too much of Bungo. "Mister Dori! Your passenger awaits!"

Dori perked up, beckoning Bilbo over with a wave of his hand. Bilbo smiled politely in return

"Do something like that and I’ll kill you," he hissed through his teeth, still smiling.

"I'd very much like to see you try,” Gandalf shot back, sending Dori a friendly wave. “Well, go on then. Don’t keep the man waiting."

Bilbo trudged over to the motorcycle, sheer propriety the only thing keeping him from hanging his head down as he walked. Even so, Dori immediately began to fuss over him the minute he arrived at his side, sensing his discomfort and prepping him for the upcoming ride ahead.

“You’ll have to wear this,” he said, handing Bilbo a helmet. “Sorry about the color. It’s His Majesty’s and the only spare we have.”
Bilbo looked dumbly at the open-faced motorcycle helmet he’d just been given. It was mint green—matching the detailing on Thorin’s own motorbike—and absolutely covered in band stickers; so much so that the color actually hardly showed at all. He turned the helmet to see if he knew any of the bands from their logos. He thought he recognized a few, but the rest were far too obscure for Bilbo’s apparently pedestrian taste in music. They both seemed to be fans of the Talking Heads, however.

“This is the king’s?” he asked, amused despite the circumstances.

“Aye. Now try it on and see if it fits.”

Bilbo shoved it on his head over his filthy bronze curls. It fit snugly around his ears, which left everything slightly muted. He shook his head, noting with pleasure that it didn’t move as he did so.

“Seems alright,” he said. “How do I look?”

“Quite charming,” said Dori sincerely.

Bilbo snorted before glancing trepidatiously at the overloaded motorcycle. “Right. Well, how do you suppose we do this?”

Dori directed him to perch on the thin back cushion in a space he had carved out of the bags and gas canisters. Bilbo adjusted his own pack, tightening the straps and making sure it stayed securely on his back. He tucked his legs up, feeling like he could topple over at any moment. Dori disengaged the kickstand and easily mounted the bike, just as the rest of the company did as well. Fili and Kili were already revving their engines, evidently eager to get moving.

“So you can either hold on to the bar behind you, or you can grab onto me, whatever you’re more comfortable with,” said Dori kindly as he turned the key. "Are you alright, Mister Baggins? You're shaking.”

The engine turned over with a coughing splutter that had Bilbo wincing. He white knuckled the grip behind him, far too proud to break from his comfort zone and accept Dori's offer.

As the putter of engines filled the cavernous hangar, Dwalin dodged around the other bikes and corpses as he walked his own motorbike to the front of the throng. He nodded at Thorin, both of them seemingly having put their differences aside for the moment. With the shift of gears and a low roar, he took off, leading the pack carefully out of the garage. Bilbo took one last look at the classic cars and ruined silver biplane, sparing a wondering glance for the alarm clock he knew was around there somewhere. He decided that Mickey was better off left behind, and a small, pernicious part of Bilbo desperately wished he remained behind, too.

He shut his eyes tightly as the motorbike began to move, feeling the sun shine on his face as they exited out of the hangar. He cracked open one eye just as they made their way down the carriage drive, realizing that they were riding near the middle of a long, single-file line headed by Dwalin and Gandalf. Thorin rode drag a few bikes behind Bilbo and Dori, flanked on either side by the princes.

“Hold on tightly, Mister Baggins,” warned Dori. “We’re about to speed up—hrgh!”

Bilbo’s trembling arms unconsciously shot out and wrapped themselves around Dori’s torso, apparently so hard all the air was forced out of the man’s chest.

“Too tight,” wheezed Dori.
“Sorry,” Bilbo squeaked, only infinitesimally loosening his grip.

Dori gasped for breath as they turned out of the drive onto a narrow lane. Bilbo found himself becoming slightly more relaxed as they kept to a fairly sedate pace, though it may have also been a side effect of the painkiller finally kicking in. In any case, Gandalf had been right, as per usual. The motorbikes, especially so encumbered, did not go very fast.

Even so, Bilbo kept his eyes tightly shut for the first couple miles, almost half an hour passing before he was finally able to open them and regard the scenery whizzing past. The day was still beautiful for early March, the sky a lovely baby blue as the sun shone unencumbered by clouds. He glanced over his shoulder briefly, just long enough to see Bombur give him a little wave from his own motorcycle, which looked almost comically small underneath him. Almost against his will, he glanced past Bombur at the king. Thorin didn’t outwardly acknowledge him, as his face was a literal expressionless mask with the visor on, but Bilbo could feel his piercing stare before he quickly turned back around.

Bilbo shifted gingerly, trying to get more comfortable as he unraveled himself from Dori, who heaved a tremendous sigh of relief, and gripping the back of the bike in the process. The hedges on either side of them opened up to reveal long stretches of country on both sides of the narrow road, and Bilbo was struck once more with how pretty the landscape of the West Country was. It was strange to think that he had almost been eaten and crushed by a plane just earlier. He tried to keep his eyes on the road ahead and stave off the inevitable motion sickness. Bilbo’s eyebrows rose in confusion as they whizzed past a sign and the turnoff it marked.

“Excuse me, Mister Dori?” he asked, having to yell slightly over the noise of the wind and the engine.

“Hm?” answered Dori, eyes on the road.

“That sign we just passed was for the A30. Are we going the right way?” queried Bilbo, especially puzzled since Thorin had elected to let Dwalin and Gandalf lead the way.

“Lad, the highways are a wreck. Dangerous, full of gangs and old-fashioned highway bandits, all of which is not especially conducive to the secrecy of our mission. We’re avoiding them wherever possible,” explained Dori.

“I suppose that makes sense,” he replied, wondering how much time taking only the back roads would add on to the normally five and a half hour drive from Cornwall to Folkestone. At the speed they were going, one day? Maybe two?

Overall, Bilbo felt strangely unconcerned about any of it. He never had reason to take high level painkillers before, and he found that they were very good at alleviating some of his ever-present midgrade anxiety.

His rosy view of opioids soon soured, however, as the countryside began to blur around him. Though his ankle no longer hurt, the low burn of nausea started itching at the back of his throat as Dori banked the bike around curves and the sharp corners of intersections. Bilbo could have kissed the pavement when the company was forced to dismount and walk their bikes around a particularly troublesome stretch of road, where the two narrow lanes had been clogged by a nasty five car pile-up.

He couldn’t tear his eyes away from the carnage of twisted metal and burnt rubber as his boots crunched over the shattered safety glass that littered the road, which almost obscured the skid marks that decorated the blacktop. The last car in the line, which looked like it had once been a
station wagon of some kind, was completely wrapped around a tree from where it had most likely swerved off the road in an unsuccessful attempt to avoid the wreckage. However, thanks to the painkiller, his horror was softened to more of a morbid fascination.

Bilbo kept a hand on the back of the overloaded motorbike under the guise of helping to push it, though it was mainly to keep him grounded as his thoughts continued to remain fuzzy. Everything felt hazy and dreamlike, like he was experiencing reality through a filter. Even the vibrant greens and browns of the countryside seemed to have a gray tinge cast over them. Had he been more aware, Bilbo would have realized that it was just an effect from the sky growing more and more overcast as the day wore on. The temperature was also starting to drop, though he hardly noticed.

"Tch. A shame, isn't it?"

"Hm?" said Bilbo, only half paying attention and feeling slightly drowsy. He was pretty sure it was Dori who had spoken to him.

"All this evil in the world, and it was a traffic accident that did these poor souls in," said Dori. "Can you imagine what the main motorways are like?"

"Oh, I bet they're very bad," said Bilbo, nearly tripping over a large chunk of bent plastic bumper. "On my way to Bag End, I saw a petrol tanker jackknife into three lanes of oncoming traffic and completely block the M3 right as it merged with the M25. The tank was hit head on by a lorry hauling livestock. The fireball was quite spectacular."

"How horrible!" exclaimed Dori, taking no note of Bilbo’s blasé tone and lifting one of his hands from the handlebars and bringing it to his mouth primly in shock. Bilbo shrugged.

"I just remember it smelling like barbecue. Made me rather hungry, actually.” Dori didn't respond, and Bilbo was only barely lucid enough to realize that he probably sounded like an absolute psychopath.

"I'm sorry," he said, still feeling somewhat absent as he clumsily climbed into his nook among the luggage on the back of the motorbike. "I'm afraid I took quite a strong pain pill before we left. Courtesy of Mister Oin."

"Ah. That's alright," said Dori stiffly. "Here, Mister Baggins, why don't you hold onto me the rest of the way. Just so I know you won't fall off the bike."

"Oh, that sounds splendid," slurred Bilbo, wrapping his arms around Dori with very little of his usual shame. "One can always use a cuddle."

Dori choked out a laugh despite himself. "Indeed they can."

"Does the king like cuddles, do you think?" asked Bilbo as Dori revved the engine and popped the clutch on the motorcycle. "I think he could probably use one right now. Not from me, because I'm pretty sure he detests me, and I'm not entirely fond of him either, for that matter. Though, I wouldn't be entirely opposed if he asked—would very much like to see what His Majesty is working with under that jacket of his, if you know what I mean. But anyway, perhaps he and Mister Dwalin could cuddle. As a way to get over their tiff, as it were."

Dori's shoulders were shaking as they picked up speed down the narrow motorway, his wheezed laughter vibrating through his parka to where Bilbo's chest was plastered to his back.

"Oh, Mister Baggins. If it was only so simple."
"But what if it were? Gandalf and I had quite the nice cuddle last night. Made me feel loads better."

Dori huffed. "I'll be sure to mention it to Mister Balin."

Bilbo hummed in satisfaction. He rested his cheek on the back of Dori’s shoulder and tried to count the fence posts as they whizzed by. He kept losing track after thirteen, too busy trying to write an asymmetric Twofish encryption in his head based on the posts' relative positioning to each other. But then he kept getting distracted from doing even that, daydreaming about Thorin's eyes and his big, lovely hands. Perhaps he should write a poem about him. He said as much to Dori, who simply hummed in response. Something about crownless kings sure had a nice ring to it.

The hours blended together as the sky got progressively cloudier and the sun dipped lower over the horizon. Bilbo slowly registered the chill as his mind began to clear, and the full extent of his babbling suddenly became apparent to him with all the force of a cartoon sledgehammer to the face. He groaned lowly to himself as the caravan turned a corner down a narrow lane that was lined closely with tall hedges of English holly, much like the one they had begun on. They rode just past a rural post office before veering slightly onto a gravel driveway, demarcated by a sign that Bilbo could just barely make out saying Raven’s Roost in the dying illumination of the twilight.

The majority of the bikes slowed to a stop as Thorin carefully maneuvered his way to the front. He didn’t look at Bilbo as he passed, but he turned his face from the king anyway, cheeks blazing.

“Don’t worry, Mister Baggins,” said Dori, smile evident in his voice as he watched the king approach Balin and Gandalf. “I won’t say anything about your crush on His Majesty. I’m very discreet.”

“I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about,” replied Bilbo, clambering down to the sweet stability of the ground with shaking legs. His boots crunched on the gravel, and he pulled his coat around him a little tighter to ward off the damp chill of the evening.

Dori only chuckled as he began to unhook some of the luggage from the bike. Bilbo quickly jumped in to help, feeling guilty about the fact that he had been too out of it to do anything useful when they had needed to push the motorcycles around the car wreck. The rest of the company started doing the same with their own motobikes.

“Mister Dori, Mister Bifur!” called Gandalf from the front. “Can you join us in making a sweep of the perimeter, please?”

“Ah, I’m afraid I’m needed. Can you take over and carry these into the house when we get the all clear?” asked Dori, unclipping a long-handled hatchet from a sling on the side of his pack.

“The rest of the company waited anxiously as the scouts completed their sweep, fidgeting silently beside their respective motobikes once they finished unloading their luggage. Soon enough, the king and the two brothers emerged from the house, signaling the all clear. The company gathered up their bags and hastened toward the entrance, throwing packs and canisters with abandon into the
mudroom. Bilbo did the same, though he had to make multiple trips.

The second trio also soon emerged from the other side of the house, their weapons conspicuously bloodied but otherwise looking unscathed.

“There are a few undead roaming around the back garden,” reported Gandalf, “and there will probably be more as it gets darker. I say we cover the bikes and settle in for the night.”

“Agreed,” said Thorin.

At His Majesty’s word, the group rolled their bikes into a tight formation like the one they had been in earlier at the hangar. Ori and Nori quickly unrolled the tarps and draped them over the motorbikes, while Gloin and Bombur quickly weighed them down with whatever objects were around. Bilbo stood back and watched this obviously well-practiced routine in fascination.

Then the company started pouring into the house, shucking their boots and coats and leaving them in piles wherever they pleased. Bilbo hastened to copy them, though he left his bright red hiking shoes neatly by the door next to Gandalf’s weathered combat boots, who had done the same. He also hung his jacket on the coat rack, which had been neglected by the rest of the group.

The style of this farmhouse was much more Bilbo’s speed than the ultramodern mansion they had just fled from, though he didn’t know how he felt about all the hunting trophies that decorated the walls. He padded down the dusty corridors to the sitting room, where the company had set up shop much as they had in Bilbo’s drawing room in Bag End. They already had a roaring fire going in the fireplace, which was slowly warming the room. Bilbo hadn’t taken more than a step over the threshold before he was once again suddenly accosted by Oin.

“I heard you had a reaction to the painkillers I prescribed,” said the medic brusquely.

Bilbo shot an embarrassed glance at Dori, who was distinctly not looking at him.

“Oh, they just made me feel a bit, er, out of it, I suppose,” he said sheepishly. Oin frowned.

“Any nausea?” he asked.

“Just a little.”

The medic nodded. “Well, those are fairly normal side effects. I say still keep them on you, but really only use them if it’s a true emergency. Let me see your ankle.”

Bilbo was roughly shoved backward onto a paisley love seat, landing with a *whoof* as he let his pack drop to the carpet. Oin once again stripped off his sock and undid the bandage, prodding around the joint. Bilbo found it didn’t hurt as much this time.

“Well, it certainly looks better,” said Oin. “The paracetamol in the opioid definitely did the trick, and the lack of walking certainly helped. Keep taking anti-inflammatories over the next couple days as we ride and you should be right as rain in no time.”

“Oh, good,” said Bilbo as Oin began re-wrapping his foot.

“Hmph. Speaking of rain, I say we’re due for some any minute,” said the doctor, almost to himself. Bilbo looked quizzically at him.

“What do you mean? The weather’s been beautiful!” he exclaimed, thinking of the lovely skies they had hiked and rode under most of the day.
“A diviner knows these things. I’ve read the portents,” replied Oin cryptically, clipping the bandage in place. Bilbo frowned as he rolled on his sock, only looking up as the fire hissed menacingly from the other end of the room.

“What on Earth are they doing?” he asked, blinking in shock as he witnessed Bofur and Bombur throwing capfuls of his stolen vodka into the flames before passing it off to Gloin, who did the same. Oin shot him a sidelong glare. His expression puckered in distaste for a moment, before he sighed in apparent resignation.

“It’s an offering. To appease the spirits of this place and ask for their protection while we stay the night,” the medic said, tone slightly reverential. “We’ll keep the fire lit overnight as well. The forge is the center of our lives and livelihoods, and it should never go cold.”

“Huh. Okay,” replied Bilbo, not sure if he quite understood. A forge and a fireplace certainly weren’t the same thing, were they? Maybe it was metaphorical.

“You should give an offering as well,” said Oin, though he didn’t look happy about it.

“Are you sure?” he asked, brow furrowing in disbelief. “I thought you weren’t fond of outsiders sharing in your traditional knowledge.”

Oin rolled his eyes. “Yes, but we also don’t want an incident like the other night happening all over again simply because one heathen Englishman doesn’t believe.”

Bilbo couldn’t help but snort instinctively at being called a heathen, even though he had decidedly lapsed as a Catholic in the past twenty-odd years.

“Oh, come now, Bilbo,” said Gandalf, who had taken the bottle from Gloin and was now splashing his own capful of alcohol into the flames. “We’re inhabiting a world where the dead walk among the living. Don’t you think it’s a little late for skepticism?”

“I suppose,” he said, unable to argue with that logic. He stood up and shuffled over to the fireplace, where Gandalf poured a little vodka into the cap of the bottle and handed it to Bilbo.

"So, I just throw it in there?” he asked.

"Yep!” said Bofur from an armchair. "Really nothing more to it. We’re just giving the folks protecting this place a little nip of something living in exchange for safety."

Bilbo cautiously splashed the alcohol into the flames, flinching as they leapt and sizzled. There were murmurs of approval from the gathered members of the company as he did so, which eased some of Bilbo’s nerves. He stared at the cap for a moment, wondering if he should be feeling any different.

"So, I hear you have the hots for the king," said a voice quietly beside him, too low for anyone to hear but Bilbo over the crackling of the fire.

He jumped, snapping his head in the direction of the voice so fast he almost gave himself whiplash. It was Nori, who was grinning amusedly at him. The sharp shadows cast by the firelight gave his face an almost devilish look, which was appropriate.

"Dori said he wouldn't tell!” Bilbo whispered in horror.

"Relax. My brother has a stick up his arse much too far to be going around spreading rumors. It's simply my job to be hearing things, is all,” said Nori, taking the bottle lid from Bilbo's hand and
Bilbo clutched his pullover in mortification as the man threw his own offering into the fire. The flames danced in satisfaction.

"Well, for what it's worth, I'm rooting for you. Might do us all some good for Thorin to distract himself from Dwalin for a bit," he said, handing the bottle off to Ori and stepping away from the fire. Bilbo followed him, brow furrowed.

"Wouldn’t that cause even more conflict?" asked Bilbo, shocked that Nori was essentially encouraging him to become a homewrecker.

The other man simply waved him off. "A little drama never hurt anybody."

"I beg to differ," Bilbo muttered. Nori only chortled.

He sat back down on the love seat and started digging through his rucksack to see if he had remembered to pack any more snacks that morning. He hadn't, unfortunately, but he did find Thorin's bandana, which he had washed in the sink the night before.

That's right, he thought, remembering that the king had to borrow Kili's after their misadventure. He should really return the handkerchief to him. But when he looked up, Bilbo realized that neither the king, nor Balin and Dwalin, nor the princes were in the sitting room with them. He cleared his throat to grab Ori's attention, who had just sat down on the other side of the love seat with him.

"Ori, dear. Could you tell me where the king is?" he asked the young man, who looked up as he flipped his sketchbook to the page he had been working on yesterday. "I'm afraid I have to return something that I borrowed from him."

"Oh! I believe he and the princes are in the kitchen," said Ori, pointing in its general direction with a pencil. "Just down the hall and to the left."

Bilbo thanked him, clutching the cloth as he unobtrusively padded out of the sitting room. He could feel the burn both Dori and Nori's gazes on his back as he did so.

He followed Ori's directions, though he hardly needed to. He found that all he really had to do was follow the glow of a kerosene lantern shining out into the hallway, along with the deep sounds of raised male voices bellowing at each other with increasing ferocity and volume. Bilbo crept in the direction of the light, cautiously peering around the door jamb into the rustic kitchen.

"You should've waited for backup the second that blasted door didn’t open!" Dwalin yelled at Thorin, just as the king wrinkled his regal looking nose at the man.

Dwalin and His Majesty stood on opposite ends of a large farm table while Fili and Kili sat stiffly next to each other on one of the counter tops. Fili was using a hand pump to fill a deflated volleyball with air while Kili watched, both lads ostensibly trying to pretend that the explosive argument—in English, for once—wasn’t happening not a meter away from them. Bilbo could feel the burn both Dori and Nori’s gazes on his back as he did so.

The two men seemed to be continuing their disagreement from the hangar. The king looked icy and had his arms crossed defensively in front of him, while Dwalin looked positively murderous, palpating in rage and leaning forward as a visible vein bulged in his forehead. He pounded the sturdy-looking table to emphasize his point, rattling it hard enough that it wobbled dangerously, as if it was wont to collapse at any moment. It jostled Balin, who sat at the table in between Thorin and Dwalin, map spread out in front of him and face in his hands. He gave off an air as if he was about three seconds away from smacking their heads together and leaving.
Bilbo quickly retracted his head and pressed his body to the wall just on the side of the entryway, knowing intellectually that it wasn’t polite to eavesdrop, but also finding himself unable to move.

“How was I to know it was an ambush?” Thorin shot back, sounding equally incensed.

“Oh, that’s rich, Thorin. Haven’t you learned fucking anything? Does Bakhchysarai mean nothing to you?”

“That was different and you know it! That was a death trap.”

“And what do you call what happened in that garage?!” snapped Dwalin, growling.

“Better I spring traps than anyone else! My only regret is that I brought Fili and Baggins with me,” retorted Thorin. Bilbo heard Fili let out a low noise of hurt, which was reflected in his own anger that simmered low in his gut at the comment.

“Oh, you always have to be the hero, don’t you. You selfish prick.”

“I am your king,” seethed Thorin, his voice dropping to something low and dangerous.

“What, so you’re king for five bloody minutes and suddenly I’m not allowed to tell you when you’re being a self-sacrificing idiot? What would Thrain think of what happened today? I’d wager less than proud,” Dwalin bit out venomously. There was the sound of a chair scraping across the tile, along with that of a body settling heavily into it.

There was a moment of silence. It rang heavily in the air, Bilbo’s heart thudding loudly in his ears. Something clattered and Kili cursed, presumably having tossed the volleyball into something he shouldn’t have.

Then:

“Get out,” said the king, voice utterly devoid of emotion. Bilbo thought for a second that it might have been directed at Kili and Fili, but Dwalin was the one who responded.

“What?” The man actually sounded genuinely confused.

“GET. OUT,” His Majesty yelled, voice cracking at the end. The sheer rawness of it was awful to hear.

“Thorin,” said Dwalin softly.

“Leave my sight! I cannot stand to look at you!”

Bilbo waited for the sounds of a scuffle, of Dwalin lunging forward to leap across the table and throw the first punch, just as he almost had earlier in the garage. Instead, there was only a loud sniff, and the sound of a chair scraping once again.

“Your Majesty,” said Dwalin. He sounded choked, like it was excruciating for him to even say the words.

Thorin didn’t respond, and it was only a second later that Dwalin stepped into the dark corridor, swiping at his eyes. Bilbo flattened himself against the wall, hoping that he wouldn’t be seen in the shadows. Fortune must have smiled upon him, because Dwalin took no notice of Bilbo. Seeming almost drunk, the bald man dazedly stumbled further into the dark house. He leaned heavily on the wall as he escaped from the kitchen, away from the sitting room. Bilbo let out a sigh of relief,
However, he had relaxed a moment too soon, because Thorin soon followed his friend into the corridor. Bilbo stiffened with an involuntary squeak, and Thorin’s head whipped toward him at the sound. Bilbo couldn’t be sure in the dim lighting, but the king’s eyes almost looked to be rimmed in red and slightly puffy. Bilbo braced himself, waiting for the vitriol that was surely to come.

But His Majesty merely looked at him in exhaustion, for once saying nothing biting. He didn’t say anything at all actually, only stalking in the direction opposite of the one Dwalin had taken, toward the rest of the company. Bilbo’s heart broke a little bit as he looked after him. Both men had looked to be absolutely devastated, and something in Bilbo wished there was something he could do to help them.

He sighed. Nori had been completely wrong. Drama absolutely did hurt.

Bilbo’s heart pounded as he watched the king’s retreating back, jumping when he heard Balin suddenly address him.

“Come in, Mister Baggins. I’m sorry you had to see that.”

Bilbo poked his head into the kitchen. Like he had thought, Kili was busy tossing the volleyball to Fili, who was expertly setting it back to him. Despite their focus, they both seemed incredibly morose. The soaps and scrub brushes were scattered in the metal sink, and Bilbo assumed that was the crash he had heard.

“Oh, no! I didn’t see anything,” Bilbo only half-lied, one hand clutching the bandana to his chest and the other flapping frantically in front of him. Balin sighed raggedly.

“Even if you didn’t see anything, you must have heard it,” he said. “The whole company probably did. Come, have a seat.”

That eased something in Bilbo’s chest. He took a chair on the opposite side of Balin, once again peering intently at the map before deciding he still couldn’t parse any of the markings. He glanced up at the bearded man, who looked incredibly tired.

“You must have questions,” he remarked.

“Oh, not really. I was just coming to return this to His Majesty,” Bilbo replied, setting the folded bandana on the table. Balin eyed it wordlessly, eyebrows rising in surprise.

“The king lent it to me in a moment of need,” he explained, suddenly self conscious.

“Did he now,” said Balin, tone strangely wondering. He considered Bilbo for a moment before becoming serious once again. Neither of them registered Fili and Kili fleeing the room, taking their volleyball and the pump with them.

“In any case, Mister Baggins, I’ll admit that was probably not the most morale-boosting thing to walk in on,” he said, “especially since you needed so much convincing to join us in the first place. If you have anything to ask, I’ll do my best to answer it. Within reason, of course.”

Bilbo shook his head. He had plenty of questions, but he didn’t know exactly how appropriate some of them were. He decided to start small, with the most obvious one.

“So, what’s, er, Bacher—Bakhy—” struggled Bilbo, slightly unable to wrap his mouth around the unfamiliar syllables.
“Bakhchysarai?” supplied Balin helpfully.

“Yes. That,” he replied in relief.

Balin immediately sobered. “Ah, yes. I suppose Mister Bombur explained to you about Mister Bifur’s affliction?”

“The aphasia?” said Bilbo. He remembered their first ever conversation, which honestly felt like a lifetime ago even though it had only barely been two days. “Yes, Mister Bombur had said something about Crimea.”

“Well, Bakhchysarai is the old capital of the long-defunct Crimean Khanate,” explained Balin. “Dwalin and Thorin, along with Mister Oin and Thorin’s brother, were all with Mister Bifur in Crimea. They were part of an elite international group protecting the interests of the Crimean Tatars during the initial annexation of the peninsula by the Russians.”

“That seems awfully dangerous for a prince!” exclaimed Bilbo, eyebrows scooting toward his hairline.

Balin rolled his eyes. “Well, Thorin has always been somewhat reckless. And even though he loved Erebor with all of his heart, he was always looking for chances to leave it, since he butted heads with his grandfather almost constantly. So, when the Russians invaded, he played on his grandfather’s prejudices to send an elite team of soldiers to help our ethnic relatives, which he led jointly with my brother.”

“What happened at Bach-Bakhchysarai then?” asked Bilbo, proud that he had said the word without butchering it too badly. Balin frowned, looking at his folded hands.

“It was an ambush. A member of their team, an Afrikaner mercenary they had befriended, betrayed them. There were many casualties. Thorin blamed himself for it,” said Balin solemnly. “And I think, somewhere deep down, Dwalin blamed him too. Not that my brother would ever admit it, though—he’s far too devoted. But His Majesty had been the one in command of the mission, and they both lost people that day.”

“Is that what they’re actually arguing about, then?” asked Bilbo softly, knowing far too well what it was like to be long in conflict over something specific without ever expressing it directly, especially with a person you cared deeply about. Still, he wondered if that was really all there was to it.

“I believe so,” sighed Balin. “And I don’t know if they’ll ever get over it. But that won’t stop my brother from trying to get the king to see reason. He believes wholly in Thorin’s potential as a leader, with absolutely everything that he has.”

“Hum,” Bilbo said consideringly, looking down at the table and tapping his chin. “Do you also believe that strongly in the king, then?”

“Yes,” said Balin with a fieriness that surprised Bilbo. He looked up, taking in the look of sheer conviction on the man’s face, his eyes hard in the kerosene lamplight. “One thing that you learn in a life as long and hard as mine is that everybody is fallible, Mister Baggins. Even Thorin his human, though he pretends not to be. It’s his humanity that makes him the greatest leader I’ve ever known. It’s what makes me proud to call him Khan. Proud to call him my king.”

Bilbo sat back, finally finding the time to truly reflect on the events of the day. He had wondered at the absolute deference everybody in the company afforded His Majesty while also somehow not
completely treating him like an other. It was a strange thing to witness, especially when coming from a nobility culture such as his, which treated its royalty with an almost infallible demigod status when it wasn't in turns voyeuristically reveling in their absolute human messiness. Compared to the British royal family, Thorin was simply a person, but also somehow more. Bilbo chewed on his lower lip, thinking. The king was so fucking rude, and unabashedly mean when pushed, but also somehow unfailingly considerate to his men; even to Bilbo on certain occasions, when he had clearly been in distress. He looked at Thorin’s bandana in front of him, the physical evidence of that tenderness.

Bilbo’s brow furrowed as he considered this. His Majesty was simply an incredibly infuriating, often surprising, utterly complicated person.

And more.

A strange feeling brewed in Bilbo’s chest, and he hoped it just was some latent side effect of the Vicodin. He should ask Oin about it.

“One last thing,” he said, his mind spinning a million miles a minute with these new realizations. “What happened to the South African? The one that betrayed Dwalin and the king?”

“Oh,” said Balin softly, lowering his eyes to the table. “Thorin hunted him down and killed him.”

“I-I see,” Bilbo said, swallowing hard around the lump in his throat. “So, there’s no possible chance that he’s the one responsible for the trap at the hangar?”

“None whatsoever,” said Balin, voice firm.

Bilbo breathed a sigh, not quite in relief, but one that released some sort of strange tension from his shoulders all the same. “Right then. Well, in any case, I’m glad to put as many miles as we can in between us and there as possible,” said Bilbo.

“Agreed.”

Bilbo looked back at the map, which was turned toward Balin. “So how long until we reach Folkestone?” he asked, curious about the route they were taking, since Dori had said they weren’t taking the main motorways.

“Oh, about a week, maybe a week and a half,” replied Balin.

“A week?!” exclaimed Bilbo, looking perplexedly down at the map. He thought he had seen a sign for Batcombe by the post office just down the lane, which meant they were nearly a quarter of the way there already! How could it take a week?

“Here, Mister Baggins. Let me explain,” offered Balin, sounding slightly more upbeat and sliding the map around so it was Scotland side-up for Bilbo. He traced a zone that had been marked out in red permanent marker that encompassed most of the central part of England, along with almost all of the south coast. The most direct route from Cornwall to Kent, taking the A30 to the M3 through London, was completely cut off by this area, along with most of everything in a rough triangle whose points comprised of Bournemouth and Hastings in the south and Leeds in the north.

"Everything in the red zone is essentially verboten, no-go for a variety of reasons—examples being bandits, whole cities overrun with ôrek, martial law that will make things overly complicated for the secret nature of our mission, etcetera. This is the route we'll be taking,” he said.

Balin traced out a complicated path along the Western edge of the red zone, diverting north just
east of their current position and hugging the border of Wales through Shropshire, making sure to skirt around the bigger cities and villages. The route avoided the Manchester metro area completely before they headed back down south just above Leeds in Yorkshire, traveling through the eastern countryside just outside of Cambridgeshire, and edging on the eastern border of London to cross over the Thames before finally arriving in Kent.

Bilbo's mouth fell open. "The king wasn't kidding when he said you've gone four hundred miles out of your way," he breathed, stunned at the extra effort Gandalf had made them go through in order to retrieve him from Bag End.

"Precisely," snorted Balin. "Now you understand why we were so put out when you initially refused to join us."

"Yeah. I get it now," replied Bilbo weakly.

"We've spent the past six months scouting out our path," Balin said, pointing out their scheduled stops, each marked with a green dot and situated about 150 miles from each other along the route. There were seven in all, not including the one they were at now. "We've left supply caches of petrol and food at each of them, in order to make our going lighter for the sake of the bikes."

Bilbo leaned over the map, studying it intently now that he knew how to read the various symbols and markings. There were still a fair amount of runes and Cyrillic on it, which he obviously couldn't understand, but he could at least get an idea of what the plan was now. He was frankly relieved there even was a plan, other than just, 'somehow get to Kent.'

"Well, you've obviously thought this through," said Bilbo, leaning his chin on his hand. Balin smiled, stroking his beard proudly.

"Safety is our first priority. Once we get to France it will be a different story, of course," he conceded. "But for now everything is accounted for."

Bilbo smiled, something like hope bubbling in his chest. A week wasn't so bad, he supposed. It would be almost like a road trip.

"As long as the weather holds as it has for the past couple of weeks, it should be smooth sailing," said Balin, still smiling. "We should be getting to Folkestone with no problem at all."

Chapter End Notes

Translation notes:
Прекратить эти глупости [prekratit' eti gluposti] -- [Russian] Stop this nonsense

Aight, well, pop some bottles because after 75,000 words act one is officially over. I'm going to sleep for a thousand years. And then wake up and immediately write act two, because there is JUICE i want to squeeze out of this. All my set up is done, so we can really get rolling now.

A disclaimer about my treatment painkillers--I don't condone any sort of unsupervised use, of course, and I do think they're generally overprescribed, especially in the US, but when you're doing anything in the back country, it IS generally a good idea to carry some heavy duty ones around with you in case you fall and break something and
have to walk out under your own power to get help. You need to be smart about it obviously, and use them only as a last resort, but I always carry some when I'm hiking alone and skiing in sidecountry or in the back bowls, because I've known a bunch of people who have almost died of hypothermia/exposure because they landed wrong and couldn't get down on their own and it took hours for their buddies to find them. I've never gotten injured enough that I had to resort to that, but that's the experience I'm drawing on here. And I imagine you especially want something that will give you an extra boost when running from zombies.

Again, I'm sorry I'm so long winded, but the motorcycles were like...integral to my original vision of this fic, so I couldn't bring myself to skim over them. Not to mention that my editor is me, who is equally as verbose, and just as impatient to move on. Also, making Bilbo a lapsed Catholic in my gay fanfiction is an oblique dunk on JRRT so DO NOT judge me for my choices. And the fact that Thorin's bike is mint green... is also an oblique reference. (IIRC his pony is named Minty in the movie lmfao. also please read this entry in the hobbit film wiki for Myrtle, Bilbo's pony. It's extremely good.) And yes, I did map out their route, because there are things I need them to do while still in England and it's hard when the whole country is about the size of fuckign... New Jersey. I'm from the west so I'm used to thinking Big Distances.

As a note, the tradition of throwing stuff into the fire to appease various spirits and gods is actually pretty widespread, but I'm borrowing it from the shamanic Even people of Siberia, who specifically use vodka. They are Turkic too.

Like always, thank you so much for reading!

**Music that goes with this chapter:**
You Might Think He Loves You For Your Money But I Know What He Really Loves You For It's Your Brand New Leopard Skin Pillbox Hat - Death Grips
Hard Time Killing Floor Blues - Chris Thomas King

[personal blog] [lotr/fanfic blog] [soundtrack]
Two Weeks Later (AKA The Beach Episode)

Chapter Summary

Two weeks have passed. Trapped by a storm in a small-town country club in Lincolnshire, the company is desperate for any sort of diversion.

Chapter Notes

Look, I've written 80,000 words of plot. It's high time that I wrote something dumb and self indulgent. No zombies, just a time skip and some idiots having vaguely sexy soccer shenanigans in the rain. Welcome to the beach episode.

(Sorry for any post time skip exposition awkwardness...my inexperience is showing lmfao)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Go.”

“Thirty-one for two,” said Bilbo serenely, laying down the two of hearts.

Gandalf’s face screwed into a dissatisfied frown as Bilbo moved his back peg up two places on the cribbage board.

“Eight,” said Gandalf, throwing down the second-to-last card in his hand.

“Fifteen for two,” replied Bilbo, laying down his seven. He moved his other peg up two more spots, thirteen points away from the goal.

“You must be cheating!” blustered Gandalf, eyeing the considerable distance between Bilbo’s back peg and his front peg. “Not even Belladonna could beat me this many times in a row. I’m the champion of my cribbage club, you know!”

“How could I cheat? You were the one that dealt this round,” Bilbo reminded the lawyer, gesturing for him to go on and play his last card. “It’s your crib, so it’s still anybody’s game.”

“Yes, but you must have a sly way of cutting the cards. And who knows what garbage you gave me with regards to the crib. Twenty-four,” Gandalf grumbled, setting down the nine of spades.

“And see? That’s a run,” said Bilbo, using his most condescending tone of voice.

“Oh, be quiet.” Gandalf moved his back peg forward three places, which closed the gap between them only slightly. He sighed. "Alright then, go ahead and tally your points."

Bilbo looked down at his cards and tried to hide his smile. He laid out his hand, which consisted of two sevens, an eight, and a nine.
“Fifteen-two, fifteen-four, and a run of eight. So, twelve points for me. But, wait! The turn up-card is a six, so another fifteen-two, and the run of eight is actually a run of ten," he said with false surprise. "Oh, I suppose I win again!” He smirked, triumphantly moving his back peg to the goal.

Gandalf glowered at him. Bilbo knew he was maybe acting like a bit of a sore winner, but he really couldn’t find it in himself to care. There were not many times that he could truly one-up the wily old lawyer, so he was going to enjoy it while it lasted.

“Pah! ‘Anybody’s game’, my arse,” muttered Gandalf, throwing down his cards in a huff. Ori, who had been resting his chin in his hands and watching the proceedings for the past few matches, pursed his lips.

“I’m… still not sure if I understand how the scoring works,” he said, glancing between Bilbo’s hand and the board. “How did Mister Baggins win those extra points?”

“You’ll figure out in time, my dear boy,” Gandalf sighed, gathering up the cards into a neat pile so Bilbo could shuffle. “Do you think you’re ready to play a game with us?”

“We’ll help you with the scoring for the first few hands,” said Bilbo kindly.

“Oh, I’m not quite sure. Maybe I should keep watching you two play—”

“All right, that is it!” cried Kili, rudely cutting Ori off. “There must be something else we can do than just sit here and wait for the rain to stop.”

The prince positively buzzed with pent up energy, pitching his voice high enough so that it could be heard over the steady patter of rain on the tin roof above them. It carried through the event space of the small-town cricket club they were situated in, drawing the attention of the other members of the company.

Gloin cleared his throat to respond, but he was immediately interrupted by the discordant twang of a poorly-played lute drifting out from the small bar area in the corner. Hidden behind the counter, Thorin was apparently trying—and failing—to teach Fili the basics of the tog’shûr, with a level of patience Bilbo hadn’t thought he, or anyone really, would have possessed. The gene responsible for Thorin’s musical ability had evidently skipped over Fili completely, despite the fact that the prince was (unfortunately for the ears of the company) a decidedly enthusiastic student. Bilbo thought that the king might be teaching him how to play the banjo part of ‘Wagon Wheel’, though there were multiple bets going on the topic. The other popular option was the opening riff of ‘Smoke on the Water’.

“Lad, not much we can do in a squall like this,” said Gloin after the caterwauling died down, puffing on a cigarillo he had found in a pack in one of the offices near the back of the clubhouse. Dwalin sat next to him, smoking his own clove cigarettes and sharing the ashtray. He grunted in agreement.

“It’s been more than two weeks since we set off, and we’re only two thirds of the way there! Isn’t anybody else getting antsy?” argued Kili.

The rest of the company, who were scattered around the wood-paneled banquet room also trying to pass the time with their own diversions, reluctantly murmured in agreement. They shifted in their uncomfortable folding dining chairs as the rain continued to pound above them, the wind howling in accompaniment. The pavilion to moaned, the old wood structure protesting loudly in the shearing gusts.
Just as Oin had predicted, the weather had not held. The first bout of rain had set in nearly halfway through their first full day of travel by motorbike. Of course, it hadn't simply been just a spring drizzle, but truly foul weather, accompanied by high speed winds and perhaps even a little bit of out-of-season thunder. The company had significantly slowed their bikes once the storm picked up to full force in that early afternoon, and then began walking them when even that had become too dangerous. They had only marched in the raging downpour for all of a few rough miles before a heavy tree branch hanging over the road had snapped and almost fallen on an unfortunate Bifur.

Wind-battered and half-drowned, it was then that Thorin made the executive decision to cut their losses and hole up until the weather cleared. It had been a choice supported by nearly everyone in the company. Only Balin had seemed slightly put out, but it was presumably merely because it was his best laid plan that was being ruined.

The company had then broken into a house in a more or less abandoned subdivision just outside of a village called Bree. Waiting for the wind and the rain to die down, they had stayed there for the rest of that day and all of the next. Though the house was relatively new, it had been draughty and poorly constructed, and was situated in an area with far too many blind spots and dark corners for comfort. On the bright side, the break had allowed for Bilbo to fully rest his ankle, even in spite of the constant vigilance and overall lack of sleep. He would have almost found it fortunate, but even he couldn't deny that the break had simply been the result of just a truly miserable start to the journey.

The day after that had found the company finally arriving at their second planned stop, already three days behind schedule. It was a storage facility just across the road from a quarry, the bottom seven to eight centimeters of which had been filled with the remnants of the pouring rain from the days before. While they should have been able to make the rest of the journey from Bree to the storage facility in four hours or less, it had taken them almost the entire day, as the motorways had been absolutely wrecked by the storm. The winds and the flash flooding scattered branches and debris all across the roads, which created difficult obstacles that the company frequently had to dismount and walk their motorbikes around on the narrow country lanes. Some roadways had even been completely washed out, creating impassable barriers that forced the company to backtrack and find detours for.

And all of this was not to mention the groups of undead that milled about the countryside while the weather was poor. Emboldened by the lack of sunshine, they roved the fields and villages in swarms during the daylight hours, attempting to eat every living thing in their path like a plague of bloodthirsty locusts. More than once there had been a skirmish among the company and these bands of infected, though thankfully none of it seemed more than they could handle. Bilbo hadn't even found reason to fire the Weatherby more than twice over the past weeks.

All in all, progression had slowed considerably, even on the few days where the weather actually cooperated. Which is why, nearly two and a half weeks after leaving Bag End, and a whole seven days after Balin's less optimistic estimate of a week and a half to reach Folkestone, the company found themselves not in France, or even Kent, but in southwestern Lincolnshire, occupying the outdated banquet room of the Weathertop Cricket Club. They were desperately trying to pass the time as yet another large storm swept through nearly all of central Great Britain, and Bilbo couldn't help but think bitterly about what the storm would inevitably bring with it—such as even more hazardous roads, even more flooding, and even more swarms of the infected, which the rain tended to flush out like worms.

Put succinctly, he was feeling incredibly demoralized. Each long, hard day of walking or riding while making little progress, accompanied by damp, terrifying nights, made him yearn more and more for the comfort of his armchair at Bag End. At least this particular place had a large ornate
fireplace at one end of the room, which they had kept burning throughout their entire stay. It warmed the space enough that they didn't even have to wear that many of their layers, which was more than he could say for some of the other spots they had found shelter in the past few weeks. At least he could play cribbage in relative comfort.

"And what do you suppose we do to pass the time?" Bofur asked the prince. While he didn't say it unkindly, he also barely looked up from the bar of soap he was whittling.

Kili frowned, drumming his fingers pensively on the plastic folding table that he had just leapt up from. He winced as a particularly tortured note sounded from behind the bar.

"I don't know. We could, er…" the prince said, apparently having not thought that far ahead. He suddenly slapped the circular table in triumph, as if he had just come up with a brilliant idea. "We could go outside!"

"And do what? Play cricket in the rain? Us on one team and ôrek on the other?" laughed Nori, leaning back precipitously in his chair. It wobbled dangerously before he righted himself just in the nick of time. Dori stared at him hawkishly from across the room with a thoroughly disapproving frown. Bifur, who was sitting next to Nori as they played a game of travel checkers, merely chuckled. The noise sounded like he was gargling gravel.

"There weren't any out there last time I checked," grumbled Kili, ignoring the few quiet snickers that erupted from around the room. "And no, I wasn't thinking we were going to play cricket. I was thinking of something more along the lines of… of football, maybe?" His voice lilted up at the end, as if he still wasn’t sure.

"Hate to break it to you lad, but we're fresh out of footballs," said Dwalin, exhaling a large cloud of tar-heavy smoke in the process.

"We could use Fili's volleyball!" Kili exclaimed, steadily seeming to grow more excited about his off-the-cuff idea.

"What's this now?" asked Fili. His blonde head popped up from behind the bar, neatly framed by two middlingly-expensive bottles of gin. "Did I hear my name?"

"I don't think a volleyball and a football are the same thing," said Ori doubtfully. Gandalf chuckled quietly as Bilbo started dealing cards, once it became clear Ori wouldn't be joining them this game.

"No, they're not," agreed Fili, scratching at his beard and eyeing his brother with suspicion. "What're you on about, Ki?"

"I thought we could go out and have a pickup game of football on the cricket green. Using your ball in place of a proper football," said Kili, exuding all the bravado of a used car salesman who clearly wasn't very confident his product but was otherwise desperate to sell it.

Fili hummed thoughtfully as Thorin's head suddenly appeared from behind the bar as well. They must have both been kneeling on the floor, having been interrupted in their lesson.

"Bad idea. You know the storm brings out the ôrek," the king rumbled, lifting one hand to the bar top and heaving himself to a standing position.

Bilbo rested his chin in his hand and took the chance to casually ogle the flex of Thorin's ridiculous biceps, which was complimented by the way his thin gray t-shirt stretched across his pectoral muscles and the thick trunk of his torso. If you asked Bilbo, the Depeche Mode logo on the front of the shirt warped over the king’s contours quite deliciously. Gandalf cleared his throat loudly,
signaling that he had just cut the cards while Bilbo hadn't been paying attention. Bilbo shook his head with a smirk, turning his gaze back to the game and flipping over the top card.

Relations between Bilbo and Thorin had cooled considerably over the past two weeks, to the point where there were hardly any relations between them at all. The king ignored him so completely—when His Majesty wasn't hurling an insult or admonishment at him, of course—that Bilbo didn't even bother to hide his glances anymore, taking only the most cursory of precautions to hide them. At this point, he was yearning for any sort of silver lining to this absolutely dismal journey. If objectifying an exiled Eastern European king with a fondness for tight-fitting band shirts just happened to be the most readily available option, then so be it.

"Lad said there weren't any zombies out," mumbled Dwalin, taking a hefty drag of his cigarette.

Thorin's head snapped toward the man. "What was that?" he growled.

"I said—"

"It's actually not a half bad idea, Uncle," interjected Fili, a little desperately. "The volleyball is lighter than a football to be sure, but if we play barefoot, that may actually work out for the better."

Dwalin didn't say anything else on the matter, shoving his black cigarette back between his lips after silently tapping the excess ash off. Balin stared at him hard from across the room, where he was sitting by the fire in an attempt to read a dog-eared Russian paperback that he had already finished once this trip. The bald man ignored the glare, turning to Gloin and quietly saying something that had the redhead snorting. The rest of the group breathed a collective sigh of relief as crisis was narrowly averted.

As Thorin and Bilbo's relationship had turned decidedly frigid, the disagreement between the king and Dwalin had grown increasingly stoked, even in spite of the fact that they were more or less giving each other the silent treatment. Thankfully, they were fine while on the road, with both men wisely reverting to a cordial military-style professionalism with each other when things needed to be accomplished. It was all the unexpected downtime that had truly exacerbated things. Neither seemed to be willing to apologize, or even talk civilly to the other during the times in which they were forced to lay low. It created a thoroughly hostile atmosphere that nobody seemed to know what to do about. According to nearly every member of the company Bilbo had asked, Dwalin and the king were almost tied at the hip, and had been for as long as anybody knew them. Seeing the two at such odds with each other was a completely new phenomenon to most of them.

So, not only were zombies and Mother Nature out to get them, the company had whatever this was to contend with. Bilbo was beginning to miss the long stretches of time he had spent alone, cursing Gandalf almost every other hour for dragging him kicking and screaming out of his house.

(If you were to gently remind Bilbo that actually, he was the one who had ran after them, just as Gandalf had on more than one occasion, he would merely turn up his nose at you and sniff disdainfully.)

Thorin also chose to drop the obvious argumentative thread, turning to Fili in consideration.

"You're willing to go out in that wind and get cold and wet just to play some football?" he asked dubiously.

"Come on, Uncle!" urged Kili. "Can't you see that we're all dying to let off some steam?"

"He's got a point," said Bofur, putting down his pocket knife and the bar of soap, which was slowly
starting to resemble one of Bilbo's chickens.

While the rest of the room seemed decidedly less than enthused at the idea, Bombur nodded from beside him, taking an absent bite from one of their many, many bags of beef jerky. If there was one thing that Gloin, their de-facto quartermaster, had ensured they all had in absolute excess, it was Russian-branded hardtack and dehydrated meat. Bilbo had mixed opinions on the overall palatability of the rations, but he figured that at least they wouldn't starve when the company was delayed in retrieving their provisions of canned beans, rice, and instant porridge at their planned stops.

"Well, even if nobody else wants to play, Kili and I can just go out by ourselves," said Fili, though he suddenly looked doubtful. He glanced back down behind the bar, presumably in the direction of the lute. "That is, unless you want to keep teaching me how to play 'Wagon Wheel', Uncle."

The king opened his mouth to reply, but whatever Thorin's response might have been was abruptly drowned out by alternating cheers and groans erupting from different parts of the room.

"'Wagon Wheel'? Is that what that was supposed to be?" cried Dori incredulously, too upset at losing his wager to Oin to be polite about it. The medic cackled, apparently having turned on his hearing aid to listen to the conversation.

"I could have sworn it was 'Misirlou'," groaned Ori, just as Gandalf reluctantly slid the fifty pound note he had initially won from the king across the table to a smug Bilbo.

"No, that's what the king's been trying to arrange on the tog'Šûr for the past week," said Balin, ambling over from the fire to sit in the chair opposite Ori.

"The riff from 'Pump It' has a name?" asked Kili from the adjacent table, seeming thoroughly confused. "I thought Thorin was just a fan of the Black Eyed Peas."

"Oh, is that what it's called?" remarked Bilbo, who only knew it as the theme from Pulp Fiction. Thorin had just the other day gotten it to the point where it was recognizable on the lute. Though, he only played it at half speed, apparently still having a hard time playing it solely from memory.

"Bah! Dick Dale would be ashamed of all of you!" grumbled Gloin loudly, which didn't garner much of a response from the crowd. When Bilbo glanced toward Balin for clarification, the man only shrugged helplessly.

There were more jeers as the company argued over what Fili could have possibly been trying to play, in spite of the fact that he had clearly said as much. The prince's shoulders slunk up toward his ears in mortification as the squabbling reached a fever pitch.

"Silence, all of you! Is this how the Khazâd of Erebor behave?" barked Thorin angrily, just as Fili's face turned an interesting shade of purple. "You know what? Actually, let's all go outside and play some football, since you lot obviously need something to cool your fool heads."

The amused hooting immediately turned into a chorus of groans at the announcement. However, Kili pumped his fist in the air in delight.

"Yes!" he whooped in victory. "Fi and I get to be captains!"

"Sure. Fili, grab your volleyball," said Thorin.

"Yessir," said Fili with a tremulous smile, color slowly beginning to return back to normal.
Bilbo huffed with amusement, settling in his chair as he turned back to his cards. While he was deciding which of them would be best to put into the crib, a tattooed abruptly latched on to the scruff of his waistcoat collar. Bilbo suddenly found himself roughly being hauled from the chair, all while letting out a squawk of indignation.

"I beg your pardon!" he cried as Dwalin proceeded to drag him in the direction of the covered deck that led to the green.

"Don't think you're weaseling your way out of this one, Baggins," the man said. "We need an even number of people."

"What about Gandalf, or Mister Balin and Mister Oin?" he argued, anxiety starting to coil in his stomach. He looked back to the table, where Oin had already picked up his abandoned cards to play in his stead. Gandalf waved at him with a smile, urging him to follow the rest of the group as he dealt Balin in.

"What, and subject the fragile health of old men to the weather? Have you no shame?" admonished Dwalin, though the statement elicited loud scoffs from all the men at the table.

Bilbo flailed, struggling to free his collar from Dwalin’s grip before he eventually found the strength to right himself. However, it only took a sharp look from the man to urge Bilbo into reluctantly trudging after him.

"Oh, I bet any one of them is in better shape than I could ever hope to achieve," he said with a scowl.

"Probably right on that," replied Dwalin. "Still, we need even teams, and they outrank you." He rubbed his hands together, seemingly unable to keep his eyes on Bilbo as they spoke. They repeatedly wandered in the direction of the entrance, and Dwalin noticeably quickened his steps as they got closer to the door that led to the porch. Bilbo blinked, considering the other man.

"You're really excited about this, aren't you?" he said wonderingly.

Dwalin didn't make eye contact. "Just sick and tired of being cooped up s'all."

"Even if that means going out in a squall?"

The large man didn't answer, only half-heartedly shrugging his shoulders.

He held the sliding door open for Bilbo as he stepped onto the porch. Bilbo shivered as the damp breeze pierced straight through the thin knit of his waistcoat and button-down. He turned to go back inside in order to retrieve his rain jacket, but was halted in his tracks by a throat clearing loudly behind him.

He turned back toward the sound. Fili and Kili were standing on the edge of the deck in front of the green, both eyeing Bilbo in a way that made him feel supremely uncomfortable. Fili had his inflated volleyball under his arm, the pump lying near his foot.

"And where do you think you're going, Mister Boggins—" started Kili.

"—when we haven't even picked teams yet?" finished Fili.

Bilbo suddenly found that he was standing abreast the other members of the company, situated near the end of a long line that resembled a military-style rank. The other end was flanked by Thorin, who looked straight ahead into the rain. With a jolt of something that strongly resembled
post-traumatic stress, Bilbo realized that the princes would be choosing players in the style of secondary school athletics.

"Oh my God," he moaned, clutching at the hem of his waistcoat. True to the cliché, as the podgy, unathletic boy who would much rather tool around on the computer than kick a football, Bilbo had almost invariably been picked last for teams every. Single. Time.

"Giving you flashbacks?" asked Bofur teasingly. He stood on the other side of him from Dwalin, laying a hand lightly on Bilbo’s back.

"Exceedingly so," he replied. He stared mournfully past the princes as he tried to accept his fate. A strong gust of wind made the deck creak ominously, which did nothing for Bilbo’s mood.

"Alright, since I'm the heir, I'll go first," said Fili once the wind died down. "Uncle, you're with me."

Thorin nodded solemnly as he went to stand to Fili's left, opposite Kili. He stood at parade rest, shoulders squared. He glowered, as if daring anyone to make a comment.

Kili sighed petulantly at Fili's claim to first choice, but he quickly recovered. "I pick Mister Dwalin, then," he said.

Dwalin grunted as he brushed past Thorin without a word, coming to a stop on Kili's right.

"My turn again," said Fili. "Mister Boggins, come on up."

Bilbo's head snapped up from where he was staring at his hiking shoes.

"Excuse me?" he asked. Thorin rolled his eyes, but Bilbo was too shocked to notice.

"The crown prince wants you on his team!" laughed Bofur, clapping Bilbo jovially on the shoulder.

"Yes, I know," said Bilbo, though he hardly believed it. "But, for Heaven’s sake, why?"

“Don’t think I forgot that spectacular kick you made in the hangar back before Batcombe,” said Fili sagely. “That clock positively flew into that Maserati.”

“Oh, is this the fabled Mickey Mouse alarm clock?” asked Gloin from somewhere down the line. There were a few quiet chuckles at the comment.

“Will you all just be quiet about that,” groaned Bilbo wretchedly, shuffling to take his place next to Thorin. The king looked down at him out of the corner of his eye, lips quirking up in a smirk.

Bilbo grimaced. His ill-fated attempt to save the king and the prince with nothing but a headlamp and an alarm clock had become something of a running joke among the company these past two weeks, hovering stubbornly somewhere between legend and farcical misadventure.

“Mister Bombur!” Kili called. “Welcome to the clearly superior team.”

Bombur stepped lightly to stand next to Dwalin, just as Fili called out the next name.

“Mister Bifur!” he announced.

“Mister Dori!”
“Ori!”
“Mister Gloin!”
“Mister Nori!”
“Mister Bofur, that means you’re with me,” said Kili.
“Ach, picked last once again. Seems only fitting for the best,” said Bofur good-naturedly, moving to stand next to his brother. “Bilbo! I’ll make sure we’re on the same team next time.”
“O-oh, of course,” replied Bilbo dazedly, shivering.

The princes turned to one another, and without saying a word, held out their fists. They played a silent game of rock-paper-scissors, which Kili won on the first try.

“Hmph. Looks like you’re skins,” said Fili sourly.

Kili, on the other hand, looked positively gleeful. He unzipped his jacket and hastily stripped down to his bare chest, which instantly goose-pimpled in the chill. Bilbo could have almost collapsed in relief, feeling as though he had dodged a bullet that he hadn’t even known was aimed at him.

The rest of the other team soon stripped down as well, throwing their shirts and jackets into a pile before unlacing their boots and shucking them, tucking their socks into their soles so as to keep them dry. Kili let out a Khuzdul war cry, leaping off the porch as he led his team to the pitch. They headed off into the rain, seemingly taking no notice of the cold.

Bofur turned around, his hat immediately having become soggy and his horseshoe moustache drooping as it got thoroughly soaked. His chest was covered in a thick mat of silky dark hair, under which Bilbo could barely make out the blue lines of a geometric tattoo, much like the ones Dwalin sported. Bofur sent Bilbo a thumbs up and a dazzling smile, the white of his teeth flashing in the drizzle. Bilbo could only wave disconsolately.

“Alright,” said Fili, surveying his team. “Who wants to be keeper?”

“I’ll guard the goal,” Ori said quickly, before Bilbo could lay his own claim to the position. Bilbo pursed his lips in disappointment, as he was not the hugest fan of running when he wasn’t being chased.

Fili clapped his hands together, almost identical to the way Thorin did whenever the king was going over a plan of action. “Excellent. So, strategy: Try to keep the ball away from Mister Dwalin under all circumstances, and shoot on Mister Bombur from the left. He’s got bad peripheral vision in that eye. We’ll not worry too much about positions. I’ll attack and Thorin will defend, and everybody else can fill in the gaps. Understood?”

“Sounds good, Captain,” said Thorin. A small, indulgent smile played around his eyes, which lightened his face considerably. Fili positively beamed, while the rest of the team nodded.

Bilbo, whose teeth were starting to chatter, raised his hand.

“May I go grab my coat?” he asked.

Fili frowned. “I suppose,” said the prince. “But you’re going to get hot with all the running around we’ll be doing. I suggest you strip down to your undershirt, at least.”
“Great,” said Bilbo. He was not in the mood to be rained on. “I’ll be two seconds.”

He quickly scampered back inside, retrieving his red raincoat before exiting back onto the deck. The rest of his team had already joined the others on the pitch, setting up some cricket stumps to act as makeshift goalposts. Against his better judgement, Bilbo’s eyes were immediately drawn to Thorin.

The king stood barefoot in the muddy field, jeans rolled up to mid calf and his hair piled on top of his head as he directed the setup. Despite his best efforts to keep it out of his eyes and off his face, a few wavy strands still stubbornly clung to his forehead and the back of his neck as a result of the rain. The others of the company who also had long hair had done much of the same, though none of them pulled it off quite like Thorin did. His strong jaw was on full display, and the wet cotton of his shirt clung to every curve of his padded, muscular torso.

Bilbo swallowed hard, attempting to distract himself by unbuttoning his waistcoat. He stripped down to his thin white undershirt as Fili had suggested. He then shrugged on his jacket, zipping it up to his chin and throwing the hood over his head. After a moment of indecision, he eventually chose to toe off his boots like the rest of them and roll up his trousers. Taking a deep, bracing breath, he took the two steps down the porch and ventured into the rain.

Weathertop was situated at the summit of a large hill, where it plateaued with just enough flat space to accommodate a cricket pitch surrounded by trees and vegetation. The pavilion was an old, squat building that had been painted white to complement its green tin roof. From a distance, it looked like a featureless box that was situated on a patchy brownish-green carpet. Attached to it was the rickety covered porch, which led into a small corridor attached to the banquet room. The location was admittedly very exposed, but it had the advantage of having an almost three-sixty view of the surrounding countryside. If there were any undead taking advantage of the rain for a walkabout, the company would see them from fairly far off, and thus be able to retreat inside with plenty of time to spare.

Bilbo grimaced at the unpleasant squelching of the turf between his toes as he picked his way across the field. While his rain jacket acted as a windbreaker, he had to keep wiping the water from his eyes as it blew sideways with the gusts. The part of his hair that was exposed to the elements was immediately plastered to his forehead. By the time he made it to the rest of his team, all of whom seemed to be unbothered by the weather, Bilbo was already wishing he was back inside with his now thoroughly frozen feet propped up by the fire.

“Ready, Mister Boggins?” asked Kili. Fili set the volleyball down for the initial face-off.

“As I’ll ever be,” replied Bilbo despondently. He took a post near Bifur, who grunted at him in greeting.

“Let’s get a move on!” roared Dwalin, looking quite fierce with his chest—every inch of which seemed to be tattooed—bare and bearded face split into a feral grin. Thorin got into a ready stance near the goal, knees bent slightly.

Fili and Kili stared at each other for a tense moment as the pitch settled into ready silence. As if hearing a silent whistle, both princes simultaneously pounced. They fought for the bright blue and yellow ball with their bare feet, neither of them shy about throwing elbows and grabbing at each other in their struggle to gain control. Fili slipped in the mud, one foot suddenly sliding out from under him. Kili quickly stole the volleyball and won the contest, dribbling down to Bilbo’s side of the field.

The game began.
The rest of his team sprung into action around Bilbo, immediately moving to cover players that had come to support Kili in his initial run for the goal. Bilbo dithered as he struggled to find something to do. It had been over twenty years since he had last played football, and he couldn’t say that he had done it well, or even willingly. Jogging aimlessly, he eventually found his way to Bofur’s side. While the other man didn’t seem overly invested in the game like their other teammates, he clearly was not as miserable as Bilbo was. Bofur tipped his head back to catch the rain, obviously enjoying it.

“How do you all play like this often?” asked Bilbo, held rapt by the way Thorin and Gloin scrabbled with an enthusiasm that made up for their obvious lack of skill.

“Only when the princes have one of their whims,” said Bofur, cheering as Dwalin barrelled through the scuffle and took control of the ball and sent it sailing toward Ori. “Then His Majesty will usually indulge it.”

“Does he do that often, then?”

Ori dove on the ball, muddying the entire front side of his shirt and obscuring the graphic that advertised some sort of Korean pop band. He held it up triumphantly, wiping the mud from his wispy facial scruff. Dori let out a whoop of pride, even though he was playing for the other team.

“Oh, often enough. Especially when they’re relatively harmless and there isn’t anything else to do,” Bofur replied.

“Huh,” said Bilbo, watching as Ori drop kicked the ball and sent it careening to the other side of the pitch. They jogged over the imaginary center line after the rest of their teammates, running this way and that and playfully jostling one another while they chatted and tried to look busy covering each other. Bilbo began to breathe hard. He started sweating under his jacket, just as Fili had predicted.

“Baggins!” snapped Thorin, apparently taking his role as defenseman seriously and keeping to their side of the field. “Stop fraternizing with the enemy!”

“Urgh, I’m hardly fraternizing!” called Bilbo, pausing to plant his hands on his hips and glare in the king’s direction. However, he had to quickly scramble to the side, as he was nearly bowled over by a maniacally laughing Dwalin. The bald man furiously dribbled the ball back to Bilbo and Fili’s side of the pitch. Thorin lunged, roughly fighting him for it with enough spitting viciousness to rival that of an angry, feral tomcat.

Just as Dwalin threw his shoulder into Thorin's chest, the ball flew up out of the scuffle. It arced over the field, landing precisely at Bilbo’s feet with a wet plop.

“Er,” he said dumbly, staring at it.

“I think you’re supposed to kick it,” said Bofur helpfully.

“Baggins! Look out!” called Nori from across the pitch.

Bilbo looked up, heart seizing in fear as he saw six feet of overly-muscular, tattooed Eastern European barrelling straight toward him in the pouring rain. A grin of pure bloodlust sat cracked on Dwalin's face, his eyes wild and ecstatic with the thrill of the chase. Bilbo shrieked, kicking out blindly and sending the volleyball sailing.

“Nice shot, Bilbo!” crowed Bofur, following the trajectory of the ball with his eyes and holding a hand over them to keep the water from dripping. “You just scored a goal!”
Though the rain blurred his vision slightly, Bilbo cracked open one of his eyes to see his teammates staring at him in shock. His stomach fluttered a bit in excitement at the news “I did?”

“Aye, but it was on your own team, unfortunately,” the other man said. He sounded a little sorry about it.

Bilbo’s stomach dropped. As his vision cleared, he could see that his teammates were staring at him not just in shock, but also a little bit of anger. Ori looked at his hands, as if he blamed himself for the own goal. Thorin glared thunderously at him near the cricket stump that acted as the goalpost, squeezing the volleyball so hard it looked to be in danger of popping. Fili jogged over to him.

“Good effort, Mister Boggins,” he said, laying a conciliatory hand on Bilbo’s shoulder. “Just kick it in the other direction next time.”

“Quite,” said Bilbo, utterly flustered. Not only did his face burn, but he felt like his whole body had heated to the point that he feared he was in danger of visibly steaming in the cold. The wind did nothing to help abate it as he continued to cook in the impervious material of his rain jacket.

“I’m actually going to go take my coat off, start the next round without me,” he said, turning tail in order to escape scrutiny.

“Thanks Baggins!” cackled Dwalin. He gave Bilbo a mocking salute as he rushed past him toward the porch.

Bounding up the steps, Bilbo shrugged off his jacket, folding it neatly next to his boots. He sighed in relief as the cool air met his overheated skin, hoping his no-doubt blotchy color would return to normal soon. He reluctantly stepped back into the rain, grimacing as his thin undershirt immediately started clinging uncomfortably to his torso. He tried not to think about how it probably hugged every single one of his unflattering curves and bulges, especially how his belly hung slightly over his belt. He looked admiringly at Bombur, wishing that he had the sort of confidence the man displayed with his shirt off.

He jogged back to Bofur’s side, who was smiling bemusedly at him.

“Did I miss anything?” asked Bilbo.

Bofur’s eyes abruptly snapped to Bilbo’s face, from where they had been hovering blankly somewhere at the level of Bilbo’s chest. The other man shook his head slightly as if to clear it. Of what, though, Bilbo hadn’t the foggiest.

“Not really,” said Bofur, voice sounding strangely tight. “Bifur scored another goal. On us, this time.”

“Oh, good,” said Bilbo with relief. Hopefully now that they were tied, this meant that all was forgiven.

But when he turned to gaze at Thorin out of the corner of his eye, he saw that the king was standing stock still and staring daggers at him. His electric blue glare burned a hole in Bilbo’s side. Bilbo wrapped his arms around himself self-consciously, wishing he could hide from the angry scowl.

“Is he going to be mad at me the rest of the game?” he asked Bofur quietly.

“Oh, I dunno,” the other man said, still seeming preoccupied. “You can never tell with the king.”
“Körmek!” shouted Bifur suddenly from somewhere down the field.

“Your Majesty!” called Ori and Nori in tandem.

“Uncle, look out!” yelled Fili.

“Huh? What?” asked Thorin distractedly.

He finally tore his eyes away from Bilbo, just as Dwalin simultaneously cocked his foot back in order to give the ball a tremendous kick, which sent it rocketing through the air at a speed that Bilbo could have sworn almost broke the sound barrier. Thorin, mind still seemingly elsewhere, didn't have time to react. Bilbo turned just in time to watch, eyes wide, as Thorin's superhuman reflexes suddenly failed him.

There was a resounding smack as the ball mercilessly bashed itself against skin—straight into the king’s royal forehead.

Everything stopped as His Majesty flailed and went down for the count. Head snapping back and feet sliding out from under him, Thorin tumbled backward into the mud as the volleyball bounced off his face. He landed with a heavy splat on his back, the turf squelching in protest under his considerable weight. The king’s breath escaped his body with an audible whoosh, while the offending ball came to rest neatly in between his splayed legs.

Dwalin could only stare speechlessly at Thorin, gaping as his mouth opened and closed in mute shock. Not in much better shape, the rest of the company had frozen in mid-action.

“Thorin! Are you okay?” cried Kili, sliding wildly as he scrambled to the king’s side. Fili did much of the same, skidding on his bare heels. The two concerned nephews leaned over their prone uncle, hovering in worry.

Bilbo slowly wandered with the rest of the stunned company toward the king, who had just now sat up. His face was streaked with mud, which was starting to run in the pouring rain and mat itself in his beard. There was a noticeable red spot on his forehead from where the ball had struck him. He looked about as dumbstruck as everybody else, glancing down at the volleyball that rested innocently in his lap.

“I’m… I’m fine,” said Thorin slowly, swinging his arms and flexing his leg muscles as if to make sure they all still worked properly. “I don’t know what happened.”

“Mister Dwalin didn’t do it on purpose,” said Kili, clearly wishing to cut a fight off at the pass. Dwalin, who stood a little ways away from the huddle, merely nodded helplessly in agreement.

“No, he wouldn’t have,” agreed Thorin, apparently too discombobulated to argue. Still, he furrowed his brow and menaced the ball like it held all the answers and he needed nothing more than to scare them out of it. The volleyball remained stubbornly silent on the issue.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” asked Fili, voice adopting that same serious tone he had used with Bilbo at the mansion. “You usually could dodge something like that in your sleep.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” replied the king. His tone sounded somewhat more confident, though his voice was still distant. “But, perhaps that’s enough football for today.”

“That’s fine with me,” said Fili uneasily. There was a general murmur of agreement among the rest of the group, much to Bilbo’s relief. He was very ready to go inside and get dry.
Thorin looked up from the ball, accidentally making eye contact with Bilbo in the process. However, before he could quail under His Majesty’s gaze, the king abruptly turned it away. Thorin exhaled loudly through his nose, rubbing at his forehead as his cheeks flushed in the chill.

Spirits somehow lower than what they had begun with, the company trudged back across the field to the pavilion. They began gathering up the belongings that had been left scattered on the porch, mood gloomy and overall looking worse for wear. In Bilbo’s opinion, they all looked as if they were doing their best impressions of drowned rats. Their drenched hair was stringing with moisture and sticking every which way, while their trousers and chests were positively splattered in mud. He looked down at himself, face flushing in embarrassment as he realized that his white undershirt was almost completely see-through.

He was about to step back inside in search of a towel when Kili let out a soft exclamation of surprise. The prince sat crouched in the back corner of the porch, where the corner of the deck met the exterior wood siding of the clubhouse. He beckoned his brother over.

“Fi, come look!” he whispered excitedly, pointing out something off the side of the porch. It looked to be on a patch of ground that was just barely sheltered under the lip of the overhanging wooden awning, which dripped awfully. Fili crouched down, balancing himself on the railing as he poked his head over and was dribbled on in the process.

“Oh my gosh,” he cooed, heedless of the heavy drops from above. Curious, Bilbo shuffled over to them.

“What are you two looking at?” he asked. He was quickly shushed by the princes, Kili pointing out a dark gray blob resting in the soggy grass in the juncture of the porch foundation and the outside wall of the pavilion.

Bilbo let out a small gasp of surprise, immediately charmed by the grumpy mother cat who was busy nursing her small kittens. While sheltered enough to not actively be rained on, she was most certainly damp from the constant dripping and looked supremely unhappy about it. She hissed at them, which made Bilbo smile.

“We can’t keep it,” Thorin remarked authoritatively from above them. Bilbo stiffened as he peered over his shoulder at the king.

“I know that,” said Kili sadly, though his lower lip poked out in a pout anyway. “But can’t we give her something to eat at least?”

“No, and no,” insisted Thorin. The king sighed as he rubbed at his forehead; the mark was slowly fading, but the impression of the volleyball’s panels were still starkly evident. “It’ll make her dependent on us. You know how cats are.”

“I suppose,” said Fili, tone glum. Kili nodded unhappily. The princes straightened, heading back inside toward the changing rooms and showers, which somehow still worked.

Bilbo remained crouched by the railing, wanting nothing more than to give the feline a small pet but knowing he would probably just be bitten for his efforts. It reminded him a little bit of Thorin, to be honest.

“Be careful to heed my words, Mister Baggins,” the king said stiffly, following in his nephews’ footsteps. Bilbo snorted. While the thought of adopting a mascot for their campaign was very
charming, he knew they couldn’t bring her along with them, especially while she was still nursing.

Bilbo looked up, intending to call Bofur over to see the kittens, but the man was nowhere to be found. Bilbo glanced around, confused.

“Looking for my brother, Mister Baggins?”

Bilbo jumped, immediately relaxing when he saw it was only Bombur. He too crouched down next to Bilbo in one graceful movement, the water from his moustache and soaked-flat hair rolling along the creases of his face as he smiled at the cats. The railing creaked as he leaned over the side, but it held his weight.

“Ah, just wanted to make sure he got a chance to see the kittens,” Bilbo said, turning his gaze back to them.

“I’m afraid he was in a rush for the shower. Something about washing his hair,” said Bombur, abortively reaching out his hand toward the mother cat before thinking better of it. She watched it suspiciously, her green eyes narrowed at the both of them.

“Well, that’s a shame then,” replied Bilbo with a frown, a little disappointed. This was the exact sort of sight that Bofur would have gone crazy over. Bilbo had rapidly come to understand that the man was easily enamored with soft, helpless things, and seeing Bofur’s lovely smile was always a nice sight.

“I’m sure she’ll be here when he gets out,” said Bombur, voice laden with good humor. He effortlessly straightened, slicking his hair back to cover his bald spot while he could. “I’m thinking he had the right idea, actually. We should get washed up, too.”

Bilbo straightened as well. “That sounds wonderful,” he said, excited to wash off the dirt though he knew the water would be cold. At least he would be clean, and have a chance to wash his muddy trousers.

Bombur nodded at him. Gathering up their articles of clothing, they followed the rest of the company. Bilbo headed for the showers, looking forward to the warmth of the waiting fire.

Chapter End Notes

Translation notes:
Körmek -- [Crimean Tatar] Look out/see

Thank you for reading and indulging my burning need for desirable soft wet t-shirt Bilbo. Maybe his attraction isn't so one-sided, after all ;^) (Did I establish Thorin's fast reflexes just as a set up for this joke? Maybe.) Next chapter will pick up immediately after this one.

Thorin has BIG "do not talk to me or my son ever again" energy when it comes to the princes. Also, yes, Balin, Oin, and Gandalf make up the 55+ community of the company. I would be lying if I said I didn't have an extensive cheat sheet that lists all the company's exact ages, professions, politics, and brief family histories and interests.

Misirlou is like, THE surf song, but Thorin's actually going off his knowledge of the
folk song popularized by Dick Dale, king of surf guitar, who was a Lebanese immigrant and probably heard it in Lebanon/the Lebanese enclave he lived in first. It's actually a composition penned by Turkish immigrants in Greece in the early 20th century, which quickly became popularized throughout the Mediterranean, and spread through the Arabic, Turkish, and Persian-speaking worlds. I really like this cover with the original Greek lyrics on the three-stringed bouzouki, which is similar to what I imagine Thorin's lute sounds like (though the tog'shur is perhaps a little more bass).

**Music that goes with this chapter:**
Supermassive Black Hole - Muse

[personal blog] [lotr/fanfic blog] [soundtrack]
Quid Pro Quo

Chapter Summary

Bilbo takes a surreptitious smoke on the porch after the football game. Thorin is there, and conversations are had.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait. Work piled up and I took time off this weekend to spend time with my dog in the country. Hope this is enough to make up for it! Another transitional chapter, though some stuff is introduced in this one that is like... important to me on a personal level, so I hope you all can just roll with the choices I make. if not....¯\_(ツ)_/¯

TW for standard gore, minor vehicle accidents, and highly inappropriate movie references

See the end of the chapter for more notes

About an hour later, clad in his spare trousers and more or less clean, Bilbo took one bracing breath before sliding open the door that led onto the rickety porch. He shivered slightly in the chill, but took advantage of the solitude to slip the cigarillo and the lighter he had bummed off Gloin out of the breast pocket of his waistcoat, so he could peacefully smoke it away from Gandalf’s prying eyes.

Gandalf’s new hobby seemed to be enacting a one-man crusade to convince Bilbo to quit smoking almost entirely through sheer bluster—usually while the lawyer was busy puffing away at his own pipe. Bilbo’s prize churchwarden was sitting on his nightstand back in Bag End, woefully forgotten in his haste to leave home. The first time he had asked Gandalf if they could share a pipe had resulted in a long-winded tirade about the dangers of tobacco that rivaled even the lecture his mother had given him after she caught him stealing her Marlboro Lights from her desk drawer when he was thirteen. And much like that time with Mum, Bilbo had the sneaking suspicion that Gandalf’s hypocritical ranting was less out of concern for his health, and more out of boredom and an unwillingness to share.

Whatever Gandalf’s mysterious reasoning for his constant badgering and judgmental stares, Bilbo had begun to thoroughly tire of it. So, when Gloin had quietly offered Bilbo one of his newly discovered cigarillos while Gandalf had been distracted by Kili regaling him and the other two older members of the company with the story of how Dwalin had accidentally pumpkin-chucked a volleyball at the king’s head, Bilbo had taken the chance to surreptitiously nip off to the one place he could be alone and figured nobody else would look for him. Namely outside, back in the howling wind and rain.

Bilbo placed the cigarillo between his lips and lit it, cupping his hand around the flame to shield it from a gust of wind so strong it almost made the whole deck shear a bit sideways. He took a
thoughtful drag. The tobacco wasn't bad, he supposed. A little spicier than he normally liked, but it did its job in delivering some of the nicotine buzz he had been craving.

"Aren't you on a smoking ban?"

Bilbo gasped, accidentally inhaling the smoke as he did so.

"Who the hell—? Oh, it's you," said Bilbo in between startled coughs. He glowered in the direction of the unexpected voice, annoyed that his private time had been interrupted.

Thorin smirked at him over his shoulder, crouched in the same corner Kili and Fili had been earlier. He gave a mocking little salute with his free hand, the other busy holding a half-empty bag of unflavored beef jerky.

"Me," the king replied humorlessly.

Bilbo took another angry draw of the (he figured it was Cuban, probably) tobacco, crossing his arms in irritation. Thorin raised his eyebrows in an accusatory manner, which made Bilbo scowl.

"Oh, don't give me that," he said on the exhale, releasing a large cloud of peppery smoke in the process. "I'm a grown man. I can do whatever I well please."

"Is that why you've come out here to hide?" the king asked sardonically.

"I'm not hiding!" insisted Bilbo, waving his cigarillo conspicuously for emphasis. "I'm just enjoying a moment of solitude. Which you so rudely interrupted, O King."

Instead of becoming angry, as Bilbo had half-feared, Thorin only huffed in amusement. "You keep assuming that I'm the one who follows you. Have you always been so self-centered?"

Bilbo rather felt like he had been pushed back out into the icy rain at that comment. The irritation drained out of him and was quickly replaced with embarrassment.

"Right," he said, sufficiently cowed.

"Indeed," His Majesty retorted, the corners of his eyes crinkling smugly. He straightened himself from his crouching position, turning to fully face Bilbo as he rested some of his weight on the creaky railing. The casual position accentuated the long line of his muscular legs, which were hugged nicely by tailoring of his jeans.

"What exactly are you doing out here then?" asked Bilbo, doing his utmost not to stare. Instead, he curiously inspected the bag of dried meat. "Not taking more than your fair share of rations, I hope."

Thorin's face turned stormy at that, even as he shiftily tried to hide the package from view. Bilbo sighed and resignedly drew in more smoke. He had only been teasing, of course. Gloin had provided more than enough jerky to feed an entire regiment over the course of a whole year, let alone a mere fifteen people for a couple of weeks.

It was just as well, Bilbo supposed. The conversation had been teetering dangerously close to civil, after all.

"You dare to imply that I've been stealing food?" spat the king, expression twisting.

*Glad to see that's been rectified,* thought Bilbo wryly, taking another drag.

However, the acidity of His Majesty's response was decidedly lessened by a sudden noise
emanating from behind the king’s back, which caused Thorin to jump and Bilbo to almost drop his cigarillo in surprise. Carried by the wind, it was surprisingly loud enough to be heard over the sheeting rain.

"What was that?" asked Bilbo, eyeing Thorin anew with an increased degree of suspicion. It sounded an awful lot like a pleading mew.

"What was what?" Thorin replied quickly. A little too quickly, if you asked Bilbo.

"That noise! It almost sounds like a ca—" Bilbo was interrupted by the noise again, which was somehow even louder the second time. His eyebrows rocketed toward his hairline, ears straining against the rain.

“It’s the wind,” Thorin stubbornly insisted, even as what was most definitely an imploring meow sounded once more from behind him.

"No, I know what the wind sounds like," Bilbo said, a delighted smile slowly spreading across his face, "and I know what a cat sounds like. That's definitely a cat noise."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," said the king. His expression suddenly turned shifty again as he positioned his body more squarely toward Bilbo, using his bulk to block whatever was behind it from view.

Bilbo felt something like giddiness bubble in his chest at the king's damning obstinacy. Bilbo craned his neck to see whatever it was Thorin was hiding, His Majesty doggedly refusing to meet his eyes. Bilbo felt a rare spark of bravery seize hold of him.

"Your Majesty, whatever were you doing with that beef jerky?" he singsonged, slowly creeping toward where the king was perched. Thorin backed himself further into the corner in response, looking very much like a hunted animal.

"You liar!" Bilbo laughed, shoving his way into Thorin's personal space to peer around him. The king simply stood there, evidently too stunned at Bilbo’s burst of confidence to protest as he was manhandled out of the way. Bilbo was somewhat shocked himself that Thorin actually let him do it, his free hand feeling strangely warm after touching the king’s muscular shoulder. It took all his self control not to give the flesh a testing squeeze, to see if it was really as hard as it looked.

All thoughts of the king’s various muscles quickly flew out the window, however, as he gazed down at the patch of grass just below the deck railing. Just as Bilbo had suspected, the mother cat was still laying there, her kittens huddling near her to stay out of the drip of the awning. She was chewing happily on a piece of dried meat, which had presumably come from Thorin’s package of jerky. She blinked up curiously at Bilbo, purring furiously as an engine.

"I think," said Bilbo thoughtfully, grin widening, “that His Majesty is a bit of a hypocrite.”

Thorin dragged a hand down his face, unable to look Bilbo in the eye. “She has mouths to feed,” he reasoned miserably.

"I'm sure the princes will be thrilled to hear about this," responded Bilbo playfully.

Thorin stiffened. “Don’t tell Fili and Kili,” he said. “Please. I’d never hear the end of it.”
"I should think not!" replied Bilbo, chuckling as he took another draw of his cigarillo. "I can’t wait to see their faces."

He inwardly boggled at the thought of the proud king pleading him to do anything. Mischief aside, he had no actual intention of telling anyone about Thorin's good deed. Some deep, inexplicable part of Bilbo wanted to keep this to himself, his own private secret about the king's hidden softer side. Of course, Thorin had no idea about any of that, so he only frowned loudly at Bilbo in response.

His expression was so openly plaintive that Bilbo couldn’t find it in himself to keep up the charade any longer. He took pity on the king.

“Don’t worry,” he said gently, awkwardly patting Thorin on his wide shoulder. “I won’t tell anybody that you’re not as tough as you look. I know you have a reputation to maintain.”

“Right,” said Thorin, brow furrowing like he didn’t quite know exactly what Bilbo had meant by ‘reputation.’ Still, he looked significantly at Bilbo’s lit cigarillo. “And I shan’t be telling Gandalf about your little indiscretion, either.”

“Ha! *Quid pro quo*, I see,” replied Bilbo. He squatted and tentatively reached a hand down to see if the cat would accept it this time. She sniffed it for a second before butting her head against it. Bilbo felt about a hundred feet tall at the permission, utterly thrilled.

"*Quid pro quo*, I tell you things, you tell me things," His Majesty muttered absently, scratching at his beard. Bilbo whipped his head around to stare at the king, hand hovering just above one of the kittens.

"Did you just quote *Silence of the Lambs* at me?" he asked excitedly, too gobsmacked at the reference to one of his favorite house arrest staples to care much about the context of it. (Bilbo's tastes in media tended to vacillate wildly between fancifully offbeat and gruesome, which is why Cher's 1987 romantic comedy *Moonstruck* competed with the classic Anthony Hopkins thriller for the top spot on his list of favorite films.)

“Oh. I suppose I did,” said Thorin, as if he didn’t quite believe it himself.

The king crossed his arms against the chill, which had caused Thorin’s cheeks to flush once again. Even though the Khazâd were seemingly impervious to the cold, Bilbo worried about the fact that the king was dressed in only a thin t-shirt. This one, a worn navy blue shirt whose collar was slightly stretched out, advertised some place called Jackson Hole, Wyoming. The Depeche Mode shirt was presumably still drying by the fire, next to Bilbo's other trousers and the rest of the company's soggy clothes.

"Why did you make such a big fuss with the lads earlier if you were just going to come out and feed it anyway?" asked Bilbo, snatching his hand away before it could get clawed. Despite the cat's friendlier turn of disposition, she was still understandably protective of her kittens.

If Bilbo was being honest, he didn't really expect Thorin to answer. In fact, he expected the king to storm off at some unintentional offense on Bilbo's part, which had seemingly become the norm for their interactions. But to his utter shock, His Majesty answered, and he answered honestly, to boot.

"It's… hard, being king," Thorin replied, voice measured in a way that belied old anxieties. He crouched down next to Bilbo, their shoulders brushing as he reached out with one huge hand to daintily scratch under the mother cat's chin. She purred contentedly in response. "You have to make decisions counter to your own instincts. My nephews are young yet, and Fili will be king..."
after me. I have to guide him in learning how to make those decisions, those sacrifices."

Bilbo didn't exactly know how whether or not to feed a stray cat factored into that heavy line of reasoning, but he decided not to look too far into it. "Have you made many sacrifices in your life, Your Majesty?" he asked softly instead.

Thorin didn't answer, his broad hand spanning the entirety of the cat's back as he stroked it. Bilbo smiled anyway, taking another thoughtful drag of his ever-shortening cigarillo.

"Look at us, having a civil conversation like two normal adults," observed Bilbo, exhaling smoke into the rain. "I tell you things, you tell me things,' indeed. Are you sure that whack to the head didn’t give you brain damage?"

"Don’t push it, Baggins," the king snorted.

Thorin's still-damp hair hung loose around his face, which created a dark, silver-streaked curtain that obscured most of his expression. Even so, Bilbo could swear he was smiling. It made something in his chest bloom warmly, and Bilbo suddenly felt massive again—like he could do anything short of walking on water or moving a mountain, though he would certainly give both his best effort if one had asked him to.

If Thorin had asked him to.

Bilbo took another draw of smoke. Riding the wave of daring he suddenly felt, he offered the tapered end of the nub to Thorin.

“Want some?” he asked, trying to ignore the swarm of butterflies in the pit of his stomach.

“No, thank you. I don’t smoke,” His Majesty said, voice carefully polite. “Hate the taste of tobacco, to be honest. And the smell.”

“Oh, I see,” said Bilbo, deflating slightly. “Sorry for smoking up the porch, then.”

“Don’t worry about it,” the king replied neutrally. A traitorous part of Bilbo’s brain, a nagging voice that instinctively tried to ruin everything, loudly wondered if that was why Dwalin smoked exclusively clove cigarettes, with their distinctly botanical odor.

The thought soured Bilbo's mood more than he expected. He took one last drag before snubbing the last of the cigarillo out on the deck. He straightened, smoothing out the nonexistent wrinkles in his waistcoat.

“Right. Well, it’s getting quite a bit chilly. I should be heading back inside,” he said, sparing one last glance for the dark gray cat and her brood of tiny kittens.

Thorin threw a few more pieces of dried meat on the ground near the feline, which she eyed hungrily. He then also drew himself to his full height, once again towering over Bilbo. Bilbo swallowed hard as he suddenly came face to face with the lettering that stretched across Thorin’s chest.

“I think I’ll join you,” His Majesty rumbled. He strode over to the sliding door and gallantly held it open for him. “After you.”

“T-thank you,” Bilbo stuttered, voice embarrassingly shrill. Mortified, he scurried inside without waiting to see if the king was following him.
He shuffled dazedly back into the banquet room, feeling increasingly like the past few minutes of conversation with His Majesty had been nothing more than a particularly unrealistic dream. Thorin, the proud Khan of Erebor, feeding a cat and afterward being charmingly embarrassed about it? Preposterous. He had even quoted Anthony Hopkins, which was something Bilbo had a hard time believing would happen even in the wildest corner of his imagination.

Kili was somehow still in the midst of spinning a yarn about the football game, which at this point was probably set to go down into Khuzdul legend. Gandalf smiled as he puffed contentedly on his long-stemmed pipe, the abandoned cribbage board sitting at his elbow. Seeing him still thoroughly engrossed in the tale, Bilbo took advantage of the man’s distraction to sneak over to Gloin, who also seemed rapt despite the fact that he had actually played in the game.

“Thank you so much, Mister Gloin,” whispered Bilbo, reaching for his breast pocket to retrieve the plastic lighter the man had loaned him, “Remind me to return the favor in the futu—”

Bilbo abruptly cut himself off as he felt his stomach drop out from under him. He fingered his breast pocket, which was empty save for the lighter. Panicking, he roughly patted his chest and then his waist and trouser pockets, all while desolately muttering, “Oh dear, no, no, no, no, no!”

“Mister Baggins? Are you quite alright?” asked Gloin tentatively, though Bilbo hardly noticed it through the high pitched whine of hysteria that rung in his ears.

“Oh, I’ve lost it!” mumbled Bilbo miserably.

“My lighter? Don’t worry so much about it, it only cost a quid,” said Gloin, obviously uncomfortable at Bilbo’s emotional display.

Bofur stood from his chair next to Gloin, coming around to Bilbo’s side of the table and gently resting a hand on his elbow. “What’s this then? Have we lost something?”

“Lad’s having a meltdown over a misplaced lighter, it seems,” replied Gloin gruffly. “No idea why. It was plastic and half-empty anyway.”

“I have your bloody lighter,” Bilbo sniffed, throwing the purple piece of plastic down onto the table in a fit of pique. The noise startled Kili into silence, the room’s attention suddenly shifting toward the three of them. “It’s my handkerchief that’s gone missing.”

“Oh, yes. Clearly quite different,” muttered Gloin, shying away from Bilbo’s ire. To Bilbo’s alarm, he felt frustrated tears prick at the back of his eyes, threatening to spill over as he frantically checked his pockets once again.

“Do you remember where you last had it?” asked Bofur gently, hand moving from Bilbo’s elbow to his upper back. He began to rub soothingly. His head was bare for once, the fur-lined hat also drying by the fireplace with the rest of the clothes. His hair hung stick-straight and dark as an oil slick around his pleasant face, features deadly serious as he addressed Bilbo’s issue.

“No,” replied Bilbo, angrily pinching at the bridge of his nose. He took a deep breath, willing himself to calm down and think about this rationally. “Well, yes, actually. Before we went out to play football.”

“Then it has to be around here somewhere!” remarked Bofur. “If not, I probably have a flannel or something you could borrow.”

“You don’t understand, this handkerchief is special. It can’t just simply be replaced,” Bilbo stressed. He wrung his hands, thoughts spiraling anxiously. What if it was gone forever? It was the
only thing left he had of Mum, other than the Weatherby.

“Well then, we’ll simply just have to find it,” remarked Bofur, voice straightforwardly optimistic. He smiled reassuringly, but his easy confidence and handsome dimples did little to ease Bilbo’s anxious fears.

“Oh, but what if it’s gone forever?” he moaned.

“Is this what you’re looking for?” asked Thorin, who suddenly came to stand only a few steps behind Bilbo.

Bilbo spun around, eyes immediately focusing in on the white square of slightly damp, embroidered fabric the king held out toward him. A wave of dizzying relief washed over him as he took the handkerchief from Thorin with shaking hands. In his distraction, he failed to notice how the king’s eyes flickered down toward their hands in shock as their fingers brushed slightly.

“Oh!” Bilbo breathed, blinking back tears. “Yes, it is. Thank you so, so much, Your Majesty. You have no idea what this means to me.” He glanced up at the king with a look of sheer gratitude before quickly unfolding the square and checking it for damage or loose thread.

“Of course,” said Thorin, sounding strangely overcome. “It fell out of your pocket on the porch.”

Bofur sent a confused glance toward him, but quickly turned his attention back to Bilbo.

“Well then! Crisis averted, I should think,” he said, smile seeming a bit more strained than usual. “Why all the fuss, if I may ask?”

Bilbo’s eyes snapped up, cheeks flushing as he realized the full extent of the scene he had just made. The whole company was staring at him expectantly. Even chatterbox Kili, who usually had some sort of smart comment or another, remained patiently silent. Bilbo clutched at the fabric, twisting it as he grasped for words that wouldn’t come.

“That handkerchief belonged to Missus Baggins,” interjected Gandalf helpfully, blowing out a perfect ring of pipe smoke in the process. “So you can imagine it’s quite special to Mister Baggins, here.”

Bilbo grimaced as the group erupted into a flurry of sympathetic murmurs at Gandalf’s words.

Bofur stiffened beside him, hand freezing on Bilbo’s back before he ripped it away as if he had been burned. However, confusing as that reaction was, it was Thorin’s response that puzzled Bilbo the most.

The king had frozen, blue eyes wide and mouth slightly ajar. Then in the next second, his expression morphed into something incomprehensibly furious. It was like some sort of emotional wall had abruptly slammed down on Thorin’s face, the pink of his lips completely disappearing into his beard as his mouth narrowed into a hard, wrathful line.

"Missus… I see," he seethed, abruptly turning on his heel and stalking back toward the creaking porch.

Bilbo gaped after him. He was absolutely certain that he couldn't possibly have said anything offensive, if only by sheer virtue of the fact that he hadn't said anything at all. Still, the king’s exit left him felt strangely guilty, as his mind hopelessly hunted for what he could have possibly done
wrong. Something near Bilbo’s heart twisted forlornly, confident in the fact that any fragile rapport built between them had been summarily shattered.

Nobody else took much notice of the king's exit save for Dwalin. He scrutinized the king over a freshly lit cigarette as he stormed past, but otherwise remained mum.

"So. There's, er, a Missus Baggins then. That's great," said Bofur with a cheer that sounded bizarrely forced. He kept his hands firmly at his sides, and it was only then that Bilbo realized just how extremely tactile the man was, along with how much he had gotten used to that fact.

"Erm, yes. I suppose," said Bilbo, tucking the handkerchief securely back into his breast pocket. "Though she also prefers to go by her maiden name, Belladonna Took."

“Belladonna. What a lovely name,” responded Bofur with a robotic sort of politeness, smile fixed. It didn’t reach his eyes.

Gloin abruptly rose from his seat, clapping his rough hands on Bilbo's shoulders with a tearful expression. The large scar above sitting just above one of the redhead's unkempt eyebrows quivered as his forehead wrinkled in emotion. "I apologize for my words, Mister Baggins, truly. If I had known that you had lost something belonging to your wife…"

"Hold on," said Bilbo, holding up his hands in bafflement. "My what now?"

Gandalf spluttered on the stem of his pipe as he choked on a laugh, drawing concerned stares from Balin and Oin. The rest of the group were too busy clucking sympathetically amongst themselves to pay much attention to Gandalf cough, though Dori and Nori only stared hard at Bilbo, brows furrowed in identical expressions of confusion.

"Your wife," Gloin repeated, as if Bilbo had somehow misheard. "Missus Baggins?"

"But wait, I thought Missus Baggins was your mother?" chimed in Bombur. Bilbo could have cried in gratitude.

"Yes! Don’t you think if I had a spouse I would have mentioned them by now?" he exclaimed incredulously.

"Your mother," exhaled Bofur, running a hand through his hair and tucking it behind his ears. It flowed through his fingers like water, and Bilbo offhandedly admired how it shined in the firelight. "I was afr—I thought—” Bofur laughed suddenly, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, I understand now."

"Still, I understand how important mementos of a loved one are," said Gloin seriously, giving Bilbo's shoulders one last sympathetic squeeze before releasing them.

"Oh, Fi and I totally get it," said Kili kindly from across the room. He reached into his back pocket to pull out his bandana, which upon closer inspection looked almost exactly like Thorin's. "Mum gave us and our uncle these before we left. She had them blessed by our local shaman for protection. I know that I would be really upset if I somehow misplaced mine."

"Really," remarked Bilbo, throat suddenly dry. His eyes darted in the direction Thorin had stormed off in.

"Really," replied Fili in lieu of his brother, who nodded happily.

"You all seem quite family oriented," Bilbo observed, for once taking real notice of the fact that he and Gandalf were the only people in the party without an accompanying relative.
"Oh, family is the most important thing in the entire world," said Bofur, looking markedly more relaxed. His tone held a casual conviction that spoke to his utter belief in the statement. The others in the group nodded along in agreement, though Gandalf peered contemplatively into the bowl of his pipe.

"All Khazâd are related to each other in some way or another, if only by virtue of being descended from Mahal," said Ori. Both Dori and Nori smiled indulgently in his direction, as proud teachers would at their star pupil.

"Though, that in itself is a highly sacred thing," added Balin, regarding Bilbo shrewdly. “It’s why we like to keep each other within arm’s reach, whether physically or symbolically, and surround ourselves with our own. We gain strength from our bonds with each other. Prolonged feuds, disowning a child—both are highly uncommon among Ereboreans. It’s something that outsiders can’t truly understand."

Something ugly twisted in Bilbo’s chest at that. Feeling rather like he had just been socked in the stomach with a brick, and too off-balance by Thorin’s sudden heel-face turn, Bilbo was unable to keep his heart from being weighed down by the dark sludge of envy.

"Right. Well, my mother and I were quite close. I’m glad to see you all relate," he said, doing his best to keep his voice steady. He excused himself from the table, wandering over to the crackling fire under the pretense of checking on how his freshly washed undershirt and trousers were drying. Bofur let him go in favor walking back over to chat with his brother and cousin.

Bilbo stared pensively into the flames after testing the dampness of his clothes, feeling very alone.

"They don't mean to alienate you, Bilbo," sighed Gandalf, who had moved to stand beside him in front of the fire. "Believe me, I find the Khuzd tradition for insularity incredibly frustrating at times as well."

"I know it's not their fault. It's just hard being reminded that you're an outsider all the time," murmured Bilbo quietly, bringing a hand to rest over his mouth to hide the involuntary quiver of his chin. "I just wish she were here."

Gandalf breathed heavily through his nose. "I do, too," he replied sadly.

"She would have been much better than me at all this."

"Now what have I told you about selling yourself short?" the lawyer grumbled. “You’ve been managing quite well so far, if I do say so myself."

"Ha! You're entirely too charitable, old boy," Bilbo laughed humorlessly. "At least we have each other, though… don't we?"

Gandalf's answering smile was somewhat melancholy, though his eyes gleamed as he looked sidelong at Bilbo. "Of course we do," he replied softly.

"Us outsiders have to look out for each other, after all," Bilbo said, breathing a sigh of relief. At least he had somebody on his side.

Gandalf chuckled, puffing thoughtfully. "You're quite right, Bilbo. Quite right, indeed."
The next day found Bilbo once again perched on the back of Dori's bike (just as unhappily as that first day leaving the hangar, though thankfully more lucid) and the Weathertop Cricket Club abandoned with deliberate care, all traces of their occupancy having been meticulously erased. While the rain had refused to let up to anything less than a steady drizzle, the wind had thankfully died down, which was enough for Thorin, Balin, and Gandalf to agree that it wasn't worth waiting for conditions to get any better. The company had set out early in the morning on their fully loaded motorbikes, hoping to make it to their next planned stop by the early afternoon, as their petrol supply was starting to become perilously low.

Bilbo didn't know exactly how close they were to that goal, but in his opinion it wasn't nearly close enough. While the fear that accompanied motorbike travel never truly went away, after two weeks of doing it near constantly, Bilbo had found ways to manage it accordingly. This was much to Dori's relief, as the man would quietly complain to Balin about having his ribs crushed when he thought Bilbo couldn't hear. There was certainly something to be said for immersion therapy.

The only roadblock to that, however, was that Bilbo’s anxiety only intensified when they were forced to travel in the rain. No matter how many times they had to do it, Bilbo could never get comfortable riding in wet conditions, as it had the added bonus of making Bilbo feel like he was being waterboarded if he accidentally angled his face just right. As a result, to their mutual reluctance, he and Dori had become exceedingly comfortable with each other over the past weeks, as Bilbo continued to clutch at him and Dori continued to grumble (to a lesser degree) about a bruised ribcage.

Bilbo turned his face from the stinging drops as they puttered on, the caravan traveling slower than any of them would like due to the unfavorable conditions. He glanced briefly over his shoulder to inspect the large branch Dori had just swerved to avoid, accidentally catching a glimpse of the blank slate of Thorin's visor as the king rode drag, as usual.

Bilbo grimaced, reluctantly turning his face back toward the wet. The king hadn't so much as looked at Bilbo once since he had returned from his second sojourn on the porch, though he had definitely calmed down after apparently spending another half hour petting the cat. While not actively antagonistic toward Bilbo, the king acted as if he barely existed.

It felt somehow worse than being insulted.

The rain mercilessly pelted Bilbo's face as he resolutely stared straight ahead, resisting the urge to look back. Two could play at this game, he thought sourly. As far as Bilbo was concerned, they were still acting under the auspices quid pro quo.

Bilbo blinked as Fili and Kili abruptly peeled off from their spot near Balin at the front, slowing their motorbikes enough to let most of the group pass before rejoining next to Ori. He rode just ahead of Bilbo and Dori, and Dori stiffened as the princes yelled something to the young man that was unintelligible over the rain.

“Something wrong, Mister Dori?” Bilbo yelled over the sound of the engine. He found enough courage to let go of the man long enough to push his sodden bangs out of his eyes with a trembling hand. He definitely needed a haircut.

“Hm. It’s nothing,” said Dori in the manner of someone who was definitely bothered about something. The princes slowed once more, Ori with them this time, and let Dori and the rest of the bikes pass before speeding up again. Dori gazed hard at Ori as they passed, Ori pointedly keeping his visored helmet turned away from his brother.
“What are they doing?” asked Bilbo, craning his head to see the lads form a tight group a ways behind Thorin.

“Nothing good, probably,” Dori muttered. Bilbo felt the words more than heard them.

Bilbo huffed, figuring that boys would indeed be boys, after all. However, anxiety churned mercilessly in his gut at the thought of motorcycles being added to the mix. He wondered if Dori, mother hen that he was, was feeling much of the same.

It all happened extremely quickly after that.

Bilbo was once again pushing his sopping bangs out of his eyes when something burst from the bushes on his right and stumbled blindly onto the motorway. Bilbo yelped as Dori deftly swerved and sped past, grasping on for dear life.

Then there was the tell-tale squeal of a slightly bald tire losing traction on the wet pavement a ways behind them, and the thunderous crash of metal against tarmac. Dori immediately slammed on his brakes, just in time for Bilbo to twist his upper body around and see Fili’s motorbike on its side, skidding in a shower of sparks into the ditch on the far side of the road. To Bilbo’s utter horror, Fili himself was sliding in the opposite direction, having landed hard on his back, a fall that was hopefully cushioned some by his overstuffed pack. He rolled in a way that looked supremely painful into the middle of the other lane.

“Fili!” Kili screamed, loud and raw enough to be heard over the rain.

The undead woman that had burst from the underbrush screeched in response, advancing on the prone Fili, who lay still in the street. Both Kili and Ori immediately skidded to a halt, tires squealing much as Fili’s had. The rest of the caravan stopped dead in its tracks, too stunned by the turn of events to react immediately.

Thorin, however, hardly even braked. He slammed his boot down onto the tarmac, seeming to physically lift the front of his bike as he flipped it around in a neat one-eighty and gunned the engine back toward the site of the crash. Water sprayed from his back wheel as he did so, desperately seeking traction as it briefly hydroplaned on the wet road. Bilbo could hardly look for fear of another accident.

Kili carelessly threw down his bike and sprinted toward his brother, clearly trying to reach him before the zombie could. Her short red pixie cut was plastered around her gaunt face, her sharp cheekbones standing stark as her dislocated jaw hung uselessly from the rest of her head. The rest of her seemed to be in fairly good shape however, as she moved quickly in her tattered workout gear and trainers. She looked as if she were dressed for a light morning jog.

Thorin aimed his mint green-accented motorbike straight for her, as if he intended to run her over with it. His sword was already drawn, the gleaming blade flashing menacingly in the low light of the overcast morning. However, in the time it took the king to perform his maneuver, Ori, who was much closer to the infected woman, had already drawn his short halberd and was dashing toward her. The young man tore off his helmet, presumably in order to better see where he was aiming, and took a mighty swing at the woman’s neck.

Bilbo’s hands shot up to his mouth to stifle a terrified scream as the blade connected, slicing about halfway through her spinal column before getting stuck. Blood spurted from the wound, splattering Ori’s grimacing face and bright yellow rain poncho. The woman collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut, crashing to the ground like a ragdoll just as Thorin arrived at the scene. Seeing that the threat was already being dealt with, he changed course and made a beeline for Fili.
Ori yanked his weapon free with a tremendous heave, before brandishing it like a hatchet and savagely bringing it back down on the woman’s neck. The blade sliced through cleanly this time, fully disconnecting her head from her body. The halberd bounced off the hard road surface, which sent Ori flailing as he tried to keep his balance. The infected’s limbs twitched disturbingly as the head rolled into the ditch on the side of the road.

The young artist’s shoulders heaved as he dropped the weapon, looking dazed as he sat hard on the ground with a wet splash. While his hair and goatee had immediately become sopping wet once he removed his helmet, he instinctively yanked on his hood, which was styled to look like the head of a duck, before sticking his head between his knees to presumably hyperventilate.

The sight seemed to shake something in Dori. The man let out an anguished cry of Khuzdul as he leapt from the bike, motor still running and leaving Bilbo to flail in panic before scrambling to catch both himself and the motorcycle. He switched off the ignition, turning to see Dori bolting in Ori’s direction, Nori hot on his heels. He had left his bike abandoned in the middle of the street with the motor still idling, having neglected to engage the kickstand much like Kili.

Speaking of, Kili had made it to Fili’s prone form, helmet thrown off to the side as he knelt over his brother. As Dori and Nori tended to poor Ori, Bilbo quickly made his way with the rest of the frantic company to see what had become of the crown prince. Though Dwalin had been at the front of the group, he barrelled through the rest of the party members and made it to Fili’s side only shortly after Thorin. He slid to a halt, immediately dropping to his knees next to the king to check over the blonde, who lay still.

“Mahal, Fi, please, please be okay. I’ll do anything,” Kili sobbed, rain and tears mixing on his cheeks and dripping off the end of his nose. His hands hovered worriedly over Fili’s body, as if afraid to touch him. Bilbo joined the huddle just as Fili let out a loud cough in response.

“Anything?” Fili wheezed, voice muffled by his full-face visor. “Does that mean you’ll finally do your laundry when mum asks you to?”

Bilbo let out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding as Kili barked out a startled laugh, scared tears still rolling down his face with the rain.

“Of course you bring that up, you utter asshole,” Kili chuckled, swiping at his eyes. “You must be fine then.”

Thorin and Dwalin gingerly helped Fili sit up, both men wordlessly communicating as they coordinated their actions to support the prince. Thorin had removed his helmet as well, eyes wide and haunted as he silently scanned his nephew for injuries.

“Can you get this thing off me? I can’t breathe,” said Fili, voice still strangely breathy.

Thorin’s hands immediately shot to Fili’s head, unclipping the strap and gently lifting the helmet off. Fili gasped as his face met the fresh air, wincing as he did so.

“Are you alright? Does anything hurt?” Thorin asked, voice pitched low and gentle. He raked a hand through Fili’s curls with a striking amount of tenderness, which the prince futilely tried to swat away.

“Of course everything hurts, I just flew off my fucking motorbike,” Fili coughed, voice strained as he finally shooed Thorin’s hands away. “But what kind of libero would I be if I didn’t know how to take a fall? I’m fine. How’s Ori doing?”
Dwalin looked toward the three half-brothers, Nori doing his best to get Ori to drink some water from an insulated metal canteen while Dori patted him down for injuries. The young man was visibly shaken, but otherwise seemed none the worse for wear. The blood was slowly starting to wash away from his face and poncho as the rain continued to pound down on him.

“He’s fine,” the large man gruffed, one burly paw still spread across the majority of Fili’s upper back to support him. “Lad’s got some steel in him, that’s for sure.”

“Out of my way, medic coming through!” Oin hollered, forcibly pushing his way through the huddle of bodies that had gathered around the prince and his companions. He shoved past Bilbo, shooing both Thorin and Dwalin away but considerately allowing Kili to remain close. The brunette clutched at his brother’s hand, biting his lip as the medic began his examination.

“This isn’t necessary,” Fili protested as Oin poked and prodded at him, testing reflexes and checking for swelling. Oin only gave him a waspish look as he prodded around Fili’s ribs, which earned him a pained hiss. Kili squeezed Fili’s hand in sympathy, wincing as if he could physically feel the other’s pain.

“Yes, definitely bruised. Maybe cracked,” Oin proclaimed. He heaved himself to his feet, much to the protest of his aging knees. “Your helmet did it’s job protecting your head, but unfortunately it seems your ribs took the brunt of the impact.”

“Of course they did,” replied Fili miserably. Kili gingerly rubbed his back, frowning.

“To be fair, Mister Oin, can he—?” interjected Thorin, hands fluttering uselessly as they searched for something to do. Dwalin hovered at the king’s elbow, tattooed fingers flexing as if they itched to reach out and still His Majesty’s frantic hands.

“No. Not for a couple of days, at least,” said Oin resignedly.

“I’ll be fine, Uncle,” assured Fili, forcing the ghost of his usual carefree smile to haunt his face. “It’s not that big a deal.”

Thorin didn’t look satisfied, but he also didn’t argue. He finally shoved his hands into the pockets of his shearling jacket, watching as Dwalin bent down to assist Kili with helping Fili to his feet. The king immediately moved to take Fili’s pack off his back, much to the prince’s protest.

“Hey! I’m not an invalid, you know!” Fili croaked, fighting futilely to keep his pack on as three sets of hands simultaneously worked against him in loosening and unclipping straps. Kili eventually ended up shouldering both his and his brother’s pack after a heated struggle, face uncharacteristically hard.

“No more heavy lifting than absolutely necessary while you heal,” said Oin. Fili glowered, a sharp look from Thorin the only thing quelling a smart response.

“He also didn’t argue. He finally shoved his hands into the pockets of his shearling jacket, watching as Dwalin bent down to assist Kili with helping Fili to his feet. The king immediately moved to take Fili’s pack off his back, much to the prince’s protest.

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“Just let me do this one thing for you, Fi,” said Kili quietly, tone firm.

Fili’s eyebrows shot up. “But—”

“You’re always looking after me,” interrupted Kili, eyes firmly fixed on the spot where his boots scuffed the wet pavement. “Even just now, the ork had been originally going for me. Don’t think I didn’t notice. You deliberately swerved in front of me.”

“Kili,” said Fili softly.
“Let me look after you for once. Please.”

Fili took in the determined set of Kili’s jaw and sighed. “Fine. But don’t think I’m letting you get away with fussing over me like Dori does with Ori. That goes for all of you,” he said, eyeing Thorin and Oin.

Thorin frowned. “You ride in front of me from now on,” the king ordered, tone thunderous as anger started to replace fear. “What in the thrice-damned hells were you three thinking?”

“Nothing,” said Kili, sounding suspiciously innocent. “We just wanted to talk to Ori, is all.”

“Somehow I highly doubt that,” muttered Dwalin. Thorin snorted in agreement.

“Well, after a thorough inspection of His Highness’s motorcyle, it seems that Mister Bifur has deemed it roadworthy,” announced Gandalf, helping Bifur wheel the bike back on the motorway from where it had landed in the ditch. “Though, it does sport quite an attractive racing stripe on one side.”

Bilbo saw that, indeed, the paint had been completely stripped from one side of Fili’s motorbike from where it had skidded across the motorway. It seemed to be in fairly fine shape otherwise. Even most of the luggage had remained attached to the back.

“Well, that’s good, at least,” sighed Fili, wincing as he breathed too deeply. Thorin turned back to Oin.

“Is my nephew clear to ride?” Thorin asked.

“Normally I would advise against it, but we don’t have much of a choice now, do we?” the medic replied. Thorin’s expression pinched in dissatisfaction, while Fili looked relieved.

“Balin, how much farther to the next supply cache?” the king rumbled.

“Twenty miles, Your Majesty,” the older man replied. “It should only be an hour at most.”

“Fine. We’ll stop there for the rest of the day,” said Thorin.

“But it’s only mid-morning!” cried Fili in protest. “Surely we can’t stop solely on my account.”

“There’s plenty of reasons to stop,” said Dwalin, raising an eyebrow at the blonde. “A hot meal, for one, and the bikes need to be refueled. Don’t think you’re so special just because you took a little tumble.”

Despite the harshness of the words, Fili brightened considerably. Thorin sent a thankful glance in Dwalin’s direction, their mutual concern over the prince’s health seeming to have gone a long way in mending fences between them.

Bilbo sighed, enviously wondering if it was even possible to repair his own fence that he shared with the king.

He stepped away as the company began to disperse, either wandering back toward their motorbikes or pausing to say a kind word to the crown prince. Bilbo didn’t know if he was quite ready to interact with Thorin again, which seemed inevitable if he wanted to talk to Fili, so he wandered over to Dori and his brothers in order to check on how Ori was coming along.

“Everything alright then?” he called, watching as Nori hauled Ori to his feet.
"I'm fine," Ori said, wiping the remaining blood from his face. "How's the prince?"

"Fine, for the most part. Mister Oin thinks he has some bruised ribs, though."

Ori winced as Dori hissed through his teeth.

"Oof. That will be a difficult recovery," remarked Nori, glancing in Fili's direction.

"I suppose so," replied Bilbo, wondering not for the first time if he was missing something. He shrugged, turning to the young man with a smile. "I have to say, Ori. You were quite heroic, leaping to the prince's defense like that."

Ori flushed, adjusting his grip on the polearm. "You think so?" he asked softly. "I'm sure anyone would have done the same."

"Perhaps. But I daresay you even showed up His Majesty with your bravery this morning."

A startled smile broke out across the boy's face as he shyly ducked his head under the orange bill of his hood. Dori smiled warmly at Bilbo, mouthing a silent 'Thank you.' Bilbo waved him off, jerking his head toward their shared motorbike to signal that they should get a move on.

After some reconfiguration of the caravan order, with Fili and Kili relegated to a spot sandwiched between Thorin and Dwalin near the back, the company was soon underway again. They traveled the remaining twenty miles without incident in a little under an hour. Bilbo had thought that he would be even more afraid to ride after what had just happened, but seeing Fili fall with minimal injury actually had a strangely soothing effect on him. After all, his worst fear was dying in a motorcycle crash, and Fili being able to get back up and ride straight away did wonders to allay some of that anxiety. Bilbo only felt bad that it took someone getting injured, albeit relatively mildly, to do so.

He was surprised when Balin and Gandalf began to lead them through a sizable village. They crossed over a river whose waters seemed dangerously high, precipitously on the verge of spilling over the banks and flooding the road. The surface of the water almost touched the bottom side of the plain bridge that spanned the waterway, and Bilbo was glad when they crossed over and exited into a large roundabout.

The center of the roundabout boasted a soggy war memorial that faced down the town’s main drag, which was lined with a number of brick-façaded shops and pubs. Most of them were either boarded up or had been looted completely, though Bilbo looked longingly as they passed the Aldi, and even more mournfully at the Tesco further down the road. His stomach rumbled angrily. He would have killed for some chocolate digestives right about now.

The motorcycles' tires vibrated on the uneven brick pavers as the company wound further and further into the labyrinthine streets and alleyways of the village. They had to continually dodge crashed and haphazardly parked automobiles, but they eventually found their way to a two-storey, red brick terrace house, situated at the end of a long row of similar houses and separated by an alley from a Chinese takeaway. It all looked quite dreary in the rain, the abandoned houses looming over the crumbling, unmaintained street like something out of a Percy Bysshe Shelley poem. Bilbo figured that the street must have once looked quite impressive, but a lack of life and people had turned it depressingly hollow. Weeds and moss had begun to creep up in between cracks in the masonry, time already beginning to take its toll.

Balin led them into the grimy alleyway in between the takeaway and the house before signaling for everybody to stop and park their motorbikes. Once stopped, the company immediately launched
into the same routine they always went through when arriving at a new place.

Thorin, Dwalin, and Balin retrieved the front door key from a fairly obvious hiding spot and went to clear the house, while Gandalf led Bifur and Dori to sweep the perimeter. Bilbo was left with his usual job of unloading the luggage off the back of the motorbike, at this point undoing bungee cables and cargo nets with relative quickness. Once Thorin poked his head out to signal the all clear, Bilbo joined the rest of the company in arranging the bikes in a tight formation to be covered with tarps, before hauling the luggage inside.

Bilbo sighed in relief as he stepped inside the narrow, musty entryway, throwing off his hood and carelessly toeing his boots off into the pile with the rest of the company's. As was customary, he was the last one inside. He unclipped his pack and unzipped his rain jacket, hanging it on the ignored coat rack by the door.

Like most middle-income British terraced housing, this house was long and narrow, the entryway leading into a poorly lit hallway that stretched all the way to the kitchen at the back of the house. Bilbo figured he couldn't complain at the size of it, considering he wouldn't have been able to afford anything nearly this big in London on his bookshop salary, but it seemed like a poor choice in which to house fifteen grown men. This was made evident by the fact that Fili and Kili alone almost completely blocked the entire corridor from where they were bickering at the end of the wooden stairway.

"I told you Ki, I'm fine," Fili insisted as he pawed frustratedly through his pack, digging for something that seemed to be eluding him. "You can stop hovering."

"I'll stop when Mister Oin gives you a full examination and confirms none of your ribs are broken," Kili replied crossly, hands planted obstinately on his hips.

"What? You trust the word of that old quack over your big brother?" Fili shot back. He rummaged around a bit more before he saw something in his bag that abruptly made him pale, all color draining from his face in an instant. The prince suddenly started swearing a blue streak in every language he knew.

"What is it?" asked Kili quickly, immediately concerned. Fili wordlessly turned the opening of his bag toward him, and whatever it was made Kili's gray eyes go wide in horror.

"Oh. That's going to be a problem."

"You think?" Fili's voice was shrill, more panicked than Bilbo had ever heard it, even when he had been ambushed by nearly thirty zombies in the dark.

"Talk to Mister Oin about it when he examines you. He may have extra," said Kili, running a trembling hand through his hair.

"Everything okay, boys?" asked Bilbo, taking a step toward the brothers to see if there was anything he could do to help.

Both their heads snapped towards him simultaneously, only just now noticing his presence. They adopted twin grins, though both were clearly strained.

"Oh, no, Mister Baggins," started Fili with forced nonchalance.

"Everything is totally fine," finished Kili in a similar tone.

Bilbo didn't buy it for a second, especially since Fili had forgotten to use their silly nickname for
him. He frowned, but Kili looked at him pleadingly in a way that urged him not to push.

"Alright, if you say so," said Bilbo, unconvinced but knowing when it wasn't appropriate to pry.

Fili reached his arm back into the depths of his bag and extracted a wad of black fabric, which he quickly stuffed into the kangaroo pocket of his hoodie. "Right. Well, Mister Oin is waiting. Are you coming, Ki?"

"Right behind you," the brunette replied, bounding up the stairs after his brother.

Bilbo looked after them for a moment, shaking his head. In time, hopefully people would start explaining things to him. But he wasn't going to hold his breath.

***

An hour later found Bilbo in the kitchen, standing over what was possibly the largest pot of canned chicken soup he had ever seen.

It was his turn to cook the meal. Bilbo was actually thankful to have anything to do, even if it did only entail the artless task of pouring about twenty tins of ready-made soup into a pot on the stove to heat through. At least it meant that they would be eating something different than rice and beans or, heaven forbid, hardtack and jerky.

"Mm. Smells delicious," said Bofur. He leaned into Bilbo's space as he stuck his head fully into the steam.

"Get back before you burn yourself, you oaf," Bilbo laughed, elbowing the man out of the way. "You can wait until it's heated through like the rest of us." He turned down the burner on the propane camp stove and put the lid on to let the liquid simmer. The house stove was electric, and therefore useless.

"Aw, you wouldn't deny a man his well earned taste, would you?" Bofur whined, comically batting his eyelashes in Bilbo's direction.

Bilbo rolled his eyes. "Fine," he said, removing the lid and scooping out a bit of noodle and soggy carrot with the wooden spoon. "But it's not even hot yet."

He held the spoon out, raising it so it was about eye level for him but more or less of a height with Bofur's goatee. The man leaned forward and sucked the soup off the end of the spoon, making an exaggerated noise of delight.

"Oh my, that may be the best canned soup I have ever tasted," he said, grinning widely.

"Oh, posh," Bilbo retorted as he replaced the lid. "It's just Campbell's."

"Hm. Must be because you're making it then," said Bofur lowly. He waggled his eyebrows in a way that made Bilbo cackle.

"For the love of Mahal, can you two keep your flirting to yourselves?"

Bilbo stiffened, turning toward Dwalin, who took up most of the small four-person table in the corner. Technically, it was also his turn to cook as well, but Balin had taken Bilbo aside to gently explain that Dwalin would burn water were it physically possible, and that it was better to just let
him help serve than let him do anything related to actual cooking.

"Flit—we're not flirting," spluttered Bilbo, flushing to the roots of his hair. Bofur shot him a bemused look.

Dwalin scoffed in disbelief, tapping ash into the bowl he was using as a makeshift ashtray. "Sure looked like it to me."

"Well, you're mistaken," Bilbo insisted. "Isn't that right, Bofur?"

"Sure," the man said weakly, a complicated look overtaking his features.

Dwalin snorted like he was suppressing a laugh, looking up as a throat suddenly cleared itself from the kitchen doorway.

"Mister Dwalin? Can we talk to you?" asked Kili from the threshold, voice uncharacteristically polite. Fili stood behind him, expression thunderous. One hand was hidden under his hoodie as he held one of Oin's chemical cold packs to his bruised ribs.

Dwalin's brow furrowed, leaning forward on his elbows as he waved the brothers in.

"Of course you can. You know that," he replied gruffly. "Something wrong?"

"It's not that big a deal," grumbled Fili. He looked like he wanted to say more, but hard look from his brother quelled him into silence.

"We need to go to the pharmacy," said Kili in a hushed tone, walking to the table and gripping the back of one of the chairs so hard that all the blood left his knuckles. "There was a Tesco a few blocks back."

"Right now? What for? Is the old man out of something important?" asked Dwalin, snubbing out his cigarette and leaning forward on his elbows, deadly serious.

"No," started Fili.

"Yes," interrupted Kili, eyes flashing. "You know when Fi landed on his pack?"

Dwalin scoffed. "Hard to forget. Scared the shit out of me, you did."

"It seems that some of his vials broke on impact," Kili responded, tone grim.

Bofur sucked in a breath as Dwalin's expression became increasingly grave, eyes darting to Fili consideringly. "How many?"

"Only three out of the five," grumbled Fili. "I packed them pretty well, all things considered."

"Yeah, but you only have two doses left in the one," said Kili with a particularly withering glower.

"That's twelve weeks, Ki. It's plenty."

"Excuse me? I'm a little lost," said Bilbo, raising his hand. "Are you on some sort of medication, Fili?"

Dwalin and the princes turned to Bilbo, looking as if they had forgotten he was in the room with them. Kili and Dwalin looked as if they had both sucked on a particularly sour lemon, while Fili just looked tired.
"You don't have to tell me of course," said Bilbo gently, holding up his hands in a placating manner. "I know that medical issues are exceedingly private. I can leave if you like."

"No, it's fine," said Fili, sending an exasperated look toward his brother and Dwalin. "It's not like I actively try to hide it or anything. I take hormones, Mister Baggins. Testosterone, specifically. I had a year's supply with me, but it seems the fall did more than just bruise some of my ribs."

Bilbo's brow furrowed as the gears began furiously turning in his head. Dwalin and Kili glared daggers at him from over Fili's shoulder, as if daring him to make an off-color comment.

"Testosterone—Oh!" he exclaimed, mouth falling open as it all suddenly clicked into place.

"Now you get it," said Fili with a wry smile, nervously fidgeting with the hem of his sweatshirt.

"I didn't know. Thank you for trusting me enough to tell me," said Bilbo sincerely, something warm pooling in his chest at the thought.

Fili waved him off nonchalantly, but he couldn't hide the relieved expression that crept onto his face. "It's fine. Like I said, I don't try to hide it, but I'm exceedingly lucky to pass well enough that I don't exactly have to go around advertising it, either. You English can be quite stuffy with your rigid notions of gender."

Bilbo snorted. That was the understatement of the century. "I understand that completely. And I know a little bit about transgender, er, stuff," said Bilbo, just a tad awkwardly. "One of my newer employees at the bookstore—Morgan, their name was—had recently transitioned and explained some things to me."

"Ha! Good, I hate giving the Trans 101 spiel. Glad that somebody beat me to the punch," laughed Fili, looking like a considerable weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Bofur chuckled quietly beside Bilbo, bumping his shoulder companionably.

"Can we get back to the issue at hand?" pleaded Kili, still obviously distressed.

"Have you talked to Thorin about this?" asked Dwalin, narrowing his eyes at Fili.

"Not yet," the prince admitted, adjusting the cold pack under his hoodie. Dwalin groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"You have to tell him. You know he would give you both of his kidneys if you only asked," growled Dwalin, frustrated. "He's going to blow a gasket when he hears that you've come to me about this first."

"That's just it!" Fili protested, Kili furiously nodding along. "He's out of his bloody gourd with worry right now. I had to tell him I was going to lie down just to get out of his sight. With all the pressure he's under, I'd feel terrible going to him with this right now. And since you and he aren't exactly on speaking terms at the moment…"

"Pick your next words extremely carefully, young man," said Dwalin venomously, expression dangerously stoic.

Fili gulped and backed off, while Kili failed to take the hint and soldiered on for him. "We thought that you and I could make a quick Tesco run while Fili distracts Uncle by convincing him to teach him more of that Black Eyed Peas song," he said.

"For the last time, that's not what it was!" Fili bit out impotently. Dwalin folded his arms across his
chest and leaned back in his chair.

"So, let me get this straight," he said. "You want me to go behind your uncle's back—my best mate, the one who hates my guts right now—to go and see if the local Tesco has your brother's meds in stock—which is unlikely—in the middle of a pouring rainstorm. After we've been ambushed by a zombie once today already."

"That about sums it up, yeah," said Kili, looking determined. "Think about it. This is the best time to do it! Thorin's already decided that we're done traveling for the day, there's plenty of daylight left, and there's a Tesco pharmacy just down the road!"

"And even if they don't have ten milliliter bottles of testosterone just lying around, it's not the end of the world," said Fili, looking pointedly at his brother. "I still have a three months with which to figure it out. But there's the added bonus of going to Tesco and possibly finding something for us to eat that's not beef jerky or hardtack. Or canned chicken noodle soup."

Dwalin examined the wood grain of the table as he considered this, finally looking back up at the princes after a long, pregnant pause.

"Fine," he muttered, flicking open his metal lighter to reignite his cigarette. "It's not like His Royal Blockhead can get any angrier at me than he already is."

"Really? You mean it?" asked Kili, eyes wide.

Fili's face had a similar expression of shock. "We honestly didn't think you would go for it," he added.

Dwalin snorted. "Yeah, well, I'm in a charitable mood. You two owe me one. Hey, lovebirds," he called, beckoning Bilbo and Bofur's full attention.

"I beg your pardon! You can't possibly mean us," squawked Bilbo, scandalized. The princes sniggered.

"Who else would I be talking about?" Dwalin responded, raising an eyebrow at him. "Either of you fancy a trip to the shop after lunch?"

"Oh, sure," said Bofur breezily, as if it were just as simple as picking up milk on a Sunday afternoon. "Absolutely hate being cooped up with nothing to do. Bilbo?"

Bilbo stared down at the soup pot, thinking hard. On the one hand, looting a grocery store didn't exactly sit well with him, though Fili most certainly needed it. There was also the threat of the undead, though that was not nearly as frightening as what the king would possibly do if he found out about their unauthorized excursion. But then he thought about what Dwalin had said, about Thorin not being able to get any angrier than he already was.

A cold, indignant fury settled in Bilbo’s gut at the senseless way Thorin had been treating him, especially after their perfectly civil conversation on the deck at Weathertop. Who did Thorin think he was, really? He was a king, surely, but that didn't give him the right to treat Bilbo like he was nothing. While he didn't know exactly why he was so hurt about it, considering it was just more of the same old hot-and-cold routine that Thorin had put on since the moment they met, there was just something about His Majesty's stupidly handsome face combined with his poor personality that had really dug its hooks under Bilbo's skin.

Bilbo scowled as he contemplated this, another idea popping into his brain unbidden. His stomach grumbled loudly once more as he appraised the possibility that a pack of chocolate digestives might
be waiting for him on a shelf in the dessert aisle.

Bilbo’s expression evened out as he came to a decision. He was quickly finding that spite, along with an insatiable craving for biscuits, was enough to convince him to brave the probable danger of a Tesco post-zombie apocalypse. Well, if he found any sweets at the store, he certainly wouldn’t be sharing them with the king. *Quid pro quo*, after all. A favor for a favor. Tit for tat.

“What the hell. I’m in,” he said, trying his very best not to think too hard about the way Thorin had so effortlessly referenced one of his favorite movies. Bofur beamed, while Dwalin stared at him with an unnerving amount of shrewdness from across the room.

“I want to come too,” said a soft voice from the kitchen entry. Ori hovered in the doorway, socked feet scuffing bashfully against the hardwood as the occupants of the room turned to look at him in surprise.

Dwalin sighed, taking a considering drag from his cigarette. “Lad, this isn’t a field trip. We’re not popping over for snacks.”

“I know that,” Ori retorted, suddenly looking fierce. “Mister Balin sent me to make sure that Mister Dwalin wasn’t burning the soup, and I happened to overhear most of everything. I want to help the prince, too.”

“Ooh, twice in one day! My knight in shining armor,” Fili teased, though his charmed smile was strikingly sincere. Ori did his very best impression of a steamed lobster in response.

“No way,” said Dwalin. “Dori would kill me if he found out. Last thing I want to do is be on his bad side.”

Ori’s face screwed up in frustration at that, his scraggly goatee accentuating the stubborn set of his jaw. “Bring me with you, or I tell the king,” he said mulishly.

Dwalin’s expression suddenly turned serious at the ultimatum. “You wouldn’t.”

“I would!” Ori insisted, putting his foot down. “Or I’ll tell Dori, and he’ll tell the king. You know I can hold my own out there. You saw it this morning!”

“He’s got a point,” Bofur remarked, stroking his moustache thoughtfully.

“I’ll not be stuck babysitting,” groused Dwalin.

“I’m eighteen!” cried Ori furiously, fists clenching at his sides. “I’m an adult, same as all of you! Kili’s only a year older than me, for Mahal’s sake. None of you ever give me a chance to prove myself.”

“Pipe down! Mahal’s beard, this is supposed to be secret, remember?” replied Dwalin with a scowl. “Fine. You can come, but you’ll have to pull your weight, alright? Your brothers won’t be there to help you.”

“That’s what I’m counting on,” Ori said, looking pleased.

Dwalin smirked despite himself. “Alright. Everybody meet outside after we get finished eating, and be discreet about it. Fili, make sure you distract His Majesty long enough for us to get there and back. It shouldn’t take more than an hour. We’ll take one of the short-wave radios just to be safe, so check in on us if we’re out longer than that.”
“Roger that,” said Fili, saluting with his free hand.

“Baggins,” addressed Dwalin.

“Yes?” replied Bilbo, straightening instinctively to attention as he shook away his daydreams of nonperishable snack foods.

“The soup’s boiling over.”

“Oh, bloody hell!” he cried, frantically turning off the burner as Bofur chortled. Bilbo sighed, looking for a rag with which to mop up the mess.

Well, add that to the grocery list, at least.

Chapter End Notes

No translations this time.

So... yeah. Fili is trans. It's been a headcanon of mine for a long time, and being a transgay menace myself, I sort of went mad with power while writing this. I was actually waffling with whether to make it explicit but I had a brain blast recently that I could easily weave it in with their excursion to get groceries, which I had already planned out way in advance. And yeah, he is pre-top surgery and binds, since he was only eighteen when the family moved to Britain on a permanent basis, in the lore of this fic the Ereboreans are EXTREMELY wary of western surgical practices, considering their tech is so much more advanced (though they've grudgingly accepted the pharmaceuticals). Think Bones in Star Trek IV when he's just horrified at what the 1980s has to offer in terms of medicine.

On a lighter note, I can't believe only one person commented on the fact that the soccer scene was my loving, unironic homage to the greatest piece of modern cinema of all time: The baseball scene in Twilight. Yes, Ash, you were absolutely right.

Look, in terms of the quid pro quo thing--Thorin is a weird enough guy to quote Hannibal Lecter off the top of his head, and Bilbo is a weird enough guy to be utterly charmed by it. They're made for each other, alright? Two weirdos in love.

Anyway, next chapter might also be a bit of a wait, since I'll be heading out for vacation on Friday. If you're going to be at Flamecon this weekend, come find me! I'd love to chat. I'll be hanging with my friends who are tabling. They create an excellent webcomic called SUPERPOSE, which is a highly cinematic queer sci-fi/horror/slice of life story about building computers and other hell machines in the early eighties. They're absolute bonkers geniuses at storytelling, and their approach influences my own work a lot, so I highly recommend it!

Anyway, as always, thank you so much for reading and being patient. Your kudos and feedback literally feed my soul.

Music that goes with this chapter:
Mykonos - Fleet Foxes
GOD'S GONNA CUT YOU DOWN

CHAPTER 11
QUID PRO QUO
The Gang Goes To Tesco

Chapter Summary

What it says on the tin. Dwalin and Bilbo do some light shopping, and then things go sideways. Of course.

Chapter Notes

Hi hi. Sorry for the wait. I got on a plane to go on vacation and then my brain shut off for the better part of two weeks. I hope this is like... good lmao

TW for standard gore and Bilbo anxiety spiraling

“You’re sure he won’t come after you?”

“For the thousandth time, my dear boy, yes,” said Bilbo irritably. The the back garden gate closed behind them with a clatter, the sodden wood slapping wetly. “He’s not my father. Not that it would even matter if he were.”

Bofur didn’t look entirely convinced. “You didn’t see the look he gave us when you told him we were popping out for a smoke.” He pulled his hat further around his ears as the rain continued to drizzle

“Oh, I can imagine it, alright. But don’t worry. Gandalf may be entirely too nosy, but he’ll get distracted soon enough.”

“If you say so,” Bofur muttered.

Lunch had been a contented affair, with Thorin blissfully none the wiser to the plot they had been brewing behind his back. He mainly seemed preoccupied with inhaling his soup and then hovering over Fili. The elder prince had heroically endured it, eventually managing to lure the king upstairs for another extended lesson on the *tog’shûr*.

While Gloin and Oin were busy washing the dishes, Dwalin and Kili quickly excused themselves after that, breezily formulating the pretense of running through training exercises in the alley. They invited Ori to join them, much to Dori’s delight. Nori, however, had only narrowed his eyes and shot them a cunning smirk as he waved them out. Bilbo would have bet the entirety of Bag End that the copper-haired man knew exactly what was afoot.

The rest of the company had taken up residence in the sitting room with the fire burning cheerfully, as was their custom. Engrossed in their various diversions, only Gandalf had taken notice of Bilbo and Bofur quietly excusing themselves. When asked what they were, quote, ‘up to’, Bilbo had panicked and told him that they were off to share a cigarette before wordlessly fleeing without a second glance.
He hoisted the Weatherby further under his arm, the extra shells he had thought to grab before leaving jangling loudly in his pocket. That was the one thing about going out for a smoke on a rainy day during a zombie apocalypse—nobody batted an eye when you took your elephant gun with you. Bofur had his mattock secured in a makeshift sling over one shoulder, which kept his hands free but left the pickaxe within easy reach in case things went sideways. Bilbo grimaced looking at it. Bofur was dangerously accurate with the pointed end. He had once seen the man split open an infected’s skull with a single swing.

“About time you two showed up,” Dwalin complained loudly. His axes were strapped to his back over his drab army green rain slicker. The yellow of Ori’s duck poncho popped starkly in the grimy alleyway, its orange bill wavering as water steadily dripped from it. Standing next to each other, the two made quite the comical-looking pair.

Bilbo didn’t bother to dignify that with an answer. He glanced toward the undisturbed motorbikes, where they still rested in their tight formation under the tarps.

“I take it we’re walking, then,” he said, not without some relief.

“Nope, too loud,” Kili confirmed. His beaten leather jacket didn’t have a hood, so his dark fringe clung in messy strings to his forehead and cheeks. It hardly seemed to bother him, though Bilbo could only imagine it would only cause his hair to become an even wilder tangle than it already was. In any case, Kili seemed very attached to the jacket in spite of its impracticality, even though it looked to be a few sizes too big for him in the shoulders.

“Ah, right. Keeping a secret from the king and all,” said Bilbo. A small part of him thrilled at sneaking around like this. It was exciting, in a way. It reminded him somewhat of being a teenager again, of slipping out his back door to go drink wine coolers with his cousins under the cover of darkness.

“The shop is only a few streets over, anyway,” said Ori, pointing his polearm down the way they had come.

“We best be off then, yeah?” responded Bofur, seeming eager to move.

Dwalin grunted in agreement, unhitching one of his axes and holding it in front of him. “Alright, stick together. Keep pace and don’t wander off.”

Bilbo nodded, gripping his rifle tighter as they rounded the corner around the Chinese takeaway in a tight group. He kept close to Kili and Bofur’s sides as the juvenile excitement began to wane and the usual vague paranoia that came with being out and about started to press in on him. His eyes darted this way and that, expecting to be ambushed every time they passed a slightly too-tall hedge or blind alleyway.

“Relax, Bilbo,” said the man beside him, dimples making an appearance, as was customary whilst in Bilbo’s company. “You’re capable in a right pinch, you know that. And besides, you’ve got ol’ Bofur here to watch your arse.”

Dwalin snorted loudly at that. “Yeah, he sure does,” he muttered.

“What was that?” asked Bilbo, unable to hear the bald man quite clearly over the steady pounding of the rain.

Dwalin didn’t turn around, taking one hand off his axe to wave insouciantly. “Nothing, just thinking out loud,” he said, tone suspiciously innocent. “Next left.”
They plodded through the narrow streets of the village in a tight formation headed by Dwalin, who looked like a great, featureless green mountain from behind. Ori took up the rear. Bofur and Kili flanked Bilbo, who remained in the middle. While he wasn’t sure how this spoke to the others’ faith in his abilities, it did do wonders for his sense of security.

That was one thing Bilbo hadn't counted on when he finally made up his mind to join this insane journey—the security he felt as part of a group. In some ways he was more comfortable than he had been in Bag End, knowing that he had people watching his back for him, who cared about if he lived or died, even if it was simply only because it would be terribly inconvenient for them if he did get eaten. Oh, he still longed terribly for his armchair and his greenhouse and his books, but there was something to be said for the simple act of being able to engage in a conversation with another human being. An act which, as someone who had been repeatedly labeled as somewhat of a hermit, had never truly been a priority for him until the option to do so had been taken away.

Bilbo hummed. Yes, he would certainly miss the company’s companionship and general camaraderie when he eventually returned to Bag End. Maybe he would get a dog when he got back. If he got back.

“Something up?” asked Bofur quietly from beside him, taking care to direct Bilbo from stepping into a particularly deep puddle.

Bilbo shook his head. “Oh, nothing. Do you think Maverick is a good name for a dog? I was thinking of maybe getting one when I returned to Cornwall.”

Bofur raised his eyebrows.

“You’re still planning on returning to your big empty house when this is over? Alone?” he asked, tone slightly incredulous.

“Of course I’m going back home!” he exclaimed patronizingly, surprised that Bofur had even asked that. “And I won’t be alone if I get a dog. There’s enough space that I could probably get two, actually. A big one for guarding and a small lapdog, maybe. The other can be called Goose.”

Bofur’s expression twisted strangely, as if the thought of Bilbo returning by himself and substituting animal companionship for human contact was something unpalatable. However, he didn’t mention it further. Instead, he only asked, “Is that a reference to something, or do you just really like geese?”

“It’s a... You know what, never mind,” Bilbo sighed. He knew that if he got started, he wouldn’t stop waxing lyrical about the schlocky, homoerotic merits of *Top Gun*. The beach volleyball scene was truly a work of art.

“If I can hear you over this rain, you’re not being quiet enough,” Dwalin grumbled.

“Who said anything about being quiet?” Bofur retorted cheerfully, expression smoothing back into something more familiarly upbeat.

“Mister Dwalin’s probably right,” said Ori, glancing worriedly behind them. “We don’t want to be attracting any undue attention.”

“Glad to see someone here has some sense,” said Dwalin with a smirk. Kili snorted, while Ori only pulled his duck-bill hood further over his face in response.

They made a quick turn that exited onto a main throughway, the uneven brick pavers of the side streets transitioning smoothly back into more traditional asphalt. Huddling together, they scurried
across the four lanes of motorway, following signs directing them to the parking lot of the Tesco Superstore.

Bilbo hadn’t paid much attention to the state of the car park while they whizzed past it earlier, but the state of it had him reconsidering the wisdom of this plan. It looked like a bomb had gone off near one of the trolley returns, a veritable slag heap of blackened and twisted metal sitting right in the middle of the lot. The burnt out frame of an old sedan sat a few feet away from it. Presumably it was another victim of the explosion, or perhaps even the source.

A few other abandoned cars sat crookedly in the lot, windows long since busted out and many of them looking like they had been stripped of parts. Kili broke off to peer curiously into the backseat of a black SUV near the car park entrance. With cracks that spiderwebbed across the windscreen and a frame dented beyond repair, it was propped on cinder blocks and looked like it had been that way for a long time. He used the butt of his crossbow to clear the remaining glass that clung to the rear passenger doorframe.

“Oh shit! There’s jump leads in here. Do we need any?” he asked, unable to keep the excited timbre out of his voice.

“Couldn’t hurt,” replied Dwalin. He unbuttoned the top half of his rain slicker, producing a bright blue reusable grocery bag from an interior pocket. “Put ’em here.”

Bilbo frowned as Kili reached in to manually unlock the car door through the broken window, struggling to come to terms with the fact that they were, in fact, technically looting. Dwalin held open the bag, which was emblazoned with an artistic slogan extolling the virtues of organic local produce, as Kili dumped the dusty cables into the bottom of the bag.

Bilbo looked to the shop entrance. The light-up sign on the roof remained nearly intact, the red Tesco logo standing stark against the dark gray sky. Large white letters spelling out the word Hello! greeted them cheerfully from inside the vestibule. While the lights were off and the dead automatic door remained slightly ajar, nothing was particularly out of the ordinary with regard to the actual storefront. If Bilbo ignored the carnage in the car park, he could almost imagine that it was just a particularly slow day. It did nothing to alleviate the instinctive guilt he felt while thinking of just simply taking the biscuits he wanted.

He patted his front trouser pocket, holding the Weatherby under his arm while he drew out the fifty pound note he had won earlier from Gandalf. He considered it for a moment.

“What are you doing?” asked Bofur amusedly, as Dwalin and Kili towed Ori around the rest of the lot to see if there was anything else useful in the surrounding cars.

“Wondering how many packages of biscuits I can buy for fifty quid,” he replied, while simultaneously doing the mental math in his head. He supposed seventy-five was quite a lot, but not if they were to last him the rest of the year. He wondered if Dwalin would lend space in his farmer’s market tote. Bofur grinned.

“You’re a convicted felon, and you’re worried about a little looting? Are you being serious right now?”

“Perfectly!” Bilbo replied indignantly. “What I did before might have been outside the letter of the law, but it was perfectly within moral grounds. Stealing, on the other hand, is a mortal sin, you know!”

Bofur let out a loud guffaw, slapping Bilbo companionably on the shoulder. Bilbo flinched as water
droplets splashed off his shoulder flew into his face.

“You Catholics,” chuckled Bofur. “So loaded down with guilt over stuff that either doesn’t matter
or is out of your control. I’ll never understand it, I’m afraid. Especially when you consider how
strange it is that you perform ritualized cannibalism once a week. It didn’t entirely make sense to
me before all this happened, but after everything, I don’t precisely see how it can hold appeal for
anybody.”

Bilbo shrugged, grip tightening on the bill. “Well, I suppose when you put it that way, it is sort of
hard to wrap your head around,” he said, brutally quashing down the instinct to defend the faith his
father so desperately clung to. “In any case, this is more of a personal moral quandary for me than
a religious one. On the one hand, I don’t entirely care for large corporations. On the other hand, I
was raised to believe shoplifting was wrong.”

“Then just think of it as sticking it to Tesco. Nobody works here anymore, so it’s basically a
victimless crime,” reasoned Bofur.

"I suppose you’re probably right,” relented Bilbo, feeling slightly relieved at that line of thought.
Though he had resolved to live his life quietly and more or less law-abidingly since his conviction,
he would be lying if the thought of direct action didn’t still hold some of its appeal.

(Still, he internally resolved to keep his haul equivalent to fifty pounds or less, so he could
surreptitiously leave the banknote on the checkout counter in case he chickened out, but Bofur
didn’t need to know that.)

“Nothing of use left in the rest of the automobiles. Let’s get moving,” said Dwalin upon returning
to Bilbo and Bofur's position. Kili and Ori had already gone ahead to scout out the vestibule,
poking their heads in to make sure that the coast was clear.

“Right,” said Bilbo, pocketing the cash. “So what’s the plan for once we’re inside?”

“Kili’s going to lead the run to the pharmacy, since he knows exactly what his brother needs. Ori’s
insisting on joining him, and I’m not sure I completely trust the backbone the lad’s seemed to have
grown in the past few hours. Bofur, fancy a little babysitting?”

“If I must,” sighed Bofur, though his indulgent smile betrayed his tone.

“What will you be doing then?” asked Bilbo.

“Babysitting you, of course,” replied Dwalin matter-of-factly.

“Excuse me?” he squawked. He looked desperately to Bofur for moral support, but Bofur only
laughed uproariously and refused to comment. He waltzed off to join the lads at the door.

“You heard me,” said Dwalin.

“If I recall correctly, it was you who invited me,” retorted Bilbo sourly.

“Yeah, because I knew it was the easiest way to get Bofur to come. Trust the man with my life, but
I knew if you stayed behind that he’d probably do the same.”

Bilbo scowled.

“And what in heaven’s name gave you that idea?” he sighed.
“Playing dumb isn’t exactly as cute as you seem to think it is,” Dwalin said, shooting him a significant look from under his hood. “Bofur’s a soft touch. I don’t want to see him getting hurt.”

They started walking in the direction of the shop entrance, and Bilbo purposefully stomped through a puddle in a childish act of frustration.

“I genuinely have no idea what you’re talking about,” he muttered, glowering darkly at the pavement. “You seem to be under the wrong impression. Bofur and I are just friends. Sure, we may kid around from time to time, but it’s not like he can be seriously interested. Especially not in me, of all people.”

Dwalin abruptly stopped short, staring hard at Bilbo.

“Wait. Are you being serious?” His thick eyebrows came together as his forehead wrinkled in confusion.

Bilbo barked out a bad-tempered laugh, scrubbing the stray droplets of rain out of his face in exasperation. “Why does everybody keep asking me that? Are you having me on?”

“No,” Dwalin muttered by way of reply, “just coming to some realizations, is all.”

“I assume you’re going to keep them to yourself, then,” Bilbo said sourly.

“You assume right.”

Bilbo scoffed. Something in Dwalin’s answer poked uncomfortably at the rawness of his insecurities, which had been exacerbated by Thorin’s most recent baffling snub.

“Typical,” he sniffed. “You Ereboreans can keep your cryptic bull and shove it, for all I care. For once I’d just like to get a straight answer about something.”

Dwalin’s eyebrows rose at the unwarranted venom in Bilbo’s tone. “Hey now, no need for that,” he gruffed, looking uncomfortable.

“Everything alright, lads?” called Bofur, concerned.

“It’s fine!” Bilbo spat before Dwalin could get a word out.

“It seems pretty quiet in there,” said Kili, wisely not commenting on the abrupt shift in mood among the older men. “The health section is in the far left of the store, so we’ll check there first for the pharmacy. What will you two be doing?”

“Shopping,” was all Dwalin said.

“Sounds like a plan, then,” replied Kili with a grin.

“What’s the signal for if we get into trouble, or run into a pack of ôrek and need help?” asked Ori, gripping his halberd tightly.

“I suppose just shouting ‘help’ will do the trick,” joked Bofur.

Dwalin snorted, shrugging as he hoisted the bag full of jump leads over his shoulder. He grabbed the handle of a nearby trolley that was still intact. “Let’s try and be as quiet as possible, but feel free to shout if all hell breaks loose.”

Bilbo didn’t quite like how casual they were all being, but he figured that was just their way of
dealing with the stress of the situation. He pumped the bolt on his rifle anyway, just to have the
added security of having something to fire at a second’s notice. He half-expected for Dwalin to
make some disparaging comment about his obvious nervousness, but the bald man only nodded
approvingly. It made Bilbo feel just a tiny bit guilty over his earlier outburst.

Ori and Kili tugged open the automatic door just far enough to let the trolley through before
creeping in themselves, heads on a swivel and weapons brandished cautiously in front of them.
Bofur chuckled, swinging his mattock in a neat arc before following them.

“Good luck,” Bilbo whispered, not knowing if Bofur would hear him. He needn’t have worried,
for the man beamed sunnily at him before turning a corner in pursuit of the lads. Dwalin’s words
echoed briefly in his head before he abruptly shook them away.

“We alright?” Dwalin murmured gruffly. Bilbo clearly heard the double meaning in the question.

“Everything’s fine,” he sighed. “Let’s just go.”

He followed Dwalin as the other man pushed the trolley forward, wheels mercifully un-squeaky as
they rolled onto the battered gray linoleum.

It was dark; without even the emergency lights, it was the sort of darkness that Bilbo was
completely unused to when being inside a grocery store. Dim light from the overcast sky outside
streamed in through the front windows, but it served the only source of illumination for the whole
store. It cast the familiar trappings of the local Tesco—the cheerful adverts and promotional
banners, even the bright yellow sale placards—in a slightly sinister light.

Bilbo wondered if the woman in the advertisement closest to them, whose several times larger than
life face beamed down at them from a poster promoting flu shots, was still walking around
somewhere, alive. He hoped so.

Though the door had been open, Bilbo still coughed as he caught a lungful of the stale, stagnant air
of the grocery. A strange sweet smell permeated the atmosphere, one which made the air taste
strongly of must.

“It’s the produce. And the meat,” said Dwalin, as if he had read Bilbo’s mind.

Bilbo spared a glance for the produce section, and indeed, there wasn’t a single shelf whose
contents hadn’t completely shriveled to raisins or been overgrown by mold.

“Oh, that's very pleasant,” he remarked sarcastically, suddenly achingly glad that the universe had
spared him from an allergy. “You said we weren’t here for snacks. What are we shopping for
then?”

“It’s canned fruit and veg, mostly. With what we’ve been eating, I can practically feel the scurvy
coming on,” said Dwalin. His answer somewhat surprised Bilbo, but he couldn't help but agree.

Dwalin reached into his coat again, producing two more reusable shopping bags. One proudly
supported a Scottish ranching co-op, while the other was just plain black. Bilbo stared as Dwalin
unfolded the bags and placed them in the trolley basket, along with the tote that held the jump
leads.

“You brought your own bags?”

Dwalin shot him a withering look.
“You know the oceans are full of plastic, right?” he griped. “Sea turtles eat plastic bags thinking they’re jellyfish, and since they can’t digest them they starve to death. I saw it in a documentary once.”

"Who made you watch it?” asked Bilbo, alternately delighted and bemused.

"What? Can't a man have varied interests?” retorted Dwalin, nudging an overturned cardboard box out of the way with the cart. The snack-sized crisp packets that were spilling out of it crunched loudly in the gloom. It made them both wince and freeze in place for a long moment.

"But it was Thorin’s sister that put it on," he conceded after the overarching silence continued to hold, though was his voice was markedly quieter. Just after he said that, however, a low, triumphant cheer echoed from the direction of the health and beauty section, which signaled that Kili had most likely found the pharmacy.

They turned into the canned goods aisle, slowly pushing the trolley and considering the ransacked shelves as if it were just another day at the shop. Bilbo’s mouth watered at the surprisingly large selection of fruits that were still on the shelves. He placed the rifle muzzle down into the basket to free his hands.

“The king’s sister... that’s Fili and Kili’s mum, correct?” asked Bilbo, hopping as he tried to reach a can of peaches on the top shelf.

“Aye,” replied Dwalin, voice fond. “Dís is her name. Dís Durinul Hatûn. She would’ve been right here with us, if she had her way.” The soft warmth of the words sounded strange coming out of his mouth, as if the gruff timbre of his voice combined with his guttural accent would only barely allow for it. He easily reached the peach tin and handed it to Bilbo.

“Why isn’t she then?” Bilbo examined the can of peaches for approximately half a second before placing it in the plain black bag. He looked up, examining the sale placard. “Can you get two more of those? It’s three for two pounds fifty.”

Dwalin rolled his eyes and retrieved two more of the peaches before swiping a whole row of mandarin slices into the cart with a clatter. Bilbo pursed his lips, making sure that his cans and the oranges made it into separate bags.

“According to an ancient Khuzd law, someone in direct succession to the throne has to stay behind and rule when the rest of the royal family goes off to war,” said Dwalin, silently weighing the merits of brand name versus generic pineapple slices. He decided that both were probably good, and set them in the markedly fuller Scottish co-op bag alongside the oranges. “Thrain figured it applied in this situation, and Dís just happened to draw the short straw. She was livid.”

“So, I take it she’s in Scotland then as well,” said Bilbo. He turned over a can of jackfruit in his hand, wondering exactly what jackfruit was. It must be good, since the can was almost two quid despite only being the shop brand.

“Yeah, and probably running the compound with an iron fist,” Dwalin said with a wry smirk. “She pitched a mighty fucking fit when she figured out that Thorin was taking her sons with him. Not that she could really do anything about it though, considering they’re both of age.”

“I was actually wondering about that,” said Bilbo, deciding that now was better than never to try new things. He placed the jackfruit in the cart, adding it to his mental tally. “The princes seem... awfully young, considering. I know they’re technically adults, but—”
“But they act like dumb uni kids most of the time?”

Bilbo chuckled. “Well, not in so many words. Though, that’s certainly what I thought when I saw them for the first time on the roof of my greenhouse.” He added a dusty can of fruit salad and one of apricot halves to his bag.

“That was a harebrained scheme, even for them,” conceded Dwalin, giving up on deliberating and resorting to throwing one of each thing into the trolley, distributing them between the co-op bag and the one with the jump leads.

They strolled further down the aisle, their choices growing scantier as they came upon the tinned meat. Bilbo pushed the cart along as Dwalin reached to inspect the high shelves that seemed to have been missed in the initial rush on the store post-apocalypse.

“While I can see why the princes have come along, how is it that young Ori made it on this journey? And how does he know his way so well around a polearm? If I didn't know better, I would think he couldn't hurt a fly,” said Bilbo.

“That’s Dori for you,” sighed Dwalin. “Wants to keep his family close, even if that means putting them in the path of danger. Man’s a bloody traditionalist when you get right down to it, probably to make up for the fact that his dad was a philanderer and his other brother grew up to be a sneak. But it seems he’s done his job in teaching Ori how to hold his own. He raised that boy according to the old ways. Lad probably wasn’t more than four or five when old mother hen first shoved an axe into his hand.”

“Blunted, I hope!” exclaimed Bilbo, though his voice remained hushed.

“No, we give toddlers live steel to toughen them up—of course it was blunted, you daft idiot,” Dwalin grumbled.

“Sorry, sorry,” said Bilbo, holding up his hands in a placating manner. “It’s just the thought of entering a kindergartener into weapons training seems… awfully medieval to me.”

“Well, we’ve been doing it for about eight hundred years. I reckon most of the kinks have been worked out by now,” Dwalin said flatly. “Certainly comes in useful for situations like this. How do you feel about Spam?”

“Never had it,” said Bilbo, blinking at the non sequitur. His nose wrinkled slightly at the thought of all that sodium. Dwalin threw three slightly dented cans in the trolley anyway, along with some pickled herring in tomato sauce.

“Don’t make that face. You shouldn’t knock things ‘til you try them,” Dwalin said. “Bombur makes this really good fried spam with soy sauce thing that he learned from his mum. Maybe that’s what we should have for dinner tonight.”

“If you say so.” Bilbo eyed the tins of processed pork product dubiously, unconvinced. “Can we at least get some tuna while we’re here?”

“Commercial tuna harvesting is one of the least sustainable forms of fishing out there,” Dwalin pointed out unhelpfully.

“I really don’t care. Can you please reach those tins on the top shelf?”

“Nope. Just because we’re out here in a zombie apocalypse, doesn’t mean you should stop caring about the environment.”
“Are you purposefully trying to be an asshole?” groaned Bilbo quietly, scrubbing his hands down his face.

“Maybe. Here, you can have some wild-caught Pacific salmon, though.” Dwalin dropped a few tins into the cart for Bilbo, who didn’t even like salmon. Bilbo stared at them sourly, but didn’t comment.

“I need a drink,” he said instead, tugging on Dwalin’s sleeve and pointing toward the liquor aisle.

“Finally, a good idea,” he replied, pushing the cart out of the canned goods aisle. They made a quick stop in international foods to grab some soy sauce, before Bilbo found himself debating the merits of brown versus clear liquor with Dwalin in front of a gin display.

He found that it was surprisingly easy to talk to Dwalin, in spite of the man’s foreboding presence and taciturn nature in large groups. While Bilbo vaguely recalled Balin calling his brother something less than a sparkling conversationalist, it actually seemed that Dwalin could certainly keep a conversation going when he felt like it. He also wasn’t averse to lapsing into silence when it felt natural, which Bilbo certainly appreciated.

It was strangely comfortable, despite the fact that they were forced to talk in muted tones, though perhaps that’s just what happened when you were around somebody twenty-four-seven on the road. Bilbo had always had a hard time relating to others and keeping up with casual acquaintanceships, historically having very few close friends that weren’t also somehow related to him. He was, after all, the sort of person who said his mother was his best friend and actually meant it.

Beorn had been the notable exception to the rule, mainly through a thorough sort of persistence on his part to draw Bilbo out of his shell. Which, of course, Bilbo had inevitably ruined by going off the rails with unsustainable dreams of vigilante justice.

He queasily wondered how long this would last, this easy companionship he had found amongst this band of rough-and-tumble foreigners. If there was one thing Bilbo knew about relationships, it was that they always had an expiration date. Sometimes the knowledge was too painful to bear, but useful in these sorts of situations. It kept him from getting too attached, from getting his hopes up too high.

“Fine. Two bottles of whiskey. The rest is vodka,” said Dwalin, completely oblivious to Bilbo’s slightly morose train of thought.

“Sounds good to me,” replied Bilbo, removing two fifths of mid-grade Kentucky bourbon from an eye-level shelf and placing it in the black grocery bag. Dwalin plunked a huge handle of Stolichnaya down next to it, which, along with the canned goods, made it look like they were preparing for some post-apocalyptic celebratory event.

Bilbo glanced longingly a few aisles over, where the sweets and biscuits were held—the true prize of this probably ill-advised excursion (other than Fili’s absolutely necessary medication, of course).

“Say,” he said slowly, wondering how much convincing it would take Dwalin to make a stop for biscuits, “since it looks like we already have dinner and drinks sorted, shouldn’t we also grab dessert?”

Dwalin eyed him sidelong, considering. “If you want to.”
“I mean, it’s only reasonable, right?” Bilbo said as innocently as possible, mind over taken by the prospect of finally having sweets again. “I know you said no snacks, but really, it would make a nice treat for the rest of the company.”

Bilbo had barely had time to get the words out before Dwalin was swiftly pushing the trolley down the aisle.

“You know what, you’re probably right,” he said distractedly.

Bilbo blinked. That had certainly been easy.

He had to jog to catch up with the other man, who had already turned the corner and shuffled past the moldy bakery section to the sweets aisle with single-minded focus.

“In a rush?” Bilbo whispered, the echoing silence of the cavernous shop reminding him to keep his steps light. He wondered how Bofur and the lads were doing. Kili was being awfully quiet.

“No, not really,” said Dwalin, though his eyes were busy scanning the thin selection of biscuits and chocolates. He narrowed in on a nearly-full box of chocolate covered honeycomb bars, immediately grabbing one with questing fingers and tearing off the wrapper.

Bilbo’s mouth fell open in surprise.

“What?” Dwalin grunted before taking a huge crunching bite. Bilbo was once again viscerally reminded of a giant black bear. Really, the resemblance was striking.

“Is this for the company, or is this for you?” Bilbo murmured, desperately smothering a giggle.

“Shut up. I could say the same about you. You’ve been staring impatiently in this direction since we got here.” Dwalin grabbed the rest of the display box and threw it in the trolley, shoving the rest of the bar into his mouth.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Bilbo sniffed, though he turned to see if there were any chocolate digestives on the shelves that were still before their sell-by date.

It took a little hunting, and perhaps a little bit more shelf climbing than Bilbo thought proper, but he finally found the biscuits he was looking for. It was a strange brand he didn’t recognize, but he figured that beggars can't be choosers. There were three whole packs, and Bilbo gleefully dumped them in his bag. He wondered if Dori would let him browse his truly remarkable tea assortment to find something to go with them.

“Well, I found what I wanted,” Bilbo said, turning back toward Dwalin. He found the other man crouched low in the American section of the aisle, digging for something in the way back of the bottom shelf.

“Hold on. Ha, got it,” replied Dwalin, before extracting what could only be described as a petrol can-sized bottle of brown liquid.

“What on earth is that for?” asked Bilbo, grimacing as he read the label. Sweetened iced tea. Yuck.

“It’s for Thorin. A peace offering,” said Dwalin quietly, shrugging.

“And he likes that?”

“Loves it. Waxes poetic about it,” sighed Dwalin with a roll of his eyes. “His kingdom for a can of
Arizona Iced Tea. Believe me, I don’t get it either. Also, hand me those lemon drops. He likes those too.”

Bilbo hummed consideringly as he tossed the nearby package to Dwalin, wondering if now was an appropriate time to ask about what exactly was going on between them. He didn’t get the chance, of course, for Kili’s shaggy head suddenly poked itself from around the corner of the aisle.

“There you are!” he whispered loudly. “See, I told you both that Mister Dwalin just wanted an excuse to raid the sweets aisle.”

“Didn’t doubt you for a second, lad,” laughed Bofur, his mattock leaned jauntily over his shoulder. He walked to stand next to Bilbo. Dwalin remained casually stoic, silently placing the huge jug of tea in Bilbo’s roomier grocery bag.

“Did you get what we came for?” he asked quietly, suddenly all business.

“There were four vials already made up!” gasped Ori excitedly, proudly brandishing a clear ziplock bag with four ten milliliter containers packed safely inside of it. “It was a miracle. Kili thought that we would have to steal the dry stuff and have Mister Oin take a crack at it making it injectable.”

“That’s incredible,” said Dwalin, eyebrows shooting skyward at the news.

“Yes, Mahal certainly was looking out for us on this one,” said Bofur, casually leaning an arm on Bilbo’s shoulder. He glanced into the trolley, whistling lowly at the assortment of canned goods and liquor they had stuffed into the grocery bags. “And it looks like you two were busy. Are we having a party?”

“We should!” said Kili loudly, obviously still riding the high of his unlikely victory. “Once Thorin sees all this, he won’t even mind that we snuck out!”

“Keep your voice down,” Dwalin hissed. “We still don’t know if—”

Dwalin was cut off as a low crunch sounded from further down the store, sounding an awful lot like the overturned box of snack-sized crisp bags that Dwalin and Bilbo had nudged earlier. The Ereboreans immediately froze in place, but Bilbo startled so badly that his hands flew up to his mouth to stifle a small scream. Throwing off Bofur’s arm in the process, his elbow banged painfully into the handle of the mostly full trolley. The cans and bottles rattled loudly as it was sent slowly rolling into one of the aisle shelves, which clattered as it shook various packs of gum and boiled sweets to the linoleum in the ensuing collision.

The sound echoed deafeningly in the quiet atmosphere. Bilbo waited for the floor to swallow him whole as four sets of eyes rounded on him accusingly.

“Sorry,” he squeaked. Dwalin shushed him, listening intently.

There was another clatter, this time seeming to come from the canned goods aisle. A familiar shrieking moan answered it.

“Oh, fuck,” breathed Ori.

Bilbo immediately lunged for the cart, extracting his rifle as Dwalin slung one of his axes off his back. Kili was already climbing one of the aisle shelves, flattening himself onto his stomach on the empty top shelf, like a polar bear evenly distributing its weight on thin ice. He peered through his scope, visually sweeping the side of the store where the entrance was located.
“How many?” Dwalin muttered.

“By my count, six or seven,” said Kili, glancing back down at the group with an uncharacteristically serious expression. “They’re beginning to make their way over here. Where in the thrice-damned hells did they come from?”

“Where is the closest one?” hissed Dwalin.

“Liquor aisle.”

Dwalin swore vehemently under his breath. “They’re following the scent. I thought all the gone-off meat would confuse their noses. Check the health section, too.”

Bilbo held his breath and edged closer to Bofur. Kili twisted in place, contorting his body to check in the direction that he and the others had just come from.

“Mahal’s hairy arse,” groaned Kili. “There’s even more over there. Were they stalking us? Can they do that now? How were they so quiet?”

“They were probably all in the back storeroom, away from the light,” muttered Bofur. “One probably heard us and the rest followed. We walked right into a nest.”

“And now they’re tracing our path from both sides,” Ori said, voice tinged with fright. A few hungry groans punctuated his statement as the undead presumably further caught their scent.

“It’s alright,” said Dwalin calmly, though his grip on his axe was tight. “It’s nothing we haven’t seen before. They still don’t know exactly where we are, since it’s taken them this long to find us already. We can still sneak out of here if we’re smart and quiet about it. Ori, Bofur, grab the bags.”

Ori grabbed the heaviest-looking of the two, the one advertising the co-op, while Bofur shouldered the one Bilbo had more or less claimed as his own. Dwalin scooped up the blue bag snugged it securely over his shoulder. Bilbo tightened his grip on his gun, feeling useless.

“Want me to do anything?” he asked, voice small. Dwalin shot him a look.

“No, you’ve done enough,” he said. “Keep your head on a swivel and gun pointed down.”

Bilbo instinctively bristled. However, just as he was about to make a smart retort, the short wave radio in Dwalin’s pocket crackled loudly to life. All four men on the ground abruptly stiffened.

“Mister Dwalin, it’s been nearly two hours,” Fili’s tinny voice blared from the speaker. “I don’t know how much longer I can keep Uncle distracted.”

“Goddamnit, Fi,” Kili whispered. “He has the worst timing.”

A low howl began to emanate from both sides of the store. Dwalin hurriedly extracted the radio from his slicker, jamming the talk button.

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“Not the best time, Your Highness,” he hissed angrily, eyes darting wildly. The clamor of the undead started to grow as they began to hunt in earnest. He cut the connection, but Fili’s voice only came back louder.

“Wait, are you guys in trouble? What was that sound? Should I tell Uncle?” he exclaimed fretfully.

Dwalin scowled and threw the radio to Bilbo, who caught it clumsily. “Here’s something you can do. Talk the prince down as I try to figure a way out of this mess. Bofur, Ori, with me. Kili, you
have my permission to start clearing a path.”

“Roger,” said Kili, reaching for his quiver. He deftly loaded a bolt into his crossbow, breathing in deeply before letting it out as he squeezed the trigger. A loud thump sounded from a few aisles over.

“Liquor aisle clear,” he said.

Dwalin nodded, sending Bofur to a post at one end of the aisle and ushering Ori to the other. They all focused in the direction of health and beauty, opposite the entrance and Kili’s line of sight. The prince let another bolt fly, brow furrowed in concentration. Bilbo noted that his normally expressive face was completely blank, his usually warm gray eyes unnaturally cool. It was a very strange, almost frightening thing to see.

Bilbo stared at the radio in his hand as Fili’s voice grew louder and markedly more panicked the longer he avoided answering. Tentatively he pressed the talk button, cutting off Fili’s calls for Mister Dwalin or his brother.

“Fili?” he said softly.

“Mister Baggins, thank Mahal. Is my brother all right?”

“He’s fine, just otherwise occupied,” Bilbo replied, trying to keep his voice calm. He glanced up to Kili in his makeshift sniper’s perch. The prince gazed down the scope dispassionately, muttering something lowly to himself. It almost sounded like a song, though Bilbo couldn’t hear exactly what it was over the growing ruckus from the surrounding undead. “We found your medication, by the way.”

“I could care less about that! Tell me what I can do to help.”

“Incoming!” Bofur called, peering around his end of the aisle.

Dwalin grunted in acknowledgement, spinning out into the main aisle near the bakery goods on the other end from Bofur. There was an aborted shriek before Bilbo heard the wet thump of sharp metal jagging through bone. Dwalin lunged back into the sweets section, blood spatter coating his rain slicker. Bilbo saw a pool of red liquid start to creep into his line of vision, flowing along the grout in between the tiles.

“Oh, I don’t think there’s much you can do, I’m afraid,” Bilbo said, heroically controlling his gag reflex.

“There must be something,” argued Fili from the house.

“I actually think we have this under control,” replied Bilbo. It wasn’t even really a lie.

Bofur sent a look to Ori. The young man nodded. He rushed forward to send the now-empty trolley rattling down the aisle in Bofur’s direction. Bofur caught it deftly with one hand and spun it around, entering back into the main pathway to send the cart careening in the direction of the health section with a hard kick. There was a tremendous crash as the trolley collided with what was presumably several bodies.

“That’s a strike, I think,” he said with an impish grin, ducking back into the aisle. He winked in Bilbo’s direction.

Bilbo frowned. Really? This was not the time for jokes.
“Stop. Flirting!” roared Dwalin in implicit agreement, seeming to have forgone his plan of a sneaky exit now that they had actively engaged the horde.

“Canned goods clear!” Kili cried, loading another bolt in his crossbow.

“How many left?” asked Dwalin, once again spinning out of the aisle. There were considerably more whacks this time, and Dwalin returned with both of his axes in hand, dripping with gore.

“Four or five. They keep coming from the storeroom, like Mister Bofur said,” replied Kili, letting the arrow loose. “They’re congregating around the entrance, but are advancing forward.”

“Four or five is doable,” said Dwalin. Kili nodded, springing down from his perch to the floor. The shelf creaked dangerously in the process, drawing a few more moans from both health and beauty and the produce.

“If we’re going to leave, it has to be now,” Bofur called, glancing in the direction of the exit and adjusting the grocery bag’s positioning on his shoulder.

“Alright. Let’s make a run for it. Ori, take point.”

Ori’s eyes widened, but he nodded determinedly all the same as he brandished his halberd. He rushed down the aisle toward the self checkout, Bofur closely dogging his steps. Bilbo moved to follow them, when suddenly, the radio crackled back to life as Fili once again pushed the talk button.

“Can I talk to Kili— oh, shit.”

Bilbo winced as Fili was cut off by rumbling Khuzdul, from a voice that was unmistakably Thorin’s. Fili shot back a few clipped, panicked sentences before there was presumably a scuffle over the radio. Thorin was shouting angrily.

Bilbo heard what was presumably Fili and Kili’s full names multiple times, which was never a good sign coming from an authority figure.

“Kili Viliynovech Dzhemilev Durinul Mîrza, where the fuck are you?! ” Thorin yelled into the radio, sounding positively livid.

“Busted,” Kili groaned lowly.

“He’s uh, not available right now,” Bilbo said mildly into the receiver. “Can I take a message?”

“Baggins?! For Mahal’s sake, put my nephew on. Now.”

“We don’t have time for this,” Dwalin growled. “We need to run.”

“Are you guys coming or not?! ” yelled Ori from somewhere a few aisles down. Kili darted in his direction, Bilbo sprinting after him.

Dwalin took up the rear, shouting, “Just run! Don’t look behind you!”

It was probably just as well, given the amount of shrieking Bilbo could hear coming from the undead who were caught up in the far aisles in their search for fresh meat.

“Baggins! Answer me this instant!”

“We’re, erm, in a bit of a situation right now. Can I have Mister Dwalin call you back?” he panted.
He dodged clumsily around an overturned fruit crate.

“Dwalin is with you? What kind of situation?” Thorin growled, tone low and dangerous. Bilbo could have slapped himself.

He felt Dwalin’s glare bore holes into his back upon hearing that. Just another reason not to turn around, he supposed.

He looked up from the radio just in time to see Bofur swing his mattock straight into the paunchy gut of a balding former store employee. He twisted the pickaxe with a sickening squelching noise and ripped upwards and outwards, effectively disemboweling him. The employee, still wearing his fluorescent cargo bay vest, slumped over on the floor, teeth continuing to snap rabidly in Bofur’s direction. He flicked the mangled guts off the blade of his mattock before bringing the pointed end down on the undead man’s ear. Bloody pulp splattered everywhere, as if the zombie’s cranium had been simply nothing more than an overripe grapefruit.

It said a lot about what Bilbo had seen over the past year that the sight didn’t immediately make him double over and retch, though it did still succeed in making him sufficiently queasy.

Bilbo brought the radio to his face, pressing the talk button with trembling fingers.

“Nothing you need to worry about right now,” he lied waveringly, yelping as he nearly slipped on a bag of crisps.

“What was that? Baggins, are you alright? Where’s Dwalin and Kili?” Thorin asked urgently, a note of panic creeping into his tone.

Bilbo could see the path to the exit clearly now. He ran as fast as he could, the sharp edges of the plastic radio digging into his hand as he clutched it in an iron grip. He let out a small internal cheer as he watched Ori dispatch another infected with his halberd, splitting open its skull in one mighty swing. He kicked the body off of his blade and vaulted over one of the checkout stands to bolt through the open door, yellow poncho billowing behind him like a cape. Bofur circled around the other side as Kili sprinted in a straight line for the automatic doors, leaping like a gazelle over every obstacle in his path. They both made it out within seconds of each other. Bilbo brought the receiver back up to his mouth.

“They're completely out of harm's way. Everything’s fine, we’re almost out—” Bilbo cut himself off with a scream as another undead Tesco employee lurched out into his path from the dry goods aisle, one of the last before the produce section and the exit.

He let go of the talk button just as the infected screeched at him. He reeled back in panic, the radio flying from his hand as he fumbled his gun in front of him. He hurriedly flicked the safety off, pulling the trigger on the rifle before he really had a chance to aim.

A deafening crack echoed through the store, drowning out all other sound.

A hole the size of Bilbo’s fist suddenly appeared in the man’s torso, staining his bright blue polo crimson. He toppled backwards into a puddle of his own gore, crooked eyeglasses shattering into his face as he wailed in outrage.

In a perfect world, Bilbo would have immediately leapt over the zombie's prone form and bolted for the exit. Unfortunately, in his panic, he had not properly braced the gun against his shoulder when he fired. He lost his footing as the rifle jumped wildly in his hand, the barrel very nearly smashing into his face and breaking his nose.
Bilbo stumbled to the floor with a startled gasp, barely hearing Thorin screaming his name from the radio over the panicked ringing in his ears.

“Stay where you are,” Thorin said, though to Bilbo it sounded strangely muted. “I'm coming to get you.”

“Fucking hell, you’ve done it now,” Dwalin growled, scooping up the radio and hauling Bilbo up by the front of his jacket in the same movement.

Once he had Bilbo back on his feet, he whirled on the zombie, who was furiously trying to find its footing despite the gaping void in its chest and the glass in its face. Dwalin stomped his boot down on its torso, crossing his axes over its neck and severing the head in one fluid scissoring motion. Bilbo stood frozen as he watched the infected's legs spasm violently before going limp, loafers cocking to either side as what little frenzied life it still possessed suddenly left its body.

“Go on then!” Dwalin cried, shooing him toward the exit. Bilbo didn’t need to be told twice.

He jogged the short rest of the way without interruption, nearly sobbing as he burst out into the fresh air and pelting rain. Ori leaned out of the doorway of the cinderblocked SUV past the slag heap, waving wildly.

“Mister Baggins! Over here!” he cried.

Bilbo sprinted for the car and dove in through open door, practically landing in Ori’s lap. He panted for breath, realizing he was still clutching his gun in a bloodless grip, safety off. It was deathly silent in the car as Bilbo started shaking violently. He stared at Ori, who stared back at him in mute shock.

He couldn’t help it. He laughed. Loudly.

“Everything alright, Bilbo?”

Bilbo looked up to see Bofur twisted around in the front passenger seat, slumped low enough that he couldn’t immediately be seen through the busted-out window. His brow was furrowed, looking thoroughly concerned as he observed Bilbo’s outburst.

“We’re alive,” Bilbo choked out.

Bofur cracked a smile at that. “Aye, that we are. And we even got the supplies out, too.”

Bilbo shifted as something dug uncomfortably into his back. He contorted himself so he was sitting curled on the floor of the vehicle in between the front and rear seats, realizing that while he had partially been been draped over Ori, he had also landed on one of the grocery bags. In front of him sat the Scottish co-op tote filled with tins. Without thinking, he dug blindly into it, excavating one of the cans of sliced apricots and thrilling at the sight of it. He pulled the pop tab with gusto, flinging the lid somewhere behind him as he dug into it with his bare fingers like a feral animal. The other bag sat on the seat above Bilbo.

He moaned wantonly as he bit down on the slimy flesh of the apricot, the sugary juice coating his tongue with beautiful stickiness. He could practically feel the vitamins entering his system. Ori reeled back at the display, but Bilbo hardly cared. Bofur stared out the window.

“Celebrating a little early, aren’t we?” Kili teased from the driver’s seat.

“Better now than never,” mumbled Bilbo, licking syrup from his fingers. “Your uncle’s gonna kill
you. Want an apricot half?"

Kili shook his head, morosely settling into his seat and crossing his arms. "He’s gonna kill all of us, I reckon," he said quietly.

They all looked up as Dwalin tapped on the cracked windscreen, axes once again strapped on his back and talking sixty miles a minute in Russian into the radio. He hadn’t bothered to put up his hood. Water dripped down the tattooed pate of his scalp and off the tip of his nose, running pink as it washed away the blood spatter. He jerked his hand roughly in the direction of the road, signaling that it was time to leave. The zombies hadn’t seemed to have figured out they escaped the building yet, and they weren’t going to stick around long enough for them to find out.

Bilbo messily slurped the rest of the syrup from the can, stuffing the last apricot half into his mouth whole. Ori opened the door and slid out with one of the shopping bags. Bilbo followed him with the other. He carelessly threw the empty can to the floor. (If Dwalin yelled at him about littering, then that would be his cross to bear.)

“Ладно, я тебя тогда увижу,” Dwalin grumbled into the radio.

Thorin growled something back that was unintelligible over the rain and static, but the murderous anger in his words was unmistakable.

“Да. Черт с вами тоже!” Dwalin yelled in reply. He clicked the switch off with a vengeance.

“Fucking prick,” he said, scowling at the device like he was willing it to burst into flames. He turned to the group, all of them gazing nervously in different directions. Kili looked the most anxious, chewing his lower lip apprehensively.

“How bad is it, Mister Dwalin?” Ori said finally, breaking the antsy silence.


And then, slightly quieter and directed mainly at Kili, he added, “He’s pretty rattled. I think his feelings are hurt. A lot.”

Kili’s chin quivered as a shattered expression briefly stole across his features. Now that the adrenaline was slowly draining from his system, a stab of guilt ripped its way through Bilbo’s stomach, one that made him feel very much like he had been caught at the wrong end of Bofur’s mattock. He clearly remembered the abject panic in Thorin’s voice over the radio, desperate to know what was going on, to know if his nephew and his… whatever Dwalin was to him, were safe.

And Bilbo had lied to him. Badly.

He clearly remembered what Thorin’s voice had sounded like over the radio. He hadn’t just been angry. He had been scared.

Hadin’t Bilbo just got done thinking about how nice it was to be surrounded by people he more or less trusted? Sure, Thorin didn't like him for whatever reason. Sure, he was frustratingly mercurial toward him. But those realities did nothing to negate the fact that the king had demonstrated on multiple occasions that he was more than willing to risk his life to save Bilbo’s own. The sense memory of His Majesty lunging on top of him as the entire world seemed to shake apart around them was not one he would be forgetting anytime soon. Thorin unthinkingly shielding him from the collapsing plane with his own body—while Bilbo had just laid there like an idiot—played on a hideous loop in his mind.
Stay where you are, I’m coming to get you, Thorin had said earlier. Not to Dwalin or Kili. He had said that to Bilbo specifically.

Bilbo startled himself with the realization that he trusted Thorin to do just that, to take care of him, even in spite of their differences. And while Thorin obviously still had his doubts about Bilbo, it was reasonable to assume that the king trusted him somewhat in turn, at least enough to be someone worth protecting.

What did it say about him that he could so casually betray that? And over what—a bruised ego and a chance at some biscuits? Perhaps the ordeal had been somewhat worth it, since now Fili had a surplus of his hormones, but Bilbo hadn’t even helped with that part of it.

He was so selfish. His his involvement hadn’t been about Fili’s wellbeing at all, which had driven Ori’s motivation for coming. Nor had it been simply a matter of boredom, as in the case of Bofur. It hadn’t even been about the biscuits.

He had just wanted to make Thorin mad. To hurt him in the way that he had been hurt.

God. An eye for an eye, indeed. No wonder all his relationships had an expiration date.

He should have known better. He should have said something. But he had been too caught up in petty vindictiveness to notice that he had clearly crossed a line.

He thought back to what Dwalin had said earlier—that if he had simply decided not to come, Bofur would have probably stayed behind as well. And if Bofur hadn’t agreed to tag along, would Kili and Dwalin still have gone to Tesco on their own?

Bilbo dragged his hands down his face, feeling wretched.

How utterly loathsome. This was all his fault. He deserved every bit of the king’s ire.

Bofur looked sidelong at him and sighed, slinging an arm over Bilbo’s shoulders. He tucked him comfortingly into his side. Bilbo leaned into it; though in his opinion he hardly deserved it, since he was objectively the worst.

“Chin up, lad. This hasn’t anything to do with you. We were just along for the ride,” Bofur murmured quietly. Bilbo shook his head.

“But we were involved,” he croaked hoarsely, swallowing hard around the lump in his throat. “I lied to the king. We all did.”

Bofur shrugged. “Aye, well. I didn’t say it was gonna be pretty.”

“Dori’s going to kill me,” Ori whispered in horror, face pale.

Dwalin sighed raggedly, running his hands along his scalp. “Don’t worry, old mother hen won’t get to you. I’ll take the blame for it all, convince him that I took you with me kicking and screaming.”

“He won’t possibly believe that,” he replied, wringing his hands under his poncho.

“He will, because I’ll make him believe it. A good CO sticks up for his men, even if he has to bend the truth and take the fall,” Dwalin said simply. “You did good today, kid. You deserve it.”

Ori looked thunderstruck, head ducking as he blushed hard under the praise. Bilbo couldn’t help
but smile weakly at the sight.

He extricated himself from Bofur’s hold, squeezing his shoulder briefly in thanks. Bofur grinned wanly at him. His dimples were nowhere to be found.

"I guess we should go and face the music, then," said Kili, tucking a wet bit of hair behind an ear and slinging his crossbow over his shoulder. "This didn't go quite as smoothly as I had planned."

"We got out alive, and with more than what we came for. I'd call that a victory," said Bofur, though his words rang hollow.

"Then why doesn't it feel like one?" Kili murmured.

Bofur simply shrugged. Nobody seemed to have anything else to say. So with that, they began the long march back to the house.

Chapter End Notes

Translation notes:
Mirza -- [Persian/Turkic, transliterated into Khuzdul as Mirza] While this is technically a historical Persian title for a royal prince, it was also used among the high aristocracies of the Tatar states & Khanates, so I thought it was appropriate for Erebor, given that I'm using the title Khan for Thorin.
Ладно, я тебя тогда увижу [Ladno, ya tevya togda uvizhu] -- [Russian] Okay, I'll see you then

As for the rest of Kili's name, I'm following the Russian pattern of patronymic naming, which in the fiction of this universe only came into style after the Soviet occupation of Erebor. I have some thoughts on names, the main being that generally the Khazad don't have last names except for high nobility, or if they were born abroad, or had a foreign parent. Vili, Fili and Kili's dad, was an Ereboan born abroad in Ukraine to a Crimean Tatar father, so he passed on his last name (Dzhemilev) to Fili and Kili. 'Durinul' is less of a name and more of a qualifier/title in its own right, as in Khuzdul it translates to "son/child of Durin," which is why it's tacked on at the end, but before his main title. So Kili's full name would come out to something like 'Prince Kili, heir of Durin, son of Vili Dzhemilev'.

You can take Bilbo's assessment of how much of all this was his fault with as much salt as you would like, but I think it is important to know that this was a shitty thing that they did. That they ALL did. And Bilbo will have to work to make amends.

Anyway, thank you so much for your patience. For some reason writing this chapter was really hard... I mainly just wanted to get to the next chapter, which includes a scene that I've had written out in dialogue form for a while now. So I hope I can get that out much quicker.

Your kudos and comments have breathed life into my cold husk of a body, as usual. I'm so appreciative. Big big thanks to Elsa, who patiently endured me babbling for hours on end as I used them as a sounding board to speak verbal words about this fic for literally the first time ever, and HUGEST, MASSIVE thanks to Ash who actually
scouted out their local Tesco for me and sent pics. It was such an incredible help.

No specific music this time, but if you're wondering what Kili was singing, it was Infinity Guitars by Sleigh Bells. He has a whole playlist of music specifically for sniping, which I went into a fugue state and actually created in Spotify, because I apparently love the high concept of creating playlists for characters. Not as in songs about them, but as in songs they would listen to. It can be found here. I suggest listening to it in order if you can just because I like the flow of it, but if not, no big deal.

[personal blog] [lotr/fanfic blog] [soundtrack]
Chapter Summary

There's a certain sort of tragedy involved with the act of having a brother, blood or otherwise. Bilbo's an only child, so he doesn't know this. He'll learn the full extent of it eventually. And for once one of his plans pans out exactly the way he wanted it, but he finds out pretty much immediately that he might have played himself.

Chapter Notes

[drops this at your feet like a cat proudly bringing in a bloodied dead mouse from outside] This is... this is what you want, right? More lore?? More themes??

I'm gonna do music, links, and general thanks here since my author's comment at the end with history/research notes got to be, uhhhh novel length lmao

Music That Goes With This Chapter:
Brother - Murder By Death
Ymai - Uch-Sume-R
The Boxer - Simon & Garfunkel

Thank you so much for reading and all of your wonderful comments on the last chapter! I was stunned at the like, immediate positive response. The amount of consistent feedback I get from readers new and old is such a bonkers special thing, I'm constantly blown away. Like, I'm just the equivalent of ten monkeys banging typewriters in a locked room, but you guys do make me feel like what I'm putting out there is worth reading to at least someone who isn't me. Which I can't even really conceive of, but still, all the same, thank you.

[personal blog] [lotr/fanfic blog] [soundtrack]

TW for heavy alcohol use, big arguments, discussions of diaspora and of lateral violence among a colonized group as a result of imperialism, and self-inflicted heartache.

And just a reminder, there are many different forms of love out there, folks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The walk seemed to take longer than the first time around.

There was no formation in their procession back to the house, all their nervous tension redirected entirely toward what awaited them there. Kili and Dwalin lagged slightly behind, silent but walking closely next to each other, their arms brushing with every step. Bofur looked ahead, uncharacteristically stoic and only speaking when Bilbo and Ori needed to be directed around a turn. Ori, for his part, stared hard at his feet.
Bilbo didn’t know how he was going to face Thorin. He internally tried to practice what he was going to say to him, to determine how exactly he was going to explain himself and how sorry he felt for scaring him so badly, but no words came to mind.

They soon rounded the corner of the Chinese takeaway. The sight of the house made them stop short in the middle of the road.

Thorin sat rigidly on the front step with no shoes or coat on, radio dangling limply from his fingers. He was completely soaked. His thin shirt had completely plastered to his torso and drenched hair clung to his face. He had obviously been sitting there a while, waiting for them.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. While it was completely out of season, but Bilbo had to admit that it felt appropriate.

“What the hell does that idiot think he’s doing? He’ll catch his death like that,” Dwalin muttered, barely audible over the rain.

“You know Uncle. He always likes to be dramatic,” replied Kili in an equally hushed tone.

Bilbo swallowed, unable to look at the king. He glanced up to see Fili at an upstairs window, nose pressed against the glass and waving frantically at his brother. Kili sent the tiniest of waves back.

Fili looked out mournfully at them for a short minute before he backed away from the opening.

Thorin finally looked up from where he had been menacing the sidewalk, glaring furiously at them. His fiery gaze shot straight over Bilbo's head, boring directly into Dwalin's cool stare.

"Give me one good reason I should let any of you back in this house after the stunt you just pulled," Thorin barked at them. He hauled himself to his feet, squaring his shoulders so as to completely block the front entryway.

Dwalin sighed. "Thorin," he started.

"You don't get to call me that!" the king shouted hoarsely. His agonized, wrath-filled voice pierced through the sound of the rain as he eyed the full grocery bags hanging off their shoulders hatefully.

"You lost the right when you decided to go behind my back and risk Kili's life for... what? For snacks?! Was the shock of me almost losing only one of my nephews today not enough for you?"

Bilbo’s mouth fell open slightly. Had Fili not told him? He looked toward Ori, who looked similarly confused. Bofur’s mouth thinned to a hard line.

"Uncle, I can explain," Kili said waveringly. "It's not like that. It wasn't even Mister Dwalin's idea."

Bilbo glanced back to see the prince take a few hesitant steps forward, eyes wide and face completely open in an expression of pained contrition. Dwalin held him back with an outstretched arm.

"Didn't I say I'd take the fall for this?" he asked quietly. Kili’s head whipped in his direction, expression openly confused. Water flew from his sodden bangs with the speed of the motion, his messy bun slapping limply at the back of his neck. It wetted the cotton collar of his t-shirt from where it poked out under his jacket.

“But, I thought that was just in regard to Dori,” he whispered.

“Good CO, remember?”
“But—”

“We were only going out for a few things, as a surprise. We’re all in need of some proper fucking food,” Dwalin said, loud enough so Thorin could hear him over the rain. “We were supposed to be back before you even knew we were gone.”

Thorin laughed mirthlessly. He slicked the hair back from his face to fully reveal dark bags under his eyes and the gaunt sharpness of his cheekbones.

“And that’s supposed to make me feel better? You know I can’t abide by this,” he said.

For possibly the first time, Bilbo wasn’t completely blinded by the beauty in that face. Now that he looked, really looked at Thorin, it seemed like the king hadn’t slept properly in days. He looked… pale. Beyond tired actually, almost even sickly. Bilbo hadn’t paid much notice to it at first, too distracted as he was by the rest of him, but it was starkly apparent now.

“We had it under control,” growled Dwalin.

“You didn’t hear it from my end,” Thorin said coldly.

Bilbo winced, mentally replaying the things he said over the radio. Yeah. They had been bad.

“I don’t care what you thought you heard. You never explicitly said we couldn’t go. So we went, and we handled it,” Dwalin argued. “I apologize if we scared you.”

“It’s not their fault, Uncle!” Fili cried, bursting out from the front door. Hardly dressed for the rain, he had thrown his patched denim jacket hastily over his bandaged torso, which was bare except for a cropped black sports top. He wheezed from the exertion, but bulled his way under Thorin’s arm anyway to stand stubbornly in between the king and the group.

“Go back inside, Irakdashat,” ordered Thorin.

“No! For once in your life, Thorin, please listen to me,” Fili said plaintively. “The accident earlier was worse than what I told you. They were just trying to help.”

“Fili!” Dwalin called in warning. Kili merely looked at the ground, water dripping down his face. Thorin reared back at the news, anger dissipating briefly as his face became utterly stunned. “What do you mean? Are you alright?”

“Uncle, I’m fine,” Fili said soothingly, holding out his hands. However, his jacket gaped open at the movement, fully revealing the purpling bruises on the right side of his ribs. Thorin’s expression twisted from concerned surprise back into a thunderous scowl.

“Tell me what’s wrong,” he growled. He descended the front step and took two huge strides, stopping just in front of Fili. His large hands hovered around the blonde prince’s shoulders, as if he couldn’t decide whether to embrace or shake him. Fili defiantly stared back, blue eyes hard and challenging.

“We needed to get his hormones!” Ori blurted from Bilbo’s side, bringing the clear bag out from under his poncho. He held it high in the air so Thorin could see.

“Ori, stay out of this!” Fili barked imperiously, not even bothering to glance in his direction. Ori flinched at the tone, and Bilbo didn’t blame him. The prince had sounded frighteningly like his uncle.
Thorin glanced in the young man’s direction, eyes narrowing on the ziplock. He looked back to Fili, expression slightly more open.

“Explain,” was all he said.

“When I fell, most of my vials broke,” said Fili, voice quiet. “I freaked out and begged Mister Dwalin to take Kili and check if the pharmacy at Tesco had my prescription. I convinced the others to go as backup. All this is my fault.”

“Fi…” Kili murmured hoarsely. Fili shot him a weak, heart-wrenching smile.

Bilbo’s heart broke. Even now, Fili was looking out for his younger brother. He was looking out for all of them, taking the blame when he didn’t deserve it. He hadn’t even wanted them to go, not for his sake.

Guilt ate further at Bilbo’s insides. How was he going to fix this?

Thorin, for his part, looked like he had been slapped. His eyes were wide, and they were hurt.

“Why didn’t you tell me? We could have done something, made some sort of plan,” he said tightly, voice unsettling in its shrillness.

His hands came to rest lightly on the sides Fili’s face, but the prince only looked away, breaking the hold. Thorin let out a noise like a wounded animal, like Fili had just personally gutted him.

It was the worst sound Bilbo had ever heard. Beside him, Bofur clenched his fists, but was otherwise expressionless.

“He didn’t tell you because he knew you wouldn’t react well,” Dwalin said calmly, expression carefully neutral. “The lads came to me because they knew I could think clearly.”

Thorin’s hands abruptly dropped from Fili’s face, his head snapping in Dwalin’s direction. His face contorted into a vicious snarl as he regarded the other man’s cool demeanor. All but shoving Fili out of the way, he stormed past Bilbo and the others without even so much as a split-second glance. It as if they were completely invisible, he was so singularly focused on the other man.

He came to stand directly in front of Dwalin, leaning menacingly into his space.

“Say that again,” the king dared. However, Dwalin was not cowed.

“You’re not listening to me,” he said.

“And why should I listen to what you of all people have to say, you thrice-damned fucking liar,” Thorin spat.

“I didn’t lie to you, Thorin,” Dwalin replied.

“You just did! To my face!” the king cried, scrubbing a hand down his wet beard. “I don’t know what’s a worse betrayal, that you keep undermining my authority, or the fact that you—all of you!—decided that it was okay to go behind my back! May I remind you that I am your king?”

“Mahal, don’t start with that shit again,” Dwalin groaned, anger finally showing plain on his face. Thorin let out a low warning growl. Dwalin ignored him.

“Are you even listening to yourself?” he continued. “Wait, no, of course not, because that’s just the
problem. You don’t listen to anyone anymore! You don’t listen to Balin, you don’t listen to your nephews, you don’t listen to me. You always used to listen to me, Thorin.”

“I’ll listen when you have something worthwhile to say,” Thorin shot back irritably.

“Except I have, but you’ve just been too stubborn to hear it!” Dwalin yelled, throwing his hands up in exasperation. “You don’t need to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders. We’re here to help you. Have you looked at yourself lately? You’re not okay.”

“I’m fine! I’m just sick of your insolence, of you questioning every single move I make!” Thorin snapped. While his tone was aggressive, he took a hesitant step back and folded his arms across the width of his chest defensively.

“Your Majesty, as your second, it’s my job to question whether or not you’re making the best decisions,” said Dwalin impatiently. “Not just for all of us, but also for you. When was the last time you slept more than two hours at a time? Or ate properly when Balin and I weren’t watching? Half of this stuff I got specifically for you.”

“I don’t need it,” said Thorin. “I can take care of myself.”

“You—you гребаный идиот!” Dwalin roared, seemingly fed up. He grabbed Thorin’s upper arms, squeezing hard. “You’re not sleeping, you’re only eating when we force you to, and you’re throwing yourself into unnecessary danger without waiting for backup! And not to mention your damned mood swings. Mahal wept, how can you expect any of us to blindly follow you, when anybody that knows you can see that you’re one misstep away from a meltdown? For the record, I’m still not one hundred percent on board with this suicide run through the chunnel!”

“The channel tunnel is the only option we have!” Thorin cried, shoulders beginning to tremble with emotion. He ferociously broke free of Dwalin’s hold and opened his mouth to say more, but Dwalin cut him off with a savage wave of his arm.

“I know that, but that’s not the point! You dismissed my reservations straight out of hand, something you would have never done just a few months ago. Блядь! I thought we left all this behind in Crimea, Thorin,” he exclaimed. “You may be Mahal’s chosen heir, but you’re not infallible. And you only make it worse when you shut down any attempt at criticism, calling it insolence! Fucking hell, you’re becoming just as bad as Thrór.”

Bilbo sensed both Bofur and Ori freeze next to him the instant Dwalin mentioned the name, which Bilbo dimly remembered being Thorin’s grandfather’s. Fili, who had gone to check Kili over for injuries during the argument, noticeably startled, while Kili glared incredulously at Dwalin.

Thorin looked as if he had just been stabbed, physically stumbling backwards as a haunted look entered his bright blue eyes. A pang of regret instantly stole over Dwalin’s features, but he didn’t apologize. Thorin’s mouth opened and closed, as if he were fishing for a retort but was otherwise entirely too upset to find one.

“How can you even say something like that?” Kili yelled instead, his entire demeanor suddenly outraged. Fili hushed him, though he didn’t look too happy, either. Dwalin gazed sharply in the princes’ direction.

“It’s true, and both of you know it,” he said lowly. “Otherwise you wouldn’t have come to me. You’re the king, Thorin. We need you to step up and do right by us. You can’t serve from an empty vessel. When you shut everyone out, play at being a martyr, you’re just being selfish.”
“Mister Dwalin, I think it’s time to go inside,” said Fili coldly. There was a tension to his shoulders that disclosed a temper that was controlled by only the slimmest of margins.

Something in Thorin abruptly shifted. As if a switch had suddenly been flipped, he shot Fili a quelling look, his expression suddenly smoothing into something that was unnervingly calm. While Thorin was usually stoic, in this instance he looked downright serene; it was a jarring shift from his earlier incandescent fury.

However, despite the king's neutral expression, Bilbo looked into that face and saw only violence. It frightened him.

“Fuck you,” Thorin whispered. His voice was disquietingly raspy, rough in a way that spoke of barely restrained savagery. “You have no idea what it’s like to be in my position. And how could you? You might have been born in Erebor, but the Russians stripped it out of you, didn’t they? You’re more Soviet than Khuzd. You can barely speak more than a few sentences of Khuzdul, after all.”

Bilbo’s mouth fell open in surprise. Now that he thought about it, he hardly ever heard Dwalin speak Khuzdul except for the few words he spoke to Balin upon their first meeting. He and Thorin always seemed to lapse into Russian when they were talking (or rather, arguing) amongst themselves, and Bilbo hadn’t thought much of it. Though, it did certainly seem strange now, considering that every other member of the company seemed to speak to each other in either exclusively Khuzdul or English.

“Shut the hell up,” barked Dwalin. A dark look overtook his features. “You weren’t even born in the mountain.”

Thorin smiled something small and scary, eyes dead. “I may have been born in exile, but I am Mahal’s chosen, the direct heir of Durin the Deathless. His and the blood of more than eight hundred years of Ereborean leadership flows through me. I was raised according to the old ways, in the manner of my forefathers. And what were you? Another cog in the Soviet machine. Shipped off to boarding school to be stripped of our identity, of our rites, of our language. What could you possibly know of Khuzd kingship, or the burden that’s been placed on me, if you can’t even speak to our ancestors? To Mahal?”

“Your Majesty! That is enough!” roared Balin from the entryway of the house, effectively cutting Thorin off.

Bilbo jumped, turning around far enough to finally notice the rest of the company had started crowding in the doorway.

Ori took a tremulous step back as he saw Dori shove his way to the front. He was positively livid. His usually perfectly coiffed hair was thoroughly rumpled, as if he had been tearing at it in anger. The teenager paled, looking very much as if he were seriously considering making a run for it.

“Ori! Get in here before I grab you by the beard and drag you!” Dori screamed. Even Oin winced at the piercing volume of it.

“Ori, I can explain,” said Ori, sending a panicked look toward Dwalin for support.

Dwalin was in no state to defend him. He breathed heavily through his nose, fists clenching and unclenching uncontrollably as he trembled in rage. Thorin stared at a spot just over Dwalin’s shoulder, unnervingly still.
“Harkulul! Ñê aqrati d’ aklut nidarinkhadi!” yelled Dori, shaking his fist.

“Okay,” Ori replied morosely. He dragged his feet as he began to trudge to the house.

“Here lad, I’ll take that,” said Bofur quietly, moving to take the full grocery bag from the boy’s shoulder. Ori shrugged him off, continuing up the steps until Dori could grab him by the scruff of his poncho and haul him inside. Bilbo’s heart went out to him.

Gandalf stood near the back of the pack, eyes flinty as he regarded the scene outside. His hard blue gaze screwed into Bilbo in a way that spoke of an inevitable dressing down. Bilbo grimaced weakly in return.

Ah. Perhaps he was in trouble, too.

Bofur laid a hand on the small of his back.

“Let’s get out of this rain, then, shall we?” he whispered, tone gentle.

Bilbo nodded, sparing one last glance for the pair in the middle of the street. They hadn’t seemed to move a muscle since Balin interrupted them. Water bounced off their immobile forms, as if they were nothing but marble statues that had been plopped directly onto the brick pavers.

However, after a moment, Thorin swiftly turned on his heel to stalk back toward the house. The crowd fell silent as he walked, shoulders stiff and hands hanging limply at his sides. He paused to squeeze Fili and Kili’s shoulders before moving to a stop beside Bilbo and Bofur.

He briefly regarded position of Bofur’s hand on Bilbo’s back, gaze somewhat disapproving but otherwise dispassionate. Bilbo froze, feeling quite a bit like a rabbit caught in the merciless gaze of a wolf.

“Bofur,” the king rumbled.

“Your Majesty,” the man in question murmured.

“Are you and Mister Baggins unharmed?”

“We’re peachy.” Bofur’s tone was uncharacteristically snippy.

“I’m not happy with you.”

“Aye. Wouldn’t expect you to be.”

Thorin regarded him for a short moment. His gaze shifted back toward the house. His eyes, however, were far away.

“Who would you say is the leader of this company?” Thorin asked casually, brooding into space.

Bofur frowned, expression sour. “The king, I reckon.”

“Good. It would be in your best interest to remember that.”

With that, Thorin began to turn away, not even having spared a full glance for Bilbo.

Suddenly able to shake off whatever had paralyzed him, he broke free of Bofur’s hold. Bilbo laid a shaking hand on Thorin’s sodden arm in an attempt to gain his attention.
“Your Majesty,” he gasped.

The king jumped, whirling startledly on Bilbo. Face open for a brief unguarded moment, it revealed the full extent of his shock, which surprised Bilbo in turn. Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, Thorin’s expression shuttered, just as it had during that confusing interaction at Weathertop. Bilbo tried not to let it rattle him.

“Your Majesty,” he murmured once again, low enough so only Thorin could hear him. “I truly apologize for my part in all this. If I had known the extent… no, that’s not an excuse. We should have told you. Look, I know what you must think of me—”

Thorin cut him off with a raise of his hand.

“Mister Baggins, while I appreciate the sentiment,” he said lowly, tone slightly patronizing, “this is between me and my family, no matter how determinedly you try to meddle. If you’re so bold as to presume that I think anything of you at all... well, then you’re sorely mistaken.”

Bilbo couldn’t help the small injured noise that escaped him from that, recoiling from the king as if he had been physically struck.

“I-I see,” he whispered, feeling like he had been punched hard in the stomach. “Well, thank you for telling me, then. I won’t bother you from now on.”

The king took in Bilbo’s shattered expression, and Thorin’s guard fell for another split-second. A complex look that Bilbo couldn’t parse suddenly overtook his features. It didn’t make any sense, but it looked in equal parts pained and longing. It was as if Thorin yearned to say something more, but was too overwhelmed by something of a deep, aching sadness to do so.

The king’s eyes desperately searched his face, looking for something in his expression that Bilbo couldn’t even hazard a guess for. Thorin reached out a tentative hand toward him, lips parted slightly.

Bilbo’s brow furrowed in confusion. Then he felt a rough hand squeeze his. Startled, he looked sidelong at Bofur, who was watching him with a complicated, somewhat sympathetic expression.

Thorin’s face immediately went blank once more, mouth closing with a harsh click of his teeth. He spun back around, furiously shaking his head as he began to walk even faster toward the house.

“Good heavens, what could that have been about?” Bilbo whispered, haplessly watching the King’s retreating back. Thorin had to forcibly to shove his way past a seething Balin, while the rest of the company simply parted to let his dripping form through.

Bofur squeezed Bilbo’s hand once again as they watched him go. Bilbo had to admit it felt nice. He didn’t remember the last time anybody had held it, be it a friend or otherwise.

“No idea,” said Bofur softly.

It was a lie, and Bilbo knew it. He just couldn’t find it within himself to care at the moment.

His hand burned, and not from Bofur holding it. It was the one that had he had used to gain Thorin’s attention, and that shook him more than anything.

He gazed back at Dwalin, who looked as if he was trying to burn a hole in the pavement with his mind. Now that Thorin had left, it was clear that he was absolutely devastated. He swayed on his feet as he ran a hand nervously along his scalp, before he dragged both his hands down his face
with a loud, aggravated groan. Bilbo’s heart clenched.

Well, when was the last time he had ever listened to Thorin? He was involved, whether the king liked it or not. He had played a hand in getting them into this mess. Now he was going to try to fix it.

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Bilbo had a plan.

Well, half of a plan. A quarter of a plan.

A vague outline, maybe. In any case, something was better than nothing. But before he could put it into action, he needed to do a little reconnaissance.

“Uncle and Mister Dwalin?”

Fili frowned from his recumbent position on the bed in one of the two upstairs bedrooms. He was propped up on the pillows, holding another cold pack to his ribs in an attempt to cut any more swelling off at the pass. Kili lounged next to him. He was trying and failing to force a comb through his snarled hair, which was still damp from the rain.

Though the bed was a full double, it looked tiny beneath them. Both of the princes were quite large in terms of height and sheer mass, though Kili was certainly a little bulkier than his brother in both the shoulders and torso. While all their long limbs barely fit on the relatively narrow bed, they curled toward each other like cats, both of them instinctively making space for the other.

“Yes,” replied Bilbo, fidgeting as he looked out the window. It was the same one he had seen Fili in earlier. “I was wondering if you could tell me anything about their history together. Not anything majorly private, mind you. I’m just tired of being caught up in the middle of all this without having any context.”

What little light had shone through the cloud cover was finally starting to die as night settled on the village and the rain continued to pour on. A trash bin a few houses down rattled loudly. Bilbo hoped it was an animal.

Fili ponderously ran a hand through his beard, grimacing slightly at how long it was becoming.

“I don’t really know the specifics, actually,” he said. “It’s weird. Mister Dwalin’s just always… been there, you know? With either Uncle or Mum, or even with our other Uncle Frerin, before he died. But we’re not actually related, at least as far as I know.”

“Hum. Sounds sort of like my relationship with Gandalf,” said Bilbo.

“Wait, so he’s not your dad then?” asked Kili, viciously attacking a particularly difficult tangle near the nape of his neck. “I could have sworn by the way you two argued earlier.”

“What—no! He’s just a close friend of my mum’s!” Bilbo spluttered in shock, face coloring instantly at the memory of the heated discussion he had with Gandalf about their extracurricular excursion. While Bilbo had angrily been called a ‘fool’ and a ‘Took’ multiple times during his tirade, he was fairly certain the old reprobate had mostly just been upset that he hadn’t been invited to go with them.
“Come on Ki, you know better,” Fili sighed.

Kili grinned. “Yeah, I do. I just wanted to see Mister Boggins’ reaction. It was exactly what I expected.”

“Cheeky,” Bilbo muttered with a frown.

Kili shrugged, letting out a small yelp of pain as he tugged a little too harshly on his hair. Fili smiled wanly at him. He forcibly took the comb from his brother, silently urging him to sit in front of him with his legs crossed.

“Mister Dwalin’s sort of like our unofficial other uncle,” Kili said, settling into position. “He’s always been looking out for Thorin, for as long as we can remember.”

"Is it true then, what Mister Dwalin said? That the king isn't… well?" Bilbo asked tentatively.

Fili sighed. He started to run the comb through his brother's hair, gently working it through the rat's nest.

"Yeah. You wouldn't know, because you didn't know him before, but he's in a pretty rough way right now," Fili said quietly. Kili kept his eyes on his lap, mouth tight. "Ever since sigin’adad died, he's been in a spiral. It reminds me of when he and Mister Dwalin came back from Crimea without Uncle Frerin. But it was worse then. Mum fucking lost it, Thorin barely spoke. I had just turned sixteen, and Ki was only fourteen, so there was nothing we could really do. It was Mister Dwalin who held us together."

"He really is part of your family then," said Bilbo, throat suddenly dry.

"Yeah," agreed Fili. "That experience really cemented it. I don’t know why it’s so different this time around. I mean, in some ways, it is better. I still see some of the old Thorin on occasion, like when he tries to teach me the tog’shûr. I know I'm rubbish at it, but it seems to make him happy."

“Getting him to play football was really fun,” sighed Kili, smiling slightly at the memory. “It really reminded me of how he was when we were kids. Would you believe that when we were little, Thorin was actually our fun uncle? He was always singing us silly songs, playing along with our games. And even though you usually couldn't pay him to watch sports, he'd always come to our youth team matches. I think the only thing he actually liked going to was our gymnastics meets, but only because he loved doing Fili's hair and dressing him up in sparkly outfits. He and mum apparently fought like mad over who got to do it. I don't think I was nearly as fun, even though I kept at it for way longer.”

"Ha! Were they really sparkly?" asked Bilbo in amusement.

Kili grinned widely. "Yeah. I was pretty young, so I don't remember super well, but I've seen pictures. He was very cute."

"I was eight!" Fili cried, yanking harshly on Kili's hair. The younger prince hissed in pain.

"Anyway," he continued, still somewhat cheerfully, "he was always cheering the loudest for us at whatever we were into at the time, even though I don't think he really knew the rules for some of the things we did. He'd be a little confused, but he always had the right spirit."

Fili gentled his hands and hummed in agreement, looking thoughtful.

“You know, sometimes I see that bit of Thorin when he's talking to you, Mister Baggins," he said,
not bothering to glance up from his attempt to tame Kili's unruly mane. Bilbo gaped at him in shock.

"With me? He barely talks to me!" he exclaimed.

Fili shrugged.

"Yeah, but when he does, he's just... lighter. I think it's because you're an outsider. He doesn't have to try so hard with you," the elder prince replied.

A small, teasing smile cracked across his face, before it suddenly fell. "But with Mister Dwalin on the other hand... I don't know. It used to be so easy between them. There was the accident with sigin' adad, and then Uncle inherited the throne while we were on the road, and now they're fighting all the time."

"I don't care how much of an ass Thorin is being, Mister Dwalin was completely out of line comparing him to Thrór," Kili muttered darkly.

"Yes, what was all that about, if I may ask?" said Bilbo, eyebrows rising at the vitriol in Kili's tone. It was surprising, especially since it was obvious the prince otherwise held Dwalin in extremely high regard. "I know they didn't exactly see eye-to-eye..."

Bilbo was interrupted by the sound of a light knock on the doorframe. He turned, surprised to see Balin standing in the threshold with four heaping plates of food balanced precariously in his arms.

"That would be the understatement of the century," he sighed. Fili and Kili let out twin grunts of agreement.

Bilbo hungrily eyed the offerings, stomach growling loudly. Right, he had been so preoccupied with getting into dry clothes and seeking out people to interrogate that he had forgotten about dinner. It looked to be mainly rice, which was topped with what he could only assume were fried pieces of Spam that had been marinated in soy sauce. It was accompanied by a mix of canned mandarin and peach slices.

Balin saw the famished gleam in his eye and smiled.

"Here, Bombur figured you lads must be hungry," he said.

Walking to the bed, he passed a plate and a fork to each of them. Bilbo sat down on the floor with the dish and immediately dug into the fruit, but he regarded the protein warily. There was still something about canned meat that didn’t sit well with him. However, all thoughts about possibly deadly sodium content promptly disappeared when Bilbo bit into a peach slice. He had to fight to hold back a pleased moan, it tasted so decadent.

"I'm not really hungry," Kili murmured, trying to refuse his portion. Fili shot him a look.

"You need to eat, Ki," he said, shoving the dish into his brother's lap.

Kili glowered at it like it had personally offended him. Fili, on the other hand, paused his attempt to tame Kili's hair in order to dig into the meat with gusto.

Balin lowered himself to sit on the edge of the bed with the fourth plate of Spam and rice sitting daintily in his lap. He ran a hand through his long white beard, lips pursed thoughtfully.

"Mister Balin, can I ask you a question?" Bilbo asked around his mouthful fruit, not caring if it was
He figured this would be as good a chance as any to get down to the bottom of this, and Balin was probably a deeper well of information than the princes had been. Kili paused briefly in pushing around the food in his lap to look up curiously at them.

Balin sighed heavily through his nose. "Go ahead, I suppose."

“So… I know that Dwalin and the king are certainly… close,” started Bilbo, his instinctual indirect politeness still forcing him to dance around the subject despite himself.

Balin snorted at him, a strange sort of smile forcing its way to sit unnaturally on his face; Bilbo found it highly disconcerting.

“That’s one way to put it. You could even hazard to say they’re even closer than brothers. Closer than Dwalin and I are, certainly, but that tends to happen when you’re born thirteen years apart,” he said, tone shocking in its bitterness.

“Oh, I, er, wouldn’t know,” replied Bilbo, who was an only child. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

"But Dori and Ori are almost forty years apart, and they're extremely close," said Fili, obviously surprised. This was apparently news to him.

Balin scoffed, though his smile remained fixed.

"Ha! Well, Dori raised Ori," he said, using that same sour tone of voice. “He was in his late thirties when he took responsibility for the lad. He's more a parent than a brother. Dwalin and I aren't like that."

“Huh. What are you two like then?” asked Kili. “You guys have always seemed pretty close to me.”

Fili groaned.

“You can’t just ask things like that,” he admonished. Kili merely shrugged.

“It’s alright. You boys deserve to know the story, anyway,” Balin sighed. “When our father was, er, indisposed early in Dwalin’s childhood, it was up to me to raise him in light of our mother not being up to the task whatsoever. And I just... couldn't. I was so young, barely an adult myself. I know it sounds like an excuse, but raising a child is an extremely hard thing to ask of any eighteen year old boy. I tried to do my best by him, but he's never really forgiven me for sending him to Moscow. Especially so young.”

“I’m sorry,” said Bilbo again, with as much sincerity as he could muster. Balin smiled politely but cheerlessly, primly folding his hands on the edge of his plate.

"Mister Balin, I had no idea," said Fili, voice tinged in shock. "I know you said he hasn't forgiven you, but surely he holds no ill will? He only ever speaks highly of you. You're family, after all. He loves you."

Balin waved him off. "Forgiveness is a subjective thing, dear boy. Perhaps it'd be more accurate to say that I haven't forgiven myself. I thought... I thought that since he had been born in Erebor, and gone through the rites of early life as performed by our highly religious father, that he'd simply retain what he knew of our culture, of our language.” The older man laughed humorlessly. It sounded incredibly dark.
"How naïve I was!" he exclaimed, running an agitated hand through the silver curtain of his beard. "I don't know what I was thinking, sending him to an unfamiliar place with no connections, no familiar faces, and just assuming that he wouldn't lose most of it."

Fili and Kili each wore an expression of mute, agonized shock on their faces, clearly stunned. Bilbo glanced at them in surprise. Was this really their first time hearing this story?

“So it’s true then, what Thorin said?” asked Fili quietly.

"How come Mister Dwalin never told us?” exclaimed Kili with a pained look. "We speak Khuzdul around him all the time. Had I known, I wouldn't have made a fuss every time he responded in English! I just thought it was just his annoying way of getting me to practice!"

"It's a sore subject for him," Balin said, tone suddenly gentle. "He understands a great deal just fine, it's only speaking the words that give him trouble. I wouldn't stop speaking Khuzdul at home on his account."

"It's sort of like Mister Bifur, right?” Fili murmured, still looking stricken. "Except that Mister Dwalin certainly has it easier... Mahal, I remember how embarrassing it was going to the market in the central square as a kid and having these nice older salesladies automatically start speaking to me in Russian. I had no idea what they were saying."

"Yeah, we'd just smile and nod and ask about something completely off-topic in Khuzdul," Kili recollected. "Usually they'd just switch without an issue. I always wondered why they didn't just speak to us like that in the first place."

Balin sighed, so heavily that his whole upper body seemed to heave with a sort of resigned mournfulness. "You lads are too young, not to mention too royal, to really know this firsthand, but most common Khazâd of a certain age who lived within Erebor at the time of the occupation have a strange relationship with the tongue of our ancestors. I know I certainly do; it's a relic of the Soviet era."

“Really?” asked Fili. "I mean, it's not like I hadn't noticed, but I guess since everybody spoke both it was never an issue. Did make me feel weird sometimes though, to go to some of the outer halls and hear everybody speaking an outsider's language instead of ours."

Balin nodded gravely. “At a certain point in time, even within the inner halls of Erebor, one would hear more Russian than Khuzdul in public. Because of the presence of outsiders in the regime, our language became something intensely personal, to be shared only with Mahal and the others in your home. Things have certainly shifted since you Durins came back, but it's been slow. One of Thrór's priorities was erasing all aspects of the Soviet occupation, but it's hard to discourage a language that's so common among the populace without outright banning it. However, there was absolutely no chance he was letting your mother raise you with it."

The princes glanced at each other, engaging in their silent form of communication for a long moment.

"Then how does Uncle know it so well?” asked Fili eventually.

"He learned it for Dwalin," Balin stated simply.

Both Kili and Fili cocked their heads at that, the movement startlingly synchronized. Bilbo had to fight down a spontaneous giggle.

“Really? For Mister Dwalin?” exclaimed Kili.
"That may be oversimplifying it a bit, since it's only prudent for a future king to know all the common languages of his people, but it's irrefutable that my brother was the driving factor. Both Dwalin and Thorin arrived back in Erebor about the same time, right after the collapse of the Soviet Union. They were both returning from their own forms of exile, Thorin’s of course being in the Highlands, and Dwalin’s in the heart of the USSR,” Balin explained.

“They immediately took to each other, becoming closer than any two people I have ever seen,” he continued, “even though they could hardly exchange a sentence between them at first. Not that that wasn't quickly rectified; Thorin's always had a knack for languages, and Dwalin's English has improved tremendously over the years. I still don't exactly know why he's had so much trouble with Khuzdul. He'll say a few sentences to me, or swear when he feels it's appropriate, but that's about it.”

"He may just be self conscious," Kili commented mildly, suddenly regarding his plate with interest. He said it so casually, but the statement made Balin straighten, as if the thought had never occurred to him.

"You think so?" he asked, the cogs in his brain turning furiously.

"I always kind of felt that way about Russian," Kili replied, shrugging. He finally started to eat his food in earnest, not looking up from his dinner. "Always felt sort of embarrassed that Mum never made us learn it, since everyone else in Erebor seems to speak it. That's why I’ve never really able to learn more than a few sentences, and it might be why Mister Dwalin can understand Khuzdul, but can’t get out the words.”

“"I see,” said Balin, appraising Kili thoughtfully. His gaze was proud.

“Anyway,” the younger prince said, “I always just assumed he and Uncle had met during their mandatory two years.”

Bilbo finished nibbling on the last of his fruit. The Spam stared up at him accusingly, laying brown and slightly wet on top of the rice. He tentatively cut off a crispier corner with the side of his fork. It was still very soft, and he wasn't sure how he felt about that.

“Mandatory two years?” he asked, as a way to delay the inevitable.

“The mandatory term of service in the Ereborean military,” Fili supplied helpfully. “It’s something Thrór put into place. Everybody has to do it, though Kili and I left before we were of age.”

“Oh,” said Bilbo. He supposed that made sense, since apparently the Ereboresans were already training their children to be warriors from practically birth.

Balin chuckled. To Bilbo’s relief, it sounded a bit more genuine this time.

“They entered the Ereborean military service together. Dwalin even lied about his age to follow Thorin, since he was only seventeen at the time,” he said.

“I see,” said Bilbo. It was starting to all make sense to him. Sort of. “Though, I thought that Thorin went to America at some point? Was that after his time in the military, then?"”

“He did, after he finished up his two years and then stayed one more,” explained Balin. “He used certain royal privileges to attend university abroad.”

“So, it’s true that Erebor had very strict border control,” Bilbo replied, finally taking a tentative bite of the meat. His eyes widened as the flavor burst over his tongue. It was salty, as he had expected,
but also slightly spicy in a way that went well with the texture, which actually reminded him of firm tofu. He could have cried. It was delicious.

Oblivious to the gospel choir singing in Bilbo’s head, Balin frowned, as if the thought of Erebor’s travel policies personally bothered him. Fili set his fork down with a clatter.

“You’re not wrong,” Balin sighed. “King Thrór was… how shall I put this… somewhat paranoid about keeping his power, especially after having his birthright stripped from him by the Soviets when he was only a young boy. As a result, he kept a tight leash on who or what came in or out of the country. Thorin had grown up believing in this as well, but once the royal family had actually returned to Erebor, the reality of truly being a prince grew to wear on him after a few years. He convinced his grandfather to let him go to New York, and Dwalin, not being of royal blood, could not follow. It was incredibly hard on him. On both of them.”

Balin looked sadly at his untouched plate of food as he remembered this. Bilbo felt for the man, filing this information away for further pondering. Kili nudged Fili, and soon the blonde was eating again, attacking the oranges with a vengeance whilst ignoring the peaches. Kili leaned over and snagged one with his fork.

“But the king came back,” Bilbo stated softly, before taking another large bite of Spam.

Balin nodded. “Indeed. And he came back with grand visions for what Erebor could be: An equitable society with a robust social security net and a system that protects both the personal freedoms and the welfare of the populace. He wants to create a modern constitutional monarchy that prioritizes the rights and quality of life of average citizens before that of the elite. An elite who, of course, only rules by the will of Mahal, which for us is a natural extension of that of the people. His Majesty probably saw the best parts of both Khuzd society and the West, and wanted to work to combine them.”

A smile crept onto his face, the cockles of his old Communist’s heart seeming to warm. He shot a significant glance toward Fili and Kili, and they both paused, looking wide-eyed at the older man. A fierce, awed sort of pride shone clearly on their faces as they took in what Balin had just described.

Bilbo hummed. It all sounded fairly utopian to him, but he supposed that at the height of his ‘activism’, it was something like that sort of system he had wanted for Britain, when the British government had still existed. In any case, it was certainly something he could get behind.

“I mean, we always knew that Uncle was the best chance for Erebor, but I guess nobody ever really explained it to us like that,” started Fili.

“Mum’s always been keen on making sure we had quote-unquote ‘normal childhoods.’ Whatever that means,” added Kili. “But of course we knew when people weren’t telling us stuff.”

Balin sighed.

“Yes, and I think you lads are more than old enough now to know exactly what your uncle has gone through, along with comprehending the ideals that he’s currently fighting for,” he said, expression slightly strained. “Aside from also keeping our mountain untainted by the SMAUG reactor, and the obvious benefit of rescuing the rest of Europe from the plague, this mission is Thorin’s singular chance to build something new for us within the halls of our ancestors.”

“Wasn’t he already working on it before we left?” Fili asked, voice small. “I mean, Thrór wasn’t exactly in… the best of shape...”
Both he and Balin shot a quick glance toward Bilbo, who suddenly realized that there was probably more to all this than they were all carefully omitting. Something in Bilbo soured at that. Right. He was still an outsider, wasn’t he.

“You need to understand,” said Balin quietly. “His Majesty's vision for a modern Erebor sounded dangerously Bolshevik to the very conservative Thrór, so the old man effectively froze him out of most affairs of state while you two were young, among other things. His work wasn’t in any official capacity. You know that.”

The princes went silent at that, looking incredibly pensive. Fili’s shoulders slumped slightly, like a great weight had suddenly been placed upon them.

Bilbo cleared his throat. “And what about the king and Mister Dwalin?” he asked, eager to know the rest that particular thread for his own purposes.

“Not much more to that story, I’m afraid,” replied Balin. “When the king returned and re-entered the military, Dwalin immediately gravitated back to his side, just as if Thorin had never left.”

“How romantic,” murmured Bilbo, turning to finish the last scraps of his meal. He scraped the remnants of the rice around his plate thoughtfully. There had to be more to it than that.

Balin snorted in mirth, his face suddenly splitting into a large grin. “Ha! True, true. People have certainly described it as such. We used to call him his knight, though the term bodyguard might have probably been a better fit.”

Something in Bilbo’s chest thumped painfully at the implicit confirmation of his suspicions. Thorin must be in really bad shape for such a deep wedge to have been driven between him and Dwalin.

Bilbo thought hard about the kind man the princes had described; about the indulgent, supportive uncle who liked doing hair and had a beautiful singing voice. Balin’s continued glowing assessment of Thorin’s potential as a ruler and the things he prioritized reminded him of the way the king was always asking after Bilbo’s well-being, even though he obviously despised him on a personal level. The king’s borderline-utopian politics and capacity to make such beautiful music, along with his apparent love of teaching the craft to even a supremely untalented student, were clear evidence of a tender, humanist soul—even if it was buried deep beneath the thick layer of vitriolic coarseness that comprised the majority of his personality toward others.

Bilbo’s resolve hardened. He wanted to help, now more than ever. Not just out of guilt for what he had done today, but because he knew without a doubt, both from his own experience and from what he had heard from almost everybody who knew him, that Thorin deserved to be happy. What’s more, Bilbo wanted the king to be happy.

No more childish pettiness. No more spite. He vowed to do right by Thorin, in the ways that he could. Maybe he couldn't fix everything—there did seem, after all, some deep issues that went far beyond the scope of what he could do anything about—but he could at least try.

And the easiest way to get there was doing what he could in trying to mend the rift between Thorin and Dwalin. No matter what anyone said, he had his part to play in the events of tonight. If he had just known better and stopped this all before it had begun, they wouldn't have said such awful things to each other tonight. They were clearly both suffering; it was plainly obvious to anyone with eyes and half a brain. If Thorin may not be receptive to his meddling, then perhaps maybe Dwalin would. Bilbo had a more stable rapport with him anyway, and to be honest, he owed it to him. For every time Thorin had saved his life, Dwalin had also done so just as many times. They
might even be considered friends, of a sort.

"Are you boys finished with your food?" asked Balin after a moment.

Kili stuffed the rest of Fili’s ignored peaches into his mouth and nodded. Fili rolled his eyes and stacked their empty plates, handing them off to Balin. Bilbo looked at the state of Balin’s undisturbed dinner in confusion.

“Are you not eating, then?” he asked, eyeing the Spam hungrily. He wondered if he might be able to snag seconds.

"Don’t even think about it, Mister Baggins," Balin replied shrewdly, hunching over the food in a defensive position. "This is for Dwalin. He’s been too busy sulking to eat."

Bilbo immediately perked up. This was just the opportunity he needed.

"I can take it to him," he blurted.

"Mister Baggins, if you're just trying to sate your endless appetite, I must say this is your weakest attempt yet," Balin retorted with a smirk.

“Yeah, where do you even put it all?” Kili asked, flopping back onto the bed beside his brother and patting his full stomach. “You’re so small!” Fili laughed loudly without thinking, chuckles quickly morphing into a pained hiss as they aggravated his bruised ribs.

“I assure you, Dwalin’s dinner is perfectly safe with me,” he sniffed, more than slightly offended. To be fair though, Mum and Beorn had always accused him of being somewhat of a bottomless pit.

“Ha, everything in jest, Mister Baggins,” Balin said placatingly. “I would actually greatly appreciate it if you brought this up to my brother. He’s up in the attic, and I’m not entirely keen on climbing ladders. Turns out I have somewhat of a bum knee.”

He handed the full plate to Bilbo and traded it for his empty one. Balin added it to the stack.

“I’ll go wash these, then,” he said. “Sleep well, boys.”

Balin made his exit. Bilbo quickly followed him, also bidding the princes a quick good night as Fili returned to his attempts to untangle his brother’s hair. Before descending the stairs to the kitchen, Balin pointed to the end of the hallway, where a wooden ladder led up through an access door in the ceiling.

"He's up there," the older man said, serious once again.

"Right," Bilbo replied, suddenly extraordinarily nervous.

Bilbo slowly made his way down the corridor, clutching the full plate in a white knuckle grip. He stopped at the bottom of the ladder and stared up into the dark entryway. He swallowed convulsively before forcing himself to take a deep breath.

He could do this. He had plenty of experience talking people through their relationship troubles. Given, they were usually more twenty-four than forty-four, but he figured that it couldn’t be that much different. Really, how dissimilar could counseling Dwalin through a rough patch with his best-friend-slash-king-slash-possibly-more in the midst of a zombie outbreak possibly be from talking young Rosie Cotton through her latest tiff with her on-and-off boyfriend while they were stocking shelves?
Bilbo sighed. He supposed he didn’t really want the answer to that question.

Whatever. He was going to give it his best shot. If Dwalin wasn’t receptive, then no skin off his nose. He could just hand him his dinner and leave.

Tucking the plate so it was balanced securely on his forearm while he gripped it, he carefully ascended the ladder.

Bilbo cautiously poked his head through the access hatch, eyes widening at what he saw. While the fading light from outside cast the room in only the barest of dim glows, he could see clearly that this was not a regular dusty attic used for storage. Rather, it seemed to have been converted into a bedroom in its own right. It was actually more of a loft than a storage space.

The roof sloped sharply on either side of the room, but things had been smartly configured to account for that, which made the space more cozy than cramped. The walls were painted a cheerful pale blue color, and light hardwood had been laid down on the floor. The decorative motif had been continued on the ceiling, obviously used as a way to cover the rafters. On one end of the room was a small twin bed and a desk, along with a bookshelf that looked to have been custom made to accommodate the strange proportions of the loft. At the other was the dormer window, which created a nook that a cushioned bench had been built into.

On that bench sat the slumped form of Dwalin. He was obviously miserable, and about a quarter of the way through one of Bilbo’s bottles of bourbon. He gazed despondently out the window before he took another pull of whisky, making a face at the taste.

The sight made Bilbo’s heart clench. Right. He could do this.

He climbed so his body was about halfway through the access hatch. For lack of anything better to do, Bilbo knocked lightly on the floor in front of him.

“G’way,” Dwalin slurred, not bothering to turn around. He waved an arm clumsily in his direction. “I don’t wanna talk to you.”

“Mister Dwalin, it’s me,” Bilbo said quietly, mindful of Dwalin’s forlorn silence.

Dwalin twisted in his seat, eyes squinting into the darkness. “Baggins? Is that you?”

“Yes,” he replied, voice barely above a whisper. The other man turned back around with a put-upon sigh.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he harrumphed.

Bilbo placed the plate on the floor and climbed the rest of the way into the loft before picking it up again. Straightening, he fastidiously smoothed out the non-existent wrinkles in his waistcoat with his free hand purely on instinct.

“I have your dinner. Also, I wanted to talk to you,” he said, making his way toward the window.

“What for?” Dwalin growled, eyes still glued to the glass. Bilbo was fairly certain he wasn’t actually looking at anything, considering it was only getting darker outside.

“I came up to try and sort this out once and for all,” he sighed. He stopped at the bench, holding the plate out for Dwalin to take.

“Well, don’t,” Dwalin replied tonelessly, looking away from the window just long enough to take
the plate and place it on the floor without even a second glance. “Don’t need it. Nothing needs
sorting.”

“I think it does,” said Bilbo. He eyed the open bottle of bourbon. “You’re not planning on drinking
all of that, are you?”

Dwalin merely grunted. “I might. Wanted to see what all the fuss was about. It tastes like shit, by
the way.”

Bilbo let out a long breath through his nose. “Alright, scoot over.”

To his surprise, Dwalin actually did, the other man bringing his legs toward himself to make space.
Bilbo took the opportunity to curl up on the other end of the bench, knees to his chest and back to
the wall. He grasped the bottle from Dwalin’s loose grip and took a swig.

“Tastes fine to me,” he announced.

“My sense of taste is just fine, thank you,” Bilbo retorted. He took another pull before setting the
bottle on the floor, resting his chin on his knees.

“Are you alright?” he asked softly. “His Majesty said some pretty awful things today.”

Dwalin settled back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest. “Heh. Yeah, that was a low blow,
even for him. I deserved it though. Shoulda never mentioned his granddad.”

“Still, it must have hurt.”

“Whatever,” Dwalin huffed, shaking his head. “Anyway, what did that utter cunt tell you?”

“The king?” Bilbo asked, surprised. “Absolutely nothing. He’s probably off brooding right now as
we speak, same as you.”

“Tch, I know that,” Dwalin muttered, looking away from Bilbo and back out the window. “I meant
my know-it-all brother. He sent you up here, didn’t he? Probably told you all about my sob story.”

Bilbo blinked. “Well…”

“Figures,” the other man scoffed. “Oh boo-hoo, I’m messed up because I was shipped off to Russia
when I was eight. Big fuckin’ deal.”

Bilbo stared at him in pity.

“He said it was a mistake,” he stated softly.

Dwalin barked out a mean laugh at that, his eyes glinting wetly in the ever-dying light.
“Understatement. You know it was him that got our dad arrested? Reported him to the secret police
once he got a little too organized and a little too public about his religious views. Did he tell you
that part of the story?”

Bilbo sucked in a horrified gasp. “No, he didn’t.”

“Course not. He always edits that little tidbit out,” Dwalin said. “Can’t stand making himself look
too bad. It’s only habit. He used to work in propaganda, after all, before he became an adviser to
the king.”
Bilbo could only gape, wondering what other things Balin might have told him that had been fudged. Dwalin sighed heavily, seeming to sense his train of thought.

“Don’t think too harshly of him. He’s actually pretty truthful nowadays,” he said with a deep frown, tone slightly defensive. "And to his credit, my brother never would have done what he did had he known the regime would make an example of it so late in the game. Y'know, Brezhnev just about to kick it, Perestroika on the horizon 'n all. Balin's right when he talks about occupation being relatively stable, least by our time. Just wanted to get Dad a slap on the wrist so he'd be quiet in front of the Russians. More the Khuzd love of privacy more than any... agh, блин. What's the word. Идеологический."

"Ideological?" Bilbo could hazard a guess; it sounded nearly the same.

"Oh. Ha, okay. Идео—ideological reason that drove him to rat Dad out when he got too loud around the outsiders. Wasn't that. Идеология, I mean."

"I see," said Bilbo patiently.

"Balin doesn't care much about secrecy anymore," he continued, accent hardening slightly in anger. "Not the way the Khazâd in the administration did, since 'pparently it was enough to turn on one of their own and push for a Stalin-era sentence. Fuck it all, and just because he praised Mahal a little too loudly!"

"How horrible. I can't even begin to imagine," Bilbo breathed. Dwalin scoffed.

"Yeah. But we're all children of Mahal, right? Anyway. Mum couldn’t handle the betrayal, and Balin couldn’t handle me. But whatever. I turned out pretty okay."

His words slurred significantly by the end of his explanation, but still he stooped to grab the bottle off the floor and take another gulp before passing it back to Bilbo.

“I suppose you do seem remarkably well adjusted, considering,” he replied. He only took a small sip, wanting to remain clear headed for this conversation.

“I've had a lot of time to think about it. Anyway, you want a real can of worms to psychoanalyze? Try talking to His Majesty.”

Bilbo tried to keep his voice detached, but he couldn’t help the spark of interest that flared at the statement. “Oh? How so?”

Dwalin, somehow still keenly observant despite being thoroughly sauced, snorted at him in amusement.

“Thorin spent his whole life bitter at the Soviets for stealing his birthright, listening to what Thrór spewed like it was gospel,” he explained gruffly. “But Erebor wasn’t all it was cracked up to be, so he ran away. To America. What a bloody fucking joke.”

“And he left you behind,” Bilbo replied, tone as gentle as he could make it.

Dwalin dragged a hand down his face and grimaced awfully. “Yeah. I suppose you could say that. But he came back eventually. All Khazâd do, one way or another. I’m a prime example of that.”

“Did he not like America, then?”

“Oh, he liked it alright,” Dwalin laughed, expression twisting into something acrid. “A little too
much, maybe. He was cut off and had to make a hard living, but nobody seemed to have even
heard of Erebor before, and Thorin absolutely loved that. Bloody bastard will absolutely wax
apoetic about his time there if you let him.”

His voice abruptly shifted register, lowering to a more-or-less approximation of Thorin’s baritone.

“‘Oh Dwalin, you have to see the Grand Canyon someday,’” he mimicked poorly, laying his hand
over his heart for emphasis, “‘I went there while I was living out of a rickety van with my
schoolmates! We hiked for three days and then had to busk for gas money! We didn’t shower for a
week but it was the best time of my life!’ Mahal, what a wanker. If I wanted to see a big hole in the
ground, I’d just go to a quarry.”

If Bilbo didn’t know better, he would have thought that Dwalin sounded envious. As it was, he
tried to word his next question carefully.

“Do you… do you wish you had gone with him, then?” he asked. “To the states?”

Dwalin suddenly sat up straight, as if shocked by a strong electric current.

“Of course I bloody well did!” he exploded. His eyes were wild, their clear gray color practically
glowing in the dimness. “Why should he be able to go somewhere that I can’t look out for him?!
Have you seen Thorin? Can’t find his way out of a wet paper bag, for starters. And I swear to you,
he probably gave all those busking tips to the first hard case that crossed his path, even if he could
only barely buy a coffee. But that’s Thorin for you. Idiot.”

Bilbo stared, wide-eyed, as Dwalin promptly deflated from his outburst. He slumped back hard
against the opposite wall, his back landing with an audible thump.

Bilbo thought about Thorin feeding that cat at Weathertop, about the selfless way he always dove
headfirst into danger when someone was in trouble. Why, just a few days ago, he had thrown
himself straight into the path of a rampaging infected that had been heading straight for Nori while
his back was turned. He could have just as easily called out a warning, but his first instinct had
been to just simply block them from even getting that far, heedless of his own safety.

Still, he asked, “Would the king really do something like that?”

“Oh, you wouldn’t know it because he doesn’t like you—heh, no offense—but he’s got the softest
heart of anyone I’ve ever known,” Dwalin said quietly, voice immediately full of aching fondness.
“Gives too much of himself. You can see it plain on his face, he’s running himself ragged with this
journey of ours. And he doesn’t even want the throne. He gave up his real dream all those years
ago because I—we needed him. We needed someone who could be king. A real one, not whatever
Thrór played at being. And Thrain wasn’t cutting it, either.”

Bilbo’s mouth fell open a bit, compelling himself to ignore that dangling thread of information. He
had more important things to focus on now. Dwalin took advantage of his distraction to grab the
bottle forcefully from Bilbo’s slack hand, drinking perhaps a little too deeply for his low tolerance.
Bilbo gently wrested the bottle back, setting it on the floor out of Dwalin’s reach.

“I get it now,” he murmured softly, clarity suddenly dawning in his mind as pieces started clicking
into place. “You just want to protect him, and he’s being stubborn about it. Is that what you’re
really fighting about, then?”

“Hmph. Yes and no,” Dwalin conceded, glowering into his lap. “The other thing is that Thorin
blames himself for everything, and never lets it go. I assume my blabbermouth brother told you all
“Perhaps,” said Bilbo. “It was a while ago.”

Dwalin sighed heavily. “I’ll admit, I blamed him for Crimea. But then I forgave him, because that’s what family does. Thought he knew that, but now that he also blames himself for Thrain’s death, which nobody in the company with half a brain cell would even consider, it’s come up again. But he didn’t listen to me then when I had a bad feeling about Azog—”

Ah. That must be the traitorous South African.

“—and he’s not listening to me now. About anything. He thinks too much with his heart, and not enough with his head. Guess I’m guilty of that too, at least where His Royal Blockhead is involved. But anyway, that’s what we’re fighting about, Baggins. Are you satisfied now?”

“Nearly,” Bilbo replied, leaning forward. “Look, I know it’s not my place, but—”

“Sure isn’t.”

“Could it be that you’re perhaps a little too protective of His Majesty?” Bilbo asked with a frown. He didn’t bother to acknowledge the interruption, figuring he had left himself wide open for that one. “Thorin’s a grown man, after all. Not to mention your king, and the leader of this company. Shouldn’t you defer a little more to his judgement? I’m getting the impression that he feels that you don’t trust him.”

Bilbo sighed, stomach flipping uncomfortably as he readied his next words. “It’s… entirely obvious to me, as an outside observer, that the king cares for you deeply. Loves you, even. I think he values your opinion more than you believe he does. And I’m wondering if your approach to criticism, and by that I mean the brusque, angry way you express your concern, may not be the best way to go about things. I think that’s hurting him quite a bit. Giving him the wrong impression that… that you don’t feel the same.”

Dwalin leaned his head back, glaring at the ceiling as he considered this.

“Thorin’s still trying to figure out what it means to be king,” he said lowly. “And it’s my job to help him. Do you really think I’m hurting him by doing that?”

“Not necessarily,” said Bilbo. He laid a tentative hand on Dwalin’s knee, patting awkwardly when it wasn’t immediately shoved off. “I just think it’s the way you go about it.”

“It’s not that I doubt him,” Dwalin responded, somehow sounding equal parts devastated and thoughtful. “Even if I complain the whole way, I’d follow him to the ends of the Earth. But he knows that.”

“That’s the thing,” Bilbo murmured softly. “I don’t know if he does. From what you’ve told me, and from my own observations, it’s clear to me now that His Majesty doubts himself, and that he thinks you do as well. You need to remind him that you care about him and only want what’s best for him, but in a way that he understands. You know, Balin told me that there was a communication block between you two when you first met, and that Thorin learned your language so he could speak to you. I think it might be time that you learned his.”

Dwalin went silent for a minute.

“Hunh. I suppose I never thought of it that way,” he said contemplatively. “For as much as I’d wish Thorin would just come out and say what he needs, I guess I’m pretty rubbish with my words
as well.”

Bilbo took a deep, shuddering breath, feeling strangely distraught as he thought of what he was about to ask. “Mister Dwalin… do you... love the king?”

That made Dwalin pause. He glanced at Bilbo in an almost startled fashion, scrubbing a hand tiredly through his beard. He closed his eyes for a long, tense moment.

“...Aye,” he whispered, heaving a ragged sigh in the process. “Mahal be willing, he’s a right ass. But yeah. I love him.”

Bilbo gaped helplessly, feeling somewhat like the world had tilted violently on its axis the moment Dwalin said the words and explicitly confirmed what he had always believed. He was mystifyingly off balance, as if a rug had been yanked from underfoot while he had been standing on it. Really, he had expected this!

While he desperately tried to grasp for words, he took the chance to move his hand from Dwalin’s knee to his shoulder. Shockingly, the other man actually leaned into the contact, breathing heavily. Something Bilbo’s gut twisted painfully, releasing a strong mix of sympathy along with a deeper, uglier sort of sadness that he refused to acknowledge.

Well. That settled that, then.

“You need to tell him,” he said, willing his voice not to waver. “Plainly. Like you’ve just told me.”

“Never done that before,” Dwalin muttered. “It’s never been our way.”

“Then I think your way needs to change,” Bilbo replied, hating every word that came out of his mouth. “You of all people know how precarious things are right now. You might not get the chance later.”

He squeezed Dwalin's shoulder for emphasis, almost expiring of surprise when Dwalin brought up one of his own huge, calloused hands to cover it.

*God*, Bilbo thought. *He's so drunk. Will he even remember this?*

Then a small, intensely horrible part of Bilbo whispered, *I wish he wouldn't.*

What?

He internally reeled the second the thought came to mind. Where on Earth had that come from?

“Hm. Maybe you’re right,” said Dwalin, haphazardly squeezing Bilbo’s hand once before letting go. “You know, you might be a better man than I first judged you to be, Baggins.”

“Thanks, I guess,” Bilbo whispered hoarsely, letting his hand drop from the other man’s shoulder to sit uselessly in his lap. The strange wretchedness he felt kept him from fully agreeing with Dwalin’s statement, but he chose not to say anything about that.

Dwalin suddenly heaved himself from the window bench, swaying slightly until he found his balance under all the alcohol. Bilbo instinctively held out his hands to catch him should he fall, though he didn’t know exactly how well that would go, considering the sheer amount of mass the other man had on him.

“Well then. Im’ma go tell the old majestic bastard,” he slurred.
“What? Now?” exclaimed Bilbo. His stomach felt like it was in free fall. He had to physically check that the floor hadn’t been suddenly dropped out from under him.

Dwalin shrugged. “Well, yeah. You were the one who said to take advantage of the moment,” he reminded him. “Besides, I talk better when I’m drunk. Don’t wanna chicken out now, do I?”

Bilbo could only watch pathetically as the man weaved slightly toward the access hatch, and toward his inevitably repaired and rekindled relationship with the king.

“I suppose not,” Bilbo said feebly.

Dwalin gruffed out a laugh, cheerfully maneuvering into a position where he could begin descending to the floor below. “Thanks for the advice, Baggins, unsolicited though it was. Y’know, you’re smarter than you look.”

Bilbo was too embroiled in his own unexplained inner turmoil to be offended at the backhanded compliment. He nodded and watched as Dwalin stumbled down the ladder. He somehow made it to the hallway without falling, his heavy footsteps reverberating in the attic as he presumably went to find Thorin.

The moment the sounds of Dwalin’s heavy tread faded, Bilbo let a hiccuping sob break free.

He buried his face in his hands, whole body trembling as he curled into a ball and cried violently into his palms. He keened like an injured animal, wailing lowly as he thoroughly soaked his face and the knees of his trousers.

Dear God, why in the world was he acting like this, feeling this way? This is what he had come up here to do, right? His talk with Dwalin had been wildly successful, beyond what he could have possibly hoped.

So why, then, did it hurt so much?

Hadn’t this been what he wanted? For Thorin and Dwalin to try and reconcile, not only for the good of the company, but for their own sakes?

Another ragged sob escaped him as he tried to heave for breath, hyperventilating slightly in the process. He tried to calm down, but found that he just couldn’t. He looked at Dwalin’s untouched dinner, but the thought of food was suddenly completely unappetizing. His blurry gaze shifted to the bottle of bourbon, which was about a third of way empty.

Hell, might as well try his best to finish the job.

He leaned down and lifted the bottle to his lips. He took a large, desperate gulp, finally noticing how dark it had gotten. The room was almost pitch black, his eyes only barely adjusting to whatever ambient light was left.

How pathetic! Was he really so lonely that he could begrudge two suffering people their chance at happiness, especially two people that deserved to have it? He took another swig of liquor, relishing in the slight burn as it slid down his throat, if only because it gave him something else to focus on other than the incomprehensible, hideous pain he felt inside of him.

In between alternating bawling his eyes out and taking mournful pulls of whiskey, something clicked.

Of course. Of course.
God, he was a moron. It was so simple.

Bilbo was jealous.

No, he wasn’t envious of Dwalin’s sudden drunken confidence that he could make things work with Thorin. He wasn’t envious of his and Thorin’s history, nor even of their relationship.

He was jealous, plain and simple. Jealous of Dwalin, and of the king’s obvious feelings for him.

Bilbo groaned, scrubbing a hand down his face in exasperation. Of course he had to be the sort of idiot that couldn’t leave his physical attraction to Thorin at just that. No, somewhere along the line, among all the near-death experiences, and the small acts of kindness, and his developing trust in His Majesty, real feelings for Thorin had taken root, somehow developing into a full-blown infatuation right under his very nose. Perhaps it had even blossomed just tonight, after learning so much more about Thorin's history, and the man he now knew he could be.

It wasn’t love, not yet. But it could definitely become so, if given time; he was sure of that. And while the feelings were new, they were certainly painful enough to make him want to lay down in his room and listen to sad songs by The Cure on repeat, much as he had when Falstoph Bolger from fourth hour English had started seeing his cousin Pansy in Year Eleven. Or when he had thought Beorn had lost interest in him after going back to Norway for a month just after they had started officially dating.

Bilbo laughed brokenly. He could either do that, or he could just cry some more and continue to drink alone in the dark.

Ha! No wonder every little thing Thorin did bothered him so badly. He had been subconsciously looking for any sign that the king might return his feelings, and had reacted poorly when they weren’t there. Because they couldn’t be there. People like Thorin didn’t look at people like Bilbo. Not in that way. Not ever.

And especially not when they were blatantly in love with someone with whom they had a deep, emotional, decade-spanning history with. He had known Thorin for what? Three weeks? Maybe four?

Oh, that was just like him, wasn’t it? Falling for someone so completely unattainable, so profoundly unavailable, who didn’t even like him. Who had said, point blank, that he thought nothing of him.

Bilbo felt a fresh wave of tears threaten to overcome him.

Oh, fuck it. He needed more bourbon.

Chapter End Notes

Translation notes:
Irakdashat - [Khuzdul] nephew
Блядь [blyad'] - [Russian] It's a swear. Pretty equivalent to an exclamation of 'fuck!'
гребанный идиот [grebanyy idiot] - [Russian] fucking idiot
Harkulu! Nê azrali d’ aklut nidarinkhadi! - [Khuzdul] Be quiet! I've heard enough!
sigin’adad - [Khuzdul] grandfather (formal)
блин [blin] - [Russian] another exclamation that's curse-adjacent, like 'crap' (lit. pancake)
Идеологический/Идеология [ideologicheskiy/ideologiya] - [Russian] ideological/ideology

[Ben Wyatt voice] It's about the found family

I established Dwalin being a loose lipped drunk specifically for this chapter, lmao. And. Okay. Okay!!!! Look. Every so many chapters I'm allowed a lore dump. I know there's a lot going on here. I'm sorry. But this is all locked in my brain and I MUST get it out.

There are a few things I want to talk about in regard to how I imagine the Soviet occupation in Erebor worked. First off, I DO want to clarify that neither the official nor the unofficial policy in the Soviet Union was to suppress indigenous languages as far as I know. It's actually somewhat the opposite, but according to my knowledge/research on this topic, Russian was most definitely the language of the primus inter pares/academia/Soviet bureaucracy and there was a big push to use it as a lingua franca among all the republics in order to "sovietize" (read Russify) them in order to create their idealized homogeneous proletariat. This is a great quick and dirty primer on the language policy throughout the Soviet Union, if any of you are interested.

Erebor was invaded in the early 1940s and was incorporated into the USSR as an "autonomous region" which meant that it had a measure of local autonomy, but it did not have the same privileges or amount of autonomy as a full Soviet Republic, such as Belarus or Ukraine. And I imagine it was under the administration of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, rather than its adjacent neighbor the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, because reasons. It was USSR policy to encourage the ethnic members of the region to participate in administration and bureaucracy, which Balin certainly did, though because of the limited amount of autonomy given to Erebor, I would imagine that the Russians installed many of their own bureaucrats, workers, and their respective families in the mountain during the occupation. Which according to Khuzd culture, would result in almost a complete public shutdown of their language due to their cultural policy of secrecy, and the wide adoption of Russian as the language of commerce and business, since Khuzdul was forbidden for outsiders to learn, anyway.

This also relates to why I imagine Fundin's punishment was so harsh--he was religiously organizing as a nonviolent form of public political protest (which the Khazad do not do--nonviolence, not protest lol). The USSR's official policy was to promote atheism as an ideologically pure, intellectual alternative to organized religion. But while Khrushchev was famously extremely harsh on religion, Brezhnev, who would have been near the end of his life at this point (I'm thinking ~1980), was markedly more lax. Which is WHY it was so surprising that Fundin was arrested. There is also a separate history of the USSR actively trying to convert indigenous people from shamanism, however, since it was seen as a "primitive" religion, but I'm not going to go into that here. You can also take that in as a factor, if you want, but I can imagine the harshness of the punishment was actually a result of the actions of the Khuzd members of the regime, who by this point were second or third generation communists and also saw this as a breach of the Khuzd, like, blood oath or whatever. Dwalin wouldn't have been able to articulate all this in story, since he was definitely drunk, so that's why I'm explaining it in more detail here.
And for the record, the Soviet administration LOVED the Khazad's active suppression of their own culture from the public sphere. In the fiction of this universe, they were basically a model minority within the USSR, as people who were super ready and willing to become communists after being "liberated" from their tyrannical monarchs. This is, of course, a total fiction that discounts the egregious bloodshed that occurred during the initial invasion and the palpable seething rage within Erebor, along with various armed uprisings even after the first couple decades. Hence the relative lack of autonomy. A lot of people were deported, they eventually adapted, and it DID become stable, if not entirely comfortable.

That's all the space I have, thanks for reading!
Hangover

Chapter Summary

The morning after. Bilbo wakes up with a headache and a massive hangover, only to find that everything has changed. Oh, well. At least the weather's good.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the slight delay, the relative shortness of the chapter, the fact that hardly anything happens, etc, etc...........tbf I actually wasn't planning on posting until at least Wednesday, and this is actually the first half of a chapter that was getting a little too long, even for me. So! Here, I guess! ¯\_(ツ)_/¯

No major warnings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was the sun that woke him up.

Bilbo wrinkled his nose and cracked open one crusty eye to assess the situation. He hissed before shutting it tightly once more, covering his face with a pillow for good measure. The sensation of light meeting his cornea was excruciatingly painful.

His head throbbed in time with the sluggish beating of his heart. He was acutely grateful for the fact that he had apparently forgotten to set his alarm last night—at least he could be spared that pain. He flung an arm out toward the nightstand anyway, so he could at least check his phone for the time. It must be late, if it was already so bright out; Rosie Cotton might already be at work downstairs. What on Earth had possessed him to drink so much last night…?

He yelped in pain as his forearm unexpectedly smacked straight into a wall. Bilbo flailed, rolling back to the other side of his queen bed in panic. Thoroughly tangled in the blankets, he tumbled off the edge and landed on the floor with a thump.

Arm smarting and head feeling like it was about to split open, he stared at the slanted wood-paneled ceiling in a daze as his vision slowly fuzzed into focus.

Right.

Bilbo tried not to feel too devastated as he remembered where he was and the state he was in. He wasn’t in his flat above the bookshop (he had broken his long-standing lease in Soho and moved to Shoreditch the minute he had signed his name on the retail space). He wasn’t even in Bag End. He had passed out, drunk and fully dressed, in the loft attic of a shitty little terrace house in what had an equal chance of being either Cambridgeshire or Norfolk, crying about his unrequited crush on an Eastern European king.

Ugh, embarrassing. At least he had possessed the good sense to move to the bed. Which, upon
recollected of his first assessment of the room, he now remembered was a twin.

Slowly, he unraveled himself from the bedclothes, frowning at the mussed state of his trousers and waistcoat. The three-quarter empty bottle of bourbon stood proudly on the desk as an unfortunate monument to his hubris. The access hatch was still wide open, a gaping hole in the hardwood. It was a miracle didn’t fall to the floor below in his stupor the night before.

“How absolutely pathetic,” Bilbo chided himself aloud, holding his head in his hands. He felt awful.

Just as he was contemplating the merits of throwing himself down the ladder anyway, a familiar shaggy gray visage popped up from the opening, not totally unlike a perturbed badger poking its head from a burrow. Piercing blue eyes narrowed at him.

Bilbo flopped back onto the floor, rolling away from the accusing glare. He threw the discarded comforter over himself for good measure. Maybe if he lay very still, Gandalf would give up and leave.

It didn’t work.

“There you are,” Gandalf said, since he was, unfortunately, not one to be tricked by so simple a ruse as hiding under a blanket. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“Go away, nobody’s home,” Bilbo replied miserably, voice muffled from inside his full-body cocoon.

“Bilbo Baggins, I cannot believe you,” the old man blustered. “First you leave me behind with these foreigners, then you squirrel yourself away up here in a secret attic to drink the whole night through without even offering to share? And sleeping on one of the few beds in this whole house! You know I have a bad back!”

“I wasn’t planning on getting drunk. It’s all Mister Dwalin’s fault.”

“If Mister Dwalin told you to jump off a cliff, would you do it?”

“At this point, I just might,” Bilbo moaned. In the dark cave he had made for himself under the blanket, his headache was just barely manageable. “Ergh, I’m too old for this.”

“Hmph. Serves you right,” Gandalf retorted snidely. “You’re lucky that you get a pass this time. Mister Dwalin also seems to be sleeping off his hangover as well, though exactly where he is doing that, I have yet to figure out. Neither he nor the king have made it down to breakfast yet.”

“Oh, good,” said Bilbo, feeling utterly wretched. He curled into a tight ball, hoping the action would physically keep the pieces of himself from bursting apart at the seams.

“I don’t know if that’s the exact word I would use,” Gandalf muttered.

“Believe me, it’s good,” Bilbo replied, voice cracking slightly. He was slightly outraged to find himself dangerously on the verge of tears once again.

Gandalf paused.

“My dear boy, are you alright?” he asked after a moment. His voice was horrifically gentle. It made Bilbo want to die.
“I’m fine,” he wheezed shrilly.

Gandalf humphed loudly, grunting as he presumably heaved himself up fully into the attic. Bilbo stiffened as he felt a tentative hand softly rub his back through the blanket. He frowned in betrayal as a few traitorous tears leaked out in spite of his best efforts.

Gandalf patted him soothingly. “Bilbo, my old friend. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Come now,” Gandalf huffed, an edge of frustration leaking into his voice at Bilbo’s stubbornness. “Did something happen last night with Mister Dwalin? Surely, you can tell me.”

“Really, it’s nothing. I’m just... stupid,” Bilbo mumbled into the floor.

“Well, we both know that,” Gandalf said. “Something so obvious can’t possibly be what’s bothering you.”

That elicited a startled laugh from Bilbo. Quickly swiping at his eyes, he cautiously removed the blanket from over his head and squinted in Gandalf’s direction. He had knelt on the floor next to him.

He greeted him with a wry smile. “Ah! The idiot emerges,” he remarked.

“Oh, piss off,” Bilbo said with a chuckle, moving to sit up. The motion made the room sway nauseatingly, and he had to dig the heels of his palms into his eyes to relieve some of the pressure in his head. “It takes one to know one.”

“Oof. You wound me, Mister Baggins,” Gandalf said with mock-seriousness.

Bilbo removed his hands from his face, wincing as the loft came back into focus. There was an airiness to the attic that hadn’t been present the night before, probably as a result of the gorgeous, early-morning light streaming through the dormer window. He blinked, his mouth hanging open slightly at the sight.

“It’s sunny out!” Bilbo exclaimed as he finally registered that, for the first time in weeks, it wasn’t even overcast.

“You’ve finally noticed,” Gandalf said dryly.

Out the window, the sky was a brilliant robin’s egg blue, punctuated by puffy white clouds that were reminiscent of a child’s drawing. It was still early enough that the sun cast severe shadows into the street from where it hid slightly behind the houses, but it certainly made the rest of the day look promising for travel. Bilbo suddenly yearned to be outside, tilting his face towards that light with a nice mug of hot tea in hand. Given how things had been going, and the constant looming threat of death around every corner, he hadn’t been entirely sure if he would ever even see such radiance again.

Gandalf snickered at him. “That’s why I’ve been trying to find you. We can’t waste the good weather with a lie-in. Though, I wish somebody would tell the king that.”

“Right,” Bilbo said, his excitement at the fair conditions deflating somewhat. The reminder that Thorin was most likely enjoying the nice morning with Dwalin took more wind out of his sails than he would like to admit. Gandalf’s eyed him shrewdly at his sudden downturn in mood, but he thankfully didn't comment.
"Well, I believe there's still some porridge downstairs if you can stomach it," he said instead. "You should also try to clean yourself up a bit. You look terrible. Did you even make it to the bed?"

Bilbo frowned, one hand shooting up to comb through his dreadfully tangled curls. "I woke up in bed. Then I fell out of it," he grumbled.

"Ha! Do you need help down the ladder?"

"I think I can manage."

It was a near thing, but Bilbo was triumphant in his attempt to descend to the second floor. His breathing was labored and his stomach rolled uncomfortably, but the promise of lovely, bland porridge was enough of an incentive to force himself to press on. Gandalf hovered over him, alternating between berating him for drinking so much and outright making fun of his plight, all while standing at the ready to catch him should he stumble. Bilbo gave as good as he got and complained the entire time, but was secretly grateful for the care.

Really, Gandalf was the only one who had truly been looking out for him this entire time, even if it was his fault that Bilbo was here in the first place. He vowed to make more of an effort to keep in touch after all this—on the off chance that both of them survived, of course.

However, the notions of porridge and washing his face with cool water soon crowded out any of his other thoughts, stripped down as he was to his base animal instincts by his hangover. He kept one hand on the wall as he moved toward the staircase, glancing behind him in confusion as he realized Gandalf wasn't following.

"Just a moment," the old lawyer said, stopping in front of the closed door to the master bedroom. He rapped loudly on the wood, most likely trying to be as obnoxious as possible. Bilbo's headache, which was just starting to die down, flared painfully at the noise.

"Rise and shine Your Majesty!" Gandalf yelled. Bilbo paled.

"I'm awake, you rude old goat," the king called back.

To his utter mortification, Gandalf apparently took the response as tacit permission to fling open the door without even so much as a by-your-leave. The door swung wide, revealing the absolute last person that Bilbo wanted to see.

Thorin arched an accusing eyebrow at them, hands hovering in the air around his head, evidently having paused mid-action. He sat perched in front of a dusty vanity that had once belonged to the well-traveled elderly lady of the house (if the framed holiday photos and various vaguely Mesoamerican souvenir tchotchkes lying about were anything to go by), clearly taking advantage of the mirror to meticulously braid his hair into an updo that was slightly more elaborate than Bilbo was used to seeing him wear.

Bilbo swallowed hard. His Majesty looked… better, for lack of a more appropriate term. Slightly more rested, perhaps. Less pale. The dark circles under Thorin's eyes weren't quite so pronounced, like he had actually gotten a good night's sleep for once. His beard was neatly combed, and Bilbo noted the glint of what might be small, deep blue sapphire studs in both of the king's ears. They went well with his navy Jackson Hole t-shirt, as well as bringing out the electric color of his eyes. All in all, he looked beautiful. Somehow more so than he usually was.

Bilbo felt his heart break all over again. Of course the king had to be lovelier than ever this morning. He was suddenly acutely aware of his own rumpled appearance. Thorin thankfully
seemed not to notice his presence right away, instead choosing to glare stonily at Gandalf.

"Can't you see I'm busy?" he asked gruffly through his teeth. They were clenched around a bobby pin, which he quickly shoved into his hair. An engraved silver clip and a hard-bristle hairbrush with pearl inlay sat on the table in front of him, laying amongst a sea of messily scattered hairpins and ties.

"Oh yes, because your kingly vanity is so important," Gandalf replied good-naturedly. "Are you almost done? It would be highly remiss of us to waste any more of this sunlight."

"Nearly," Thorin grumbled as he reached for the clip. He neatly secured the complicated braided twist he had skillfully manipulated his hair into, turning his head this way and that in the mirror to make sure everything was in its proper place. The sunlight coming from the window glinted off the polished silver of the clasp.

Bilbo sighed quietly at the sight of it, chest becoming painfully tight. The shine of the clip contrasted beautifully with the golden cast to Thorin’s excruciatingly regal profile. The light made his eyes seem an even clearer blue, a color that shouldn’t have been possible in real life. It made him look ethereal.

Bilbo wanted nothing more, in that moment, than to stride across the room and take the king’s face in his hands, feel the softness of his beard against them, and test if Thorin’s lips were equally as soft with his own.

A wave of dizziness abruptly overcame Bilbo as he realized the direction that his thoughts were headed. He had to leave.

Gandalf chortled. "Now that your hair is dealt with, do you have any idea where Mister Dwalin had gone off to? I've just located Bilbo, but Mister Balin is still looking for—"

Thorin cut Gandalf off, suddenly sitting straight at attention.

"Mister Baggins?" he asked with a peculiar intensity. "Is he here?"

Bilbo seriously considered making a run for it. Unfortunately, Gandalf was already looking at him expectantly, beckoning him over to the threshold. He figured escaping would probably just cause him to ask more questions than Bilbo would ever be ready to answer. He sighed, maneuvering his body so Thorin could see him through the doorway.

"Good morning," he said in a voice so small and shy that it was practically a squeak.

"Good morning," Thorin replied quietly, baritone rumbling out from somewhere deep in his chest. He looked at Bilbo with an inscrutable expression.

Blood rushed in Bilbo's ears as awkward silence hung thick and syrupy in the sunlit morning air. Nobody spoke for a few long moments until Gandalf uncomfortably cleared his throat.

"Right," he said slowly, eyes darting suspiciously between Bilbo and Thorin. "Well, as I asked before, have you any idea how Dwalin fares this morning? Really, this house is tiny. I don't know how we could have misplaced him."

Gandalf abruptly received a loud snorting noise in reply, one that came from further inside the bedroom. It sounded very much like the snuffle of a large animal being woken up from a deep sleep. Thorin grunted in a way that could have possibly been a laugh, beginning the process of tidying up his hair supplies by sweeping them roughly into a small zippered bag.
"Ask 'im yerself, you old bastard," Dwalin slurred grumpily. "M'not something that can be misplaced."

Gandalf's eyebrows rocketed skyward. Bilbo tried not to physically stumble as his knees suddenly decided to give out from under him. This entire morning had felt like he was walking on dangerously thin ice, and now he had just fallen through.

They peered around the doorjamb to the modest queen bed. What at first looked to be a pile of unmade blankets thrown over some pillows on the mattress—where Thorin had also obviously slept, if the messily rumpled sheets on the other half of the bed were anything to go by—actually turned out to be Dwalin himself. Who, despite the fact that he was obviously hungover and a little bit cranky, didn't actually seem to be in too bad of a mood.

"Mister Dwalin!" Gandalf said in genuine surprise. "Glad to see you finally joining us!"

"Fuck off," Dwalin grumbled. The tattooed pate of his scalp gleamed from where his head poked out from beneath the floral quilt. "Morning, Baggins. You look just about as shit as I feel."

Bilbo was too gobsmacked to respond. His heart throbbed agonizingly.

"This has to be a nightmare, he thought desperately as Thorin snorted in fond amusement. It can't possibly get any worse than this.

Dwalin's eyes shifted to Thorin at the noise, his expression suddenly going soft. "Hey," he said.

"Hey yourself," Thorin replied, eyes crinkling at the corners. Gandalf watched the exchange with interest while Bilbo tried his hardest to force the atoms making up his body to disincorporate.

"You look nice," Dwalin observed casually. "Trying to impress someone?"

"Of course not," Thorin scoffed, eyes narrowing. He lobbed the zippered bag full of bobby pins at Dwalin's head with deadly accuracy.

Dwalin caught it easily before burrowing back down in the bedclothes. "What's the occasion then? Haven't seen those earrings in a while."

The king glowered at him. "Perhaps I'm just in a good mood. You, on the other hand, look awful."

Despite the king’s protestations, there was a slight shyness to his tone that made Bilbo feel vaguely sick in a way that had nothing to do with all the whiskey he had drunk the night before.

Dwalin laughed, the sound ringing clear and happy in the cozy atmosphere of the bedroom. He seemed to have picked up on Thorin's mood as well, for he smirked slyly and glanced in Bilbo's direction in what he could only interpret as a conspiratorial manner. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. It wasn't like Dwalin knew what he was doing, but did he really have to rub it in like that?

He had spoken too soon. It absolutely could get worse.

"Well!" exclaimed Gandalf, clearly amazed. "This is certainly a dramatic turn of events. Not that I'm not ecstatic to see you two finally getting along, but what brought all this on?"

"None of your business," Dwalin growled from under the blankets.

"He burst in here last night completely wasted," Thorin recalled. "Said we needed to talk. We began to have a useful discussion, but then he started crying and I had to put him to bed.”
"I didn't cry," mumbled Dwalin, in a way that indicated he most definitely did.

Thorin rolled his eyes, but his overall expression was unbearably warm. "However, before he passed out, he was able to tell me that, apparently, he had received a bit of good advice. I'm... I'm very grateful for it."

The king looked significantly at Bilbo at that last part, which frankly only made him want to walk into the sea with lead weights in his pockets.

"Really," Gandalf said in shocked wonder. He glanced appraisingly at Bilbo, who had resolutely turned his head away. "Good, that's... well. That's good. Nice to see you both finally seeing sense."

Dwalin and Thorin only glared at him in reply. With their combined force, it was very much like a death ray to which Gandalf was apparently immune.

Seeing that the lawyer was regrettably unaffected, Thorin then turned fully to Bilbo. It was an unfortunate bit of timing, because it just so happened in that exact moment Bilbo had decided that he definitely needed to flee.

"Mister Baggins, I—" the king started.

"Oh, would you look at that!" Bilbo interrupted, voice pitched high as he anxiously wrung his hands. "I think Mister Bombur is calling me. I should head downstairs."

"If you wait a moment for me to clean up, we can join you," the king said, sounding strangely eager.

"I think you may need more than a moment," said Gandalf. He dubiously evaluated the disaster area that was Thorin's room.

As had been the case in Bag End, it was as if the king's pack had somehow exploded, in spite of the fact that they had been inhabiting the house for less than twenty-four hours. His things were scattered everywhere; extra shirts and trousers lay wadded on the ground, and his sword and the tog'shûr were propped precariously in a far corner. Thorin's jacket was lazily draped over the sword. His grimy motorcycle boots lay on their sides, each one seeming to have been kicked to opposite ends of the room.

Bilbo's fingers itched in an instinctive desire to tidy up. Dwalin let out a bark of laughter in response to Gandalf's comment, evidently used to it.

Thorin colored slightly, brow furrowing in anger. "How dare—"

"Peace, Your Majesty," Gandalf placated, evidently possessing no shortage of good humor. "In any case, Bilbo certainly needs some time to freshen up and get his own affairs in order. I mean, just look at him."

Bilbo nodded vigorously in relieved agreement. He could have kissed Gandalf for giving him such an easy out, even if it was slightly at his expense.

"And besides, there are some things I need to discuss with you, anyway," the older man continued. "Have you considered my proposal to petition extra help from the firm?"

Thorin's expression darkened. It was matched by Dwalin's own glare from under the bedclothes.
"I have, and the answer is still no," said Thorin flatly. "I don't trust lawyers, especially not those of your ilk. The company and I are in agreement on this."

Gandalf frowned. "Your Majesty, I'll say this only once: Be sure not to bite the hand that feeds."

"We don't need your scraps," snarled Dwalin.

Gandalf groaned, throwing up his hands in frustration.

"Curse the stubbornness of Ereboreans! Your foolish pride will be your undoing, mark my words. What will it take to convince you that my only agenda is to actually **help** you lot?" he harrumphed loudly, folding his arms across his chest.

Thorin gazed stormily at him, eyes flashing. "That may be true now, but sooner than we expect, your lot be the ones coming to ask us for a favor, and where will that leave Erebor then? If there's one thing I've learned over the years, it's that nothing in life ever comes for free. **Quid pro quo** — isn't that what you Western legal types like to say?"

Ice stabbed at Bilbo's gut at that, and his slowly waning headache suddenly returned with a vengeance. Right. It was too early for this.

"If you'll excuse me," he muttered, hastily making his exit.

Thorin might have called out after him, but by that point Bilbo refused to listen. No matter how much he enjoyed looking at Thorin, or yearned for the scraps of his attention, he wasn't that much of a masochist. He had to get away.

Bilbo stumbled his way down the stairs, somehow light enough on his feet that he stole into the sitting room to retrieve his pack without being noticed by the rest of the company. He ensconced himself in a bathroom to change—and perhaps to quietly cry a little bit more, but that was neither here nor there—before brushing his teeth and splashing water from a conveniently placed jug onto his puffy face and eyes, which he hopefully could blame on the hangover. Not that he necessarily wanted to explain that either, but he supposed a little late night carousing would be easier to write off than having to provide a cogent reason as to why he had spent most of the night bawling like a schoolgirl.

He needn't have worried. Nobody in the company commented on his appearance when he finally walked into the kitchen to avail himself of some of the porridge that Gandalf had mentioned, if only because there was hardly anybody in the room when he got there. While it was mainly empty, there were still some stodgy oats clinging to the bottom of the large sauce pot on the camp stove, though it seemed to have long since grown cold.

Oh, well. Bilbo could manage. Maybe he needed something a little stodgy to settle his sensitive stomach, anyway.

Bowl full of what porridge he could manage to scrape out of the pot, he settled himself at the small kitchen table next to Kili, who was uncharacteristically brooding into space with his chin in his hand.

The prince didn’t bother to look at Bilbo as he sat down. He did, however, let out an incredibly noisy sigh the minute Bilbo’s chair scraped against the tile. Bilbo glanced at him inquisitively before tucking into his cold slop. It turned out to be slightly maple flavored. Better than cardboard, at least.

Kili heaved an even bigger sigh after a few minutes of silence as Bilbo continued to eat. Bilbo
merely raised an eyebrow at him, licking the back of his spoon. Kili groaned in frustration.

“Well?” he exclaimed loudly, leaning back in his chair. “Aren’t you going to ask me what’s wrong?”

“Oh? Was I supposed to somehow infer that from your dramatics?” Bilbo asked mildly.

“Yes!” Anger colored Kili’s tone, utterly devoid of shame in a way that made Bilbo smile fondly despite himself.

“Alright, I’ll bite,” he said with a snort. “Your Highness, whatever is the matter?”

Kili waved an arm in the direction of the sliding glass door that led to the back garden, looking aggrieved. Two figures leaned against the outside of the door, backs pressed casually against the glass as they enjoyed the fresh air. Their bodies were angled toward each other, heads bent closely together and obviously deep in conversation.

“That,” he spat.

The door had been slid open a bit, ostensibly to let a breeze in after what possibly could have been months of keeping the house tightly sealed against the weather and more sinister elements. Though the two were being quiet, the door was cracked just wide enough to let snippets of their discussion leak into the kitchen.

“Yeah, they’re called Red Velvet,” Ori said excitedly, hands buzzing animatedly as he spoke. “They’re probably my favorite girl group. They’ve been around for a while, though Yeri didn’t join until 2015. Irene’s the best, though. Did you know she’s actually really good at archery?”

“Oh, wow. No, I didn’t. That’s really interesting,” Fili replied breezily, posture full of a constructed type of machismo swagger that Bilbo instantly recognized as flirtatious.

“You should give them a listen when you have a chance!” Ori exclaimed, eyes shining.

Fili’s answering grin positively exuded enticing bravado. “Maybe I will.”

Bilbo stared, spoon hovering in the space between his mouth and the bowl. “Are… are they—?”


Bilbo nodded sagely, though he wasn’t exactly sure if he knew what ‘K-pop’ even was. Something about Korean boy bands, maybe? Ori did seem to own a lot of branded merchandise. Even his sketchbook wasn’t immune, as it was practically covered in stickers.

“He only listens to weird harsh noise and sad songs where people mumble the lyrics instead of actually singing,” Kili continued, pulling irritatedly at his neatly combed hair. “I mean, Ori’s my friend, and he’s not a bad guy, but…”

“You’re concerned for your brother,” Bilbo said softly. Kili nodded in reluctant agreement.

“Fili doesn’t date,” he muttered, resting his elbows on the wooden table in order to harshly regard the grain. “He never has. Everybody knows that Ori’s had a crush on Fili since forever, but my brother never returned it. Fi even used to tease him about it sometimes, when we were younger. This is the first time I’ve ever seen him even remotely interested in anyone, and I don’t want it to be out of some sort of obligation to Ori for helping him out. He should—he should hold out for someone he really likes.”
Bilbo abruptly set his spoon down with a clatter, as whatever appetite he had previously possessed suddenly became nonexistent.

Inexplicably, Bofur’s cheerful face was suddenly dragged, unbidden, to the forefront of his mind. It would be somewhat of an understatement to say that Bofur’s easy acceptance of him had gone a long way to ingratiate Bilbo with the rest of the company. Bilbo owed him in a number of ways, big and small.

He contemplated his striking smile, his unerringly thoughtful manner, their almost effortless camaraderie. The extremely bold notion he had considered on that second night in Bag End suddenly hit him like a brick wall, when he had briefly weighed the merits of inviting what had then just a friendly, handsome stranger up to his room for a bit of fun. Thankfully, he had second-guessed himself for the better and chickened out before he could make things awkward when Bofur inevitably rejected him. It had been an absolutely insane thought, after all.

But… what if?

What if it hadn’t been so insane? What if there was some merit to what Dwalin had told him, that Bofur was actually flirting with him in a serious manner? And where did that leave Bilbo, disturbingly infatuated with a man who wouldn’t even deign to spare a thought for him? Not to mention that Thorin constantly proved time and time again that he was so wildly out of Bilbo’s league that they weren’t even playing the same sport. He might as well be curling at the community center while Thorin played major league baseball. The vision the king had presented this morning had merely been a testament to that fact.

Bofur, on the other hand.

With his dark eyes and dimpled cheeks, he was still far too handsome for his own good, but he was disarming in a way that could charm even the shyest of spooked animals. His hands were always so warm, and rough in a pleasing way that Bilbo more than sort-of liked, if he was being honest with himself. They were seemingly always touching him, and more than once had one of Bofur’s hands grounded him when his own anxieties threatened to carry him off somewhere he’d rather not go. And it had fit so neatly in Bilbo’s last night.

Bofur… Bofur was nice. Bofur was comfortable. Bofur was safe. And if, against all odds, he was interested in him for some unfathomable reason, didn’t Bilbo owe him the chance?

“It might not be that simple,” Bilbo remarked tightly, seriously regarding his own loneliness in a new light, while simultaneously trying to ignore the heartache of it. “He might not have that many options.”

Kili’s eyes narrowed at him, nostrils flaring as he immediately went on the offensive. “What? Because he’s trans?” he barked, visibly bristling.

“No, nothing like that,” Bilbo replied, holding up a conciliatory hand. “It’s like I told Mister Dwalin last night; these are precarious times we live in. We have so few chances at happiness. Holding out may not be the wisest choice.”

Kili didn’t exactly seem satisfied, but he settled down all the same. “Huh. Dunno if I agree with you on that one. How was Mister Dwalin, by the way?”

“He was drunk, but fine mostly. We talked for a bit,” said Bilbo noncommittally, still staring into his bowl.
So preoccupied was he with rearranging his mental space that he hardly noticed the rest of the company filtering into the kitchen to pack away the rest of the food and wash the dishes. He only came back to full awareness when Dori startled him by abruptly snatching his bowl out from under his nose without asking if he was finished. Bilbo gawked in disbelief as the usually unfailingly-polite Dori didn’t bother to spare him a word, clunking the dish hard down into the sink. If it had been anything but plastic, it most definitely would have shattered.

“He’s mad at us,” Kili explained as Bilbo gaped wordlessly. “He thinks we’ve corrupted poor Ori.”

“Oh, like the lad wasn’t already corrupted. Not ideal being on Dori’s bad side, though,” Bofur remarked cheerfully, plopping himself down in the seat opposite Kili. “Morning, Bilbo! Wearing my favorite pullover, I see.”

Bilbo instantly felt his face flush as he absently fingered the hem of his hideous fleece. In the wake of this morning’s realizations, Bofur’s normally unchallenging smile suddenly became distressingly overwhelming. The proximity of their hands on the tabletop made him dizzy.

Oh. This was bad.

Luckily for him, Bilbo was saved from attempting to respond by Bombur taking the final seat at the table and immediately engaging his brother in a lively conversation about the fair conditions outside. Bifur soon wandered over joined them, adding to the discussion in the ways that he could, mainly by making complicated signs with his hands and adding a few guttural words of inscrutable Crimean here and there. Bilbo was also nominally a part of the conversation, but if the brother and cousin trio thought he was unusually quiet this morning, they didn’t mention it. Kili summarily went back to glaring into the garden at Fili and Ori, though this time he was accompanied by Dori. The two young men seemed to be blissfully oblivious.

Nori only glanced briefly out the glass door from his spot against the counter, instead choosing to turn his gaze onto Bilbo and leer at the proximity of his pinky finger to Bofur’s. Bilbo immediately snatched his hand off the table, but that only made the man smirk at him knowingly in a way that was supremely irritating. Balin soon wandered in as well, arguing heatedly with Oin over whether his offerings to the spirits of the village the night before had anything to do with the sudden change in weather. Gloin listened amusedly from a few paces away, obviously wanting to spectate without explicitly getting involved.

Idle chatter filled the kitchen as pots and pans were washed and put away, and the camp stove was packed up for storage. Soon there wasn’t anything left to do, and it became clear to Bilbo that they were all now simply waiting. Though the presence of the sun had made the mood relatively light, there was a tension in the air that was unmistakable.

Nobody except him knew how Dwalin and the king fared. It was a burden he wished that he didn’t have to bear.

Just as the thought crossed his mind, deep voices chatting in what he had now unmistakably learned to recognize as Russian emanated from the narrow hallway. A hush fell over the kitchen as Thorin and Dwalin approached the threshold.

Thorin’s eyes were bright and his expression open as he nattered on like an excited schoolboy about something Bilbo couldn’t even hope to guess at. Dwalin nodded along, humming in acknowledgement at what Bilbo assumed were the appropriate moments. Though he wasn’t exactly smiling, Thorin positively glowed at the attention.

Bilbo tried not to feel too devastated. Harboring ill feelings would have been completely selfish of
him. He had originally set out to make Thorin and Dwalin happy, after all. It was his own fault if he had made a wish upon the monkey’s paw.

Their expressions fell as they registered the abrupt silence that had been cast over those gathered in the kitchen. There was a pregnant pause as the members of the company gaped at them in varying degrees of shock. Balin, for one, looked as if he were about to keel over. Bilbo only looked at his hands, which were folded neatly in his lap.

Thorin’s lips quirked into a small, exasperated smile. Dwalin scowled at the crowd.

“What are you all looking at?” he growled.

Nobody answered.

Then, after a long moment, the other members of the company simply turned back to their previous conversations with a certain sort of ease that made Bilbo’s head spin.

And just like that, everything was back to normal. Though, perhaps what Bilbo had come to know as ‘normal’ didn’t exactly apply anymore. It was as if a weight he hadn’t even known was there had suddenly been lifted off their collective shoulders—a secret, unspoken tension suddenly gone slack that the company didn’t want to jinx by acknowledging directly.

It made Bilbo want to scream.

He jumped when he felt a familiar hand rest itself gently upon his shoulder.

“She’s alright, Bilbo?” Bofur murmured.

Bilbo immediately forced his hands to relax, which he hadn’t realized had clenched themselves into white knuckle fists. He almost didn’t notice Kili leap up from his chair to rush over to Thorin.

He did turn his full attention over to watch as the prince flung himself at his uncle, spitting out sentences of what sounded like remorseful, rapidfire Khuzdul as he wrapped the king in an unexpected embrace. Thorin, looking thoroughly nonplussed, patted his back awkwardly. Dwalin merely watched in amusement, chuckling quietly as he folded his thick arms across his chest.

However, the king seemed to quickly get over his shock, and he murmured something lowly before gently cupping Kili’s face and tapping his forehead to his. This made Kili beam and look at Thorin like he had hung the moon. Balin soon wandered over as well, smiling widely and resting each of his hands on one of Dwalin and Thorin’s arms. The sight was heartwarming enough that Bilbo briefly forgot some of his own distress.

He sighed. This is what it had all been for, wasn’t it. He might be alone, but at least he had helped to mend a family, in his own small way.

“Yes, I’m alright,” he said. “Just have a bit of a hangover, is all.”

“A hangover?” asked Bofur, bemused. “Was there a party I wasn’t invited to?”

Bilbo snorted. “Ha, no. Mister Dwalin simply availed himself to some of my bourbon last night, and from there coerced me into joining him. A huge mistake, if you ask me.”

“Huh. You don’t say,” said Bofur, smiling fondly at him. He leaned slightly into Bilbo’s space, and perhaps for the first time since their meeting, Bilbo was acutely aware of it. “That reminds me. We still need to drink together sometime. Properly, I mean.”
Bilbo glanced sidelong in Thorin’s direction, startled to find that the king was looking at him with an unreadable expression. However, the king quickly looked away the moment they accidentally made eye contact. Bilbo swallowed convulsively, turning his attention back to Bofur.


Tentatively, he reached out to adjust one of the flaps of Bofur’s trapper hat, which was sitting slightly askew. Then he moved to brush an imaginary bit of lint off of his knitted jumper, hand lingering on Bofur’s shoulder perhaps a bit longer than strictly necessary. He wondered if his hair was as soft as it looked. In a move of impressive daring, Bilbo swiped off a bit more lint closer to his neckline, his fingers brushing softly against one of Bofur's braids.

Bofur’s eyes went round.

“Aye,” he breathed, a giddy smile blooming slowly across across his face. He looked at Bilbo like he was nothing short of a revelation; it made Bilbo squirm. “Just tell me the time and the place. I’ll be there.”

“I’ll let you know,” Bilbo mumbled, feeling somewhat like he was staring into the sun. He patted Bofur’s shoulder awkwardly before retracting his hand and setting it on the table.

“Take your time,” Bofur said gently, subtly moving his hand so his fingers brushed delicately against Bilbo’s on the tabletop, just as Bilbo had imagined only moments earlier. When Bilbo didn't protest, Bofur moved his hand to cover Bilbo's fully. “I’m very patient.”

Bilbo ducked his head bashfully. “I know that now. Thank you.”

“No need. I’d wait forever if you asked me to.”

He really sounded like he meant it. Bilbo didn’t quite know how to handle that.

Well, he supposed he didn’t have to worry about that just now. The sun was rising ever higher in the sky, illuminating the kitchen as it buzzed with light conversation and the warmth of something Bilbo could only describe as family. He looked up to see Gandalf leaning in the doorway with his walking stick tucked under his arm, surveying the scene with a sort of softness that made Bilbo ache. They briefly caught each other’s eye and exchanged small, strained smiles in the process.

He should have expected it by now, but Bilbo was still surprised at himself when his gaze inevitably wandered back toward the king. He didn’t know exactly why. Maybe he was a little bit of a masochist, continuing to try and steal glimpses into a world he could never enter, pining for something he couldn’t have. He completely expected Thorin to be back in conversation with Dwalin, fully engrossed in whatever they had to talk about. Surely they had some catching up to do after weeks without speaking to each other.

However, Bilbo was startled to find that Thorin was staring directly at him with a curiously neutral expression. But no matter how controlled his face was, there was no disguising the fact that his eyes, which were boring into Bilbo’s own, were completely hollow.

Bilbo sucked in a breath. He had long since grown used to Thorin’s moods waffling between raging heat and icy cold. This sort of empty apathy was something entirely new.

Bilbo hated it.

He swiftly turned his head away, covering his mouth with a hand. Bofur looked at him in concern, but he shrugged him off. It wouldn’t do anybody any good if Bilbo suddenly burst into tears again.
Right. Nothing was ever easy, was it.

Chapter End Notes

No translations this time.

So.........yeah? Hope this is good ? Tbh writing this chapter felt like a hangover lmao. Also DO NOT @ ME ABT KPOP I KNOW NOTHING ABOUT IT !!!!!!!!!! This was a discrete character choice I made bc I thought it was cute and literally what you see here is all I know after .2 seconds of googling.

Anyway, here's some behind the scenes theater:

_Dwalin: [roaring drunk, busting through into Thorin's room] YOU! I HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY TO YOU!!_

_Thorin, morosely playing a sad song on the lute: ????!

_Dwalin: Baggins told me to tell you that i love you and and that maybe we're not communicating effectively but the thing is that i miss you and i forgive you for what you said but also can we table this for a little bit bc i AM going to pass out now

_Thorin: [who can only process the words 'i love you' and 'Baggins'] OH BAGGINS TOLD YOU TO SAY THAT ??????? wow.... maybe... Baggins is cool, actually

_Dwalin: [already snoring]

[later]

_Thorin: hmmmm maybe i should make myself pretty this morning, perhaps THAT will get Baggins's attention.

_Bilbo, hungover gay disaster: hhhhhhh i'm gonna be alone forever....but wait....bofur...is nice

_Bofur: [ecstatic but also can't believe that Bilbo is finally returning all of his extremely unsubtle signals]

_Thorin, upon seeing all this: I CAN'T BELIEVE I DID MY HAIR FOR N O T H I N G. okay i'm going to go commit seppuku now, brb

_Dwalin: [tears in his eyes] i hate this fuckign family

Thank you so much for reading and for all the amazing feedback I got last chapter ;w; !!!!! I was really worried about it, so hearing you all say such nice things was incredible. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Music That Goes With This Chapter:
Faith - George Michael
also.....[coughs] if you want the horny alternate ending to the last chapter.... please accept this humble offering
Four Days In Essex

Chapter Summary

Thorin and Dwalin make up, and spring has sprung in full. The sun is shining, the world seems to be rebuilding itself around them, and things are suddenly hunky-dory—for everyone except Bilbo, that is. He has his own problems, not the least of which being that his motorcycle might be haunted. Too bad he left his bourbon behind.

Chapter Notes

hhhhghnngh,... Hi. My brain decided to shut down for a while and take a quick detour to write noncanonical ggcyd dwaggins smut, but here I am. I think I sort of got lost in the sauce with this chapter, so it's kind of a mess. But there are some things I needed to set up since the last chapter sort of acted as a bookend for the whole Thorin-Dwalin drama, so I hope there are some things that provide some entertainment. The purpose of this (egregiously long, extremely self-indulgent) chapter is mainly a vehicle for characterization, so like. Sorry if it's boring. I swear there will be action next time.

So like.... [rod serling voice] welcome.... to the Self-Indulgence Zone.

TW for brief standard gore

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once it became evident that he and Dwalin had worked out their differences, the rest of the company quickly closed ranks around Thorin, much as they had that first night in Bag End. They all began to give him brief, nonessential updates about things he may have missed over the past two and a half weeks, including everything from how Gloin’s bike was making a strange noise on startup that neither he nor Bifur could figure out, to Nori bragging about how proficient Ori was becoming at fleecing the others at cards. (Not cribbage; the boy still hadn’t quite figured that one out yet.)

Thorin seemed somewhat overwhelmed at the attention. While his expression was for the most part outwardly stoic, the king's eyes darted wildly among each member of the company as he tried to focus on what seemed to be about ten different conversations at once. He was admittedly doing an admirable job of it, but whenever he visibly began to struggle, Dwalin was right there beside him, subtly steering Thorin's attention to where it was needed the most.

Bilbo was once again left on the outside looking in, staring forlornly as Thorin absently brushed a dark strand of hair that had artfully escaped from its elaborate twist behind his ear. The movement caused the sapphire inlaid in one of the king’s earrings to glint invitingly in the dewy morning sunlight; it accentuated Thorin's eyes, which glittered just as brightly.

Sitting there at the kitchen table, watching the king hold court with Dwalin’s solid, steady presence at his side, Bilbo summarily decided to leave his second bottle of bourbon behind. He didn’t know how spirits felt about whiskey versus vodka, but he decided that if they wanted it, they could keep
Bilbo swallowed heavily. The sight of Dwalin’s hand, firm and huge on Thorin’s shoulder, made his heart hurt intensely.

Right, he thought irritably. His mind was still a scorched, muddled wasteland from the emotional intensity of the night before, which was only aggravated by the poisoning effects of too much alcohol. No use crying over things we can’t have.

In the spirit of that, he turned his attention back to Bofur, wondering if they could perhaps continue their conversation in a little less oblique terms. However, he was surprised to find Bofur also staring at where the small crowd had gathered around Dwalin and the king. He wore a pinched expression that was strikingly similar to Bilbo’s.

“Something wrong?” he asked in a low voice, concerned. He had been so wrapped up in his own thoughts, he had shamefully failed to notice the other man’s mood this morning.

Bofur agitatedly drummed his fingers on the table, staring daggers at Thorin.

“Nothing,” he muttered, tone strangely dark. “I just think Dwalin’s forgiving him a little too easily. Don’t you?”

Bilbo’s brow furrowed in confusion, surprised at the uncharacteristic venom. Bofur, as a general rule, always seemed to be the most laid back of all the Ereboreans.

“Do you… not like the king?” he asked tentatively. He and Thorin had never been particularly warm to each other, but then again, Thorin hadn’t really been warm to anybody these past couple of weeks.

“Oh, I like him alright,” Bofur sighed, sending Bilbo a wan smile. “But our personalities don’t quite mesh, if you get my meaning. Dwalin, on the other hand… he’s a good mate of mine. His Majesty said a lot of pretty awful things to him these past few weeks. I just think that he should maybe do a bit more grovelling, but then again, I haven't got quite the blind spot for him that Dwalin does.”

It was almost the exact same sentiment that Dwalin expressed to him in the parking lot of Tesco, and Bilbo couldn't help but feel a little charmed at the unintentional parallel.

Still.

"I was under the impression that the king was going through his own struggles," he said, trying to keep his voice carefully neutral. "Namely, the circumstances with which he became king in the first place."

Bofur scoffed, leaning his chin on his hand and fixing Bilbo with a fairly incredulous look. "And that excuses bad behavior? Why are you defending him? It's not like he's treated you with any particular kindness, either."

The tenor of his voice was more curious than barbed, but it stung Bilbo all the same. He recoiled slightly, looking down at his lap as his stomach flipped uncomfortably. He glanced briefly at Thorin, who pointedly was not looking in their direction. Bofur breathed heavily through his nose, running a ragged hand over his moustache.

"Ach, I'm sorry," he said quietly, scooting closer to Bilbo so their thighs pressed together under the table. The contact was nice, but Bilbo noted that it didn't send any particular thrill down his spine.
"What he said to Dwalin, what he said to you last night… it really boiled my blood. I recognize what we did might not have been the smartest or kindest thing in the world, for all our good intentions, but there are certain things you just don't bring up, no matter how mad or hurt you are."

"I didn't exactly peg you as the type to hold a grudge," Bilbo muttered with a frown.

Bofur always seemed so even-tempered. Something in his chest seized anxiously at the thought, and Bilbo absently started wringing his hands. They were quickly stilled by Bofur's broad palms laying themselves gently atop his. Bilbo stared at their joined hands, willing himself to have some sort of reaction other than simply nice.

Bofur sighed.

"I have a longer memory than most," he murmured lowly. "I have to, since most everyone else here lets things go so easily. You know how family is, right?"

"Right," Bilbo lied.

He must not have been very convincing, since Bofur only produced a pale imitation of his usual grin. Still, his dimples thankfully managed to make an appearance, and he squeezed Bilbo's hands once in a tight, warm grip before letting go.

"Well, how about we discuss this further over drinks," he suggested, sounding a bit more chipper. "You bring the scotch, I'll bring the vodka."

"Actually, I may just go ahead and have what you're having," Bilbo mumbled, cringing as he considered his unopened bottle of bourbon. The thought of it made him sick.

Bofur's eyebrows rose, a bemused smirk settling on his handsome face. "Really?"

"Really."

"Oh, praise Mahal," teased Bofur, the white of his teeth flashing brightly against the darkness of his goatee. "Finally, the Englishman is developing some taste."

"Now, if you would listen to me about extra añejo," Bilbo quipped back. He laughed at Bofur's resulting exaggerated face of disgust.

"Urgh, tequila will always make my skin crawl," he chuckled.

"You've just never had good tequila."

"Unfortunately, I have to concur with Mister Bofur on this one," said Gandalf as he sidled up to the small kitchen table. He leaned heavily on his walking stick, and though his expression was nominally placid, his bright eyes seemed unusually sharp as he stared right at Bilbo.

"Not you too!" Bilbo cried. Bofur shot him a triumphant look.

"Tequila is nothing but trouble," the lawyer grumbled, giving off the distinct air of someone speaking from experience. "But all that aside, what say you both to preparing the bikes for the ride ahead, while the rest of these lollygaggers waste time fawning over the king? We can't be missing any more of this daylight."

Bofur snorted derisively. "Agreed," he said. He stood from the table, and the warmth of his thigh against Bilbo's quickly dissipated.
Utter fool he was, Bilbo was helpless to do anything but glance back toward the corner of the kitchen where the king was currently listening to Oin’s boisterous monologue detailing his successful negotiation with whichever entities controlled the weather.

Thorin seemed preoccupied, only lending half an ear for the medic’s self-aggrandizing tirade. Though his expression was thankfully free of its earlier emptiness, the king’s face was hard in a way Bilbo could not decipher. He felt the vise screw ever tighter around his heart, so much so that he actually found it hard to breathe.

"Wait for me," he gasped after Bofur and Gandalf, springing up from his chair. It made an audible scraping against the floor, which caused Thorin's lips to thin perceptibly beneath his beard, even as he refused to look at him.

Bilbo fled the kitchen, retrieving his pack and shoving his feet in his boots before following Gandalf and Bofur through the sliding door to the back garden. While Bilbo and Gandalf went to remove the tarps from the motorbikes, Bofur conscripted Fili and Ori into helping him retrieve the canisters of petrol that had long ago been squirreled away in the small utility shed.

Just as they had finished rolling up the tarps and set them aside to be packed away later, Bilbo jumped as Fili violently kicked open the back garden gate, hauling an improbable amount of the red twenty-liter cans. He gripped two in each of his hands while also somehow managing to keep one tucked under each arm, carrying a ponderously heavy six canisters in total.

“Fili!” exclaimed Ori while stumbling through the gate behind him. “Don’t strain yourself!”

“Really, I’m fine!” the prince insisted with a stubborn wheeze. Much to his consternation, he was still being treated as something delicate by certain members of the company due to his injury. He seemed wholly determined to prove that he was just as fit as the rest of them.

Ori also carried a similar amount of canisters, though he looked to be having a markedly easier time of it. He hadn’t even broken a sweat, even while still dressed in his heavy woolen jumper and various layers. Fili, by comparison, was positively gleaming with exertion, and had taken advantage of the fair weather to strip down to his loose-fitting black undershirt.

“Please, it’s not worth it,” Ori sighed, though Bilbo noted that the young man had a hard time tearing his eyes away from the prince’s rippling arm muscles. Fili grinned, unsubtly making sure to flex every time he caught Ori’s gaze.

Bofur sauntered into the alley behind them, not left with much to do during this display of adolescent peacocking. He stopped next to Bilbo, plopping his two lone jerrycans onto the concrete with a smile.

“Ah, to be young again,” Bofur grinned, watching the boys banter as Ori desperately tried to lighten some of Fili’s load.

It quickly turned into a strange sort of dance. Ori would lunge for Fili, trying to grab one or more of the full petrol canisters. The prince simply whirled out of the way at the last second in response, laughing freely as if he hadn’t a care in the world.

The hoodie tied around Fili’s waist fluttered as he gracefully twirled and hopped, reminding Bilbo strongly of an exotic bird engaged in some sort of intricate mating ritual. The illusion was made all the more intense by Ori’s decidedly drab attire, as he had decided to dress himself that morning in a simple palette of light grays and browns. They seemed to blend together, especially with the mousiness of his hair. It all resembled something Bilbo had seen in a nature documentary once
“I can only wish for even a fraction of their energy,” Bilbo replied, snorting at the mental image he had just conjured. Of a mind to share this humorous comparison, he turned to glance at Bofur.

Whatever words he had prepared abruptly died in his throat.

Instead of watching the lads cavort about the alley, Bofur was merely staring at him with an incredibly soulful expression. Bilbo immediately ducked his gaze, suddenly irrationally discomfited.

“Aye,” the other man agreed softly, his dark eyes impossibly warm. The back of Bilbo’s neck tingled uncomfortably.

“I could use some help over here!” Gandalf grumbled loudly from across the alley. He had already twisted fuel cap off the tank of his own bike, and was tapping impatiently on the handlebars.

“Coming!” Bilbo called in relief. He hurriedly grabbed one of the heavy metal cans and began dragging it toward Gandalf before Bofur could get a word in edgewise.

The lawyer soon put him to work, for which Bilbo was exceedingly grateful. While he had learned a lot about general automotive maintenance over the past three weeks, Bilbo was still left trying to follow the leads of the others as they set about making the fourteen motorcycles ready for the day. He carefully filled the fuel tanks and checked tire pressures according to the general specifications laid out to him by Gandalf, but he still found himself asking an embarrassing number of questions, even for the simplest of tasks.

Thankfully, Fili soon wandered over occasionally under the guise of checking on how he was doing, but Bilbo noticed in the way he quietly wheezed that he may just be trying to avoid overly straining himself. Apparently, despite his assertions to the contrary, all that spinning and skipping seemed to have taken its toll on his injured side. He patiently answered all of Bilbo's incredibly basic questions in an unnecessary level of detail, and grinned sunnily when Bilbo started asking questions that they both knew that even he had the answers to, subtly extending the time they spent checking over each motorbike.

The rest of the company soon started filtering out into the alley just as they finally ran out of things to talk about, hauling out luggage and the rest of their supplies. Fili straightened from his crouch next to Bilbo, ostensibly in order to finally attend to his own motorcycle, which he seemed to have been avoiding. He hissed at the conspicuous racing stripe that had been scraped into the side, which revealed an ugly swath of gray that broke up the dark purple paint.

Kili soon bounced into the alley behind Bombur, making a beeline for Fili the moment he spotted his brother.

“Aw, it doesn’t look too bad,” he said about the motorbike whilst slinging an arm over Fili's shoulders. For all his physicality, Kili was conspicuously careful not to lean too heavily on him; it was a far cry from how the brunette usually hung off his brother and forced him to support the weight of his entire body, which was either the same or greater than Fili’s own. The elder prince evidently noticed, his grimace at the sorry state of his bike quickly morphing into an annoyed frown.

"Maybe we can paint it," Kili suggested obliviously, grinning widely. "Trick it out with flames or something. What do you think, Fi?"
"Sure. Maybe Ori can help," Fili muttered, roughly shrugging his brother's arm off.

"Yeah, I s'pose that's fine," he said tightly, badly startled by the action. Fili arched an imperious eyebrow at him.

"But?" the elder prince bit out.

"But..." mumbled Kili, "I kinda wanted it to be our project, y'know? Just us." He looked incredibly downtrodden, almost shy in a way that Bilbo had never known Kili to be.

Fili glowered at him for a moment, sighing heavily before his expression abruptly lightened into something like an exasperated smile. Barking out a short laugh, the elder prince reached up to ruffle Kili's hair, successfully mussing the fringe into something that more closely resembled its usual wild tangle.

"Sure. We can do that," he said, blue eyes warm. Kili's answering grin was so dazzling that Bilbo was slightly blinded by it.

He shook his head, wandering toward the black motorcycle that he rode with Dori. Being an only child, he didn't quite understand the depth of the bond the two brothers shared. It seemed to be much closer than most of the siblings he knew, though he did have a pair of twin cousins who acted a lot like Fili and Kili with each other.

Bilbo supposed that if one was the sole focus of their beloved older brother's attention for practically their entire life, unwavering even for adolescent flings and dating, suddenly having to share that attention must be something of a shock. However, even in spite of his relative lack of experience in the arena of siblings, Bilbo knew they'd get through it. The sort of love they shared was obviously something special, after all.

Speaking of a special sort of devotion, Thorin and Dwalin soon walked in perfect synchronicity through the back gate, the still damp wood smacking mutedly as Thorin locked it behind them. Muttering lowly to each other in Russian, and Bilbo could only watch in mute horror as something Dwalin said served as cause for Thorin to grab the other man's thick forearm and briefly bump their foreheads together. It was an agonizingly tender gesture, one that made Dwalin smile warmly.

“Alright lads, kiss and make up so we can get on the road!” Gloin called from somewhere behind Bilbo. Dwalin flipped the bird at him.

Overall, the mood was extremely light as the sun slowly climbed higher into the sky, though Bilbo had a hard time taking it to heart. The alley itself was still cast in a chill shadow, the concrete still damp where the water wasn’t actively puddling in the dips and crevices that pockmarked the pavement.

Bilbo drew his pullover closer around himself, wondering if he should put on his coat just in case. Hopefully things would get warmer as April steadily began transitioning into May.

“Mister Baggins!”

Bilbo froze, his whole body going stiff as he slowly craned his head in the direction of the voice that had just called out to him. It only took two quick strides of his ridiculously long legs before Thorin was barely a foot away, towering over Bilbo.

“Yes?” Bilbo’s voice was barely a croak, subtly shrill with panic as he tried to look anywhere but at the king.
“May I have a word?” asked Thorin quietly. His baritone rumbled out from beneath the depths of his sheepskin coat, which was zippered all the way to his neck. Bilbo focused on that fact, absolutely refusing to look at the king’s face or at how fetchingly he had arranged his hair.

“Erm, perhaps later,” Bilbo said, eyes darting to his boots. Though the red had become somewhat faded with near constant travel, they still clashed brightly against the dun pavement. “I think we’ve already burned more than our fair share of daylight.”

“It will only take a moment,” the king insisted.

“Thorin Durinul Khan! I need to speak with you!” Gandalf hollered, his booming voice echoing badly in the confined space of the alleyway.

It was all a little too much for the company, as they all had grown extremely wary of unexpected noises and echoes. Bilbo flinched instinctively, about half a second away from diving for his pack and his gun. Thorin’s whole body immediately tensed like a coiled spring, his hands flying abortively toward the sword securely strapped to his back.

“Ha,” Bilbo said shakily, once he realized just what had happened. He nervously sneaked a glance at Thorin’s expression.

Just as Bilbo had feared, Thorin’s face was tight and furious. His eyes blazed as one of his hands hovered in the air near Bilbo’s shoulder, like it was wont to shove Bilbo out of the way at any second.

“Well, best not keep him waiting,” he said, warily eyeing the appendage. "You know that Gandalf always gets his way."

“Indeed,” Thorin growled. Shoving his hands deep into his pockets, he spun on his heel and stomped wetly through a puddle as he stalked off in Gandalf’s direction.

Bilbo let out a relieved sigh. Turning in order to attend to his own motorbike, he stopped short when instead of Dori, he saw that it was Bifur securing his luggage to the back with a pair of particularly obstinate-looking bungee cords.

“Erm, Mister Bifur?” he asked, slowly making his way over. “Where’s Mister Dori?”

Bifur looked up, brow furrowing as he regarded Bilbo’s somewhat dazed expression. He pointed to Dori, who was readying Bifur’s usual mount in a position that looked to be pointedly blocking Ori from Fili. It was a vintage-looking sports bike from China, and it gleamed beautifully in the early morning light mainly thanks to Bifur’s loving daily maintenance on it. He shifted restlessly as Dori inadvertently pressed his fingerprints all over the flawless orange paint and previously-spotless chrome, looking like he wanted nothing more than to rub them away with the soft microfiber cloth Bilbo knew he kept in his back pocket.

“Tavuq… eserli,” he ground out tersely, sounding frustrated as worked his way through the slow ordeal of forming sentences. He gestured roughly between himself, Bilbo, and the motorcycle. “Men… sanya-nen… ketmek. Avtomobil.”

“...Right,” Bilbo replied.

He’d been trying his hardest to learn a bit of the Ereborean sign language, but the sentence and verb structure was based heavily on Khuzdul, and any attempts on his part to get someone to teach him more than a word or two of the Ereboreans' language had been met either with polite demurs or outright scoffing refusal.
"He's trying to say that Dori's mad at you, and he was the only one who offered to switch," Nori translated helpfully, already straddling his bike and leaning casually on the handlebars.

Nori’s grin was sharp and irascible beneath the neat grooming of his copper beard; more of a vicious baring of teeth rather than an actual smile. It sent a chill down Bilbo’s spine, giving him the unmistakable impression that perhaps Nori was also a little bit angry with him as well.

Bilbo sighed. Of course. He unclipped his helmet from his pack, shoving it on his head.

Bifur signed something irritably at Nori. The other man only let out an annoyed *hmph* in response, holding up his hands in an ostensible sign of surrender.

"Yeah, yeah," he grumbled, eyes still narrowed in Bilbo's direction. "I get it. Ori might be my baby brother, but he’s an adult. I’ll lay off. Just have fun riding the haunted motorbike, B."

He flipped down the visor on his helmet with finality, walking his bike over to a spot closer to his brothers. Bilbo gaped after him.

"Haunted motorbike?" he asked hoarsely.

Bifur grunted, dismissively waving a hand.

"Thrain Khan," he uttered gutturally.

"Ah," murmured Bilbo, inspecting the bike anew. "Yes, of course,"

It had been the former king's bike before his death, and Bilbo very vaguely remembered Balin mentioning the spirits of loved ones remaining connected to the Earth shortly after dying.

Going by Bilbo's own notions of inheritance, the big black motorcycle should rightly belong to His Majesty. He had offhandedly wondered why Thorin hardly ever went near the bike, and furthermore refused to ride it, despite it belonging to his father. Those in the company must lend some credence to the thought of lingering ghosts, if all but Bifur had indeed refused to switch. From what he had observed, none of them except the man in question seemed particularly attached to their motorcycles. He absently wondered if Dori also believed in such things, or if he had simply drawn the short straw.

In any case, it didn't seem like Bifur was particularly superstitious, and honestly neither was Bilbo. They exchanged a wry glance, for once communicating with full clarity.

Bifur gestured in a gentlemanly manner toward the bike, as if to say 'after you.'

"Thank you," Bilbo said, climbing into his regular nook among the luggage. Bifur had done an admirable job arranging things in nearly the same manner that Dori always did, so Bilbo was more or less comfortable. He shot Bifur a thumbs up to signal that all was as it should be, receiving a short nod in return.

Bifur disengaged the kickstand and settled heavily on the front seat, his untamed shock of black-and-white hair flowing freely. Bilbo had noticed that he never wore a helmet.

With a spluttering roar, Bifur revved the engine to life. He followed behind Balin and Gandalf, exiting out of the alleyway as they rode out into the warm, mid-morning sun, following the path further down the road to Kent.
The next three days passed with relative uneventfulness for Bilbo.

The gorgeous weather held as they slowly made their way into Essex. The brilliant sun illuminated the passing fields and woods in a riot of beautiful color. The leaves on the passing trees had finally fully unfurled from their buds to stand lushly against the robin’s egg blue of the sky, and the wildflowers began to bloom in earnest, enthusiastically sprouting through the absolutely sodden topsoil.

However, while the days and nights became increasingly milder as April marched into May, all the same road hazards that had existed during the long period of rain still continued to plague them. The planned route to their last supply cache before the channel tunnel was halfway washed out, and what navigable stretches still existed were more often than not blocked by debris that had been swept into the motorways by the ceaseless rain and wind. It made for incredibly slow going, which even the fair weather couldn’t entirely make up for.

Somehow worse than actual zombies in slowing their progress, which weren’t an issue as long as the sun continued to beat down on them during the day, the good weather also brought out other survivors, particularly as they traveled closer to the former suburbs surrounding London.

Small hubs of community had seemingly popped up all over Essex practically overnight, or at least since the Ereboarens had first scouted out their path. What had once been abandoned villages six months ago were, more often than not, slowly being revitalized nearly a year after the initial outbreak. It caused something like hope to spark somewhere deep in Bilbo’s chest, wondering if the world hadn’t ended quite so badly as he initially thought. Almost all of them boasted disconcertingly armed guards and barbed wire fencing, but they seemed to be more or less orderly, at least from what Bilbo could tell as they flew past.

Even so, these new pinpricks of civilization created their own problems, blocking the road just as effectively as a washout. And it was still a shock to see other humans freezing in their heavily guarded crop fields, staring at them as they gunned their engines and zoomed past at a speed Bilbo was entirely unprepared for. He had grown quite used to their fairly sedate pace, and he found that going any faster than roughly thirty-five miles an hour was more than enough to unearth his original intense fear of motorcycle travel.

That, coupled with the occasional percussive crack of automatic weapons fire waringly dogging them as they passed, most definitely took years off his life. Zombies, he could handle. He still didn’t know quite what to make of people.

Thankfully, Bifur seemed to be made of stronger stuff than Dori, for he barely grunted as Bilbo attempted to squeeze the life out him during these instances. Bilbo had originally feared it would be a little uncomfortable, given their communication barrier, but their time together was surprisingly pleasant.

Bifur was unerringly kind and unselfconscious, which reminded Bilbo very much of the man’s cousins. He would point out things he found interesting, listen carefully whenever Bilbo decided to break the silence and tell a story from his wilder days, and even tried to teach him a little bit of sign language, which, after some asking, Bilbo now knew was called ingleshnêk in Khuzdul.

Somehow over the course of riding with Bifur, their journey had become less of a trek through an apocalyptic wasteland, and more of a strange spring road trip with foreigners that he was becoming to consider friends. Despite having to become slightly more creative with where they stayed each
night in order to find adequate shelter from the undead, those three days of travel reminded Bilbo strongly of the relative idyll of that first golden morning after setting out from Bag End.

It all felt much of the same, except for one teensy, incredibly minor difference:

Thorin.

Where the king had spent the past few weeks all but ignoring Bilbo’s existence, it was like he had done a complete one-eighty, and was now incapable of leaving Bilbo alone. It only made matters worse that Dwalin had taken to inviting Bilbo to his and Gloin’s nightly card games, which His Majesty had also recently begun to join. There were only so many ways that Bilbo could refuse something as simple as cards, so he had spent many hours sitting uncomfortably close to the king as Thorin glowered at him over his hand.

However, that would all be bearable, as long as Thorin didn’t keep trying to get him alone.

To talk.

Which was the last thing Bilbo wanted to do.

Seeing the king and Dwalin interact in their carefully intimate way was already an intensely vigorous exercise in emotional self restraint. He quickly figured out that the company hadn’t been lying when they expressed the extreme strangeness of His Majesty’s feud with Dwalin. ‘Attached at the hip’ was an incredible understatement in describing their behavior toward each other. Rather, it was like their whole sides were fused together. They moved in perfect harmony with each other, straight down to their breathing.

He didn’t know what twisted game the king was trying to play, but Bilbo was afraid that if Thorin managed to get him alone while turning the full brunt of his electric attention on him, he would collapse on the spot, pouring out his feelings and weeping like a teenage boy with his first unrequited crush. And then Thorin would either insult him or worse, never look at him again even in passing, which would be a special kind of torture all its own.

He thought longingly to those first weeks when he had thought Thorin was simply a hot-looking piece of particularly rude eye candy. He now knew the full meaning of the term ‘simpler times.’

Luckily, the universe seemed to support Bilbo in his campaign to studiously avoid Thorin. Due to the simple act of being king, his attention was naturally divided among all of the members of the company. It left him little free time with which to harass Bilbo, and what time he did have that was not spent poring over maps of the continent by lamplight with Dwalin and Balin seemed to be increasingly monopolized by Gandalf, who was doing his best to convince the king that stopping by one of his legal firm’s branch headquarters before they made their way for the tunnel was the most favorable course of action.

Thorin would refuse by citing his innate mistrust of lawyers, and thus of Gandalf himself. The resulting arguments had been steadily ramping in intensity, so much so that Bilbo was afraid that things would soon come to blows between them.

(Bilbo wasn’t quite sure who would win if that particular scenario played itself out. Certain members of the company had already started taking bets, and he was sorely tempted to put his money on Gandalf.)

Still, in between all this, Thorin somehow found space in his busy schedule to persistently try and unsuccessfully corner him, while Bilbo continued to make up increasingly improbable excuses.
with which to duck out of interacting one-on-one.

The only places he seemed to be truly safe were on his motorbike and within a certain radius of Bofur. He and the king seemed to be on somewhat less-than-friendly terms at the moment, as Bofur still apparently had not forgiven him for all the grief he had put Dwalin through the past weeks. Feeling only a little guilty, Bilbo unabashedly used to his advantage. He would be the first person to admit that he was being a coward, but for the sake of his own fragile heart, Bilbo decided that he could live with it.

As for his own feelings for Bofur, well, he was working on it. Bilbo did what he could to funnel his stubborn infatuation with the king into possibly building something with his friend. Every logical reason he could think of pointed toward it being something of a good idea, but his heart was remaining infuriatingly uncooperative.

Even so, things were still incredibly new, and there was always something to be said for ‘fake it until you make it.’ With that in mind, he remained neutrally receptive to his friend’s increasingly overt gestures of interest, hoping beyond hope that one day it would spark the sort of intense rush he got whenever Thorin looked at him with anything even slightly better than active disgust.

Bofur, bless him, turned out to be an unerringly patient suitor. He seemed content to go at Bilbo’s own pace, even if it was at a snail’s. But while the amount of physicality and the general playful tenor of their interactions hardly changed, there was a glint to Bofur’s dark gaze that he hadn’t noticed there before. It made something in Bilbo warm in a way he couldn’t quite articulate. He hoped that it was a good sign.

On the third night, however, they found shelter at an abandoned construction site by somehow all squeezing into the foreman’s office trailer. After more-or-less tunelessly tooling around on his fiddle for a bit, Bofur surprised Bilbo with a small bouquet of wildflowers picked from behind the double-wide they were all stuffed in. Bilbo had thanked him, and then promptly braved the darkness of the night and the possible undead under the guise to smoke, when really it was to cry. He had cried so much in the past few days, and Bilbo was frankly sick of it. He was forty years old, for heaven’s sake. He had no excuse to be acting like this.

He woke up in his bedroll that morning in the thin gray light of dawn to the quiet murmur of the company around the camp stove, eating the last of their instant porridge. The atmosphere was moderately tense as Bilbo dressed and ate, his companions barely noticing him as he silently squeezed himself between their much larger bodies to get at what was left of the food. Afterwards, he quickly gathered his bedroll and checked his rifle, yawning widely.

It had been a rough night. Bilbo’s ‘smoke break’ had attracted some nearby undead, and the company could hear them prowling around the construction site all night through the thin walls of the trailer. Their rough screeches echoed weirdly off the strangely shaped structures and equipment dotting the site, and they were so agitated by the obvious human smell that some had even took to tussling, summarily ripping each other apart in frustration.

They had taken turns keeping watch, Bilbo sharing his shift with Bombur, for which he was inordinately grateful. The man had a great sense of tact, and thus had kindly said nothing about Bilbo’s obviously fragile emotional state, nor anything about the fact that he was the de-facto reason that they were forced to stay up in the first place.

Bilbo lingered in the trailer as the others piled out, stretching and tilting their heads toward the fog-covered sun in what promised to be another beautiful day. Balin was confident they would reach the final safe house by nightfall, provided they got moving quickly.
Curled up under a framed blueprint of what was presumably supposed to be the finished product of the construction site (it looked to be some sort of corporate office, though why it was located in the middle of nowhere, Bilbo could only guess), Bilbo double and triple checked that he had everything, right down to his useless travel bottle of cologne.

As he took a deliberate moment to seriously weigh the pros and cons of leaving the bottle behind, a pair of heavy boots stopped in front of him. Bilbo’s eyes traveled up the length of the man’s legs and over a rectangular, improbably muscled torso until they reached Dwalin’s steely gray eyes, which were looking down at him with a strangely concerned expression.

“Baggins,” he murmured. “You alright?”

“Quite fine,” Bilbo fibbed, shoving the cologne under his rain jacket and back down into the depths of his bag. He quickly zipped the top pocket, but then paused to stare mutely at a spot on the floor beside his rucksack.

The small bouquet lay innocently on the stained, low-pile carpet. They had shriveled slightly from being out of water overnight, but otherwise the blooms were still startlingly beautiful. Though the stems were bound with a simple length of sturdy twine, Bofur had obviously put a lot of care into choosing the best looking flowers of the bunch, though the particular combination he chose betrayed his obvious lack of knowledge of their meanings. Harebells and buttercups were pretty diametrically opposed, after all.

“What’re those?” Dwalin asked, following Bilbo’s gaze. He looked significantly at the flowers, raising one caterpillar-like eyebrow in question.

“Oh. They were, erm, a gift,” said Bilbo. He tried to keep his voice even, when really all he wanted to do was kick the bouquet under the foreman’s desk and forget about it completely.

“Bofur?”

It wasn’t really a question. Bilbo ducked his gaze, fastidiously tightening all the straps on his bag that he could reach.

“Yes.”

Dwalin sighed, running a hand through his beard in exasperation.

“Look,” he said lowly, “I can't believe I'm getting myself involved in all this, but I suppose I do owe you one. I believed when you first told me that you and he didn’t have anything going on, but even a blind man could see that something's changed. You didn't hear this from me, but he's gone for you, and has been for a while. If you’re not feeling it, you need to tell him. Bofur’s a big lad. He’ll get over it.”

“But what if he doesn’t?” Bilbo asked, throat tightening in anxiety. Bofur had admitted himself that he possessed the unusual ability to hold a grudge. Bilbo didn’t want to lose the one person who may be his only true friend—other than Gandalf, of course, but then he was practically family, so he hardly counted—on this whole journey.

“Believe me, he will,” said Dwalin. “He’s got a soft heart, but it’s resilient. Just do me a favor and don’t lead him on for too long.”

“But what if I’m not trying to lead him on?” exclaimed Bilbo desperately, suddenly tilting his face up to look Dwalin in the eye. “What if I truly want for this to work out? I like Bofur. There’s no reason for us not to.”
Dwalin cleared his throat uncomfortably, eyebrows rocketing toward his nonexistent hairline.

“Aye, well,” he muttered, taken aback at Bilbo’s candor. While his tone was gruff, he brought up one tattooed hand to rub nervously at the back of his bald head. “I think you need to take a hard look at yourself, then. Figure out what you think you want, and then what you actually do.”

Bilbo went silent as he considered this, hands stilling as they ran out of buckles and zippers to fiddle with. Dwalin’s huge paw suddenly filled his line of vision, and his hand almost entirely eclipsed Bilbo’s much smaller one when he took it. He effortlessly pulled Bilbo up from his spot on the floor, before clapping him roughly on the shoulder. They stared at each other for a long, tense moment.

“Right. Good talk,” Dwalin grunted, quickly turning on his heel in order to flee the room. He looked back briefly at Bilbo over his shoulder. “By the way, I think Thorin wants to talk to you.”

Bilbo swallowed forcefully, hands fluttering to smooth his hair as the other man stomped heavily down the trailer steps.

“Of course he does,” he croaked to the empty air.

Bilbo had no choice but to follow Dwalin out the door, shutting it securely behind him.

A thin mist coated the construction site in the early hours of the morning, the steel girders that supported the minimal concrete framing of the unfinished office complex standing as dark pillars in the fog. Gravel crunched beneath Bilbo’s boots as he made his way toward the motorbikes, which, as he had imagined, were receiving a more thorough than usual check-up due to the zombie activity the night before.

As he had expected, mangled bodies of the particularly unruly undead littered the path toward the lot that housed the bikes. Bilbo held his breath as he stepped carefully around a barely recognizable torso whose ribs had been cracked all the way open. Black entrails had been scattered all around it, and an entire human leg that was still attached to part of a pelvis lay sadly in the shovel of a nearby backhoe.

Near the beginning of the outbreak, Bilbo had been surprised to learn that the undead never actually ate others of their kind. Any lateral violence they enacted on each other was simply a product of pure, unadulterated rage. It made Bilbo wonder what it felt like to be that angry, to experience the sort of fury that compelled something that once had been a person to turn on its own and rip it limb from limb with their bare hands. Bilbo could barely conceive of hurting an animal, let alone another human being.

He heroically controlled his gag reflex as he jogged down the path toward the parking lot.

Going by the relative lack of commotion from the company, there didn’t seem to be anything particularly urgent that needed attention when it came to repairs. Trying his hardest to ignore what he had just seen, Bilbo psyched himself up for what would hopefully be another quiet day riding behind Bifur—unless Dori had decided that he wasn’t angry with him anymore, that is. He had even deigned to hold a conversation with Bilbo the night before, which hopefully was a positive sign, since he was still aggressively ignoring Dwalin.

Running over the possibilities in his head, Bilbo almost didn’t notice who exactly it was that leaned up against King Thrain’s purportedly haunted motorcycle. Shrouded in fog, they remained a ghostly shadow until Bilbo was almost upon them. When their face and form finally resolved themselves in the mist, Bilbo stopped short.
Panicked bile rose in his throat. He wondered, not for the first time, if it was too late to begin the walk back to Cornwall.

“Mister Baggins,” Thorin called above the din of the rest of the company, all of whom seemed to be studiously ignoring them. He sat perched on the front cowl of the bike, his plain black helmet tucked up beneath one of his arms.

The king’s casual posture accentuated shapeliness of his legs, which were artfully ensconced within his slightly nicer pair of jeans. Bilbo said ‘nicer’ because this particular pair didn’t have a hole that was just starting to be worn into the left knee—not that he was paying attention, or anything.

“You’re riding with me today,” he said, the fingers of his free hand tapping impatiently against the meat of his thigh.

The king’s tone left no room for argument, but that didn’t mean Bilbo still couldn’t try. The thought of a whole day pressed so close to Thorin without escape made his head spin dangerously. Bilbo wished for nothing more than for a zombie to pop out from behind the nearby pile of bricks and eat him, just so he could avoid when Thorin inevitably chewed him out for some verbal slip-up during their ride.

“What about Mister Bifur? Or Mister Dori?” he wheezed, trying to will his traitorous heart to stop beating so loudly. He noticed with no shortage of despair that Thorin’s pack was already tied securely to the back, the head of the tog’shûr glaring at him ominously. “I thought Your Majesty didn’t like riding the former king’s motorbike?”

Thorin waved him off with a small grimace. The king flicked the long tail of his braid over one of his impossibly broad shoulders. The silver clasp at the end of it gleamed lowly in the muted gray light of the morning. Two thin braids also hung in front of Thorin’s ears, fastened at the end by silver beads whose engraving matched that of the larger clasp. While the braids framed Thorin’s face nicely, they also didn’t obscure the deep blue of the sapphires glinting in the lobes of each of Thorin’s ears.

“That may be true, but I’ve been trying to talk to you for days, and I’ve run out of options,” he said, brow furrowing as an unmistakable note of frustration edged its way into his regal tone. “Besides, my father’s spirit has most likely long since departed to the Halls, not to mention that Mister Bifur has been longing to get back on his own bike. I offered to let Mister Dori ride Minty today in order to keep an eye on his brother.”

Bilbo blinked owlishly, mouth opening and closing as he fished for something to say.

“...Minty?” he settled on. Not his finest response, he’d admit, but it was strangely worth it to see the Thorin’s ears color against the fog.

“Oh,” muttered Thorin, coughing slightly. “My bike. Its name is Minty, for the—”

“For the color. Yes, I get it,” interrupted Bilbo. He wished Thorin would just get to the point and be done with it. He thought he heard Dwalin cough loudly from a few feet away, which only caused Thorin’s flush to deepen.

Bilbo observed the change in morbid fascination. He wondered if Dwalin had possibly put the king up to this, as some sort of payback for what Thorin had put him through. The thought didn’t even bother Bilbo particularly, as no other line of reasoning made nearly as much sense.
Maybe this is for the best, Bilbo thought with a sigh. Eight hours of interrupted rudeness from the unfortunate object of his desires might do wonders in alleviating his little affliction.

If there was indeed a point to this ordeal, His Majesty was being frustratingly equivocating about it. Instead of getting down to business, he pointed to Bilbo’s helmet (which, now that he thought about it, wasn’t actually his), where it was securely clipped to his rucksack.

“Thank you for keeping my helmet in such good condition, Mister Baggins,” he said quietly.

Yes, Dwalin had definitely put him up to this. Thorin, thanking Bilbo for something? How utterly ridiculous.

Bilbo merely stared blankly at him, wondering what on Earth Thorin was getting at.

“It’s taken me a long time to accumulate all those stickers,” the king continued unhelpfully. It was a comment that only lent itself to further to the absurdity of the whole situation.


He looked hard at Dwalin out of the corner of his eye, but the man had his back turned to them. That didn’t mean he still wasn’t listening, though.

He also noticed Gandalf keenly observing them from across the gravel lot they were situated in. The lawyer only waggled his eyebrows and shrugged when Bilbo succeeded in catching his eye, to which Bilbo responded by sending him the darkest look he could muster.

Thorin briefly glanced over his shoulder, seemingly wondering who Bilbo could possibly be glaring at. However, by that time Gandalf already had his back turned to them, white motorcycle helmet shoved over his shaggy head.

Thorin turned back to Bilbo, looking slightly more sour than usual.

“Your Majesty,” said Balin gently, wheeling his motorbike beside them. “I think it’s about time we got going.”

“Yes, let’s,” Thorin rumbled, shoving his helmet over his braids. Bilbo quickly did the same, but he gave the decals covering the helmet a quick once over for the first time in a while before placing it gingerly on his head.

Thorin kicked the bike stand with more force than was probably necessary, swinging his leg over the seat. He had yet to flip his visor down, and his blue eyes flashed as he glanced significantly at the open space behind him.

“Are you coming or not?” he asked imperiously.

Bilbo gulped. Carefully, so as to not touch Thorin more than strictly necessary, he settled into his usual spot on the back of the bike. Body stiff as a board, he felt more off-balance than even on that first day in the hangar, which now seemed like forever ago. Bilbo’s front tingled under his pullover as he remembered the feeling of Thorin’s body pressed so closely to his.

“You can hold on to me, you know,” Thorin said quietly. “I’ve heard that you’re… somewhat nervous on motorcycles.”

Bilbo bristled at that, shoulders scrunching toward his ears as he defiantly held onto the grip
behind him.

“Are you making fun of me?” he hissed.

Bilbo saw the line of Thorin’s shoulders tense.


The fog finally started to dissipate as Balin led the company out of the construction site and onto the main motorway. By this time in the day, Bilbo would still usually be trying to blink the sleep out of his eyes as they made their way down the road, but this morning he was wide awake, sitting stock straight as he desperately tried to keep even a little bit of distance between himself and Thorin’s back. The space crackled with tension, as if it were some sort of DMZ that Bilbo wouldn’t, under any circumstances, willingly choose to cross.

Unfortunately, it seemed that Bilbo didn’t have much of a choice, as Thorin proved to be somewhat more of a reckless driver than either Bifur or Dori.

While the king normally always rode drag (officially because it was the position most in need of defense; unofficially because of Thorin’s absolutely abominable sense of direction), he quickly maneuvered the motorbike to the front of the pack, weaving it through the others with a confidence Bilbo couldn’t imagine possessing even in his wildest dreams. Once he got them to the front, Thorin nodded quickly at Dwalin before he abruptly twisted the throttle, gunning the engine and shooting out ahead of the pack at about fifty miles per hour.

Bilbo couldn’t help it. He shrieked in panic, crossing the two inch wide demilitarized zone and crushing himself to Thorin’s back. He buried his face into the soft leather of the king’s jacket as the scenery whizzed past them in a sickening blur. Soon they were riding alone, and Thorin finally slowed so they were riding at their normal speed, which honestly did nothing for the frantic pounding of Bilbo’s heart.

“Alright, Baggins?” Thorin asked with a slight wheeze, as his ribs were no doubt being crushed into submission from Bilbo’s bruising grip on them.

“Are you trying to kill me?” Bilbo screeched angrily.

It took everything that he had not to headbutt Thorin’s shoulder as hard as he could. He was suddenly intensely grateful that Thorin chose to pack his sword away with the tog’shûr, considering how tightly Bilbo had absolutely plastered himself to the king’s back. He couldn’t even find it in himself to be self-conscious about it.

“No!” Thorin responded. His tone sounded a touch frantic, though Bilbo supposed he might have just been projecting. “I, ergh—блять. Apologies. I was just… I wanted to get somewhere where we could talk. In private.”

Bilbo abruptly stilled at that, dread coursing through his system. To his utter mortification, his heart only continued to pound faster, the muscle thumping frantically against the fragile interior of his ribcage. At least he could blame his near heart attack if Thorin had the mind to mention it. What he wouldn’t be able to explain away was the irascible swarm of butterflies that abruptly bloomed in his stomach, though the king certainly didn’t need to know about that.

Now that the adrenaline that came with the fear of imminent death had left his system, he was acutely aware of the hard press of Thorin’s back against his front. The hedonistic part of Bilbo was
sorely tempted to just stay there and enjoy it, but the rational part of him violently beat that
impulse back as he loosened his grip and slowly disengaged himself from the king.

Thorin sighed as he let go, no doubt as his ability to breathe abruptly returned to normal. Bilbo
flushed in annoyed chagrin, thankful that the king couldn’t see his face.

“Well, you’ve certainly gotten me alone,” Bilbo muttered irritably, sending a quick glance behind
them. The rest of the company was almost half a mile behind them, and it didn’t look as if they
were in any particular hurry to catch up with them anytime soon. “So go ahead and start talking.”

Thorin scoffed, revving the engine and urging the bike to lurch forward as they accelerated briefly.
Bilbo squeaked, arms whipping up to clutch at Thorin’s thickly built midsection as the bike jolted
under him.

“I wouldn’t have to resort to this if you weren’t so damned weaselly,” the king huffed.

“I wasn’t being weaselly!” Bilbo blatantly lied.

Thorin sighed. “I suppose it’s only natural. You know, you do awfully remind me of a ferret
sometimes, Mister Baggins.”

“A ferret?!” Bilbo squawked indignantly. “Why, I never!”

“Ugh, wait,” said Thorin, taking one hand briefly off the handlebar to pinch the bridge of his nose
through his open visor. “That’s not what I—I once had a—I quite think ferrets are…. Um. You
know what? Never mind.”

Bilbo’s brow furrowed in confusion, gears turning in his brain for a moment as he tried to parse
this thoroughly incomprehensible string of words. It was supremely strange, especially while
stuttering from the mouth of someone who was usually so eloquently biting with his insults.

Suddenly, something like realization flashed in the forefront of Bilbo’s mind, as he finally
considered Thorin’s general demeanor. The proverbial light bulb abruptly clicked on over his head.

What if, Bilbo thought wildly, his heart leaping giddily in his chest. What if… Thorin was just
awkward? As in, simply a very awkward person, especially when he wasn’t trying to be king?

The realization shocked Bilbo, shaking him to his core as his mind scrambled to recontextualize
every single interaction he’d had with Thorin to date. Perhaps he wasn’t the only person who
suffered from a severe case of foot-in-mouth disease. Maybe… maybe this, what Bilbo previously
described as an ‘ordeal,’ was in good faith, after all.

He decided to put his theory to the test.

“Your Majesty,” he started, leaning back a bit so as to give Thorin some space. “What exactly is it
that you’re trying to tell me? It must be important, since you went to all this effort to bring me out
here—whilst in the course of scaring me half to death, I may add.”

Though he tried to reinstate some semblance of the DMZ, Bilbo greedily kept his hands planted
on the king’s torso. Just in case, he reasoned, that Thorin decided to pull another little stunt with the
motorbike.

Thorin sucked in a sharp breath, shoulders hunching in a way that suggested to Bilbo that he might
even be embarrassed.
Bilbo sighed heavily through his nose, stomach flipping at the sight.

Thorin responded with a mumble that Bilbo wouldn't have possibly been able to hear even in the best of circumstances, let alone over the roar of the engine or the wind whipping at their clothes and faces.

“What was that?” Bilbo asked, prodding lightly at Thorin’s side. The king jumped slightly in surprise, the bike wobbling dangerously for a moment before Thorin quickly righted it.

Bilbo’s eyes grew large, something resembling a grin slowly starting to widen across his face. However, all thoughts of how ticklish the king might possibly be suddenly ground to a halt at Thorin’s next words.

“I wanted to thank you,” Thorin said, louder this time. His baritone was curt, the words clipped in a way that spoke of a mild sort of shame.

“Excuse me?” Bilbo gasped hoarsely, barely even daring to breathe.

The king seemed to be actively wrestling with his pride as he carefully chose his next words, which charmed Bilbo much more than it probably should have. Completely the opposite of what he had hoped, none of what Thorin had to say was doing anything to ameliorate his abysmal little crush.

“I know I told you not to meddle,” Thorin muttered, his voice barely audible over the ambient noise of the motorbike, “but for once I’m happy that you did. I was… quite distressed about my situation with Dwalin, not to mention the events of that particular day. I said some things that I deeply regretted, and I didn’t know if I would be able to take them back.”

“I understand,” murmured Bilbo, heart fluttering in sympathy at clear remorse in the king’s tone.

“So imagine my shock,” His Majesty continued, “when it’s Dwalin who comes barging in to forgive me, apropos of nothing, saying that he discussed some things with, and I quote, ‘Baggins, the wee smart bastard.’ His words, not mine.”

“Ha, okay,” Bilbo said tremulously. His thoughts raced as he took one hand off of Thorin’s waist to rub absently at his chest.

The king snorted, a slight smile coloring his next words. “Whatever you said to him, I’m obligated to thank you for it, Mister Baggins. I suppose we’re even now.”

Bilbo heroically kept his emotions at bay as he slowly processed all of this, not quite believing that the current situation was happening. There was still the slight chance that Dwalin had indeed put Thorin up to this, and Bilbo honestly wouldn’t put it past him. But all the same, while the king acted bashful in a way that spoke to the fact that Thorin rarely, if ever, found cause to thank people, he sounded painfully sincere. That was more than enough for Bilbo.

However, there was one little thing the king said that struck Bilbo as strange.

“Wait, hold on,” he said. “What in heaven’s name do you mean by, ‘we’re even now’?”

Thorin stiffened, his knuckles turning white as he forcefully gripped the handlebars of the motorbike in a crushing hold.

“Your wife’s handkerchief?” he mumbled, his body curiously rigid beneath Bilbo’s hands. “Among other things.”
Bilbo could concede that he did perhaps owe Thorin for the time he had saved his life, along with the betrayal he had helped facilitate. Still, he slapped a hand to his face and dragged it down with a groan.

“Oh my God, that’s right,” he said. “You left before I could explain. Did nobody tell you?”

Thorin twisted slightly in his seat. “Tell me what?

“Missus Baggins is my mother,” said Bilbo with a forcefulness he couldn’t quite give reason to. “I don’t have a wife, and never will. I’m, erm, a confirmed bachelor, and all that.”

Thorin abruptly stilled, his hands going slack on the rubber grips.

“Oh,” he breathed.

“Oh?”

“That’s… that’s good.”

Bilbo felt more than actually heard the words, but they shocked him into rearing back all the same.

“Good?”

“Good that you don’t have someone out there waiting for you, not knowing if you’ll return or not,” Thorin explained in a rush, seemingly eager to disabuse Bilbo of any notions that he might be interested.

Bilbo tried not to deflate too much. Right, the king and Dwalin had just gotten back together, after all.

“We have too many people counting on us,” the king said softly, speeding up as they zoomed past yet another barb-wire encampment in what was once an out-of-the-way subdivision, “and I’m not even talking about the world. I have the entire Khuzd diaspora to take care of, not to mention our immediate families waiting for us in Scotland.”

The people and children of the nearby housing development milled about in the soft light of midmorning, running their errands as they carefully tried to pick up the shattered fragments of their lives post-apocalypse within the safe confines of the armored security fence. The armed lookouts pointed their weapons threateningly at Thorin and Bilbo’s motorbike from a makeshift watchtower, but the fact that they only accelerated further as they passed most likely signaled that it was probably not worth wasting ammunition on them.

“You’ve seen what time can do,” Thorin remarked, jerking his head toward the side of the road. “Humans adapt, and then they rebuild. It’s simply in our nature. I’m sure that soon there will be more villages like that one popping up all over the place. Perhaps even near Bag End.”

Bilbo pursed his lips, thinking about what would happen if something like that did crop up around Hobbiton, near Bag End. He hadn’t been part of a community in any meaningful sense for so long. What would that be like?

Instead of dwelling on it too hard, he asked instead, “Why don’t the Ereborans adapt then? From what I heard, it seems like you’ve set yourselves up nicely in Scotland.”

“That’s the thing about the Khazâd,” Thorin replied bitterly. “We’re incapable of rebuilding anything without Erebor. Surely Balin told you that.”
Bilbo hummed. “I mean, I know the mountain is important to you for religious reasons, but...”

Thorin sighed. “There’s an obscure Khuzd legend that might explain it,” he said, before pausing. Bilbo’s eyebrows rose, waiting to see if the king would say more.

After a few seconds, in an almost tentative tone, Thorin then added, “Would you like to hear it?”

Bilbo leaned forward slightly, eyes alight with curiosity. He always liked a good story.

“Of course,” he breathed, not quite wanting to push his luck by sounding overly excited.

Thorin cleared his throat as he began. “The legend I’m referring to suggests that the Khazâd were originally carved by Mahal from the very stone that forms our halls. He was lonely, and longed for children of his own to populate his domain. However, shortly after he put the finishing touches on his masterpiece, our father got into some trouble with Tengri, the primordial god of the sky.”

“What kind of trouble?” asked Bilbo, wishing he could write this down. He had been thinking a lot about the book he wanted to write recently, and he could use some inspiration. (Though, once he thought about it further, he didn't know exactly that would work according to the stipulations of the NDA he had been forced to sign all those weeks ago.)

“It doesn’t really go into that much detail,” the king muttered, and Bilbo figured it probably didn’t really matter. “But as punishment, Mahal was forced to sleep for a thousand years, and his children were subsequently scattered to the corners of the Earth among the other Turkic peoples, all the memories of our original father erased. Mahal then slumbered within the deepest depths of Erebor on a bed of jewels and precious metals for the next millennium, waiting for his children to somehow find his way back to him.”

“You all did eventually,” interjected Bilbo.

Thorin snorted, seeming unfazed by the interruption. “Yes, when Öz Beg forced us to take shelter in the mountain. But until then, we were wanderers without anchors, directionless and without stability or purpose. It was a terrifying time for the Khazâd, to be so disconnected from the place where we were crafted, the very source of our essence as a people.”

“Then it was a happy accident that you found it,” Bilbo murmured. He was surprised to find himself pressed back up against the king’s broad back, listening to the soothing rumble of Thorin’s words as they melded sweetly with the purr of the engine.

“Indeed,” Thorin agreed with a pleasant hum. It was an excruciatingly beautiful sound, one that buzzed all way from Bilbo’s chest down to the very tips of his toes.

“However,” he continued, ”because we were originally crafted from stone, it's said that we’re not like other humans. The Khazâd were not meant to adapt. We wait. We endure. We eventually find our way back. That’s what we did for those thousand years before Erebor—wandering, waiting, enduring. But if we bend too much, we break. I don’t know how much else the others have explained to you, but when we say the mountain is our home, we mean that it’s our only home.”

“I see. And it’s up to you to reclaim it,” said Bilbo, somewhat incapable of conceiving of that kind of burden. No wonder the king was so grumpy all the time.

Thorin exhaled heavily, the resulting movement so strong that it jostled Bilbo where he was nestled against the supple leather covering His Majesty's wide back.

“It must be freeing, not having to worry about all that,” he mused neutrally, almost as if to himself.
“To have your home, and to have it wait for you to return, just as you left it,”

The king’s tone was curiously devoid of the snideness Bilbo had long since become accustomed to when Thorin mentioned Bag End in front of him. All the same, ice formed instantly in Bilbo’s gut at the comment, chilling him to the core as the giddy, bubbling haze that had suffused him over the course of their borderline-pleasant conversation was suddenly forcefully banished. He recoiled instinctively from the king, unhooking his arms from around his waist and settling back further toward the luggage.

Thorin, irritatingly observant, unfortunately noticed.

"Something wrong?"

"Not at all," wavered Bilbo, bewildered at his own reaction.

He knew that Bag End was waiting for him, safe and sound, just as he left it. Of course he was going to return to it after all this was done; he thought longingly of his armchair about ten times each day, after all.

(Bofur's face and his dimpled smile flashed uncomfortably in his mind as he thought this. He admittedly hadn't thought that far ahead, perhaps assuming they would both be dead by then.)

They lapsed into uncomfortable silence. However, Bilbo found that he desperately wanted to continue their conversation, unsure of when or if he would get another chance to talk to the king so candidly and without ire. If he was to be trapped on a motorbike with him for the whole day, he might as well make the most of it.

He racked his brain for something, anything, that could turn into a possible topic of discussion. He unthinkingly brought up a hand in order to run it nervously through his hair, grimacing when it naturally bounced off the hardness of his—or rather, the king’s—helmet.

Bilbo blinked. A-ha!

“So, you, er… like the Talking Heads?” he asked.

Thorin straightened, craning his head to gaze at him over his shoulder with a slightly wide-eyed expression.

“Oh, yeah,” he said, sounding somewhat baffled at Bilbo’s hamfisted nonsequiter. “David Byrne, he’s great. A real genius.”

Bilbo fumbled as he tried to follow that up with a response. The conversation had flowed so naturally before—how could he get that back?

“Yes,” he said, perhaps a little less-than-intelligently, "I listened to *Little Creatures* on repeat in my first year of undergrad. Do you like them more or less than Depeche Mode?"

Thorin made a sound of confusion. “How did you know that I like Depeche Mode?”

Bilbo thought that Thorin’s tone might have sounded vaguely suspicious, so he panicked.

“You’re, uh. You wear one of their shirts,” he said, voice dangerously close to a squeak. “Not that I pay much attention, but you do only seem to have. Erm. Two or three shirts.”

That was an outrageous lie. Bilbo absolutely did pay attention, especially to the way that all three
of Thorin’s distinct t-shirts clung so invitingly to the extremely pleasing combination of muscle and fat that made up Thorin’s thick torso.

“Oh. Right. Yes, I like Depeche Mode better. They're, uh, my favorite artist,” said Thorin. “To be honest, it makes me wish my voice was more Dave Gahan and less Darius Rucker, but it’s fine. It’s just different than what I would like.”

“Who?” Bilbo asked, wondering where he might have heard the latter name before. He recognized the former as the lead singer of Depeche Mode.

Thorin's shoulders leavened in a halfhearted shrug. “Hootie and the Blowfish?”

It rang a bell, albeit a very dim one.


The moment the words left Bilbo's mouth, the king instantly seemed to perk up, almost as if he had been jolted by a minor electrical shock.

“Oh, I like Prince!” he exclaimed.

Bilbo’s mouth fell open in surprise. Haplessly in lieu of a proper response, he said, “I'm glad?”

"You know, the timelessness of Prince's music really lies in the underlying simplicity of his chord structure," remarked Thorin. Threads of genuine excitement slowly crept their way through the king's words, wrapping themselves around the syllables and coating his baritone in unadulterated exuberance. "You can strip his songs of all production value and they'd still be instantly recognizable. Take Purple Rain, for example—"

He couldn't quite parse what Thorin said after that, since his brain promptly short-circuited as the king suddenly dropped all regal pretense and abruptly launched into a shocking, impromptu, incredibly detailed lecture about the different merits of what he described as Prince’s ‘sound.’

Mind utterly reeling, Bilbo was held rapt as Thorin proceeded to monologue about things he didn’t entirely understand, detailing musical devices and themes in Prince’s music and bunch of other concepts that flew right over Bilbo’s head. The king then connected them to other artists that he had only ever vaguely heard of, and continued on from there. Bilbo thought he recognized some names from the decals decorating the helmet, and he tried to commit them to memory, just in case. His own lack of knowledge aside, Bilbo could hardly believe what he was hearing. He subtly scooted forward on the bike so he could better differentiate Thorin’s excited rumble from that of the engine.

“—and it doesn’t have any bearing on Vivaldi’s irrefutable influence on his relative contemporaries such as Bach, or even modern composing as we know it,” Thorin proclaimed breathlessly. “In some ways, The Four Seasons was the first concept album ever, and contemporary rock albums can definitely trace their roots back to it. I mean, look at the first movement of Winter, the absolute intensity involved whenever somebody is concerned with playing it well. I’ve been to punk shows that were performed with less zeal—"

Bilbo’s mind was briefly caught off guard by something Fili had said, about the king somehow acting ‘lighter’ whenever he talked to Bilbo. Maybe the prince was right about Bilbo’s relative status as an outsider easing Thorin into a state where he felt comfortable enough to speak his mind without a filter, and to talk at length about a subject that he was obviously deeply passionate
about. Something inside him warmed enormously at the notion, but it also brought with it a certain amount of sadness.

Bilbo knew that Thorin didn’t particularly enjoy his company. What did it say about the pressure he was under, that he of all people was the one person that the king felt comfortable enough talking to? He didn't think he had ever heard His Majesty speak so many words at once, and Bilbo was absolutely incapable of sneaking a word in edgewise, so bowled over as he was by the sheer force of Thorin’s personality.

If he was being honest, it was all a little overwhelming.

"Which reminds me," said Thorin, "there’s this Native American EDM group I just discovered recently, and—"

Thorin brusquely cut himself off, his whole body tensing as if he had been summarily struck. He closed his mouth with an audible click of teeth.

Uncrossing his eyes, Bilbo shook himself out of his stupor and tried to quell the spinning of head. "Something the matter?"

“Oh, no,” Thorin gruffed. "My apologies, I must be boring you. My sister always tells me that I have a tendency to talk a person’s ear off when I get started on music."

Bilbo vehemently shook his head, even though he knew Thorin wouldn’t be able to see it. "It's fine!" he assured him. It wasn’t even a lie to spare Thorin’s feelings. His own complicated thoughts aside, Bilbo could hardly breathe due to the vise currently squeezing itself around his heart. The simple fact of the matter was that Thorin’s voice was just so lovely. The king could probably read aloud the phone book, and Bilbo would still be pathetically entranced by it. He merely wished he could contribute at least something to the conversation.

"You just know so much more about this than I do," said Bilbo. "It’s interesting, but I don’t really know what to say,"

“Ah. Well, thank you, I suppose,” the king mumbled, sounding strangely sheepish. The rigid line of his shoulders failed to relax.

“You’re welcome?” Bilbo wasn’t quite sure what he was being thanked for.

There was a beat of apprehensive silence as the scenery continued to zoom past. It was somehow even more awkward than the first time around, and Bilbo was too preoccupied by that fact to really notice Thorin swerving precariously around a dangerous piece of rebar lying in the middle of the street.

Desperately grasping at straws by this point, Bilbo resorted to his emergency go-to when it came to navigating uncomfortable small talk.

“So… have you read any good books lately?” he asked, cringing at the absolute inanity of it. He desperately wished he listened to more music.

When Thorin didn’t respond right away, Bilbo continued on, chattering nervously. "My selection at Bag End is fairly limited, but I just got through reading my Redwall books left over from when I was a kid. And just before I left London, I finished this absolutely smashing novel by a new young author. I think her name was Fatima Farhe—"
Bilbo cut himself off as Thorin’s shoulders abruptly hunched forward, body somehow stiffening even further.

“Your Majesty?” Bilbo panicked, wondering what he could have possibly said wrong.

“If I’m being honest, I don’t really read that much,” grumbled Thorin, his tone peculiarly defensive. “I don’t really remember the last time I finished something that wasn’t explicitly for sch—work.”

Bilbo’s eyebrows rose.

“Well, that’s fine,” he said gently, laying a tentative hand on one of Thorin’s rigid shoulders. “Reading certainly isn’t everybody's idea of a good time, though I do have some audiobook recommendations if that’s more your speed. You enjoy films, though, right? Silence of the Lambs, at least.”

Thorin shrugged tightly, frustration palpably leaking from the barely-restrained violence of the movement.

“It’s a classic,” he growled.

Bilbo sighed, removing his hand from Thorin’s shoulder and resigning himself to spending the rest of the day in silence.

After a few moments of quietly watching the endless mosaic of forest, cropland, and small settlements pass by them, Thorin shifted slightly, drawing Bilbo’s attention once again. Really, it was just pathetic how the king didn’t even have to try.

“Do you... have a favorite movie?” Thorin ground out clumsily, as if stringing the words together was an absolutely torturous act. Bilbo's brows crept closer together as his forehead wrinkled in thought.

“Your Majesty,” he said slowly, “are you trying to make small talk with me?”

“Isn’t that what we’ve been doing?” asked the king. "I can stop, if you want.”

“No!” said Bilbo, somewhat more intensely than he necessarily meant to. “I’m merely saying that you don’t have to. If this is out of some sort of sense of misplaced obligation you feel towards me… Really. I was only trying to help a friend.”

Thorin glanced at Bilbo over his shoulder.

“Do you consider us friends?” he asked curiously.

“Erm,” said Bilbo, unsure how to answer. “I was mainly referring to Mister Dwalin.”

Thorin swiftly turned back toward the road, the resulting silence between them immediately growing stonily cold.

“My favorite movie is a tie, actually!” Bilbo exclaimed in a rush, hands gripping Thorin’s waist as the king dodged around a particularly nasty-looking pothole. “Silence of the Lambs, as you might have guessed, but also a film called Moonstruck. I could probably quote it word for word.”

“Moonstruck?”

“Yes,” Bilbo said tremulously, trying desperately to salvage the situation. “It’s a film from 1987
starring Cher and Nicholas Cage. It’s about—"

“I know about it,” Thorin interrupted quietly. “I love that movie.”

Bilbo choked on his own spit. “You do?”

“*I lost my hand, I lost my bride,*” the king murmured.

“*Johnny has his hand, Johnny has his bride!*” Bilbo quoted back, expression absolutely incandescent with wonder. A rapturous giggle threatened to burst from his chest.

“*You want me to take my heartbreak, put it away and forget?*” Thorin replied, which frankly made Bilbo want to fly away on a wave of ecstasy.

“Ha!” he cried, laughter finally breaking free. “They don’t write them like that anymore.”

“No, they certainly don’t,” said Thorin, voice warming significantly. “You know that you’re the only other person I’ve met who has seen that movie? I keep trying to convince my sister to watch it, but I can never sell it right. It’s such a weird film, but that’s why I like it? It’s… enchanting. Sticks with you. I can watch it over and over.”

The rigidity of the king's body slowly started to melt away as they somehow settled on common ground, and the conversation finally began flowing more freely. Bilbo suddenly wondered if the king, for all his usual confidence, wasn’t feeling nervous as well.

“Oh, I completely agree,” he sighed, settling back in his seat. “I almost wonder if it shouldn’t have been a book rather than a movie. It reads like a piece of classic literature. You know, slightly absurd romantic drama couched in textural, almost morbid narrative themes surrounding death and fidelity. It stretches the definition of what can be called a romcom.”

“Is it even a romantic comedy?” Thorin grunted in incredulity.

Bilbo shrugged. “I suppose in the way that *Pride and Prejudice* could be considered one.”

“I like that movie, too,” the king admitted. “The one with… what’s her name… Keira Knightley. But unlike *Pride and Prejudice*, I don’t know if *Moonstruck* can necessarily be considered ‘good.’”

“Cher won the Oscar for best actress as Loretta!” Bilbo responded, tone playfully indignant. “And what’s considered ‘good,’ anyway? Isn’t it enough to see Nicholas Cage, sweaty and unhinged as he whisks her away to the opera?”

The king huffed out a short laugh at that, the sound of which made Bilbo freeze in place. It reverberated through the king's whole body, shocking Bilbo with its warm resonance.

Thorin, thankfully oblivious, replied, “Heh. I will admit, the passionate, wild man quality he has in that movie is somewhat… magnetic.”

Bilbo smiled. “*Pft.* Is that your type, Your Majesty?” he teased.

Thorin went silent for a long moment, and Bilbo worried if he hadn’t accidentally gotten a little too friendly with the king. While this might be their most successful conversation to date, his previous attempts at banter hadn’t exactly gone smoothly, after all.

“…No,” said Thorin after a while, seemingly lost in thought. Bilbo sighed in relief.

“I’ve always admired Loretta more, actually,” he added. “Her pragmatism, the way she tempered
Ronny’s ferocity. I always thought she was too good for him.”

“But you're discounting the fact that she found her own fortitude in her relationship with him,” argued Bilbo hotly, who had always thought the two protagonists were fairly well matched. “She brings out Ronny’s inner tenderness, and he encourages her to use the strength hidden beneath her reserve. If not for Ronny, she’d be locked into an unhappy existence with his brother, just because she thought it was ‘safe’!”

The second the words left his mouth, Bilbo felt like he had been drenched with a bucket of cold water. A huge lump formed in his throat in an instant, compelling him to swallow around it convulsively.

But Thorin only rumbled out another brief, gravelly laugh, which summarily swept Bilbo out on a tide of warm, indistinct emotion. The atmosphere was close and comfortable between them, and Bilbo suddenly wished that they could just ride like this forever, away from all the death, away from the company, away from everything Bilbo actively tried to hide from.

Including himself.

God, he really was a coward.

“Maybe you’re right, Mister Baggins,” Thorin murmured, tone astoundingly pleasant.

“I’m always right,” Bilbo sniffed haughtily, trying his best to shove his feelings down into an iron box and shove it away into an unused corner of his heart. “It’s a curse, really.”

“I imagine,” Thorin snorted. Bilbo could practically hear the raised eyebrow in his tone.

Bilbo scoffed playfully, arms tightening around Thorin of their own accord as the king deftly weaved them around the rusted-out frames of a few abandoned cars that were littered through one section of the motorway. The wind felt strangely soft against his face as they continued down the road, and Bilbo registered that he felt unusually calm, calmer than he had been even under the influence of the painkiller. He tried to enjoy it all—the closeness they shared, the beautiful blue sky above them, the relative solitude—but his mind stubbornly kept playing what Dwalin had said to him in the trailer on repeat, skipping like a broken record.

Bilbo grimaced. Maybe he did have some things to think about, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Translation notes:
Tavuq... eserli [...] Men... sanya-nen... ketmek. Avtomobil. -- [Crimean Tatar] Hen [Dori]... angry [...] I... ride... with you. Car/motorcycle. (Kinda had to futz with Crimean Turkish sentence structure here? Briefly skimmed a paper that said the most basic was Subject-Predicate-Verb, so that's what I went with. But I figure Bifur's aphasia can explain for any grammatical weirdness on my part.)

Y'all call this a date???????

Thorin, a dumbass who thinks ferrets are the cutest animals in the world and once had one as a pet: You remind me of a ferret, Mister Baggins :)
Anyway, thank you so much for your patience and thank you so much for reading! I know 90% of it was just like... talking... but hhhbnnggh I needed to get it out !!!! So thank you for your service !!!! And yes, I strongly headcanon Thorin as like... a Music Nerd with the absolutely wildest taste; like imagine a guy who was super into dad rock but also country and really obscure world folk fusion. You can listen to his roadtrip playlist here. Also, just to be clear, I, personally, know nothing about music. lmao. Also I hc his voice to be more Johnny Cash than Darius Rucker, but that'd be a little too on the nose now, wouldn't it.

Thank you for your patience and for reading, as always! I hope to get the next chapter written much quicker. A little housekeeping--I've decided that the length and pacing of this fic pretty much demands for it being split into two parts, so that's what I'm going to do. I've already figured a pretty good stopping point for the first half, so !!! yeah!!! also i'm probably going to write more horny noncanonical outtakes, so that will go in the series work as well. Also !!!!! ash twelvemagpies wrote an incredible side story for this universe based on some lore i've worked through with them that, as far as i'm concerned, is canon. please make sure to read it here!!!!

**Music That Goes With This Chapter:**
Hermit the Frog -- Marina and the Diamonds [official]
Breakfast at Tiffany's -- Deep Blue Something [unofficial, lmao]

[personal blog] [lotr/fanfic blog] [soundtrack]
Cabin in the Woods

Chapter Summary

After spending the night in their last safe house before the channel tunnel, everything is starting to hit Bilbo all at once. Remind him never to do Kili any favors ever again.

Chapter Notes

Hello, it's me again. Enjoy?

TW for anxiety attacks, referenced homophobia, referenced sexual situations, standard gore, and me being in a really spooky mood this Halloween

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"So."

"So," replied Bilbo distractedly, trying to ignore the nervous tension brewing in the pit of his stomach. His fork scraped noisily at the sides of the empty tin of yellow curry that had served as his breakfast.

Bofur sighed softly, moustache cocking as his expression briefly twisted into something complicated.

"Big day ahead of us, yeah?"

Bilbo stared into the can. "Oh, yes."

Heavy silence reigned in the sitting room of the creaky farmhouse that held their last supply cache, settling over the occupants as thick and viscous as overboiled molasses. A few other members of Thorin's company were scattered about on the dusty furniture, whispering amongst themselves while they finished their meager breakfasts and packed the rest of their things with an air of anxious finality.

A general feeling of overwrought gogginess suffused them, the hour so early it could still be considered nighttime. The thinnest rays of morning twilight still had yet to pierce the predawn stillness, and the dusty curtains were still closed tight to the surrounding dark wood, lest the smoldering fire in the hearth give away their position to any unwanted visitors, alive or dead. It had been a quiet night, almost unusually so, but there was no such thing as being too cautious in times such as theirs.

Balin, Dwalin, and Thorin surrounded the low coffee table, talking in hushed tones over their maps; hopefully for the last time before leading their run for the channel tunnel. Gandalf sat near them on a low ottoman, close enough to listen in on what the three were saying, but far enough away to signal that they were also pointedly ignoring each other. The atmosphere crackled around them as the lawyer obstinately puffed on his pipe, the smoke rising in a thin stream toward the
exposed wooden beams of the low ceiling.

*This is it, isn’t it*, thought Bilbo. If everything went to plan, after today, there would be no going back. Either they would make it to the continent, or they would die, trapped and eaten nearly twenty three miles below the surface of the English Channel.

Bilbo didn’t know exactly which sounded worse.

“You went to bed so early, I didn’t get a chance to ask last night,” murmured Bofur, seemingly muting his natural penchant for projection in deference for this particular morning, “but how did it go?”

Bilbo’s mood somehow managed to sink even further with the question.

“How did what go?” he asked, feigning ignorance. Instead of looking Bofur in the eye, he chose instead to intently examine how the glint of the low burning firelight bounced off where he had nervously peeled away the label from the side of the can.

“Your ride with the king, of course,” said Bofur. “Shocked all of us with that one, he did.”

"It was fine, I suppose,” Bilbo replied with a tense shrug. Bofur looked hard at him.

“Fine? Bilbo, tell the truth. Did he say something to you?”

Bilbo glanced up, surprised at the sheer gravity coloring the other man’s voice. The warm tones of the fire lit his face dramatically; it highlighted a glinting hardness to his eyes that didn’t quite fit the rest of his face.

“No!” he replied with complete sincerity. “Well, we did talk, but His Majesty said nothing… untoward, if that’s what you’re implying. Our conversation was rather, erm, pleasant, actually.”

Bofur’s eyebrows climbed up his forehead, until they nearly disappeared under the woolly brim of his hat. “Pleasant?”

“Yeah. We talked about music and films we’d both seen, stuff like that. You know, small talk.”

“Small talk?” parroted Bofur in disbelief.

His eyes briefly tracked toward the king, and Bilbo was helpless to do anything but follow. Thorin was seated on the worn linen sofa, bent over a map and arguing hotly with Gandalf, who didn’t seem to be capable of holding his tongue any longer. His hair hung loose in dark, silver-streaked waves around his face, obscuring the no-doubt venomous expression he tended to wear whenever he talked to Gandalf as of late.

“That doesn’t exactly sound like His Majesty,” Bofur added quietly.

“Then you’re just as surprised as I am,” said Bilbo.

“Huh, I thought he had said something…” Bofur paused, as if searching for an appropriate word, which he didn’t seem to be able to find. “Well, *something* to you that made you dash off so early yesterday evening. But now I’m afraid that I…” He trailed off once again, grimacing uncomfortably.

“You’re afraid that you what?” Bilbo asked quizzically. Words usually came so easily to Bofur. He set his empty can down, scooting slightly on the loveseat they shared in order to be closer to the
other man, who looked strangely insecure.

“The flowers,” he muttered. “They were too much, weren’t they.”

Bilbo blinked owlishly at him. In all honesty, he had nearly forgotten about the bouquet, utterly overwhelmed as he was by the discombobulating maelstrom of emotion that had been elicited from the, admittedly, more than pleasant ride. The trepidation of the morning had only served to exacerbate his already fragile nerves, which left Bilbo in no state to rationally examine his feelings. Yes, perhaps the flowers had been a little much, but they were the last thing on Bilbo’s mind at the moment. The reality of their situation was hitting him a little too hard all at once for him to be dwelling on his own petty personal drama.

The channel tunnel had always seemed so far away. Now that it was finally here, Bilbo found he could barely cope.

“It wasn’t that,” he sighed, hoping he could just leave it at that. However, Bofur merely looked at him in expectation, which made Bilbo’s stomach tighten even further.

“Just felt a little sick last night, is all,” he continued, deciding to stretch the truth a bit. “Still feeling a little nauseous this morning, if I’m being honest.”

In truth, he wanted nothing more than to book it straight back to Bag End. Instead, he opted to set a hand lightly on Bofur’s denim-clad knee. Bilbo’s chest squeezed uncomfortably at how immediately Bofur perked up at that small gesture, cheeks dimpling as he regarded Bilbo in the low firelight.

“Oh, well, the good doctor might have something for that,” he said, sounding noticeably relieved. "Mister Oin!"

Bilbo’s eyes widened, hands shooting up to instinctually ward off any vestiges of attention as Bofur called to the medic.

Thankfully, Oin didn’t seem to notice. Paying them no heed, he occupied the low armchair in a nearby corner, too busy rummaging around in his medical bag for something that seemed to be eluding him. Bilbo let out a small sigh of relief. Any stomach upset he might have was just a product of nerves, after all; nothing that required medical attention.

Still, Bofur wasn’t to be deterred. He sprang up from the sofa, marching straight up to Oin and tapping him roughly on the shoulder. Oin jerked his head up at the motion, his bushy brows creeping toward the center of his face.

“Turn your ears on, Old Man,” Bofur said with a good-natured smile.

“What’s that? Hold on a moment, can’t bloody hear you without my hearing aid on,” Oin replied loudly, drawing the attention of some of the other members of the company. He buried his blunt fingers into his mane of bushy salt-and-pepper hair, fiddling with something angrily near his ear.

After a long moment of this, Bofur’s smile started to become strained.

“Everything all right?” he asked loudly, making sure to enunciate every word.

“Damned thing is on the fritz,” Oin mumbled sharply. “Battery must be running out.”

“Here, let me see,” said Bofur. His hand hovered questioningly in the vicinity of Oin’s ear. The medic reluctantly grunted his permission, dropping his hands sourly to his lap.
Bilbo watched with mild curiosity as Bofur gently drew Oin’s hair away from his ear. His body obscured the actual device, but he hissed lowly at what he saw.

“No wonder it’s failing on you,” Bofur muttered in exasperation. “Thing’s bloody fucking old. I’m half a mind to think it’s not the battery at all. When’s the last time you changed it?”

Oin shrugged. “Five, six years ago?”

Bilbo’s eyebrows shot up at that. He had a deaf Took uncle that used hearing aids, and he was under the impression that changing batteries was a once-monthly ordeal, not once-decadally. Curiosity thoroughly piqued, he climbed off his perch on the loveseat and slowly wandered over toward where Bofur was crouched in front of Oin.

“Well, then, I take it back,” said Bofur. “It’s definitely the battery. Don’t you have a spare?”

“Where on Earth do you think I’m going to find a mithril battery in this backwards country, lukhkel,” the medic spat. “Baggins, what in the Creator’s name are you staring at?”

Bilbo struggled to form sentences, too astounded by the device on the side of Oin’s head, which was seamlessly welded to his skull near the base of his ear. It was a far cry from what he used to consider the cutting-edge cochlear implants Uncle Hildigrim that had accessorized the sides of his head.

The memory of those looked supremely clunky in comparison to the sleek device that Oin sported. Roughly an inch long and fitting neatly to the contours of the medic’s cranium, the curved piece of impossibly thin silvery-black metal was possibly sleeker and more futuristic than any mainstream medical device Bilbo had ever encountered. The geometric etching on its surface seemed to glow ever so faintly, the light pulsing slightly with each of Bofur’s next words.

“Don’t be too impressed,” he said sardonically, shooting a pointed glance at the medic. “The old goat should’ve changed it out about a decade ago. Then this wouldn’t be an issue!”

Oin must have been quite skilled at reading lips, for he scoffed loudly in Bofur’s general direction at that statement.

“Pah, you know those subcutaneous implants are harder to turn on and off. How would I tune out your endless prattling?”

“The old fashioned way!” Bofur cried, throwing his hands up in exasperation. “Plus, it’s probably safer than having an egregiously obsolete piece of metal with a direct connection to your auditory processor just hanging out there in the open. Don’t you think, Bilbo?”

“I’m afraid I might be wildly underqualified to have an opinion,” he stammered, staring as the faint iridescent glow of Oin’s implant pulsed with each syllable that left his mouth. He found himself quite unable to tear his eyes away from the astonishingly sophisticated piece of equipment connected to the medic’s head. “That’s obsolete?”

Bofur rolled his eyes. “About fifteen years, give or take. You can tell by the micro-etching near the edges there. Quite, er, retro, as you Westerners like to say, and that’s not even mentioning the size. It’s bloody huge!”

“It does what I need it to do,” Oin snapped. “I don’t need ears like a bloody bat or external storage for my brain—none of that transhumanism shit. Mahal forged us a certain way, who are we to expand upon that?”
“Is that… is Erebor capable of technology like that?” asked Bilbo. His mind fuzzed slightly at the edges when he tried to think about it too hard. Bofur cocked an eyebrow at him.

“Oh, aye. Thought you knew that, since you’ll be dealing with the computer and all, but I suppose to Englishman, seeing it firsthand must be a shock all the same,” he replied, tone lilting slightly in surprise. “Even though mithril was discovered only recently enough to just now be putting me out of a job, it sped up our technological development so quickly that I suppose it makes the invention of the silicon chip look somewhat like the discovery of fire; an incredibly important first step, but a first step all the same. Though some innovations might be a little… contentious, if you catch my drift.”

“Sacreligious might be a better word,” Oin snorted.

“It’s been the subject of many a spirited debate amongst the deep thinkers,” said Bofur. “It’s all a bit too philosophical for me.”

“Right,” Bilbo said weakly.

His thoughts began spiralling dangerously. While he certainly hadn’t not believed Balin when he claimed that Erebor had cracked quantum computing, it still hadn’t been quite enough to dispel the mental image he had maintained that they were off to reclaim a quaint medieval kingdom frozen in an earlier time. The Ereboareans’ fondness for swords and axes aside, the way they talked about their homeland sometimes made it a hard task for Bilbo remember that Erebor was in fact a modern technological powerhouse, whose scientific progress was about to make Bofur’s entire field of study— nuclear engineering , for heaven’s sake—fall by the wayside, seemingly just as easily as if he had been studying alchemy.

Bilbo swallowed thickly. If Oin’s fifteen years out-of-date hearing aid was enough to intimidate him, what prayer did he have of trying to break into their defense mainframe?

“Bilbo, are you okay?” asked Bofur, immediately growing concerned as Bilbo began to sway slightly where he stood. “That’s right. Mister Oin, d’you possibly have anything for nausea?”

“Hold on, I might have something—”

“Then you are a fool!” Gandalf suddenly roared, immediately shocking the rest of the room into startled silence. Bilbo froze, watching helplessly as the lawyer bolted up from his seat on the ottoman, grabbed his broadsword and walking stick, and furiously began stalking toward the front door.

"Where do you think you're going?" Thorin growled icily, the line of his shoulders going violently rigid.

"To scout ahead!" Gandalf yelled back.

"Fine!" Thorin snarled. "If you're not back by sunup, then we're leaving without you!"

“If I’m not back by then, then good riddance!”

Gandalf continued grumbling angrily to himself as he stomped off into the dark forest and slammed the heavy wooden door behind him.

Bilbo’s throat constricted painfully, choking his airflow. He found himself thoroughly incapable of speech, though he wanted nothing more than to call after Gandalf in a panic, to make him promise that he would come back for him. Static slowly began obscuring his thoughts as he faintly heard
the sound of an engine turning over and the rumble of motorbike tires crunching down the narrow gravel road.

Air. He needed some air.

“Ori!” Dori called, suddenly poking his head into the sitting room from the narrow hallway.

His handsome face glowed, looking as radiant as if he had finished performing chemical skin peel, which he very well may have. His hair was neatly coiffed and his moustache lovingly waxed, ostensibly in preparation for the significant day ahead. He scanned the room briefly, seemingly taking no notice of the tension that was more than thick enough to cut with even the bluntest of knives.

“Has anyone seen my brother?” he asked the room at large.

“Finally lost track of him, have you?” Dwalin snorted, exhaling a large cloud of tar-laden smoke in the process. “Took him long enough,"

Dori’s lips thinned to nothing, his only response a black look that could have killed a lesser man. Dwalin, in an impressive show of resilience, weathered the glare and met Dori’s gaze head-on, all while stonily taking another long drag of his clove cigarette.

“Haven’t seen hide nor hair of your boy since last night,” Gloin remarked, tapping his chin thoughtfully, “but I did see Kili sneak out toward the barn a little bit ago. That might be a good place to start. Come to think of it, haven’t seen Fili around much this morning, either.”

Dori’s cheeks turned a truly unhealthy shade of puce at the mention of the elder prince’s name. “Really,” he growled.

“I can go find them,” Bilbo exclaimed, his airway loosening just enough to wheeze out simple sentences. He didn’t care if it was still pitch black out. The undead seemed to be avoiding the immediate area, and he, more than anything, needed to get out of this room, to get away—from Oin, from Bofur, from Thorin, who had hardly paused in staring at Bilbo since he had stumbled off the back of his bike yesterday evening, even while plucking out the first couple verses to what Bilbo had immediately recognized as a Prince song on the tog’shûr.

Thorin was staring at him again now. His expression was totally unreadable, an impenetrable wall of stoicism firmly locked over his face.

Dori narrowed his pale blue eyes at him. “Mister Baggins, I don’t think—”

But Bilbo was already halfway to the door at that point, heeding neither Dori’s suspicious protests nor Bofur’s concerned cries for him to wait. His hand instinctively closed around the barrel of his rifle, yanking it hard from the straps that secured it to his nearby rucksack. He narrowly dodged Bofur’s questing fingers trying to snag the sleeve of his pullover as he barrelled out the entryway and slammed the door behind him.

The damp air of the brisk morning shocked him into gasping in a deep breath, forcing air into his lungs as he tried to steady the irregular racing of his heartbeat. The surrounding forest loomed eerily around him, making Bilbo shiver from more than just the cold.

Surrounded by a dense wood, the farmhouse sat in the middle of a grassy clearing, situated at the end of a long, narrow drive that ran parallel to a small creek, whose water was still rushing unusually high due to the unabating rainfall of the past few weeks. The gnarled branches of the
nearby trees were quiet and unstirring in the breezeless pre-twilight hours, too early for even the songbirds to begin tweeting their dawn chorus.

While there had been some grumbling about the location’s remoteness, Balin had rightfully pointed out that the forest somewhat insulated them from the armed settlements that had cropped up in the surrounding countryside. Keeping a low profile had become more important than ever since crossing the border into Essex, and going by the thick layer of dust over the furniture and the rundown state of the buildings, it seemed like hardly anyone had visited this particular property even before the start of the outbreak.

The nearby foliage on the grassy edge of the clearing was utterly still, but Bilbo still briefly scanned the surrounding area, squinting hard into the nearby bushes for any signs of unusual activity. While there seemed to be nothing particularly worrisome present at the moment, the cluster of motorbikes in the gravel lot at the far end of the house had been disturbed.

One corner of the largest tarp had been flung off haphazardly, with Gandalf’s motorbike conspicuously missing. The sight of it gutted him more than he could have possibly expected.

Feeling slightly dizzy and a lot winded, in the quiet of that dark morning, Bilbo felt hopelessly, chillingly alone.

In his haste to leave, Bilbo hadn’t even checked to see if the Weatherby was loaded. However, the thought of returning to that suffocating sitting room was somehow even worse than the crushing loneliness he felt in that moment. Bilbo checked the gun, lips thinning as he found only two rounds left in the magazine. He had no idea what time it was, but the cloudless sky above him was just now starting to lighten incrementally. Bilbo hoped that the promise of a clear sunrise would be enough to ward off the few, if any, undead who may still be walking about. If not, he’d just have to make his two rounds of ammunition count.

He turned his eyes toward what he knew to be the direction of the dilapidated barn. Only in slightly worse condition than the moldering whitewashed farmhouse, its rotting green siding blended thoroughly with the surrounding forest. While the barn was only a short walk across the clearing and into the bushes from where Bilbo stood just below the front step, the path seemed almost impossibly forbidding in the dark.

Bilbo peered down the footpath, tightening his grip on his gun and setting his jaw. He had told Dori that he would go look for the boys, and he was going to keep his word—whether Dori wanted him to or not.

Steeling his nerves, he tramped off down the path, his boots sinking slightly into the soft turf as he got closer to the edge of the clearing and away from the graded drive. There, he found a narrow opening between two wild privet bushes, revealing an overgrown trackway that led further into the thicket. The canopy overhead was already dense and lush thanks to the recent rains, shading the Bilbo’s surroundings back into something that resembled the dark of full night.

He kept his head on a nervous swivel, his senses on high alert for anything that could be lurking in the shadowy greener. The only ambient sounds were the babbling of the nearby creek and his own clumsy rustling, though he could hardly hear either over the pound of his blood in his ears. He tried to be stealthy, but Bilbo rather felt like an elephant charging through the bush with how much noise he was making. Anybody, or anything, would easily be able to hear him.

*Don’t be a coward, don’t be a coward,* he repeated like a mantra.

(He stubbornly refused to acknowledge the irony that it was, in fact, his persistent cowardice
urging him away from the relative safety of the house in the first place.)

After about five extremely long minutes, Bilbo finally stumbled out into another large clearing. He came face-to-face with the buckling facade of the old barn, which was closely hemmed in on either side by twisting old growth trees. The termite-eaten door had been propped open by a crumbling brick, but otherwise there were no other signs of human life in the clearing.

It was all undeniably spooky, and Bilbo had to fight a growing sense of unease as he scanned the clearing for any sign of the boys.

“Kili?” he called out tremulously. He found he actively had to fight with his own nerves in order to raise his voice louder than a hoarse whisper. A faint breeze suddenly picked up, rustling the very tops of the surrounding trees, but otherwise the clearing didn’t answer.

Bilbo sighed, lowering the nose of his rifle. “Oh, bother. Did I really come all the way out here for noth—”

“Don’t. Move.”

Bilbo’s blood ran frigid at the sound of the gruff voice behind him, an icy sweat breaking out over his forehead almost instantly. He nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt the hard press of something square near the middle of his back. He summarily dropped the Weatherby and flung his hands into the air in order to signal that he wasn’t a threat.

“Please don’t shoot!” he shrieked, voice embarrassingly shrill. He hoped beyond hope that whoever had accosted him wasn’t so remorseless that they would shoot someone as clearly pathetically hapless as him in the back, especially without so much as a by-your-leave.

The voice behind him sighed in a way that sounded distinctly disappointed. “Mahal’s beard, Mister Boggins. That’s your reaction? I thought it would be funnier.”

“What the— Kili?! ”

Vision suddenly going red with anger, Bilbo whirled around, hands clenching as his boots slipped slightly in the dewy grass. Mind going blank, he blindly flung one of his fists, sailing it straight into Kili’s stubby jaw.

A resounding smack echoed through the clearing as Bilbo’s knuckles made decisive contact. Kili stumbled backwards a few steps in surprise. The noise and resulting pain in his hand immediately cleared Bilbo’s mind of any lingering wrath, his mouth falling open in shock as the prince slipped on the wet turf and fell straight back onto his jean-clad bottom.

Kili, for his part, looked about as equally surprised. His light brown eyes were wide as he held his jaw and stared up at Bilbo, seemingly flabbergasted. His other hand was still gripped around the butt of his crossbow, which he had presumably shoved into the small of Bilbo’s back.

“You hit me!” he cried.

Bilbo immediately began wringing his hands, not even bothering to be mindful of his smarting knuckles as he mortifyingly registered that he had just punched royalty. Young royalty, at that.

He spluttered. “Your Highness, I am so sorry—”

“Now that’s funny!”
And with that, Kili promptly flopped backward and started guffawing toward the open circle of gradually brightening the sky above them.

Bilbo watched, utterly dumbfound, as Kili proceeded to laugh himself out, expression tightening as the pain slowly leached from his hand. The prince eventually sat up, wiping the tears from his eyes and resting his elbow on his knee in order to support his chin. It wasn’t even bruised, Bilbo noted with a touch of sourness.

“Ah, I needed that,” Kili said, and Bilbo didn’t know if he was talking about the laugh, or being socked in the jaw. Bilbo certainly knew which one he preferred.

“Well, I hope you certainly got your kicks,” he sniffed, picking up his rifle and tucking it primly under his arm, “because you nearly gave me a heart attack in the process.”

“Hm. Worth it,” Kili replied, grinning impishly at him.

“I beg to differ,” huffed Bilbo.

Kili hopped up from his spot on the ground, brushing his backside of any lingering dirt. He clapped Bilbo companionably on the shoulder before wandering over to perch casually upon the slanted hatch that led to the barn’s root cellar.

“So, I take it you’re looking for me,” he said, tone irritatingly chipper.

Bilbo scoffed. "I was, but now I've half a mind to throttle you and just tell the others that something out here ate you for breakfast!"

"Aw, did I scare you that badly?"

"I had a gun, you dope!" Bilbo cried in admonishment. He shook the Weatherby for emphasis. "I could've easily shot you! There's no coming back from being hit by a round of this caliber!"

"Oh, Mister Boggins, I didn't know you cared!" Kili replied, sarcastically batting his eyelashes at him.

Bilbo readied another retort, but paused just before he was ready to unleash it. He suddenly took note the unusual tightness around Kili's eyes, which was otherwise belied by his casual smirk. Bilbo’s annoyance abruptly withered and died.

"Of course I do, Kili," he said, with all the sincerity he could muster.

The prince faltered, visibly thrown off by Bilbo's abrupt change in tack. He stared at Bilbo in mute bewilderment, his expression intensely vulnerable as his eyes darted over Bilbo's face.

"You know that, don't you?" he asked softly, laying a gentle hand on the boy's shoulder.

Kili only shrugged, suddenly looking incredibly lonely. Bilbo was viscerally reminded that for all the prince's carefree bravado, he was, by sheer definition, still a teenager—which, to Bilbo, was achingly, unfathomably young.

"What's going on?" Bilbo sighed. "Why are you all the way out here by yourself?"

"M'not out here by myself," the prince mumbled.

Bilbo's brow furrowed in confusion. "Where's your brother, then?"
Kili merely jerked his head in the direction of the barn door by way of reply.

"In there?" Bilbo said, expression morphing into a horrified frown. The building, if it could even really be called that, looked wont to collapse if one even breathed on it wrong.

"With Ori," Kili explained, voice slightly clipped. "They, erm. Spent the night there."

"Oh, well. That's..." Bilbo coughed slightly. "I don't know if I noticed."

"Probably not, since I had to run interference the whole bloody evening," Kili grumbled, making a face. "It was exhausting. There’s only so many ways you can keep Mister Dori distracted, and it’s hard maintaining a conversation about the merits of different kinds of tea when you hardly even like the stuff."

Bilbo stared hard at the prince, trying to make sense of his downcast gaze. He chose his words with deliberate slowness.

“And are you... okay with that?” he asked in a purposefully measured tone. "With Ori and your brother, er, spending time together, I mean?"

Kili glanced up from where his trainers had been morosely scuffing at a patch of sandy dirt, looking genuinely confused.

“Huh? Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I mean, he’s not just your brother, right?” said Bilbo gently. “But your best friend, as well? Being a little jealous that your other friend is suddenly monopolizing his time is only normal.”

Kili stilled.

“Is it?” he asked after a moment.

Bilbo smiled thinly. The prince’s voice was heartbreakingly fragile.

“Of course it is, my dear. You’ve been the sole focus of his attention for so long. That’s a hard adjustment.”

Kili raggedly scrubbed at his face with both of his hands and inhaled deeply, before pushing his bangs back in frustration. It revealed the prominent furrows that had dug themselves deep into Kili’s forehead. Bilbo absently wanted to reach a hand up and smooth the creases, a gesture Mum had done for him too many times to count. As she would undoubtedly say, the prince was far too young and handsome for wrinkles.

"Huh. Okay," Kili said. He didn't entirely speak the words, so much as heave them out on the back of a ponderous exhale. He tilted his face contemplatively toward the sky, watching as the last stubborn stars finally winked out in deference to the coming dawn. "I guess that makes sense. And here I was feeling like an awful weirdo, all bent out of shape over the fact that my brother finally decided to start dating at the tender age of twenty-one. But now that I think about it, I guess it just made me feel like more like The Spare than usual."

Bilbo gingerly leaned back against the crumbling siding of the barn, propping the Weatherby against the wall next to him. He rested his head against it, unheeding of the splinters catching in his hair as he squinted at Kili through the darkness.

“The spare?”
Kili shot him a sardonic smile, the edges of it bitter in a way that didn’t fit the soft lines of his face at all. “Haven’t you heard that term? The heir and the spare? I’m the spare, obviously.”

“Hum,” said Bilbo, cocking his head slightly in thought. “I guess I never considered that. Do you envy your brother, then?”

To Bilbo’s surprise, Kili shook his head, staring at him as if he had suddenly sprouted another arm. “Of course not!” he exclaimed, before his mouth turned suddenly turned down at the corners. "Or, I mean, maybe I did when we were kids, when I didn’t quite understand why Fili got so much more attention than I did."

Bilbo looked at him consideringly, which caused Kili to duck his gaze back toward his trainers. "I think I did actually kind of resent him for that at first," he admitted. "but I’ve realized now that sort of attention comes with a price. He’s under so much pressure, and looking after me our entire lives certainly didn't help."

"I can't even imagine," replied Bilbo sympathetically.

Kili snorted. "Neither can I. You know that he's been groomed for leadership from literally the moment he was born? Even before he was… well, he’s always been my brother, but before most of us realized that.”

Bilbo glanced sidelong at Kili, making sure to school his expression into something neutral. “Has your uncle never thought about having children of his own, then?” he asked quietly. Bilbo grimaced as something in his question caused Kili to chuff slightly in mirth, but ultimately he was glad it brought some of the usual cheerfulness back to the prince’s face. "Ha! Only if he got together with someone like Fi," he replied. "But I doubt even that would change anything. Uncle loves him too much. My brother, I mean.”

“He loves you too,” Bilbo said, feeling strangely off-kilter at Kili’s casual admission regarding his uncle’s preferences. It was so obvious that the king and Dwalin were an item, and of course Dwalin had practically admitted as such, but it was still somewhat of a thrilling shock to hear Kili reference it as something so mundanely normal. He had never experienced anything quite like that before.

Kili looked back down at his feet, fiddling slightly with the zipper pull at the hem of his too-big leather jacket. "Yeah, I know he does,” he replied lowly, seemingly made uncomfortable by his own sincerity. "But he's never doted on me the way he dotes on Fili. You saw his reaction when Fili got hurt. He's never gone crazy like that over me, and I don't blame him! Don't tell Fi I said this, because it'll only strengthen his already overinflated ego, but my brother is the best person alive. And I think… I think whatever attention he gave me... er, went a long way toward just, erm, easing whatever, like, consideration I did or didn't get while we were growing up. Because playing second fiddle to him for everyone else didn’t matter when I was first fiddle in his eyes. Or something like that.”

Kili began to babble slightly near the end of his little speech, tripping over his words as he self-consciously shoved his hands deep into his pockets. “You know,” said Bilbo, after spending a moment of amazed silence absorbing what Kili had just told him, “I think you’re much more self-aware than most people give you credit for.”
“Ha, it’s just because you actually bother to listen,” Kili responded with a quiet smile. “It makes you easy to talk to.”

Bilbo stammered, ears flushing as he frantically waved the comment off. “Yes, well! I’ve had years and years of practice.”

Kili then turned in order to face Bilbo fully, expression painfully earnest as the pale shade of his usual countenance suddenly inflated back into full vibrance.

“All, I just want to say thank you, you know, for being so cool about Fi,” he said quickly, barely pausing to breathe between words. “It’s been… really hard, adjusting to the West in that way, especially for him. I don’t want to stereotype, but we weren’t particularly excited to be travelling with an Englishman we didn’t know. People here can be so cruel for no reason.”

Something in Bilbo’s chest twisted bitterly at that, the easy calm he had felt while talking with Kili suddenly souring as things started striking a little too close to home.

“Ha, tell me about it,” he muttered, crossing his arms tightly across his ribcage. “My own father wouldn’t talk to me for more than once every two months after I broke the news to him that I was in a relationship with another man for the first time.”

Though he tried to tamp it down, the usual burst of anxious nausea he felt whenever he explicitly ‘came out’ to a new person suddenly flared brightly in his gut. He knew it was ridiculous, since this was Kili of all people, but in all honesty, the way the prince was currently goggling at him in abject incredulity did nothing for his instinctive sense of unease.

“What?” Kili exclaimed, voice pitching into something of a yell.

Bilbo flinched. It was still a little too dark for comfort, let alone to be making any loud noises.

“What?” repeated Bilbo in a low hiss, eyes darting wildly toward the surrounding bushes. “I thought… I assumed you knew?”

“Not that! The bit about your dad. He did what now?” The prince barely bothered to lower his voice, practically simmering in his own burgeoning rage.

Bilbo blinked, settling back on his heels as he tried to interpret Kili’s inexplicable change in mood.

“I suppose he sort of just… stopped talking to me,” he said, not knowing how else to explain it. “I mean, I really should’ve seen it coming. I don’t entirely regret telling him, but part of me does wish I had just kept my big mouth shut.”

Kili suddenly straightened to his full height, his gangling form immediately towering over Bilbo as he began to pace restlessly in front of the entrance to the root cellar. He reminded Bilbo somewhat of a caged tiger, though he wasn’t entirely able to fathom why.

“You mean… ugh,” Kili groaned. “Let me get this straight. You mean that he disowned you, just because you were… what? Seeing another guy?”

“Well, he didn’t really disown me, not in the legal sense,” explained Bilbo, still somewhat puzzled at the prince's reaction. “But it happens sometimes, especially when one prioritizes themself over a relationship. I understand if something like that might not be entirely common in Erebor, but—”

“That’s horrifying, Mister Baggins,” interrupted Kili. He stopped short, brown eyes blazing with a sort of passionate intensity that reminded Bilbo strongly of Thorin. “He’s your dad. He should love
you no matter what.”

*Oh, thought Bilbo. Right.*

“My dear boy,” he sighed, tone equal measures sad and resigned. “You’re young yet. Sometimes things just don’t work out that way.”

“I don’t think this is a matter of age,” Kili retorted, though the edge of a whine began to creep into his voice all the same.

“Nobody is entitled to another’s feelings,” Bilbo said gently. “And I know he does loves me, deep down. Just not that part.”

“But he’s your family,” Kili insisted mulishly.

“We English do things a little differently.”

Kili scowled.

“Sorry, Mister Boggins,” he said, sounding thoroughly exasperated, “but it’s decided. The West officially sucks. Not that Erebor is perfect, but it makes more sense than here.”

“Ha!” laughed Bilbo, charmed despite everything at Kili’s customary bluntness. “I don’t disagree with you. But I also think it’s important that you know how lucky Fili is to have someone who loves him so wholly as you. Not a single person can replace that. As long as you continue to love him as unconditionally as you do, you’ll always be playing first fiddle to everyone else that comes and goes. Never forget that.”

Kili sat heavily back down on the root cellar doors, expression pursed.

“Maybe you’re right, but I don’t think ‘lucky’ is the right way to describe it,” he murmured. “It’s just what Fili deserves. What anybody deserves, really.”

Bilbo smiled. “Have I ever told you that I think the future of Erebor is in supremely good hands?”

Kili grinned bashfully as he started to fiddle with the crossbody strap of his quiver. He kept the crossbow tucked into the crook of his arm, where it lay nestled there like a natural extension of his body.

“Mister Baggins, do you have any siblings?” he asked suddenly. Bilbo raised an eyebrow in surprise.

“Er, no,” he admitted. He wondered what that had to do with anything.

“Hm.”

They lapsed into a comfortable—if uncharacteristic, on Kili’s part—silence. Bilbo gazed out into the clearing. The trees seemed less forbidding, less smotheringly caging as he examined strange pride he felt at Kili’s sudden show of maturity.

Bilbo had always tried to act as a sort of mentor for his younger employees, but what he felt toward Kili in that moment was different. It felt deeper somehow, and infinitely more raw. He had never planned on being a father, but Bilbo supposed this was perhaps what having a paternal instinct might feel like. Or the one involved with being a much older brother.

It scared him a little bit. He had no claim over Kili, not as a mentor, and certainly not as a paternal
figure. At the most, he was simply the nervous old British guy who happened to travel with his
group, who not only was wildly unqualified for the task he was hired for, but also harbored an
unfortunate crush on his uncle. What on Earth did that make them?

*Practically nothing more than strangers,* the pernicious voice in the back of Bilbo’s mind
whispered. He ruthlessly shoved it back into the dark hole in which it lived, much too tired of
being ruled by his insecurities for one day.

All the same, his mind wandered back to the sight of Gandalf's missing motorbike, wishing that the
sun would rise quicker and speed the lawyer's return. Bilbo didn’t even dare contemplate the
possibility that he wouldn't.

"We have a big day ahead of us," he remarked suddenly, a little desperate to break the silence and
interrupt the whirlpool of his thoughts. "Shouldn't we be checking on your brother and Ori by
now?"

Kili stiffened, refusing to look up from where he was absently counting all of the bolts in his
quiver.

"I guess," he said.

Bilbo narrowed his eyes. "What's wrong now?"

Kili grimaced, pointedly keeping his gaze turned from the barn door. The small breeze from earlier
picked up in earnest, rustling the surrounding leaves and making the building groan softly. The
door creaked as the wind forced it against the brick acting as a prop.

“What… what if they’re still… you know,” the prince stammered, shoulders beginning to creep
toward his ears.

A slow smirk began to creep across Bilbo’s face as Kili became increasingly flustered. He found it
impossible to resist the opportunity to tease.

“Still what?” he asked with false innocence.

The prince shuddered, squirming as Bilbo's hawkish gaze forced him to explain further against his
will.

“Don’t make me say it. You know. Still on their *date.*”

Bilbo grinned, throwing his head back and letting out a sharp cackle as Kili’s expression pinched in
mortification.

“I get it!” he said. “You’re worried that you’ll get an eyeful something you can’t unsee.”

“*Hmrgh,*” Kili gurgled.

“I don’t know what that means,” Bilbo chuckled, “but do you want me to go get them for you?”

He smiled behind his hand as Kili’s shoulders sagged, his breath audibly escaping from his chest.

“Would you?” he asked pathetically.

“Of course,” Bilbo replied, tone kind. Figuring that he had teased enough, he lightly patted the
Kili’s arm while shaking his head in amusement; the action was only slightly patronizing. “Once
you’ve been walked in on a time or two, much of the embarrassment you feel in doing it to others
quickly fades.”

“Ugh, too much information!” Kili cried, roughly clapping his palms over his prominent ears. However, he soon removed one of his hands in order to reach into his back pocket, from which he extracted a small black torch.

“Here,” he said, still sounding a little disgusted. “I think they must have a lantern or something, but just in case.”

Bilbo thanked him, shoving the handle of the surprisingly heavy light into his own back pocket. While he wasn't particularly excited at the prospect of possibly finding two of the youngest members of the company in flagrante delicto, doing something for brave, headstrong Kili made him feel important in a strange way. Necessary, almost, might be a good word for it. Besides, Fili and Ori really did need to get a move on if they were all to depart just shortly after sunrise.

Bilbo left his rifle with Kili and marched to the crooked door, pausing only when its peeling green paint suddenly reminded him achingly of Bag End. He shook the thought away, nudging the door open just wide enough to poke his head and shoulders in through.

Bilbo peered into the gloom of the cavernous main room. The air inside the barn was stale with the damp scent of must. He tried to make out shapes in the pitch darkness, but any attempt his eyes made to adjust was fruitless.

Bilbo carefully squeezed through the opening and stepped over the threshold, the worm-eaten wood beneath the soles of his boots creaking loudly in the still air. He drew the torch from his back pocket and flicked it on, swinging the surprisingly bright LED beam across the room.

The barn somehow looked even worse on the inside. A thick layer of dirt coated the floors, gathering in the gaps between the wooden planking and at the bases of the cracking supports that shored up the walls and supported what was left of the sagging gambrel roof. Bilbo couldn’t even begin to guess what shade the wood had been originally, as the relentless march of time had conspired to uniformly coat everything in the same dingy, oxidized brown color. Bilbo felt that just breathing the air was bound to give him tetanus.

It wasn't exactly Bilbo's idea of an ideal, or even passable, setting for a romantic evening. But he supposed that if he were young, hormonal, and desperate for alone time, even an oversized shack on a long-abandoned farm could look like an over-the-water bungalow at a honeymoon resort in Bali, especially if one person in the couple had an overbearing older brother that was vying to protect his supposed innocence at virtually any cost.

Trying not to breathe in too deeply, Bilbo called out into the grit-caked shadows.

"Fili? Ori? Rise and shine, lads."

A low groan echoed from the far end of the barn. Bilbo's gut instinctively twisted in fear, his blood chilling as his muscles tensed in preparation to run. He frantically swung the beam of his torch toward the sound, illuminating the underside of a precarious-looking platform suspended on the far wall about three meters above the floor. It might have once acted as a hay loft, but now it slanted slightly toward the ground, the support pillars having shifted somewhere along the line. A piece of rusty farm equipment with a terrifyingly serrated edge swayed from a hook attached to the underside.

"Mister Baggins?"
Bilbo barely stifled a yelp at the soft voice, which was still obviously thick with sleep. He slowly raised his torch upwards to the top of the loft, heaving a tremendously relieved sigh when Ori’s mousey brown head squinted at him from over the edge of it.

"What are you doing here? What time is it?" he whispered, shading his eyes from the bright glare.

"Time for you to get a watch," Bilbo retorted snippily, pulse still jackrabbiting frantically in his neck. He breathed deeply through his nose as he tried to form a calm answer. "Actually, it’s almost sunup. Your brother is looking for you."

Ori's eyes widened comically. The boy shot up from his bedroll, and Bilbo instantly averted his eyes.

"Oh, fuck," Ori breathed. "We were supposed to get back before anyone noticed! Fili, wake up."

Bilbo grimaced as another deep groan sounded from beside Ori.

"Are you two, erm, decent?"

"Yes? Why wouldn’t we be?"

Bilbo glanced back, relieved to find that Ori was indeed fully clothed in his usual multiple layers, and was in fact in the process of wrapping his thick, loose-knit scarf around his neck while he simultaneously attempted to smooth his sleep-mussed goatee.

“He thinks we came out here to have sex,” Fili remarked bluntly, rising like a zombie from his sleeping spot next to Ori. His blonde curls were arranged in a wild cloud around his head, obscuring his eyes and most of his face.

“In a barn?” Ori screeched, seemingly scandalized. Fili snorted, and Bilbo politely averted his eyes once more as the prince withdrew his arms from inside his hoodie in order to gingerly wriggle into his tight sports top, mindful of his still-tender ribs.

“To be fair, what were we supposed to think you two were doing?” sighed Bilbo.

“Nothing, because we were supposed to be back long before now!” Ori cried, flicking on the lantern beside him. It illuminated a good portion of the barn, and while it banished some of the more sinister shadows, it also highlighted just how pathetically ramshackle the whole structure was. Cracks decorated the walls, matching the gaps in the floor. Even the rusty piece of serrated farm equipment looked broken beyond repair, even though Bilbo hadn’t the foggiest clue what it could have been used for in the first place.

“We must have lost track of time talking and stayed up too late,” Fili said, rolling out of his sleeping bag and beginning to gather his things. The platform shook slightly with each of his movements. Bilbo eyed it askance.

“Er, do you two need any help? I don’t trust that thing to hold your weight much longer,” he said, his nervousness increasing with each ominous rattle.

“Could you, actually?” replied Ori shyly. “The ladder up here was really dodgy. If we throw down some of our stuff, can you catch it?”

“I can certainly try,” said Bilbo, flicking off the torch and pocketing it once again.

Ori and Fili merely grunted their acknowledgement, too engrossed in hurriedly packing their
supplies and rolling up the spare tarp they had laid down under them to speak proper words. Bilbo began shuffling toward the raised platform of the hay loft, kicking up a frankly choking amount of dust with each creaking tread.

Bilbo coughed and took another step. A sharp crack pierced the still air around them. Fili and Ori paused in their industrious rustling as Bilbo stopped in his tracks.

“What was that?” asked Fili.

There was a moment of long, tense silence, the three of them straining their ears against the ambient noise of the breeze and surrounding forest.

Eventually, Bilbo simply shrugged.

“No id—”

There was another grinding snap, and then the floor fell out from under him.

“Mister Baggins!”

If Fili and Ori made any other remarks as Bilbo plummeted through the rotted wooden planks that made up the floor, he couldn’t hear them over the deafening roar of his own blood in his ears. Time seemed to slow as he tumbled through the air for an improbably long amount of time, his stomach forcing its way into his throat as his arms and legs flailed uselessly into space.

It was so dark. He thought his eyes were open, frozen wide in sheer terror as his face contorted into a silent scream, but he couldn’t for the life of him figure out which way was up.

He soon found out when his shoulder suddenly collided with what could have only been a dirt floor. The rest of his body soon followed. Bilbo wanted to howl, to scream in agony, but all that escaped him was a muted hiss as the wind was sharply knocked out of his lungs. In his current state, a small, whimpering ‘ow,’ was all he was able to manage.

He rolled onto his back, carefully cradling his left arm to his chest as his shoulder began to throb in time with his heartbeat. He could move it, but only barely.

A great commotion sounded from the storey above, feet pounding on the rickety floorboards above him. The shaking caused dust to rain down from the ceiling onto Bilbo’s face. It clogged his eyes and nose, making him sneeze badly. He squeezed his eyes shut, a few tears of pain leaking out and no doubt leaving tracks in the dirt. He wanted to scream at the boys to be careful, so they wouldn’t end up like he did, but he could only barely gasp for breath.

A dark silhouette appeared in the gap above him, sending down a fresh cloud of dust from above. Dazed as he was, Bilbo couldn’t recognize if it was either Fili or Ori.

“Agh, Mister Baggins!” a distraught voice cried. “Are you alright?”

Ah, Fili then. Bilbo squinted, trying to see if he could make out any glint of the prince’s golden hair. It was so, so dark in the place where Bilbo had landed. It must have been the root cellar.

“Do I look like I’m alright?” he replied nasally, rasping out a cough. “My shoulder really fucking hurts.”

“We can’t really see. Hold on, we’re coming to get you,” Fili assured him, though his voice sounded fraught.
Stay where you are, I'm coming to get you," the king's voice rumbled through his stunned mind. Bilbo sighed, trying to conjure the image of blue eyes and strong cheekbones framed by a dark beard. Irrational as it was, it did distract him from the pain a little bit.

"Bugger it all," Bilbo muttered to the empty air, before feebly wheezing a bit louder, “Okay. Please be careful.”

The silhouette disappeared, and took with it whatever weak illumination the lantern had provided. The floor rattled dangerously above him once more, as the lads presumably booked it to the outside cellar doors Kili had been sitting on. It left him once more laying alone, in the dirt, surrounded by darkness as black as pitch.

Curse his rotten luck.

He wished Thorin was down there with him. Not hurt as well, obviously, but just with him.

With very little much else to keep his mind occupied from another panicked spiral, Bilbo tried to focus on how Thorin’s resonant baritone had reverberated through his chest from where it had been pressed up so tightly against the king’s back. Every point of contact between them on the ride from the construction site had been a torture of the sweetest kind, soothing and inflammatory in equal measure. Bilbo concentrated more on the soothing aspect of it, attempting to recapture the peculiar calm he had felt while riding with Thorin. He stubbornly willed for his breathing to slow and for his heart to quit racing.

To Bilbo’s unending surprise, the strategy actually worked. With his maudlin fantasies of the king occupying a good portion of his brain, he miraculously began to calm down.

As the rush in his ears subsided, Bilbo registered a faint scuffling near the far end of the cellar, though with the echo it was hard to tell. A new, hot spike of fear promptly rocketed down his spine at the sound.

He really hoped there weren’t any rats down here. He hated rats.

Bilbo determinedly grit his teeth. Well, he certainly didn’t have to just lay there and wait for the rodents to crawl over him and start chewing on his nose or something. It was his shoulder that was messed up, not his legs. He rolled onto his good side, wiggling a little bit as he clumsily retrieved Kili’s torch from his back pocket. He felt blindly for the switch and flicked it, which was a mistake, since he had accidentally aimed straight at his own face.

“Oh, bloody hell,” he hissed, squeezing his eyes shut against the blinding luminescence. Spots danced in his vision as he blinked rapidly in an attempt to clear it.

He turned the torch around, first directing the concentrated beam through the hole he had just made in the floor. He squinted at the gap, trying to force his eyesight into becoming less blurry as he examined the state of the floorboards. It was a wonder they held anything at all; most of the supports had rotted away. By all accounts, Fili and Ori should have fallen in straight after him. That alone spoke to Bilbo’s unending misfortune.

He swung the light back down toward himself, checking to make sure he didn’t have any other injuries he hadn’t noticed in favor of his smarting shoulder. Nothing seemed to be amiss, other than the fact that he was incredibly dirty and covered in large splinters of termite-eaten wood.

Continuing throughout this exercise was the scuffling noise that Bilbo had resolutely decided to ignore. However, it steadily grew louder and louder, to the point where the hairs on the back of his
neck began to prickle anxiously with every slight sound that came from the opposite end of the cellar. Blood-curdling visions of just a seething mass of hungry rodents clouded his every thought, which made it very difficult to concentrate on finding an exit.

Fear beginning to overwhelm him, Bilbo could not ignore it any longer. Determined to prove to himself that there were, perhaps, only three or four rats sharing the cellar with him, and not the hundreds his traitorous mind seemed determined to conjure up, he twisted to his right and swept the beam across the dirt floor toward the sound.

Bilbo choked as his mind stuttered to a grinding halt, too overwhelmed by sheer, paralyzing horror.

There were feet. Not creepy little rat paws, but distinctly human feet shuffling in the dirt about eight meters away from him. Some were clad in shoes of multiple types, some were bare, some sported missing toes or other gaping holes in their flesh, and there were far, far too many for Bilbo to count with any sort of quickness.

*Rotten luck, indeed,* Bilbo thought in absolute despair.

Almost of its own accord, his hand tilted the shaking beam of light by fractions of degrees, traveling up a pair of bare legs mottled by sores and bruises, which were attached to a pair of feet clad in gore-stained boat shoes. It eventually reached a torso, then a pair of shoulders, and then finally a head that bobbed amongst a crowd of others, its matted black curls glinting in the harsh LED.

The moment the spotlight landed on the figure’s head, it snapped its face toward Bilbo with a violent, neck-snapping jerk. Blank, bloody eyes as dark as coal stared down the concentrated beam. The white of bone shone through a deep gash in the zombie’s cheek, standing stark against their skin. Its lips peeled back in a snarl, revealing a lolling tongue and greedy, sharp looking teeth. It huffed loudly.

The other infected surrounding it jolted viciously at the noise, their heads snapping in near perfect unison toward Bilbo. Scores of blank, dead faces stared hauntingly at him.

Bilbo shut the light off with a terrified squeak.

The scuffling grew increasingly more agitated, now accompanied by low huffs similar to the strange sound Boat Shoes had made. Bilbo didn’t have the capacity to think about what it meant. He knew he was going to die, and in probably the worst way possible. So he did the only thing he could do while down in that dark basement alone, immobile with fear, and also suffering from a probably dislocated shoulder:

He thought fleetingly of Thorin. Then he curled up, he prayed, and he waited.

He hoped it would be over soon.

Chapter End Notes

Translation notes:
lulkhel -- [Khuzdul] fool of all fools (Oin's basically calling him the biggest idiot alive. He's mean like that.)
Yeah.... you know that skeleton of a plot I mentioned earlier? It's, uh, back. I guess.

Anyway! I don't really have much to say, which is unusual, I guess. Just thank you SO much for reading and indulging like, my wildest headcanons last chapter......I'm glad at least some people enjoyed the date lmfao. Thank you to everyone who reads, kudos, subscribes, etc; you are all SUCH real ones I'm just !!! [shakes fist] so incredibly grateful. Life has really been punching me in the gut recently so it's like... nice to hear nice things about something I do. So thank you.

Anyway, no music for this chapter, since, again these were transitional scenes that sort of got away from me. Whatever. Writing this chapter was really fun for some reason???. I like... setting the mood.... describing scenery... lol. Sorry.

Thanks again for reading, as always!

[personal blog] [lotr/fanfic blog] [soundtrack]

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