For Thine Is The Kingdom

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Summary

There are many things that Bilbo Baggins considers himself. He fancies himself a respectable man, a florist with a teeming business who does not mix with any distasteful persons, thank you very much. Safe and comfortable in his Boston flower shop, the last thing he expects is to find himself on the road with a questionable band of bikers on a far more questionable journey.

Notes

This began months and months ago as a birthday gift to mudkippy, but clearly got way out of hand. It was my (vilelithe)'s first writing endeavor of any considerable length. Enjoy!!!
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Bilbo lectures an uncouth stranger on the importance of not littering and becomes unwilling host to an entire gaggle of uncouth strangers.

Boston, Massachusetts is a city of approximately 645,000 people who all agree on one thing: the MBTA fucking sucks.

While Bilbo Baggins would refrain from saying so in polite company (at least not before a few glasses of wine,) he agrees wholeheartedly. Though his commute can be nightmarish and drawn out thanks to the barely-functioning transit system, he has found that there is but one thing worse than the commute: the commuters.

Today, it’s a man around his age. Tall, broad, and surly. He practically oozes disdain for every person in this godforsaken car. It shows in the uncomfortable glances those near him steal when they think he isn’t looking. He is dressed... well, not how Bilbo would. Not at his age. Over his broad shoulders is a well-loved leather jacket. Beneath it he wears a v-neck pulled lower by the sunglasses clipped to the neck. If not for his certain strain of fearlessness, Bilbo might be more intimidated.

Because the man is huge. What little glimpse of skin afforded is sun-darkened and covered in tattoos: the tapered ends of what might be an intricate tribal sleeve. His dark hair is gathered in a tight knot at the back of his head. His beard, though neat, only adds to the general ruggedness this man wears like any other accessory.

Bilbo doesn’t like him. He doesn’t like the way that this man immediately takes up a seat on the crowded train, legs spread and elbows jutting out. Space is a precious commodity on the crowded car, and he seems intent on snatching up more than he deserves. Bilbo knows the type, and he knows it well. As an avid people watcher, particularly on T rides, he knows exactly what this man’s next move is.

And there it is. One of his hands drops from its spot in propriety to rest against his thigh, drawing undue attention to his crotch. What was it his cousin called it? Oh yes. Presenting.

Bilbo decides to spend a good deal of his ride casually hating the man, getting offended by each minutia as it comes. The man’s phone rings, and quite loudly at that. He grunts, pulling it out of his pocket and squinting at the screen for a moment. Bilbo is sure that he will answer and proceed to have a loud conversation that absolutely no one wants to have to hear.

Instead, he grunts a second time and ignores it, silencing the ringer.

For a moment, Bilbo is taken aback, and he works doubtletime to reassess his original judgment. In the end, he decides to fault the man for that injustice. Surely whoever took the time to call him thought it was important! Never mind the fact that it could have just been a telemarketer, Bilbo was already on a roll. Really! How rude.

If it weren’t for the sudden efflux of passengers, Bilbo might have missed his stop.
Park Street Station is a wide, open place, and the people disseminate quickly. Already Bilbo is beginning to forget the man. He probably would have passed from his thoughts without incident, but as Bilbo climbs from the train, he sees him. It is hard to miss the man, his height distinguishing him in the crowd. It is also hard to miss someone who is walking right in front of you. Bilbo tries to ignore him.

The man’s phone rings again, and Bilbo watches as he digs into his pocket to check it. Apparently, he cares little for what this persistent caller may or may not have to say, as he replaces the phone shortly after. And Bilbo watches as he instead pulls out a stick of gum, presumably from some pack inside his pocket, and unwraps it. As he pops it into his mouth.

Drops the wrapper on the floor, no more than five feet from a garbage can.

Oh well now that just does it. How rude! No, inconsiderate! How egotistical, heedless, discourteous, impolite! Unfortunately, Bilbo puts little thought into his next move. In later days, he will come to regret it, in fact. Because what he does needlessly complicates an already complicated series of events.

But he does it. He marches right up to the man, snatching up the discarded wrapper as he goes, and taps him firmly on the arm. No mistaking that as a simple, passing brush. No, Bilbo is a man on a mission. The stranger (now single-handedly responsible for global warming in his eyes) turns, looking thoroughly confused. “Can I help you?” he asks, looking the slightest bit uncomfortable. Good, Bilbo thinks, right before his tamer side catches up to him. Then he realizes just how intimidating the guy really is. He resists the urge to shrink back, instead brandishing the wrapper at him like a sword.

“I believe you dropped this,” Bilbo tells him.

“I suppose I did.”

Indignant, Bilbo shoves the wrapper at him while pointing at the nearby garbage can. “There is a trash can right over there!”

“I suppose there is,” he repeats, and the look on his face sets Bilbo’s blood to boiling.

“You seem to have missed,” Bilbo says, “by quite a few feet.”

The man’s eyebrows crawl towards his hairline. If he wasn't so clearly displeased, Bilbo might say that he looked amused. “What do you want from me?”

“I-“ what does he want? He sputters for a moment. In that time, the man sighs, plucking the wrapper from Bilbo’s hand.

“Look,” he says, “even if you don’t, I’ve got somewhere to be. And you can rest easy, knowing that I’ll throw this on the floor somewhere else when you’re not looking.” And that seems to be that. He shoves his hands back into his pockets, wrapper and all, and turns away from Bilbo. Bilbo, for his part, simply stands there, gaping as the litterer simply strides up the stairs ahead of him.

The rumble of a train passing above reminds him that he actually does have somewhere to be. With an indignant, indulgent huff, Bilbo turns on his heels. His shoes click on the stone steps as he ascends purposefully. The stairs open up into a wide and crowded area, tracks set on either side of a series of platforms. Between the chaos of the station and the second train ride, Bilbo manages to simmer down rather quickly after getting so worked up.

Indeed, he might have forgotten all about the encounter were it not for the fact that Bilbo manages to
run into the guy again.

As he climbs the steps out of the Hynes Convention Center station, the powerful draft hitting him with the unpleasant, persistent heat from outside, he hears the familiar chirp of a ringing phone. Drawn by the noise, he peers over his shoulder, only to find that Tall and Surlly has finally deigned to answer his persistent caller.

Bilbo picks up his pace, walking fast to put some distance between the two of them. He’s glad that he has, because a moment later the man snaps at his phone, barking impatiently that yes, yes, he knows where he is going, for fuck’s sake.

Walking faster.

Thankfully, when Bilbo turns right out of the station, his new friend turns left. Bilbo is glad to see the back of him, no doubt for good this time.

Out on the street the light is dying quickly, slanting into the last golden beams of another picturesque day. Newbury Street is still alive, thrumming with the desperate energy reserved for the last few hours before closing time, a sentiment Bilbo thoroughly appreciates.

He slides his hands into his pockets, striding easily down the familiar streets and greeting fellow shop owners as he passes. It is all quite comfortable. Any troubling thoughts about any distasteful persons does little to weigh down his bolstering mood.

So much so that he fails to notice the increased number of distasteful persons window shopping among the fashionable boutiques. But Bilbo failing to notice them does not make them any less of a reality, strolling along in their leather jackets in small groups of two or three. In fact, Bilbo is so resolutely not noticing distasteful persons that he almost misses the cheerful wave Balin, who owns the neighboring Tattoo shop, offers as he passes. But wave he does, and Bilbo returns it before ducking down the stairs to his own store.

“Hey, Uncle Bilbo.” Frodo greets him with some enthusiasm, though Bilbo knows he would rather be anywhere but keeping shop for his eccentric uncle on a perfectly fine summer’s day. A pair of women are examining some cactuses on the shelf, murmuring among themselves as they do so.

Seized by a sense of charity and a desire to bask in the golden shafts of light that lanced in through the window, Bilbo rounds the counter and pats Frodo on the shoulder. “I’ll close up today,” he offers, “you head home early. Or, I think I saw Merry and Pippin lurking outside of Newbury Comics, and perhaps someone should keep them out of trouble.”

That clears Frodo out quickly. Bilbo realizes all too late that, more likely than not, Merry and Pippin will drag him into trouble. Primula will have his head, no doubt, but it’s too late for him to do much else. Besides, the two women seem to finally settle on a cactus, and soon enough Bilbo has the shop to himself.

Pleased with his solitude, Bilbo settles down on the stool behind the cash register. He flips through a nearby catalog, scrawling notes about future orders. Just as he begins to consider closing up early, the telltale ringing of a bell draws his attention to the door. In stoops an old man, entirely unremarkable but for his impressively long, grey beard. “Good afternoon,” Bilbo greets, and he means it. Nestled among his plants and bathed in the warm, waning light, Bilbo is in a very agreeable mood.

But not so agreeable that he approves of the heavy, black boots on the old man’s feet. Nor is he very impressed with his attitude, as he inspects Bilbo with keen eyes and says, “What do you mean? 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?”

Bilbo blinks, surprised by the unusual greeting. “Well, all of them, I suppose.”

The old man’s eyes crinkle, and his beard raises slightly, which Bilbo takes as a sign of pleasure. But still the old man does not move, as Bilbo had expected him to. Rather than explore the shop, he stares at Bilbo. And continues to stare, scrutinizing him until he feels like bizarre specimen pinned to a board. As the moment passes into impropriety, Bilbo begins to feel uncomfortable. “Can I, uh, help you?”

“Perhaps you can,” the (maybe?) customer says cryptically, which Bilbo does not really appreciate. Thankfully, he goes on. “I’m looking for someone to partake in an adventure I am arranging, but it is quite difficult to find anyone willing.”

“I should hope so! I like to think we are all sensible folk here. The colleges are that way, you will have more luck there.” He points quite helpfully in the direction of thousands of kids no doubt eager for a little extra excitement between their classes. With that he goes back to his book, relocating a particularly excellent selection of orchids.

But still he feels the old man’s gaze on him, staring so intently that Bilbo looks up, now getting rather upset. “Good afternoon! Unless you are looking for some greenery, I think you will find that I have little else to offer you,” he snaps, and feels immensely unlucky, as this is the second distasteful person he has had to deal with today.

“You certainly seem to enjoy playing with the boundaries of a word. Now you use your ‘good afternoon’ to try and get rid of me, and that it won’t be good until I am good and gone.”

“Not at all!” Bilbo lies, for the sake of his store’s reputation, “I just- I never caught your name.”

“While I know yours? Yes, well, Mr. Baggins, I believe you do know my name. You might not recall that it is my name, but I’d be heartbroken to hear that you forgot me completely. I am Gandalf,” he announces. “To think that Belladonna Took’s own son would try and see me off with a good afternoon as though I’m some pesky telemarketer.”

Now Bilbo remembers summers in the hills, summers not unlike this one. Summers where the days passed in a blissful blur and the nights were alive with sparks and thunder cracks. Bilbo remembers them fondly, and now he remembers Gandalf as well.

“Gandalf! Gandalf, my goodness, now I remember you! Your fireworks were famous,” he exclaims, now standing. He fusses with his apron for a moment, then decides that Gandalf has already seen it on him and propriety is a lost cause.

“So you do remember me? Perhaps there is hope for you yet. Very well!”

“Very well?”

“Very well. Would I be able to trouble you for lunch?”

“Well, it’s already well past six, dinner would be-“

“Tomorrow, then,” Gandalf says, effectively cutting Bilbo off.

“I- yes, tomorrow. Where will we-“

“I imagine that a Baggins still lives above this shop? Your apartment will do just fine for the
engagement. Indeed, I think it’ll serve our purpose well,” and with that, Gandalf turns on his heels. Before he can say much of anything Bilbo finds himself alone again, the bell ringing along with Gandalf’s parting “good afternoon, Bilbo!”

The evening finds him still reeling from the encounter. Not long after Gandalf leaves Bilbo closes the shop, too distracted by the day’s events to truly accomplish anything. Still, closing takes some time, and the street lights are flicking on as Bilbo locks the front door. Luckily, he needs only climb some steps to reach his apartment.

336 Newbury Street is a largely unremarkable apartment in that it appears quite similar to all those that surround it. It is located just above Oak Hill Florists, a flower shop bought by one Bungo Baggins for his wife, now run by their son. It is an old brick building with wide bay windows and a lovely green door and is nestled between a chic patio restaurant and a relatively respectable tattoo parlor, the latter of which is tolerated only for its cleanliness.

And within 336 Newbury Street, Bilbo Baggins has built himself a comfortable life. Every evening, he settles in his armchair with a fine cup of tea and an engaging book (poetry tonight) and lets whatever stresses the day brought remain forgotten on the doormat with the dirt from his shoes. This night is no different, and would remain as such if not for one small detail.

When Gandalf left the quaint little boutique, he strode up the walk to the front door of 836, rather than turn down the street as one might expect. For a moment, he seemed to be searching for something, until he finally decided on a brick beside the door. It was neither too close to be noticed by anyone entering, nor so far that it was unclear which building was meant. Gandalf produced a thin piece of chalk, and very carefully drew a series of four lines, forming half a square with a squat line protruding from the top.

Here is the place.

Pleased with his work, Gandalf left, sure to return within a few hours.

And indeed, a few hours later, Bilbo is surprised by a knock on the door. He would very much like to think that it is Gandalf, or even better, some other, tamer caller. “Just a moment!” he calls, carefully fastening his robe around his waist as he rushes to the door. “Just a moment,” he repeats, flinging open the door, “I am-“

Here he stops, because no matter what he was expecting moments before, it was not this. Before him stands a tall, tall man, all corded muscle and dark, tattooed skin. On his head, even! And did he mention tall? Because the stranger is tall. All of these things alone, including the unexpected and late arrival, would be enough to make Bilbo want to close the door in his face. And rightly so! But at the sight of a worn leather jacket, his patience all but gives way.

Distasteful persons indeed.

“Dwalin,” the man grunts, and it takes Bilbo a moment to realize that that must be his name.

“Of course! Um. Why don’t you come in? I was just about to make tea,” he hears himself say. Immediately, he finds himself regretting it, as Dwalin simply follows him inside and closes the door behind him. Now that he has made the tea promise, Bilbo feels he has to follow through with it, and so he fusses in the kitchen while Dwalin goes off to do God knows what.

Bilbo fears the worst as he waits for the tea to boil and prepares a tray of the essentials. What he finds is upsetting, but only the surreal upset of seeing a man easily twice his size sitting comfortably in Bilbo’s arm chair, his favorite book of poetry in the man’s large paws. Dwalin looks up when Bilbo
arrives, fine dishes clattering on the colorful tray. “Sorta fruity shit, don’t you think?” Dwalin asks, holding up the book in explanation.

“I happen to quite enjoy that one,” Bilbo says, and he pours their tea as aggressively as one can in his barely contained anger.

“Still fruity.”

“Now-“ Bilbo is interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Door,” Dwalin points out, rather unhelpfully. Bilbo sighs, the most put-upon gardener in the world, and goes to answer the door. He steels himself for yet another imposing man with a leather jacket, so he is quite relieved to find Balin there instead.

“Bilbo!” he exclaims, “I was hoping to get here before the others. I can see that Dwalin has arrived-“ they share a wordless greeting, “which is just as well.”

“Yes,” Bilbo sighs, both relieved and exasperated, “I would like to know what’s going on.”

Balin fixes him with a strange look, confused and sympathetic, but before he can open his mouth, yet another loud knock shakes the door. “Well, I’ll let you get that. There will be time to explain later.”

As it turns out, there is no time to explain. The sudden influx starts with two startlingly young men, and they rush in, each shaking his hand with youthful exuberance. “Kili-“

“And Fili,” they say, and then they are brushing past him to greet Balin and Dwalin. They are dressed much the same as Balin, with helmets tucked beneath their arms.

“Bikers,” Bilbo says numbly as the realization dawns on him. “My kitchen is filled with-“ Distasteful persons.

He tries to limit the damage done to his home as they tear through it like a hurricane, but he can accomplish little in the way of order before someone rings the bell.

“You should get that,” says Kili, or is it Fili?

Five more of these bikers arrive, introducing themselves as Dori, Ori, Nori, Oin, and Gloin. Bilbo decides that he likes none of them, even the youngest, standing fresh-faced and innocent on his doorstep.

They, too, join the now growing party, Bilbo protesting weakly as the entire group begins to raid his well-stocked pantry. He imagines that his weekly trip to Trader Joes will have to be moved up to Thursday. And perhaps Thursday’s cry will be moved up to Wednesday, as he is sure the stress will reduce him to tears soon. He swears that if he hears just one more knock-

It ends up being less of a knock and more of a pound.

By now he is quite strung out, at the end of his wits. He nearly cries out in frustration at the knocking. He fears for the safety of his poor front door, and wonders how many more poundings it can take. Still, he opens the door, expecting yet another biker.

He is not disappointed, as not one, but three more come stumbling in, as though they were all pressed close together and leaning on the door. Perhaps they had been. Behind them stands Gandalf, and Bilbo could probably think of a few choice words for him if he weren't struck speechless with shock.
“Oh, good,” Gandalf says, pushing through those assembled at the door, “I see that a good number of us have arrived. Bilbo, this is Bifur, Bofur, and Bombur.” He points to each in turn, then sees himself in, immediately shooing the three inside. This leaves Bilbo alone in the hall with Gandalf, who begins counting heads and muttering names. “…Ori, Nori, Dori… Why, we still seem to be one short,” he muses. Bilbo thinks that even one more will be too many.

“You know Thorin,” says… someone as they come careening past, “he’ll show up when he damn well pleases.” The same someone stops short when they finally notice Bilbo, asking where he keeps his alcohol. Numbly, he points back towards the pantry.

The bikers have now managed to spread through the entire downstairs. Some are clustered near the window, heads together in conversation. Most, however, are wreaking havoc in his kitchen. Honestly where are their manners? They seem to be helping themselves to his pantry and making good use of his kitchen. Again Bilbo gets underfoot, trying to limit the damage to hearth and home as best as he can through his feeble protests. He is largely ignored.

While not a single plate has been broken or chipped yet, he likes to think his concerns are not unfounded.

Soon enough the drinks are flowing, beer and wine and whatever other drinks Bilbo had stocked up. They originally had been bought for some future party, but this was not the one he was expecting. But there truly is no other name for it, as the energy in his apartment soon climbs to a fever pitch. The table groans under the weight of the food, and he can’t help but notice that his pantry is nearly empty. He fears for its safety as well, more so when Fili hops onto the table to distribute bottles of beer. There is now little that Bilbo can do to control them, overshadowed as he is by their volume. He paces, muttering curses about their manners, their height, and anything else that comes to mind.

It is by far the most surreal experience of Bilbo’s life. With the stress of keeping them from ruining his home, Bilbo forgets to ask just why they are there. In fact, he even finds himself thankful that they deign to clean up after themselves, eleven hands making light work of the task. But even once the table is cleared, the party continues and the drink still flows.

Until one final time, a fist falls heavy on the door. All fall silent.

“He’s here,” Gandalf says. And it is Gandalf who stands, beating Bilbo to the door by several strides. He flings it open, and in walks-

“You!”

“Oh good,” says Gandalf, looking between Bilbo and Thorin, the former glaring daggers, “it seems you two have already met. It took you quite a while to get here, I do hope you found the place easily.”

“I got lost,” Thorin explains, ignoring a seething Bilbo, “twice. A confusing place, Boston. Wouldn’t have found it at all if it weren’t for the noise.”

Bilbo winces, hoping that he receives no noise complaints. Would his neighbors call the police? His concern is quickly overshadowed by his rage, because Thorin only notices Bilbo when he brushes past him to enter.

“Oh,” says Thorin.

“That is all you have to say for yourself? Oh?” Gandalf watches on in thinly veiled interest and surprise as Bilbo refuses to step out of Thorin’s way. “No. No, I refuse. This is where I put my foot
down. I will not have all of these… hooligans making a mess of my house. Least of all you!”

“I didn’t realize littering was such a grievous crime here,” Thorin replies gruffly, “and I sure as hell regret it now. Is this really the burglar, Gandalf? He looks more like someone’s twink.”

“Twink?” Bilbo asks, pitch raising with his temper, “burglar?”

“You asked me to pick the fourteenth member of our party, Thorin. Mr. Baggins comes with my full recommendation.” Bilbo is hardly surprised to hear that this is Gandalf’s doing. He only wishes that he had but one target for his anger.

For his part, Thorin seems equally disgusted. Gandalf, sensing the tension, politely excuses himself. Bilbo plucks up the courage to ask, “you are Thorin?” He thinks that he is quite civil about it, too.

“I thought that that much was clear. Gandalf seemed sure of your-“

“Oh, please spare me,” Bilbo sighs, snapping his hand between them. “Bilbo Baggins.”

Thorin looks at Bilbo’s hand in naked confusion, then takes it. “Thorin Oakenshield.” His grip is firm, but not crushing. He seems to have lost some of that Alpha Male bravado on the way there. Upon releasing Bilbo’s hand, Thorin edges past him, joining the throng.

Or so Bilbo thought, but the moment they see him, those assembled fall silent. The chair at the head of the table scrapes against the floor as Thorin pulls it out, dropping into it heavily. “What did Dain say?” asks Dwalin.

“That this job is ours, and ours alone. They won’t come.” The table sighs. More questions are asked, unfamiliar names dropped, and soon the bikers fall into disarray, arguing about this or that detail of some unknown plan. All the while, Bilbo stands in the corner meekly, wondering just what he did to deserve this. Thorin silences them with a shout, and raises their hopes while settling their doubts in a surprisingly eloquent and rousing speech. Even Bilbo finds himself affected, leaning in as though drawn by Thorin’s rough charisma.

Bilbo listens, half in horror and half in interest, as Thorin explains their purpose. Twenty years ago, he and his kin and kith were driven from their home by a rival gang. Some were able to flee, to live another day in another place, but some of their number were not so lucky. The mood is now somber, their faces grave. It is clear that some were witness to the attack, while some were far too young to remember. And that, Bilbo guesses, is why Thorin needs to tell the story at all.

He goes on to explain the counterattack that Thorin’s grandfather tried to lead, which failed so horribly and placed responsibility squarely on Thorin’s shoulders. It all seems so… far-fetched to Bilbo. Like a modern fantasy. He leans over to ask where the police were in all of this, but he is hushed by Gandalf and by Thorin’s hard glare.

Thorin then explains that they will be taking back their home- taking back Erebor. Cheers erupt, then die down quickly as those assembled fall back into rapt silence. Taking back Erebor, Thorin says, will require stealth. Rather than lead a large group, he will take the fourteen assembled, and he will take them over an army any day. Bilbo does a quick head count and finds, to his horror, that he is counted in that number.

Erebor, it turns out, is a warehouse located just outside of the ruined town of Dale, Montana, a few miles from the still-teeming lakeside town of Esgaroth. Inside it lies a hoard of riches. Bilbo finds it difficult to be so enamored with a run-down warehouse full of antique motorcycles.

That is, until he Googles a few of the names mentioned under the table. They are not after a hoard of
motorcycles, but a hoard of gold, each worth thousands.

Bilbo still is not sure where he comes in, but he is saved the trouble of asking by Fili, who does it for him.

“So why do we need him?” he asks, and Bilbo takes some offense with the way he is pointed at. Everyone turns to look at him, suddenly appraising him as though they could find some hidden meaning in his presence.

“He is our burglar,” Thorin says. “Smaug will know us, will know our type. He won’t be suspicious of a florist’s intentions. Our task will require-“

“Now excuse me, I’m not a burglar, I’ve never stolen a thing in my life!” A lie, but an innocent one. Stealing packs of gum in his youth hardly counts as true theft, he thinks. It certainly doesn’t make him a burglar!

The table seems to agree, and they break out into chaos again before Gandalf draws himself up, bringing his fist down on the table to capture their attention. “Enough! If I say that Bilbo is a burglar, then a burglar he is. He has a certain skillset that makes him perfectly suited to this task,” he says, then turning to Thorin adds, “I need you to trust me on this.”

“Very well, we will do this your way. But how will he travel? Surely he doesn’t own his own bike,” Thorin points out. Bilbo thinks of his bicycle, carefully stowed in the hall closet, and huffs a laugh to himself. Thorin seems to take it as a derisive snort, which Bilbo supposes it could have been, and fixes him with a glare.

“I am sure something could easily be arranged,” Gandalf says. Bilbo hopes that whatever arrangements he tries to make are so difficult that they all decide a burglar is too much trouble after all.

“He could learn!” supplies Ori.

“And we can find something on the way,” says Balin.

Bifur supplies something in… whatever language he speaks, before Dwalin roars, “aye, I’m sure he’d be right at home on a crotch rocket!” to the general delight of the partygoers. Color rises to Bilbo’s cheeks, and he sputters for a moment, struggling to string together the most potent words to express his distaste. He is saved the effort when Balin, dear, sweet Balin leans over and helpfully supplies that that is, indeed, a kind of bike.

Somehow, that doesn’t make Bilbo feel that much better.

“There’s always the side car,” says Bombur. Never before has Bilbo been so offended. The very idea of him riding in a-

“That will work perfectly,” Gandalf says, and he is very pleased. Bilbo is not so pleased.

“Now, see here, I won’t be-“

“I agree, that will do. We have more pressing matters than transporting the burglar,” Thorin says. “Balin, give him the contract.” A pause. “Please.”

Balin nods, eagerly digging in to his bag to retrieve a slim manila folder. After being passed down the table, it is shoved rather unceremoniously into Bilbo’s hands. “There you are. Standard issue, really. Outlines... well, you’ll see.”
Bilbo hums his numb assent, standing up and ambling away from the table to read. The contract consists of a short stack of papers, twelve point, Times New Roman font, single spaced. It lists expectations, payment, travel arrangements, and the like. Standard issue, really. Then it begins to deviate from what Bilbo would call standard. “Funeral arrangements?” he asks, glancing at the table before going on to read, “…not responsible in case of lacerations… evisceration… incineration? Incineration? These are people, not dragons.” His voice raises in panic with each new threat, his mind helpfully supplementing with some rather creative scenarios.

“And flamethrowers are a thing,” says one of them, God help him if he can get their names straight. Bilbo blinks uncomprehendingly.

“Flamethrowers,” he peeps.

“Aye, one of Smaug’s old favorites. He’s fuckin’ brutal, don’t know mercy in the slightest.” The other bikers snigger. Encouraged, Bilbo’s tormenter continues, “and if you don’t catch ‘im with the flamethrower, he’s just as quick with a knife! Quick and capable, will cut y’open in a second, hang you by your insides.”

Bilbo curses his ability to form solid imagery from words as his mind takes those descriptions and runs with them. He recalls all of the times he has burned himself on hot skillets, and imagines that pain tenfold, across his whole body. He recalls-

“Nope.”

He recalls nothing, except for the fact that he really needs to vacuum the floor.

Bilbo awakes about an hour later thinking that he has yet again fallen asleep in his arm chair. Dazed, he looks around, his mind slow on the uptake until he sees the man from the train peering at him, entirely too close for Bilbo’s comfort. Thorin, he remembers, just before he remembers passing out. And once he remembers passing out, he remembers why and starts to feel a bit nauseous. Bilbo bats weakly at Thorin, trying to get him out of his face. "I'm alright, I'm alright. Space. I just need some space.”

For his part, Thorin complies, straightening up and allowing Bilbo to do the same. “Stay seated,” Thorin orders, and a few choice words about just whose home he is in jump to Bilbo’s tongue, “we wouldn’t want a repeat episode, no matter how entertaining it was.” A few more colorful retorts spring to the forefront, but before he can work up to his tirade, Thorin stands and stalks away. He joins Gandalf in the hall, just around the corner and out of sight.

Snippets of their conversation float into the living room, and Bilbo sees that all of the bikers are listening as intently as he is.

“I cannot guarantee his safety,” Thorin murmurs.

“Nor am I asking you to. But if this endeavor is to succeed, you will need him. I think you will recall that Smaug has a certain predilection for flowers and their language. Unless you think that one of your number is as charming as Bilbo, then by all means leave the man behind. But I think you will find that Bilbo will suit the needs of this company quite well.”

“You found me a florist,” Thorin says. “How am I supposed to send a florist to steal from Smaug?”

Gandalf smiles, and places a hand on Thorin’s shoulder. “Bilbo is far more courageous than you think. Indeed, he is far more courageous than he thinks.”

And that just about does it for Bilbo. This is his breaking point. Not the thirteen unexpected visitors.
Not the outrageous task they want him to perform, nor the myriad of ways he could die in the attempt. No, it’s Gandalf coming into his life so suddenly and acting like he knows Bilbo better than Bilbo knows himself! Well, he can keep thinking that, and won’t he be surprised when Bilbo doesn’t show up tomorrow? No, Gandalf and Balin and Thorin can find some other poor fool to die for their run down warehouse.

Resolved, Bilbo stands (and to his great pride, he only sways a bit) and marches out of the room, right up to Gandalf. “I suspect that you expected to take advantage of my hospitality and put some of these, these… heathens up for the night. There are guest rooms upstairs, they can sort themselves out. Good night,” he snaps, vicious in his righteous anger. And then he storms up the stairs to his own bedroom. He takes out some of his anger on the poor door, slamming it and gaining some childish satisfaction from the way it rattles. Then he putters around, aggressively preparing himself for bed.

And he is viciously satisfied when, through the walls and floors, he hears a hint of disappointment in the words, “and there goes our burglar.”

By the time he is finished washing up for the evening, he can hear someone moving about in the guest room adjacent to his. He ignores the sounds and tries to lose himself in a book, since he knows he will have little luck trying to sleep until he can calm the racing of his thoughts. Mouthing the lines does little to soothe him, but he is steadfast in his attempts.

It becomes more difficult to forget his trauma when Bilbo hears singing, low and sonorous, through the walls. The sound is muffled, but strikes him, plucking some long forgotten chord in his heart. Something like longing fills him, nostalgia for mountains he has never seen, lakes he has never touched. He thinks of the plains in the West, of miles unrolling before him and grasses swaying and he pines to know the things that Thorin has. Because the voice is Thorin’s, plain and clear, and the things that he feels are so clear in his song. So clear that Bilbo can feel it, and he starts to think that he understands.

Bilbo falls asleep soon after the voice goes silent, the contract left unsigned but not forgotten on his night stand.
Chapter 2

Chapter by vilelithe (BroPorrim)

Chapter Summary

Bilbo gets an impromptu lesson in packing lightly. He doesn't take it well.

Chapter Notes

As of now, I have up to Chapter Five written and at various stages of editing. I'll probably hoard them and release them once a week or so. Nineteen is a super rough estimate for chapter numbers, it could end up being more or less depending on where I do and don't break things up. Also, I took minor liberties with Bluetooth technology, because as far as I could tell, they are only capable of two-way communication. Not fourteen. Oops.

Massive thanks to mudkippy, who made this a thousand times more readable with her editing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Bilbo wakes in the morning, it is to an eerily silent house.

Bilbo blinks at the light filtering in through the windows, rolling over and groaning before he notices just how quiet it is. Far too quiet to still be holding twelve rowdy bikers and Gandalf.

“So they have left,” he muses. “Good riddance.”

But he doesn’t sound so pleased. The manila folder on the nightstand draws his gaze like a magnet to steel. He slowly drops his hand onto the smooth paper, gripped with indecision.

The sensible side of him thinks of his comfortable life. He thinks of his arm chair, his bookshelf, and the golden afternoon sunlight filtering through his mother’s flower shop. He thinks of the automated mist gently falling onto rows of daffodil and valerian, of the brass bell on the door, and of closing the register at the end of the day. Then he remembers Thorin’s stirring voice, calling him back to his earlier days, the wild years before he had settled in the shop. His heart fills to bursting with that same foreign longing, his resolve to stay weakening until-

“Oh, fuck it.”

Emboldened by his decision, he moves with startling speed, dressing quickly, with little regard for appropriate road trip dress. He yanks open his closet door, fishing out an old hiking backpack from his last great adventure (a backpacking trip across Europe in the summer before his final year of college.) The displacement causes an avalanche of shoe boxes, belts, and other odds and ends he has accumulated over the years.
He cobbles together a mental packing list as he goes, muttering under his breath as he rushes to make sure he has pants, socks, underwear, shirts. Enough for two weeks, that’s what he had in Europe. Would he need winter clothing? Better bring some. He doesn’t have a leather jacket, oh, he hopes that it’s okay.

He thinks of the bikers’ lustrous beards and tosses a razor into his bag. His beard has always come in as a weak, wispy thing and he has no patience for the jibes he would no doubt receive.

He runs through the list, dashing through his room to assemble the final pieces. Toothbrush, shampoo, dental floss. As he goes, he pulls his phone out, punching in the number for his most trusted and long-standing employee. “Hello, Mr. Gamgee?” he asks, the moment the line picks up.

Gamgee picks up, dependable as always, and greets him brightly. “Mr. Bilbo! What can I do for you?”

“Oh, excellent, you’re up. Listen, I’m going on a vacation, very impromptu, and all but--”

“A vacation? ’bout time! Say no more, trust the shop to me. I can take care of it good and fine.” Right, he had been saying that Bilbo needed to get out a bit more, go see things.

“That would be -- that would be wonderful, yes. I knew I could count on you. I cannot tell you how much I appreciate--”

“Oh hush, you don’t need to tell me. You’re welcome.” He sounds very smug.

“Okay good. Yes, very good. Well I must get going. Packing, you know,” Bilbo explains, sounding a bit harried himself.

“Yes, go on! Don’t fret one bit about the shop, me and my Sam will take care of it all. Be thrilled to! Take your vacation, the shop’ll be here when you get back.”

And with that, he hangs up, leaving Bilbo to his bulging pack.

“Oh, I’m missing something. I must be missing something,” he hisses in agitation. Does he have everything? Quickly, he revisits his mental list. Even if he doesn’t, it will have to do. He has yet to hear the roar of bikes coming to life, but it will be any second now, and wouldn’t this all be very embarrassing if they left without him?

With a grunt, a groan, and a few more undignified sounds, Bilbo hefts his pack onto his shoulders. It takes him too long to adjust to the extra weight. “Funny, I don’t recall this being so--” another grunt as he situates it comfortably “--heavy.” Still, on it goes, overstuffed in the exact same way it had been all those years ago for Europe.

Now all that remains is the contract. It sits, innocuous as ever, where Bilbo left it the night before. Although it promises him a one-fourteenth share of the profits, the money does not interest him. Neither does the prospect of being incinerated or shot, as is more likely to happen than surviving to reap the profits. But he has already surmounted his towering doubts. It is no small thing, signing the contract, but it feels like an inevitability. Bilbo signs it with a flourish, then shuts the folder, and leaves his room.

He practically inhales the single muffin that survived the desolation before sprinting out the front door. Not a moment too soon, either. Across the street and down in a below-street level parking lot, a rumbling begins, the purr of thirteen engines coming to life. A moment later, the rumbling builds to a deafening roar as engines start.
“Wait!” he shouts, dashing across the street wildly. It is a testament to his luck that he doesn’t get struck in crossing, and he makes it to the top of the narrow staircase unscathed. “Wait!” he shouts again, dashing down the steps to the small lot. “I signed it,” he pants, the sounds of the engines dying down as the bikers notice his presence. They all stare as he marches up to Balin and announces, “I signed the contract.”

Balin raises a brow, then takes the folder to check it over. “It seems you did. Well, everything here is in order.” Balin smiles, crinkling the lines of his face. “Welcome, Bilbo Baggins, to the company of Thorin Oakenshield.”

After that, things move remarkably quickly. Attached to Gandalf’s motorcycle is a small sidecar, barely enough to fit Bilbo and his things. Already he can see that it’ll be a tight fit, and he is concerned that, with his overstuffed bag, it will be impossible.

Before Bilbo can tackle that puzzle, Thorin beckons Bilbo over to where he stands with Gandalf. In his hands is a huge leather jacket. It shows signs of age in its faded seams, and from the look of expectation on their faces, Bilbo realizes it is for him.

“Oh, no. I really don’t think that that will be necessary,” he says pleadingly. He looks mostly to Gandalf, hoping that he might be the voice of reason. He can’t possible wear that thing! It looks huge, and seems as though it will function like a furnace under the hot summer sun. How they don’t get heat stroke in those jackets is a mystery to Bilbo, but he does not want to find out for himself.

“It is very necessary,” Thorin says, crossing his arms. “We have no time to find you another, so you can borrow this one. It’s one of my old jackets, and the smallest spare we have.”

“No, no. It’s not that. I just- do I need it? I really don’t think I need it,” Bilbo says.

“No, you will take it,” Thorin insists, “because if you don’t take it, the second you and Gandalf end up in a crash, you’ll lose the skin off of your arms.”

“Road burn’ll fuck you up real good,” agrees Bofur, who must have been eavesdropping, “can take your whole face off, leave ground beef behind instead of a human being.” The thought sends Bilbo reeling, and Bofur seems eager to pay witness to another fainting spell. Fortunately, Bilbo does not give him that satisfaction and remains firmly upright. Almost. He stumbles as Thorin thrusts the jacket into his arms and stalks away.

Bilbo stares down at the jacket like it’s a dead thing before shrugging it on. It is massive, engulfing him in such a way that must be comical, because he can hear Kíli and Fíli laughing at him from a few feet away. Bilbo finds the whole article offensive, and tugs the collar up so he can sniff it, sure that it will reek of sweat and motor oil. Perhaps if he has some real grounds for protest, he can talk Thorin down and make him see reason.

Upon inhaling deeply, though, Bilbo finds that he has made a grave mistake. It smells like sweat, yes. And gasoline. But neither is as unpleasant as he expected, and they are both overpowered by the warm smell of leather and some sharp spiced scent that must be Thorin’s.

Before he can truly assess what it is he is feeling, though, a pair of hands shove beneath his armpits and lift him bodily from the ground. Immediately, he kicks out, mortified at the indecency of it all. He is thirty-five years old and he will not be hefted like some child into a high chair. “Now, see here!” he shouts, and Fíli and Kíli laugh from behind him. Of course.

“Shit!”Fíli laughs as Bilbo’s leg connects with his shin.
“We got a live one, man! See, Uncle Thorin? He’s got some fight in him,” says Kíli as they deposit Bilbo into Gandalf’s sidecar. Bilbo thinks it would be very convenient if the pavement opened up to swallow him whole. He is not afforded that mercy, unfortunately.

“Now was that really necessary? I would have been able to find my way in just fine,” Bilbo sputters, though the effect is lost since he is still drowning in the overlarge jacket. The brothers laugh and high five each other, then amble away to their own bikes. “Honestly.”

He isn’t left to stew for very long, however. Soon enough Bofur is offering him a helmet while Gandalf is embroiled in discussions about their route with Balin and Thorin a few feet away. “Oh, uh, thank you,” Bilbo says, surprised as the display of good will.

“Don’t mention it,” says Bofur. He leans against the sidecar and watches the discussions with Bilbo. “Don’t know why they bother keepin’ him in those talks. Thorin can’t handle directions for shit. You saw that.”

Bilbo laughs, shuffling to get comfortable in the cramped sidecar. He remembers Thorin’s late arrival very well. With startling clarity, in fact. “You know, I think it took him a good three hours of wandering the streets to find it. I saw him coming out of the T station around six yesterday, and that’s just up the street.” Bofur laughs at that, an encouraging sound.

“Well, he’s lucky he’s pretty. ‘Guess we can’t all have brains, huh?’” The biker shrugs, watching the three break apart. When Gandalf makes his way over to them, Bofur pats the car and wishes Bilbo luck, then goes to ready himself.

Gandalf gives Bilbo some unreadable look, then smiles. Bilbo feels he has done something right, although he is not sure what it is.

“We are finally ready to leave,” Gandalf announces, mounting his matte grey bike with practiced ease. Bilbo watches as the others do the same, then begin to fuss with their helmets. “Glad to see Bofur got that helmet to you alright. I was beginning to think he’d forget just to see you and Thorin argue over it.”

The bikes begin to roar to life again - a deafening din that must startle the neighbors - and Bilbo secures his own helmet over his head. Again, he was expecting the helmet to stink of sweat, but it seems to be brand new.

“Gandalf, you sneaky bastard.”

Gradually, the company edges into the street. The parking lot spills out into Fairfield Street, a small side street adjacent to Newbury Street, and from there it’s easy to navigate to the larger roads.

There, they encounter the first problem of their journey.

Boston is known for its colleges, its sports teams, and its traffic. Today, it seems determined to prove the latter. Bilbo’s cheeks burn with shame, imagining the people staring at the strange little man sweating in the funny side car.

The stop-and-go traffic that means they cover little ground in far too much time. The bikers joke and laugh among themselves, able to hold conversations without the whipping of the wind to carry their words away. For Bilbo’s part, he remains silent or speaks to Gandalf.

Bilbo’s reticence is in part because of his discomfort. Underneath the heavy jacket, his knitted cardigan grows damp with sweat. The jacket is still roomy, which Bilbo thought would afford him more circulation, but in reality just makes the thing feel like an oven. Sweat rolls from every crease of
his skin, so that he swiftly starts to feel disgusting and longs for nothing more than a long, cool shower. His knees ache from their cramped position with his bag shoved gracelessly between his legs, and he thinks that the exposed skin on his neck might be getting sunburned. The helmet is heavy on his head, and combined with dehydration, he is started to get a headache.

Worst of all, though, he is bored. Gandalf and he run out of things to talk about rather quickly, which Bilbo finds surprising because Gandalf is the kind of man to always have something to talk about. Bilbo blames the silence that falls between them on him, though not uncharitably. Gandalf must have a good many things to think about, and long stretches of road are quite conducive to productive thought.

They pick up speed as congested city streets give way to crowded highways, which soon become simply cluttered. The idea of them actually covering ground raises Bilbo’s spirits, but does little to change his current, miserable condition. The wind cools him, and he no longer worries about roasting in his borrowed jacket, but that little relief hardly offsets his multitude of other issues. Soon the headache blooms into a dull, insistent pounding that shorts his patience. Bilbo is hungry, he desperately needs a bathroom, and he thinks he might die before they even reach Worcester if he doesn’t get something to drink.

Just as Bilbo thinks that he’ll meet his untimely end on I-90, the entire company seems to make a unanimous decision to pull over at a rest stop outside of Framingham. They turn with no sign of any communication made, making Bilbo wonder if he just missed some subtle signal, invisible to his untrained eye. When they come to a stop, he shakily climbs from the sidecar and his bladder protests. Several others are heading into the squat rest stop building, so Bilbo yanks his helmet off, sets it on his seat carefully, and trots off after them. Almost as an afterthought, he leaves the jacket folded on the seat as well, and is pleased to feel the air on his arms.

Urinating with ten near-strangers turns out to be an odd ballet of orbiting one another and staring resolutely at the ceiling. They laugh and joke all the same, which is oddly endearing, but doesn’t mean that Bilbo is going to let his eyes wander. They have little care for the sanctity of unspoken urinal laws, though, as they do not always afford a one-person gap between each urinal, forgivable only due to their sheer number. Still, Bilbo goes about his business quickly, keen to avoid seeing more than he would like to.

On the way out, Bilbo purchases a water bottle, downs it, and refills it again at the water fountain. To quell his hunger, he eats a quick, greasy meal, compliment of McDonalds. He now feels a bit more human, though his temples still throb and his back still aches. That is easily remedied with a quick stretch, and he groans in relief as his joints pop and his back cracks.

He returns to the motorcycles and those left to watch them. Gandalf gives him an amiable nod, but then rushes off to the bathroom himself, leaving Bilbo to find another source for his information.

Of those still outside, Ori seems the best option, as both the youngest and seemingly most benign. It helps that Ori is fussing with something on the inside of his helmet, something that looks like a small gadget. He looks up when Bilbo approaches, offering a, “Hey, Mr. Baggins,” in greeting.

“Please, Bilbo is fine,” he says.

“Alright, Mr. Baggins.” Bilbo sighs. “Did you… need something?” Ori asks.

“Hmm?”

“Well, you came over here lookin’ like you wanted something,” he explains, “so I thought you might.”
“Oh, right,” says Bilbo, “I was wondering how you all communicate when on the road. Is there some sort of… of radio in your helmets? Or…?” he trails off, allowing Ori to supply his own answer.

Ori smiles at him, tipping his helmet in his lap to show the inside off to Bilbo. “A bluetooth, right here in the helmet,” he tells Bilbo, pointing out the set-up. It’s a clumsy rig, but seems to be otherwise functional. “Set them up myself, actually,” Ori adds, “can use them for talkin’, but Kili helped me set ‘em up to play music, too. Partners up with your phone, lets you do whatever. Good thing, too. Listening to Thorin and Dwalin argue gets a bit old. I wish they’d use a different channel. We have private ones,” he adds sheepishly.

“Impressive,” Bilbo mutters, because it is. He still has difficulties operating his phone and his tablet, but with Frodo’s help he has become proficient enough to survive. Setting a system like this up seems like more than Bilbo could ever do.

“Do you not have one in yours?”

“What? Oh, no I don’t. But I-”

“I can get you one!” Ori offers brightly, “do you have a hundred dollars?”

Bilbo immediately hands Ori a small stack of twenty dollar bills. It’s only as he walks away that he realizes that that was a very silly thing to do, but it’s too late to change his mind. He’ll give Ori the benefit of the doubt, but if little comes of his investment, he’ll find a way to get his money back.

As he fusses with his bag in a vain attempt to make it smaller, though, he sees that Thorin must have witnessed to the transaction, as he has a few words (of encouragement? Warning? Bilbo can only imagine) with Ori. In the end, Ori keeps Bilbo’s money, but that could mean anything, so Bilbo goes back to resolutely trying to squish his bag down to a more reasonable size. If he keeps things up as they were on the first leg of the trip, he’ll need new knees by the time he’s forty.

So desperate are his attempts that he does not even notice Thorin until he is directly behind him.

“You overpacked.”

Already his mood is suffering under the combined weight of all of his ailments, so at the sound of Thorin’s voice, he puffs up, not unlike an irritated cat. He moves to the side, then turns, frowning up at him. “I most assuredly did not,” he huffs, sounding a bit petulant, “I brought only the essentials.”

“Let me see,” says Thorin.

“Let you-? Well, fine, but only to prove to you that you are being very silly.” He opens up the bag and steps aside, arms crossed as he watches Thorin smugly. *Checkmate.*

Thorin leans in to investigate, and lifts the first piece of clothing from the top.

“What is this?” says Thorin, holding up a well-tailored jacket like an oily rag.

“A sport coat,” Bilbo declares, who for his part looks at Thorin like he has just sprouted an extra head. “Surely you’re not so unrefined that you don’t know what a sport coat is.”

“A sport coat.” Thorin repeats incredulously.


“You don’t bring a-“ Thorin sighs. “You overpacked.”
“I did? But I’ve only brought the essentials. Why, I even left some quite important things at home!”
How unreasonable can one man be? Does he not see that Bilbo has already made sacrifices?

“Like what?” Thorin asks, slowly crossing his arms. It’s a challenge, one that Bilbo is willing to take.
Yes, he’ll make Thorin Oakenshield see reason. Bilbo Baggins is never overpacked. One can never be over prepared, especially on a road trip like this.

“Well, I’ve only brought one tie, and no leisure shoes. Oh, and I left my handkerchiefs, I really should go back for one, and—”

“Enough.” He drops the sports coat atop the pack. “Rid yourself of half of this or Dwalin will do it for you.” Thorin sounds so exasperated that Balin takes pity and leads Bilbo away.

“You see, laddie,” Balin says, “you’re better off bringing a few clothes and lots of Old Spice. No shame in doing it when we all do, too.”

Bilbo isn’t sure what offends him more: the idea of traveling with an unwashed band of bikers or the assumption that he wears Old Spice. He decides that it is both in equal measure. “I—” he stops short
when Balin places a hand on Bilbo’s shoulder.

“Best redefine your essentials, and quickly,” he advises, “my brother may have many talents, but he wears plaid and camo together.” Bilbo winces and trudges away.

Set a little ways away from the sprawling lot and building is a seating area. Shielded from view by ornamental cypress and dotted with planters of petunias, it’s an almost peaceful place. Still, the rush of the highway and clattering and murmuring from restaurants inside are ever present and break the spell. The trees’ boughs are laden with hundreds of round little house sparrows who chirp merrily at each other. Bilbo massages his temples and hefts his bag onto one of the tables.

Unpacking and repacking is a difficult and unpleasant job. Their first hour on the road beat some sensibility into him, but he still finds it difficult to set aside the comforts of 336. Everything is neatly folded, cardigans and button downs and fine leather shoes. He is alone, so there’s little shame in quickly shedding his current outfit in favor of one that will serve him better on the road. His niceties give way to soft band shirts and dark-washed jeans. Designer, naturally, but he doubts a brand name will gain him any notoriety. All of his more fashionable clothes, save for one nice outfit, are left abandoned on the table. His pack is now lighter; there are no fifty dollar colognes, no ties or jackets or slim, fashionable belts. He does pack his tablet, and his phone is a necessity, but otherwise there is little but the barest necessities.

He would like to say that it’s liberating, but it just makes him feel homesick.

He returns to the sight of twelve bikers lounging about, sitting on the curb or huddled in small groups. The smell of cigarette smoke hangs thick in the air, and Bilbo knows he will have to get used to it. While he has been known to occasionally indulge himself with a nice pipe when the day’s stresses are too much, the smell of cigarettes has always been abrasive to him, and he has never been particularly quiet about that. Even now, he knows his expression is disapproving, but if anyone notices, they don’t acknowledge it.

The leaders of their company, Thorin and Gandalf and Balin, are standing a little ways away from the rest of the group, pouring over maps to determine their route. Bilbo sets his bag back inside the sidecar, simultaneously reveling in the leg space and mourning the loss of his clothes.

Someone must take pity on him, because soon he finds himself absorbed into the largest group. How miserable did he look? He makes a mental note to reign in the outward expressions of his
homesickness, then lets himself live in the now a bit. They’re quite a vicious group, taking jabs at each other and receiving in turn. At first Bilbo wonders how they maintain any semblance of cohesion before realizing that it’s all in good fun. Mostly.

They play a lot of games, he finds, old ones that Bilbo remembers using to pass the time on long car trips. Most of them have more adult twists, a particular favorite being Fuck, Marry, Kill.

“You would fuck Scar?” asks Dori, tone accusatory. Glóin, whose answer is now being contested, makes a very rude gesture towards his naysayers.

“It has to be Kovu,” says Fíli adamantly, exasperated as though this is the simplest matter in the world. As if he has given this some thought. “You fuck Kovu, you marry Simba, you kill Scar. Scar is an asshole, but Kovu is like, way too hot for an animated lion. Like, they did not need to do that. And Simba is obvious. Who wouldn’t want to be fucking king?”

They break out into friendly bickering about lions and what happens if a king marries a man. “They’re a pair of queens!” puts an end to that discussion, murmurs of assent traveling through the group.


“You think of one, Bilbo,” says … Nori? He thinks it’s Nori.

“Oh, um. Gorbachev, Stalin, and Khruschev?” Bilbo offers.

“Gesundheit,” Nori says. The bikers break out into laughter, and Bilbo flushes. It’s then that Bilbo notices Thorin, Balin, and Gandalf have rejoined the group.

Balin offers a charitable, “nice try, laddie,” but it does little to make Bilbo feel better. Thorin announces their departure, and the group scatters to their own motorcycles. Bilbo learns that he can get into the sidecar just fine, thank you very much, Kíli and Fíli. He also finds that, with his considerably slimmed-down bag, he has plenty of leg room. That’s promising, he thinks, daring to hope that the next few hours will be more tolerable. The water bottle he now has will hopefully aid in that as well.

The whole set up jostles as Gandalf mounts his motorcycle. “You know,” Gandalf says, leaning in conspiratorially, “bets were placed on whether you would join us or not.” Disheartening. “Were they? Did you bet?”

Gandalf chuckles, patting his fat pocket. “I never doubted you for a second, Bilbo my boy.”

Bilbo thinks that he has had quite enough socializing for now. Mercy comes in the form of the bikes starting up one by one, cutting off any chance for more conversation.

It takes them another forty-five minutes to pass Worcester, but once they do, the trees close in around them. It’s a far more picturesque scene than the various urban centers they pass, each a sweltering grey hive of activity of its own, but not what Bilbo had been hoping for with this trip. Once the highway cuts into a forest, his spirits begin to soar.

All around him, the country whips by at breakneck speeds. Beside him is an indistinct blur of dense forest. Before him, only the road. The road and the backs of those before him, Thorin and Dwalin in
front, Balin behind. The sun is high overhead, now, beginning to sink towards the West. In a few hours, it will endanger their vision, but for now it simply beats on their necks. Bilbo had been expecting the heat to be more of a problem, and indeed, for awhile, it was. But now that they have picked up speed, he finds himself with little to complain about. In fact, he begins to enjoy himself.

A lack of inhibition throws everything into stark relief. Before, when he was bathed in the heady joy of his comfort, every edge was softened. Now, speeding down the highway, every angle is sharp. Every line crisp and clean. It is a different feeling, but it is not bad. Bilbo realizes that this is what it feels like to truly seize the day. That taking your life into your own hands is scary, and not always pleasant, but that there is a comfort in knowing that everything you have in this life you chose for yourself. His back may hurt and his knees may be cramped, but for what may be the first time in his life, he is free.

After half an hour the adrenaline rush dies down and with it, the rosy glow of his excitement. Now he is left alone with his thoughts and the sound of the wind rushing past his helmet. Where not long ago the trees excited him, towering and proud, now they simply bore him. There is no variation in the landscape but for the mile markers, which Bilbo takes to counting religiously. Somewhere along the line, they pass into Connecticut, and Bilbo counts his blessings. They shouldn’t be hitting Hartford traffic, at the very least.

Signs indicating Hartford’s approach begin to crop up, and within the hour they are in the small city itself. It’s still early in the afternoon, and so passing through is blessedly quick.

Finally, the cities die away again into a bucolic landscape. Some of the towns and villages they pass seem idyllic, but more and more Bilbo thinks that they look like worn-out, dirty places. Finally, as the sun dips so low to the horizon that it almost blinds them, the decision is made to stop in the next town they pass for dinner. And so the company of Thorin Oakenshield enters the tired town of Oxford, Connecticut.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that was a whole lot of nothing. On to adventure!
Chapter 3

Chapter by vilelithe (BroPorrim)

Chapter Summary

A gaggle of uncouth strangers joins anime club.

Chapter Notes

Here lie my hopes and dreams. From here on out mudkippy has had her fingers all over these, making them far more readable.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They sit three or four to a booth in IHOP, spread out among other, more respectable citizens. Bilbo realizes just how out of place he looks here, a miniscule five foot six among veritable giants. They are a loud group, and gruff, rough around the edges to the man. The moment they arrived, Kili and Fili grabbed him, frog-marching him to a table, joined a moment later by Ori. Belatedly, he realizes that he has been shunted to the kids’ table.

“IHOP?” Bilbo asks incredulously. He glances around at the formica-topped tables, the eating families uneasily eying the bikers, and the brightly colored booths. “Shouldn’t we be in a … a bar?”

“Don’t like bars,” Ori says.

“Thorin took our fake IDs,” Kili complains. It is then that Bilbo is reminded how young they are. Under his bad bowl cut and wispy beard, Ori must be barely eighteen. Fili and Kili are a few years older. Thorin’s contract had mentioned incineration as a possible threat, and yet he is willing to bring his young nephews along?

“Well,” says Fili, “you seem to get along famously with our uncle.”

“Fastest friend we’ve ever seen him make,” agrees Kili.

Bilbo sighs as he fishes out his phone and charger, plugging each into the outlet along the wall. “Is he always so…” Bilbo makes a vague hand gesture while Kili and Fili dive for the second outlet, wrestling over it until one of them comes out on top. To the victor goes the spoils, and soon Fili’s phone is charging on the table.

“Grumpy?” says Ori.

“Stubborn?” offers Fili, a mischievous glint in his eye. Bilbo fears that he has made a mistake in asking this.

“Douchebaggy?” says Kili, and the three devolve into laughter.

“I’m sure that you’re quite enjoying slandering your Uncle, but anything you say, I’ve already
thought it. I’ll take that as a yes, that he’s always so…” he repeats the vague gesture, and they laugh.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Kíli says, “but he’s never had it out for someone this bad.”

“Please, he doesn’t have it out for Bilbo,” says Fíli, to Bilbo’s great relief. “He probably just… I dunno, intimidated? We don’t deal with people like you all that often.”

Bilbo isn’t sure how to take that, but he thinks he understands. The soft life that Bilbo leads is as foreign to Thorin as Thorin’s life is to Bilbo. He would do well to remember that.

“Just give him time,” Fíli adds, “he may not come around completely, but he might warm up to you a bit.”

“And for what it’s worth, we like you,” Kíli adds.

Well that… that was surprisingly sweet. Bilbo starts to open his mouth to reply, but then he notices the waitress approaching out of the corner of his eye. As though he could make up for the (less than stellar) behavior of the rest of their group, he smiles apologetically at her (Louise, according to her name tag), and thanks her by name when she takes their drink orders. A glass of wine would be divine right about now, but the International House of Pancakes is not known for their drink menu, so he settles with a glass of water.

He finds a simple pleasure in listening to the three boys banter, with Kíli frequently reminding Fíli who is cleverer and Fíli countering by reminding his brother who is older. Bilbo laughs or plays mediator, mostly, but finds himself doing the latter more often. They’re good kids, he decides, and far friendlier than their uncle.

When their drinks arrive, the three take to trying to launch the ends of their straw wrappers at each other by blowing sharp puffs of air through the straws. Much of the fire is aimed at each other, but once or twice, Bilbo gets caught in the crossfire. Soon, the paper gets wet or torn, and that source of entertainment is gone.

After Louise comes for their orders (a burger and three orders of pancakes,) Ori shuffles out of the seat. “Where’re you going?” asks Kíli.

“Oh!” So he hasn’t been robbed? He is ashamed to say that he is surprised by the fact that Ori is actually going to follow through on his promise to get Bilbo set up with a radio.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” Ori promises, and then he’s gone, jogging down the street to reach a nearby Radio Shack.

“Where’s he going?” Kíli and Fíli ask, because God forbid they were out of the loop. “C’mon, tell us!” Bilbo laughs and fends off their increasingly demanding questions until Ori returns. The smile he offers, along with the bag looped around his wrist, means that he was successful. Sure enough, he hands Bilbo the change and opens the bag beneath the table. Kíli and Fíli stand up to lean over the table, nosey little brats that they are.

Inside is a headset not unlike the one Ori showed him earlier: just some speakers, wires, and a microphone.

“You’re going to put Bilbo on the channel?” Kíli asks, quicker on the uptake than his brother.

“That was the plan,” Bilbo says.
“Did you ask Uncle?” This time it’s Fíli.

“Well, no. I should have, though, huh?” Ori says.

“Yeah, but don’t do it. He’ll be pissed, but it’ll be worth it,” says Kíli, mischief glinting in his eyes.

“You sure?” Ori asks, now glancing nervously at the table where Thorin, Gandalf, and Balin are gathered. Bilbo does the same, sure that any blame will be placed squarely on him and Ori will be regarded as a victim. Absently, Bilbo wonders what Thorin would do if he really got angry with him. Would Thorin send him home?

Louise, sweet Louise, saves him from that disheartening train of thought, setting the best looking burger he has ever seen before him. His stomach loudly reminds him that meals have been few and far between today, and so he thanks Louise hastily and picks up his burger.

“Alright,” Ori says, “I can get you set up the next time we stop tomorrow, Mr. Baggins.” Bilbo had almost forgotten their conversation in his excitement over the food, but he remembers himself and thanks Ori politely. He doesn’t spare the brothers a glance as they fling food at each other, resolutely pretending not to see them misbehave over their breakfasts-for-dinner.

He makes short work of the meal, eating with a fervor he had quite forgotten in his years of comfort. If he ever went without a meal these days, it was only because he had been caught up in his work or caught in transit and delayed. Perhaps he’ll get reacquainted with hunger after all. It’s only once there is nothing but crumbs left on his plate that he sits back and tunes back into the conversation.

A jovial little noise alerts Bilbo to the fact that his phone is fully charged, so he unplugs it and offers the outlet to Ori. Bilbo must be having some good influence on them, because a moment later, Fíli offers the outlet to Kíli.

It’s not long until they’ve all eaten and paid for their meals, and then they are back onto the hazy streets. Bilbo starts preparing himself for the long haul, and works up a particularly good daydream in which he knocks his insufferable cousin down a peg with some carefully arranged flowers.

They’re not even out of Oxford when they stop again. This time it’s in a wide, flat patch of dirt just before a small bridge over a swift and muddy river. The spot is made more for hunters’ trucks than their bikes, but serves their purpose well enough. Off come the helmets, and everyone is staring at Gandalf and Bilbo. He’s about to ask what’s wrong when Thorin comes storming over.

“Thorin,” Gandalf says, attempting to placate Thorin.

“Absolutely not!” Thorin snaps, “I will not be indebted to another one of their family.”

“Now, now,” Gandalf chides, “don’t be unreasonable, Thorin. It’s a lovely place full of-”

“Arrogant, stuck-up assholes with their heads shoved so far up their-”

“You really are a poor judge of character if you think that every-”

“We’re not going! Never again will I rely on one of them.”
“I assure you that Elrond and Thranduil are nothing alike, save for their-”

“For their what? Their name? Their choice in profession? Their-”

“I have had enough of this-” Gandalf says, and he swings his leg over the seat of his motorcycle suddenly.

“Wait,” Bilbo asks, sitting up again, “where are you going?”

“To seek the company of the only one around here who can see reason,” he snaps, “myself!” And then he’s gone, trudging through the trees and out of sight. The only sound to be heard in the stunned silence is the crack of sticks and rustle of leaves, growing fainter with distance. Thorin marches off in the opposite direction. He crosses the street and stops to lean against the railing of the bridge. The others are content to mingle quietly, but Bilbo still watches him. There’s a quick spark, lighting the inside of Thorin’s cupped hand momentarily, then the pinpoint glow of a cigarette, smoke curling from its tip.

“Mr. Baggins?” That’s Ori, now standing beside the sidecar where Thorin had, Radio Shack bag in hand. “We’ve still got light, and it’ll probably be a while before those two get settled down. I can get you set up now? Only, Thorin seems a bit pissed, so you might just want to stick to listening for now.”

“Oh, sure,” he says, blinking as though he’s woken up from a dream, “that’d be divine, actually. I could use something to keep me busy during the ride.” Bilbo offers his helmet up, and Ori leans against the sidecar. Every so often Bilbo peeks over his shoulder. Ori is carefully carving small channels into the foam inside with a pocket knife, grooves just large enough to fit the radio’s components. It seems like delicate work, and Bilbo doesn’t want to disturb that peace.

Fíli and Kíli don’t seem willing to afford Bilbo the same kindness. They must have gone wandering off into the woods, as they burst from the tree line noisily. While the other members of the company are accustomed to their loud entrances, Bilbo is not, so his is the only eye they catch. Frantically, they wave him over, so he sighs and extricates himself from his perch in the sidecar. “Come on,” they tell him before turning back into the woods. Unwisely, Bilbo follows them. The way they murmur to each other a few feet ahead of him has Bilbo suspecting mischief.

“Well, what is this about?” he asks, not pleased with the lack of an explanation.

“We heard screaming,” says Fíli.

Bilbo raises a brow. “Screaming?” The forest is thin, but he is still careful as he picks through the underbrush behind them.

“From a house,” says Kíli.

“A house.” Bilbo doesn’t believe them, but still wanders in to what he expects is a poorly executed prank.

“Yes- oh come on, Mr. Baggins,” Kíli groans as Bilbo trips over an errant branch.

Bilbo rolls his eyes, jogging to catch up with them. “I’m coming, I’m coming.”

He hears the first scream before he sees the house, along with indistinct, male shouting. His heartbeat quickens. Ahead of them, the trees open up into a yard full of desiccated grass and old tires. The house itself is nothing extraordinary, grey with two stories and a bilco door into the basement. The doors are flung open, the space beneath them yawning, and from them issues another thin scream.
The words are still indistinguishable, but the anguish is clear.

“What do we do?” Bilbo asks, panicked and looking wildly between Fíli and Kíli.

“Well, the door is open,” Kíli suggests. “And you are a burglar.”


And that is how he finds himself staring into the cobweb laden depths of a cool basement. The metal doors are rusted, their grey paint chipped. There’s nothing for Bilbo to hold on to as he descends the thin, concrete steps, so he makes his way slowly and carefully.

Through the open bilco door and down the set of stairs is a tight little passageway. Bilbo treads carefully towards the darkened room beyond. Little light spills into the short hall, and all Bilbo can see within the room is the bright square of a television. The inner door into the basement room is open as well, presumably to allow fresh air in, so it’s easy for Bilbo to sneak in unnoticed. The only light comes from a large TV on the opposite side of the room, illuminating the whole place in an eerie, blue light. It reveals poster-plastered walls and shelves of anime figurines staring dead-eyed into the room. They’re frozen in poses ranging from extreme to anatomically impossible, their brightly colored hair and clothing stuck fluttering in an unseen wind. An entire shelf is devoted to technicolor ponies, but Bilbo can’t imagine why.

He is unsettled.

He realizes that the screaming comes not from any woman in distress, but from the no-doubt expensive sound system littered about the room.

In the middle of the room sits a couch, and on that couch sits three silhouettes, one large, one small, and one that bridges the gap quite nicely. Perched on their heads are some poorly worn trilbies. The TV’s light casts shadows over the them as they bicker and shush each other, trying to wildly argue while still watch whatever is on the TV.

Though the room is eerie by itself, whatever is on the TV is the most frightening part of all. It’s some anime, all vibrant colors and larger breasts than could possibly be comfortable or necessary, subtitles displayed in a contrasting yellow on the bottom of the screen. Bilbo thinks of Frodo’s friend, Pippin, and wonders if he should warn Primula of bad influences. That is, if he can bear to think of this ever again. Frozen to the spot, Bilbo watches in abject horror as animated breast after animated breast defies every law of physics. For goodness sakes, Bilbo is gay and knows that breasts don’t move like that!

He is about to sneak his way back out, return and break the disappointing findings to Kíli and Fíli, when the shelves upon shelves of trinkets catch his eye again.

Determined to prove his mettle as a burglar, Bilbo creeps towards them. He has always been able to move quietly, even in his fashionable (and functional!) Merrells, and now is no different. He sneaks up to it, carefully perusing it for the shiniest and or/most expensive thing there. First he takes a paperclip, simply because it catches his eye and office supplies are always useful, but he knows that that is a poor prize from such a hoard, so he scans for something else. He finally settles on a large knife with dulled edges. Or, rather, a miniature sword with a small, yellow resin-cast gem set into the leather-bound wood of the blue hilt. When he picks it up, he is surprised by just how heavy it is, like the blade is made of actual steel. Pleased with his choice, he tucks the knife into the inside pocket of Thorin’s voluminous jacket. For a moment he feels guilty, thinking of how expensive it must have been. Stealing is wrong, he thinks. But from a hoard such as this, would they really notice?
He doesn’t feel so bad anymore when he feels a large and sweaty hand close over his mouth, yanking him away from the shelf. Bilbo shouts, but the sound is muffled. He tries to kick out, but loses his balance and falls flat onto his backside. The upside to this is that the hand holding him withdraws. The downside is that another pair of hands wrenches his arms behind his back, drawing a pained groan. His wrists are tightly bound together with some rough fabric with a thin metal plate glued to the front. Bilbo is only pleased he has the sense to turn his wrists outward so that the resulting loop is wider.

“What are you doing in my basement?” asks the first and largest of his captors.

“Florist,” Bilbo says dumbly, because apparently, his first defense mechanism is reverting to nonsensical statements.

“What?” asks the second.

“I think he said he’s a florist,” provides the third.

“Yeah. I’m a florist. I’m a florist,” he repeats, the second time entirely for his own benefit. Apparently, he needs reminding that he is not a burglar, and that his interests lie with dahlias and not thievery.

“He says he’s a florist.”

“I know, I heard, Tom.”

“Well, what do we do with him?”

Yes, that was the question, wasn’t it?

“Good question,” William says.

Bilbo knows where this is going. They’ll call the police, and Bilbo will get arrested, and that will be that. He’ll return to Newbury Street with a criminal record, never to hear from Thorin and Company again. Well, good riddance! But he could really do without sullying his perfect record. What would the neighbors say?

So deep was his despair that he did not even notice that his captors had made their decision. “Wait, excuse me, I do believe I missed that,” he says.

“You’re joining anime club,” William announces.

Bilbo blinks. “Excuse me?”

“Anime club.”

“Oh, no no, I’m not going to-“ Bilbo protests, but they pay him little mind.

“What’ll we watch?”

“Sword Art Online, man.”

“No way, Evangelion. It’s got my waifu in it.”

“Your waifu fucking sucks.”

“Now would you please just-” Bilbo tries again, but he can’t get a word in edgewise.
“Asuka does not fucking suck, she has a deep storyline.”

“Okay now that’s just-”

“Enough!” Bilbo shouts, “goodness, I cannot handle all of this arguing.”

“He said my waifu sucks,” one says, pointing a large, petulant finger at his friend.

Bilbo sighs. “Yes, I know. I was there.”

“Then-” whatever he has to say is cut short by Kíli’s arrival, no blessing in disguise.

“Bilbo? Heard you yelling, and Thorin found out that we-”

“No, Kíli-” Bilbo tries to warn him, but he is much too late. Within moments, Kíli is deposited beside Bilbo, bound similarly.

“Did you tell the others?” Bilbo asks.

“They should be on their way.”

With their backs against the back of the couch, they have front row seats to watch as every single member of their company wanders one by one down the stairs and into the basement. And, just like Kíli, each of them are quickly subdued, tied, and dropped in a pile where Bilbo and Kíli sit. Early on, Bofur suggests that Bilbo try and move off to the side, and now he’s glad of it, wincing as Bombur is tossed heavily onto the growing pile.

Last of all comes Thorin, who at least lands a harsh blow to the stomach of one of their captors before he, too, is handcuffed and tossed unceremoniously into their midst.

The three eye their groaning pile of captives with malicious glee.

“Shit, man, that’s thirteen new members for the Anime Club! Officially recognizable, now.”

“So what do we watch?” says one.

“Evangelion? C’mon, William, it’s so deep. It’s got so many layers,” says the other.

“Dude, Tom, fuck no. Bert, please tell me you have a better suggestion,” says William.

“Sword Art Online!” crows Bert.

“Or we could watch hentai,” suggests Tom.

“Oooh no,” Bilbo whispers in horror. He recognizes that word, and now he thinks he really needs to have that talk with Primula. He leans against the couch to pull himself up, better to address his captors. “No. You really, really do not want to watch hentai. Not with this lot.”

This seems to throw the three for a loop. They murmur to each other, glancing doubtfully from Bilbo to his companions. “And why not?” asks Bert.

“Yeah, why not?” parrots Tom. Stall. He needs to stall. Bilbo holds onto the tremulous hope that some of his more martial companions are developing an escape plan.

“Well. You see, they’re, uh,” through the slim cellar window, Bilbo sees a pair of heavy boots flash past. *Gandalf. Help.* “They’re all gay.”
Out of the corner of his eye, Bilbo sees a flash of something pained and panicked on Thorin’s face, but the expression is swiftly replaced by one of realization. He seems to have caught on, but unfortunately, the others are not so quick on the uptake.

“What?” gasps William, at the same time as Gloin.

“Oh yes. A huge band of homosexuals. Should have seen them at Pride last week,” Bilbo tells them, then whistles lowly. The three look among themselves, horrified.

“Did he say that we’re all gay?” asks Oin.

“Yeah, we’re not gay, you’re gay!” shouts Kíli.

“Yeah, I love tits!”

“Tits and pussy,” Dwalin says, “girl things.”

“Well, technically the two aren’t mutually inclusive,” says Fíli, taking Bilbo quite by surprise. He has little time to spare wondering about Fíli’s understanding of gender politics, though, when he’s still trying to save them all from… whatever ill fate might befall them.

Their captors share a skeptical look. His plan seems to be slipping between his fingers, no thanks to the bikers, and he doesn’t know what else he can do to stall.

There’s a thud and a muffled “oof” as Thorin kicks Kíli in the side. They all fall silent for a moment, before realization dawns on all of them at once. They break out in shouting again, confirming their rampant homosexuality.

“I’m gay! I’m so gay.”

“Oh yeah, cocks!”

“I’ve sucked dicks! Sucked dicks as big as my arm!”

“Yeah, I love cocks, I love huge cocks. The biggest!” Oh, Kíli.

“I love dicks!”

Well, at least they’re enthusiastic. Bilbo thinks that they might be overdoing it, but their captors seem convinced, too.

Not for the first time, Bilbo realizes that he is surrounded by idiots, and questions what that makes him.

Unfortunately, his companions are a bit too enthusiastic, and the shrewdest of their captors eyes Bilbo skeptically. “Hold on, gentlemen,” he says, “I think this pleb is trying to pull one over on us.” Shit.

“What? You mean he’s trying to get out of anime club?” asks Tom.

“It would seem so, gentlemen,” says William with far more gravity than the situation necessitates.

“Well, we should-” Bert begins, before a shrill voice from upstairs interrupts him.

“Billy?” a woman calls, “Billy, I made pizza bagels for you and your friends. Stop watching cartoons and come eat them while they’re still warm!”
“Mom!” William shouts, “can’t it fucking wait? I’m in the middle of something important.”

Bilbo cringes, and can’t help but hiss, “You talk to your mother like that?”

Before William can reply, the woman yells, “Billy! Pause the cartoons and come eat your dinner!”

“Fine! God!” he yells back, “and it’s called anime.” He huffs, then mutters, “stupid gaijin. C’mon, guys. We can get back to this later.” The two nod and follow William up the stairs.

And just like that, Bilbo and the Company are left alone, their only light coming from the glow of the TV screen. They all begin to struggle with their bonds, Bilbo included. When he was bound, he made sure to take any measures he could to give his wrists room, so now he has the wiggle room to loosen his knot more easily. The letter opener’s blade is dull, but he’s able to force the tip into the knot and loosen it that way. Whatever it’s made out of is good metal, and doesn’t bend or snap when he begins to wiggle it in the knot. Soon enough, it’s loose enough that he can pick it apart with his fingers.

The headband falls to the floor, its hard front clattering softly on the hard floor. Gandalf bursts into the room, looking immensely pleased with himself. “That was you!” Bilbo says, shocked. And a bit worried. Did Gandalf hurt his voice pitching it up so much?

“Indeed it was. We have little time, so hurry.”

With an immediacy quite unlike him, Bilbo drops to Thorin’s side. Getting Thorin to cooperate is no small feat, not when he’s still struggling like he can break through the metal through sheer force of will. It leaves Bilbo nudging him until he gives up and smacks Thorin’s arm. “Will you hold still! You’re hurting yourself,” he scolds, sympathetically feeling the metal cutting into Thorin’s wrists.

The paperclip from earlier is still in his pocket. Oh, thank God for his hoarding tendencies, especially when it comes to office materials. It takes only a moment to bend the paperclip into a usable shape, the ends of which he slips into the lock of Thorin’s handcuffs.

“What are you doing?” Thorin asks, squirming quite unhelpfully to peer over his shoulder. Bilbo sees that Gandalf has begun freeing the others.

“What do you think? I’m picking the lock. Hold still!”

“You pick locks.” He phrases it as a statement -- incredulity was likely beneath him -- but Bilbo heard the inquiry beneath.

“Of course I can,” Bilbo says, as though it’s a common skill. “Now please, stop talking so I can concentrate.” He fusses with the paperclip, wiggling it in the lock until the mechanism gives a soft click and the first cuff comes off. “Okay, go. Quickly, now. I’ll take care of the other one once we are out of this hellhole,” he promises, shooing Thorin away so he can start working to free Bombur.

Each they free goes on to help another, and so they make quick work of the bonds. Once all are free, they pour out through the bilco doors, dashing through the woods and back to where they were parked. Somewhere in the woods a decision must have been made to leave immediately, just in case the police actually are called, as they wordlessly mount their bikes and pull back onto the road. They navigate the town’s streets until they can return to the highway.

While they drive, the sun drops low, then finally gives up fighting the good fight. Day becomes night, but the stars have yet to come out.

This time, they drive for nearly forty-five minutes before Thorin signals for them to stop. As a unit,
they pull into the parking lot of a Super 8 motel tucked a few hundred feet from the highway. 
Overhead, the street lights buzz and flicker, casting the cracked lot in a sickly yellow. Light spills 
from the lobby’s door as Balin and Gandalf enter first to settle the financial side of things. Outside, 
the company laughs and smokes in the humid heat until the air smells like smoke and stagnation. 
Bilbo sheds Thorin’s leather jacket and fishes the paper clip turned lock pick from his pocket. Then 
he catches Thorin alone, absentbly rubbing his thumb against some small scratch on his motorcycle.

“Let me take care of this,” Bilbo offers, catching the dangling end of the handcuff and tugging 
lightly. For a moment it looks as though Thorin will refuse, or at the very least complain, but he does 
neither. Instead he sighs and turns to face Bilbo, offering up his still-cuffed wrist. Out comes the 
paper clip and Bilbo sets to work.

“Where did you learn-”

“Shh! Concentrating,” he hisses. Thorin looks suitably cowed, so Bilbo continues his work. “Aha!” 
The lock clicks, and the second cuff falls away. Thorin moves to pull his hand away, but Bilbo grabs 
it, turning it to inspect the damage to his wrist in the dying light. “You shouldn’t have been thrashing 
like that, look at this! You nearly rubbed yourself raw.”

“That’s not the only thing he rubs--ooof!”

Leave it to Thorin’s nephews to ruin a perfectly good moment. He and Thorin hadn’t argued once! 
Any openness is gone, now, locked away and guarded jealously. Bilbo bemoans Kíli’s terrible 
timing, and doesn’t pity him even as he rubs his shoulder.

“Your left hook is getting better, Uncle,” he says, and from the look on his face, another unsavory 
joke is coming their way. “I daresay you’ve been-”

“Fíli,” Thorin snaps, effectively cutting off 
and ignoring Kíli’s impending joke, “quit gaping. Are 
you here to bother our burglar or did you need something?” Bilbo doesn’t notice it until Thorin 
points it out, but Fíli was watching the two of them with an odd expression, concentrated yet soft. It’s 
gone the moment Thorin snaps at him, replaced with a sly grin.

“Right. Can’t it be both, dearest Uncle Mine?” Fíli teases. “We just want to know how Mr. Baggins 
knows what hentai is. A connoisseur yourself, maybe?”

“No! I just employ teenagers,” he lies. Pippin Took is more of a helpful loiterer.

“What is hentai?” That’s Thorin, and ohhh no. Nope, he is not going to be the one to tell Thorin 
Oakenshield what hentai is.

“All anime porn, uncle.” Kíli saves him the trouble and looks glad to do so.

“Oh.” Thorin looks disgusted, looks disgusted with Bilbo and oh god, abort, abort. Fíli and Kíli titter 
to themselves, dancing away before things really go south. “And you…”

“No! No. Dear god, no, there’s better porn than that. I mean, I- oh, god” His head drops heavily to 
rest in his hands, his cheeks alight with humiliation. What is he saying? How could this get any 
worse?

Easily, apparently. When he dares to glance back at Thorin’s face, it’s a mix of approval and 
frustration. Bilbo would be fine with the just the latter, but the former softens his features in a way 
that Bilbo just isn’t ready for. He stares resolutely at the sunny patch of sunflowers in the planter 
beside the motel.
“You did well today. Talking yourself out of that mess,” Thorin tells him gruffly. “Glad to know you’re as good at getting out of trouble as you are at getting into it. Just please be more careful. And don’t listen to my nephews, they’re both little shits,” he says affectionately. “They’ll get theirs. But you. Next time you get into trouble, I will not risking any members of this company to save you. Understood?”

Bilbo nods, cheeks burning with shame. He tries to formulate an apology, but finds himself only coming up with excuses. Blaming Fíli and Kíli would do little, he thinks. And really, he should have known better. “I’m—”

Rescue comes in the form of Gandalf and Balin returning, laden with room keys. Once again they split into their threes and fours, Bilbo now apparently graduated from the kiddie corner to room with Bifur, Bofur, and Bombur. They have been decent enough (or incomprehensible) to Bilbo, so he’s pleased with the change. The brothers are nothing but hospitable, albeit in their own unrefined way, and Bilbo suspects that some of this hospitality might have to do with his quick thinking today. Though perhaps it’s just pity, as it was his fault that they ended up in trouble in the first place. Oh, he would have to apologize for that, wouldn’t he? No matter, he isn’t so proud that he couldn’t apologize once or twice.

They all settle down easily, their bags tucking in one corner and beds parsed out. They all go about their business, chatting and getting ready to sleep.

For Bilbo, a nightly ritual is a precious thing, the sanctity of which must be laboriously upheld. There’s a certain calming effect to the repetition involved in brushing his teeth. To the refreshing feeling of the day’s sweat and grime swirling down the drain. To the last lines of poetry from the glow of his tablet, Frost’s gentle words easing him towards sleep.

Their first bizarre bout of trouble is behind them, but it was enough to make Bilbo realize one thing: this trip would be anything but straightforward.

Chapter End Notes

Trolls, geddit?
Chapter 4

Chapter by vilelithe (BroPorrim)

Chapter Summary

The Company of Thorin Oakenshield proves just how refined and civil they are.

Chapter Notes

Things happen!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By mid-morning, they have a new addition to their company.

Bilbo notices the man on his frequent and wistful glances back east, towards his flower shop and creature comforts. The stranger is on a sleek black bike — unlike the bulkier chrome bikes of the company — with Washington plates. He is different from the usual collection of semis and family cars, so Bilbo watches him in Gandalf's side mirror.

He is still behind them an hour later. Still, Bilbo says nothing, as this is not all that strange, either. The roads are fairly empty at this time of day, late in the morning. The calm before the lunch-rush storm. They just have similar routes as the man, that is all.

And when they pull over in a small commuter lot, the strange motorist continues on. As he passes, Bilbo notices a red, writhing dragon embroidered on the back. If he hadn’t noticed the dragon, that might have been that. But the dragon caught his eye, so Bilbo watches as the man continues for a hundred yards or so, then pulls over in the breakdown lane. He pulls off his helmet, but Bilbo can discern little of his features from this distance. The figure lifts his hand to his head, presumably on the phone.

Bilbo leaps out of the sidecar and stretches his legs, watching the biker out of the corner of his eye. The man finishes his call and drives off, but Bilbo remains intrigued.

“Do jacket decorations mean anything?” he asks Gandalf.

“Hm?” Gandalf lowers his water bottle.

“On the back, I mean,” he pats his own back to illustrate, “we don’t have any, so I was wondering if that’s really just a made-up thing.”

“Oh, no. We are simply attempting to travel in secrecy. In the old days, the Durins were known by their raven.” It fits, the image of Thorin and a raven. Both were equally dark and ill-mannered.

“And you?”

Gandalf's bushy eyebrows press together like tectonic plates. “I am no common biker, Mr. Baggins.”
“What about a red dragon? Whose is that?”

This detail catches Thorin’s attention. He grabs Bilbo’s shoulders. “Where did you see that?”

“Well, just now,” Bilbo says, confused by Thorin’s reaction. But if he thought that Thorin’s initial reaction was strong, he was not prepared for what came next. “There was another man, on a motorcycle, following us for a while. He pulled over just up the way when we turned in here, made a call. He’s gone now, but—”


“We’re going!” Thorin shouts. “Quickly! Don’t drag your fucking feet.”

Even before Thorin gives the order, several of the others within earshot are already running back to their bikes, Thorin’s agitation reflected in their franticness. They are on their motorcycles in less than a minute, zipping down the highway at twenty miles per hour over the speed limit.

Now is as good a time as ever to test out the radio. “Gandalf, channel three, would you?”

Gandalf’s creaky voice fills his helmet as clearly as if they were talking at a rest stop. “Of course, my dear boy.” If he is surprised to hear Bilbo on the radio channel, it doesn’t show.

The app that Ori had him download the night before has a learning curve, and changing the channel to their designated private channel is difficult, but he succeeds after a moment of fumbling. The danger of dropping his phone is ever present, but Gandalf never seems unconcerned. He makes the switch one-handed and without looking.

Once they’re on the channel, Bilbo asks the most pressing question. “What’s going on?”

“The red dragon is Smaug’s insignia. It’s likely that we had the unfortunate pleasure of encountering a scout of his. I highly doubt the man himself has left the relative comfort of Erebor itself, but one of those under his command may soon be upon us.”

The only thing Bilbo knows about the man is that he likes to use flamethrowers. It is enough to frighten him.

“So what do you propose, Gandalf?” It’s Thorin, and goodness, isn’t this channel supposed to be private? As Bilbo will come to learn, switching to channel three is just an invitation for eavesdroppers.

“Head to Greenwich,” Gandalf instructs. “Belle Haven, mind you. Old Greenwich will do us little good. I must make some calls.”

On the main channel, Thorin relays orders. “We’ll be heading towards Greenwich.” It sounds as if he says it through gritted teeth. “The Belle Haven area. I’ve got no address yet, but apparently Gandalf has something planned.”

Things remain quiet for the next fifteen minutes, until a roaring mass of bikers appears over the hazy crest of the last hill. “Mr. Baggins, how many?” Thorin asks. For a moment Bilbo wonders why the task is his. Then he remembers that he’s not useful anyway, and he’s not driving. Bilbo turns in his seat, craning his neck to count.


“Speed up to ninety-five. Fill the passing lane, too. Mr. Baggins, get Gandalf off the phone. I do not
want to miss the exit now that we’ve got company,” Thorin growls. The task is easy enough; Bilbo needs only to tap Gandalf’s leg to get his attention. Then he taps his helmet. Gandalf nods and moves his head as if he is talking, probably to Thorin.

Whatever plan they make is private, leaving the rest of the company to simply trust in their judgment. Gandalf and Bilbo accelerate to drive parallel to Balin, who occupies the passing lane. Ori moves behind them, while some of the rougher members of the company move to the rear of the pack.

The sidecar vibrates horribly at this speed and Bilbo cannot unlock his fingers from their death grip on his pack. He can easily imagine cresting the next hill and running over someone’s burst tire, then spinning out of control and dying horribly in a fiery crash. He mutters a quick Hail Mary through chattering teeth on the off chance that Lobelia’s piety has something to it.

“They’re twenty yards behind us!” Dwalin shouts.

“Don’t shoot!” Gandalf commands.

“They’ll hit us at this range!”

Bilbo chances another look over his shoulder. One of the dragon bikers is holding a gun in one hand, slowly lowering it to aim at the tail members of the company.

“They have guns?” Bilbo squeaks, unable to help himself.

He and Gandalf zoom under an overpass and red and blue lights flare to life from beneath the bridge. Sirens scream as three police cars pull onto the highway just behind their pursuers. Angry swearing pours into the radio channel, but Bilbo is relieved. They’re saved! They’re going to be arrested, no doubt, but they’re saved! Better to spend a few days in jail or pay a speeding fine than to die in a fiery crash.

“Don’t pull over,” Gandalf instructs, much to Bilbo’s horror. The lead police car positions itself between the last member of their company — Dwalin — and the red dragon bikers. They are forced to slow down while the company speeds on.

“As far as the police are concerned, there were only ever fifteen speeders,” Gandalf says. “I simply called in a few favors.”

The rest of the company attempts to pry further, but Gandalf refuses to answer.

Without a tail, they are now able to drive respectable five miles per hour above the speed limit. Soon they come upon their exit, slowing again in the residential area. The residents out watering their verdant lawns or walking their perfectly-groomed dogs look upon the bikers with distaste. The bikers do not match the scenery of a respectable town like Greenwich. Belle Haven is made up of gated communities and brick sidewalks, of neatly trimmed hedges and uncluttered gardens. Bilbo drinks in its sprawling estates and towering mansions and cute little shops.

The thunder of the bikes is like a hammer to a mirror, shattering the peace. They rumble through main streets and side roads, passing orderly homes until they reach a set of grand wrought-iron gates and come to a halt.

Gandalf pulls his helmet off and shakes his long grey hair out. He leans over and says his name into the intercom sticking out of the ground. The gates glide open and they all roll up the long, cobbled driveway. As they round the corner, the glossy hedges reveal the house.

It epitomizes Belle Haven’s affluence. It is a sprawling mansion, with three floors and three visible
balconies, including on jutting out to cover the driveway. The soft yellow marble walls stretch as far as he could see. He can see many well-dressed people watching curiously from the windows.

A tall man, aging with grace, waits before the arched walnut doors, his hands neatly folded over his designer suit.

Gandalf quickly turns off his bike and takes the stairs two at a time to embrace the man. Gandalf greets him as Elrond and Bilbo presumes he is their host.

Now that they are safe, Bilbo allows his eyes to wander around the property. There are acres of well-manicured lawn, but around the trees and closer to the house, there are gardens

Bilbo’s tastes lie more towards rustic gardens, the small patches of yard that burst with bright flowers, overgrown herbs, and bird houses. But Rivendell’s gardens are another beast entirely, one that Bilbo can appreciate just as well. It is pristine. It’s well kept, clean cut, beautifully organized. There are small, private benches tucked between lattices of climbing roses and among prismatic flower beds. And oh, the flowers. The flowers.

Gandalf and Elrond turn towards the rest of the bikers, the sudden movement breaking Bilbo’s reverie. Elrond spreads his hands and says, “All are welcome here.”

Thorin swaggers up from the back of the company. “Gandalf! We need not stop here if our pursuers are gone.”

“He has offered you food,” Gandalf says with no small amount of asperity.

Bilbo hears the creak of leather and thump of heavy boots as first Bombur, then his brothers and half the company, get off their bikes, sheepishly shuffle past Thorin, and go through the door behind Elrond.

Despite the enormity of the house, they still must share rooms. Again, Bilbo is roomed with Bifur, Bofur, and Bombur. He doesn’t mind as much this time, since each room has several trundle beds. Bilbo beats out all three brothers to the shower, where he takes a long soak before changing into more respectable clothes and rushing out to the gardens.

Angelica, amaryllis, azaleas. Goldenrod and gardenias, calla lilies and rows of smiling petunias. Bilbo sits on an ivy-bound stone bench and lets the sun warm his skin. Lets the scents wash over him, full and sweet, spiked with the scent of brine.

He wanders for about an hour, discovering new surprises around every corner. Some, like finding a young couple tongue deep in each other’s throats, were not so pleasant. But mostly, Bilbo finds himself the most at peace he had been for days. It is the simple peace of being among the flowers again, and it makes him terribly homesick.

Rivendell and Cambridge are similar, but the comparison is lacking just enough that Bilbo can’t draw comfort from it. Because Rivendell Estate is the stuff of postcards. A place with great depth and great history, but little soul. It is sterile marble and straight edges. It’s the sort of place that one appreciates, but not where one should live. It’s suitable to write a letter on the back of, to say “look where I have been!” To stick a stamp on and mail it, and at the end of the day return to a warmer and homier place.

Dori finds him sitting under a trellis watching the sun set and informs him it is time for dinner. Bilbo is glad he has already showered and changed. Dori leads him back into the gargantuan house, stopping several times at intersections, until they arrive on the balcony overhanging the driveway.
Bilbo doesn’t complain, as it gives them a lovely view of the front gardens. The bees have been replaced by fireflies, now, and decorative lamps have been lit along the periphery of the property. Bilbo is seated at a small, round table with Gandalf, Thorin, and Balin as well as Elrond; the rest of the company take up one end of a long, rectangular table. The other end is filled by a small petting zoo of college-age kids.

Bilbo wonders why he is at this table, but he is simply happy not to be at the kid’s table — even if his new seat is the dangerous position between Thorin and Elrond, whose dislike for each other is palpable.

The cooks bring out the main course: paneer with broccoli and celery, served alongside an arugula salad and a delectable Sauvignon Blanc. Bilbo waits impatiently for the others to be served.

Thorin does not bother and, for a moment, Bilbo wishes he, too, could have that sort of disregard for manners.

It is only after Bilbo has inhaled his meal and some of the dessert — orange slices topped with crushed olives, oil, and fennel seeds — that he sits back and listens to what Elrond and Gandalf speak of.

“…White Council has wondered where you are,” Elrond is saying.

“Enjoying a comfortable retirement,” Gandalf says.

“You have never enjoyed a comfortable life.”

Gandalf merely shrugs. *It’s nice to know he’s this mysterious with everyone.*

“Captain Galadriel is flying in the day after next, if I can tempt you to stay.”

Gandalf eyes his empty plate. “Perhaps.”

Thorin says, “We will leave tomorrow.”

Bilbo — with his clean hair and full stomach — resents Thorin’s urgency.

“Stay awhile so that we may ensure Smaug’s agents are not skulking about,” Elrond says.

Thorin leans forward. “Our company is more than capable of dealing with Smaug’s lackeys.”

“There’s no sense in risking members of your company when there is no cause,” Gandalf chides.

“A few guns-for-hire are nothing,” Thorin snaps. “We can easily outride them.”

Bilbo remembers Thorin getting lost on the T and thinks, while they may initially outride the bikers, the bikers will certainly catch them.

“I never knew Thorin Oakenshield to be reckless,” Elrond says. “What need drives you?”

“We have urgent business with our southern chapter,” Balin butts in. “We want to reach Atlanta as quickly as possibly.”

For the first time, Elrond’s gaze turns to Bilbo. “Does it concern the newest member of your company?”

“That is company business.” Bilbo basks in Balin’s inclusive tone. “It doesn’t concern the police.”
“Former,” Elrond says.

“Or a cousin of Thranduil,” Thorin spits.

Elrond sighs. “That I cannot contest, although we rarely speak. We are … fundamentally different.”

“Curse your stubbornness,” Gandalf says to Thorin. “Thranduil could prove useful to us.”

“I would not ask his help if we were the last humans on Earth.” Thorin grips the chair’s arms, focused unblinkingly on Elrond. “I would not give him shelter if he were dying or piss on him if he were burning.”

Bilbo cringes at such strong words being bandied about the table, especially about family and especially since Thorin appears ready to fling him into the Sound to get at Elrond.

“This is a lovely house,” Bilbo says, lifting his wineglass. “A toast, to your beautiful gardens. I’m a florist by trade and I understand how difficult it is to make dahlias to bloom in the shade.”

“At least some of us have an appreciation for the finer things in life,” Elrond says after a long silence. He, too, raises his glass to return Bilbo’s toast. Gandalf and Balin join in. Thorn glares at all of them before pushing his chair out with a horrid screech and marching over to the main table. Bilbo, distracted by food and his position, has not paid much attention to it and is horrified to look over and find Elrond’s guests gone and half the table on fire. Fili dances on the other half and Bombur sits in the wreckage of two chairs. Dwalin, Nori, and Glóin are throwing knives at wine glasses set on the railing. Someone — Ori, no doubt — has gotten into the sound system, which quietly disseminates Metallica into the midsummer air.

At Thorin’s passage, some of the more sober members of the company shamble out with him.

“Bikers,” Gandalf mutters, with mixed exasperation and affection. One look at Elrond’s face tells Bilbo what he thinks.

Bilbo decides to leave before he can be held culpable for anything that happens later in the night. He says goodnight to Elrond and Gandalf before stumbling his way back to the bedroom, sloppily undressing, and collapsing into bed.

Chapter End Notes

Thorin is a hot mess and only gets worse.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

The Company thoroughly enjoys Rivendell’s various amenities. Thoroughly.

Chapter Notes

Dwarf butts, and the company gets its last taste of peace for some time.

Bilbo is the first of their party to awaken, but not the first in the house. When he heads to the kitchen for tea and toast, he finds it swarmed with Elrond’s guests from the night before, now dressed in business attire and fighting over several Keurigs. Bilbo flees to the relative quiet of the gardens as soon as his toast is properly brown.

He finds a nook close to the house, tucked just out of sight beneath the boughs of a fragrant cypress. He’s content to sit on the cushioned bench, watching the birds and butterflies flit between plants.

The unseasonably cold morning had prompted Bilbo to wear Thorin’s massive jacket. The temperature rises with the sun, turning to something a bit more seasonable that has him removing the jacket. As he does so, he feels something long and hard in the inside pocket. Frowning, he pulls out the knife he had stolen and turns it over contemplatively. What was I thinking? he wonders, the musing more a sharp reprimand. Me, a burglar?

If stealing this knife went so poorly, how does he expect to steal from Smaug himself? And Rivendell only serves to remind Bilbo of the creature comforts he left behind in Boston. His heart aches with a terrible yearning for his shop and his arm chair.

Just as Bilbo’s thoughts turn for the worse, Fíli and Kíli arrive, sliding into the comfortable patio chairs and propping their dewy, grass-covered shoes on the short, glass table set nearby. Bilbo tries not to cringe at their manners.

“Well don’t you look right at home,” Kíli teases, gesturing boldly at the garden around them.

The blade in Bilbo’s hand immediately catches Fíli’s attention. “What’s that?”

“A knife,” Bilbo says. “Picked it up at that house.”

“It’s more of a letter opener.”

“We can make it sharper,” Kíli says, snatching it from Bilbo’s hand and looking it over. “Good metal. Stay here. D’you still have that whetstone?” The latter is directed at his brother, who nods.

The two rush off, leaving a bewildered Bilbo in his wake. He is glad to see that yesterday morning’s
excitement hasn’t shaken them. It’s almost as if it didn’t happen, but Bilbo can remember the pounding of his heart and the way his voice had cracked, as though he was twenty years younger!

The sudden appearance of tangible foes has made him realize there is much he does not know about this quest and its dangers. He tolerates — even likes — his companions and trusts Gandalf, but he knows he is being deceived.

Again, he is not left to stew for long. Kíli and Fíli return in their usual manner — loudly — and settle into their work.

It’s an interesting process to watch, a slick shick of metal on stone as they pass the knife over it again and again. The brothers don’t seem to share his opinion, it must be monotonous for them, as they soon begin to chat about unimportant things: their old high schools, old pranks on family members, daring escapades, and the like. They gossip a bit, too, divulging some information about various members of the company. For example, Bilbo learns that the company has a Scottish branch, which is why Bifur speaks Gaelic. Only Gaelic. And that Gloin wears a locket with his wife and son’s pictures in it. And that Oin has a technicolour horse tattooed on his ass. And that this is the first time Fíli and Kíli have left the northeast.

They are curious about his life, too — a sedentary life in the city, where kin are irritatingly close and you would never travel at 65 except in emergencies. A life where money has never been a problem, but where nosy family members still try to make off with his best silver.

As Kíli makes some joke at the Baggins family’s expense, he idly scratches at his stomach, his hand pushing his shirt high enough that Bilbo can see a pair of thin, pink scars on the front of his chest. Huh. That explains why Kíli is relatively hairless in a family full of very hairy men, among other things. Bilbo looks away quickly, just in time to catch Fíli watching him, expression stony, daring Kíli to say something. Bilbo holds eye contact for a moment, then shrugs and responds whatever Kíli said with a vague sound of amusement.

After they finish, Fíli pulls an old canvas tent bag from his jacket with a flourish and wraps the newly sharpened blade with it. “A little big, but it’ll do,” he says as he slides it across the table to Bilbo, who cautiously accepts it.

Fíli tries and fails to give him a lesson on knives and their types, Kíli often side-tracking him by reminding him of what he has forgotten or contesting him on his expertise. Fíli demonstrates some of his points with the vast collection squirreled away in his jacket. Where he hides all of these blades is a mystery, but Bilbo thinks it’s better not to ask.

Fíli is in the middle of a long-winded tirade about brass knuckles when Bilbo notices the leader of their company heading towards them. Thorin looks very out of place, large and rugged, beleaguered on all sides by the well-tended flowers. He catches sight of them and marches towards them in a straight line, a path that brings him right over a bed of pristine white tulips.

“Excuse you!” Bilbo shouts. “There is a path, Thorin. A path! Right there! Honestly, you’re trampling the tulips!” The brothers snicker to themselves. Thorin’s scowl is visible even from this distance.

“What’s that?” Thorin asks upon his arrival, and Bilbo might even dare to say he looks cowed.

“A knife,” Bilbo says, reveling in his success.

“The burglar picked it up back in Oxford and we sharpened it up for him,” Fíli explains.
Thorin holds his hand out. It takes Bilbo a moment to realize that he wants to see the knife, so he hands it hilt-first to Thorin. He examines it, considers Bilbo for a moment, and hands it back. “Good idea. This trip is going to be more dangerous than we thought. Do you know how to use this, Mr. Baggins?”

“Well, I’ve got a good idea,” he offers meekly.

Thorin seems highly skeptical. “Of course you do. Dwalin can teach you how to not kill yourself with that thing. I’ll have him find you later.”

“Dwalin is a good teacher?”

“Only the best for our burglar,” says Thorin. Bilbo can’t tell if he’s being sarcastic or not. To all of them, he says, “we leave tomorrow.” He strides away to do whatever he deems important. With vicious satisfaction, Bilbo notes that Thorin sticks to the path.

Dwalin finds him half an hour later, looking far too excited for his own good. Resigned, Bilbo follows him to a flat section of the impeccably groomed lawn.

They begin by adjusting his grip. It’s weak, Dwalin tells him, and if he “continues to grip his letter opener like he grips his cock in the pisser,” he’ll be easy to disarm. So first he makes Bilbo tighten up, shift his fingers up, tuck his thumb in. No, not on the bottom, lay it over top. He is of the opinion that a job worth doing is a job worth doing right, so he is surprisingly nitpicky. He teaches Bilbo different ways to hold the knife and the advantages of each, then points out which ones are best suited to Bilbo.

Bilbo grudgingly admits Dwalin is a good teacher, tailoring his lessons to Bilbo’s size and experience. He goes for the quick and easy, teaching Bilbo not how to fight, but how to survive. To Bilbo’s relief, this means disarming, not killing. As Dwalin points out in his usual colorful manner, no one will chase him when they’re nursing a cut hamstring or holding their guts in.

By the time they move on from lessons with the knife, they have amassed a handful of spectators. Kíli and Fíli were there from the beginning, cheering whenever anything exciting happens. This is not all that often. It’s not until Dwalin teaches Bilbo disarming techniques and how to counter them and they actually begin to do things.

Some of the interns take an interest in the noise that they are making and gather as well. Though they’ve all only taken a passing interest in the strange collection of bikers, they now seem thoroughly entertained as Bilbo tries and fails to escape Dwalin’s choke hold.

“Kick him where it hurts!” one girl shouts.

Well, Dwalin did say anything goes.

Within seconds, Bilbo is free and Dwalin is doubled over, clutching himself. Bilbo dances a few feet away, thinking it better to put some distance between them while he apologizes profusely. But when Dwalin recovers, he is proud. “That’s right, go for the weak points. SING — solar plexus, instep, nose, groin! Never step closer than you must. And use your environment! Throw dirt in their eyes, hit ’em with a stick, position yourself uphill. Now let’s try again, but spare my balls this time.”

Dwalin’s meaty arm loops around Bilbo’s neck again, tight against his throat. Bilbo ineffectually mashes one hand against Dwalin’s face, groping for his eyes before realizing his arms are too short. Instead, he drives his foot into Dwalin’s kneecap, earning him a grunt and loosened grip. From there, he is able to duck out of Dwalin’s grasp.
“Too slow! If I were trying to kill you, you’d be dead. Again!”

An immediate elbow to the solar plexus is enough to convince Dwalin that Bilbo is prepared enough to call it a day. Bilbo is exhausted, but pleased with his progress. The knife goes back into its pocket, and, hopefully, there it will stay. He thanks Dwalin, apologizes for the bruises, and goes inside for a shower.

The bathrooms are a luxury, one to each bedroom and outfitted with everything Bilbo could possibly want. Bilbo takes full advantage of everything — from the heated floors to the vertical and horizontal shower heads to the fluffy cotton towels.

After his shower, he explores, the knowledge of their impending departure a heavy weight on his mind. The tasteful furniture varies enough from room to room and hall to hall that Bilbo doesn’t get too lost, and through the windows he can always spot a familiar landmark in the garden. As he progresses further into this unexplored wing, the air grows humid and bears the tang of chlorine.

Down the hall, he sees the glint of floor-to-ceiling glass. He can hear whooping from inside. Whooping that sounds quite familiar. He turns the corner warily.

The indoor pool sits behind a glass wall. It’s a beautiful room with picture windows overlooking the garden and tasteful blue and green mosaics circling the pristine pool.

Later, these are the only details he’ll remember. The rest are bleached out of his mind at the sight of the company, all stark naked.

If Bilbo’s eyes gravitate to just one person, it’s only because he finds Thorin’s tattoos the most interesting. One arm is covered from wrist to shoulder in that same writhing, black tribal tattoo that Bilbo noticed on the train what feels like a lifetime ago. Now, in its full glory, Bilbo can see that it is a highly stylized bird, with one wing spread down his arm and the other half-folded across Thorin’s bicep.

A raven, Bilbo thinks, recalling the old Durin insignia.

It draws the eye up to Thorin’s broad back, to two lines of elegant Gaelic script the seem to flow across his back as his arms move and flex. The other arm bears a stunning, monochrome mountain. It’s breathtaking, a piece of art. Stone etched into living skin.

Another raucous cheer derails Bilbo’s train of thought.

Most of them are simply lounging against the side of the pool. Others are up to more mischief, whipping each other with towels or attempting to dunk each other. In the shallow end of the pool, Dwalin and Thorin are locked in a game of chicken with Kíli and Ori perched on their respective shoulders. They each lock hands, both top and bottom pushing against their opponent until–

Roars of laughter as Kíli and Thorin tumble backwards into the pool. The water erupts with splashes, as Bombur, Fíli, and Nori cannonball into the pool almost simultaneously. He has now seen the bare ass and more of almost every single member of this company, and he isn’t sure if he can live with that. They had all seemed very insistent of their heterosexuality back in Oxford, yet here they all are, very comfortable with the shameless nudity.

It’s only when he feels eyes on him does he realize that he has been lingering in the window for far too long. Thorin is looking right at him, gaze piercing and wow is this uncomfortable. It is rather strange to stare so intently at a room full of naked men.

Worried that he’s outed himself, Bilbo scurries away from the window. As he retreats he hears
another loud splash and water pounds against the window Bilbo had been watching from. They are never going to be welcomed back into Rivendell.

After last night’s catastrophic dinner, Elrond goes about things a bit differently. First, tonight’s utensils and dishes are all paper or plastic. Second, it’s a buffet style, where they serve themselves in the kitchen and bring their food out into the garden to eat. Bilbo piles his plate high with fruits, nuts, and greens, but other members of the Company eye the healthy food with unwarranted suspicion.

Bilbo finds himself eating with their host and his daughter, Arwen. Fortunately, they do not attempt to pry the details of the quest out of him. Rather, they talk about gardening, or Arwen’s summer in Bournemouth, or Elrond’s latest business venture. Bilbo measures his evening in glasses of wine. When his first glass is nothing but the last dregs, Arwen politely excuses herself to wander the depths of the gardens with a boy a few years her junior. And Bilbo is halfway through his second wine when some important phone call draws Elrond away. He has drained his second glass by the time he leaves the well-lit porch, his third cradled in one hand as he meanders through the roses.

In his third wine of the evening, he finds Thorin seated at one of the private benches overlooking the Long Island Sound, lost in thought. Emboldened by the wine, Bilbo plops down next to him. Thorin flinches in surprise but makes no comment.

“You don’t like it here,” Bilbo says.

“You do,” Thorin counters, a little defensively.

“The wine is good, but that’s not what I meant. What do you have against Elrond?”

Thorin hesitates, probably questioning whether Bilbo is the man to confide in. “He’s … he’s a scavenger. His whole family is. They’re arrogant, faithless cowards — the lot of them — and I hate being indebted to him. Our families were friends, once. Thranduil and my father were particularly close.” His knuckles turn white with the force of his grip on the edge of the bench. “But when we needed them most, after Smaug conquered Erebor, they turned us away. Like … like we were beggars at their door.”

It finally dawns on him to ask about yesterday’s chase. Somehow, in the rush of the chase and their arrival, the question just why they were there was forgotten.

“Who’s Azog?” Bilbo asks. Thorin’s brow furrows, but Bilbo feels as though he is owed an answer and refuses to let himself feel guilty for asking.

“Smaug’s lieutenant,” Thorin explains. “He was there during the takeover.”

Bilbo is sure that that’s not all there is to this, but this is neither the time nor place to pry. They lapse into an uncomfortable silence that spans minutes. Bilbo nurses his wine.

“Why are you doing this?” Thorin asks. “Helping us.” Something about him seems more solemn, more intent.

It’s a question Bilbo has asked himself many times in the past few days, and one he has only just found the answer to. “Home.” Thorin looks confused. “You don’t have one. A home. It was taken from you and I’d like to help you get it back. If—if I can. Is that so wrong?”

Thorin inclines his head, indicating the sprawling mansion of Rivendell. “You belong here. In places like this,” he points out. The light is soft on his heavy brows, and though he looks sad, there is a peace about him.
“Yes, I suppose I do. But I think I’d like to see a bit of the world before I retire to my comforts. I went to Europe once. Backpacked the whole continent. You’re supposed to learn things on that trip. About yourself, mostly.” He tips back a bit more wine. “I don’t think I did. Learn anything, I mean.”

“This is no college trip.”

“I know that. But you don’t learn things easily, most of the time. A hard lesson or two will do me good.” Bilbo chuckles quietly. “I think that that’s what Gandalf intended, at least. He might have been right. I was too comfortable. Stagnation doesn’t suit people in the way I thought it did.”

“You’re a strange man.”

“Well, I’ve always prided myself on my eccentric—eccentriciti—oh.” Bilbo blows a raspberry. “You know what I mean. I think it’s best I go to bed before I say anything else I shouldn’t. Goodnight, Thorin. Do try some of the white. It’s really excellent.”

“Goodnight, Mr. Baggins,” he says, and if Bilbo didn’t know any better, he’d say it sounded fond.

Chapter End Notes

Dwalin loves Miss Congeniality. He has a massive crush on Sandra Bullock. This is canon. It is law.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Crossing the Appalachian Mountains is more difficult than it needs to be, thanks to good old Mother Nature and Thorin's impeccable sense of direction.

Chapter Notes

This chapter brought to you by alcohol.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The morning is still young when they part with their host on the same driveway they arrived on. Bilbo stands behind Thorin on the porch as he waits for his chance to speak with Elrond, so he has the chance to witness Thorin’s graciousness firsthand.

“Your hospitality was … appreciated,” Thorin manages.

He receives a tight-lipped smile, as Elrond is no doubt remembering the ruined pool, acres of broken dishware, and the squirrel Dwalin had trapped and cooked in his bedroom. As Thorin turns away, Elrond adds, “I should warn you that my cousin has been asking after you. Just how he found out that I have been housing you is a mystery unto itself, but I thought you should be made aware.”

Thorin says nothing and stomps from the porch to the bikes, footsteps resounding on the wood. This leaves Bilbo with Elrond, who gazes upon Bilbo with sympathy.

“You could stay,” Elrond says. “I don’t think any of your party would think ill of you for it.”

“Thank you,” he says, “a tempting offer, but I will see this through until the end. I’m still not sure what I’ve gotten myself mixed up in, but now I’m rather invested. Though if the offer remains when all is said and done, I would love to spend another few days here.”

Elrond looks surprised, leaving Bilbo brimming with pride at defying expectations. “You will always be welcome in Rivendell, although hopefully under better auspices than your last visit.” They shake hands.

Bilbo’s step lightens as he crosses the drive, gravel crunching beneath his shoes. Much as he loves Rivendell, the prospect of replacing endless houses with endless fields and trees excites him. Perhaps he has lived too long in the city.

He halts as he sees his sidecar attached to someone else’s bike. “Where is Gandalf?”

The motorcycle is Balin’s; he mounts it and puts the keys in the ignition. “He and Elrond have business. Gandalf will catch up with us later.”
“But Gandalf has contacts,” Bilbo says. “What if we encounter more of Smaug’s men?”

Balin opens a hidden hatch in the center console, revealing a sawed-off shotgun and several scarlet rounds. “We fight.”

“We’re lost,” Bilbo says, somewhere in the Virginia foothills. They left Rivendell about eight hours ago, driving into Pennsylvania with the sun at their backs. One of Elrond’s sources spotted Azog and his men in a Pittsburgh bar. In order to avoid them, Thorin had planned to take I-81, I-68, and I-70, missing the worst of their pursuers.

Somewhere along the line, the plan went wrong. Bilbo hadn’t paid much attention, taking advantage of the Bluetooth to listen to his audiobooks. By the time he tunes back into their radio channel, the sun and the mountains are to his right. They’re a breathtaking sight, the last bursts of orange and pink gilding the edges of the clouds that hang heavy on the heights, but Bilbo is certain that they’re supposed to be seeing it from the other side.

He can think of no other way to put it than bluntly. “We’re lost.”

“No, Mr. Baggins,” Thorin snaps. “We are heading s– and then west, as discussed.”

They pass a highway sign. I-81. “Odd-numbered interstates only run north-south. When are we planning on heading west?”


“Anyone?” Bilbo says into his helmet, but no one replies.

On the bike ahead of him and Balin, Thorin waves to the next exit ramp. The bikers pull off I-81 into the parking lot of a long-abandoned gas station.

Thorin yanks his helmet off. “What happened?”

“It doesn’t work if there’s no signal,” Ori says from the back.

Bilbo checks his phone. He has no bars and — from the apprehension spreading around the company — neither does anyone else.

He looks up from his phone to find Thorin standing intimidatingly close. “We are not lost.”

Bilbo points to the license plate of a passing car. “We’re in Virginia. We’re supposed to be in Ohio.”

“Part of our journey takes us through Virginia,” Thorin insists.

“Not this much.” Bilbo pulls out his phone to use Google Maps to show Thorin the error of his ways, but, of course, he has no signal. Why isn’t anyone else saying anything?

“We’ll have to do it the old fashioned way,” Balin says finally. “Aim into the sunset for as long as we can until we have service.

The others nod as if this is an excellent idea.

“We should ask for directions,” Bilbo says.

Thorin looks as if he has suggested they divine the directions from Kili’s steaming entrails. Someone whistles through their teeth. Bilbo learns why moments later. “We are not asking for directions. We are not lost.”
Bilbo catches Balin’s eye in silent appeal. Balin kicks Bofur, who stands beside him.

“After a whole day out riding, I’m rather thirsty,” Bofur declares. He leans back and looks at the pinpricks of street lamps igniting like fireflies on the nearby hills. “Looks like there’s a town over yonder.”

“Where there’s a town, there’s a pub,” Kíli adds, quick on the uptake.

“Excellent point, Fíli,” Balin says. He puts an arm on Thorin’s shoulder. “Let’s figure this out after a pint.”

As the company crowds into a small bar, Bilbo finds a woman out walking her dog and asks her the best way over the mountains. She very carefully details a route, drawing lines on the map he’d taken from the pub — Christ, they were almost in Tennessee — while Bilbo scratches her dog behind the ears.

“There you are,” she says brightly, handing it back. “Just be careful going over the mountain. No cell service … and lots of old stories about the abandoned coal mine up there. Don’t believe any of it myself, but s’always good to be safe, right?” Bilbo laughs and nods, letting her know the sentiment is shared. Every town has its ghost stories and none of them are to be believed.

His task complete, Bilbo marches proudly into the pub. Red faux leather seats and dark wood tables line the periphery of the dining area, a long bar juts into the center of the room. Deer heads stare glassily at the opposite walls and a TV blasts a NASCAR race from every corner. Their company makes up the majority of the crowd crammed into the pub. The locals seem wary, but tolerant.

Bilbo worms his way through the crowd, finally finding Thorin sitting in the back with Dwalin and Balin. He slams the map down on the table between them and stomps off to the bar, believing he deserves some alcohol as compensation for his ordeal.

He finds a seat with Bofur and Nori, who are glad to share their food.

“In return for taking the bullet,” Nori says, pushing his half-finished plate towards Bilbo. “Once, we were driving to Austin and ended up in Canada. After Dori pointed it out, Thorin didn’t speak to him for a week.”

“I could do without speaking to Thorin for a week,” Bilbo confesses, popping a french fry into his mouth.

“He’s not always this bad,” Bofur says. “Was certainly mellower before Smaug took Erebor and cut his grandfather’s head off in front of him. With a box cutter.”

Bilbo recoils in mixed sympathy and terror. This is the man he must steal from? Suddenly, the beer is much more appetizing than the fries.

“Did you hear anything about the lost mine?” Nori asks.

“The what?” Bilbo asks, eager for the distraction.

“Guy at the bar said that a whole bunch of those blue people in Kentucky — y’know, the ones that married their cousins one too many times, all got that blue skin? Whole bunch of them got really spooked by Y2K, so they packed up and made a bunker in the old coal mines.”

“Really?” Bilbo says, though he’s more interested in his lager than ghost stories. “And how have they been faring all these years?”
“That’s the interesting bit. No one knows. Haven’t seen hide nor hair of ’em since they sealed up all the entrances. Locked up from the inside. Probably all dead by now,” Bofur concludes. He and Nori extrapolate all of the filthy details of their continued existence. Bilbo rolls his eyes and finishes off their food, pleased when Dori swings by to tell them they’re leaving.

None are pleased to leave the bar, but progress is a powerful motivator. Bilbo liked watching them there, as they looked right at home among the bar’s usual patrons, but they look more at home astride their bikes. Bilbo himself now feels comfortable in the cramped sidecar, taking in the surroundings with newfound awe. Each sight is another brilliant one, and none he takes for granted. Tonight, it’s the sight of the moon behind the towering, anvil-shaped clouds. They’ve lifted high above the mountaintops now, so that the tips of each peak are illuminated with the hazy glow of the full moon. And the clouds billow on the heights, blocking out the stars but providing their own glory.

These mountain roads have sheer drops to their right and the rocky mountain face to their left. Bilbo intends to soak in the view while he can. Instead, it begins to drizzle. Lightly at first, with the faint rumble of the thunder in the distance. But soon it begins to pour, the headlights illuminating the fat drops of rain moments before they smack helmets like bullets. They must travel under the speed limit for the first time Bilbo can think of — 15 on a 55 road. He can only shield his pack and pray they find shelter soon.

Mercy comes when they round the bend and find an cleft dynamited into the mountain. It looks as if there is something behind the trees. Kíli, the leader of the pack, slows to a halt and hops off his bike to investigate. He returns, says something to Thorin, and signals for everyone to follow him.

They walk their bikes over the rough terrain and find an ancient barn-like structure pressed against the mountain face. The chance of staying completely dry seems dismal, but inside, the roof is not as leaky as Bilbo had feared. The building is large enough for all of them and their bikes. Oin lights a fire in the driest corner with some old boards he peels off the walls. The company eagerly crowds around it, holding out soaked jackets and socks in an attempt to dry them.

Just before they turn in, Fíli finds a door set into the rock. It’s locked from the inside, so Bofur recounts the story he overheard in the bar about the Blue People. Bifur crosses himself, but the rest of the party laughs it off and goes to sleep. For Bilbo, that means tucking his pack beneath his head, his damp jacket over his shoulders. He listens as the chattering of the company drifts off into snoring. But still he cannot sleep. The cold chills him to the bone, and the floor of the building is far from comfortable. He dozes sporadically for several hours, so that the times he is awake seem as strange as the dreams he has in sleep.

That is why, when he first sees the door crack open, he does not believe it. Instead, he writes it off as a dream, and shuffles in place to get comfortable again.

It proves to be anything but a dream when the locked door flings open. Thorin springs up at the squeal of the rusted hinges. Bilbo tries to do the same, but gets tangled in his jacket and backpack, and falls.

All he can do is watch as a hoard of strange, blue-tinted men and women come rushing from the open door, snatching up members of the company and dragging them through the door. Some, like Thorin, struggle, striking some before they are subdued and pulled into the tunnels. All Bilbo attempts to do is keep his belongings, the jacket hanging from one arm while holding onto his backpack.

And so the company of Thorin Oakenshield is dragged into the labyrinth dug into the mountain. They’re hurried along by their captors — bearded, blue-skinned men with weapons fashioned from plain materials. They carry bats with nails protruding from the head, twisted, rusty things; shovels;
pickaxes; or old rusted pipes. The company is forced to run, jogging uncomfortably through the tight passages, their captors at the rear. Bilbo struggles to keep up, finding himself at the back of the group with the blue men breathing down his neck. Often, his feet catch in the rock.

The worst of his falls occurs when he is jogging along at the periphery of the group. A splinter of rock surges up to meet his foot, knocking him off of his feet and into the wall. If the wall were there. Instead, he crashes through the old boards blocking off an offshoot passage and plummets into the stygian depths.

Bilbo lands hard on his back. The lights from the blue people fade, yet tiny stars still dance before his eyes. He cannot move or see, and it feels as though unseen walls and unknown enemies are closing in on him.

One hands and knees, he crawls along the smooth stone, feeling around until he finds a wall. The air is damp and cool, bracing in his lungs as he continues to crawl along, hoping against hope that he is dragging himself closer to the exit. His head throbs ferociously, pain emanating from where he struck his head.

Then he remembers his phone. Of course. He opens up a flashlight app and lets the harsh LEDs illuminate the ground before him. He can now see that the passage is tall enough for him to walk in. So he stands, one hand on the wall as he seeks the exit.

Little does he know, the blue people are not the only ones occupying the old mines. Unbeknownst to them, another creature lurks in the deepest shafts. Twisted and warped from years of solitude, he crawls the abandoned tunnels, making his meals of those unfortunate enough to cross his path. The years have sharpened his instincts, but dulled his mind. And the fumes that vent from deep in the rock have perverted him into something not quite human.

Behind him, wide, lamp-like eyes glow in the light of his phone. Bilbo does not see them, but they follow silently. The hair on the back of his neck stands up, and he’s pleased when he comes out of the claustrophobic tunnels and into a huge, ruined room.

The walls have been covered with wood, though in places it has rotted away to reveal the rough-hewn stone behind. It used to hold many books and supplies, if the shelves that line the walls and protrude into the room are anything to go by. The shelves themselves are in a state of great disrepair, knocked over or collapsed, all in a great heap of rubble. Few are left standing. A single, listing table stands in the middle of the room, littered with decades-old maps and documents. Bilbo approaches the table, curious to see if a map of the tunnels is among the sheets of paper, but stops short when he hears the soft padding of footsteps behind him.

He wills his breathing to stay even despite the frantic tattoo of his heart. He brings his phone to his chest to block its light, then shuts it off entirely. It’s only once he does that he notices an odd glow that fills the room, a sourceless, sickly radiance that casts its green light upon the bookshelves, shadows in their eaves. Bilbo summons his courage and turns, gasping when he sees eyes peering at him, flashing catlike in the soft light.

“Who is there?” Bilbo asks, pleased that his voice remains even despite his fear.

A wretched, wraithlike thing peels itself from the shadows. “What is it?” it gurgles, voice hoarse from disuse, “what does it want?”

It’s a man, Bilbo sees, aged and withered. His skin is pulled taut against his bones, like a thin sheet over a frame, so pale its almost translucent. Bent by age and poor posture, he reminds Bilbo of an old apple tree, knobbly, bare-branched, and twisted. Each vertebra of his bowed spine is visible,
perpetuating the sense of wrongness.

Despite his condition, he moves with a startling speed, hands and feet cleverly pulling him over rocks and other obstacles. His breathing rattles off the walls like the beating of Bilbo’s heart.

“Back! S-stay back,” Bilbo warns, his knife tip wavering near the man’s throat, “I’m warning you.”

The man trips over himself as he staggers back away from Bilbo’s blade. He mutters to himself as he crawls in a tight circle, turning to Bilbo suddenly. “What is it?”

“My name,” he says through heavy breaths, “is Bilbo Baggins.”

“Bagginses? What is a Bagginses?”

“I’m a — a florist,” Bilbo squeaks out, waving the knife threateningly. The man bares his nine remaining teeth in feral distaste, wandering back along the toppled shelves.

“A florist? Florists are soft, and weak things, we can…” He trails off into ominous muttering, his cough hacking the sentence short. Gollum leers, turning back towards Bilbo and advancing on him again.

“No,” Bilbo says sternly, “stay back. I don’t want any trouble, I just want to get out of here. Just… just tell me the way out, and I’ll be on my way.”

“Why? Is it lost?” Gollum asks, the beginnings of a plan forming in his shrewd mind.

Bilbo thinks carefully. Is it better to lie, to say he is exactly where he wants to be? To say he is lost would be to show weakness, but bluffing could have untold consequences as well. No, it is best to be honest. “Yes, yes I am. And I’d like to get unlost as soon as possible, so my friends can come looking for me.”

“Oh!” Gollum exclaims, eyes bright, “we knows, we knows! We know safe paths for florists, safe from the blue men and out of the mines. Shut up!”

A change comes over Gollum, as though two separate entities are warring for control. Baffled, Bilbo tries to get him to keep talking. “I… I wasn’t saying anything.”

“We weren’t talking to you!”

How rude.

The man trails off into muttering, indistinguishable in the echoing room. Finally, he appears to come to some decision. “Sit and chat with us for a while, perhaps? We don’t get company, it’s been so long. Play a game with us. It likes games, does it? A game of riddles.”

“I only know riddles about plants, unfortunately. Flowers, trees. The like,” Bilbo explains, placating. “But I’ll play with you, on one condition. If I win, you will show me the way out. And if you win —”

“We eats it!” Gollum exclaims, nearly toppling over in his glee.

“No, that’s not what I was going to—” Bilbo begins, now quite afraid. Being eaten was not in the contract!

“Good, good, little florist. We accept, we will do riddles with flowers.”
Long ago, Gollum held a love for the good green things of this earth. He found pleasure in the sweat and dirt of his days’ labor, digging and shoveling and planting, replanting. He knew the cycle of bloom and decay like he knew the hour of the day. Once that had been his job, planning and tending great gardens like those of Rivendell.

But that was before the years in the dark warped him and his coal-blackened lungs forgot the joy of fresh air. He grew bitter with the world, his hate festering. Those who owned the gardens he tended had let him go. “There’s a war on,” they said sadly, “we all have to make sacrifices.” So he worked in the coal mines. The war ended, but there he stayed. The world ended, but he did not.

These riddles would suit him fine.

“You ask first,” Bilbo prompts, wracking his brain for a good riddle. Gollum grins and hisses:

“This thing all things devours:
Birds, beasts, trees, and flowers;
Gnaws iron, bites steel;
Grinds hard stones to meal;
Slays king, ruins town,
And beats high mountains down.”

Not a very cheerful start. The riddle is as gloomy as the tunnels Bilbo wandered through.

“Very well, very well. Just give me a moment to think!” he snaps. He moves his mouth wordlessly, searching for a riddle to stump the man. Gollum practically bounces on his feet, giddy in his excitement at having stumped Bilbo, creeping forward. His hands twitch with the excitement of the hunt, itching to wrap themselves around Bilbo’s neck and squeeze.

The feral glint in his eyes is plain as day even from Bilbo’s distance. “I need more time, you haven’t given me nearly enough, and I gave you a good long while to think on that last one yourself. Give me more … time! Thyme is the answer!”

Gollum recedes, disappointed. “Very clever, florist,” he spits, breathing heavily. Bilbo thinks that that was a bit of a trick question to begin with, until he gives it more thought. Yes, time is an answer, and so the homophone works. But the herb also stands for courage. Strength. And haven’t Bilbo’s books always taught him that courage trumps all, and with enough strength even kings and mountains can be toppled?

“Go on, go on,” Gollum prompts with an impatient wave of his hand. “Give us one.”

“Right,” Bilbo says. “Right. Well, here is one:

“An eye in a blue face
Saw an eye in a green face.
‘That eye is like to this eye’
Said the first eye,
‘But in low place
Not in high place’”

Gollum shrinks back as Bilbo speaks, backing up all the way to the wall before beginning to pace. He prowls along the wall, turning the corner and passing the door before looping back and continuing the circuit. As he goes, he mutters key snippets of the riddle. Bilbo watches him, hand fisted tight around his knife.
“Well?” Bilbo asks, keen to defeat him.

“Nasty!” Gollum hisses, creeping behind one of the ruined shelves. He rakes his hands through his sparse hair, steps growing quicker in his agitation until—

“Sun on the daisies, it means,” Gollum says, triumphant. But he is all the more angry for his success. He had to delve deep into his memories of brighter days, memories he now scorns for their happiness.

Bilbo deflates. He had been so sure that that would stump him. He takes a step back as Gollum steps forward menacingly. “W—well?” Bilbo prompts, “I do believe it is your turn. Go on, ask me.” Gollum’s eyes gleam with rage, and he begins to pace and mutter.

“He wants a riddle? Nasty, stinking florist that he is? Very well, gollum! I will give you one:

“It cannot be seen, cannot be felt.  
Cannot be heard, cannot be smelt.  
It lies behind stars and under hills,  
And empty holes it fills.  
It comes first and follows after,  
Ends life, kills laughter.”

Tension rises as Bilbo paces, casting frantic glances around him in search of inspiration. All he can find is despair at the thought of dying in this dark hole. Gollum seems to sense this and hone in on it, slinking ever closer. Bilbo’s heart rate soars, beating desperately. “I don’t know this one,” he mutters. “I don’t—”

“He is stumped,” Gollum murmurs from some shadowy corner. “Baggins … is stumped.”

“Now — now give me a moment, please. I gave you a good long while,” Bilbo says. He hears the shifting of rocks. Bilbo mutters the lines to himself, panicked. Gollum has met the end of his patience. Somewhere in the shadows, he holds a rock in his fist, ready to spring out from the—

“Dark. Dark! That’s nightshade. Your flower is nightshade,” Bilbo tells him. Gollum lets out a strangled noise of fury, bursting from behind a shelf. Bilbo puts the knife between them, fumbling with his phone. Gollum ducks beneath the blade, arm raised, rock in hand.

Bilbo aims the front of his phone at Gollum and turns the flashlight on. Light lances through the room, piercing Gollum’s unadjusted eyes. He shrieks and crumples, hands flying to his face. The rock drops, and Bilbo looks down at his prone form. The knife is a cold weight in his hand. He should kill Gollum, lest Gollum follow him back through the tunnels and exact his revenge. Bilbo raises the knife, picks out a spot on Gollum’s neck.

Pity stays his hand.

He tears from the room, way now lit by his phone, and flies through the rough stone tunnels. Gollum’s screams of rage follow him, the slapping of his feet against the rock echoing around him. Bilbo runs until his lungs ache. Until ahead of him, sunlight pricks in through a boarded-up threshold.

The wood is old and rotted and gives way when Bilbo throws his shoulder against it. It splinters, fractures, falls away. Light pours into the tunnel like water from a pitcher, and Bilbo tumbles into the sun.
Chapter End Notes

Do they still teach you kids about the blue people? Love that Founder's Effect.

Riddles are from their chapter in the book!
While Bilbo faces unseen terrors in the dark, Thorin and Company struggle with their own hardships beneath the Appalachian Mountains.

Bilbo’s absence goes unnoticed, the sound of his fall lost in the din of echoing footsteps.

The company rushes onward through the tunnels, their captors snapping relentlessly at their heels, forcing them down, down into the mountain. Thorin’s breathing turns ragged with the exertion and he curses his lack of stamina. The air is stale and motionless, the lanterns cast sinister shadows on the wall, the company’s figures twisted and wretched in their misery.

The blue people shove them into a single room, using their heavy boards to keep them at bay until they slam the door shut and slide the bolt home, throwing them into darkness.

Thorin casts around blindly for the others, unable to see even the hand in front of his face. He swipes at empty air once, twice, groping about before his hand finds solid flesh. The yelp of surprise informs him that he's found the youngest of his nephews. “Is anyone injured?”

“No,” several of them chorus, to Thorin’s great relief.

He does not think the room is furnished, though he can feel old rags and newspapers on the dirt covered floor. The walls are made of pitted concrete, cold to the touch. He shivers, made hyperaware of the cold by the heat radiating from the rest of the company. Only the sound of their labored breathing and the scuffling sound of their movement punctuates the ensuing silence.

“What’ll we do?” asks Gloin.

“Try the door,” Thorin says, crawling closer to the sound of voices.

“It’s no good,” he hears Nori say from across the room, devastation in his proclamation. “They’re made of solid iron. Made to withstand cave-ins. Bullets will ricochet right off.”

Dwalin’s enraged shout fills the room, leaving all with ringing ears.

Thorin reaches out and touches a wet lumberjack hat. Bofur. He feels a beard, then a Gaelic expletive, accompanied by teeth clamping down on his hand.

“Sguir dheth sin!” Thorin snaps.
Bifur mutters an apology.

Thorin finds the others without issue. All seem to be accounted for and the comfort of being able to touch others keeps the anxiety at bay. He doesn’t tell them of the comfort they bring, and he wonders if they are afraid.

Thorin loathes the silence that follows, nearly suffocating in the still air. He is trapped, sightless, and can only think of light. He’s forced to ruminate, replaying the last day and dissecting his choices. Yet something feels off about all of this, something that nags at him, more irritating than a mosquito’s hum. There are details that don’t seem to fit right, but he cannot name them, and is simply aware of their presence.

Finally it comes to him. *The lanterns.* They seemed to be only a few years old at the most. The source was pure and white, not yellowed like it should be. And it would be impossible for anyone to hoard enough food to feed their numbers for so many years. It can only mean that someone has been bringing supplies up the mountain, though Thorin cannot imagine to what end.

While Thorin wrestles with the idea, Bilbo meets his terror in the dark. He trades riddles while the company huddles in silence. And when they all begin to nod off, Bilbo bursts into the morning sun, alone and afraid, but free.

They are left in the sealed room until the hours blur and Thorin loses all track of time. He rubs circles into the top of one of his keys like it’s a worry stone and finds tentative calmness in the repetition.

At long last, the door creaks open and the light from the lanterns floods in, bringing with it a tide of bodies they could not hope to overpower. Though they try to fight, the crush is too much and they are drawn ever on towards an unknown.

They arrive in a large chamber, buzzing with overhead fluorescents. It would be bare, save for the water stains on the ceiling and the sagging, threadbare recliner shoved against the back wall. One of the blue people — the largest and bluest, in fact — perches upon it like a throne. He is not a pleasant sight. Though the rest of his people are gaunt and bent, he is overweight, with thin, white hair and a scabbed goiter dangling from his navy neck.

“Search them!” he howls with a voice hoarse from disuse. He swings a great arm out in a grand, sweeping gesture. “Every crack! Every crevice!”

Four of his minions hold Thorin down while two more search him, tossing his sawed-off, two-handguns, knife, ammo, keys, phone, and wallet onto the ground before their leader. They pat him down again, roughly, but spare him the cavity search. He tries to follow the glint of his keys and swallows his panic when they’re lost in the chaos.

Thorin flinches every time a gun hits the ground, thinking that it would be all too fitting for one of them to go off. Perhaps, in a stroke of cosmic justice, the errant bullet would strike him down, and then he wouldn’t have to suffer any more of this.

Because here he stands, Thorin Oakenshield, a failure once again. Here he stands, having led his people to ruin, to shame. To die in these dark holes at the hands of these freaks. And all because he deemed the safety of the company less important than their journey.

Their leader heaves himself off the couch. “Who’d be so bold as to come armed into my mines? Government spies? Thieves?” His crosseyed gaze scrutinizes each of them in turn. “Robots?”

Thorin glances around at the company and finds the same emotions — revulsion and fear, but also
defiance.

“Won’t confess?” asks the man. He squints at the company, searching their faces. “We got ways of finding out, don’t we? Start with the youngest.” He points a thick finger at Ori. “Him.”

The blue people start to force their way into their numbers, but Thorin pushes faster, up to the front of their group. “Stop!” he shouts, and all fall silent.

“And who are you?” the man asks, rocking forward to peer at Thorin.

Thorin holds his head high and announces himself. “Thorin Oakenshield, leader of this company.”

“Thorin?” the man repeats, incredulous. “Thrain’s son? Thror’s grandson?” He smirks, a haughty grin that shows his uneven, yellowed teeth. “I wouldn’t believe it if the family resemblance weren’t so plain. So you must be running Erebor now.” He laughs cruelly. “But wait! I forgot. Erebor ain’t yours anymore, is it? So that makes you nobody.”

The word stings like a lash, but he does not flinch. Soon, no one will say that ever again.

“I know someone,” the man continues conversationally, “who would pay a pretty price to see you dead. You might know ‘im, too. Guy by the name of Azog. Used to see him a whole lot more before your granddaddy locked us all up down here. And I saw a whole lot more of him before you were through with him.” The last time Azog and Thorin did battle, Thorin lost his brother and Azog lost his arm. Azog’s arm was a poor price to pay for the life of his brother, though.

“You did this to yourselves,” Thorin growls, incensed by the mention of his grandfather and terrified by the prospect of running into Azog again.

“It was your grandfather who drove us here!” their leader roars, spittle flying from his mouth. It’s a wonder Thorin doesn’t flinch. “Thror drove us into the mountain and sent it crashing down behind us. He locked us in here.”

“Lies,” Thorin retorts. “Thror removed the worst elements when he took power and he never came this far south.”

“This was all this was off the records. We was his side business. The one that got you where you did.” He leans close enough for Thorin to smell his atrocious breath. The man is excessively smug, and Thorin would call it hubris if he could actually do anything about it. “You can’t expect me to believe that he never told you about his li’l meth operation he had goin’? It was a big deal here for awhile. He’d bring us the stuff, we’d cook it up right here in the mines, and we’d get a cut of the profits. Pretty good deal ’til the police started sniffing around. When we told Thror we weren’t cooking for him no more, he got pissed. Told us one more cook, just one last one, then we could go. Blocked us right up in here before we were even started.”

Thorin cannot meet Balin’s eyes, afraid of the answers he might find there. The legacy of his grandfather has always been clean. Or had his father and grandfather simply made it all seem more palatable to him? Had they withheld their true methods and darker workings for another day? Saved the dirtier details for a time when Thorin was older, more invested, more complacent? Thrain had riddled his early adulthood with lessons on what is good, what is right, and what is best for the company. That their good legacy was upheld through tough decisions.

Was his legacy tainted?

While Thorin reels with the implications, their captor gloats. “But Thror lost his head and Thrain is missing. And that just leaves you.” The leader laughs again. “Grab him! We’ll send him off to Azog
the same way as his granddaddy. Make it a family tradition.” They’re swarmed, the mine dwellers crowding them in an instant. Thorin is overwhelmed and dragged to the ground. There’s a fist in his hair, a jagged blade at his neck. He can’t fight. Like the hydra, once he shakes one off, two more take its place. He waits for the end, for the first sawing touch of the blade, the fall of the axe. He is nobody.

“Look out!”

The warning shout comes moments before blinding light and a rib-rattling bang fill the small chamber. Even though Thorin has his eyes closed and his hands clamped over his ears, it is still several seconds before he can safely look. Afterimages burn behind his eyelids, eyes twisted shut against the brilliant light. When his vision returns to him, he turns to the exit and finds Gandalf’s tall, bearded silhouette filling the cave mouth. Once again Gandalf’s voice fills the room, commanding, resounding. “Move!”

Needing no other encouragement, Thorin dives for the pile of weapons, as does everyone else cognizant enough to stand. He scoops up his keys first, then a gun and his knife, then Ori, who is still curled among the stunned blue people.

As they begin to stir, Gandalf clicks his flashlight on and shouts, “To me!”

The entire company follows. Horrid shrieks echo off the walls behind them as the blue people recover. Their ill-made shoes pound through the passageways. Dwalin drops to the rear to fire his shotgun at their tightly-packed pursuers. After five deafening explosions, the screams redouble in volume and triple in rage.

Thorin’s breathing becomes ragged, his heart painful in his chest as they sprint onward. Ori gets his feet under him soon enough, but Thorin’s shoulder still aches. Gandalf takes them through increasingly narrow and twisted passages until, suddenly, they stop at a door with chipping blue paint, not unlike the one they were first dragged through. Thorin’s spirit sinks when he sees a small raven — a simpler version of the one he has tattooed on his shoulder — etched into the corner, just below a set of bloody scratches that could only come from human fingernails.

While this moment seems to last for eternities to him, seconds later, Dori throws himself against the door and it explodes outward with a piercing squeal. They stumble out through the door, all fourteen of them, and shut it behind them, blocking their pursuers. The cool evening air washes over them and Thorin has to shield his eyes against the sun, roosting low on the western horizon. They must have been in there for nearly a day.

But there is little time to think of that. They sprint away from the mine, stumbling on the steep incline. Branches close overhead and hem them in on the sides, striking unwary faces. Thorin can hardly see where he places his feet in the inky shadows cast by the trees and he can hear his companions’ curses as they trip and stub their toes. But no one calls for a halt.

Gandalf finally stops them at the foot of the mountain. “I do not think they will not leave their hole. You can be thankful that I arrived when I did,” he says, more pitying than disgusted. His phone chirps in his pocket and he vanishes behind a stand of birch. Thorin checks for his own phone, glad to find he has it, even if it is dead. And he has his keys.

Thorin leans heavily against a nearby tree, watching the company as they collapse or pretend not to be winded. They have all survived with minor injuries — shallow cuts and bruises from resisting the blue people, combined with scrapes from trees or thorn bushes. His own cheek stings where a branch whipped him in his haste, and when he thumbs at the spot, his finger comes back smeared with beads of red. Though they are tired and ragged from their captivity, they can move on. There’s nothing else
With that unhappy thought as motivation, he begins to plan. Their bikes and things are on the other side of the mountain, but he thinks he can easily navigate back to where they began. If not him, then Gandalf, or perhaps Balin. They will, of course, only travel during the daytime. Though the cover of night would protect them, these unfamiliar woods could prove to be their downfall. There is no doubt in his mind that they must go back for the motorcycles. Traveling without their bikes would be too costly and too risky.

He dares to begin planning how to get all fourteen of them to Erebor as cheaply as possible, when Kíli says, “Where’s Mr. Baggins?”

_Shit._

The company glances around, and swiftly discover that their burglar is no longer in their midst. Thorin imagines his grisly end at Gandalf’s hands. Though Thorin had warned him that Bilbo’s safety was not guaranteed, Gandalf might not be so understanding in the face of that reality. Thorin takes a deep, steadying breath. “Who saw him last?”

“Me, I think,” Bombur says. “When we were first in the tunnels and they had us running. He fell over, up against the wall I think, but I lost sight of him. I figured he was just behind me after that, but maybe…” He trails off, but the implication is clear.

“We should go back for him,” Bofur says.

“No,” Thorin says. The looks he receive vary from mutinous to consenting, so he explains. “By now, he’s either dead or found a way out and abandoned us.” The thought of the latter infuriates him, the former fills him with dread. “If you want to go after him, you’re going alone.”

At that very moment Bilbo emerges from the trees, stumbling and short of breath, color high on his face from exertion. He is covered in grime and coal dust, and his hair is full of leaf litter, but there is no doubt it is him. The entire company cheers at the sight; Kíli and Bofur nearly tackle him in a hug. Thorin contemplates doing the same — _he came back_ — when Bilbo says, “Glad to see you all escaped, even if some of you wouldn’t afford me the same kindness.” He finishes with a very pointed look at Thorin that forces him to stop in his tracks, fearing he was overheard.

“Mister Baggins…” Thorin begins uncomfortably, but Gandalf reappears and surprises both of them.

“Bilbo Baggins!” Gandalf exclaims. “You found us! Proving your capability once again. You’ll have to tell us your story as we go as we have lost quite a bit of time. It’s been a day since you were all captured, and if we would still like to make good time on our journey, we had better be off. I have received word that Azog is once again on the move, and presumably headed our way. I think we would all rather avoid meeting him, am I correct?”

They all agree unanimously, and so they begin to move again. The looming threat of another encounter with Azog is a powerful motivator. As they pick their way downhill, more slowly this time, Bilbo tells his story. Thorin listens closely — it is a welcome distraction from his own experience in the mines, even though guilt stabs him deeper upon hearing how Bilbo had cheated death. He had not cowered in the darkness. He had escaped a foul creature without Gandalf’s help and he had come back for them. _He_ had not given any of the company up for dead.

Bilbo proves to be an excellent storyteller. He picks up where they lost track of him, detailing his
blind wandering in the mines. Most impressive is the details of his encounter with the creature he
calls Gollum, and he seems proud of himself as he recounts the game of riddles. And once he was
free of the mountain, Bilbo’s phone had had just enough charge to call Gandalf, which was how he
had found them and how Gandalf had rescued them.

Thorin squirms uncomfortably at how quickly he had abandoned Bilbo, writing him off as a lost
cause, either dead or a deserter. Bilbo could have called the police or the National Guard, but he had
instead assured their discreet rescue and, honestly, made the continuation of this journey possible.

Thorin stares ahead at the back of Bilbo’s head with new affection. Loyalty, honor, a willing heart...
That was all he could give and all he could ask for.

Chapter End Notes

Guess what comes next! EDIT: Also, I'll put translations at the end of chapters, too.
Silly of me not to.

Translations
Sguir dheth sin: stop that.
They struggle through miles of underbrush, guided only by Gandalf’s flashlight. It is slow going and at least two members of the company shout joyfully when they can see a road at the bottom of the next hill. Bilbo is already looking forward to resting in the huge abandoned building that looms at the foot of the hill. His stomach gurgles and twists angrily, and suddenly he can’t decide whether he wants to eat or sleep first.

The company, galvanized by the sight of their goal, descends the hill in minutes. Bilbo’s vision begins to swim on the edges as he thinks of sleep. The night is warm, but not muggy and the stars shine brightly overhead, without a cloud in sight. It is perfect weather for drowsing outdoors.

They pause on the edge of the cracked asphalt parking lot to take a breath. Gandalf does another headcount, since Thorin apparently can’t keep track of all the members of his party. Bilbo would be more offended if he weren’t so tired.

Suddenly, an enormous light flicks on, pinning them all under its glow like rabbits. Engines roar to life somewhere to their right and dread slithers down Bilbo’s neck like icy water.

“Run!” Gandalf shouts, and they sprint towards the crumbling building.

For a moment, the rumble of engines seems distant in comparison to their heavy footsteps on the pavement, but that is short lived. Motorcycles burst from the forest. Bilbo counts three, four, seven, ten, fifteen. Sixteen, on a white motorcycle that shines like burnished silver in the moonlight.

The building must be as old as the mines themselves, and is painted the same, industrial blue of the mine doors. A spindly set of exterior metal stairs lead to the inside. The company climbs, their footsteps a metallic cacophony that mixes unpleasantly with the engines. Below, the engines cut, but the lights stay on.

Now Bilbo, too, is racing up the stairs, taking them two at a time. Thorin waits for them all to enter, then slams the door behind him. Once he is inside, Dori barricades it with old filing cabinets. Dwalin and Bombur smash the windows, aiming their guns down at their assailants. The room must have been some overseer’s office, with glass windows that look down into the decrepit plant. Dwalin and Balin take the exterior windows, while Thorin and Bifur take the interior. Only four guns survived
the search and all of them have only a handful of bullets each. Fili hands out small knives from his collection.

For a moment, all is quiet except for the crickets. Even Bilbo’s beating heart sounds muted. It’s as if everything pauses in waiting, the very earth waiting on tenterhooks for the action to begin.

A crash from the windows below them, and it’s as though they had never stopped. Guns explode on both sides, the loudest sound Bilbo has ever heard. Something bright and orange flickers in the corner of his eye, down in the dark depths of the processing plant.

“Fire!” Bilbo shouts. Several curse the flames licking the floor of the plant and he can’t help but think of what his mother used to say in situations less dire than these. *Out of the frying pan and into the fire.*

“Aye!” shouts Dwalin from his spot at the window. “That’d be the molotovs.”

“We must get out!” Dori exclaims.

“How?” Fili demands, eyes wide and panicked. Bilbo is struck with the sobering realization of just how young some of them are. “We’re surrounded.”

“And outgunned.” Balin throws down his empty handgun, out of bullets.

Everyone looks to Gandalf.

“Help may be coming,” he says grimly. Bilbo wonders what this help will find, and morbidly imagines that it will only be their charred bodies. The fire is on the walls now and he suspects the floor is dark from coal dust. Within minutes—

The whole left side the factory collapses thunderously. The company throws themselves to the ground as huge splinters of wood fly through the window, striking the Filing cabinets, piercing the metal like tissue paper. A wave of intolerable heat rolls in immediately afterward.

“Thorin, no!”

The cry catches his attention, but Bilbo only looks up in time to see Thorin running out the door.

Dwalin tries to follow him, but a shower of bullets punch through the wall near his head and he must retreat.

Bilbo moves to one of the outward facing windows, safety be damned, and watches Thorin descend. He walks as if there are no gunmen, as if the building is not in danger of collapsing at any moment. One of the bikers removes his helmet and steps away from the white motorcycle Bilbo had noticed earlier. He seems to be grinning as he gestures for his men to stop shooting.

Dwalin and Balin make another attempt to charge out. This time, the bullets chew into the metal siding and spit debris. Balin falls, clutching a bloody cheek.

“Who is that?” Bilbo asks, fearing he already knows the answer.

“Azog.” Dwalin growls.

Azog is tall, rivalling Dwalin in stature and build. His face is horribly scarred, the feature exacerbated by the hellish light pouring from the burning structure. Instead of a left hand, he has a metal hook.

Beside him stands a second man, the rest of his people set farther back. He and Thorin seem to speak
from a distance, but over the roar of the blaze, their words are lost. The line of Thorín’s shoulders is tense, and Bilbo wonders if he’s afraid.

Suddenly, Azog and Thorín charge each other and wrestle in the flickering lights cast from the burning building. Bilbo can barely see what’s happening.

A gunshot rings out.

“Thorín!” Fíli screams.

Azog stands, a small pistol in his hand and a huge gash on his face. His hook arm seems to sit too high on his shoulder. Thorín rolls away from him, one hand grasping his thigh. Bilbo feels as if he has been transported out of his body. There are important things in the thigh, like a bone, an artery… He can’t breathe.

The man beside Azog moves forward, one hand on the gun shoved into his belt. Thorín fumbles for his dropped knife. The man kicks it away, bends over him, and twists his fingers into Thorín’s hair, yanking his head up.

Bilbo flies down the stairs even as the muzzle of the gun is pressed to the side of Thorín’s head. They don’t seem to notice him: small, dark, and crouching behind the rail. It’s as if he watches himself cover the ground towards the man and Thorín. Watches as he tackles the much-larger executioner, knocking him down. Bilbo’s body rattles upon impact, but if anything is hurt, he doesn’t feel it.

The gun goes off over Bilbo’s head as they hit the ground. Bilbo rips his knife out of his jacket and shakes off its canvas sheath. Azog’s man grabs him by the throat, holding him at arm’s length away from him while he feels for his second gun with the other hand. Bilbo plunges the knife downward as hard as he can.

The man shrieks in pain. His grip on Bilbo’s throat tightens for a painful moment before falling slack. Bilbo’s whole weight falls on the knife and pommel jabs him uncomfortably in the stomach. He scrambles to his feet, yanking the knife out as he rises. It almost slips through his blood-soaked hands, so Bilbo stamps one foot on the body and pulls. The letter opener comes free with a yell and an arc of blood. He gulps in air like a dying man and glances about, blind and dazed, finally facing Azog who has an expression of faint surprise writ on his face.

Bilbo thinks he hears Thorín groan behind him, but he’s not sure.

“You cannot protect him,” Azog says, his voice surprisingly calm. Bilbo thinks he can see bone under the cut on Azog’s cheek. The knot in his stomach tightens. Not now, cannot be sick now… “Either now or at Erebor, he and his entire family will die.”

“No.” Bilbo swipes the knife in the air a few times and takes what he thinks is a ready stance. “I’ll … I’ll do the same to you as I did to him.” He gestures violently at the still body on the ground.

Azog sighs and unholsters his handgun, pointing it directly between Bilbo’s eyes. Bilbo swallows, his body ready to spring at Azog. “Very well.”

The forest erupts with wailing sirens and strobing red and blue lights. Police. Help. Azog’s eyes widen, one side of his face lit by the fire and one side lit by the police lights. He fires at Bilbo — his hair ruffles and he prays it is the wind — and then turns and bolts with the rest of his men. They fling themselves on their bikes and tear down the road.

Bilbo wobbles, then falls to the ground beside Thorín, blissfully unconscious.
He wakes a few seconds later, Gandalf by his side. Everything is a confusing rush and his head spins when he sits up.

“Bilbo my boy! Glad to see you are awake,” he says. “You must be quite shaken up.”

“Gandalf?” Bilbo asks, blinking. “What just—?” He glances around. He is still lying on the ground, its damp coldness seeping uncomfortably through his clothing. The building is still burning behind them, its heat palpable even from this distance. Bilbo whips his head around, causing a spike of pain to pierce his forehead, but he can see the rest of the company standing nearby, a little sweaty but no worse for the wear. They seem to shine in the glow from the lights.

Oin grabs his forearm, pulls him up, and ushers him into one of the police cars. Something heavy drops into his lap. Bilbo looks down and the sleepy edge vanishes from his mind when he realizes it’s Thorin’s head, thankfully still attached to the rest of him, though he looks pale and battered.

On Thorin’s other side is Oin, gloved hand tight on Thorin’s thigh. Thorin’s blood is dark against the sky blue latex, but he is breathing.

Thank God.

“Is everyone safe?” Thorin mutters, barely loud enough to be heard.

“Yeah, except you,” Bilbo says. For some reason, this is hysterical to him and he bites back a wave of giggles.

Thorin’s eyes open a crack. “Why did you…?”

A young officer settles into the front seat, with Balin in the passenger seat. Through the grill, Bilbo can see the bandage taped to his cheek. Ah. The invalid car.

“Alright back there?” the officer asks kindly. Thorin groans in response. “I can’t do much for you, but I’ve got a pretty good first aid kit and I’ll try to avoid the potholes. Hang in there.”

She hands a flashlight and a red plastic box emblazoned with a white cross to Bilbo, who takes it uncertainly.

“Scissors,” Oin commands.

“Right,” Bilbo says after a moment, during which he realizes that Oin was talking to him. He fumbles for the scissors and finds them hidden amongst the bottles and packets of gauze. Oin thanks him, then sets about cutting Thorin’s pant leg away above the wound.

“How’s the head?” Oin asks he cuts.

“What?”

“I can smell concussions,” Oin says, tapping his head. “Got good at it in ’Nam.”

For the first time, Bilbo notices the hearing aid curled around his ear. “Um. Fine.”

“Did you lose consciousness?”

“Not at the time, no.”

“See stars?”
“Yeah.”

“Throw up?”

“No.”

“Probably mild. I’ll see to you after I’m done with him. Painkillers.”

Bilbo puts the flashlight between his teeth and rummages around until he finds a small box of Advil. Thorin opens his eyes long enough to take three out of Bilbo’s filthy hand and swallow them dry. His chest heaves, his brow covered in sweat and grime. He looks to be in immense pain, but bears it well. Better than Bilbo would, at least.


Balin, who has been watching the proceedings anxiously, seems reluctant to have an excuse to turn away.

Bilbo takes off his seatbelt and repositions himself so he kneels, facing Oin. It’s an uncomfortable position on the hard plastic seats. He wraps his arms around Thorin’s significantly larger frame and blames the quickening of his heart on the last vestiges of adrenaline. Oin tucks Thorin’s good leg under his own and passes the flashlight back to Balin, who aims it steadily at Thorin’s leg while muttering into his phone.

“Get ready!” Oin warns. “I’d like him not to break my nose. Again.”

Oin peels his hand off the wound and Bilbo’s head seems to float off his shoulders again as he sees it. Azog’s bullet has shredded a deep valley into Thorin’s thigh, turning smooth skin into a gaping, ragged maw. Blood still seeps from the wound and fresh scarlet begins to run anew over the older, brown stains.

Oin douses the forceps with disinfectant and pokes at Thorin’s leg. Bilbo feels Thorin’s shoulders tense, but nothing violent.

“Through and through,” Oin proclaims with a contented sigh. “Deep, but no bone damage and it’s on the wrong side and too shallow for the femoral! He will live.”

“Damn,” Thorin says.

Oin quickly wipes down the area around the wound, seemingly unconcerned that blood continues to drip down Thorin’s leg. Finally, he gives Bilbo a warning glare and upends the disinfectant on the ragged wound.

The effect is immediate. “Fucking hell!” Thorin shouts, curling inward. Bilbo’s shoulders slam into the ceiling, almost falling onto Thorin. “What is that?”

“Your guarantee against septicemia,” Oin retorts. Thorin’s head drops onto Bilbo’s chest, and Bilbo shushes on instinct. To his surprise, Thorin relaxes almost entirely and doesn’t seem to notice the needle dipping in and out of his flesh. Oin is a skilled surgeon and he has the final bandage wrapped around Thorin’s leg not three minutes later.

The smell of blood and alcohol permeates the car until Balin opens the window. Oin carefully
removes the bloody plastic bag he used to cover his pants and puts it in another plastic bag. It is joined seconds later by his gloves and a yard of gauze. He hums a Doors song as he repacks the med kit and uses the flashlight to find the errant spots of blood on the seat, which he mops up with disinfectant. Then he looks at a few small cuts Thorin received from wrestling with Azog, shines the flashlight in Bilbo’s eyes, and disinfects Balin’s cheek. To Bilbo’s relief, Balin’s injuries are not nearly as bad as he feared.

All of this is done in complete silence — save for the car tires on the bumpy road — and Bilbo jumps when Oin says, “Anything I’ve missed?”

“Is this supposed to be a tourniquet?” Thorin grumbles.

“I don’t know. Do you enjoy the sound of exsanguination?” Oin says. To Bilbo, “Make sure he doesn’t move too much or pick at the bandage.”

Before he or Thorin can properly protest, Oin drops into sleep, his gentle snoring joining that of Balin, who had nodded off some fifteen minutes earlier.

“Of anyone in this car, I deserve a rest,” Bilbo complains, although he is neither old nor white from blood loss. Nor has he just finished a surgery.

“How long has it been?” Thorin asks. “Since you slept, I mean.”

“I suppose Rivendell was the last time I had a proper rest, unless you count the nap I took back there in the parking lot real sleep.”

Thorin laughs, catching them both by surprise. “How are you still awake?”

“Absolute terror, mostly, though I’m running on fumes.” Bilbo clears his throat uncomfortably and tries to look anywhere but at Thorin, because oh god.

He might be in trouble.

“I owe you an apology,” Thorin says. “For my words earlier. This… this is greater than one person … greater than me … but you didn’t think…”

Bilbo isn’t sure if the blood loss is making him ramble. “Apology accepted, since we’re going to be traveling together for awhile yet. Good for morale and all that.” Thorin, it seems, isn’t the only one rambling.

“Why did you try to save me?” Thorin asks.

He can’t honestly answer, so he says, “Concussion. Scrambled my brains.”

Somewhere in his thrashing, or maybe it was the fight, Thorin’s hair came undone, and is now laying in thick waves on Bilbo’s legs. He begins to gather it up, though he pauses when Thorin tenses at the touch. “What are you doing?”

“Fixing your hair,” Bilbo explains. “Should I stop?”

“No,” Thorin says quietly.

Bilbo pauses at the tenderness in Thorin’s voice, then immediately puts it down to his exhaustion. Bilbo wouldn’t be speaking normally after losing that much blood.

After that, he quickly fixes the hair in a tight bun with the proffered hair tie. “Much better. Almost as
if you aren’t pantsless in a police cruiser with a chunk shot out of your leg,” he says, patting Thorin’s shoulder awkwardly.

“Sleep Mr. Baggins. I promise I’ll behave while you do,” says Thorin. Bilbo thinks that that is a very good idea, and sets aside all of his worries in favor of some well deserved rest.

Bilbo gets about three hours of blissfully dreamless sleep before he is shaken awake. In that time, they have left the foothills and countryside and entered the city of Lexington, Kentucky. He blinks in the pale morning light, his mind slow to catch up with just why Thorin is waking him up in the back of a police cruiser.

Then it all comes back to him. Right. He almost died yesterday. Twice. He blinks the black dots away from the periphery of his vision, groaning incomprehensibly as the last vestiges of his headache remind him how much trauma he has sustained.

“‘morning,” he says blearily. Thorin doesn’t justify it with an answer, instead urging Bilbo to get out of the cruiser so he can do the same. The return to his usual behaviour probably means Bilbo imagined most of the more pleasant aspects of last night.

Bilbo scrambles out, followed more slowly by Thorin.

Before they can go to join the company, the officer clears her throat to catch Bilbo’s attention, gesturing at his clothes. “You might want to wear … not that,” she suggests. “You look like something out of a slasher flick, and if I get a call about you, I’m gonna take you in.”

Bilbo’s stomach feels as if it will rebel and he steadfastly refuses to look down. “Right. Do you mind if I…?” He gestures at the cruiser.

The officer laughs and sweeps her hand accommodatingly. “Be my guest.”

Bilbo clambers back inside, swiftly changing out of his filthy clothes and stuffing them in the bag with the bloody gauze and Thorin’s pant leg. He emerges looking significantly less gruesome, though his arms are still a grisly sight.

Out in the parking lot, the rest of the company comes pouring from their respective cars. Fíli and Kíli nearly knock their uncle over in their glee and everyone else seems simply happy to crowd him and alternate discreetly supporting him. They grimace at the sight of the slightly bloodied bandage on his thigh. A few nod appreciatively at Bilbo, although he keeps a respectful distance from the closely packed company.

One by one, the police cars roll away. Bilbo thanks their driver and apologizes for the blood. She laughs, says she’s had worse, and drives away as well. He is about to wander away when Thorin’s hand lands on his shoulder.

“What were you thinking last night?” Thorin asks, voice rough. “You nearly got yourself killed. Did I not say that you would be a burden? That you wouldn’t survive the perils? That you have no place amongst us?” Bilbo opens and closes his mouth a few times, unable to meet Thorin’s gaze.

He is startled when Thorin’s powerful arms envelope him in an embrace. A powerful sense of belonging and fondness warms Bilbo’s chest.

“I’ve never been more wrong in all of my life.”

Over Thorin’s shoulder, he sees the rest of the company cheering. Thorin steps back, looking over Bilbo as though seeing him for the first time. “I’m sorry I ever doubted you.”
“What? No, no. I didn’t do anything — nothing that the rest of us wouldn’t do,” Bilbo deflects, uncomfortable with the praise. “I’m not a hero, or a fighter of any sort, or … or …”

Then Thorin *smiles* and Bilbo’s objections die on his lips. “Come along, we might as well see what Gandalf has planned for us. And I’m not so sure I can walk alone yet.”

Bilbo laughs and lets Thorin lean on him as they hobble along. Perhaps it’s just the concussion speaking, but he feels the worst is behind them.

Chapter End Notes

Sugar, it's gonna be canon. Buckle up, folks, it's gonna get gay.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

The Company travels to Chicago and Thorin explores the wonderful world of prescription-strength painkillers. Bilbo finally gets some answers.

Chapter Notes

Take illegal pain medication responsibly, kiddos.

Also, hover over Gaelic responsibly. And read tags, since there are some new ones.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

While the others buy food, Bilbo and Thorin are ushered into the Greyhound station bathroom to clean up. Bilbo can smell the ovens’ grease from the bathroom and his stomach rumbles, but he grits his teeth and bends to his task.

He has almost forgotten the brown blotches on his arms are bloodstains. Perhaps he has deluded himself so as to delay the inevitable. He pretends not the care, pretends the rusty-colored water swirling down the sink is dirt. He nearly finishes — nearly — when the horrid rank stench of old blood engulfs him. He frantically covers a paper towel with soap and vigorously scrubs his forearms. But no matter how much he scrapes, the stink will not leave him.

He runs into a stall and heaves, throat burning, a hot and sour taste filling his mouth. Slowly, he takes his panic, his disgust, his fear and wraps them tight, tighter than the bandage around Thorin’s leg. He takes his misgivings and holds them close to his heart, guarding them jealously until he knows how to deal with them. He wipes his mouth and returns to the sink as though nothing has happened. Thorin, who is washing his face, pretends not to notice. It’s a small mercy, one Bilbo is glad for.

There are dark bruises beneath Thorin’s eyes, made all the more stark by his waxy face and the scabbed cut over one brow. Bilbo imagines he doesn’t look much different, and, indeed, when he looks in the mirror, he hardly recognizes himself. His face is filthy and his hair is a nest of leaves and twigs, which he quickly brushes out. His eyes reflect only an exhaustion that transcends the physical.

Bilbo checks himself over for further injuries and finds four grape-sized bruises running down one side of his neck, with another one on the opposite side. Marks from where the man tried to strangle him.

It was in self defense, Bilbo tries to tell himself. I saved myself. I saved Thorin.

The water runs red while he washes the blade, and he recalls with crystal clarity the feeling of flesh giving way to unyielding steel. Thorin watches him through the mirror, scrubbing at his own dirty face, but Bilbo’s expression is unreadable.

The only thing that keeps him from falling apart over this, he thinks, is the knowledge that there is
still a job to be done. There will be time to address his sins when all is said and done and Erebor is
reclaimed. There is no longer any question that he will see this through to the end, not now. He
recalls that the first day, when he had asked Gandalf if he would come back. “I don’t know,”
Gandalf had said, “but if you do, you won’t be the same.”

Gandalf has a terrible habit of being right.

Dwalin kicks the bathroom door open and strides in with a plastic bag, and Bilbo thinks he has never
been happier to see the man. “Clothing for His Majesty, King of All Dumbasses,” he says
imperiously.

Thorin snatches the plastic bag out of his hand and hobbles into one of the stalls. Dwalin meets
Bilbo’s eye and winks. Bilbo grins nervously in return, surprised at his sudden show of camaraderie.
He prefers this over the studious ignorance or disdain he’d received before the mine.

Seconds later, almost at the same time Thorin grumbles, “You’ve got to be kidding”, Bilbo realizes
Dwalin is trying to tell him something about the clothing. Bilbo has to choke back a laugh as his
imagination runs wild.

“I look like Adam Sandler,” Thorin says as he comes out, tugging at a shirt the color of a computer
error screen that boldly proclaims: SKILLED IN EVERY POSITION. The shorts live up to their
name, ending high on Thorin’s thigh, away from the wound. They’re safety yellow and offensive to
they eye, but it probably could have been worse. Most of the company lost everything when they
were captured in the mountains. Only a few had been able to hold on to their things like Bilbo. It
would most likely be another day until they could get new clothes, depending on where Gandalf was
taking them, so Bilbo thinks that Thorin should count himself lucky. At least these are clean.

“Maybe next time you’ll warn me before you run out of a burning building to face fifteen hitmen and
Azog in single combat without a gun,” Dwalin says.

“If this is to be my punishment, I’ll go without a knife next time, too,” Thorin says as he mournfully
throws away his old, blood-spattered clothes. “It would be a cleaner end.”

“There will be no ends as long as the company is around,” Dwalin snaps, “so put the thought of any
other fucking heroics out of your mind.” Bilbo starts to wish he wasn’t here, this doesn’t seem like a
conversation he should be included in.

“Smaug is only after me.”

“I could tell by the way Azog tried to burn all of us alive.” Dwalin jabs a finger at him. “I haven’t
spent the last ten years hiding only to sit on my ass. And neither has anyone else.” Then he grins. “I
can’t wait to see Azog’s new scar.”

“Maybe he won’t live long enough to see it scar.”

“Oh, he won’t.”

Thorin is about to shift his weight off the bathroom counter when he thinks better of it. He sighs.
“Could you…?”

Dwalin takes a step back and crosses his arms. “Oh no. This is your fault. Ask the burglar. He seems
capable of fixing your messes.”

Thorin and Dwalin, both very tall men, look at 5’ 6” Bilbo, who angrily squares his shoulders. “Oh
no, you can’t possible expect…”
They stagger out with Dwalin trailing behind them, Thorin bent almost double to lean on Bilbo’s shoulders. Bilbo, for his part, tries not to look too winded when they collapse into the nearest chairs. It had been so much easier to move him after getting out of the police car, when Bilbo still felt somewhat alive.

Nothing has changed in their absence. Fíli, Kíli, and Nori are still gone, having vanished an hour earlier with whatever cash the company had left. Gandalf is still on his phone, troubled by whatever conversation he is having, and the rest of the company is asleep. Bilbo takes the opportunity to charge his phone and tablet — it takes him four tries to get the plug into the outlet — relieved that he’ll be able to entertain himself on the trip.

If he can stay awake at all. The only thing propping his eyelids open is hunger. Most the company has lost that battle, leaning against walls or each other and sleeping. Bilbo watches them with glazed eyes, having lost the strength and will to do anything else.

Thorin doesn’t share the sentiment. He shifts incessantly, his eyes never focusing on something for more than a few seconds.

“Where did Fili and Kili go?” Bilbo asks, drawing Thorin out of his reverie. He looks like he’s been thinking far too much, and Bilbo can only imagine what about.

“Food.”

That’s it. No judgemental look immediately afterward or confrontational undertone to his voice. Bilbo is still not sure what to do with this newfound peace between the two of them.

“I’m not—” Whatever Thorin is about to say dies at the sight of his nephews shoving the door open, laden with stacks of McDonald’s meals and a huge case of water. “Oh my god.”

The company simultaneously awakens and nearly attack Fili and Kili in their hunger. Bilbo (too tired) and Thorin (unable to walk) wait impatiently for Fíli and Kíli to come to them. Within is a simple meal — hash browns and an Egg McMuffin — but it is one of the best Bilbo has ever had. Thorin throws his Happy Meal toy, specially requested by his nephews no doubt, at Dwalin’s head, claiming that “it’s only appropriate for a fucking child.” As far as revenge goes, it’s rather petty.

“I like the new look,” Fíli says, dropping the case of water next to Thorin. “Pick it out yourself?”

Kili gleefully snaps a picture with his phone. His uncle tries and fails to snatch the phone away, expression pinching as he disturbs his wound.

“Dwalin did,” says Thorin. “And do not tell Dis. And don’t send her that!”

Kili tucks his phone away, out of reach of grabbing hands. “Gandalf says the trip to Chicago is going to take eight hours. What are we gonna do?”

“I’ll sleep,” Thorin grunts, twisting the cap off a water bottle. His expression softens. “As should you, Kili. You look exhausted.”

“I’m young,” Kili says with a shrug. “I’ll recover faster than you, bodach.”

Thorin takes a playful swipe at him, which he easily evades. “Watch yourself. I’m still your uncle.”

“Mom told us to watch you,” Fili says.

Thorin frowns. “She would tell you that.” Bilbo does not miss the slight emphasis and neither does
“You’ve gotta at least stay up until Nori gets back with the painkillers,” says Fili. “We saw him round the side talking to some shady-looking guy.”

Bilbo shudders at how many laws they’ve broken in the past few days, and once again finds himself wondering just how they aren’t all in jail. Or dead. He knows it is, in part, Gandalf’s doing. But they’ve stolen, murdered, trespassed, and now illegally purchased prescription medication, and Bilbo isn’t sure how much of that Gandalf can cover. Or, really, why he is bothering to do so to begin with. It doesn’t add up at all, but Bilbo just doesn’t have the brain cells to devote to that problem right now. Stringing together cohesive thoughts is a bit of a struggle with the exhaustion and mild brain damage.

Nori returns about ten minutes later, slipping a bag of pills to Oin, who in turn hands them to Thorin. “You’re to take them as needed,” Oin instructs, wagging his finger at Thorin. “No more than two every six hours. The fewer the better. Take it with water. Expect to be a little lightheaded and too relaxed. Finish off the water. You need fluids.” To Bilbo, “Other than not moving, there’s little you can do for a concussion.”

“I’m perfectly content with that,” Bilbo says sleepily.

Thorin scowls at the pills before popping one into his mouth and chasing it down with water. Then he turns to Bilbo. “You should have told me you were injured.”

“It didn’t seem all that important,” Bilbo says. “Not compared to, you know…” he trailed off, gesturing to Thorin’s wounded leg. Because what was a bumped head to that? “I’m quite fine, really. Didn’t even pass out.”

Thorin seems unconvinced, but doesn’t press the matter.

Getting onto the bus is an ordeal with Thorin’s leg and a stairway too narrow for assistance. Bilbo thinks he’ll finally have a few hours of peace until Oin pushes him into the aisle seat next to Thorin, no doubt a move calculated to keep him still. Thorin appears not to notice, so Bilbo sighs, opens his tablet, and hopes the meds don’t mess with his head too much.

The bus pulls from the station at eight, maneuvering through city streets and out into the open country beyond. Bucolic scenery blurs past, rolling fields and hills dotted with farm houses and barns. It’s lovely, but difficult to focus on in Bilbo’s state. The words on his tablet similarly blur before his eyes until he is forced to put it down. Not even Longfellow can calm him now.

He glances at Thorin to find him much the same position. He shifts restlessly in his seat, grimacing when his leg brushes the seat in front of him, staring off into the distance without really focusing on anything.

“Something on your mind?” Bilbo asks.

“The mine,” Thorin says, his voice thick. “The monsters there claimed my grandfather had walled them inside after they refused to cook meth for him.”

“Good riddance, if you ask me.”

Bilbo sees his raw pain and confusion mirrored back at him in Thorin’s eyes. “That is not something
“Well, you’re bikers, aren’t you? I didn’t expect you amassed money by…” Bilbo stops himself before he says *legitimate business* or something else offensive.

“I will not claim everything we had was legitimately come by, but I never expected *drugs.*” He spits the word. “Thor was distancing himself from the company, willing to let it fade. He said we were moving on to better things. He did not mention moving on meant nearly murdering dozens of people.” He leans down and puts his head in his hands. “Perhaps we deserved what happened to us.”

Bilbo lets him have his silence for a moment as he thinks of what to say. “You are not your grandfather. You have the opportunity to change everything after you reach Erebor — for the better, obviously. You’re a good man, Thorin.”

Thorin pulls his hands away and studies him through long lashes. Their eyes lock for a long moment, until Thorin says, “Thank you.”

Bilbo feels his face heat and pretends to fiddle with the straps on his pack. Thorin shoves a keyring under his nose.

“This key—” Thorin separates the smallest and oldest from the others “—belongs to a safe in Erebor. Whatever is in the safe is the change that my grandfather spoke of. It is what you’re to steal.”

Bilbo flashes back to the first night they met, when Gandalf had mentioned his difference from the rough bikers of the company would aid him in entering Erebor. “I’ve…” He silences his objections at the desperate look on Thorin’s face. Admittedly, Bilbo *had* been good at nicking gum from convenience stores. He tells himself that will be enough. “I am actually rather skilled at stealing things. Shouldn’t be too much trouble.”

Thorin puts a heavy hand on Bilbo’s shoulder. “Gandalf gave me the key on the condition that I take you along. Said that you would be useful. I doubted him and I … I have never been so happy to be proven wrong.”

Bilbo laughs uncomfortably, unsure what to do with Thorin’s sudden candidness. Not that it was *unwelcome* — far from it — but because it was so unexpected. And it cheers him far too much. “I haven’t stolen anything yet.”

“*But you’re*…” Thorin seems to struggle for words again “…just good.”

“Course I am,” Bilbo says. He refuses to let Thorin’s praise reach him. He can barely string a sentence together, let alone mean anything about inherent goodness. “You should sleep. You won’t mind if I…?”

“If you…?”

“Sleep.”

Thorin nods.

Bus seats are, unfortunately, extremely uncomfortable.

Bilbo awakens about an hour later, still exhausted, but unable to sleep any longer. Thorin’s head is heavy on his shoulder, one arm flung across Bilbo’s stomach. There is absolutely no way Fíli and Kíli, who are situated across the aisle from them, did not feel the need to take a picture. This impression is helped along by the incredibly guilty look on Fíli’s face and the way Kíli shoves his
phone into his lap like it’s contraband. Bilbo gives them each a terribly dirty look, then carefully crosses Thorin’s errant arm over his own chest.

Thirty minutes later, Thorin blinks blearily from his spot on Bilbo’s shoulder, straightening up when he realizes where he has been leaning. “Sorry,” he grumbles.

“Don’t be.”

Oin pops his head through the break between the seats. “How is your leg?”

Thorin mulls this over. “Like shit.”

“Very helpful. I’ll change your bandages once we transfer.”

“When do we transfer?” asks Thorin. He turns to look out the window at the city passing around them. “Where are we? What country?”

“Fifteen minutes,” Bilbo tells him. “And Louisville, I believe. You weren’t asleep for all that long, only forty-five minutes or so. A good enough doze, I suppose, but not long enough for us to flee the country.”

“My father did,” Thorin says. It’s so out of left field that Bilbo doesn’t have enough time to grasp what it means before Thorin continues. “After Smaug, he left. I think … I think Azog killing Frerin was too much for him. He left.”

“Mr. Baggins,” Balin says, and Bilbo starts because he had not realized that Balin was even there. “We’ve arrived. It’s time to transfer.”

Bilbo thanks him and gets out of the seat. Thankfully, Dwalin takes on the task of maneuvering an unwilling Thorin off the bus. Bilbo very much within his own head, ruminating over Thorin’s words. Frerin, Bilbo assumes, is some relative. Selfishly, that mystery matters little to him.

The hour they spend in the station waiting to transfer passes in a blur. Bilbo entertains himself by watching Fíli and Kíli play with a drug addled Thorin.

“Mom sent a picture of the dog,” Kíli says, swiping through his phone to find the photo. He holds it up to show Thorin, though Bilbo squints to catch a glimpse as well. On the screen is a fat, decrepit old basset hound asleep and drooling on a bright pink blanket.

“I love that dog,” Thorin whispers reverently, grasping at the phone. Kíli tugs it away, swiping through for another one. This time the dog is drooling on the sidecar of a motorcycle, bedecked in a pair of goggles. A sidecar that looks suspiciously familiar.

“Wait a moment, is that—” Bilbo snatches the phone out of Kíli’s hands, ignoring his noises of complaint. In the resulting struggle, someone’s finger drags across the screen, swiping to the next photo. It happens to be a photo from the bus, Thorin’s head on Bilbo’s shoulder. Bilbo’s head rests on top of Thorin’s, his arm loosely grasping the one that had fallen across his stomach.

Bilbo glares daggers, then deletes the photo before returning the phone to Kíli, who flashes him a guilty smile.

“This is the first time Mom’s let us leave home,” Kili confides in what must be an attempt to regain favor. “She insists that I send regular updates.”

“I hardly think this counts as an update,” Bilbo says sternly. “I know about families and how much
they like to blackmail each other.”

Kili seems offended. “She’d do nothing of the sort. Besides...” He indicates the bikers loitering in the station. “You’re looking at most of her friends and they already know. No family, of course. Not since Thrain left and Uncle Frerin died.”

“This is it?” Bilbo asks. “Is this the entirety of the company?” Uncle Frerin he notes. Hindsight is a bitch.

“About half that I’ve met.” Kill shrugs. “The other half are mostly the relatives or wives of this lot. There are other branches — Mom’s cousin, Dàin, runs the Edinburgh branch; we’ve never met him — but none of them are as close or would be as willing to help us.” His expression darkens. “No one counts them. And uncle doesn’t trust them anyway.”

Bilbo glances at Thorin, who whispers, “I love that dog.”

“We’ll tell Mom to pet him for you,” Fíli says. “She’ll be glad for the excuse. She loves to hate that dog.” Thorin smiles a genuine smile Bilbo knows is reserved solely for his nephews. Bilbo savors the sight for as long as he can.

Their layover is a short reprieve from the cramped bus seats, but soon they are back on the bus. They have a fresh driver and a new bus, both of which seem to have seen far fewer years than the last. Rather than the strange blue upholstery of their last bus, this one has faux-leather seats and overhead fans that blast frigid air down upon them less sporadically than their last bus.

Thorin drinks another bottle of water and falls asleep almost immediately afterward, this time leaning on his arm against the window. The cool air makes the hairs on Thorin’s bare legs stand up, a highly distracting sight, as it only draws his attention to Thorin’s well-sculpted thighs. Not a helpful train of thought when he is still trying to tamp down any inconvenient feelings before they can really take root. Rather than stare, Bilbo lets his own eyes slide shut, and it isn’t long before uneasy sleep takes him.

His dreams are dogged by the wide, lamp-like eyes of Gollum. He imagines watchers in the dark, hands on his neck, and great, twisting shadows. He imagines wandering for hours in the labyrinth of tunnels going down, down into the earth. The walls around him breathe, inhaling light and exhaling dark so that with each wheezing breath the choking blackness grows thicker. Again hands dart from the blackness, wrapping around his throat and squeezing. The dream slips, pieces of the tunnel falling away until the ground he lays upon is cracked asphalt and the hands on his neck are not clammy but dry, calloused. The knife disintegrates in his hand, leaving him to struggle weakly, though his arms are bound by some invisible weight.

Someone jostles his shoulder until he stirs. “Bilbo,” says Bofur. Bilbo sits up, still feeling groggy despite the hours he’s gotten. “Up you get. Another layover. Just in time, too. I’m starving.”

This time, all of them venture out to get food. There is a small café across the street from the station, and they all file in and disperse. Bilbo and Thorin settle down on a couch by the window, Gandalf and Balin sitting across from them on a mismatching loveseat. The windowsill beside them is covered in small potted plants: a strange variety of cacti and aloes, anemones and curling ferns. Bilbo immediately loves the café, feeling more comfortable and in his element than he has felt in days. Tension bleeds from his shoulders incrementally until by the time a waitress comes for their orders, he is relaxed.

He orders a tea and fancy little panini. The tea is delivered steaming, and Bilbo cups it in his hands as he gazes out the window and sips it. It does wonders for his conflicted mood and settles the last
vestiges of upset after his dreams. Sitting here, it’s easy to forget that less than a day ago, he was fighting for his life in Kentucky.

“I have arranged a safe house for us in Chicago,” Gandalf says. “We will be able to rest there a few days without trouble.”

“What kind of safe house?” Balin asks suspiciously. “It’s not another police house, is it?”

“He has no love for police,” Gandalf says. “If he agrees to take you in, we will be in the safest place in Chicago.”

Bilbo had killed someone. He throws his sandwich down. “Safe enough to escape murder charges?”

“You record will remain untarnished,” Gandalf says. “We were picked up by some… friends who would like nothing more than to apprehend Azog’s ilk. It also helped that they owed a few favors. You needn’t worry about the police, my dear boy.”

“For how much longer?” Bilbo demands. “Adventure might have been a good enough lure to get me out of the door, but now people are dying. And I haven’t been a boy for quite a while, thank you very much.”

Balin leans forward. “You’re free to leave at any time.”

Bilbo is acutely aware of Thorin’s eyes burning a hole into the side of his head and sending him tripping over his words. “I… I’ve come too far. I’ll see this through to the end. Provided I’m not kept in the dark anymore. If I’ve … I’ve…” He can’t say it. He swallows painfully. “I need to know.”

Balin begins to protest, but Thorin interrupts. “Answer his questions.”

“You’re not in your proper mind,” Balin says. “This is Durin business.”

“Since it seems meth manufacturing is also Durin business, this seems rather harmless,” Thorin snaps. “I told him about the safe.”

Bilbo shifts to stare at him. The pain medication has probably worn off; Thorin is pale and one hand grips the edge of the table too tightly. But he is entirely lucid and his fierce expression brooks no argument.

“Who is Smaug, really?” Bilbo asks.

“An investment banker from Canada,” Balin says. “Thror told him of whatever was in the safe and asked for a loan. Three months later, mercenaries descended on Erebor and we were driven out.”

“And why hasn’t anyone done anything about him? He can’t just get away with all of this, not for twenty years.”

“He has more subtle and powerful resources than Azog at his command,” Gandalf interrupts. “Rousting him is beyond the scope of the legal system.”

“And who are you?”

“An interested party,” Gandalf says, “with high connections who also want to see Smaug gone. Connections high enough not to trouble themselves over the death of a few criminals.”

“Like Elrond?”
Gandalf merely shrugs.

“The last time we tried to remove Smaug by our own means, we paid for it in blood,” Balin says hollowly.

“My father and brother, in some tiny town called Azan.” Thorin’s mouth is little more than a tight line and he seems even paler than before. Bilbo remembers Frerin and immediately regrets asking.

“Oin!” Balin shouts, and the old veteran runs over with the bag of pills. Thorin nods gratefully, slipping the pill into his mouth and chasing it down with his water.

“About time to be getting back,” Balin announces, conveniently about the same time that Thorin’s eyes gain that far-away look synonymous with the medication’s side-effects. It makes Thorin a bit more complacent, so it’s easy to coax him out of his seat. It’s a bit more difficult for Bilbo to convince himself to leave the comfort of the café. He only manages with the internal promise of sleep.

They file onto the bus for the last time, taking up the same seats as before. Bilbo curls around his backpack, nearly sideways in the seat, and rests his head against the headrest. Try as me may, though, sleep does not come.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: let's mcfreakin lose it. EDIT: I've been informed that we will not be mcfreakin losing it until the chapter after next. Balls.

You also get (gasp) real chapter summaries.

Translations:

*bodach*: old man
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

The Company arrives at a safe place and begins to recover from their trials.

Chapter Notes

Hail Queen Dis (long may she reign.) Dis is actually the main character in this fic.

They roll out of Indiana and into Illinois with the rain at their heels and the night at their side. Before long, the lights of Chicago shine through the bus windows, blurred behind the rain running down the glass. They stop and start with the changing traffic lights, creeping through the city. Bilbo feels stiff, exhaustion hanging over him like a heavy coat.

The company stands the moment the bus parks in the garage, ready for this miserable ride to end, but Gandalf makes them all sit. “The owner of this safe house is a very great man. You must be polite when I introduce you — a few at a time, so as not to anger him, since the lot of you are rather abrasive, especially when together. He can be appalling when angry, which happens easily.”

“You couldn’t have found a more easy-tempered host?” Dori demands.

“Not at such short notice,” Gandalf says. “Wait here and come after me in pairs, with about five minutes between each pair of you. Dwalin is most threatening and should come alone and last.” Shouting over the company’s protests, Gandalf adds, “Come, Mr. Baggins!”

Bilbo shoulders his pack and springs eagerly from his seat, ready to be off the bus if nothing else. His legs are cramped and he thirsts for something other than the dry, cold air conditioning … and the awful proximity of Thorin’s feverish body.

Bilbo steps out into the muggy Chicago evening, the odors of diesel, wet asphalt, and urban decay heavy in his nostrils. He stuffs his jacket into his pack and blinks at the harsh light beating down from the overheads.

Among those waiting for the disembarking passengers is a huge man, standing head and shoulders above the crowd. He wears only black leather, despite the humidity, and sports a shaggy, dark brown mullet reaching halfway down his back. The edge of a paw print tattoo peeks out from under the collar of his black wifebeater.

Bilbo has a bad feeling this is their host, a feeling acknowledged when Gandalf waves to the hulking figure. “Are you nervous?” Bilbo hisses after Gandalf once again straightens his shirt.

“Of course not, Bilbo. Best behavior now,” Gandalf says. “This is him.” He smiles at the man. “I am Gandalf.”
“I know,” the man rumbles. “This is not the sort of man you said you would be bringing.”

“Bi—”

“No names,” he interrupts, holding up a large, hairy hand. Immediately, Gandalf’s mouth clamps shut. “You may call me Beorn. Who are you hiding from?”

“Azog,” Gandalf says.

Just the name causes something thunderous to pass over Beorn’s otherwise stony expression. He rubs one wrist self-consciously and says, “He’s active again? This sounds like a long story.”

Gandalf nods and seems to consider how he’ll start. Finally he begins with, “I was coming over the Appalachians with a friend or two—”

“Or two? I can only see one, and a little one at that,” says Beorn.

“Well, to tell you the truth, I didn’t want to bother you with a lot until I found out if you were busy.”

At that moment, Dori and Ori appear behind them.

“This is not a lot,” Beorn says, looking them up and down. “I am not fond of bikers, but if you are enemies of Azog, I suppose I can make an exception. Gandalf was telling me how you came to be here.”

“Several of us are taking a cross-country journey,” Dori says.

“Four is scarcely several,” Beorn says, now skeptical. If he didn’t know any better, Bilbo would think that Gandalf wilts under the scrutiny.

“There are more than the four of us,” Gandalf says.

“Where are they? Did Azog kill them? Have they fled?”

Bilbo hears the tramp of footsteps behind them as two more appear — Balin and Gloin this time. The sight of Balin’s bandaged cheek seems to make Beorn angrier, although Bilbo cannot tell if it is directed at Azog or them.

“They are still very much alive,” Gandalf says, “although all of us rather worse for wear. Anyway, they were crossing the Appalachians, when they took a wrong turn — I was dealing with business in Connecticut — and were captured by Smaug’s allies in a Kentucky mine. I rejoined them there, and we had only just escaped when Azog cornered our crowd—”

“Six is a small crowd,” Beorn says.

“It seems to be taking them awhile to get off the bus.” Gandalf looks back. “Ah. More of them are coming now.” He winces.

They whip their heads around to see Thorin, who has apparently tripped while getting off the bus and landed in a puddle. Oin jumps out of the bus and pulls him upright, putting one arm around him to help him limp under the covered bus station.

Thorin is about to say something to their host when Beorn waves him into silence and indicates Gandalf should keep talking.

“We were cornered in an old processing plant without any help in sight,” Gandalf continues, “and
since we lost our fleet on the other side of the mountain—"

“Eight is a small fleet,” Beorn says.

Fíli and Kíli sprint out of the bus, clearly unable to wait a moment longer. They take over supporting Thorin from a grateful Oin. Thorin looks even more haggard under the harsh lighting and Bilbo hopes Beorn takes them somewhere safe and dry soon.

Beorn crosses his arms with a creak of leather. “I wish I had been there. I would have given him a good fight.”

Bilbo does not doubt it.

“It is better that you weren’t,” says Gandalf. “We were trapped in a dry building covered in coal dust. His minions tossed a molotov through a window and there was only one way out. All twelve of us thought we would meet our deaths.”

Beorn counts them. “Since when did ten become twelve?”

“Oh, dear,” Gandalf says. “I’d forgotten a few. Here they come now.”

But instead of two, this time the bus disgorges four: Bofur, Bifur, Bombur, and Dwalin, followed by an angry bus driver.

“Got kicked off,” Dwalin says by way of explanation when they reach Beorn.

Beorn seems too interested in the story to acknowledge them. “How did you escape Azog?”

“I’ll tell you the full story, but several of our company are injured and we would like to get away from prying eyes,” Gandalf says.

“Fine, fine.” Beorn turns and begins to walk to the parking lot, Gandalf beside him, their heads close together.

“Who is this?” Gloin asks. Everyone looks to Bilbo.

“Beorn, he said his name was,” Bilbo says. “Probably not his real name. It sounds ridiculous.”

“Agreed,” Bombur grunts.

“Is he going to kill us?” Ori asks.

“I’d like to see him try,” Dwalin snarls, cracking his knuckles. “I didn’t get to swing at Azog and I’ve been sitting on public transportation for eight hours.”

Beorn’s large, brown van is parked outside the Greyhound station.

“I was expecting fewer of you. You’ll have to find a way to fit,” Beorn says. He slides the doors open to reveal three rows seats. Gandalf hastily clambers into the passenger seat and Bilbo scowls at the back of his head.

It’s a tight squeeze. Each bench seats three, forcing Fíli, Kíli, Ori, and Bilbo, as the smallest of the group, to get more creative. Kíli and Ori have no problem depositing themselves on laps, but Fíli is too heavy and Bilbo enjoys his dignity, thank you very much, so they sit in the aisle.

When they stop elbowing each other and fidgeting, Beorn begins to drive. To his credit, it’s a smooth
ride, but the cramped position coupled with his exhaustion makes Bilbo irritable, and by the time they stop, he has the beginnings of a tremendous headache.

They tumble out into the drizzle and glance around. They’re in the tiny backlot of a three-story red brick building that seems to vibrate with the bass line booming from within. The back door is propped open and Bilbo can see harshly bright strobe lights dancing riotously along the walls. The air coming from the building is a thick mixture of pot, old alcohol, and sweat. Two men in revealing leather chaps walk through the door and strut towards the street, hand in hand and giggling.

Bilbo is so grateful for the shelter he doesn’t even question it.

Beorn’s hulking figure appears from around the van, arms crossed and face stern. “While you’re here, you’re not to leave the building without telling me. Do not use your real names. You can go to the bar, except for these three.” He indicates Ori, Kíli, and Fíli.

Fíli triumphantly produces his driver’s license, which Beorn reads in the flickering light coming from the open door. Beorn hands it back without comment and Fíli smirks at his younger brother.

Beorn yanks the ladder down from the fire escape and they all clamber up the slick metal, except Thorin, who must take the stairs inside. Feeling a pang of sympathy, Bilbo offers to help him up. Thorin refuses.

The fire escape ends at a window on the third floor, which leads to a modest apartment covered in air mattresses. A table and several chairs are stacked in the kitchenette, and doors lead off into other rooms.

“The fridge is stocked and everything works. There are a few beds. Someone can take the couch. I was expecting fewer of you,” Beorn says, rattling off the amenities as he opens up doors. The kitchenette sits in the corner closest to the door, a tiled corner with the baseline necessities for cooking. The living room empties into a hallway leading to two bedrooms and a bathroom.

To Bilbo, it’s as if they were staying in the Four Seasons.

“I have to return to the Carrock,” Beorn announces, presumably referring to the bar downstairs. “We can address business later.”

Beorn disappears down the stairs just as Thorin staggers up them and collapses on the couch, covered in sweat. Beorn’s absence prompts the company to break out into conversations among themselves. While much of the company expresses their doubts about a gay bar for a safe house, a few seem more enthusiastic than the situation merits. The general consensus is that Ori needs to be kept in the dark about just what sort of establishment they’re staying above.

A fight breaks out over who gets the bedrooms and who gets to shower first, but Bilbo does not participate. Instead, he locates an air mattress and a corner of the room. The hum of the air pump, paired with the music below them and the bickering of the company, does little to help his headache, but the promise of sleep gives him the strength to not snap at the closest person (Kíli, loudly mourning his chance to explore the bar.) He caps the air mattress off once it’s firm enough, then removes his shoes and jacket before settling down on the bare mattress.

He falls asleep in minutes.

Fíli dives into the thrift shop’s $1 box and comes out with a ratty green t-shirt proclaiming, THE MAN, THE MYTH — an arrow pointing down — THE LEGEND. It isn’t in Dwalin’s size, though, so he throws it back. Somewhere in the next row, Kíli is trying to find pants that fit. Men’s jeans
don’t usually come in his size and Fíli is just about to go over to help him when his phone buzzes in his pocket. He accepts the call gladly.

“Good afternoon, Karen Stone,” he drawls.

On the other end, Dis snorts. “It’s Stephanie Coleman now, as you’ll do well to remember, Ryan Coleman.”

“Just when Jon Stone was beginning to grow on me.” He catches Kíli’s eye and mouths, *Mom.* Kíli goes back to his search. Fíli hears his mother grunt into the mouthpiece, as if she’s shifting something heavy. “Are we moving?”

“Yeah.” Dis sighs heavily. “I found a house in Vermont.” Fíli knows the bitterness in her voice. Ever since Erebor fell, they’ve never stayed anywhere for longer than two years, never kept the same names for longer than three. It’s not the life he wants to live — or his mother to live, or his brother to live, or his uncle to live. “Tell Thorin — tell, uh … Richard Shafter.”

“Dick Shafter?” Fíli grins. “Still mad at him?”

There is a long pause on the other end and Fíli can easily see his mother clenching her teeth and taking a slow breath. “A little. What are you doing?”

“Buying clothes,” Fíli says. He holds the phone against his ear with his shoulder as he goes back to digging. “We lost our stuff in the mine.” In the other aisle, Kíli holds something up. “Oh, Kíli has a pale green shirt.”

“Tell him to put it back,” Dis orders, breath hitching as she lifts something on the other end. “Pastels wash him out.”

Fíli obediently shakes his head at his brother, who scowls. Fíli finds a red shirt that looks about Thorin’s size and slings it over the shoulder not supporting the phone.

“Thorin hasn’t been picking up,” Dis says. “I always go straight to voicemail.”

“Christ, he almost bled out two nights ago,” Fíli says. “He’s probably sleeping.”

“Alone?”

Fíli is faintly disgusted by the suggestion. “Yes, alone.”

There is another long pause on the other end. Fíli hears a jangling sound — probably the dog’s collar as Dis rubs his head. “The burglar. He seems … squishy.”

“More so in real life,” Fíli admits. “I don’t think he’s ever wanted for anything.”

“If Gandalf—”

“If Gandalf hadn’t given Thorin the key, we wouldn’t be here right now.” Fíli holds up a grey shirt about his size and adds it to the pile on his shoulder. “Having the key and a squishy burglar along is better than helping you move out again!”

“I’d rather you and your brother were helping me move out for the hundredth fucking time than having you hare off on your uncle’s batshit crazy roadtrip,” Dis snaps. “The last time we tried to retake Erebor, Frerin died. And Dad vanished! If—”

“We’re all going to die if we don’t get rid of this madman,” Fíli retorts, trying to keep his voice low.
Kíli already looks concerned. Fíli motions him to stay put. “I’d rather die on the road than in my seventieth house with my ninetieth job. Kíli feels the same way!”

“Smaug cut my granddad’s head off in front of me! It took half an hour. Is that what you want for Thorin? For Kíli? For any of the company?”

While Fíli has been all but whispering, Dis is shouting and some of the nearby patrons are beginning to stare.

“We’re both adults. That’s what you told us,” Fíli says, trying to inject some finality into his voice. Dis would fight for eons if he let her build up a head of steam — something he and Kíli had learned well in their teens, and Thorin had learned every time he spoiled them. “His name is Bilbo Baggins. You can’t keep calling him the burglar forever.”

Dis growls, but seems willing to let her anger dissipate … or at least be redirected. “Bilbo Baggins? The fuck kind of name is that?”

“Dunno. I think he comes from old money.” He finds an enormous black shirt with the legend, DRINK UNTIL YOU WANT ME. It goes over his shoulder for Dwalin. “On our first day out, he was blabbering on about forgetting handkerchiefs.”

There’s a loud bang on the other end. Fíli thinks she’s dropped the phone. Then comes the laughter, distant but loud. It feels good to hear his mother laugh like that and he can’t help but smile.

“Oh, fuck.” She picks up the phone again. “Fuck. I can’t wait to see my miserable bastard of a brother again. Handkerchiefs. Christ. He’ll never hear the end of this. I’m sure Dwalin is already … I should call him …”

Kíli is unable to stay away any longer. He grabs the phone off Fíli’s shoulder and says, “Bilbo’s not that squishy. He killed a man.”

Fíli glares at him after making sure no one else has heard him and snatches the phone from his hands. He says, “Azog’s buddy almost shot Thorin in the head. Bilbo saved him.”

“Fíli!” Dis reprimands sharply. “Not in public, Christ.”

Fíli sighs. “He’s not Voldemort, he’s not gonna show up just ‘cuz we mention him.”

“Better safe than sorry,” she says, then she’s back to talking about Bilbo. “Pity he’s not more of a twink. You would have come home, I would be rid of my most pigheaded relative, and that would have been the end of that.” Despite her words, Fíli suspects her esteem of the fourteenth member of the company has risen. “What are your thoughts? Could I fight him?”

“Maybe after you’ve put a few beers in him,” Fíli says, “but he knows fuck all—”

“A bhradag! Don’t swear in front of your mother!”

“He doesn’t know much about fighting,” he amends. “He seems like a nice guy, just …” He searches for the words.

“I like him,” Kíli puts in.

“Dwalin dropped you on your head as a baby.” To his mother, Fíli says, “I don’t know. He’s not one of us.”
“Perhaps that’s a good thing,” Dis says wryly. “If all goes to shit and you escape, at least your uncle will have a nice sugar daddy in Boston.”

Kíli makes exaggerated retching noises into the mouthpiece.

For a moment, it amuses Fíli to think of his uncle — hands usually stained with dirt or motor oil, who never has more than three shirts at a time — finding a place among Bilbo’s flowers and doilies and sagging bookshelves. But in reality, it would likely be the other way around, with Bilbo endlessly shifting from house to house, having so many names that he scarcely keep track of them, laboring in low-paying jobs at odd hours just to keep enough money to flee when there seemed to be too many people asking too many questions. Fíli has known Bilbo for less than a month, but he knows that this life was not meant for him. Bilbo belonged in his established apartment with too many belongings and a fireplace. Sometimes, Fíli wonders what that life is like. And sometimes, he resents Mr. Baggins for it, but those times are few and far between and always tinged with shame.

“Well, I’ll leave you to shopping,” she says. “Náina’s come to help me finish packing. She says to ask you to ask Gloin to call more often. Keep sending me pictures and don’t get into more trouble — I can’t wire you much more.” Again, the jangling of the dog collar. “Harley says hi. Tell your uncle I’m moving and that he’s being a jackass, as usual. And if you can’t get Thorin to cut his fucking hair, at least cut yours, Fíli, you two look like hippies. Ah- anyway. I love you both. Stay safe!”

“Love you, Mom,” they chorus, and Dis hangs up.

When Bilbo finally wakes, it’s with the pleasant confusion of someone who has slept for far longer than intended. Muted sunlight glows on the walls opposite the window, so Bilbo assumes it’s day, at least. Someone placed a pillow under his head and a blanket over his shoulders, but it’s impossible to tell who did it.

Bilbo sits up to find that the room is nearly empty. Dori is flipping through channels on the TV and Bombur has busied himself in the kitchen, but that is it.

“At afternoon, burglar,” Dori says when he notices Bilbo moving.

“At afternoon?” Bilbo asks blearily. He reaches for his phone, but the battery died in the night. His tablet, however, still has some juice left. It informs him that it is four in the afternoon as Dori does the same.

“Slept the day away,” says Dori. “We were given strict orders not to bother you.”

“Well, thank you,” Bilbo says, still dazed. *Four o’clock! That’s nearly nineteen hours!*

“We tried to wake you up earlier on Oin’s orders. He had Kíli shake you, y’know, to make sure you weren’t dead,” he taps his head. Bilbo understands it to mean they were concerned about his concussion, and if he weren’t so frustrated about the entire company finding out, he’d be touched. “Took a good swing at ‘em and then went right on back to snoozin’. Don’t know if you remember. It convinced Oin that you’re right as rain, at least. How d’y you feel?”

Bilbo smiles at the story, though he doesn’t remember waking up. “A bit hungry,” he admits. But otherwise, he realizes, he is fine. No headache, no lingering exhaustion.

“I can fix that well enough,” says Bombur from his place in the kitchen. “There’s plenty left over.” In that moment, Bilbo decides that Bombur is his favorite, and scrambles to the kitchen to pick over the leftovers.
“Where is everyone?” Bilbo asks.

Bombur shrugs. “Thorin and Balin are sleeping. Most of the rest are downstairs at the bar. I think some of the others are stocking up for the second leg of the journey and Gandalf mentioned something about making himself scarce for a few days. Either way, don’t expect anything to happen anytime soon.”

That suits Bilbo just fine. Five minutes later, he is perched beside Dori on the couch, watching the news with a cup of tea and a bagel, ready for the first peaceful afternoon he has had since Rivendell.

The only other thing he could want is a stiff drink…

Chapter End Notes

NEXT TIME we mcfreakin' lose it. Finally. God.

Translations

A bhradag- brat
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

“Wass that?” Bilbo slurs, throwing off his neon green shutter shades. “Key to your chastity belt?”

Chapter Notes

We interrupt your regularly scheduled Hobbit fic to bring you the Hangover.

Or.

LET’S MCFREAKIN’ LOSE IT.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The next thing Bilbo is aware of is a sharp pain cutting into his side. He sits up too quickly and the resulting headache threatens to trap him in bed all day. He curses, cradling his tender head and shielding his eyes from the blinding sunlight streaming in through the bedroom window.

He knows it is the day after he sat down with Dori, but he has no memory of the interluding night. The aches emanating from every inch of his skin — and his monstrous hangover — suggest it was spectacularly awful.

He looks down at his greatest source of pain, noting with mounting panic that he’s gotten a tattoo.

Bilbo sits on the bed for a few moments, morosely wondering how long it will take for him to die after jumping from a third story window. Then he studies the tattoo again. It’s a thistle, he realizes after a moment of consideration. And it is rather lovely. The black lines are crisp and the design is wonderfully simple.

He hopes this tattoo is the worst relic from the previous night.

Bilbo casts about for his missing shirt and finds nothing but that awful shirt Dwalin found for Thorin. He has nearly turned the room upside-down when he spots something half-covered by the comforter. Further investigation reveals a spot of dried blood about the size of a quarter, smeared as if someone had tried to wipe it away.

Bilbo checks the bed again and finds small spatters of blood where he must have brushed against the mattress with his new tattoo. There is no way his small pinpricks could have left so large a stain.

There’s nothing else for it. He’ll need to ask the company what happened last night.

Thorin has never been so aware of the pulse in his thigh. With every heartbeat and every bass drop, it feels as if Azog is shooting him in the leg all over again.
Thorin grits his teeth and pretends to watch whatever Kili and Ori have on the TV. No alcohol, Oin had warned, but Thorin hasn’t medicated in seven hours. His latest adventure into idiocy had cost them $100 for just six painkillers. Six pills were not enough, not nearly enough, but he would never ask for more. He ought to feel lucky he had escaped as lightly as he did. Thorin toys with the idea of ordering the company to let him bleed out, since the hospital is too much paperwork and to be stationary with Azog hunting them was to beg to be found. Then Thorin thinks of Dwalin’s reaction — there likely wouldn’t be enough of him left to bury. And Fili and Kili...

Thorin glances guiltily at Kili, who is pouring the last of the popcorn down his throat. A poor role model he has been. At least Kili had Fili and Dis.

Dis... Thorin contemplates calling his sister for help, but it will take her days to arrive and Azog is already searching for them. Dis has remained hidden thus far and he will not endanger her lightly. Not after Frerin. And he will not cry for help after merely being shot in the leg. He has had worse.

That doesn’t mean his leg feels like sunshine.

It’s been seven hours since the last pill and he needs a beer. Besides, Thorin hardly thinks he needs to babysit two adults or, as is more likely the case, that they need to babysit him.

Thorin hauls himself to the bar downstairs, orders several cheap beers, and takes them to a corner removed from the worst of the noise. He finishes two in short order and fishes his father’s key out of his pocket. The sliver of steel feels heavier than a lodestone and, instead of a buzz, he feels a gnawing sense of dread stealing over him.

Thorin shakes his head and reaches for the third bottle. Retaking Erebor has been his only desire for twenty years. He cannot have second thoughts now.

No one in the company would have second thoughts. The only ones foolhardy — or foolish — enough to join him had been those worst affected by Smaug’s manhunt. They had all lived on the road, changing their jobs and homes almost as often as their names. They had all lost friends and family. In their eyes, Thorin must be a lamp that they are drawn to like moths. And, like lamps usually did to moths, it seems Thorin was only drawing them to their deaths. They have been on the road for less than a month, and already they have been shot at, held hostage by Thranduil’s arrogant cousin — yes, that had been a hostage situation, no matter how polite — horribly lost, captured again, and nearly burned alive. Perhaps he ought to put the burglar in charge. He appears to have his wits about him.

The burglar.

The company — bound by friendship or kinship — has been a unit even before Gandalf had suggested this journey. Then Gandalf had forced the burglar to come along. He has no stake in any of this, yet he remains with them, enduring every shade of hell as if he had been born to it. He does not owe Thorin anything — in fact, Thorin owes him for all but destroying his apartment during their visit — yet he does not hesitate to follow him. To kill for him.

Thorin polishes off his third beer at the thought of the burglar’s pale, blood-speckled face, tight with fear. The fourth beer starts with the image of that same face, lit by the rising sun but illuminated with a smile after Thorin embraces him. And why would he not smile? Thorin has been, at best, dismissive and, at worst, hostile of the company’s erstwhile member. Inclusivity appeals to everyone.

Thorin wishes he would do it more. Bilbo is quite handsome when he smiles, and even when he doesn’t smile, he has a sort of ease about him that Thorin admires.
The fourth beer disappears. Thorin remembers a stuffy-looking but comely man sitting across from him on the subway, that small, endearing scowl etched across his features — *Christ, didn’t I call him a twink?* — as he silently judged Thorin for hanging up on Gandalf for the tenth time. Of course, Thorin had despised the burglar then, even though he was handsome and he was an excellent cook. No, it had to have been…

*Forget it,* Thorin tells himself as he pops the cap off the last of his bottles. *His tastes probably run towards men who can read directions.*

*Fuck it. I’m drunk and he’s nowhere nearby.*

It had to have been in the cruiser, when the pain had dragged Thorin into consciousness. He had opened his eyes and Bilbo had been there, alive, and it had felt as if an enormous weight had vanished from Thorin’s chest, only to be replaced by something just as crushing.

So deep is his distraction that he doesn’t even notice Bilbo shambling over until he is already in the seat beside Thorin. The light playing off the empty beer bottles is suddenly fascinating.

“*Wass that?*” Bilbo slurs, throwing off his neon green shutter shades. “*Key to your chastity belt?*”

Thorin clumsily drops the key back into his pocket and peers at the Bilbo-shaped blur. Bilbo looks as drunk as Thorin feels, except nicer-looking … nicer-lookinger? *Is that a word?* “*Uhh … no.*”

Bilbo giggles. “Then what *isss* it?”

“A key given to me by my forebears to—”

“You have *four bears?*” Bilbo asks.

“I — what? No, I—”

Bilbo cuts him off with a sharp wave of his hand. “*Why are you out here?*” He waves both arms behind him at the strobe lights and almost falls over. “*Party’s over there!*”

Thorin slowly pats the seat beside him. He ought to keep the burglar out of further trouble. At least, until he put him in the greatest trouble of his life by sending him against Smaug.

Thorin considers going for another beer. Maybe two beers. But that would involve standing and leaving Bilbo. One of those results is considerably worse than the other.

“Dwalin said you were looking for me.” Bilbo collapses into the chair, catching himself on Thorin’s arm. Thorin can’t remember if he really did say that or if Dwalin was meddling again. Both are entirely possible. “*Wass it?*”

“This quest,” Thorin says, carefully enunciating his words. He shakes his head and starts over. “I have been a terrible leader.”

Bilbo blows a loud raspberry. “*Boo, you whore. We all agreed to it!* Fuck, if I was the leader or something we’d never have left Boston. And who knows what Gandalf wants, so he’d probably be even *worse.* So get over it, you’re doing fine.”

Bilbo doesn’t *understand.* “I have endangered members of this company far too often. Balin, my oldest friend, is …” Thorin pauses to gulp down more beer “*...injured and Fili and Kili, my own nephews … I told them it would be dangerous, but did I really impress that on them? Do they follow me only out of love?*”
“Killed a guy,” Bilbo says matter-of-factly. “Stabbed him right in the chest.” He mimes doing that with one limp arm, then reaches out and takes a swig of Thorin’s beer.

Thorin drops a heavy hand on Bilbo’s shoulder. “You killed in defense of my life. I can’t … can’t …” His eyes swim with tears that threaten to spill at any moment. “Of all the members of this quest, I have … I’ve underestimated you the most, Mr. Baggins.”

Bilbo looks as if he’s made his mind up about something and grins dangerously.

As Bilbo turns the corner to the kitchen, Ori makes a cautionary noise and everyone stops talking.

The silence at his arrival is disconcerting. He had heard their raucous shouting from the bedroom and expected it to be much the same after he arrived. What had they been talking about? And why wasn’t he involved?

*It was only yesterday ... yesterday?! that I ... that Thorin ...* He can’t piece together his thoughts through the hangover and refuses to try until he’s eaten something.

They’re all gathered in a rough circle, chairs drawn up to the long (but not long enough) table. Most of them, Bilbo notices, are wearing new clothes. He also cannot fail to notice that it is so quiet that he could hear a pin drop.

“No need to stop on my account,” he mutters. The only open seat is between Thorin and Dwalin, and for the life of him he can’t figure out why he is so reticent to take it. It might have something to do with the way Thorin is rigidly avoiding eye contact, but it might just be the imperiously smug look on Dwalin’s face.

Bilbo has little choice. The chair scrapes loudly on the floor, causing those nursing hangovers to cringe. Bilbo slumps into it with a heavy sigh, thanking Bombur weakly when he places a plate of food in front of him.

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“Wild night last night, eh?” Dwalin asks. The only response that Bilbo can muster is a pathetic groan. Irritation flashes through him when his knife scrapes on his plate, the sound painful and piercing.

“*Thoir pòg bho Thorin!*” Bifur roars, pounding the table. Half the room breaks into another round of laughter.

“I suppose it was,” says Bilbo cautiously after they’ve finished. “Only, I’m having quite the time trying to remember it. I indulged a bit more than I should have, I’m afraid.”

Dwalin puffs a laugh. “Don’t I know it. I was there. Ah, where to start? There was the arm wrestling, the strip poker…”

“*Strip poker?*” Bilbo sighs and grabs another piece of toast. At least now he knows how he lost his shirt. He privately swears off drinking for a year — no, two years. Not even temporarily forgetting the nightmareish last few days had been worth this. He couldn’t even *remember* forgetting it. And just when the company had begun to accept him, too. No doubt he had mightily impressed them with his low tolerance.

Dwalin leans forward. “And then Thorin—”

“And Dwalin got chlamydia,” says Thorin through gritted teeth. Dwalin shrinks back into his seat with a scowl.
“Dwalin wasn’t the only one who got laid!” Kíli shouts bravely, before he catches Thorin’s venomous glare. Conversation bubbles up in fits and starts, too quietly for Bilbo to catch whatever just happened. But Thorin seems to be in a terrible mood and Dwalin won’t explain, so Bilbo is left to wonder.

“I need to know,” Bilbo says. “There was a spot of blood next to me when I woke up and it wasn’t mine. What if I—?”

“Sounds like someone got their cherry popped last night,” Dwalin says with a leer.

Over the company’s renewed amusement, Bilbo tries to insist he is not, as everyone likes to assume, a virgin, but no one seems to care.

“Wasn’t talking about you,” Dwalin says, before shouting, “Bilbo wasn’t the only one who lost a round of strip poker, eh, Oin?”

At least Bilbo isn’t the only one suffering for his actions the previous night.

“Honestly,” he mutters, to no one in particular.

“Do you really not remember?” Thorin asks haughtily.

“No, not particularly,” says Bilbo. Just when he’d begun to accept me. “Do you know what happened?”

“I wouldn’t know.” Thorin looks away, rubbing his neck. The action draws Bilbo’s attention to a series of mottled bruises along the side of his neck. Bilbo’s temper flares. Thorin has no right to judge him when he himself clearly had an interesting night. Under Bilbo’s irritation, though, is jealousy. He can hardly help but wonder who gave Thorin a veritable garden of lovingly tended hickies.

Bilbo finishes his meal quickly, eating what he feels he can keep down before hopping in the shower. There he can think and maybe even rediscover last night’s memories. Try as he might, though, he cannot recall anything of any great import. Vaguely, as though in a fever dream, he remembers snippets of feelings, sights, sounds. He remembers the prick of a needle on his skin and the sharp taste of appletinis — of course — and … something else. The ghost of a hand along his bare skin, searing hot and callused. That one feels important, and it isn’t a difficult leap for him to assume that he shared a bed last night, if only for a short while.

That is disconcerting, to say the least. He likes to remember when he had sex, and he likes to remember who it was with. Most upsetting was the fact that, whomever he had laid with felt it was not necessary to stay the night. Like he was some hooker! Perhaps the rest of Bilbo’s party sleeping in the other room had scared them off.

Or perhaps he had slept with a member of the company. The water seems to run cold as he considers this horrifying possibility. He takes comfort in the knowledge that he doesn’t think anyone in the company would…

The scattered memories of a game of strip poker come back to him, vague and strangely tilted, as if he been leaning over. The table is made of faceless men but for the one beside him.

_Dwalin._

_Fuck._
Then, more urgently: Do I have chlamydia?

They kiss with the same sort of urgency Thorin has become familiar — dare he say comfortable — with. They kiss instead of talk, because the way their lips meet is clean and words are messy.

It’s hard to keep track of where Bilbo’s hands are; they move too quickly for Thorin to keep up with. So he stops trying and starts appreciating them. They alight on his shoulders, the back of his neck, his sides. They leave an electric buzzing in their wake, kindling arousal that pools in his gut.

They kiss long and hard, hungry and insatiable until they pull away breathlessly. “This is good,” Bilbo pants. His arms are flung over Thorin’s shoulders and crossed behind his neck, his knuckles brushing against him in a highly distracting manner. “This is…” Whatever else Bilbo might have to say is deemed unimportant, as he dips back in to catch Thorin’s lips.

They continue like that for what feels like an eternity, and, if anyone else can see them, Thorin doesn’t care. Eventually they break away, more reluctantly than the first time, and breathe each other’s air for a moment. “We should do more,” Bilbo says, lips quirked and Thorin knows exactly what he means.

“Oh god, yes,” Thorin says, and together they scramble out of the seat, an uncoordinated mess of limbs and hair. “Upstairs.”

Bilbo snorts a laugh. “And then what?” He winks.

“I can think of a few things,” Thorin purrs.

Bilbo’s hair is still wet when he throws himself down on the living room couch. He needs to speak to Dwalin, but it’s difficult to get the man alone and Bilbo’s courage fails him repeatedly. So he settles on the couch with his legs tucked under him and his tablet in his lap, ready to pounce on the next opportunity.

Nori, who sits on the other end of the couch, says, “You’ve changed shirts.”

“Of course.” Bilbo plucks at his comfortable and plain brown shirt. “Did you think I’d keep that horrid thing on?”

“It was funny,” Nori says, “although Ori says from weathered observation that it isn’t true.”

The words flash like neon in his mind. Skilled in every position.

Nori sees the expression of sheer terror on his face and grins. “You won’t be able to find him around today. Scared him off, I expect, with what he saw you do last night.”

Bilbo leans forward and seizes his shirt. “What did I do last night?”

“Ah.” Nori extricates himself and waves to Dori. “You’ll have to find out from someone else. Dori and I have business.” He winks at Bilbo and leaves with his brother.

Bilbo contemplates chasing after him, but Nori has only heard things from Ori. It’s more worthwhile to wait for Dwalin — currently cleaning a large handgun with Bombur and Gloin — to be alone.

Kíli sits in Dori’s place, unable to keep the smirk off his face. “How’s the tattoo? I did it. It’s some of my best work, so I hope you like it.”

“You let drunk me convince you to give me a tattoo.” Bilbo is about to scream, but then remembers
that Kíli is twenty at most and that it is a very nice tattoo. He obediently rolls up the side of his shirt. Fíli and Bofur wander over to investigate.

“What I heard was true,” Bofur drawls. “It is that easy to get you to take off your clothes.”

Kíli laughs so hard he almost falls off the couch. Bofur grins at his wit, but Fíli looks concerned.

“Better than the tattoo you gave me,” Fíli grumbles. “It actually looks something.”

Kíli beams. “Mind if I take a picture for Mom?”

“Isn’t it too red?” Bilbo asks as the flash goes off.

“Your face was redder last night,” Kíli says.

“And I suppose you have pictures of that, too.”

“And video of the karaoke. Here—”

Bilbo, now thoroughly embarrassed and sick of the company’s needling, tosses up his hands and marches over to Dwalin, ready to get to the bottom of all of this.

“A moment, please?” Bilbo asks roughly, startling him. Bilbo strides purposefully from the room, with a confused Dwalin trailing behind him. As they leave, Bilbo senses even more jokes whispered at his expense.

“Can I help you?” Dwalin asks, sounding as though that is the last thing he wants to do. They descend the stairs into the relative privacy of the landing.

“I should hope so. What happened last night?” Bilbo demands, cleverly concealing his desperation.

His captive looks uncomfortable and irritated, as though he has had to answer the question multiple times already. “Everyone wants to know about the chlamydia. It’s just a possibility not even a fucking—”

Bilbo groans. “No! What did I do. Did we…? I mean, you and I…?” He trails off, waving a hand between them. Dwalin stares uncomprehendingly, then barks a laugh that grates on Bilbo’s headache as well as his nerves.

“We didn’t fuck,” says Dwalin once he has calmed enough to speak again. “As for what you did last night? A bit harder to pin down. I tried to keep you from doing too much damage. There was the arm wrestling, the tattoo, the strip poker. You tried to fight a guy a good foot taller than you.” As he speaks, they begin to ascend the stairs, Bilbo in front and Dwalin behind him. When Dwalin finishes and shows no intention of continuing, Bilbo turns around, effectively trapping Dwalin again.

“Yes, I’m sure that was all quite fun to watch,” says Bilbo tersely. “But did I…?” He trails off again, hoping that Dwalin will understand.

“I hear you, I hear you. Calm down,” Dwalin says, waving his hands placatingly. “You’re better off asking Thorin about that.” And with that, he pushes past Bilbo and up the stairs, shoulders quaking in silent laughter.

As they push through the crowd, Thorin limps behind Bilbo, his enthusiasm not suffering for his
cumbersome injury. They never lose contact, always shoulder to shoulder, hand in hand, or otherwise pressed together. And when they reach the back room, hands dig into Thorin’s shoulders, pressing him roughly against the shut door. The wood is hard against his back, but Bilbo’s lips are soft on his, and he can find little reason to complain.

“Better,” Bilbo says. His legs close around Thorin’s waist like a vice, his breathless laugh cool on Thorin’s slick lips. As Thorin climbs, Bilbo attempts to continue kissing him. Thorin dodges easily, giggling when he feels searingly hot lips on the smooth skin of his neck and leaving trails of saliva that chill when the breeze hits. This position allows Thorin to bury his nose in Bilbo’s hair, inhaling deeply. The thick curls smell strongly of cinnamon. It’s a good scent for Bilbo, he thinks.

Then they get to the stop of the stairs, and he starts to think with his other head.

“Is there any—?” Ori peeps, squeaking when he sees Bilbo and Thorin tangled in each other. Thorin had forgotten he was there, not down at the party due to his age. Briefly, he wonders where Kíli is, before realizing that the answer is obvious and he’ll have to figure out how to ground his nephew while still on the road.

Thorin’s cargo whispers “bedroom” into his ear hotly, and how can he argue with that? He strides into the bedroom he had claimed, kicking the door closed behind him. The streetlights outside the window gild the edges of the room and illuminate his way.

When Thorin tries to lift his leg to climb onto the bed, Bilbo still attached to him like an overgrown leech, his leg alights with pain.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck” he mutters, dropping Bilbo unceremoniously. Bilbo bounces off the mattress, unable to save himself.

“What?” he asks, clearly frustrated by the change in pace. Thorin is grips at his leg, hissing as the pain subsides in ebbing throbs. “Oh my God. Can’t you … can’t you walk it off? Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Thorin grunts, straightening up. “I’m fine.”

Thorin struggles to meet Bilbo’s scrupulous gaze, studying Thorin as though he could detect a lie from his eyes. Bilbo breaks the standoff first, flicking to stare hungrily at Thorin’s lips before surging up to kiss him again. A hot, slick press of lips with Bilbo sucking Thorin’s lower lip into his mouth, drawing hushed, desperate noises from Thorin’s throat and swallowing each of them in turn.

Together they maneuver Thorin onto the bed and out of his shirt, and Bilbo spares no time in straddling his hips, the weight of him a pleasant burden. Thorin’s shirt slides up his chest slowly, and Bilbo acts as though every inch of skin bared is a gift given to him and worships it accordingly. In their wake they leave a buzzing feeling, as if Bilbo’s touch invigorates the every cell, every atom. It seems highly unfair that Bilbo still has his shirt on, so Thorin begins to toy with the hem of it, carefully slipping his hands up and under it. Bilbo sits up straight, tugging his shirt over his head and throwing it aside. The breath he was taking catches in Thorin’s throat, hitching as his heart begins to pound that much harder for the want of him.

Dwalin was surprisingly helpful, but the lead he gave Bilbo is troubling.

First, neither of he nor Thorin should have been drunk in their condition, let alone having sex! With Bilbo’s head and Thorin’s leg, it would have been disastrous. More concerning, though, was that they were only just beginning to bridge the gap between thinly veiled dislike into tolerance and maybe even friendship. Bilbo has known things like this — drunken
nights filled with poor choices — to drive a permanent wedge between bonds less tenuous than theirs. The thought of losing what little he has with Thorin is unbearable even without taking his unfortunate affections into account.

And therein lies the true complication, because Bilbo has feelings for Thorin that he finds so difficult to explain. It’s like every boyhood crush, but tinged with the terrible heavi ness of all the journey has wrought. It’s Thorin’s smile and the sight of him, battered and bleeding, laying before a burning building. It’s the freedom of the road with the feeling of snuffing another man’s life out, and Bilbo has had such a hard time coming to terms with the conflict that he has neglected his attraction.

A pit of despair opens up in him at the thought of Thorin banishing him from the company. In these last few days, he has escaped death too many times to leave now. Bilbo fears what will become of him if he returns to Newbury Street, alone and without closure. He fears what will happen to him when he is left with enough time to relive killing that man over and over and over and over and—

Bilbo’s hands shake as he makes himself a cup of tea, but he does it without spilling anything. He leans against the counter, now unable to face the company at all, although he feels their eyes on him.

He takes a deep breath and it calms him somewhat. Then he begins to wander over the hazy events of last night, using Dwalin’s clumsy summary to piece together what happened and fill in the blanks. This helps, up until he remembers slipping into a seat beside Thorin. Try as he might, he can’t remember much else after that.

The memory that returns to him lacks lucidity, just like the others, but this one is tinged with more than just the alcohol. All he can recall are rough, calloused hands and a thick voice rasping, “*a thaisce.*”

Just the memory causes color to bloom on his cheeks. Bilbo thinks, not for the first time, that his feelings for Thorin will only spell trouble in the end. He has to remind himself that he is Bilbo Baggins, tagalong florist-turned-burglar and that Thorin is … himself. Thorin has only just begun to accept Bilbo. He couldn’t possibly feel the same way. And yet the voice in his memory is reverent, though he fears that that just may be him hearing what he wants to hear.

He’s getting ahead of himself. He should really just find Thorin and talk to him, because if Bilbo knows one thing, it is that talking things out generally helps. Finding Thorin may prove to be a challenge, as Bilbo has not seen him since breakfast.

Finding the resolve to do this is far more difficult than Bilbo expected, though. If deciding to talk to Thorin is hard, then getting out of the kitchen is like moving a mountain. Time and time again he finds an excuse to tarry, be it an e-mail to Mr. Gamgee about the shop or an interesting article.

Bilbo looks up as Balin enters the kitchen, a shot in one hand and a pint of beer in the other. Of all of them, Bilbo feels that Balin has been the least antagonistic, so he welcomes the older man’s presence.

“Little early for that, isn’t it?” Bilbo asks.

Balin gives him a withering look, then pours the shot into the beer. “I need it with this lot, and especially with Thorin as he is.” He leans against the counter next to Bilbo. “Laddie.” He takes a big gulp of the boilermaker. “You should talk to Thorin. If not for your sake, then for the sake of the company.”

Bilbo sighs, then nods. “I suppose I should. I have been trying, you know. But he is quite difficult to track down.”
“You haven’t been trying very hard, I imagine. He’s been in the bar, but I believe he’s outside, now. Beorn has managed to find us a few bikes.” Balin rolls his eyes and waves the pint towards the door. “Just go talk to him.”

Bilbo tucks his tablet beneath the arm holding his tea and stands, beginning to ruminate over what he should say.

Thorin lays his hands heavily on the softness of Bilbo’s stomach. He draws his hands up Bilbo’s sides, savoring every inch until he reaches his ribs and feels a sticky wetness. When he pulls his hand away, there’s a dark smear on his hand. “You’re bleeding,” says Thorin.

“Am I?” Bilbo asks, lifting his arm to examine the spot where Thorin’s hand had rested a moment ago. There, still red and bleeding in spots, is a small black tattoo, the skin around it inflamed. Bilbo seems to only just notice it, his eyebrows drawing together as he considers the tattoo. “Oh, right. Kíli did it. Neat, right?”

“He did what?” Thorin asks, firmly but gently twisting Bilbo in his lap so he can inspect it more closely. It has all of the hallmarks of a youthful, unsteady hand, but doesn’t carry the same imperfections that some of Kíli’s earlier (and just as illicit) attempts. Thorin brushes a careful thumb over the tender skin, something twisting painfully in him. “He did this? But… but you’re so…” much like on the bus, Thorin is at a loss for words. However, now they are lost among the sea of his thoughts and not the haze of his medication. His eyebrows draw together, his lips parted as he struggles with to find words. “You were so… pure.”

Bilbo laughs, sharpened with something like irony. “Before the… this or before the stabbing a guy in his kidney thing?” Thorin cringes as Bilbo swipes at the air proudly, demonstrating the move for him again. “Either way, you’re wrong. Like, so wrong. So wrong.” Bilbo swivels awkwardly to show off his first tattoo, a watercolor style bundle of lavender, blue and purple. Thorin rests his hand over it, staring with naked admiration as he slides his hand over Bilbo’s back, gradually revealing the watery splotches of color. He continues to slide his hand along the line of Bilbo’s spine, relishing in the shudder that passes through him at the touch. If the mood was killed by his question, it is swiftly reignited by the action.

Hands tangle in Thorin’s hair, woven in among the thick, dark waves. His hair falls from the loose bun, spilling over the pillow, before it is disturbed by those same hands. Thorin strokes idly at the curve of Bilbo’s hip with his thumb while Bilbo continues his exploration of Thorin’s chest. The touch is like a live wire laid bare across his skin, and he wants more of it.

“May I?” he asks, voice rough yet tender, fingers hovering over the tongue of Bilbo’s belt. The answer comes in the form of hot kisses peppered along Thorin’s jaw, his neck, and then back up. As he slips Bilbo’s belt free from its loops, he feels teeth scrape against his neck. The needy sound that bubbles up from his chest only grows as scrapes become sharp nips and Bilbo begins to suck marks into his neck. “A thaisce.” he gasps, voice thick with arousal. They free Bilbo from his pants, leaving both of them nearly naked but for their underwear and Thorin’s repulsive yellow shorts.

The air is hot and damp between them, their chests heaving in tandem. They breathe the same air and beat with the same frantic heartbeat. The sight of Bilbo nearly drives Thorin mad with need. His lips are red and parted, shining with a thin sheen of saliva so that he looks beautiful, ruined in his pleasure.

Such is Bilbo’s need, apparently, that he forgets his own sharp reprimand from the police car. It is, best to ask first, but Bilbo skips asking and goes straight to working Thorin’s godawful shorts down his thighs.
“These really would look better on the floor,” mutters Bilbo, chuckling at his own wit. The waistband reaches his covered wound, but Bilbo is not careful and it drags roughly over the bandages. Thorin recoils and hisses in pain and Bilbo stumbles over hasty apologies. A moment later the pain subsides, and by then Bilbo has gotten the shorts to the floor.

Bilbo finds Thorin in the otherwise empty parking lot, leaning against the wall with a cigarette between his lips. It is drizzling, but Thorin keeps himself and his cigarette dry by standing under the fire escape.

Thorin’s eyes slide in his direction, but Thorin makes no move to acknowledge him. Bilbo sighs and sprints through the rain to the safety of the fire escape.

Bilbo stares at him for a moment, birthing sentences his mind and sending them to die on his lips. “Those things will kill you, you know.” Starting with his foot in his mouth has always served him well.

Thorin slowly removes the cigarette and exhales, smoke curling around his mouth. It calls to mind the crystal image of Thorin beneath him, lips swollen from too many kisses. It weakens his resolve for a moment.

“So will guns, bikes, and my nephews, probably,” Thorin says. He tries to take another drag before realizing he’s at the end. He drops the cigarette and scuffs it under his boot. “Your point?”

“Ther’s not really one.”

They stare at a puddle on the ground for a few minutes, watching the raindrops plop into it. Finally, Bilbo concocts a plan and turns to him, only to find Thorin’s mouth open as well. Bilbo quashes the urge to silence him with his mouth and indicates Thorin should continue.

“You’ve done well by the company,” Thorin says. “You’ve won the respect and loyalty of more than a few of us. Myself included.”

Bilbo has a gnawing suspicion he knows what direction this discussion is going in. To be honest, it wasn’t entirely different than the path he would have chosen. Because they cannot work. Not until the end of the quest, when Erebor stands reclaimed or they fail. And even once Erebor is reclaimed, will Bilbo have a place there? He is an interloper, a temporary addition at best. And he has his own life to return to, while Thorin will continue to live his.

“As — as long as I can stay,” Bilbo says in a rush. Thorn’s expression changes from composed to alarmed. “If that’s not too much to ask. I’ve—”

“I had no intention of asking you to leave,” Thorin says. Bilbo breathes a sigh of relief. “We would be losing a valuable member of the company.”

“What happened last night never happened?” He wants so badly to make it a definitive statement, but can’t stop himself from adding an inquisitive edge.

“My duty is to recover Erebor and nothing will dissuade me from it.”

He says it with such force that Bilbo cannot help but catch a fraction of his urgency. “And I’m going to help you do that.”

A smile illuminates Thorin’s face. Bilbo basks in its glow before he remembers himself. “I’m honored.”
This feels like a good moment to duck out, but Bilbo can’t resist asking, “What does, ah, a thasce mean?”

Thorin stiffens. “You remember that?”

“Well enough.”

The tips of Thorin’s ears are red, peeking out from beneath his hair. “A thaisce. It’s a … term of endearment. In Gaelic. It translates to my treasure.”

“Ah,” says Bilbo, so caught up in processing the information that he cannot find words to express himself. His heart flips and his stomach flutters, rendering him momentarily speechless. “I’ll … see you later, then.”

“Undoubtedly,” Thorin says wryly.

Bilbo sprints back through the rain and into the bar before he realizes Thorin has not answered him on how he feels about last night.

“Perhaps we shouldn’t,” Thorin says, now looking slightly pale. He wishes he wasn’t so drunk. Perhaps then his tongue would not feel so fat and useless in his mouth and he could find the right words to say.

“Sorry,” is the best he can come up with, and it is no small wonder that he can even work that out. Color rises to his cheeks.

Bilbo nods and swings his legs over the side of the bed, beginning to slide off of it. A thrill of panic rises in Thorin, so he reaches out and grabs Bilbo’s wrist.

“Stay,” Thorin says, sounding more vulnerable than he’d like. He feels more vulnerable than he’d like. It’s jarring, but has his heart flipping in his chest. Thorin looks as surprised by himself as Bilbo does, but doesn’t let go until Bilbo nods and lays back down. They fit on the bed well, Bilbo a calming presence tucked against Thorin’s chest. They are no longer frantic, driven by need. There is no tension, just understanding. Just exploration.

There is a reverence between them, as though they are examining fragile, ancient artifacts. Fear and uncertainty bleed from Thorin, because so much has been scary and confusing but this? This is not.

Chapter End Notes

Have fun with the last lighthearted chapter you’ll get for a while! (Sort of.)

Translations:

Thoir pòg bho Thorin! - Give Thorin another kiss!
A thaisce - My treasure
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

The company gets back on the road again, only to end up decidedly off the road and in the clutches of their third worst antagonist.

Chapter Notes

As you can see, I've changed the chapter count yet again. We're in the final(ish) stretch of writing this thing, so now I have a more accurate count. This should be final (hah).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The moment Beorn appears upstairs with the day’s groceries, Thorin says, “We’re leaving tomorrow.”

Beorn sets the bag down and stares at them curiously — the entire company has congregated in the living room to support Thorin. After nine days cramped into the same five rooms, they are all at their wit’s end.

“Gandalf said to wait for his return,” Beorn says.

“We can’t wait any longer,” Thorin says. “Azog and Smaug know we’re on the move. They’re probably preparing Esgaroth for our arrival this moment. We need to move.”

“I am not your jailer,” Beorn says calmly, as though he’s dealing with a petulant child. “It is simply what I suggest, since Gandalf has connections and you—”

“I’m healed,” Thorin insists, even he leans against the wall to keep weight off the leg.

“So be it,” Beorn says, and that is that.

Whether the company gripes about their departure or welcomes it, the next morning sees them packing their bags and mounting their bikes. Bilbo regards his with more than a little trepidation.

Beorn had managed to scrounge up fourteen bikes, all in varying states of disrepair. The smallest had been given to Bilbo, along with driving lessons in the parking garage down the street with whoever was patient or bored enough to bother. The company deemed him roadworthy, but Bilbo had still never gone over thirty. It reassures him somewhat to hear that Kíli legally received his license in six hours

Bilbo gently taps the handlebars and says, “I have some concerns.” Although he had intended to say it to Bofur, Thorin overhears.

“You’ll be fine. Just don’t look at the ground or that’s where you’ll end up,” he warns, patting Bilbo’s arm before moving on to awkwardly mount his bike.
Bilbo gracelessly slides his leg over the seat of his motorcycle, settling uneasily in the middle. He secures his second-hand helmet, which stinks of sweat and marijuana smoke, and ensures that his (also second hand, but at least he knows the first owner) jacket is zipped and the pack slung over the front of his seat is secure.

Moments later, they roll out onto the main streets. They’re on familiar streets for a while and move slowly enough for Bilbo to acclimate. They weave through light city traffic onto overpasses, funneling out of the city and onto deserted highways, where they pick up speed.

Driving at this speed is different from riding as a passenger, Bilbo finds. It’s more thrilling, more terrifying. He feels too alert, helped along by a concoction of nerves and exhilaration.

He falls somewhere near the end of their party, alongside Bofur and just in front of Bombur. Despite the fact that, at their speeds, conversation is impossible, Bilbo feels something companionable between them.

The silence is conducive to thinking, but Bilbo doesn’t want to do that. For the last few days, he’s been able to avoid it. Even separating Fíli and Kíli for the tenth time, or stopping Ori from disassembling the TV, or sitting between the maelstrom of Gaelic insults issued by Dwalin and Bifur is preferable to contemplating the finer points of committing homicide. Or, perhaps worse still, trying to figure out what exists between himself and Thorin. Thorin has been acting as if nothing happened, but remains careful not to let Bilbo catch him alone.

Bilbo thinks talking to someone would help, but he doesn’t know who he can ask. There are some in the company whom he could confide in, but still does not. How could he? How can he expect to find sympathy when he has life has been so gentle to him and so cruel to them? Instead, he bottles up these prickly feelings and shelves them carefully, like angry little cacti in neat terrariums. It’s the best he can do.

He tries to think of better things, like the meager gossip Hamfast Gamgee has been providing of life on Newbury Street. It seems nothing has changed in Bilbo’s absence, and the disconnect jars him. On one hand, he would like to return to an unchanged home. On the other, he doesn’t know how he’ll adjust without something burning down every four minutes. Strangely, his homesickness has died. Some of it he attributes to the hellish chaos of the past few weeks. Some of it he attributes to the beautiful scenery he passes as he rides, not in the least similar to Boston’s streets.

They ride north to escape Chicago and the urban sprawl sticking to Lake Michigan like a barnacle. If Bilbo ignores the flatness of the land, the trees and quiet suburbs can almost trick him into believing he is in New England. The illusion shatters outside of Sioux City. The houses grow farther apart, corn and soybeans take the place of browning lawns, and grain silos replace garages. Before long, even the trees have disappeared, giving way to endless seas of short, sere grass and rare but brilliant effusions of wildflowers. Overhead, the July sun rides high in the heavens, accompanied only by wispy mare’s tails and circling buzzards. Too late, Bilbo remembers he isn’t wearing sunscreen.

They cross the Missouri River — a muddy, sluggish thing this far north — sometime in late afternoon. Everything is beginning to look the same, as if they were on an enormous conveyer belt. Only the mile markers, rest stops, and occasional exit serve to remind Bilbo that they are, in fact, making progress.

Balin signals them onto a side road marked Route 240 at dusk. They rumble down the road and Bilbo nearly takes one hand off the wheel to rub his eyes. Large white rocks erupt out of the earth like teeth, rising without warning from the unchanged landscape. Bilbo scarcely has time to admire them before the sun sets and they are reduced to shadows against a velvet night.
They park in an empty campground and dismount. Bilbo stumbles, bowlegged, off his bike, ignoring the teasing he receives from his friends at his odd gait. It is too dry to light a fire, so Bilbo munches contentedly on a granola bar, lying on his back and watching the stars revolve in their nightly waltz.

Thorin wakes them before dawn the next day, announcing they would reach Esgaroth — a town near Erebor — by late today or early tomorrow.

*I sincerely hope so*, Bilbo thinks, rubbing his aching back. A night on the ground has done him no good, and combined with the mosquitoes and yesterday’s sunburn, he feels miserable. He thinks the older members of the company would be as stiff as him, but they seem totally unaffected by the rough conditions. Bilbo scowls and ties a sock around his neck to protect the sensitive skin. The rub of cotton is better than a third-degree burn.

His ill humor dissipates by the time they rejoin I-90. Urbanization waxes as they approach Rapid City, as do the traffic problems. Outside of Spearfish, South Dakota — Bilbo will never forget the name, not after staring at the same sign for four hours — they’re stuck in traffic because of a ten-car accident up the road (Ori and Kili have enough time to walk there and back to give the report.) In the front of the pack, Thorin sits uneasily, shifting constantly and drumming his fingers on his good leg. The rest of the company catches his impatience, scratching their mosquito bites and snapping at each other in the noon haze.

They are clear the crush of cars around two in the afternoon and set off at a brisk 75 mph. Bilbo doesn’t question it. He wants to leave that awful town behind him, too.

They cross into Montana at last, beginning to leave someone of the dull landscape behind them. The highway crests small hills, now flanked by barbed wire and rangy black cattle instead of crops. The trees reappear in fits and starts clustered by the highway. And, at last, when Bilbo looks north, he can see dusty brown mountains rising in the distance.

The fair weather holds as they drive farther northwest. Yesterday’s delicate cirrus clouds are replaced with fat cumulus that provide a meager respite from the relentless sun.

They pass Billings at six, with the sun setting on their left. They leave the highway behind, switching onto a single lane county route littered with deer crossings and potholes.

They do not turn west again until well after nightfall. Animal eyes flash in their headlights — thankfully, horses and cows safely behind the fences, or rodents too small to trouble them. The slim crescent moon illuminates the scrub, which slowly gives way to trees, and then a forest. Despite his earlier feelings of vulnerability on the open plain, Bilbo does not like these trees. The enormous pines seem to crowd a little too close to the road.

Perhaps it’s his exhausted and dehydrated imagination. They stopped briefly after Spearfish, but that must have been seven hours ago. Bilbo is considering the edibility of leather jackets when he sees Ori — just ahead of him — swerve into the oncoming lane in a manner that doesn’t seem intentional. He corrects himself moments later, but Dori pulls to the head of the column and signals them to pull over. Bilbo, who is last, sees Thorin and Dori finish what looks like a tense discussion. Thorin relents and pulls his bike into the forest on their side of the road. The rest of the company is visibly relieved. Bilbo, although delighted they are stopping at last, remembers passing a park sign some hours back and feels a twinge of guilt. This is so illegal.

*I killed a man*, he reminds himself grimly. *What worse crimes can I commit?*

They walk about a hundred yards into the forest, where they find a natural clearing beside a small creek. Many collapse instantly, but Bilbo finds simple pleasure in helping Bombur boil enough water
for fourteen Mountain House packets. While Bombur piles rocks around their fire, Bilbo hums to himself and methodically tears the packages open, using a plastic spoon to dig around in the freeze-dried food bits for the preservative packet. He really wouldn’t put it past the company to ingest that along with their food. But even he considers eating the freeze-dried food now, consequences and food poisoning be damned.

The first pot of water comes to a boil and the company reanimates at the smell of food. It’s only enough to fill a few of the bags, unfortunately, so while Bombur refills the pot, Bilbo tries to keep the company from tearing each other apart and burning each other, as they are equally likely to do. No matter how much he tries to instruct Dori and Dwalin to be careful! when shaking the food pouches, they continue to do so with an entirely unnecessary vigor. And sure enough, Dwalin sustains some painful but benign burns when some of the near-boiling water escapes through a gap in the seal and spills onto his hand.

His curse resounds in the forest, loud enough to scare birds from their perches.

Bilbo cannot lie down, not after being glued to the bike since dawn. He wanders into the strange wood, inhaling the scents of rotting wood and fresh water. He can barely feel his legs or hear his footsteps on the carpet of needles.

He follows the brook, walking until he can no longer hear anything, save the distant hoots of owls and the trickle of water. A pine-scented breeze ruffles his hair and he breathes deeply. For a moment, away from the company, he can pretend he is who he was before he had been whisked away … was it almost a month ago? He reaches for his old self instinctively, but finds nothing there, as if it had been jerked suddenly out of his grasp. Who had he been? Fussier, certainly. More like to complain. Sedentary. Too cautious.

And yet…

He thinks about the way Gloin spoke of his family, of Bombur’s cooking, of Fíli and Kíli’s teasing, of Balin’s dry humor, of Dwalin’s protectiveness, of Bofur’s bluff honesty, of Bifur’s habit of carving nearly anything into a gift, of Dori and Oin’s fussing, of Nori’s sly grins, of Ori’s endearing politeness, and Thorin’s rare smile, and he feels a warm glow in his chest. He had been safer on Newbury Street, but he had been lonely.

He opens his eyes and nearly jumps out of his skin. A white stag’s nostrils flare curiously, as if Bilbo were a distant threat instead of mere yards away. Its pelt seems to glow in the moonlight. Entranced, Bilbo holds his breath, unsure if the animal is real or not.

A stick snaps behind them and the stag wheels back into the darkness, shattering the illusion forever. Bilbo turns more slowly, afraid of what he will find. But it is only Thorin, with several branches under one arm.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Bilbo says dazedly. “Bad luck.”

Thorin shrugs. “It was only a deer.” He kicks around the leaf litter until he finds another stick about the length of Bilbo’s leg, which he adds to the pile. “You shouldn’t be wandering off on your own. It’s dangerous.”

“I was clearly in mortal danger,” Bilbo says, gesturing in the direction the deer had fled in.

“You could get lost.”

This statement is rather rich, coming from a man who got off a T stop five minutes away from
Bilbo’s apartment and knocked on the door four hours later. “And I suppose you know where we are?”

“Lewis and Clark National Forest. We’re only a few hours out of Esgaroth.” He sounds wistful. “Dad took our family camping here.”

Bilbo realizes this is the first time they’ve been alone since Chicago and tries not to let that bother him too much. “Why did we drive for so long?”

“I wanted to pass the ranch on the northern end of this forest,” Thorin says. “It belongs to Thranduil Oropherion. He thinks I owe him money.”

“Do you?”

“Our debt was repaid long ago and I don’t want that scum waylaying us so he can use his tired excuses again.” Thorin turns back to camp, Bilbo following.

Bilbo has wandered farther than he had thought; it takes ten minutes to reach the camp. Bilbo sits on one of the logs someone has dragged closer to the fire, watching the flames dance behind the stone circles. It is chilly and he is grateful for both the fire and Thorin’s jacket. After a moment, Thorin slowly lowers himself to sit beside him.

Bilbo glances around, trying to discern the reason for this blessing, but finds none. He settles for a neutral topic. “How’s the leg?”

Thorin smiles, briefly. “Better than it was. It’s good to be on the road again.”

“I think everyone was going a little stir-crazy,” Bilbo says, “myself included. And cities aren’t really my thing, I’ve decided.”

“You live in one.”

“Boston is different. It doesn’t count.” Bilbo reaches down and pulls up a stalk of pink flowers, half-crushed by the log. “Long like delphinium, but not the right color.” Bilbo’s delphinium were usually blue. In fact, the same blue as Thorin’s eyes… Bilbo clears his throat. “Fireweed. Definitely fireweed.”

Thorin shrugs, but not out of disinterest. He roots around for a bit on his side of the log and comes up with a wilted white flower. “Daisy?”

Bilbo laughs and takes it from his hand. “Too big.” He twirls it between his thumb and forefinger. “Too many petals. Mule’s ear? Christ, it’s been so long since I’ve bothered with wildflowers.”

Thorin scowls as it as if he had been expected to know. “It’s all gealag to me.”

“It’s rude to use a language no one else knows,” Bilbo says. “Why do all of you speak it?”

“Thror found it was useful when we wanted to have private conversations. Not many people know Gaelic, although Frerin was nearly fluent before—” Thorin stops abruptly, then takes the white flower back. “Gealag. A general term for white things. Birds, flowers, fish.”

For some reason, that’s when it hits him. They will arrive in Esgaroth tomorrow. Bilbo could be facing Smaug tomorrow. And he has no plan. What will he do? He can’t just sneak into the house, because that worked so well last time. Could he bluff his way into the house? Lie? What—
“Mr. Baggins?” Thorin is looking at him, concern kindling in his eyes.

“We’re almost there,” Bilbo says, half to himself.

“I know,” Thorin says. His fingers wander to the ends of his raven tattoo. “I have not been back in … twenty years, now. Fili and Kíli have never been there.” He pauses. “It is good to go home.”

More to distract himself than anything else, Bilbo asks, “What is it like? Home.”

Thorin sighs, the lines of care and worry on his face seeming to deepen before Bilbo’s eyes. “I can barely remember now. Sometimes I dream of Erebor, but when I wake, I can’t remember what I saw.”

“We’ll be in Esgaroth tomorrow,” Bilbo says.

Thorin nods. “We will need to move swiftly after that. I have no doubt Smaug has spies watching the town.” He shifts a little to face Bilbo. “What I ask of you—”

“Is no big deal,” Bilbo interrupts, dismissing Thorin’s words with a wave. “I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

_I’m sure I would do too many reckless things for you._

Thorin puts a fire-warmed hand over Bilbo’s. “I hope so.” With his other hand, he pulls his keyring out of his pocket and pries the small piece of steel away from the others. “You should have it, in case anything should happen.”

Bilbo puts the key in the inside pocket of his jacket and pats it. “There.”

“I have entirely too much faith in you, my burglar,” Thorin says, a smile tugging at his lips.

Bilbo leans into him and they have a moment cut entirely too short by Dwalin calling Thorin away. Judging by the impish grin on his face and the look of utter murder on Thorin’s, Dwalin knows what he’s doing.

The fire feels colder than it did a moment ago, and Bilbo wanders off again — not as far, just a respectable distance at which to relieve himself. As he approaches their camp again, he hears a faint drumming noise, the crack of underbrush, and then raised voices.

One of them is a woman’s.

“What are you doing here?” she asks, voice ringing with authority. Bilbo creeps forward, hiding behind a low bush on the edge of the clearing. The company is frozen in various states of readiness, some just rising off the patch of grass they were sleeping on, others with their hands on weaponry.

The woman — a mounted redhead dressed in a green and grey park ranger uniform — is directly in front of Bilbo. There are five men on either side of her, also mounted and dressed in mud-caked denim. Although she carries nothing but a flashlight, the others have guns trained on the clearing.

“Passing through,” Balin says. “We got lost on our way to a campsite.”

The set of the young woman’s eyebrows indicate she doesn’t believe him. “You would have passed the turn for the camps miles ago.”

Two of the other men lean across the gap between their horses and whisper to each other, then to the uniformed woman.

“Can I help you?” Thorin asks.

“I’m taking you in,” the woman says. Her flashlight sweeps across the campsite, illuminating each
violation as she lists them. “Trespassing, illegal camping, inadequate bear-proofing, lighting a fire in
an undesignated area—”

“What the fuck,” Kíli mutters. She fixes him with a sharp glare, under which he withers and blushes.

“Disorderly conduct.” She glances around, looking for more infractions. “Littering.” Bilbo recalls
Thorin’s predilection for littering in subways and thinks, rather fiercely, that at least justice is being
served there. “Illegal parking. Illegally opened alcoholic beverages. Off-roading, disturbing the
environment, operating a motor vehicle that causes damage to the park.” Her flashlight falls on
Dwalin’s shotgun. “Illegal weapon, and I don’t suppose you have a license for that.” She smiles
beatifically. “I am going to take great pleasure in escorting you through intake.”

“You don’t have the room for thirteen,” one of the men says.

The company looks around at the sound of thirteen and Bilbo’s blood runs cold. Oh, you
miserable… But the company has just enough common sense not to blurt his name. Indeed, some,
like Kíli and Bofur, seem considerably happier than a moment before. Dwalin looks as if he’s being
marched to death row.

The same man moves his horse beside the ranger’s and glares at the company with undisguised
disdain. He is better-dressed than the other men, with neatly trimmed hair nearly as light as the
horse’s. “Tauriel. My father could hold them until those drunks are out of your cells.”

The half of Thorin’s face that Bilbo can see is contorted with rage, directed at the blond man.

“I… sure, Legolas,” Tauriel says. “Search them. Tunnith, be careful with that one.” Fíli tries to look
less guilty.

The company is surrounded, some willingly handing over their weapons while others subject
themselves to a pat down.

Kíli offers his gun to Tauriel easily enough, but follow with an incredibly cheesy, “Aren’t you going
to search me? I could have anything down my trousers.”

Bilbo slaps his forehead and he shrinks back into the underbrush, hoping no one heard. The blond —
Legolas — glances briefly in his direction, but does not approach.

Tauriel raises an eyebrow and counters, “Or nothing.”

Bilbo’s heart aches at the pained expression on Kíli’s face. Tauriel turns away and mutters, “Sorry.”
Kíli mutely offers up his hands for the cuffs.

Once the party has been searched and cuffed, the rangers mount and form a circle around the
company, leading their captives back to the road. Bilbo watches them go and releases a deep sigh of
relief. It’s only after the last horse tail flickers behind the trees that Bilbo remembers he is alone and
has no idea where he is. His sigh this time is one of resignation as he stuffs food into his pack.

Between the flashlights and the sharp clop of hooves on asphalt, Bilbo does not need to stay close to
follow them. Nor does he want to. One misstep and he could be captured along with the rest of them.

Because by now, Bilbo has realized the he is going to rescue them. Gandalf is far away on
mysterious business, the rest of them are unarmed — and can be quite hopeless in a pinch like this —
and Bilbo is the only one who can help.

Much as he would like to grouse about his predicament, inside he is bracing himself to meet the
They leave the park, trees now giving way once more to open fields. Bilbo trails even farther behind, counting on the cloudy night and scrub along the road to hide him, and the flashlights to make the men night blind. He tries to ignore his cramping legs.

Tauriel’s men reach a gate in the fence they have been riding parallel to for the last few hours. They swing it open, usher the company through, and shut it behind them. Bilbo waits even longer this time — the sky is beginning to lighten — before clambering over the gate and collapsing onto the dirt road on the other side. Bilbo stares up at the lavender sky for a moment, then brushes off his jacket and rolls into the grass.

The road leads down to a dip in the endless plain. An enormous one-story ranch pools in the valley, surrounded by a barn, a stable, and a few other outbuildings. Despite the early hour, loud country music and drunken laughter spill from the barn.

From his position — hunched behind a small tree — Bilbo watches as the group split. Legolas dismounts, takes Thorin’s shoulder, and guides him towards the house. One of the men takes the horses, while Tauriel and the others lead the rest of the company into the barn’s basement.

Bilbo sneaks down the ridge line until he finds a side of the house without windows. He glances around to make sure no one is around, then sprints down the steep hill, counting on the music and the soft ground to muffle any sounds. He nearly crashes into the plastic siding, catching himself just in time. Then he crouches under windows, popping up like a prairie dog to try to find Thorin.

Through one of the windows, he catches sight of Legolas disappearing down a hall, no doubt with Thorin in tow. Bilbo flits from window to window, catching the top of Thorin’s head through the open door of one room, then the sound of his voice from another window.

Bilbo peeks out from under the overgrown hydrangeas and finds himself looking into an office that would deserve the name **executive suite** if not for the beer cans flocking on every flat surface and the numerous antlers hanging from the walls.

He is looking through a side window, with Thorin and a tall, blond man of similar age standing in profile.

Bilbo can only assume this man — this plaid-wearing, poorly shaved rancher with a regal bearing — is Thranduil Oropherion.

Chapter End Notes

Because this was a major point of contention between us, mudkippy wants me to make sure that you all know that TECHNICALLY Legolas’ horse is gray, because it has black skin and white hair. Truly white horses have pink skin and look like demons spawned from the malicious machinations of a dark god. There is no love in their cold eyes.

In other news, I love horses.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

With the company captured by a loan shark-by-day (rancher also by day, human disaster by night), Bilbo is left to find them an escape route while also avoiding detection. This is both easier and harder than it seems.

Chapter Notes

I was tempted to do Thirsty Thranduil Thursdays, but ultimately decided against it for the sake of consistency.

I'm sorry to any Thranduil fans out there. This hurts me more than it hurts you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Thranduil glides around his desk with the grace of a panther, a small smirk affixed on his chapped lips. “We meet again, Thorin Oakenshield,” he says, his voice twanging softly with an Appalachian accent. “I thought you dead.”

“I had hoped the same for you,” Thorin retorts. “But, like a cockroach, it seems you are immune to things that would kill a normal human.”

“Strange, I was about to say the same for you. Twenty years your family has hidden from me, as if time would wipe the memory of your debt from my mind.”

“It was repaid long ago,” Thorin snaps, “if not in money, then in blood. And we haven’t been hiding from anyone, much less you.”

“Blood does not erase the ink in my ledger.” Thranduil leans against his desk, tapping his finger against one of the notebooks there. “What have you told your companions? That your intent is to regain your home? Dispose of the man who has made your lives a misery for the last two decades? How... noble.” The last word drips with sarcasm.

“We are looking for Thráin,” Thorin lies. “I was advised by Gandalf to begin in Esgaroth.”

Thranduil looks up at the mention of Gandalf and Bilbo wishes the old man were here now to work whatever influence he has over Thranduil. “That meddler. He would never involve himself with something so prosaic as a manhunt.”

Bilbo has a difficult time reconciling Thranduil’s flowery speech with his atrocious accent. Although it fits with the rest of him. Thranduil might be beautiful, if he could bother to wash his hair, give himself a good shave, and wear longer pants. Much longer.

“In my magnanimity, I will forgive your insults and lies, for I have a use for you,” Thranduil says. Behind his back, Thorin’s hands ball into fists, then very slowly relax. “I’m listening.”
“Smaug has also made my life difficult of late.” Thranduil’s jaw twitches and Bilbo suspects he is more harassed than he lets on. “I will release you and your companions and return everything in your illegal camp, on the condition that Smaug’s body is never found and that you return what is owed to me.”

Take the deal, Bilbo pleads silently. Surely it will be easier to figure out how to trick a loan shark out of his money than to escape this place.

But, as Bilbo predicts, Thorin wants nothing to do with it. “I am not your lackey,” Thorin all but spits, “and I owe you nothing.”

Thranduil seems offended. “Your family was one my first clients and for that, I have granted you far more leniency than this situation calls for, Durin.”

“And I am rejecting it.”

“Pity. Smaug and I have suspicions about what is in the box you are no doubt attempting to recover.”

Bilbo inches forward, his nose almost over the sill. Please, please bait him...

“You speak with him?” Thorin hisses.

“I watch him,” Thranduil corrects, a hint of indignation in his tone, “and I suspect he is close to his goal. There are more of his ilk swarming around Esgaroth than I have seen in nigh on two decades and more arrive every day. You would be best advised to accept my offer.” He inclines his head regally. “I give you my word.”

“I have seen the value your word holds,” Thorin growls, dangerous and low, before his voice rises in rage. “I came to you for aid, once, and you turned your back on me and mine. Téigh trasna ort féin!”

Thranduil recoils, and though neither he nor Bilbo have a translation, the malice is palpable. Thranduil paces back behind his desk, disgust etched into his features. “You’re just like them. Your father and your grandfather both. Stubborn, greedy men. Feren!”

Feren enters with an expression of carefully schooled nonchalance, then surges forward to haul Thorin back from leaping over the desk at Thranduil. Another rancher bursts in and, together, they drag Thorin from the room as he spits curses. Determined to get the last word, Thranduil drawls, “Stay here if you will, and rot. A week, a month, a year. Time matters far more to you than me. I am patient. I can wait.”

The door sticks in its jamb, partially ruining the dramatic effect Thranduil was no doubt hoping to achieve. Bilbo slides below the window and cobbles together a plan: climb through the window, incapacitate Thranduil, get the keys, and escape. He needs to give Feren time to return Thorin to their makeshift cell, but he can account for that. And now he—

The window shuts and Bilbo loses his opportunity.

He peeks out from behind the hydrangea into the yard. The sun is still rising, the grass on the plains gold in its rays. Around him, the yard is beginning to wake, with ranchers stumbling out of the barn and riding out on both trucks and horses. Bilbo would definitely be seen if he ran, so he curls up under the thick emerald leaves and sleeps.

His nap is frequently punctuated by others walking by. Bilbo lies utterly still and sweats through his shirt until they pass. Somehow, he escapes detection. When he feels he can rest no longer, he observes through the window. He might as well make the best of his advantageous position.
Thranduil comes back to his office at noon and slurps down a bowl of grits and a beer. Bilbo’s stomach snarls viciously and he eats a granola bar out of his pack. He doesn’t want to think about what happens when he runs out.

Thranduil is on his laptop for several hours after that. Legolas comes in and they briefly discuss college, which allows Bilbo to see the resemblance between them. At least Legolas had not inherited his father’s poor grooming habits.

Thranduil leaves again around six, probably for dinner, and returns exactly an hour later. Bilbo mournfully eats another granola bar as the weather breaks and it begins to drizzle. Fat drops collect on the hydrangea’s leaves and plop into his hair.

At ten, the light is gone and Bilbo dreams of escape. Then the window rolls open. Bilbo freezes, hoping the woody branches will conceal him. Above, a thin line of smoke curls out the window and Bilbo dares not even shiver.

Someone forces Thranduil’s office door open; it gives way with a squeal.

“Mr. Oropherion?” Tauriel’s voice asks. “A word?”

Thranduil flicks the butt of his cigarette out the window. “Of course.”

Bilbo creeps closer to the window and looks in.

Tauriel paces in front of the desk, wearing torn jeans and a faded Dartmouth t-shirt. Specks of rain glisten in her fiery hair. “The ranger station is ready to take the bikers off your hands.”

“Did you tell the rangers that I have them?” Thranduil asks.

“No, as you ordered—”

“Then I will keep them here,” Thranduil says. “I have business with them.”

Tauriel frowns. “They’ve broken the law and I will see them in court.”

“Not these ones.” Thranduil flicks one end of his greasy ponytail over his shoulder and settles in his chair.

“But—”

“I was gracious enough to extend my hospitality to you because of your friendship with Legolas. Favors do not go unpaid in my household.”

Several emotions flicker over Tauriel’s face — shock, disgust, anger — before she straightens her back and says, “My pleasure, Mr. Oropherion.” She pauses at the door. “One of the men you captured has medication he needs to take daily.”

Thranduil shrugs. “Give it to him. I intend to keep them down there for quite awhile.”

Bilbo has heard enough and it is now fully dark outside. He glances back into the office to make sure Thranduil is distracted — this time with his Rolodex — and breaks free of the hydrangea’s woody branches. He sprints up the hill, slipping in the mud and panicking that, any minute, a flashlight will catch him. But he makes it to the crest with his pack and a pound of dirt on his shoes and jeans.

It is still raining and he knows he won’t be able to live outside for however long it takes to break the company out. There is nowhere to hide in the grass, nor is there food. Bilbo briefly toys with the idea
of calling Gandalf before he remembers his phone is dead.

The lights flick off in one of the buildings — the stable. Surely there are places to hide in there. Bilbo shoulders his pack once more and trudges down the hill.

The stable is humid and smells of horses and damp leather, but it’s better than sleeping in the rain. He climbs up the ladder, into the hayloft, and crawls behind the bales until he finds a concealed corner. He is asleep in seconds.

From there, he develops an odd routine. He awakens in the early evening, when the ranchers come in to feed the horses. He shakes off the blanket of barn cats that have inevitably curled up around him, sniffing and sneezing all the while, and waits for the ranchers to leave so he can use the bathroom just under the hayloft. The bathroom doesn’t have a shower and Bilbo tries not to look in the mirror when he washes his face and hands.

Then he returns to the hayloft and waits for night to fall. After dark, he sneaks out and forages for food. There are buckets of apples and carrots, and some sugar cubes in the feed room, and that is usually what he must eat, unless he gets lucky and someone left their lunch in the stable.

After his sparse meal, he leaves the stable and falls into his nightly habit: reconnaissance.

The ranch has a strict schedule. The horses are fed promptly at eight and eight, and given hay at two. A red pickup comes at three every other day with something that Thranduil receives personally. The lights all around the compound are turned on at nine pm and shut off at three am. And Thranduil opens his office window every night at ten to take a smoke, usually forgetting to shut and lock the window after he finishes.

Bilbo can tell time easily without a watch because someone stops by the basement holding the company on the hour and blasts an airhorn through the window, to curses that grow louder and angrier by the day. One evening, Thranduil himself parks a radio in front of the tiny, barred window and plays She Thinks My Tractor's Sexy for two days straight. Bilbo does not envy them, even though they’re fed.

Several times, he approaches the barn in the dead of night, intending to rap on the window and tell someone that he is here and trying to help. But without Gandalf’s number, he will not risk anything that might get him caught. So he sits on the darkest side, curled up behind the overgrown lavender, back against the cold concrete, turning Thorin’s key over in his fingers. Solitude, once a regularly enjoyed comfort, has become hell. One of the company — whether sleeping, riding, eating, or whatever else — has always been within at least twenty feet of him. He has grown used to their constant presence and to suddenly be robbed of it bothers him more than he thought it would.

On the third evening, as he weeds the tiny garden along one side of the barn, he overhears voices. Once he has ascertained that they aren’t coming closer — and that one of them is Kíli — he creeps nearer, crouching behind a honeysuckle bush in desperate need of pruning.

“...Oropherion has your things, so there’s no way I could charge you, even if I wanted to,” Tauriel says, sounding exasperated. “It’s been too long.”

“If it’s any comfort, I’d love to see you in uniform again,” Kíli says, “even if it is to take us to jail.”

Bilbo can picture the turn of his smile and perhaps Tauriel’s as well, from her long pause. He wonders if anyone else in the company can hear them. Probably not, since the hourly airhorn interrupts them twice.
Bilbo learns of how Tauriel graduated Dartmouth, coming to Montana to train on the local national parks. She had been friends with Legolas for all four years of college, and he had invited her to live with him — “as friends,” she is quick to clarify — for the summer.

Kíli talks a bit about his summer jobs and brushes off his inability to go to college — “I’ve been too busy” — and seems more interested in Tauriel’s stories.

“Mowing lawns and stuff isn’t as exciting as riding horses and shooting things,” he says. She still presses him, until they can bond over the summer he worked on a farm.

“I never wrestled a pig before I came here. Nor did I shoot a gun, but the pig thing is a bit more notable, if you ask me,” says Tauriel.

Kíli laughs. “So how’d you do? With the gun and the pig, I guess.”

“Mr. Oropherion says I’m a natural,” she says with a note of pride. “With both. Legolas is better at skeet, but I’ve surpassed him in the art of wrestling pigs.”

“Amazing,” Kíli says wistfully.

By the next day, Tauriel has become part of the schedule, visiting Kíli every day at ten fifteen sharp.

On the sixth night, Bilbo watches from the loft as Feren brings Thorin out of the basement. Curious, Bilbo sneaks back to his window to watch. He attempted to continue spying on Thranduil, but after witnessing a rather noisy tryst, he has since stayed away. Bilbo is very sure that is not Thorin’s intention and is less circumspect about eavesdropping this time.

“Thranduil,” Thorin greets casually, as though he isn’t unwashed and in handcuffs. The twigs are gone from his hair, replaced with a few days’ worth grease and violet bruises beneath his bloodshot eyes. Bilbo counts himself lucky. He may be sleeping in a hayloft, but at least he is sleeping.

“Thorin,” Thranduil returns with an incline of his head. Bilbo ducks down to listen, still afraid that he’ll be seen. By now he’s familiar with the milky white of Thranduil’s left eye, which he covered at times, but always left bare in Thorin’s company. Bilbo attributes it as just another one of his many idiosyncrasies. Like his apparent aversion to common decency.

“Did you want to tire out your old line of questioning or gloat?”

“We must discuss the fourteenth member of your party.”

Bilbo throws himself into the mulch, heart pounding.

“It took you six days to do the math.” Despite his mocking tone, Thorin seems tense. Bilbo dares to look once more. Thranduil is still behind the desk, not in Thorin’s face as he was the last time they met. Thranduil seems … nervous.

To be expected, Bilbo thinks with some amusement. He probably thinks the fourteenth member is a hardened killer, not a fussy florist from Boston!

“I have pondered his identity for a long time and reached a definitive conclusion.” Thranduil pauses again, and Thorin sighs at being prompted to ask a leading question.

“And?”

“Those boys with you bear a family resemblance, but I can’t imagine that they’re yours. Not with
your inclinations.”

On the other side the window, one of Thorin’s inclinations is deeply offended and, after what he has had the misfortune to see and hear, thinks Thranduil should not sound so dismissive.

The strain goes out of Thorin’s posture. “You’re right.” His voice is laced with vindictive glee. “I cannot fathom what punishment she has for you after keeping me, her sons, and many of her friends locked in a basement.”

Thranduil goes whiter than the antlers on his walls. Bilbo silently cheers.

“Feren!” Thranduil barks. The same man that dragged Thorin out before does so again, though Thorin obliges him and leaves without a fight.

“My sister sends her love!” Thorin calls over his shoulder.

After the door half-closes, Thranduil sinks heavily into his chair, tapping his unevenly bitten nails on the desk. Bilbo slides down the side of the house, preparing to spend another dreary evening skulking by the basement.

“I know you’re there,” Thranduil says. Bilbo claps a hand over his mouth. “Why do you hide in the shadows?”

“Just making sure you’re alone, boss,” says a male voice, one that Bilbo recognizes as one of the ranchers’. “I’m here about the train schedule. The train isn’t leaving Geyser until tomorrow, so we’ll need to wait another day to send the hay out.”

“Discover what the delay is,” Thranduil commands. “And start a perimeter patrol. I’m looking for a woman, about five feet tall, muscular, black hair, early forties, probably armed. Very dangerous. Lock the gates and scour the property. No one enters Mirkwood and no one leaves it, save by my express permission.”

Bilbo rolls out from under the bush and sprints for the barn, where he digs his pack out of the hay and clutches it desperately in the darkness.

_Could Thorin have picked someone a little less intimidating?_

A calico cat worms itself into his arms and he pets it mechanically as he thinks. All the car keys are in the ranch house, so they can’t leave that way. The idea of stealing the horses is laughable, since Thranduil has plenty of off-road vehicles.

For a few days, Bilbo has toyed with the idea of revealing himself to Tauriel and begging for her help. Unfortunately, he suspects that while she may help them, she would likely help them right to the county jail.

Headlights flare in the loft window and Bilbo remembers what Thranduil had been talking about. _The train._

Bilbo jumps up, dislodging the cat (who complains loudly), and disappears into the night.

He creeps through Mirkwood’s pastures, wary of cows and prairie dog holes. The truck vanishes from his line of sight, but no matter; the town’s streetlights are already visible, a yellow blur on the black horizon. Although he has to take a detour around the watched gate and squeeze under an electric fence, he is free of Mirkwood. The town is probably an hour’s walk from the perimeter, so Bilbo finds a sheltered dip and falls asleep between one thought and the next.
The sun is in his eyes as he walks into the town of Geyser, Montana the next morning, along the road like a respectable human being. He waves at passers-by with their children and their dogs, feeling a bit strange to be back in civilization. His body prickles with nerves, as if, any second, he’ll run across someone who recognizes him and need to flee back to the wilderlands.

The first thing he does is to use the crumpled twenty at the bottom of his pack to buy himself the largest, greasiest breakfast he possibly can. He scarfs it down, savoring every bite of sausage and wishing he were actually free to enjoy it with his friends.

Shortly after noon, he walks to the train station, finding it a charming, bright yellow building with white trim and overflowing flower boxes. He settles under one of the boxes, idly weeding with one hand while watching the trains. There are four rails: two for the commuter rail and two for boxcars. While one commuter train heads south, the train sitting on the northbound cargo rail does not move, and he wonders if this is the train the rancher was referring to.

He goes inside to find a schedule. An old woman at the desk asks if she can help him with anything, so Bilbo makes up a story about scouting for a train watching group, hoping to play his nervousness off as an idiosyncratic tic rather than the true beast that it is.

She seems to welcome the distraction in the otherwise empty station, prattling on about the schedule for the next few days. While the passenger train Bilbo saw earlier is the only one for the next week, she adds that the cargo trains usually leave every day.

“Up to Esgaroth,” she says and Bilbo feels a thrill of recognition at the name. “Nice enough town. The mosquitoes are bad in the summer, but it’s a short drive to the mountains. There’s always something going on in that town — five years back, they had to expand their train station owing to all the mining equipment going up there. I’m sure you’ll find a wider variety of trains there. Always going in and out.”

“Not like here,” Bilbo says, hitching a thumb to the unmoving train outside.

The woman shrugs. “Oh, that’s just temporary. A small malfunction in the engine. It’s going out at …” She checks her ancient computer “…eleven tonight.”

Eleven makes the plan forming in Bilbo’s mind even more dangerous. He thanks her and wanders back out onto the main track. The enormous cars, marked BERYL SHIPPING COMPANY, tower over him, covered in bright graffiti. He glances around before slipping to the other side and testing the doors until he gets one to slide open very slightly. He cheers silently as he finds space among the crates stacked inside — enough to fit fourteen people, although perhaps not comfortably. He marks its place in line and goes back to the ranch fence as soon as it’s dark, running through the plan in his mind. It may not be the most solid plan, but he thinks that it’ll work.

Or they’ll all be shot in the back as they flee.

He slips into the stables without being detected and initiates his daring plan by opening all the stall doors. But instead of bolting into the night, causing mayhem and panic, a few horses wander into the aisle and sniff at the loose hay. Bilbo throws his hands up, on the verge of crying, when he spots the bright red box against one wall.

The alarm’s piercing scream tears through the night. The horses whinny in fright, galloping out the door as ice-cold water rains down from the sprinklers. Bilbo watches his hard work pay off until he hears the ranchers shouting and running in his direction. Then he sprints to Thranduil’s window, which is thankfully open.
Seconds after Bilbo situates himself under the frame, Legolas bursts into the office. “The horses! They’ve escaped and there’s a fire in the barn!”

Thranduil curses viciously and cocks a shotgun. “In case it’s her.” Their footsteps recede, the door squealing as Thranduil pulls it shut.

Bilbo hauls himself through the window, straddling the sill for a moment before his feet brush the carpet on the other side. He ducks down and rolls into the office with all the grace of a master sneakthief.

The keys are where they have always been, among the clutter of the first drawer of Thranduil’s old, scratched desk. Bilbo grabs them, steps toward the window, hesitates, and turns back to the desk. He *is* a thief, after all.

At the moment, though, he wishes he were a maid. The desk is an absolute disaster. The top drawer holds office supplies — he steals a few paperclips and a nice pen — along with a lighter and pack of cheap cigarettes — he thinks of the company, a week without a smoke, and pockets both — and several cans of half-empty chew. The bottom drawer is a mess of condoms and lubricant and Bilbo slams it shut. The desktop is covered in browning apple cores and beer cans, mixed with pens stolen from banks and post-it-note riddled manila folders. None of the papers make any sense to him, but as he absently flips through the Rolodex, a name catches his eye.

*Smaug, ASSHOLE*

Bilbo’s grubby fingers pause over the paper. He’s tempted to leave it, to say that he has no idea how to get to the safe, to say that even the greatest thieves can be stumped. But he hasn’t come this far to give up or play it safe. He memorizes the number and email address beneath before tearing the card off the rings and stuffing it into his inside pocket, where it rests with Thorin’s key.

The doorknob turns.

Bilbo’s heart leaps into his throat and he springs to the window. The door is stuck in its frame and someone on the other side curses, jiggling the handle before shoving it open with their shoulder. Thranduil and Bilbo stare at each other in shock, the soaking wet redneck and the would-be burglar with hay in his hair. Then Bilbo seizes an antler off the wall display and hits the loan shark over the head.

It collides with a meaty *thunk*, and Thranduil stumbles forward, catching himself on the desk. Bilbo throws the antler at him and shimmies out the window, running as soon as his shoes hit the mulch.

He tears around the side of the house, making directly for the dark shadows surrounding the basement door. His hands shakes, but he finds the key he’s seen Tauriel use and throws open the bilco doors. He scarcely has time to react before someone tackles him, crushing him into the dirt and gripping his skull in a headlock.

“Get off!” Bilbo squeaks, scarcely able to breathe between the body odor and the arm around his throat. “We’re leaving.”

“Took you long enough,” Dwalin grunts, releasing him.

“Bilbo!” Bofur says, followed by similar exclamations from deeper in the basement.

“Do you have food?” Ori asks.

”*Tapas leibh!*” shouts Bifur.
Bilbo sighs. Nothing has changed in his absence. “Shut up! Thranduil’s men are nearby!”

The company scrambles out of the basement and into the cool air. Bilbo stands at the top of the stairs, twisting the keys through handcuffs as quickly as he can before handing the keys off to Nori. Since Gandalf isn’t here, he takes on the role of counting them as they come out of the basement. Thirteenth and last is Thorin, gratitude shining in his eyes.

“I knew you’d come,” Thorin says.

Bilbo turns away, glad the darkness will hide his blush. “Well it’s not like there was anyone else riding to your rescue.” He spots several of the company drifting in the direction of the ranch house, no doubt bent on some vengeful property damage. “Not that way! Come on!”

They make their way to the pastures and speed up in the open ground, keen on putting as much distance as possible between them and Mirkwood.

Chapter End Notes

Dís’ entry in Thranduil’s Burn Rolodex reads: This girl is the nastiest skank bitch I've ever met. Do not trust her. She is a fugly slut!

(Thorin’s is: too gay to function)

EDIT: mudkippy wrote our explanation for why Thranduil fears Dis.

"Imagine this, if you will. You are a scuzzy redneck loanshark who's recently made an enemy of the youngest Durins. You think nothing of it, since you have *very* strong ties to their dad. In fact, you flaunt these strong ties in front of them, because what are a bunch of teenagers going to do to you, Thranduil Oropherion, chiefer and greatest of moneylenders? It's laughable. Anyway, you discount their threats so much that you decide to go over to the Durin residence and get roaring drunk. You wake up in the back of a pickup. That's not so odd. You are *tied* to the back of a pickup. Still not the worst thing that's ever happened to you. It's still shaping up like your normal Friday night. Then the truck starts to move and you are unable to flee as the pickup drives through the carwash with you, exposed and vulnerable, in the back. You cannot scream, or your mouth will fill with suds. Finally, *finally*, the torture ends. A woman sticks her head out of the driver's side. You vaguely recognize her as the annoying daughter of Thráin Durin - but there is nothing irritating about her now. She maintains an expression that could melt through steel, maintained even as her bratty brothers fall over themselves with laughter at the sight of you. You stare right back. You will not be broken by this witch barely out of childhood. So she steps back into the cab and drives around in a circle. You're back at the mouth of the carwash and there's nothing you can do as you go through again. And again. And *again*, until you are begging for death's sweet release. And in that moment, you learn to fear Dís Durin."

Translations:
Tapas leibh! - Thank you!
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

The company’s escape from Mirkwood goes better than planned, barring one unforeseen variable.

Chapter Notes

I found out a whole lot while writing this chapter, like the fact that they don’t make cargo trains out of wood anymore. The more you know.

The company stumbles across the pastures on tired and unused legs. Bilbo stays to the rear, urging them on as much as he can, certain their absence has been noticed. To their credit, they do not complain or lag behind, although he’s sure he’ll be treated to a thunderstorm of snores when they reach the train.

The way is dangerous, the ground made slick by fresh cowpies and riddled with prairie dog holes. Shapes in the dark are rendered indistinct, and it is difficult to find the strange rock he’d used earlier to orient himself.

“Right!” Bilbo hisses to whoever is in front. Thorin, as it turns out. God help us. “We need to go more to the right!”

Thorin’s silhouette holds up both hands, each making an L-shape, but still heads the wrong way.

“Your other right, dumbass,” Dwalin says, yanking on Thorin’s arm to direct him. Bilbo stifles a snicker, but Kili and Fili aren’t so successful.

The lights of Geyser appear on the horizon and Kili gives a shout of joy, breaking away from the company to sprint a shorter route towards the fence.

“Not that way!” Bilbo nearly yells. “There’s—”

Kili goes down with a yelp and a thud.

“Fuck!” he cries. “Fuck, hold on.” He gingerly pulls his foot out of a prairie dog hole. Fili sprints to his side, with Oin not far behind. The company comes to an uneasy halt a few feet away, turning to watch as Oin inspects Kili’s ankle gravely.

“It’s fine,” Kili insists. “I just twisted it. We can’t stop for this.”

“Put weight on it,” Oin suggests. Kili struggles to his feet with Fili’s help, then hisses in discomfort. “Not gonna say it’s broken, not in this light, but you’re not goin’ anywhere alone on that. Dori, Dwalin, help him — not you, Thorin. You’re still injured. Fili, you’re too small.”
Dori loops Kili’s arm over his shoulder, and Dwalin does the same with his other arm. When Kili opens his mouth to protest, Oin shoots him a withering glare. “Well, what are we waiting for?” he snaps, then they move on. Dori, Dwalin, and Kili hobble along at a snail’s pace and the hairs on the back of Bilbo’s neck prickle. He can’t stop rubbernecking, sure they will be followed at any minute.

Soon they come upon the edge of the field, the electric fence humming softly with the crickets. The company begins to carefully wiggle their way through a gap in the fence — again, all slower than Bilbo would like. There is the terrifying possibility that Thranduil is letting them go, but he cannot imagine to what end.

For a moment, he thinks he sees a man’s silhouette over a distant hill, but it vanishes before he can be sure of anything.

He turns around to see Nori trying to bait Ori into touching the electric fence, but Bilbo doesn’t have to intervene, as Dori looms over them moments later.

“What I wouldn’t give for an ATV or a horse right now,” Bilbo mutters to himself as he watches Gloin edge over the fence.

Thorin, who stands beside him, rumbles, “Horses are the ready vessels of a wrathful god.”

Bilbo opens his mouth to respond, then realizes Thorin isn’t paying attention to him. He peers into the distance, back towards Mirkwood. Bilbo turns to where he thought he saw someone. The hill remains empty, even though it’s been fifteen or twenty minute since their escape. “Where is everyone? All of Thranduil’s… I don’t like this.”

Thorin’s face mirrors his concern. “Hurry up!”

Dwalin scoops Bilbo up and throws him bodily over the fence. Kili and Ori follow a moment later, all landing in a heap of elbows and knees on Bilbo’s back. Bilbo hears a few zaps and curses, and then the rest of the company is through. They move as one across the highway and up the platform at the rail station. Fourteen pairs of shoes thud on the gravel as one by one they jump down from the platform and into the train yard.

The bees are gone, but the impatiens bend with the same breeze that lifts strands of Bilbo’s hair away from his face. He holds up a hand, trying to make them stay in the shadows while he creeps forward to investigates.

At the front of the cargo train, light spills from an open door. The old woman who had been sitting at the desk earlier that afternoon stands just outside the cabin, speaking up to the conductor. The two are caught up in their conversation, laughing, so Bilbo inches towards the train. The door he had pushed open is still ajar, so he returns to the company and brings them over. One by one, they slip inside, with Bombur sliding the door shut behind them. Bits of thin, yellow light stream through holes rusted in the metal car and Bilbo glances around at the company. Several of them grin and give him a silent thumbs-up.

Not five minutes later, the train jolts, slowly beginning to roll forward and the company sighs with relief.

“Thank god,” Kili says as he sinks to sit against the side of the train, carefully tucking his injured leg out of the way of any stray limbs. “I thought we would die down there.”

Dori pulls Bilbo into a literally crushing hug and Gloin ruffles his hair affectionately. Bifur slaps him
so hard on the back that he sees stars for a moment. They may have survived, but he might not survive their gratitude.

“Thank me when we’re out,” Bilbo says, but inside, he’s delighted to see them again. He can’t fathom another week alone.

The weariest among them nod off quickly, leaning against crates or each other. Bilbo watches as the open fields tumble past through a hole in the side. He’s exhausted, but cannot yet find the peace for sleep. Neither, it seems, can Gloin, Dwalin, Ori, or Thorin.

Bilbo glances at Thorin and notices he’s rubbing morosely at the raw lines where he had strained against the handcuffs.

“You’ll never learn, will you?” Bilbo says, finally sagging with relief. They might just make it after all.

Thorin scowls. “Where were you all week?”

“Here and there. In the hayloft, mostly.”

“I wondered what that stink was,” Thorin says with a small smile. “Look who’s talking.” They’re all in desperate need of a shower, and Bilbo is glad for the air whistling through the hole he’s been peeking through. “Next time I’ll leave you handcuffed in the basement,” Bilbo grumbles. “Your nephews are much more deserving of whatever’s in the safe.”

Thorin casts a fond glance at their sleeping forms, Kili with his head nestled against his drooling brother’s shoulder. “Probably.”

Bilbo offers Thorin a cigarette and the lighter. “Here. The smell will be an improvement.”

“Mr. Baggins, I could kiss you,” Thorin rasps, putting the cigarette in his mouth and bending to light it.

“Well, you can,” Bilbo says. The lighter clicks off, the cigarette still unlit. “If you want.”

Thorin lets the cigarette drop from his lips and brushes Bilbo’s jawline with one hand before burying it in the curls at the nape of his neck. Their lips touch, briefly, and Thorin withdraws, his rough thumb tracing delicate patterns into the back of Bilbo’s skull. It’s the most comforting gesture Bilbo’s ever received, he thinks.

“I haven’t brushed my teeth in a week,” Thorin says ruefully.

Bilbo pulls him down to kiss him full on the mouth. Thorin does taste awful, but it’s a sacrifice Bilbo is willing to make just to have him close again.

Then Bilbo plucks the cigarette from Thorin’s fingers, lights it, and takes a drag. “To get the taste out.” He forces back a cough. “God, never mind. This is almost worse.”

Thorin smirks and takes the cigarette back. “It’s an acquired taste.”

Bilbo snuggles closer, tucking himself comfortably against Thorin’s frame. “I’ll open your eyes if we get out of here…”

“Moment over,” Dwalin growls from the other side the car. “Hand over the cigarettes or your boyfriend will be missing a few fingers.”
Bilbo hands them to Thorin, who throws them with impeccable accuracy at Dwalin’s head. Then Dwalin is nearly trampled as the alert members of the company demands their smoke.

Between this and the rumble of the train, it’s no wonder that they don’t notice their pursuers until a spray of bullets tears through the metal siding over their heads.

Anyone who wasn’t awake certainly is now, jolting into alertness with the eruption of sound. “Get down!” someone shouts. Bilbo doesn’t need to be told twice, and flings himself to the floor behind one of the many crates. They provide suitable cover, unlike the sheet metal, and soon all of the company is crouched behind crates while the wall is eaten away above their heads.

“Dwalin, is it Thranduil?” Thorin shouts over the rattle of the train and the howling wind.

Dwalin presses his eye against a hole and shakes his head. “Azog, fortunately. What do we do?”

Fresh gunfire chews at the train car and interrupts Thorin. In the scant light, there is little to see, but Thorin still glances around wildly. They’re all packed among the stacked crates and pallets, fear plain in the their wide eyes. Bilbo’s heart beats a wild tattoo, rattling his body almost as much as the car.

He feels a soft tug near his stomach as the train begins to slow, an almost imperceptible change in speed. Inertia jostles them.

“Don’t stop the fucking train!” Dwalin roars, as though the conductor could hear. Bilbo pities him. He must be confused and terrified, not expecting a pack of bikers to start shooting at him.

Bilbo pushes himself into the floor, willing himself to disappear as the chatter of gunfire starts up again. But he cannot hear the metallic pop of bullets going through metal.

Ori presses an eye against one of the holes, but Nori jerks him back and looks out. “It’s Thranduil’s kid and the ranger!”

Kili all but headbutts the rail car as he tries to see them. “Tauriel!”

Bilbo knows the danger too well and pulls Kili away. Out of one hole, he sees a mud-caked red pickup speeding alongside the train. Tauriel leans out the passenger side, sighting down a large rifle as her moon-silvered hair billows in the wind. The muzzles flash accompanies a loud crack and one of the motorcycles ahead of her spins out of control. Bilbo relays the action to the others.

Ahead of Tauriel and Legolas, a handful of bikers speed alongside the train, black blurs that are no doubt armed to the teeth. In their midst, Bilbo sees a flash of silver chrome. Azog. Fearing Thorin’s heroics, he doesn’t relay that part.

“We can’t let those brats save us,” Dwalin growls, kicking open the door on the opposite side. The wind whistles through the car, though not as intently as it might have if they were moving at full speed. Bilbo can bike faster than this and there are certainly vehicles that can drive faster. Like motorcycles.

Thorin, Balin, Dori, and Oin have a heated argument as Tauriel and Legolas, and Azog’s gang continue to fight on the other side. Balin points to water glinting in the distance, and Dori and Oin shake their heads. Thorin adds something, and the other two seem to reluctantly accept.

“We’re jumping,” Thorin announces, pitched to rise over the whining winds. “There’s a river ahead. It’s our best bet. Get ready.” And hope for the best goes unspoken.

Bilbo thinks it’s a terrible plan. Absolutely horrible. How high is this bridge, and how fast is the train
moving? How deep is the river? Probably not deep enough. What he previously thought was a speed he could bike at turns into the fastest speed he has ever seen a vehicle go. He checks on Tauriel and Legolas—maybe even being arrested would be better than certain death—just as the pickup truck’s windshield shatters. Bilbo turns towards the door. Jumping it is.

“Bofur,” Bilbo hisses. He flinches as a fresh round of bullets carve into the car. “Bofur, I can’t swim.”

Bofur glances around wildly before realizing that he is alone in this. The rest of the company is too focused on the impending jump. “Of course you can’t. I’ll help you, I’m a strong swimmer, if you ask me,” Bofur says, grinning. “Do you want your last rites? I only know them in Gaelic.”

The glinting river steadily approaches, quicksilver in the moonlight, now just a few hundred feet away. The train has slowed to barely faster than a brisk jog, but Bilbo is still dubious. Thorin stands in the open doorway, the wind tugging at his hair, Dwalin at his side. Thorin cuts a striking figure and if he is to be the last thing Bilbo sees on this green earth, well, he can think of few better sights.

The river yawns beneath them. The bridge could be twenty feet over the water or twenty inches. Bilbo cannot tell.

Dori pushes the door wider and they begin to jump. Bilbo thinks he’s going to be sick. Bofur crowds him towards the door despite Bilbo’s squawks of protest.

“I’ll help you to shore. Don’t argue.”

“No time to think. Just trust me!” Bofur shouts, and pushes Bilbo off of the train.

The fall feels longer like an eternity, until Bilbo smacks the surface. Pain detonates on the tips of his feet, his shins, and his chin, and the air is forced from his lungs in an explosion of bubbles. He flails wildly against the weight of his pack and clothing. There is nothing to see but darkness, nothing to feel but fear and his lungs screaming for oxygen. He doesn’t know which way is up and which is down.

Finally, he feels an arm loop around his chest and he is pulled to the surface. Never has the air tasted so sweet. Bilbo coughs and sputters, gripping onto Bofur with all of the strength he can muster.

“I’ve got you,” Bofur pants, then slowly strikes out for the riverbank.

“Bilbo!” Thorin shouts, knee-deep in the water. The rest of the company must have been able to get their bearings before the river brought them downstream, but Bofur and Bilbo find themselves on the far side of the bridge. “Bilbo!” Thorin continues to call, while Bofur and Bilbo stumble into the shallows, coughing and crawling to shore on their hands and knees.

Clumsy footsteps displace some of the smooth stones on the rocky bank. “Thorin! Tá siad anseo! Bofur, freisin!” Bifur shouts, and more footsteps scramble over. Bilbo coughs and snorts, clearing yet more water from his nose, and sits up as Bofur does the same.

Thorin kneels down beside him and draws him into his arms. The chatter of the company falls silent as Bilbo wraps his arms Thorin’s great chest. They draw apart slightly and Thorin’s hands settle on either side of his head.

Rough lips press to his forehead, a warmth spreading from the point of contact through his chilled limbs. Bilbo sighs, fingers curling into Thorin’s sleeves, before the two pull apart. There are things to
be said, but they can wait. For now, Bilbo is content with the exhaled, “a thaisce” that Thorin breathes into the air between them.

Their hands linger as they pull apart, ultimately dropping to rest at their sides again. Bilbo disguises his pleasure by pulling his phone out of his pocket, trying and failing to power it up. His tablet will have suffered a same fate, but he can’t bring himself to mourn their deaths yet. He is too cold and hungry — and he has no idea where they are.

Glóin voices a similar thought, to which Fili whoops and replies, “Not in Mirkwood, thanks to Bilbo.”

Bilbo is then treated to another round of hugs, back-slapping, congratulations, and an exuberant kiss on the cheek from Dwalin, although Bilbo suspects that has more to do with getting under Thorin’s skin than a proper thanks.

At their encouragement, he recounts his week through chattering teeth as they trudge up the riverbank, their feet slipping on soft sand and loose stones. He leaves out his general misery, what he heard between Kili and Tauriel, and the wet Rolodex card burning a hole in his jacket.

He has just gotten to his return from Geyser when they pass between the first trees and Oin calls for a stop. Thorin pushes them another hundred yards into better cover before they collapse, huddling close to share whatever body heat remains to them. It’s the first night he’s slept with company since South Dakota, but he doesn’t have time to relish it before he drifts into troubled dreams that ring with gunshots and end with hands around his neck.

They receive quite the rude awakening.

They must sleep into the day, as the sun leans slightly to the west and hangs high in the sky. From the way his skin pulls as he shifts, Bilbo thinks his sunburn has only worsened. His arms itch terribly, no doubt covered in mosquito bites from sleeping by the river. He’s also quite sore, and a pressure behind his eyes warns him of a headache, the full force of which only hits him when he sits up.

These would be more troubling if it weren’t for the yelling, indistinguishable through the haze of clinging sleep. Bilbo groans and pushes himself upright, only to be met with the business end of a crossbow trained on him. It goes without saying that he’s a bit more awake, and watches the tip of the bolt jump to aim at Nori next, then Balin.

“Hands up!” orders the man at the other end. His aim darts between the members of the company, his expression grim. “Stay where you are. Nobody moves, nobody gets hurt.”

Chapter End Notes

We finally got our act together, so we’ll be posting on tumblr whenever we update, if that’s more your cup of tea. Look for us at midafternooncrew and kingsofcarvenstone.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

After some tense negotiations, the Company arrives in Esgaroth. We meet some familiar faces and Bilbo begins to set his plan in motion.

Chapter Notes

V: For once I have literally nothing to say. Incredible.

M: Bard is too real for this fic. Or the movies, for that matter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Nobody moves, nobody gets hurt,” says the man, tone deceptively calm. The company, all still lying down, tracks the tip of the bolt as he trains it on each of them in turn.

“And what can one guy do?” Dwalin challenges as he begins to crawl towards the bowman’s left periphery. Gloin does the same with his right, Nori following, with Thorin positioning himself between his nephews and the arrowhead.

The bowman frowns, hefting the crossbow to remind them of its presence. “One guy can put this bolt through your chest before you can blink. So quit trying to flank me.” He steps back, revealing three more arrows impaled in the dirt behind him. The set to his jaw tells Bilbo they ought not to provoke him. “Same goes for your friends.”

Balin puts his hands up in a placating gestures and slowly rises. “This is all a misunderstanding. We were just looking for a sheltered place to sleep; we meant no harm to your-- ah. Your property.”

“And I’ll mean no harm by you if you leave.” He waves his crossbow back the way they came. “Walk until you’re standing behind the embankment. Then I’ll go and you’ll be on your merry way.”

Good thing he’s not calling the police. Tauriel would— Why wasn’t he calling the police on a large group of unwashed bikers sleeping in the middle of nowhere? Bilbo studies him with renewed interest, taking in his uncut hair, ripped jeans, much-repaired boots, and unevenly buttoned flannel shirt. Likely poor, but that doesn't tell him much. Bilbo’s eyes drift to the woods around them. Specifically, the uniform rows of chest-height plants. Bilbo hasn’t seen much since his own disastrous experiments with hydroponics, but he knows marijuana when he sees it.

Bilbo clears his throat nervously and tries to emulate Thorin’s best glare. “On our way to call the police on this little operation?”

The arrow jumps to him. “We’re all friends here.”

Balin winks at Bilbo briefly before turning back to the man. “Perhaps we can work something out. Between friends.”
“What do you want?”

“You must know where Esgaroth is.”

“It’s hard to miss.”

“We need to go there,” Balin steps forward. “In exchange, we’ll keep our mouths shut.”

The man’s eyes narrow. “What business do you have there? You’re not one of Smaug’s usual employees.”

“Our business isn’t yours,” Dwalin snaps.

“It is if you’re using my car.” The man aims at Dwalin again. “These days, it’s not easy to enter Esgaroth undetected.”

“We’ll pay,” Balin says and a groan goes up from the company.

“We have no love for Smaug,” Dori says.

“No one does, but we suffer him all the same,” the man says.

Bilbo can feel their chances of hitching a ride — and escaping unharmed — slipping through his fingers. Thorin moves to get up, a thunderous expression on his face, and Kíli tugs him down with a desperate, “Thorin!”

The stranger frowns. “Thorin? Thror’s grandson?”

“What’s it to you?” Fíli demands, chin held high.

The arrow drops slightly from Thorin’s face. “My dad was Girion Bowman. I’m his son, Bard.”

The name apparently means something to the older members of the company, as they relax. Bard, too, seems to calm down. The lines of tension unspool from his shoulders and he takes the arrow out of the crossbow. “I can at least give you food and a place to shower and sleep.” He turns and walks back through the rows of marijuana.

Bofur shrugs and follows him, the rest of the company trailing behind.

At the other end of the narrow path is a beat-up old pickup, its red paint mottled with rust around the wheel wells. The bottom half of the driver’s door has been replaced with plywood and the back window is nothing more than a garbage bag taped over the hole.

“Most of you will need to squeeze under the tarp, but I can take four up front,” Bard says. “And …” His eyes fall on Bilbo “…you.”

“Lucky bastard,” Gloin mutters.

It’s nice to see the gratitude he amassed while orchestrating their escape lasts so long.

Bilbo climbs into the pickup’s cab and finds it in no better condition than the exterior. The stained seats are pockmarked with cigarette burns and reek of mildew, old soda, and watermelon — courtesy of the bright pink air freshener hanging from the cracked rearview mirror.

The company finishes drawing straws and Kíli squeezes in on Bilbo’s other side. Bifur and Dwalin take the back seats, with Thorin stuck in the middle. Bilbo watches the shadows shift over Thorin’s
head as the rest of the company settles under the tarp. When the movement stops, Bard turns the keys four times to start the engine, and the truck grumbles and coughs it way to the main road.

“Alignment’s off,” Thorin mutters. “And it has engine knock.”

“There’s little I can do about it now,” Bard says.

“The engine knock is probably the spark plugs or deposits in the cylinders,” Thorin says absently. “Should be easy to fix.”

“Fancy yourself a gearhead?”

“Before it became another way to make ends meet.”

Bard’s eyes meet Thorin’s in the rearview, but does not respond.

The drive is silent for a few minutes, until Dwalin and Bifur pull Thorin into a whispered conversation entirely in Gaelic. While they are laughing — and Kili is watching with a gleam in his eye — the tips of Thorin’s ears are red and he looks as uncomfortable as Bilbo has ever seen him. Bilbo may have been amused if he didn’t suspect they were talking about him.

They turn a bend in the road and the trees vanish, revealing a vast lake scintillating in the late morning sun. Bilbo shields his eyes from the glare and eagerly gazes north. An enormous mountain erupts from behind the pines, stretching upward until the trees fade away to the bare black rock and the final remnants of winter’s snow. Its true height is yet veiled under fire-bellied clouds.

“Is that …?” Bilbo cannot finish his sentence.

Beside him, Kili stares up with his mouth open and awe in his eyes.

“The Lonely Mountain,” Thorin says hoarsely. “We’re home.”

Bilbo can’t drag his eyes away from the mountain until it disappears behind another stand of trees.

Bard turns to him. “Duck under the console. You in the back — crouch down.”

“Why?” Dwalin demands.

“We don’t take kindly to strangers in these parts,” he says with an exaggerated drawl. Despite his attempt at a joke, he does not smile. “I’ll tell you when we’re safe.”

The truck slows, then goes through a few lights. From his position on the floor, Bilbo can see the flat tops of faded timber buildings, old iron streetlights, and power lines.

“You’re not missing much,” Bard says. “Esgaroth’s a dump.” He makes a right turn. “Oh, there’s Alfrid’s Diner. A health code violation if I ever saw one … if health inspectors came here, anyway.” He chuckles darkly. “I don’t know what you’re looking for here, but if it’s anything other than mining work, you’re out of luck.”

Bard drives for about ten minutes more, then parks the car in the cool shadow of a garage. “We’re here.”

Kili and Bilbo slide out, and Kili leans on him as they follow Bard to the door. He unlocks it, then ushers them and the rest of the company into it. The house is in slightly better shape than the car. It’s stuffed with shabby, second-hand furniture and several of the whitewashed walls bear marks or dents. The floors are worn smooth and covered in tattered rugs.
The bay window over the sink is open to let in fresh air from the backyard. A chain-link fence demarcates the end of Bard’s property, with only dark conifers beyond. Within the yard, a few white chickens peck at the browning grass or among the plant beds, whose tending is neither here nor there. Bilbo wonders who cares for them, since Bard doesn’t seem to be the growing type — not even of marijuana.

Bilbo and Bard converse for a moment by the door, no doubt discussing arrangements for their stay — however long that will be. Curious, Bilbo drifts back towards them.

“… appreciate this. We will not overstay our welcome, we need only enough time to recover. We’ll repay you and then some for your friendship,” Balin says.

“Just remember I’m taking a risk for you,” Bard says. “You need to be discreet.”

“Understood,” Balin turns to the company, half in the kitchen and half still in the garage. “Mr. Bowman is allowing us to stay here for the night.”

“And showers?” Ori asks hopefully.

“One in the basement and one down the hall,” Bard says. “Don’t wander and don’t go outside.”

“Be quick about it,” Thorin orders. “There’s more of us than there is hot water.”

There’s a scuffle over who gets to shower first, one that Bilbo doesn’t participate in. He doesn’t mind going last The others go into the basement and, moments later, rumbling snores roll up the staircase.

Only Bilbo, Bard, Oin, and Kili remain upstairs, all four sitting around the kitchen table. The former two watch intently as Oin tends to Kili’s injured ankle.

Oin examines the grape-colored skin and says, “Sprained. You’re lucky it’s not worse. I’ll wrap it after your shower. Do you have ice?” The last question is directed at Bard, who takes a moment to realize he’s being addressed. He fills a plastic bag with ice, handing it to Kili along with a bottle of ibuprofen. Then Kili and Oin hobble down the stairs and leave Bilbo alone with Bard.

“How long have you been missing?” Bard says immediately.

“Wh—?” Bilbo splutters. “Excuse me, do I look like I’ve been kidnapped? Because I have gone through far too much with these people for you to think the worst of them.”

“Just trying to figure out why you’re different,” Bard says, unperturbed by Bilbo’s outburst. “Asking questions is my profession. I’m a PI.”

“In a town like this?” No wonder he had to grow weed on the side.

“There’s more to investigate here than you’d think,” Bard says. “Folk go missing often. Hiking accidents, cave-ins, wild animals … all far too common for a town this size. Not to mention petty theft, mysterious assaults, and the like.”

“Smaug,” Bilbo guesses.

“After he took over Erebor, Esgaroth went into decline. It …” He frowns. “If you go into the town, you’ll see it. My dad, Girion, was a county sheriff. One night he responded to an assault call involving a one-armed man. Heart attack, they said, but it was closed casket.” Bard’s piercing eyes fix on Bilbo. “I’ve told you my side. Why are you here?”
“It’s really not my business,” Bilbo says. “You’re better off asking Thorin or Balin. I’m just … along for the ride.” He tries his most honest smile.

To his relief, Bard doesn’t press, although Bilbo suspects his curiosity hasn’t been satiated. “Hungry?”

Bilbo’s stomach warbles in response. “God, yes.”

“We have more eggs than we know what to do with. Let me start the stove. It’s a little finicky.”

Soon, Bilbo has a pan of eggs simmering on the stove. Bard makes himself a cup of coffee and watches Bilbo cook. But the moment Bilbo finishes an omelette, another member of the company passes on the way to or from the ground floor bathroom and takes it, so Bilbo ends up frying five eggs before he actually eats one.

He has just started cleaning the dishes when keys rattle at the front door and a girl’s voice yells, “Home!”

Three teenagers clomp into the kitchen and immediately see Bilbo at the sink. The oldest girl meets his eyes defiantly, but her younger brother and even younger sister shrink behind her.

“Should I take them back to Hilda’s?” the oldest girl asks Bard.

Bard nods. “It might be best if you stay there for a few days.”

“Not again!” the youngest girl cries. “I’m allergic to cats.” She makes a credible fake sneeze.

“Go pack your things,” Bard says in a tone that brooks no disagreement. The boy and younger girl slouch into other parts of the house.

“I’m not going, Da,” the oldest girl declares.

“You will.”

The girl sets her hands on her hips. “It’s a three hour walk from Hilda’s to the diner and if I get off shift at midnight and walk home alone…” Bard’s face whitens. “I suppose I could quit, but then we wouldn’t have groceries for—”

“Fine,” Bard snaps. “Take the truck to Hilda’s. Pick up a few hours of overtime, if you can. Stay away from the house for the next few days.”

Bilbo fiddles with his fork, feeling incredibly out of place.

The younger Bardlings return with their overnight bags and Bard tosses Sigrid the keys.

“Don’t tell anyone about my guests,” Bard warns them. “The sheriffs might come around again and…”

The guilt is too much. Bilbo excuses himself and leaves to check where he is in the shower line-up.

Unfortunately, he catches sight of more of Bifur than he ever wanted to see, but at least it is his turn, so his suffering has not been for naught.

Even cold showers foster plans, so, under the weak dribble of frigid water, Bilbo finally begins to think of how to get into — *infiltrate*, a more romantic part of his mind whispers — Erebor.
Bard’s comments incline Bilbo to believe that Smaug may be aware of their arrival. Even if he isn’t, he likely will be within the next few days. The company is anything but discreet. Bilbo must act swiftly. To wait would be to walk into quick and messy demise.

Or maybe not quick, based on anecdotal evidence.

He emerges from his shower feeling cleaner, but not refreshed. His stomach writhes like a seething mass of snakes. So, rather than try and sleep, Bilbo puts the first part of his plan in action.

He towels his hair dry and goes upstairs. Bard is at the kitchen table, now alone, poring over the day’s newspaper with a police scanner at his elbow. As Bilbo enters, he hears something about multiple arrests, but Bard turns it down when he sees him.

“I’m going into town,” Bilbo announces.

Bard deliberates for a moment before saying, “Well, you’re not wanted yet.” He points in the direction of Esgaroth. “It’s two streets running parallel to each other, so I doubt you’ll get lost. If you do, the plaza is in the center of the town and the buffalo statue points north. And take an indirect route back. If you’re not here by sundown, I’ll look for you.”

Bilbo thanks him for his advice, laughs at the thought of Thorin trying to figure out an “indirect route”, and sets off for the town. It’s a warm and pleasant day, although the clouds rolling over the Lonely Mountain indicate rain later in the evening. His arrival into Esgaroth proper is heralded by a derelict sign proclaiming the name and population — two and a half thousand — of the town superimposed over a simplified painting of the mountain. The zeroes in 2,500 have been shot out.

Esgaroth is home to a meager selection of businesses. It boasts a post office, a handful of retail stores, a single diner, and two inexplicable law firms. Bilbo can’t imagine they get much business in so small a town, much less with the competition. The buildings are an assortment of colors, textures, and materials; squat, brick buildings with white trim mix readily with taller wood structures, colorful storefronts, and plastic siding houses.

He goes to the only phone store in town — Verizon, thank God — and haggles with the salesman for nearly an hour over cell plans before buying a phone and the most durable case they carry. He has a feeling he’ll need it.

Bilbo had hoped to wait a little while longer to perform the hardest part of the plan, but the phone comes with 50% battery and he has no excuse to procrastinate. He plops down on a bench in the park, takes two deep breaths, pulls the water-stained rolodex card from his pocket, and, with shaking fingers, punches in the number.

The phone rings twice before it clicks and Bilbo’s last hopes are both dashed and realized.

“Hello?” The voice seems to slither into his ear before congealing there in an oily mess.

“G-Good afternoon!” Bilbo says, mustering all the cheer he can to hide his stutter. “Is this Mr. Smaug?”

“This is he,” replies the voice. “How may I help you?”

“Oh, excellent. I was hoping to catch you. Is this a bad time?”

“Not at all,” he says.

“Good, good. I’m from The Western Gardener. We’re a—a small startup magazine based in
Spokane, Washington, as I’m sure you know. All about gardens, arranging, the like;” he babbles.

“Ah, anyway, I was hoping I’d be able to come out and meet you, perhaps interview you about your own gardens, which I’ve heard are the best in Montana. Truly without equal. My editor heard about them once and has been raving to do a story on them ever since”

“Of course, Mr… I believe you never gave me your name.”

Bilbo falters, racing to think of a fake name. “Mr. Took,” he says, then groans internally. His mother’s maiden name is far from an appropriate undercover name.

“ Took,” Smaug repeats, turning it over as a cat might a mouse before snapping its neck. “Not related to the Tooks of Boston, by any chance?”

“Yes?” Bilbo peeps. The phone slips in his sweaty hand and he repositions it. “I — yes I am. You’re familiar?” He knows he’s divulging too much information, but he’s so caught up in his nerves that he can’t bring himself to lie smoothly.

“Money knows money,” Smaug says noncommittally. “What brings a Took so far west?”

“Oh, just wanted a change, you know?” he says airily. “Open skies, cleaner air.”

“Quite understandable. I moved for much the same reason,” he says, and it’s said so smoothly that if Bilbo didn’t know better, he would believe it. “Day after tomorrow, at noon?”

“That sounds great!” This time, Bilbo doesn’t need to feign enthusiasm or nervous energy.

He is about to hang up when Smaug says, “A moment, Mr. Took. This is my personal number. How did you reach me?”

Before he can think of anything worse, Bilbo says, “Money knows money” and hangs up.

The world seems to be too bright as he tucks the phone back into his pocket. He inhales slowly, trying to focus on the park instead of the mess he’s gotten himself into.

It’s strangely empty.

It’s late afternoon on a Friday. There ought to be people shopping or walking their dogs or just enjoying the last rays of the sun’s warmth. There ought to have been tourists whiling away an evening between hikes. And there ought to have been outdoor performances or photographers or something.

Instead, from his position behind a neglected bed of lilies, he can see maybe ten or twelve people in a five hundred yard radius. They walk fast, keeping their heads down. Every once in a while, a group of thickset young men will amble past, small red dragons embroidered on the shoulders of their jackets.

After seeing three of these groups — one of them interacting with a sheriff as if they were old friends — Bilbo remembers Bard’s warning and hurries to finish the rest of his errands.

There is a camping store across the street and a thrift shop a few stores away from the Verizon store. Deciding to try his luck at the thrift shop first, he continues on down the street. The bell tinkles merrily as he pushes the door open.

The thrift store smells strongly of mothballs and has a grand total of three employees in its rotation. Bilbo gets the delightful privilege of meeting the owner and first employee, a woman with
shockingly red hair and an outfit to clash. She smiles sweetly at him and asks if he needs anything, to which he shakes his head and thanks her.

She leaves him to wander the racks himself, muttering under his breath about the disappointing selection. He isn’t sure what he had been expecting, though, from a small thrift shop in a smaller town. Maybe if Thorin hadn’t made him throw out his sports coat, he wouldn’t be in this dilemma. In the end he finds a simple button-up shirt, one he suspects belonged to a high schooler, and a sinfully soft cashmere cardigan with a few buttons missing.

He pays for these with his card and absently reminds himself to check his balance, not worried about the money but still preferring to be aware. Next he tries the camping store, hoping to find a suitable pair of pants.

The camping store’s air conditioning is a blessing on his sunburned skin and doesn’t carry the stale scent of mothballs, so he lingers among the racks of pants for longer than necessary. Eventually, he selects a pair of sturdy khaki shorts — morosely noting his waist has shrunk by four inches — and picks up a small moleskine notebook from among the small flashlights and candy bars hanging by the register.

For the first time in almost a month, he will need to dress and appear the fussy, untroubled florist. The prospect that he will need to act like himself is amusing and the thought tides him over on the circuitous route back to Bard’s house.

He arrives just as the rainclouds and a ridge completely obscure the sun, tucking his purchases into his pack. If they ask where he went, he’ll show them the phone. Telling the company he plans to face Smaug alone and unarmed would be asking for an unwanted escort.

He finds Fíli, Kíli, Ori, Balin, Bofur, and Thorin sitting in the mismatched chairs around the table. Fíli, Kíli and Ori seem to have sprung back, and the others look slightly less miserable than they did that morning.

“Welcome back to the land of the living,” Bilbo teases.

“So be peppy somewhere else,” Kíli moans, while beside him his brother chews mechanically on a piece of toast, eyes fixed on a spot on the wall.

“Goodness, he really did a number on you all, didn’t he?” Bilbo muses, digging through the cabinets to see if he can find the ingredients to make pancakes. He thinks that they’ll appreciate them.

Behind him, Thorin groans, and there’s a hollow *thunk* as his head hits the table.

“No sleeping and no showering for a week, laddie,” says Balin.

“She Thinks My Tractor’s Sexy for days,” Thorin says. Bofur laughs, clapping Thorin on the back.

“Needless to say, we’re all glad we brought you along,” Bofur says.

Of those gathered, he seems the best rested, so Bilbo recruits him to help make the pancakes.

Fíli, Kíli, and Ori perk up at the mention of pancakes, and soon the entire process is out of Bilbo’s hands. He backs away when he can, ready to intervene if he needs to save Bard’s kitchen, and leans on the table beside Thorin.

“I don’t see you with your hair down all that often,” Bilbo says conversationally.
“Too tired,” says Thorin, his head still cushioned by his forearms. Then he holds up a hair tie. “You do it.” Despite his apathetic tone, Bilbo knows he’s watching him through a curtain of hair.

Bilbo snickers, not mischievously, and gathers his hair off his shoulders as Bifur appears from around the corner, taking the two of them in with an appraising eye before clapping Thorin’s shoulder. "Gan bhfolach ó do chroí? Dea ar tú."

Thorin shrugs. “Chan fhaca mi a-riamh duine a leth cho brèagha ris,” Thorin mutters, voice rumbling like boulders crashing down a mountain. Bilbo finds himself less put out by the exclusion than he thought he would, and quite enjoys listening to the two trade barbs (presumably). He finishes wrestling Thorin’s hair into submission and drops into the seat Bofur vacated.

“There you are,” he says. Then, to Balin, “Where did our host wander off to?”

“Bard? Don’t know. He said he had business, and that it isn’t our business,” he says, clearly unhappy with this turn of events. “Although trust is important in—”

The front door opens and in strut Tauriel and Legolas.

Chapter End Notes

OH man. Look at that. Look at that indication that plot things are actually happening. Incredible.

For once I wish I could get those hover tags right on the first try. I love coding these things. So much.

Translations:
Gan bhfolach ó do chroí? Dea ar tú. - Done running from your heart? Good on you.
Chan fhaca mi a-riamh duine a leth cho brèagha ris - I've never seen a man half as beautiful as him.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

While Bilbo plans his heist, the company tries to decide what their next move is.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is gay.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Bilbo.” Bard trails behind them, a sour expression fixed on his face. “This is Legolas and—”

“Tauriel,” Bilbo and Tauriel provide in tandem. She opens her mouth before a clatter from the kitchen catches her attention.

“Tauriel?” Kíli exclaims, a batter-coated whisk lying forgotten at his feet.

At the table, Thorin jumps as if he’s been stabbed, struggling to stand on his injured leg. “What the hell?”

“Dad asked Bard, his business associate, to keep an eye on Esgaroth,” Legolas says smugly.

“If it’s any consolation, I don’t do it for free,” Bard mutters.

“Dad let you go,” Legolas says as Thorin takes a step forward. “We’re not here to take you back.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Bofur says, tipping his chair back to the floor with a crash.

The rest of the company rises from the table, glaring at the interlopers. Fíli’s hand is on the knife drawer, Bard has his crossbow half-lifted, and Bilbo is trying to figure out whether he should be running or stepping between them.

“You’re welcome for arresting Azog,” Tauriel finally says.

Bilbo fears Thorin might get an aneurysm from trying to balance his gratitude with his choler. Thorin finally says, “You took your time.”

“Roadblocks don’t materialize out of thin air.” Tauriel strides past Kíli and steals a pancake, and the tension dissipates.

“Why wait?” Ori asks. “If Smaug is alone, what can—?”

Bofur pats him on the shoulder. “Flamethrower, lad.”

“We’re not charging through the front door,” Bilbo reminds them.

“Who are you?” Legolas demands.
“The fourteenth member of the party, I believe,” Tauriel says.

“Don’t sound too surprised,” Bilbo sniffs, offended at the disbelief in her voice.

“I was expecting someone …” Legolas frowns as he searches for the word.

“Don’t strain yourself, lad,” Dwalin says.

“Smaug is vulnerable,” Tauriel says, batting aside Legolas’ rude gesture. “Mr. Oropherion sent us to Esgaroth to watch you and—” Legolas’ mouth twists in distaste “—assist, if need be.”

“We will have no need of your assistance,” Thorin says coldly.

Bard pushes off the wall he had been leaning on. “In that case, Legolas, we ought to discuss business.”

They disappear down the hallway and the company files into the basement. Bofur kicks their still sleeping companions awake and Ori recounts the events upstairs.

“We can’t trust Bard if he’s so familiar with Thranduil,” Gloin says. “We should go.”

A chorus of muttered agreement meets his words.

“Thranduil is the lesser of two evils,” Balin says. “Thranduil and Smaug have no love for each other, and we may need Thranduil’s assistance before the end.”

“Could we play them off each other?” Fíli asks, leaning forward.

“Thranduil is a lesser evil, but an evil nevertheless. We would be better off leaving altogether,” Thorin says.

“And where would we be then?” Bilbo demands, crossing his arms. “We lost everything — again — at Mirkwood. We don’t have food or transportation or even shelter.”

“Quit listing our problems and get around to solving them,” Dwalin snaps.

“I have,” Bilbo retorts. “Got around to solving them, I mean.”

The company stares at him with renewed interest and hope, and Bilbo cannot meet their eyes and lie about everything.

“We’ll only need to stay until the day after tomorrow,” Bilbo says.

“What is the plan?” Ori asks.

“I’m curious, too,” Nori says, a hint of suspicion in his voice.

Bilbo is reticent to reveal the half-baked mess that is his plan. Better for them to think that he will break in at the dead of night and burgle the safe’s contents like a proper thief. It will keep them safer, too. “I’m still working on it. I’ll tell you when I’ve figured out the particulars.”

Of course, they regard him with the utmost faith, because he hasn’t let them down yet, has he? Some of them do not appear entirely convinced — Thorin and Bofur in particular — but even that is less doubt and more concern for his wellbeing.

“We should still find other supporters in the town,” Gloin says. “We were well-known here before
Smaug arrived. Surely some are still around.”

Bilbo recounts what he saw earlier between the sheriff and the dragon-emblazoned thugs and the company grimaces.

“We will stay here at least until tomorrow, if Bard lets us,” Balin says.

And that’s all there really is to say on the matter.

Most of them go upstairs to grab the pancakes, although Bilbo doesn’t think Kíli is leaving for the food. Bilbo smiles to himself and stretches out in one corner, scribbling down some interview questions for Smaug. It’s difficult to keep his work from prying eyes, but after the first few venturing hands met the business end of his notebook, they leave him to his devices. After all, who would dare come between a burglar planning a heist?

The next morning, Bilbo tiptoes over the sleeping bodies of the company and strolls around the neighborhood. His skin prickles in the cool mountain air, but the sight of the clear mauve sky fading over the Lonely Mountain’s jagged peak is not one he would have wanted to miss. For a moment, Bilbo allows himself to wonder what it might be like to wake up to this sight every morning — from Thorin’s bed, if he’s being honest — and warm contentment spreads into his chest.

By the time he finishes his roundabout walk, the sky has turned entirely blue. He sits on a bench behind the enormous azalea bush in the front yard and scribbles down a few more ideas while the chickens cluck about his heels. He finds it soothing to pretend he really will have a friendly chat about flowers.

The door swings open with a harsh rasp and Bilbo slams the notebook to his chest.

It is Bofur, and he’s brought a cup of tea.

“Thanks,” Bilbo says, accepting the cup. Bofur merely nods and sits next to him in companionable silence.

“Can nearly see Erebor from here,” Bofur says, squinting off to the west.

“You’ve been?” Bilbo asks.

“A few times. Uncle Bifur and Thráin were good friends.” He points up the mountain. “The trees are hiding it, but the mansion’s up there.”

“Mansion?” As if finding the safe wasn’t hard enough.

“I’m pulling your leg. It’s just a house.” There is only sadness in Bofur’s voice, and worry begins to gnaw at his mind. Bofur swirls the remnants of his tea around the cup a few times before speaking again. “But surely you knew that, since you’re going to sneak into the place. Just like you know Erebor is the complete opposite direction.”

“I — I was going to ask about Erebor today. Obviously I would ask, but the particulars of stealing are what I was focusing on. Sort of psyching myself up for it. Then I was going to ask about the place,” Bilbo says, knowing full well that he’s babbling.

Bofur puts a hand on Bilbo’s shoulder. His eyes brim with pity. “I wish you all the luck in the world. I really do.”
Bilbo watches him leave before diving back into his work. He cannot let Bofur’s faith go unplaced.

He remains outside until the light crawls onto his sunburned hands. He wanders into the garage, intending to work or hide in there, but it is not empty. The hood on Bard’s ancient pickup is raised and someone is moving about behind it, humming absently.

“Hello?” Bilbo asks.

Thorin shuts the hood. His hands are dark with grease and there’s an especially large smear on his cheek. He rubs his nose, blackening that as well. “He did drive us here,” Thorin says peevishly.

Bilbo sighs. “You’re filthy.” He marches up to him and uses the tip of Thorin’s shirt to wipe away the worst of the grease.

“I don’t think my shirt is doing anything other than pushing the grease around,” Thorin says. “Is it the view?”

“I’m not looking!” Bilbo can’t resist glancing down and a low whistle escapes him. “Most certainly am not.”

Thorin chuckles, catches his wrist in one hand, and leads him inside.

Half the company is finishing a late breakfast of eggs — Bard must have been serious about their plenitude — while Legolas watches from the living room. Tauriel and Kili share a chair on the other side, deep in conversation and holding hands.

“Kili!” Thorin barks, and Kili detaches himself from her side.

“Did you eat breakfast already?”

“Yeah.”

Thorin is unable to think of anything else to distract him, so Kili goes right back to the ranger.

“She doesn’t want to be here, you know,” Bilbo says. “Not really. She wanted to throw you in jail the moment she caught you, and Thranduil told her no, that ‘debts do not go unpaid in my household’. She didn’t seem happy to hear that.”

“Will she turn on Thranduil?” Thorin asks.

“The point is, she’s not stringing Kili along,” Bilbo says. “Stop scowling. They seem happy.”

Thorin makes a vague noise of disgruntlement. “Dís will have my head for this.”

“Your sister can’t possibly be worse than you.”

“She is.” Thorin glances down to where he still holds Bilbo’s wrist. The ball of his thumb massages the smooth skin just over his veins. “But I hope you will meet one day.”

“You going to eat anything other—” Nori stops as Dori glares at him. “We made breakfast.”

Bilbo reluctantly parts from Thorin and eats his share of the massive mountain of eggs, which he notices are vaguely in the shape of the Lonely Mountain. As he takes a chunk out of the western flank, Fíli rearranges the pile to fix the hole.
After breakfast, he takes Bofur’s advice and asks the others about Erebor. Half of them have only been there once or twice and Kili, Fili, and Ori have never been there at all.

Balin and Dwalin are the greatest helps, Balin having more or less run the estate and Dwalin having … well, to hear Thorin tell it, lazed around on the couch and flirted with Thorin’s grandmother.

“She was a beautiful woman!” Dwalin retorts. “And I did other things.”

“Drained the wine cellar,” Thorin says dryly. He peers at the tiny floor plan Bilbo has drawn on a page torn out of his notebook, plucks the pen from Bilbo’s hand, flips the paper over, and begins to sketch.

“She was a beautiful woman!” Dwalin retorts. “And I did other things.”

“Whoa, there,” Dwalin says, sliding the paper out of range. “We want our burglar to find the safe, not end up in Smaug’s bedroom.”

Thorin snatches it back. “I can remember my own house.”

“There might be a few of our old associates left,” Balin says, returning to the most pressing matter.

“I meant it when I said Smaug’s thugs waltz around the town like they own it,” Bilbo says.

“We need to make the effort.”

“We can try later,” Thorin says.

“Bard told us not to,” Bilbo points out.

“You come and go as you please,” Dwalin says.

“I’m not on Smaug’s most wanted.”

“We’ll go after dark,” Thorin says. He passes the paper to Bilbo. He has drawn a scale floor plan of Erebor. “The best I can do without a ruler.”

“No, it’s great!” Bilbo says, tucking the map into his back pocket. “It’ll be useful.”

“What are you planning to do?” Dwalin asks.

“The sooner you tell us, the sooner we assist you,” Balin says. “Smaug won’t let the theft go unanswered. You’ll need all of us.”

Bilbo had conveniently forgotten about Smaug’s inevitable retribution. “I’ll definitely have something by tomorrow.”

He wishes Thorin wouldn’t look so hurt and wishes he could just tell Thorin about his plan, consequences be damned! But no, Thorin won’t like it, Bilbo knows he won’t, just as he knows that Thorin would try to sabotage his efforts.

Kili pounds down the stairs, Bard’s phone pinned to his ear. “I know. Yes. He’s right here.” He skids to a halt in front of their gathering, one hand over the receiver. His face is bone white. “It’s Mom.”

The terror on his face is echoed in everyone else’s expressions. Thorin takes the phone from Kili’s hand. “Dis?”

A woman’s voice explodes out of the phone. “Seven fucking days, Thorin! I had all the girls ready to
come sweeping to your rescue! God help me, if I even see that goddamn weasel Thranduil again, I’ll snap his neck!” The voice quietes by degrees. “I’m glad everyone is safe. Now put me on speaker. Everyone’s here and if they don’t get a chance to hear from their family or friends, you’ll have bigger problems than Smaug.”

A moment of shocked silence meets the conclusion of Dis’ tirade. Finally, Thorin says, “Nice to hear from you, too, sis.”

“Don’t you sis me,” Dis grumbles. “Kíli tells me you got out of Mirkwood thanks to your new squeeze.” Everyone looks at Bilbo and he sets his jaw. “I guess he’s not as squishy as he looks.”

Bilbo glares at the very guilty-looking Kíli. “How does your mom know what I look like?”

“Ha,” Kíli says with forced cheer. “That is an excellent question.” He bundles Bilbo off to the stairs. “I’ll answer it after you round up the rest of the company.”

Bilbo allows himself to be herded upstairs, if only to spare Thorin, whose ears have gone rather red.

He finds the errant members of the company easily in the small house, except for Fíli. After calling his name a few times, Bilbo steps outside to find Fíli and Sigrid feeding the chickens and locked in deep discussion.

Bilbo clears his throat and stands off to the side. Neither Fíli nor Sigrid acknowledge him, so involved are they in swapping tips on how to best throw a knife. “Fíli, your mom is on the phone.”

Fíli hands the bucket of chicken feed off to Sigrid, a smile spreading over his face. “Really? Where?”

“They’re in the basement,” Bilbo says, and Fíli sprints past him. To Sigrid, he says, “Need help with that?”

“Nah.” She brushes past him and tosses another handful of grains to the chubby white birds pecking at her feet. “Fíli says you’re a famous thief from Boston.”

“Hardly,” Bilbo says. “Fíli is just exaggerating.”

Sigrid holds up a wallet that looks suspiciously similar to his. He instinctively pats his back pocket, only to find it missing. “I thought so.” She tosses it back to him and he at least manages to catch it. “I think you’re here either to steal something from Smaug or to kill him. And if you fuck that up — or even if you succeed — Smaug and his cronies are going to flush out every traitor in Esgaroth. Da will die. My brother and sister and me might die, too.”

Bilbo feels as if his head is floating over his body. He does know, and he knows it all too well, but pretending that he is only going for a chat about some flowers is so much easier than acknowledging the truth. “You seem remarkably calm about this.”

She sets the bucket down and glares at him with steely blue eyes. “Living in this town means you accept death at Smaug’s hands rather readily. My only regret is that I’m not taking that bastard down myself.”

“Well, maybe that’s a good thing,” Bilbo says, nervously fiddling with the edge of his shirt. “Fighting … it’s not fun.” And that’s really all he can say on the matter before his voice will waver and fear will stopper his throat.

“Necessary, though,” Sigrid says.
“Yes.”

Sigrid nods. “Da won’t ever admit it, but he hopes you succeed. Everyone in this town does. I’ll say a few words for you, too.”

“Thanks,” Bilbo says, managing a small but genuine smile.

“But just because Da supports you doesn’t mean he’ll make it easy,” she warns.

“No,” Bard says.

“We’ve overstayed our welcome,” Balin says. “Let us find—”

“Smaug was ruthless in hunting down anyone who would oppose him,” Bard says. His eyes wander to the crossbow sitting in the corner of the living room. “If you walk out the door, I’m not letting you back in. I have kids.”

Silence descends over the living room, the company’s faces lit only by the fire flickering in the wood stove.

“What are you trying to do?” Bard asks.

“Kill Smaug,” Bofur says with his usual tact.

“You’re leaving tomorrow.” Bard picks up his crossbow. “I can’t risk anyone’s safety on your success.”

“Understood,” Balin says. Bard nods sharply, once, and goes out into the garage with the crossbow.

The moment the door shuts, Dwalin says, “In case you’ve forgotten, we don’t have anything but the clothes on our backs.”

“We’ve made do with less,” Balin says, and although the others nod, they don’t seem too happy with this development. Balin turns to Bilbo. “Will that interfere with your plans?”

“No, not at all.” And before they can ask any other questions, he retreats to the bench on the front porch.

With Thorin’s old jacket wrapped around his shoulders, the cool air is much more tolerable than before. He doesn’t have to suffer it for long, though. Thorin sits beside him, leaning slightly into him. Without either of them really planning for it, their hands slip into each other.

“Don’t ask me about the plan,” Bilbo says.

“I won’t,” Thorin says.

“Thanks.”

“Actually…’” Thorin rubs his neck with his free hand. “I wanted to ask you out. On a date. We can grab coffee or something after all of this is over.”

“After risking life, limb, and sanity for you, I suppose I could deign go on a coffee date,” Bilbo says dryly. “Don’t you take your coffee black?”

“So?”
Bilbo groans and rests his head on Thorin’s shoulder. “You wouldn’t even appreciate it.”

“If I’m going to have coffee, I’m going to have coffee, not cream and artificial sweetener with a side of coffee.”

“Let’s have dinner. I’ll cook it. How does steak au Poivre sound?”

“It sounds…” Thorin breathes a laugh. “Whatever you make will be delicious, I’m sure.”

“And if you want to talk about meeting each others’ family, I’ll have you know I have twenty-four aunts and uncles, and, to be quite honest, I’ve forgotten how many first cousins alone that I have.”

“I’ll learn their names.” He says this with the same stern certainty he had used in Bilbo’s apartment all those weeks ago when he had said he would take back Erebor.

Bilbo tilts his head up and kisses his jaw. “I’d be glad to teach you. And they’ll be glad to meet you.”

His face scrunches a little. “Although I’ve been a confirmed bachelor for years and I’m not looking forward to the knowing looks on all their faces.”

“Let them stare,” Thorin murmurs.

It’s a graceless kiss, too wet, too much teeth. Bilbo redoubles his efforts when Thorin begins to kiss back, now over the initial shock. Thorin tastes like tobacco and mint and he smells like the shampoo that Bard supplied them with. Bilbo tastes like his beer and blood, as though he’s been chewing the inside of his cheek. They kiss for so long that the world falls away around them and they become blind and deaf to anything but each other.

They say that memory and smell are intimately related. So Bilbo hopes that years from now, when the memory has faded, the cigarette smoke and strawberry shampoo will bring them back, vivid as they are now.

“We could work,” Bilbo says, terribly distracted by Thorin’s thumb stroking at his hip. “But there’s… there’s Smaug in between now and then, so for now we should keep doing this. Worry about the rest later.”

Thorin must agree, because his lips meet Bilbo’s again, soft but insistent, as though he’s putting his words to action. They kiss again for a good long while, before the mosquitoes become too much for Bilbo to handle and he scrambles out of Thorin’s lap. The streetlamps outside gild their edges, casting Thorin in pure gold. The next morning, Bilbo will wake up with beard burn and Thorin will wake up with marks on his neck. Tomorrow, Bilbo will wake up hours before Thorin and he will go to steal from Smaug, but they have tonight. Bilbo can make do with that.
V: They fucked, use your imagination I guess.

M: Bilbo is soft and warm like mash potatoe.
Bilbo intends to leave late the next morning, when the rest of the house’s residents and guests will be asleep. It is easy to creep away from the raucously snoring company, but his luck is not entirely with him. Bard and Sigrid are sitting in the kitchen.

“Morning,” Bilbo says and they both nod to him before returning to the newspaper and their coffee. He fixes himself a quick breakfast — eggs, again — and is conscious of every sound he makes next to the near-silent Bowmans. Even the chickens’ gentle putting seems like gunfire compared to the soft rustle of paper.

Sigrid has left the house by the time Bilbo announces he is going to go for a walk. Bard spares him only a grunt. Bilbo pauses at the door, wishing for a second that the normally discerning Bard had noticed his new attire and demanded to know where he was going.

But then Bilbo turns and steps outside, firmly placing both feet on the Bowmans’ porch. He refuses to think of anything he is about to do. He can think only of what will happen afterward. He pictures the look on Thorin’s face when he returns, the contents of the safe in his hands. In his mind, they then kiss there, both overcome with the weight of their success. The things that happen next don’t matter. What matters in the press of their lips, the warmth of their embrace.

What matters is that they can go on that coffee date.

Outside, the air is redolent with petrichor. Leftover drops of rain still cling to every available surface, and the pavement is dark with moisture. The infrequent cars allow Bilbo to believe he is merely taking another stroll around the neighborhood.

It takes him twenty minutes to cross town and another forty — all uphill, to his vexation — to reach Erebor. He spends a good ten minutes just walking up the gravel driveway and he must pause halfway up its steep incline to catch his breath. He puts his hands on his knees and regards the Lonely Mountain. Its odd familiarity is frustrating. Then he tilts his head a little and recognizes this mountain as the one tattooed on Thorin’s arm. Bilbo smiles sadly before continuing onward.

Finally, he rounds a bend in the driveway and sees Erebor for the first time.

The property contains three buildings — a stone and wood house, a small warehouse, and an even
smaller outbuilding made of the same material as the house. Waves of colorful blooms peek out from behind the home, stopping only at the dirt road leading back to the warehouse. Bilbo aches to study them closer, but he really ought to wait for Smaug to parade him through so he can react with appropriate awe. So he sighs and turns to the house. There are flowers here, too: bright begonias crowd the planter on the side of the oak door. Bilbo can’t help but feel a sense of foreboding — Smaug has placed flowers that mean beware right beside the entrance.

Bilbo walks past the peachy harbingers of doom, knocks on the door, and then nervously studies his distorted reflection in the sleek red BMW parked nearby. His heart thumps rapidly in his chest and he can think of little else other than stealing that car and driving until he reaches Boston.

The door opens.

Smaug is impeccably dressed in a tailored suit, despite the inferred informality of their discussion. Unlike his jacket and tie — which he sports with practiced ease — the cold smile he wears seems ill-fitting, unnaturally stretched over his reptilian features.

Bilbo remembers his manners seconds before the silence would have become uncomfortable. He smiles and says, “Hello. I’m—”

“Mr. Baggins,” Smaug says, holding the door open so Bilbo can enter. “Come in. Did you walk?”

“It’s such a lovely day, especially after all that rain last night,” Bilbo says. And just like that, he steps into the lion’s den. “I had to.”

The entry opens into an enormous room with a vaulted ceiling. Opposite the door is a dormant fireplace, and arched entries leading to other parts of the house. The decorations are fashionable — modern whites on brick interior walls, cast-iron ornamentations, faux fur, slate table tops — but wildly out of place in Montana. Bilbo expects this sort of ornamentation in a brownstone loft.

“You have a beautiful home,” Bilbo says. A stolen home.

“Would you like a tour?” Smaug asks, brushing past Bilbo as he closes the door. “I imagine you’re tired from your walk, but it would be remiss of me not to offer.”

Bilbo silently thanks social convention, then nods enthusiastically. “I’d love it.”

Smaug does not halve his enormous stride for Bilbo, leaving him to jog behind. The house is only one floor and all of it is connected to the hall, but Smaug is so embroiled in his monologue on interior decorating that it takes them nearly forty-five minutes to finish.

*Elrond would have shown me Rivendell and its gardens in less time.*

Bilbo wonders what Erebor would look like if Thorin lived here. It would certainly be more lived-in; the house felt as if it were maintained only for show, as an athlete might obsessively polish a trophy. No, Thorin would do away with the strange industrial décor. Bilbo’s only mental image involves piles of geometrically-patterned quilts and quilts lead to beds and suddenly he’s off in some very vivid and very illicit imaginings.

*Focus*

As they go, he mentally superimposes Thorin’s map over the rooms Smaug guides him through. For the most part, little has changed, except Smaug’s office is in a renovated guest bedroom instead of the office Thorin’s grandfather must have used.
Bilbo glimpses it as Smaug talks about the coat closet — of all things — across the hall. The steel safe seems to glare at him through the crack in the door. Thorin’s key weighs heavily in his pocket.

Smaug notices him staring and shuts the office door, then settles his hand on Bilbo’s back to steer him away. And that would be all, if not for the way Smaug’s hand lingers, just a little too low for comfort, before dropping away.

Prompted by some reckless urge, Bilbo asks, “Are you the original owner?” Smaug halts in his tirade against ceramic tile and his eyes narrow. “Sorry — I just noticed the wood walls aren’t original, and I thought—”

“The original owners sold it before they had a chance to move in,” Smaug says.

Bilbo scribbles that down in his notepad, resisting the urge to write lying twat instead.

They move out into the garden for the main interview. It is as beautiful as Bilbo has dreamed, bursting with flowers of every variety. A plethora of vibrant dahlias sit beside crimson rosa rugosa, and lissome stalks of violet larkspur tremble in the breeze. Purple-tinged hydrangeas soak up the early afternoon sun, while bubblegum pink foxglove uncurl in the shade.

Bilbo could feel something intensely wrong about the garden, but it isn’t until he sits down under the pergola — covered in a white climbing rose — that he puts his finger on it.

“Do you have any early blooming flowers, or have I just come at the right time?” he asks. There are no spring flowers — no peonies, no irises, no viburnum, no hellebore.

Smaug pulls his seat closer to Bilbo’s before he sits. “I tear my spring flowers out after they’ve finished blooming and plant my summer flowers immediately afterward.”

“I don’t see the greenhouse where you’re storing them.”

“I throw them out. They have no use to me after their blooms are spent and I have enough money to replace them next spring.”

Not for the first time, a chill steals down Bilbo’s spine. “Would that we all had enough money to do that.”

Smaug does not even effect modesty. “Do not think me heartless, Mr. Took. I take excellent care of things that serve me well.” His hooded eyes slide towards Bilbo, whose skin crawls.

Bilbo clears his throat. “I can tell. Your larkspur doesn’t have a touch of mildew on it, and I can empathize with how difficult it is to keep them free of that. So, uh … What was the first flower you planted?”

“Marigold,” Smaug says.

Cruelty or desire for wealth, depending on who you ask. Fitting. “Any reason?”

“It is my favorite. I used to care for symbolism, but that desire has since passed. Items should be held according to their real value, not sentiment.” He all but hisses the last word. “Such is the way of the world.”

Normally, Bilbo would fight him on it, but this was Smaug. “Wise words.”

Smaug’s lip curls and the baleful light in his eye mellows, but does not lose its bite. In fact, it appears
“acquisitive? “Thank you, Mr. Took. Few acknowledge the uselessness of emotions in this modern world. I am pleased you have a more discerning mind.” He shifts closer. “Princeton or Brown?”

“This is your interview, Mr. Smaug,” Bilbo reminds him. He has not thought through Bill Took’s background thoroughly enough to cover his college education. And, as a third generation Middlebury grad, he is mortally offended.

“It seems unfair that you are soon to learn much about me, while you will remain an unknown,” Smaug says. “All relationships should be built in reciprocation.”

Bilbo plasters on his second-best fake smile, the kind he reserves for meddling aunts who ask when he’ll marry. “While I’m honored an illustrious businessman such as yourself would would to build a relationship with me, unfortunately I’m just a recorder.”

“You are full of pleasantries, aren’t you, Mr. Took?” Casually, his hand falls on Bilbo’s knee, the thumb curling around to grip it loosely.

“Well, ah, they are well-deserved,” Bilbo says. “I heard in Esgaroth that you single-handedly revitalized the town with your mining ventures.” The hand begins to slide upward. Un-fucking-believable. “That’s an incredible accomplishment, especially in this economy.”

“I try. It isn’t always easy.”

“Per aspera ad astra,” he quips. Smaug has reached mid-thigh and he squeezes. “Mr. Smaug, I do believe that is my knee.” Smaug’s hand retreats, but the ugly light in his eyes is not quenched. He does not apologize. “Let’s start with the interview, shall we?”

Bilbo asks his questions, Smaug answers them, and then he records them dutifully, his slanted handwriting quickly filling the pages. Smaug enjoys compliments as much as he enjoys speaking, absolutely loves the sound of his own voice, and seems to relish the chance to do so ad nauseam. And he also enjoys his poorly veiled flirting, which Bilbo deflects as graciously as he can. Perhaps this comes across as simply coquettish, though, because it does not fend off Smaug’s advances as effectively as Bilbo hoped.

“You often tend your own garden?” Bilbo asks. “I imagine it must be difficult with all the work you do.”

“It is becoming harder, but I try not to let it affect me. What is the point of victory if one cannot enjoy it to the fullest?” This time, Smaug rests the toe of his shoe against Bilbo’s calf. “I thrive in conquest,” he says pointedly.

Smaug’s foot starts moving up his leg and Bilbo jerks his leg away, sputtering. “I’m sorry,” he says, affronted, even though he isn’t sorry at all. “I was under the impression that this was a professional meeting?”

Smaug’s eyebrows rise, but he settles back. “Of course, Mr. Took. My apologies.”

“No worries,” Bilbo lies. “A-- ah. A simple mistake. Now, where were we?” He turns a page noisily, finding the next question and reading it off with feigned interest. Then his phone rings. Bilbo ignores it as he jots down the response to his question. Then it rings again and keeps ringing, for a good ten minutes.

Finally, Smaug asks, “Who is your insistent caller?”
“Uh…” Bilbo checks his phone. Thirty missed calls, all from Bard’s home phone. Bilbo doesn’t think it is Bard who is dialing his number. He feels a pang of regret for leaving the company — and Thorin especially — without warning. “My boyfriend.”

“The needy type?”

Bilbo seizes his chance. “Jealous. Big muscles, bigger temper, only wears muscle shirts, covered in machine oil — you know the type.”

Bird song and Bilbo’s vibrating phone fill the silence between them.

“He has good reason to be jealous, with a catch like you.”

There is no warmth in Smaug as he says this, only cold calculation and a gleaming predatory edge. Bilbo is unsure how long he’ll be able to keep Smaug off him, so he decides to make his move. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to make a quick trip to the bathroom.” Smaug stands and Bilbo nearly screams, “I know where it is. On the left, yes?”

He forces himself to walk back to the building at a casual pace, but once he’s inside he bolts into the office. Bilbo skids to his knees before the floor safe, shoving the key into the lock with shaking hands. The lock clicks, louder than a gunshot. At the last second, Bilbo looks around for cameras. Seeing none, he opens the safe. Nestled inside is a single piece of paper marred by one line of angular handwriting.

48.29 -114.86

“Coordinates,” Bilbo breathes, a smile spreading over his face. He had wished it would be a large sparkly gem instead of another mystery, but coordinates will be much easier to smuggle out of Erebor and they will hopefully lead the company out of Smaug’s immediate reach.

He shuts the safe again and stows both key and coordinates in his wallet. By the time he sits back down in the seat beside Smaug, he feels preternaturally placid.

“Apologies for the interruption,” Bilbo says, taking up his pen and notebook. “Where were we?”

“It is my turn to apologize, Mr. Took,” Smaug says. His own phone sits on his lap and he taps it with one long finger. “I just received a call that requires my immediate attention. You must leave.”

“That’s fine,” Bilbo says, looking over his notes. “I definitely have enough for my article.”

“Are you staying in Esgaroth?” Smaug asks, voice suddenly husky.

“No,” Bilbo says loudly. “Sorry — heading back to, uh, Spokane tonight. It was a pleasure, Mr. Smaug.”

Bilbo holds his hand out. Smaug takes it in both of his own sweaty hands, one enfolded in Bilbo’s and the other lightly stroking the inside of his wrist. Bilbo, gripped with revulsion, contemplates chewing off his own hand to escape. He can survive with it. “The pleasure was mine, although if you stay in Esgaroth—”

“Have an excellent afternoon,” Bilbo says, somehow extricating his hand without any carnage. He does not look back as he strides towards Esgaroth, his pace only increasing as Erebor falls out of sight.

The moment he’s on the main road, he yanks his phone from his pocket to call Bard’s house.
Bombur answers. “Hello?”

“Oh, Bombur, excellent. It’s me. Bilbo,” he says breathlessly. “Can you get Thorin for me?”

“Yeah.” There’s muffled rustling as Bombur puts hand over the phone, but Bilbo can hear raised voices and general chaos over the line. Bombur calls Thorin’s name, then mutters, “Brace yourself” to Bilbo before passing the phone.

“Bilbo!” Thorin yells. Bilbo jerks the phone away from his ear in surprise. “Where the hell are you?!”

“Walking. That doesn’t matter. Thorin. Thorin, I got it. The thing in the safe — it’s a set of coordinates.”

“Oh my god,” Thorin breathes. “You— that’s where you were? You’re okay?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine!” Bilbo says. He is. He’s ecstatic, euphoric, success flooding his head like a drug. “I’ll tell you more later, but Smaug doesn’t suspect a thing. I’ll be back soon, in another forty-five minutes or so. I have to walk back. Just wait for me, alright?”

Thorin sounds numb with disbelief. “Yes. Oh my god, yes.” He laughs, sounding as breathless as Bilbo. “Yes. You have to tell me everything the moment you get back.”

“I will,” Bilbo says. They’re both repeating themselves, but the weight of this accomplishment and relief is as good an excuse as any. “It’ll be a bit. See you soon.”

They trade goodbyes, and then Bilbo hangs up the phone. He shoves his hands in his pocket and hums tunelessly, mind wandering as he strolls back into town, finally feeling that everything will go as it should.

He’s halfway down Main Street when he sees a red BMW with familiar plates cruising on the other side of the park. Bilbo’s heart plummets to his stomach and all his delight crashes and burns around him. No, no, no it’s only been a half hour … why didn’t I steal Bard’s car and oh God it’s too soon…

The sun shines too bright and the world spins, and it feels as if two strong hands are wrapped around his neck, squeezing, squeezing—

He steadies himself on a newspaper dispenser, reeling. Now is not the time to despair. He must think craftily, like the burglar he was hired to be, if he is to escape this with all four limbs and his head in tact.

Esgaroth is a tiny town and Bilbo does not think he can escape back to Bard’s house without being spotted, not even if he cuts through the woods. He will not alert Smaug to the company’s presence or Bard’s involvement.

If nothing else, he must get the coordinates to the company.

He glances around before sighting a familiar sign and slipping through the door.

“Good afternoon and welcome to Alfrid’s Diner,” Sigrid greets as he enters the seedy restaurant. Her features are schooled into polite nonchalance, as if she were greeting anyone else.

“Afternoon,” Bilbo says. He grabs a menu and slides into a seat at the bar. The chrome counter reflects his strangely calm face. “How are you?”
Sigrid glances around and leans in under the pretense of showing him something. “It’s chaos at home. Your friends have been tearing the house apart looking for you, Da is at the end of his rope, and Legolas said more of his people are on the way.” She straightens and whips out her notepad. “Is there anything I can get you?”

Ah well. Bard’s house isn’t safe anyway. “Tea?”

Sigrid nods, bustling off to take care of his order. Two elderly women gossip in the corner, and the cooks argue in the kitchen, but otherwise the diner is empty. Bilbo dares to glance out the picture windows and does not see the car.

The horrid crawling sensation on his neck and back does not cease.

Sigrid comes back with a steaming cup of water and a selection of teas. Bilbo chooses a black tea and tears the packet open with steady hands.

“Here, let me pay now,” Bilbo says, opening his wallet. He pulls out three ones, a five, and the coordinates, pressing all of them into her palm. “Take the change home with you. I won’t need it where I’m going.”

She counts the bills, pausing with a look of faint surprise, then understanding when she reaches the slip of paper. “Thanks.”

Bilbo’s phone rings.

He fumbles with it. After accepting the call, he brings the phone to his ear and leaves the diner, ambling a few feet away to gain some semblance of privacy. Outside, the red BMW sits by the curb.

“You had excellent manners for a liar and a thief,” Smaug snarls. “Come outside and we’ll go for a drive.” Bilbo nods numbly, the color drained from his face. “Very good.”

The driver’s seat of the BMW is empty, a fact he registers about the same time he realizes there’s a gun pressed to his back, a presence looming over him. “Kind of you to join me, Mr. Baggins.”

Cuffs click around his wrist, then the cold presence of the gun is gone, replaced instead by an equally chilling hand on the small of his back that guides him towards the car. Feeling very much as though he’s simply watching on, not experiencing this. The back door opens, and the hand no longer just hints at violence, but pushes forcefully until he falls into the car. His hands are useless behind him, and he cannot avoid hitting his head on the door frame as he falls. Moments later, rough fabric closes over his head, tied around his neck with a thin cord, dimming the light and effectively blinding him.

The car door shuts, and Bilbo realizes that he is going to die.

Chapter End Notes

V: I'M THE FUCKING LIZARD KING. Also I'm in another country for a month, means I'll be posting things around 3PM-ish EST instead of 6PM for a few weeks since I'm six hours ahead of the east coast. And I'm an old lady who loves to sleep. PS I'm drunk.

M: The next installment in our thirst saga arrives next week.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

A storm draws near.

Chapter Notes

Thorin gets the award for Golden Retriever Boyfriend of the year.

Also this chapter gave me hell, so thank mudkippy, we sort of reversed roles in this. She added the memes, I took them away (and added more memes.) We continued in this fashion until there were no more memes. Also please excuse any times where "landline" has been replaced with "landmine." That was me and it was an accident.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As it turns out, Bilbo Baggins is a biter.

It had not bothered Thorin so much at the time, but the collar of his shirt will not cover the uppermost of the marks on his neck.

The realization that Bilbo may have done it on purpose — none of the other marks are so high up — elicits a rueful chuckle from him.

“Are you done yet, Your Highness?!" Dwalin shouts through the bathroom door.

Thorin dresses and leaves the shower, making sure to shoulder Dwalin as he passes. Dwalin returns the favor with a good-natured jab to the hip, right over one of Thorin’s new bruises.

Thorin refuses to show pain — it is too early in the morning to deal with Dwalin’s comments — and heads upstairs, where Bilbo will be waiting, likely with another plate of those infernal eggs. He pauses on the top step and arranges his hair to fall over his neck. He is not ashamed, but it seems in poor taste to flagrantly display his hickey their host.

Bard is sitting at the kitchen table, alone, engrossed in the local classifieds. There is no sign of Bilbo, save for a neat stack of washed dishes beside the sink.

“Where is Bilbo?” Thorin demands.

“Walking.”

*You would think the sky and all the flowers were to vanish tomorrow,* Thorin thinks with a grouchiness he does not truly feel. Perhaps if Bilbo comes to love this place, so far from his home, he will want to stay…

“When did he leave?”
Bard idly turns the page. “About half an hour ago.” He looks up. “You’ll leave after he comes back.”

If Balin had not conceded so readily, Thorin knows he could have argued Bard into letting them stay. But Bard will regret having treated them so brusquely after Smaug is dead, Thór’s treasure back in Durin hands, and Esgaroth begins to prosper once more.

“Of course,” Thorin says curtly. “Where are Thranduil’s—” He forcibly bites back worse words, for Kíli’s sake if nothing else. It is good to see him smile, even if it is at her. “—associates?”

“I kicked them out earlier this morning,” Bard says.

“They will return before long, with their master at their heels.”

“They won’t be coming here.”

Thorin has not thought to find such optimism from such a dour man. He leaves Bard to his daydreams as he heads outside to escape the crowded house. And, if he also happens to be strategically positioned just outside the front door, it’s certainly only coincidence. Not to wait for Bilbo’s return. Mindful of Bard’s warning, he drags the folding chair behind an enormous flower bush so that he invisible from the road.

He can still see the tip of the Lonely Mountain over the leafy branches. It is a sight he thought he had sorely missed during his exile, but now it seems to haunt him, its omnipresent bulk always within his peripheral vision. He scratches at the rendering tattooed on his arm — the view from halfway up Erebor’s drive; Bilbo will love it, if he can be bothered to look up from the wildflowers — and stares up at the mountain with renewed resolve. Bilbo will return soon with his plan, and by the end of the day, they will be rid of Smaug at last.

Thorin has never imagined how his family’s life would change with Smaug’s death. It is simply too painful to think of Fíli and Kíli going to college, and Dís starting that bar, and any of the dreams his family and the company have. It is too painful to think of himself doing whatever made him happy, although, for the life of him, he cannot remember what it is. For him, happiness is ensuring the safety and happiness of those he loves. Perhaps after Smaug is dead, he will find something that will content him as much as flowers do with Bilbo.

Simply the fact that Thorin is thinking of these things is enough to bring a small smile to his face.

Thorin glances at the sun, now fixed at noon. Bilbo has been gone for nearly an hour now. Still, his last walk took an hour and the walk he took while the rest of the company slept was even longer than that. And he probably has more cunning in him than the rest of the company combined. He is in no danger.

Thorin turns his attention to the puffy white flowers on the bush beside him. What did he call them? Hydrangea? If Thorin asks, Bilbo will no doubt take too much pleasure in informing him the exact strain, what they symbolize, how to keep them longest in a flowerpot, and how they are the biggest bother to properly trim, or something like that.

Dwalin strolls out the front door, his hands in his pockets. “Brooding again?”

Thorin makes a noncommittal noise and braces for impact. Although, honestly, he has ribbed Dwalin’s choice in partners too many times not to deserve this. He still resolves to act the martyr in front of Bilbo. A little pity may go a long way.

“Truth is, I don’t know what to say,” Dwalin says, as if he can read Thorin’s mind. “At last, my
chance to get even with you … but there are so many things I could say that I can’t choose one.”

_This is a pleasant alternative._

“Well, I’ll start with _thanks._”

“Why?” Thorin asks warily.

Dwalin laughs. “I won!”

“…Won what?”

“The bet.” He sighs and leans against the house, his eyes closed with contentment. “We had a bet going on when you two would get together.”

The shoe does not merely drop. It slams to Earth with an apocalyptic impact. “A bet,” Thorin repeats dumbly. “We.”

“Whole company. And Dís. And Dís’ friends. And I think even Glóin’s kid got in on it…”

Thorin runs a hand through his hair. If he has it free, he’s afraid he won’t be able to resist putting Dwalin in a headlock. At least he can now genuinely play the martyr. “Betrayed on all sides. Even by my own kin.”

“Don’t be so melodramatic.” Dwalin grins. “Nearly two hundred dollars, Thorin! And tomorrow would have started Fili’s slot, so thanks for that.”

It was better to imagine the company betting on their relationship in the abstract, rather than having to suffer through the thought of his nephews, specifically, speculating on his relationship. “I’m never letting you see them again.”

“Nori started it.”

“Should I laugh or take a swing at you?”

“Hit me. Haven’t heard you laugh in years. It’d be unnatural.”

A companionable silence falls between them, although Thorin is still fuming over how carefully they concealed the bet from him. It makes him wonder what else the lot of them are keeping.

“All I can say,” Dwalin says eventually, “is that, one, Dis and I will gang up on you the moment we’re all together, two, you scream like a dying cat, and, three, that Bilbo doesn’t deserve you.”

“Probably not,” Thorin says with a grin.

“What the fuck? Are you smiling?” He cuffs Thorin over the head. “Come inside. The sun’s made me hallucinate.”

They go back into the house, Dwalin laughing good-naturedly at Thorin’s limp, which has not been exacerbated by _anything_, whatever Dwalin might think.

The entire company is sitting around — and on — Bard’s kitchen table, while Bard himself watches them warily from the living room armchair.

“Bilbo isn’t back yet?” Dori asks.
“No.” Thorin ignores a few exaggerated panting noises from Kili and Fili’s direction. As is, they’re both grounded until the heat death of the universe.

“He’s been gone for nearly three hours,” Balin says.

Thorin’s mind immediately runs through the worst possible scenarios — captured by Azog, hit by a car, captured by Thranduil, something with Thranduil in general, attacked by a bear, captured by Smaug, lying at the bottom of a ditch with a broken leg — before Ori suggests they leave to look for him.

“He left his number on the refrigerator a few days ago,” Bard calls from the living room.

Bofur immediately goes to the phone and starts dialing, Thorin watching out of the corner of his eye. After Bofur’s tenth failed attempt, Thorin gleefully tears the illusion of nonchalance by taking the phone himself, as if Bilbo will somehow notice he, Thorin, is calling and pick up the fucking phone already.

“I doubt Azog will let Uncle Bilbo pick up the phone in the middle of a torture session,” Kili drawls.

“You’re not helping,” Thorin snaps, hanging up and redialing the moment the voicemail starts. Kili immediately sobered.

“Maybe we’d be in a better position to help if our nursemaid would let us out,” Dwalin growls.

Bard finally rises from his chair, stalking into the kitchen with his customary grimace. “I told you — if you leave this house, you’re not coming back. I’m in enough trouble with the authorities without whatever you’re planning.”

“We can’t just leave him out there!” Bofur exclaims. “He’s a member of the company!”

“No one is leaving anyone,” Balin says. “This isn’t Azan. I’m sure Bilbo is fine.”

The memory of that tiny town only spurs Thorin to greater desperation, until he nearly shatters the phone’s housing when he slams the receiver back into it.

“You’re free to leave,” Bard reminds them.

“We’re not leaving without Bilbo,” Ori says.

“So you won’t leave without Bilbo, but you also want to go look for him. Makes perfect sense,” says an increasingly exasperated Bard

“Watch it,” Glóin snarls.

Thorin must have called forty or fifty times now, and he still goes straight to voicemail. His phone is on; he’s just not answering. Why?

“As I think about it,” Bard says, now sounding properly angry. “I’m not letting you leave without the only sane person in your entire company. You’ll be arrested before you take four steps out the door.”

Thorin is about to retort when the doorbell rings.

The house is truly more of a hovel. Yet, Thranduil loves it every inch of it, from its dirty porch to its badly-repaired roof. It reminds him of the home he has forsaken to mop up the mess in which Thorin Oakenshield has mired himself.
Ever since Thranduil’s business deal with Thráin went sour in the wake of Smaug’s takeover, it seems as if he’s been doing little other than cleaning up after Durin mistakes. But no more. He is finished.

Thranduil inspects his reflection in the rearview mirror. He has never met Bard and he only has one chance to make the most imposing and majestic impression he can.

Grooming finished, he opens the truck door and shifts to get out. His forehead throbs dully and, not for the first time that day — or that hour — Thranduil curses the undersized burglar. “A moment, Feren.”

“Sure, boss,” Feren says, leaning against the hood.

After his headache fades to manageable levels, Thranduil straightens his shoulders, drawing up to his full height as he approaches the charmingly crooked brown door.

It opens seconds after Thranduil rings the bell, by a man so startlingly handsome that Thranduil’s mouth nearly falls open. If he, Thranduil, is a silver fox, then this is the scruffy hound worthy of its pursuit.

The man’s brow knits in confusion. Then he says, “Mr. Oropherion?”

_This is Bard?_ “I require a moment of your time.” Thranduil sweeps past him and into the rest of his quaint house, currently stuffed to the brim with—

Thorin meets his eyes from across the room, and Thranduil can only hope his eyes burn with the same hatred that Thorin bears for him.

“What the fuck is he doing here?” Thorin snarls, slamming the landline into its cradle.

“I’m going to be arrested,” Bard mutters from Thranduil’s side.

“I am visiting a business associate,” Thranduil says, “and I am here to dissuade you from the foolish venture Legolas has spent most of the morning telling me about.”

“You and what army?” Big And Bald demands, crossing his arms. The rest of the bikers follows his lead in a poor attempt to appear intimidating.

Thranduil holds the record for the largest wild hog ever wrestled in Texas. He is not so easily cowed.

“The hundred trained freelancers I have in my employ,” Thranduil replies, “who are eager to recapture our lost prisoners.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake we were in a national park,” one of the younger men says. Thranduil suspects he is one of Dís’ spawn and does not refute the point.

“I forgot,” Thorin says coldly, “that you and Smaug have an _arrangement_. Where will your freelancers really take us?”

“I have no love for Smaug,” Thranduil hisses, circling the kitchen table so he can use his height to greater effect. “We are neighbors. He happens to be the more powerful one.” He casts his glance upon the company. “And I have my own to worry about. Surely even one as simple as you can empathize.” Before Thorin has a chance to offer his undoubtedly witty rejoinder, Thranduil continues. “This is a suicide mission that will only end in your inglorious and untimely deaths. I have seen it many times before.”
“You are not the first to stand against Smaug,” Bard adds from his position beside the hall.

“Have any of the others had less to lose than us?” Thorin asks, turning more to his company than to Thranduil. “We all agreed to fight — to die, if necessary — to rid ourselves of Smaug.”

“All of you?” Thranduil asks with an imperious arch of his impeccable eyebrows. This seems to have its intended effect, as Thorin’s eyebrows draw together in something akin to concern, had he the higher brain functions necessary for such an emotion.

“Lemmings,” Feren mutters, voicing Thranduil’s sentiments exactly. Of course, this is not what anyone wants to hear, and they all begin screaming at each other like agitated jaybirds. Even Bard, who seems rather reserved, seems on the verge of fighting the nearest member of the company he can reach. Thranduil knows some foul utterances are directed towards him, but he adjusts his old John Deere hat and pretends not to hear. He is far above such pettiness.

Suddenly, one of the bikers plops himself in the middle of the chaos and shouts for Thorin’s attention, phone in hand.

“Quiet, all of you!” Thorin bellows, and that does the trick, since he had been making most of the noise to begin with. “I want them out.” He gestures at Feren and Thranduil.

They see themselves into the living room without argument. Bard appears a moment later and toys with an arrow’s fletching, his eyes fixed on the kitchen. Thranduil himself hears nothing but excited muttering.

“Legolas says you have been hosting them for days,” Thranduil says.

Bard grunts. “Has it been days? It feels like a small eternity in hell.”

From the kitchen, Thorin shouts, to general cheering, “He got it!”

“I’m assuming this isn’t herpes,” Feren mutters, resting a hand on his holster.

While the company — a name just a step lower in pretentiousness than fellowship, in Thranduil’s opinion — raucously celebrates, Thranduil expects Bard to sink even lower into his chair. But his expression has shifted from exasperated to hopeful for some inexplicable reason.

Thranduil realizes with growing horror that he is the only one who does not know what is happening. In his world, it could be a death sentence. Since this conundrum involves not just one, but three Durins, he will be lucky to see his next sunrise.

That is when Legolas and Tauriel choose to reappear, walking into Bard’s house as if they own it. Bard himself slips back into his default grouchiness. It is still endearing.

“What have you found?” Thranduil asks.

“Nothing unusual,” Legolas says, sitting cross-legged on the floor. “Smaug doesn’t seem threatened by anything. I doubt he even knows the Durins are here.”

Thranduil expects Tauriel to give a more detailed report on their impromptu scouting mission, but she remains silent, her body half-turned towards the kitchen. Thranduil had neither made her arrest Azog, nor take a leave of absence from the rangers to pursue the company. He cannot understand her enmity. Or why she is even invested in the fates of a bunch of unruly bikers to begin with.

“Is Azog still imprisoned?” Thranduil prompts.
“Yes, with no bail,” Tauriel says. Her gaze returns to Thranduil. “But we can’t expect him to remain there for long.”

Thranduil gestures Legolas closer. “What is it the company is celebrating?”

“The fourteenth member of their company probably stole something,” Legolas says with a shrug. “I heard he’s a famous art thief that Thorin hired so he could steal something from Smaug.”

“The fourteenth member, Baggins, is the one who broke them all out,” Tauriel supplies. “You know, the one that took you—”

“I am aware,” Thranduil snaps, the back of his head aching as a helpful reminder that the burglar shattered a deer antler on his forehead. It had been a beautiful antler, too. Sixteen point whitetail, autumn of ’97. Legolas’ first hunt.

If the burglar had been small enough to easily slip through the window, he would be small enough for Thranduil to pick up and shake a few times. Seeing Oakenshield’s reaction would be well worth the ensuing wrath.

“What is it?” Tauriel asks. “What did Baggins steal?”

“It is none of our concern,” Thranduil says. Even he does not know, loathe as he is to admit it, although he has his suspicions. He had been deep in Thráin’s council.

“If it’s something that could bring down Smaug, we need to help them,” Tauriel says, stepping forward excitedly. “I know the local law enforcement has been unable to pin any charges on him for years and if we could—”

“Wishful thinking,” Thranduil pronounces. Tauriel’s mouth closes slowly, but the light in her eyes has not been quenched. “A document found in an ex-biker’s office, touted by a bunch of petty criminals? It is pointless to risk our lives — our careers—” She remains unfazed “—on a fool’s hope.”

Tauriel’s head lifts. “That does not mean we should not try. I will be outside.” She turns on her heel and departs. Bard goes back to correcting the arrow’s fletching too intensely to be genuine.

“Feren,” Thranduil says. His lieutenant straightens, his hand hovering hopefully over his handgun. “Ensure she doesn’t drive up to Erebor by herself in a fit of righteous fury.”

“Yes, Mr. Oropherion,” Feren says, wilting.

Now it is just Thranduil, Bard, Legolas, and the occasional biker poking his head through the door to make sure Thranduil is not hiding their burglar in his overalls.

“She’s right,” Legolas blurts out and Thranduil wonders if Thorin deals with this sort of crippling betrayal from his nephews. Probably not, judging by how the blond one mimics him.

“She’s idealistic,” Thranduil says. He cannot simply say no to Legolas and, besides, his son may have a valid point to make … at some point. “Smaug has connections that would have him out of jail faster than we could go into hiding.”

“It’s not just about us,” Legolas insists, gesturing towards Esgaroth proper. “This whole town is suffering. I’ve never been here, but I could feel it just driving around.”

“Crime rate is five times the national average,” Bard adds from his dark corner.
The idea of Smaug’s disappearance — or, even better, demise — is deeply satisfying. Not only does he limit Thranduil’s business for his own purposes, his employees are ruthless. The border between Mirkwood and Esgaroth has been anything but peaceful, and coverups are expensive, especially for shootings. And, most importantly, Thranduil does not want to call any more of his employee’s next of kin to inform them of an “accidental” death.

Those talks are always the hardest.

“We will wait,” Thranduil decides. “I must see what this burglar brings back.”

Legolas looks as if he will argue, but instead he turns away with a scowl and says, “I’ll be with Tauriel.”

“Are they yours?” Bard asks.

Thranduil flinches, having nearly forgotten he was there. “Legolas is. Tauriel is his friend.”

“Hm. Good kids. Good at heart, anyway.” Bard casts a skeptical glance towards the kitchen. “More than I can say for those. The burglar, Bilbo, was the only one who seemed to have any common sense.”

“They’re Durins,” Thranduil says, making a sweeping motion with his hand. He wanders over to the blocked-up fireplace, leaning against it so that Bard might see him in profile. “They cannot be reasoned with.” Bard grunts in agreement. “Will you stand against Smaug?”

“Not openly.” Bard twirls the arrow around in his hand. “Even if he is gone, what will happen to his cronies? The mayor, all our council members, all the sheriffs — they won’t have to answer to anyone but themselves. It would be chaos.”

“This town needs a leader,” Thranduil says, now studying Bard in a different light. From his incredibly diligent reports, Th randuil knows he is friends with nearly everyone in the better part of town. He has the goodwill of Esgaroth’s people for his PI work. And he would cut a sharp figure in a suit. A very sharp figure.

“I’ve told people to lie low for a few days,” Bard continues as if he had not heard Thranduil. “They know to expect trouble, if it comes to that. A few have left for their cabins or their hunting lodges, but for most—” Bard shrugs helplessly “—there is nowhere to go.”

“Mirkwood is a half hour’s drive south,” Thranduil says after a long silence.

Bard raises an eyebrow. Thranduil is quickly learning his body language, and something like this can only mean Bard is shocked to the core. “A loanshark with a heart?”

“A loanshark who wants peace on his borders. It is merely good business.”

Bard nods and Thranduil, although he has shown his sympathetic side, feels relieved, as if he has passed some sort of test.

They sit quietly for awhile longer, Bard fiddling with his arrow and Thranduil tracing the worn woodwork on the mantel. The company is equally silent in the kitchen as they eagerly await their burglar’s return.

But a half hour after Bilbo’s call turns into a full hour. Then two hours, and it is almost nightfall. That’s when the calls begin anew.
Keys rattle against the front door, and Bard leaps from his seat, Thranduil close behind while the entire company surges into the tiny hall. Thranduil’s height allows him to remain in the back, away from the eager bikers.

The door opens, and in walks a slim, blonde girl in a waitress’ uniform. She is understandably surprised at her welcoming party.

“Where’s Bilbo?” she asks.

“That’s what we’re wondering,” one of the bikers says.

“You’ve seen him?” asks the hatted biker.

“Um. Yes. About an hour ago.” The bikers press forward, shouting questions. The girl — her name tag says Sigrid — seems in danger of being trampled, before Bard wades through the crowd and stands between her and the company. He and Thorin exchange a few sharp words as Sigrid digs into her purse, pulling out a small piece of paper and all but shoving it in Thorin’s face.

“Bilbo said to give this to you!” she shouts.

Thorin takes it from her, studying … whatever is written on it. Thranduil cranes his head as much as he can without giving himself another headache, but the writing is illegible from here.

Thorin takes it from her, studying … whatever is written on it. Thranduil cranes his head as much as he can while still appearing disinterested, but the writing is illegible from here.

Thorin doesn’t gasp, but it’s a close thing. His mouth falls open, scanning the paper before nodding, his lips thinning. The company picks up on his shock instantly, quieting and gathering even closer around him.

“Something’s happened to him,” Thorin says. Within moments he’s back at the phone, punching in numbers with the sort of frenzied clumsiness that Thranduil does not associate with him. If Thorin is frightened, Thranduil knows he, Feren, Legolas, and Tauriel are not safe here.

The room is silent, everyone watching as Thorin waits, his body tense with anticipation. Finally, whoever is on the other end picks up, and words come tumbling out. “Bilbo? Bilbo, where the fuck are you?” Thranduil would relish his evident panic if he didn’t have a horrible suspicion as to who had answered. “Are—?”

Thorin whitens, his eyes widening. “Smaug,” Thorin breathes quietly, and the air in the room turns tense, chokingly thick.

“Not in the slightest,” Thorin says in reply to some unheard comment, but his voice is trembling along with his hands. This is fear like Thranduil has never seen in him. Judging by the grave faces of Thorin’s followers, neither have they.

“No,” Thorin gasps. There’s a pause on Thorin’s end, during which Thranduil can only hear the tinny, far away murmur of voices. Then a sickening crunch emanates from the phone, followed by a scream.

Everyone flinches. Thorin almost drops the phone before reasserting his grip, now white-knuckled. “Smaug, I swear to god if you lay another hand on him—“

Thorin screams a curse as the line cuts out. “We’re leaving. Now,” he growls, already pushing past some of the peanut gallery.
One of the old guys speaks up, catching Thorin’s shoulder gently. “Thorin, lad, think about this,” he says gently. “We haven’t got any way to get to him, nor do we have any weapons.”

“So you want me to just leave him? After all of this?” Thorin’s eyes are wild, his face contorted into something between a snarl and a bloodthirsty smile.

“No. None of us want that, but we can’t go rushing to our deaths.”

“Balin, Smaug is going to kill him if we don’t go now,” Thorin growls, fists clenching and unclenching.

“And go to your deaths? I thought you wiser than this, Thorin,” Thranduil drawls, unimpressed but a little frightened. He thought that Thorin would hold up better under pressure, not lose his head over one misfit. Then again, if Smaug is personally torturing this misfit, he must be very important indeed.

Unfortunately, his comment garners him Thorin’s full attention, and he storms right up to Thranduil. “The fuck are you still doing here?”

“My son is still here; therefore, so am I,” Thranduil says, shrugging.

“Leave,” Thorin orders, shoulders squared in his best intimidation stance. .

“This isn’t your home,” he points out, which Thorin doesn’t seem to like one bit.

“This isn’t the goddamn time. I need to… Fuck!” he snarls, and begins to pace like a caged beast. Diving into the lion’s den doesn’t seem like Thorin’s style, and Thranduil wonders why this particular member of his company is so important. Or, rather, why what he risked his life to deliver is so important.

Whatever is on that paper carries the key to either wealth or taking down Smaug, or both, and those options are things Thranduil is very interested in. What better way to enter one’s confidence then to aid them on a suicidal venture?

At least, this is what Thranduil’s practical side tells him. An even larger part of him dives even deeper into despair and helplessness. He well knows what it feels like to lose a loved one to Smaug.

“You need weapons and transportation,” Thranduil says slowly. And he doesn’t know what possesses him to do it, but he continues to say, “I can provide what you need.”

Chapter End Notes

Stay tuned for next time, where we go see what Bilbo is up to!!!

Ha... ha... h... a...

M: I'll give you a hint: HEEEE wakes up in the mornin’.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Bilbo and Smaug have a conversation.

Chapter Notes

The latest tags have been up for a little while, but I feel the need to point them out again. So, chapter not for the faint of heart, I guess. Literally one hundred percent torture. And thoughts of death/suicide.

Also contains Dave Matthews Band. Be warned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The only sound in the car is Bilbo’s own harsh breathing and the faint hum of the engine. Then Smaug turns on the radio and the first beats of *Ants Marching* tear through the quiet in what is probably one of the most surreal moments of Bilbo’s life. To think, the last moments of his life spent listening to Dave Matthews’ weird warbling voice.

*Perhaps better than Smaug’s, though.*

“Who are you really, Mr. Baggins?” Smaug asks, his sibilant voice curling uncomfortably around Bilbo’s ears. “My wargs tell me you are a florist, but you clearly have other designs in Esgaroth.” His voice turns hard. “What are they?”

Bilbo’s foot gently probes the edge of the car, finally digging into the door’s edge. Perhaps he can kick out the window. Or open the latch with his toes. Anything is better than sitting here, *waiting*—Smaug puts a proprietary hand on the small of Bilbo’s back. “There is no escape now, Mr. Baggins.”

The car stops with a crunch of gravel, barely jostling Bilbo. He counts that as a small blessing, then forgets what a blessing is when a hand fists in his hair and hauls him into Erebor. He is rudely pushed in a chair, then handcuffed to it. The silence stretches on; Smaug must be contemplating something. Bilbo merely stares at the hood’s black fabric, not daring to think of what will follow.

“So, Mister Baggins,” Smaug drawls, “you’ve two options. You can tell me what I want to know now or I can force it from you. And I think you’ll find I can be very persuasive. So how do you choose to die?”

Bilbo shakes his head. It’s all he can do.

“You’re making a mistake,” says Smaug. His footsteps retreat. With Bilbo’s sight robbed, his other senses sharpen to compensate. He can hear Smaug rummaging around the kitchen, the rattling of metal implements as loud as fireworks. Smaug returns, dropping several light objects and one heavy one on the glass table.
The descending call tone of Bilbo’s phone is too loud and too sudden and too near, and Bilbo flinches. It is somewhere nearby; he can hear it rumbling along a tabletop.

Smaug’s ring scrapes the glass as he scoops up the phone. “Thorin Oakenshield, I assume? He must not have planned for your little heist to take so long.”

*Don’t answer it,* Bilbo silently pleads. It would be better for everyone if his dead body shows up somewhere, without Smaug taunting Thorin for hours over the phone.

To his surprise, Smaug appears to oblige him. “But I know Oakenshield better than that. He would never let one of his so-called company do the work as he sits idle. Does he even know where you are?”

Bilbo does not reply.

“It is of little consequence. He knows where I am and he will tear apart the mountain sooner or later looking for you.” A chuckle rolls deep in his throat. “I have not spent twenty years chasing my quarry without learning their habits.”

Smaug steps away, and Bilbo tries to track him based on the mental images of the room. About five feet away, he stops. Five feet brings him near the wall, just around the fireplace. The logs shift in the fireplace, and there’s the sharp sound of metal on metal. The sound of a match striking and flaring to life is more confusing than anything. It’s summer, and while the brick of the building keeps it cool, it’s not so cold that a fire is necessary!

He very quickly stops pondering that as the sound of Smaug’s muffled footsteps on the rug grows near. There is the rattling sound again — matches in a box, Bilbo supposes. The other item Smaug brought over is a mystery until it snaps shut around his throat. Dully, Bilbo notes it’s a dog leash, the kind that veterinarians keep in bulk stock; a D-ring sewn to the end of a lead.

Then the panic sets in.

The lead is tight — *too* tight — and Bilbo isn’t even in Erebor anymore; he’s outside the burning warehouse in Kentucky. Blood leaks over his hands as the man breathes his last and Bilbo can see the light in his eyes fade, his glassy gaze painted with the flames from the building. Then the man rises, his features suddenly transformed into the gaunt, twisted features of that thing in the mines and it is dark and Bilbo is scrambling on his hands and knees, but he is never fast enough to escape the rattling breath echoing through the tunnels.

*No, no, no!* Bilbo screams against his own imagination, a weak voice against his gibbering fear. *It’s not real, it’s not real!*

Then Smaug tugs on the leash and any resistance Bilbo has falls away as he is swept away on the tide of his frenzied mind.

Nothing is real again until Smaug lets up on the pressure.

Bilbo sucks in air through the hood’s thick fabric, as terrified from his imaginings as he is from Smaug’s efforts.

Bilbo capitalizes on his temporary lucidity by attempting to anchor himself. The leash, however odious, is real. Where is it from? Was it left over from when the Durins still inhabited Erebor?

Smaug speaks again and Bilbo knows this will be the voice of his nightmares for years to come — should he live that long. “The fourteenth member of the Company of Thorin Oakenshield. I knew of
you long ago, of course. Azog didn’t recognize you when he cornered the company in Kentucky.”

The dog. Bilbo remembers the ancient basset hound that Kili had shown Thorin on the bus. Bilbo was no expert on dogs — his parents had been allergic — but he was sure they did not normally live for twenty years—

“I had hoped you were another Durin — Dáin, perhaps, or one of his children — as I have something of a collection that I wish to expand.”

—unless it was a puppy when Smaug arrived? No. Don’t think of the collection. The dog, think of the dog… This leash seems heavy for a puppy, especially one as small as a basset hound.

“Remind me to show you later. Had I known your identity earlier, I would have featured it on our little tour.”

Had Smaug been flirting with him out of genuine interest or out of a twisted sense of amusement? Bilbo fervently hopes it is the latter, although the thought of returning safely to the company and recounting this ordeal brings a strange smile to his face. What he would not give to hear them encouraging him to become Mata Hari for the cause. They wouldn’t know or care Mata Hari was a double agent, but maybe Ori would try to tell them.

“In any case, it was only a matter of time before Thorin’s gang of thugs came to steal from me, or kill me, or whatever their goal is. I cared not about the specifics, until I heard Gandalf Grey was involved. From his friendship with Thráin, he would know about the safe. And the safe is very interesting to me.”

Thorin would be in a towering fit of rage from both Bilbo’s unannounced disappearance and his status as the “jealous boyfriend”. And as soon as Bilbo got him alone he would yell himself hoarse before dissolving into mush. Amorous mush, if Bilbo was lucky.

“After I left, I spent time searching for your presence in Esgaroth—” Bilbo shudders in revulsion, but Smaug’s voice betrays no indication that he notices “—and I found a credit card belonging to Bilbo Baggins being used in a store in Esgaroth. The still from the security camera looked very familiar to both myself and to my warg associates.”

Jerked out of his reverie, Bilbo momentarily wishes he were unbound so he could slap himself for his stupidity, and then punch Smaug’s face as he enacted his daring escape, possibly stealing one of Smaug’s nice pens in the process. It had worked on Thranduil.

He should have stolen a pen from Smaug and asked for a pen from Elrond. It would certainly have made for an interesting — and valuable — set of mementos.

“Since nothing else is missing from this house, I can only deduce you were after what is in the safe.” Bilbo’s face prickles. He has a nasty feeling Smaug is very close. “What was it?”

The peace of mind Bilbo had managed to regain during Smaug’s monologue flakes away, but he keeps enough to remain silent and avoid shaking like a leaf.

Smaug sighs. “Very well.”

The moment the leash closes around Bilbo’s neck, his sanity flees like the sun before the coming night. There is nothing he can think of that will distract him from this hell — not home, not the company, not even the thought of death’s release. He writhes in his seat, his arms straining against
the handcuffs to instinctively pull the choking thing away. His legs kick out, but his captor stands out of reach. His screams are reduced to desperate, inhuman squeaks.

Just as blackness begins to creep into the edges of his vision, the lead goes slack.

Bilbo sucks air in greedily, his chest expanding with his inhales while each exhale comes a choked sob as tears stream down his face. His nightmares could not have prepared him.

“What was in the safe?” Smaug asks again.

He is met with uneasy silence, but when the hold around Bilbo’s neck begins to tighten again, he cries out. “Wait! Wait. God, please.”

“Well?” asks Smaug, impatient.

This will be his one and only confession, his one and only betrayal. And — God help me — he can’t muster the willpower to delay this reprieve for a time when he will actually need it to keep hold of what remains of his mind. “A map.” Instantly, panic constricts his throat, saving Smaug the trouble.

“As I thought.” The rope tightens, another threat of more to come. “To where?” demands his captor. “Do you have it?” Bilbo shakes his head, and Smaug’s voice drops dangerously low. “Where is it?”

Now a new need drives him, because it’s in Sigrid’s hands, or in Bard’s home. With Bard’s children, with Thorin’s nephews, with Thorin and the company and all that Bilbo has learned to hold dear.

A shake of the head will be the last direct answer Smaug gets from him.

After an hour following that same, tired line of questioning, Smaug grows impatient. He pulls harder and longer, until the blackness sucks Bilbo down like dark water. Sometimes, if he remains silent for too long, he can goad Smaug into granting him a few precious moments of oblivion.

One doesn’t often imagine what they’d do under torture. Bilbo had never truly entertained the thought before, but sometimes a book or movie would give rise to curious musings.

And, when you are safe in your armchair, you can always imagine that you are stronger than you actually are. But resisting is not as easy while a leash digs another groove into your soft throat. At this point, surrender is a luxury, something he never truly appreciated until he lost it.

There is no distracting himself. Between being chased through the endless warrens of his mind and the physical reality of Smaug’s torture, there is nowhere to hide.

Time and time again, Smaug offers an end, if only Bilbo will name his hiding place. The offer is sweet, because anything is better than this, and death really is anything. An end to the suffering, to the guilt, the fear. When Bilbo left his home for this quest, he only thought about returning as a general thing. Now he realizes that he never knew what would come after their arrival. Bilbo would do what he was hired to do, and then what?

Why not disappear?

On the table, Bilbo’s phone rings near-constantly, chiming and buzzing violently before going silent, a reminder of all the people he protects with his continued silence. In that way, he is glad Smaug has left the phone there.

But this time, Smaug realizes Bilbo’s worst fear: he answers the phone.
The speakers crackle, spitting out a flawed version of Thorin’s voice. He sounds panicked, harried, tired. “Bilbo? Bilbo, where the fuck are you? Are—”

Once again, Bilbo’s breathing is cut off. Cries for help, warning shouts, sobs of relief; all are born and die in Bilbo’s throat. Smaug’s voice glitters with glee. “Hello, Mr. Durin. Rather, Oakenshield, now. A bit ostentatious, if you ask me.”

“Smaug,” Thorin breathes, so quiet Bilbo almost can’t hear it over the speakers and the blood pounding through his ears.

“Yes, it is I; I am not easily forgotten. Now, can you imagine the reason for my call? Surely you’ve an idea.”

“Not in the slightest,” says Thorin. He speaks steadily enough, but he is fooling no one, not with the tremor in his voice.

“Did you know that Erebor has a rat infestation? Rather recent, I confess, perhaps due to a lapse in my own mindfulness.” Smaug is met with silence, so he continues. “This one even has a name: Bilbo Baggins.”

“No,” Thorin gasps, and Bilbo tries to muster the breath to scream, but he can’t, not with the redness in his vision flashing to black as his coherent thoughts grow farther and farther apart.

“He was a wonderful guest. Charming, even, until he stole something of mine.” Smaug releases the cord and Bilbo slumps in the seat, gasping for air. His attempts at a warning amount to a ghastly honking sound and, suddenly, the chair tilts under him and he crashes to the floor. His vision goes white with pain and something isn’t right with his shoulder, but, in the grand scheme of things, Bilbo cannot be bothered to care about the specifics.

“And, as you should know,” Smaug snarls, his gloating demeanor gone, “I do not part with what belongs to me. Not a single piece of it.”

His foot comes down hard on Bilbo’s chest, and his collarbone snaps with a horrendous crack, tearing a hoarse shriek from his throat.

“No!” Thorin shouts, voice thinned through the phone. “Bilbo! Smaug, I swear to God if you lay another hand on him—”

“That’s all the time I have for you, as Mr. Baggins and I have business to complete,” Smaug says, then hangs up. “Now, where were we?”

“I traced the call,” an unfamiliar, guttural voice says from the other room. “They’re in Esgaroth still.”

“Dispose of them,” Smaug hisses. “Burn them out of their hole. Even if Durin survives, I want his name so blackened that he can never return to Erebor for fear of his life.”

Smaug’s pronouncement only compounds Bilbo’s torment. Bard is still in Esgaroth, and his children, and two and a half thousand other people. The company has been evading Smaug for twenty years; perhaps they can escape. But thousands cannot vanish like a small band of fourteen — thirteen, now, since Bilbo decided to pull his own vanishing act.

The voice’s owner plods out of the house, slamming the door behind him. The vibrations, jostling Bilbo’s collarbone, grating the jagged ends of bone together. Another miserable squeak whistles through his mangled throat.
All he has worked to keep — lost with a single call. Why couldn’t he protect everyone in Esgaroth? Why hadn’t he destroyed his phone the moment he realized Smaug was after him?

His broken bone wracks him with a pain he’s never known. It only worsens when Smaug forces him back into the chair. This time, Bilbo’s hands are bound to the arms of the chair, the inside of his wrists facing up.

The uncertainty is almost as bad as the torture, and together they muddle his senses. He can hear nothing but the pounding of his heart, his injury throbbing painfully in time with his heartbeats. Before, he could track Smaug’s movements by the sound of his steps, but now primeval instincts speak louder than any footstep.

His hood is ripped off and the chair turns one hundred and eighty degrees to reveal a lovingly arranged line of large, glass jars set against the opposite wall. To Bilbo’s horror, two of them contain heads suspended in yellowish liquid. The first head is of an older man, his last, agonizing moments preserved in his twisted features. The second head cannot have belonged to a man much older than Fíli at his time of death. His long, brown hair floats around him like a cloud, his milky eyes staring accusatorially out at Smaug.

Thrór Durin, presumably, and the little brother Thorin does not speak of. Frerin.

But Bilbo’s horror is only compounded as he sees the four empty jars sitting to the left.

Bilbo dares not open his mouth for fear of vomiting, swallowing thickly and screwing his eyes shut against the sight. Thoughts of Thorin, Fíli, Kíli, and their mother come unbidden to him, so thoroughly distracting that he doesn’t notice that Smaug has moved.

And that is why the first searing touch of the flame-heated fire poker comes as a surprise.

Another half an hour passes. There are now evenly spaced, inch thick lines of red, shiny skin marching up the inside of his arms. And he can watch as inches more of his skin are ruined at Smaug’s bidding.

The hot cast-iron rod touches his skin again, and once again a scream tears itself, unbidden, from his throat. He cannot drift, try as he might to remember the afternoon sun bathing the interior of his shop. The gilded plants give way to dreams of fire. “Thorin,” he chokes pitifully.

“He will not come. You truly have been abandoned,” Smaug says, his smile knowing. “The coward Oakenshield has weighed the value of your life and found it wanting. And that leaves you, thief. You and me.” Iron meets skin, his moans, having no energy left for anything louder. It is a messy sound in the neatness of the room.

In a moment of epiphany, he realizes this is justice.

He had killed a man and gotten away with it, but justice and karma have a funny way of catching up with you. In his case, it means he’ll be tortured until … until what? Until he finally breaks? Until Smaug grows impatient — as he already has begun to — and kills him?

The front door bursts open and Bilbo instinctively looks, dreading it will be Azog dragging Thorin’s bloody body into Erebor to meet a similar fate.

But it is only a single man, with a much lighter build than any of the wargs.

“Fuck,” mutters his eloquent hero.
“Bard!” Bilbo cries, because maybe if he says it that will make it real. Smaug reaches for something in his jacket, but Bard is faster. Before Bilbo’s mind can catch up to what’s happened, Smaug is on the floor with a crossbow bolt through his chest, his blood seeping into the white carpet. Blearily, Bilbo notes that that is going to be hard to clean out.

Then, surging blackness overtakes him for the last time.

Chapter End Notes

Nicely done, Bard.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Thorin and his company, now down to ten, set out to rescue their burglar.

Chapter Notes

We interrupt your regularly scheduled hobbit fanfiction to bring you Mad Max: Fury Road.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

While the company swarms over the supplies Thranduil summons to Bard’s house, Thorin heads inside to make a call.

For the first time, he is glad he didn’t destroy the landline. He dials the number with shaking fingers, cursing and hanging up twice after he makes mistakes. Finally, the phone begins to ring. One ring is too long. Two rings feels like an eternity.

“Pick up,” he mutters, and by the fourth ring all of his nightmares about Bilbo’s fate have transferred onto Dís. She is more prompt than this. Suppose one of Azog’s bastards got to her, or—

“Speak.”

“Dís, it’s me,” Thorin says, his voice coming out in a rush. “I’m in Esgaroth. I need—” He grits his teeth “—help.”

“Really?” she says, drawing the word out. “After telling me this would be easy, and that you would keep the company out of any and all danger, you’ve finally—”

“I’m not in the mood for a lecture,” he snaps.

“Carson a tha thu anns a’ choire theth sin?”

“Bilbo.” He chokes out the name. “Smaug has Bilbo.”

“Why didn’t you just say so?!” she yells. “Will you be in Esgaroth in two days?”

“No. I’ll be at—” He pulls the coordinates out of his pocket. Bilbo’s life for this tiny slip of paper. “—48.29, -114.86.”

Dís dutifully repeats the numbers. “What’s over there?”

“It doesn’t matter now,” Thorin says roughly. “Just be there.”

“You’re going to fight him?” Dís asks after a short pause.
“Of course not.”

“Save your sarcasm for someone who will actually appreciate it. I’m just trying to understand for what’s going on.” She sighs. “Don’t let my son and my d— don’t let my children out of your sight.”

“They’re not going,” Thorin says.

“Oh, good. Your decisions are starting to make sense again,” she says. Background noise starts to filter in; it sounds like she’s at a bar. “I’ll see you in a few days.”

Thorin grunts and is about to hang up when Dís’ voice comes floating back to him.

“Be careful. All of you. I’ve already lost one brother, and I need you — I need you to stick around. You’re a pretty good wingman.”

“Done wasting my time?” Thorin asks dryly.

“No. Get my sons. I want to talk to them.”

“They’re busy.”

“I’m their mother.”

How much time will they lose to Dís’ sentiment? Thorin does not know if he can afford it, but he can take over whatever task they’re doing — and perhaps do it faster. He sets the phone down and heads into Bard’s garage. Kíli is helping Tauriel affix Missouri plates on one of the borrowed trucks, and Fíli is drilling a minigun to the bed of a pickup.

“Dís is on the phone,” Thorin says, and they immediately take off — or, in Kíli’s case, hobble off — to the house.

Thorin paces under the guise of overseeing preparations, though his mind is anywhere but. His mind is abuzz with fears and worries. What if they’re too late? What if Bilbo is already dead?

He finds Ori sitting in the driver’s seat of one of the trucks. “The glass is bulletproof,” he says, tapping one window. “Although it’s not technically glass, it’s more of a transparent pla—”

The only thing he can dignify that with is a grunt. “I’m having my nephews remain here, where it is safe. You’re staying behind as well.”

“Excuse me?” Ori practically shouts in disbelief. “I’m coming, too. I like Bilbo, and I don’t want to have to just sit and hide somewhere. Not when I can do something.”

“I would not risk you, not when my own nephews remain safe.”

“You’re not risking anything. I’m risking myself, and I’m happy to do it,” Ori insists. “I don’t see you asking anyone else if they want to duck out.”

“I am not asking you to stay behind,” Thorin growls. “I am telling you.”

“And I’m telling you that I’m going! I’m not afraid!” Ori says, getting out of the cab. “I’ll give him a taste of lead right up his—“

Thorin runs a hand through his hair, mussing up the neat job he’d done pulling it back. “Fine. Fine. If Dori says you can go, you can go.”
Ori’s face falls. “Oh.”

Content that he’s getting his way, Thorin stalks off to haunt another part of the preparations, finding nowhere for him to be helpful. Dwalin and Tauriel won’t let him inspect the weapons, and Ori glares daggers any time he comes near any of the trucks. They all seem to be conspiring against him, not letting him help anywhere.

Out of nowhere, a hand drops onto his shoulder. Thorin whips around with a startled gasp while Fíli says, “Uncle! It’s just me.”

“If you’ve come to try and convince me, the answer is still no,” Thorin says, crossing his arms over his chest. *I will not lose anyone today.*

“I—no. No, I’ll stay, because if Azog didn’t manage to kill me, Mom would. But I think you should go inside—”

Thorin’s temper flares again. “I will not remain—”

“Hear me out, Uncle.” He puts a hand on Thorin’s shoulder, trying to lead Thorin towards the house. An uncharitable part of Thorin thinks that Fíli’s trying to spare him embarrassment. “You’re upset — give me a moment, please! You’re upset. I can tell, everyone can tell. And no one blames you or anything — maybe Thranduil does, but he’s a jackass— but it would probably be for the best if, you know, you get a little time to… collect yourself.”

“And who will lead in my absence?” Thorin demands. “You?”

Fíli takes a step back, his expression troubled. “I would, if I can.”

Fíli is barely old enough to drink; he’s not old enough to even begin questioning Thorin’s ability to lead, when Thorin has done this his entire life. He led after Azan, he can lead now. He *will* lead now, because everything is his fault and if they fail, he will find some comfort in only having himself to blame.

Thorin bites back the vicious remark that comes to mind. He will not part with Fíli with rash words. Fíli has begun to come into his own over the course of this trip and he deserves more trust than he has received.

Thorin sighs, glancing at Fíli. “You should oversee preparations.”

His nephew smiles, all relief and hesitant pride. Thorin is proud, too, through the murk of his negativity. “We’ll have this all cleaned up before Mom even gets here, and Gimli’ll be pissed because he missed it all.” Fíli pauses. “I learned from the best. We’ll be fine.”

“Be quick about it,” Thorin says as Fíli returns to the garage. Fíli waves an acknowledging hand over his shoulder.

Thorin settles on the stoop, watching the darkness rapidly deepen behind the Lonely Mountain’s bulk. How long would it take him to walk to Erebor? A half hour, maybe more. He could have been there now, if he had started the moment Smaug had hung up.

But cooler heads had prevailed, and here he was, his only consolation being that at least he could possibly shred Smaug’s body into oblivion with a minigun.

Bifur appears to call him back about ten minutes later — *could be a third of the way to Erebor by now* — and Fíli explains how he has parceled out the positions. Nori and Bombur are drivers, with
Balin, Dori, Dwalin, and Thorin in Nori’s truck. Balin is given the role of navigator, while Dori and Dwalin will handle defenses. It’s a solid lineup, and the other truck’s is just as sound.

Bard and Thranduil wish them (grudgingly, on Thranduil’s part) good luck. Thorin thanks Bard rather stiffly for his reluctant hospitality. He doesn’t know what he should say to Thranduil, so he takes the high road and says nothing.

“You stole these from me,” Thranduil reminds them. “I will not have my reputation spoiled by a supposed display of altruism. And I’ll expect reimbursement along with the rest of your debt.” He turns on his heel and disappears through the front door. Bard mumbles something, then follows.

Next come the goodbyes that truly matter. Thorin hugs Fíli and Kíli while Ori’s brothers do the same for him. The moment stretches on, but Thorin refuses to believe that this is the last time he sees them. And then they too are gone, Kíli hobbling into the house supported by his brother.

The rest of the company piles into the trucks, Thorin taking shotgun, Balin in the back seat. Dori and Dwalin take a few moments to prepare, and Thorin ensures that the radios are working.

Finally, the only thing left to do is leave.

They drift like ghosts onto the streets of Esgaroth, a rumbling pair of trucks armed to the teeth. There is no one in sight, even though it is early evening. All the lights are out, and all the doors are shut. The only living things Thorin can see are cats, and even then only their eyes as they flash in the car’s headlights.

“Where is everyone?” Dwalin mutters.

“No traffic on the way to Erebor,” Nori points out as he drives through another red light. “We’ll get there faster.”

They round the corner and the air splits with the deafening din of gunfire. Bullets strike the passenger side window and turns them into a mess of spiderly white cracks. In the back, Thorin hears two loud thumps as Dwalin and Dori throw themselves into the truck bed.

“Four bikes and a truck!” Dori yells.

Dwalin rips the tarp off the minigun and returns fire with a sharp, exhilarated laugh. Thorin takes careful aim with his borrowed shotgun, trying to shoot out the tires, as opposed to … whatever Dwalin’s strategy is.

Nori has floors the gas pedal, speeding around another corner to use the buildings as shelter. Bombur’s truck has disappeared, but their attackers split up and tear off in another direction.

“Get out of town,” Balin says. “We can’t fight in Esgaroth’s streets.”

Another spray of bullets chews into the siding of a nearby house, shattering windows. Nori swerves down a one-way, only to be met head-on by another group of bikers.

“Keep going!” Thorin shouts as Nori starts to slow down.

The bikers drive out of the way just in time, but not before they lose a side mirror and the windshield is fractured.

“I can’t see,” Nori hisses, twisting in his seat to see around one of the bullet holes.
“Left!” Balin shouts, and Nori narrowly misses a cluster of garbage cans. “Keep going down this street.”

“Erebor is the other way,” Thorin snaps. All of his energy is bent on the hope that if they can only make it to Erebor in time, things will work out. They have to.

Balin casts an apologetic look at Thorin. “There’s no helping him if we don’t make it there ourselves.”

As if to punctuate his point, the back windshield shatters, showering Balin with fragments of sharp plastic.

“We’re alright. Thanks for asking,” Dwalin shouts.

“Fine,” Thorin growls, a petty little voice in him remarking that he hates when Balin is right. “Tell Bombur we’ll regroup at the coordinates.”

The radio crackles as Balin relays the message, and Nori gives a jaunty salute and an “aye aye, captain” before following through.

“Turn here,” Balin says. Nori takes the turn hard, their pursuers doing the same behind them. One of the motorcycles spins out as it banks, the tires shot out by Dori.

Nori whoops in excitement, and they are so preoccupied by the sight that they are unprepared for what lies around the next corner.

Nori brakes hard, flinging them all forward as the car screams in displeasure. Dori tumbles through the shattered back window, crashing into Balin. Thorin’s head slams into the dashboard and tiny stars dance before his eyes.

“Shit,” is all Nori can manage before the pursuing truck crashes into their rear.

This time, Thorin arrests his fall with his hands. He yells at Nori to drive, dammit, but the airbag has deployed out of the steering wheel and he can barely see.

Then the passenger side door flings open and he’s yanked out of the truck. Thorin scrambles back on his hands, fumbling for his dropped rifle while two of Smaug’s wargs advance on him.

Thorin chances a glance back and sees a glint of steel in the firelight. He grabs the shotgun, leveling it with the nearest warg, but it’s kicked out of his hand from someone behind him. He rolls under the car, snagging the shotgun as he passes and firing off a shot at someone’s feet.

The pellets spark as they strike the pavement, blinding Thorin to the outcome, but over the crackling fire, he hears the screams.

He comes out on the other side the truck and shoves Nori into the passenger seat, batting down the airbag and turning the wheel all the way around as he steps on the gas, turning into someone’s front yard.

“Dwalin?” he shouts back once they’re a safe distance away.

“Here!” Dwalin shouts back. “Just a little dazed.” He crawls into the cab beside Balin, one hand over a sluggishly bleeding cut on his head. “Ran out of bullets awhile back, or I would have shredded Azog for you.”
“Azog?”

“He was the one that grabbed you.”

Thorin makes a hard turn, heading back to the flaming barricade. If that bastard was anywhere nearby, Thorin would run him to the ground. He might have survived losing an arm, but he would never walk away from severe internal bleeding. And maybe a few shells to the face for good measure.

“Turn around!” Balin orders. “We’ll lose them on the back roads.”

“Not until I murder that son of a bitch,” Thorin snarls, his foot nearly pressed to the floor. The engine roars gamely as the tires chew through acres of front yards. “Frerin—”


“Yet.” Please, please, let him be alive. “This is the only way to Erebor.”

“We can’t get around the barricade,” Balin says. “Unless we get out of the car and walk there, and I hope I don’t need to tell you how reckless that idea is.”

“As if he wouldn’t do the same for us,” Thorin says. The barricade has come back into view, a familiar hulking figure standing before it. “He walked into Smaug’s house, alone. For us.”

“Bilbo’s not the suicidal type,” Dwalin says. “He’d come up with another way.”

“Another way isn’t fast enough.” Thorin’s hands are tight around the steering wheel, fixing it on an unerring course towards Azog’s miserable body.

“Maybe it would be if we thought about it for two seconds,” Dwalin snaps. He reaches forward and twists the steering wheel, forcing Thorin to turn or risk flipping the truck.

“Drive,” Thorin orders coldly as he lets go of the wheel and accelerates. He pops two more shells into the twin barrels of the shotgun and takes careful aim out the window.

Since Dwalin turns sharper than Thorin expects, both shots go wide, one striking a warg in the shoulder, the other disappearing into the flames of the barricade.

But he feels marginally better.

“Can you drive again?” Dwalin grumbles. “We haven’t done this in years. I’d forgotten how fucked up this is.”

Thorin takes the wheel back, trying to focus on the act of driving a four-wheeled vehicle instead of Bilbo’s fate.

So lost in his thoughts is he that he doesn’t even notice they’re out of town until the transition from paved streets to dirt roads jostles them. Their tail has been narrowed to two, but Dwalin and the dirt roads are quickly taking care of that. Thorin takes his turns as suddenly as he dares, flinging their passengers about. They would be more upset if it didn’t work, but one of the motorcyclists has a nasty accident trying to emulate the turn, and Dwalin congratulates him for that.

The next hour of bumbling around on dirt roads is miserable. They’re constantly jostled, and Thorin sinks deeper and deeper into his foul mood. Soon the others learn that it is best to leave him to his brooding. All of his thoughts turn to Bilbo, Bilbo, Bilbo. He devotes very little effort to actually
driving, letting instinct take over for him. If there is any conversation in the truck, he hardly hears it. With every minute that passes, Bilbo's chances of survival fall, and they're up here wasting time in the mountains.

They pass a single truck, which immediately turns around and accelerates to catch up with them.

“It’s Bard,” Nori announces from his position in the backseat.

“Thranduil’s pet,” Thorin snaps.

The truck honks at them and Thorin pulls over with a harsh jerk of the wheel.

Illuminated only by his headlights, Bard climbs out of his truck, looking lost and bewildered. He slowly puts his hands up and stops a few feet away from the truck’s cab.

“I was lucky to find you,” Bard says, wild eyed in the flood of lights.

“What for?” Thorin demands.

Bard sighs. “Bilbo.”

Thorin’s throat constricts. “What of him?”

Balin asks the unbearable question. “Is he alive?”

"Very much so, judging by the way he yelled at your nephews when they hugged him," says Bard.

Immediately, there's yelling, cheering from the company ("Like a cockroach I tell you, never doubted him for a second," says Dwalin.) Thorin is so overcome by a powerful rush of relief he can’t think to say much of anything. He’s alive.

“Is he hurt?” Nori asks.

Bard looks uncomfortable. Thorin remembers the chilling scream through the phone and shudders, suddenly feeling nauseous. “Broken bones, burns, things like that. But he'll be fine once he gets to a hospital. He didn't let me take him. I was inclined to agree, with the way things are now.”

"What of Smaug?" Balin asks nervously.

"Dead," says Bard.

"Dead?" Thorin repeats. He has finally found his voice.

"I killed him. When I went to get Bilbo," he says. He doesn't sound like he believes it himself. “I had intended on using the law to bring him down, but beggars with their houses being burned down around them can’t be choosers.”

There’s a story there, but Thorin has other things on his mind. “Where is he? You said he's with my nephews.”

“He’s safe. Outside of town. No one will think to look for him, so long as he stays there. With no visitors," Bard says pointedly. "No one pays attention to the place, but they will if you're showing up there with all of your guys in tow.

"Will you take me? Just me, and Oin. He was an army doctor. You said Bilbo needs medical attention," Thorin says earnestly.
Bard stares for a moment, thinking this through, before sighing. "Christ. Fine. We leave in the morning."

Chapter End Notes

Thorin doesn't wear a seatbelt and almost gets thrown into a fire! Always wear a seatbelt, kids.

**Translation:**

_Carson a tha thu anns a' choire theth sin?_ - Why are you in such a panic?
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Bilbo recovers in a tentative safety. There are cats.

Chapter Notes

Those of you who are incredibly observant will have noticed that this is a week late. mudkippy and I are both slowing down as we work on the last three chapters, which are turning out to be very involved and/or very long. The final chapter alone should be around 10k. We're also both working! And, perhaps unwisely, we're in the planning stages of our next joint project (look for that late September/early October.) So we'll be doing a chapter every other week for a little while, perhaps until the end. So thanks for being patient!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Things happened between Bard dragging him out of Erebor and his arrival in this house. Bilbo knows this. But for the life of him, he cannot remember what they are. Nor does he particularly want to. It’s a few hours of torment to which he remains blissfully unaware. He’d rather it stay that way.

But this particular torment remains horribly vivid.

“Does it hurt here?” Bain asks, pressing down on Bilbo’s collarbone.

Pain flashes white-hot in the exact place Bain pressed down on. “Yes, dammit,” Bilbo hisses, trying to prevent harsher words from slipping through his lips. Bain’s attempts at doctoring have gathered an audience: Fíli, Kíli, Tilda, and at least twenty cats, and no one is sitting still. Nor are they shutting up.

“Be gentle with our uncle!” Kíli snaps, shooting up from the couch on which they’re all clustered.

“If you think you can do better, be my guest,” Bain retorts. “Since someone won’t go to the hospital.”

“I’ve got a signal!” Ori yells from the other room.

“Look up collarbone injuries!” Bain yells back.

“I can very securely tell you that it’s broken,” Bilbo says, with as much levity as he can manage. His voice is rougher than sandpaper and every breath is torture. A headache pounds between his eyes, and he’s quite sure that the next person to yell will be the last. His patience has run very thin. “As I was witness to a very loud cracking sound.”

Fíli and Kíli wince, and Bilbo hates Smaug all the more. They must have been in the room when Smaug called. And curse Thorin for letting them be there.

The owner of the house, Hilda, sticks her head into the room. She is a woman in her mid-forties with
a knit cap and about four pounds of cat hair on her sweater. Both appear to be permanently stuck to her. “Have you had dinner yet?”

“I’m sure Smaug treated him to a four course meal,” Kíli says.

“Stop it,” Bilbo croaks. He puts on his best polite smile for Hilda’s sake and says, “Haven’t. Would love some.”

“Be careful what you wish for,” Tilda mutters. “There’s always hair in the—”

“I’ll make soup,” Hilda suggests, bustling off to the kitchen.

“—soup,” Tilda finishes.

“You’re lucky I’m treating you,” Bain says, returning to his inspection of Bilbo’s burned arms. “Da would just dump rubbing alcohol on it and call it a day.”

Bard had not been particularly gentle when he popped Bilbo’s arm back into its socket, but, then again, Bilbo doesn’t think there is a gentle way to do that.

“Once he told me to walk off a sprained ankle,” Tilda says.

Bain rounds on his sister. “He didn’t know it was sprained!”

“Hmm, my foot was so swollen that it couldn’t fit into my shoe — must be natural!”

“Pregnant women’s feet swell.”

“Call the Pope. We have a virgin birth at the age of seven.” She gets up and goes into the kitchen. “Maybe I gave birth to you, since you’re still such a big baby.”

“It’s loading!” Ori shouts.

“Leave your sister alone,” Fíli says.

Bain throws his hands in the air. “Why is it always my fault?”

“You’re the oldest,” Kíli says. “It is actually your fault.” Fíli elbows him into a pile of cats, who all scatter and stare balefully at the young Durins.

“Ow,” Bilbo says, and, just like that, all the attention in the room returns to him.

“Hurry up, Ori!” Fíli shouts, his body weight more on the tips of his toes than on the couch. He looks like he’s about to tackle Bain.

“Uhhhh…” There’s a long pause from the other room. “Mr. Baggins, if your neck hurts, you probably have throat cancer. Does your neck hurt?”

“Thorin’s going to murder us,” Fíli mutters.

“Try broken collarbone,” Bain says.

Ori curses viciously, Kíli clapping his hands over Tilda’s ears just in time.

“Lost the signal,” Ori explains cheerfully, wandering in from the hall with Bain’s cellphone held aloft. “Perhaps in here…”
Hilda barges in from the kitchen, brandishing a wood spoon. “No manners, none of you! You think I wouldn’t notice the missing brownie? Right from the middle! Unbelievable.”

Ori squeaks in surprise, curling in on himself. “Don’t tell Dori!”

Kíli grabs his arm and forces the cellphone back into the air.

Tilda returns with a cup of water and sets it down by Bilbo’s hand. He drinks it sloppily, relishing the cold water in his ragged throat.

“This is taking too long,” Fíli growls, in a manner so reminiscent of Thorin that Bilbo does a double take.

“Page loaded.” Kíli tosses the phone to Bain. Bain fumbles it, and the phone falls onto Bilbo’s chest.

The pain explodes like fireworks across his body. His vision goes white and he comes back to his senses paler than a bone and covered in cold sweat.

Everyone is once more looking at him, their eyes wide, like rabbits in the headlights. Not for the first time, Bilbo is blown away by how young they all are.

“’m fine,” Bilbo manages.

“Um … do you have any slings?” Bain asks Hilda.

“I can make one,” she says, bending down to cradle a fat, black hairless cat.

“And some kind of…” He sneaks a look at the phone again “…antiseptic? And burn cream. And pain pills?”

“I think I have some from that foot surgery in November,” she muses. Quite uncharitably, Bilbo wishes Bard had left him to Smaug.

“That’s really alright—” Bilbo tries.

“Nonsense, and I’ll hear no more of it. You’re a guest, just like those Durin spawn, and I’ll keep you safe,” she says. The last of his protests die when a steaming bowl of soup is placed before him moments later.

The pain and panic roiling around his gut has quashed any hunger he should have felt, but everyone still looks so frightened and the least he can do to reassure them is pretend to eat. He swallows a single spoonful and immediately regrets his condition. It’s delicious — chicken noodle that skims on neither — but he just can’t stomach any more of it.

But he lifts another spoonful to his mouth and his minders visibly relax.

“I’ll find the burn cream,” Hilda says, disappearing into another part of the house.

“Did Da tell you what happened?” Tilda asks.

Bilbo drops the spoon, splashing hot soup down his front. “That what happened?”

“We don’t know,” Bain says. “That’s why she asked.”

“The company is safe,” Fíli says, pushing a small calico cat off his lap. “He told us that.”
Bilbo finds the next spoonful of soup much easier to eat.

“But there was a big fire in Esgaroth,” Kíli says. “We were watching them fight it when Bard came back with you.”

“It hasn’t rained for a week,” Bain says. “It’s dry. The fire’s probably unrelated.”

The looks Fíli, Kíli, and Ori trade indicate otherwise, but Bilbo won’t ask them in front of Bain and Tilda.

“Found it,” Hilda says, handing a small tube and a roll of gauze to Bain. “Good luck, doctor.”

Bilbo isn’t sure how he feels about the patient being the only adult supervision for this, but Hilda probably has other things to worry about, if Esgaroth is indeed burning. At least he knows that the company is safe.

He dares another look at his arm and the burns, and immediately studying the lace runner draped over the coffee table is preferable, until he starts seeing his own mutilated skin in the pattern sitting atop the redwood.

Bain pulls a chair beside Bilbo’s. He pulls on a pair of blue rubber dish washing gloves and uncaps the tube. “This might hurt,” he warns, then begins to dab the ointment onto Bilbo’s various burns.

Bilbo sucks a sharp breath in through his teeth at the first touch, then sighs contentedly when the pain resides but the cool ointment lingers. Bain carries out his task with a clinical interest, so Bilbo asks, “Do you want to be a doctor?”

“No,” says Bain, squeezing more burn cream onto his finger. “I want to be a trauma surgeon. You know, when people lose their legs in accidents and stuff. Not because it’s cool, but because I want to help.” He pauses. “But it is kind of cool, like when people’s legs get cut off and it’s spurting blood like an anime and—”

“Good to know,” Bilbo interrupts, hissing in pain at a particularly rough dab.

“Sorry,” Bain says, quickly enough that Bilbo knows he means it.

“Careful,” Ori and Fíli caution.

“I’ll be fine,” Bilbo says. “I really do appreciate this, Bain.”

Bain nearly glows at the praise.

He and the others remain mercifully quiet as Bain finishes. Bilbo closes his eyes and tries to pretend he’ll be able to drift off to sleep soon afterward. When he opens his eyes again, Bain is tying off the gauze, Tilda has vanished, and the three boys are still on the couch, barely keeping their eyes open.

Bain hands him a bottle of Advil and barely manages a “Good night” around his yawn before he, too, leaves.

Bilbo swallows the pills dry and leans back into the comfortable chair.

“You alright?” Ori asks drowsily.

“I’m fine,” he says shortly. He thinks he’s warranted a little bit of irritation. He really is in quite a bit of pain.
The three of them look over Bilbo at each other, and must come to some tacit decision. They don’t take his hint about the crowding. In fact, they do the opposite, pulling up wooden chairs to sit by his side. It might have been endearing at another time. Now, it’s just stifling.

But he lets them fall asleep around him, even kicking a blanket over Ori’s shoulders when he shivers.

Hilda walks through one last time a half hour later, shutting off the lamp on the far side of the room and waving goodnight.

Alone, the darkness presses in on him, choking and tight. He can’t tell which shadows are his imagination and which are cats stirring. The boys’ slow, steady breathing from the dark room is hardly grounding, but it’s enough of a tether that he doesn’t launch into a full blown panic.

He breathes with them, in and out. And in. (And there are hands on his neck in a dark mineshaft, and no one knows he’s there.)

Out. (Sunlight washing through his windows and alighting on the broad-leafed plants.)

In. (Fire and smoke, settling in his lungs, too thick to breathe.)

Out. (Thorin, warm and solid and there.)

He finds sleep, and it's mercifully dreamless.

The intense feeling of being watched jolts him awake. He throws up his arms to defend himself, his eyes not even fully open, only to remember his collarbone a moment too late.

His curses don’t even sound like noises that should come out of a human throat. They frighten the cross-eyed tabby watching him from under the coffee table, but do not deter the black sphynx picking its way across the room towards him.

“No,” Bilbo croaks. “No, no, no—”

The cat, unperturbed, jumps onto his lap and rubs against his collarbone. He doesn’t know if it will hurt more to shove the cat off.

“You rotten beast,” Bilbo snarls. “I swear I’ll make a nice pair of gloves out of your miserable hide, you monstrous—”

Tilda and Bain run into the room and he silences himself. The boys are missing, but they’re the least of his worries.

“You’ve met Ancalagon!” Tilda exclaims, pointing at the evil cat.

“I’d like to un-meet him as soon as possible,” Bilbo says. To his relief, Tilda takes the hint and pushes the cat away.

Bain gives him the promised post foot surgery pills. Bilbo swallows two only because of the expectant eyes on him. Between his arms, his collarbone, and his throat, he is in a haze of pain that feels oddly peaceful. There is comfort in its consistency, instead of the sharp jags of pain from the night before.

But other than that, he feels an aimless irritation, and the watched feeling has not dissipated.

“I found you a sling,” Bain says, proudly handing over a red and brown ombre knitted … something.
“Well, I cut up an old blanket, but Hilda has like five thousand of these and she won’t miss one. Also, I’ll blame it on Tilda if Hilda asks where it went.”

“I’m telling Sigrid,” Tilda says sulkily.

That brings a small smile to Bilbo’s face. He maneuvers himself into the sling, pleased to find the yarn is smooth and soft. If it isn’t cashmere, it’s something close. It alleviates some of the strain on his arm, and immediately some of the dull aches disappear.

The door bursts open on the other side of the house and Bilbo leaps out of his chair, instinctively pushing Bain behind him. The movement sends a burst of pain down his arms and he wobbles, barely catching himself on the table.

“Where’s our uncle?” Fíli demands as he stalks into the room, Kíli and Ori flanking him. Kíli, Bilbo is glad to see, has finally procured a set of crutches.

“He’s alright!” Ori exclaims.

“Thanks to Doctor Bain,” Bilbo says, settling down in the chair.

“And Doctor Tilda!” Tilda exclaims.

“No visitors,” Bain says, flapping his hands at the bikers. “I’m in the middle of surgery.”

Kíli snorts and throws himself down on the couch, nearly squashing Ancalagon. “We’re family.”

“And we deserve it,” Ori says, mournfully picking at his palm. “Hilda’s had us chopping wood since sunrise.”

“Are those splinters?” Bain asks excitedly. “Can I pull them out for you?”

“Have you heard from the company?” Bilbo asks the Durins.

Kíli looks up. “No. But I’m sure they’ll be here soon. Thranduil gave Dwalin a minigun, so I’m sure —”

Fíli clears his throat and jerks his head towards Tilda and Bain. “Company business,” he drawls by way of explanation, a smirk on his lips.

Bilbo is merely trying to process the thought of Dwalin with a minigun. The resulting image is almost as painful as his burns.

“Thranduil gave it to him?” Bilbo asks. “What is he doing here?”

“Protecting investments,” Ori says with air quotes.

“Is Sigrid safe?”

“She came back and told us what happened,” Kíli says. “I saw her at the house yesterday but I’m not sure—”

“What happened to Sigrid?” Tilda demands, her hands on her hips.

“Nothing,” Fíli says quickly.

“Da will probably come back with her,” Bain reasons. He caps the burn cream and wriggles out of
the gloves. “Then we’ll finally get to go home.” He eyes a pile of long-haired grey cats lounging in one corner. “There’s more cat hair than nitrogen in this air.”

“I heard that, young man,” Hilda says as she enters the room. “And, with an attitude like yours, you should reconsider your views on animal companionship.” Ancalagon immediately abandons his seat on the couch to wend around her legs. But she does not acknowledge him, instead scrutinizing the Durins and Ori like cheese with a spot of mold.

“Something wrong?” Fíli asks, slowly rising.

“Half of Esgaroth has been shot up and I’ve heard it was your lot’s doing,” Hilda says sharply.

“Shot up?” Bain and Tilda exclaim, as Kíli says, “Says who?”

“Esgaroth is our home,” Fíli says. “Thorin wouldn’t destroy it.”

“I don’t remember any other bikers coming around,” Hilda says. “Least of all ones with miniguns.”

“Smaug’s people must have had one.”

“They don’t grow on trees, boy.”

“Smaug,” Bilbo says. “He … he told someone to burn the town …” The remainder of the memory brings with it another wave of pain, and he shuts it away. “It’s not the company’s fault.”

“If you say so.” She glances down at Ancalagon, now asleep on her feet. “We’ll have the full story soon enough. Bard’s truck just pulled into the driveway.”

“How…?” Bilbo says as the boys tear off to the door, leaving a trail of audibly disgruntled felines in their wake.

“The cats speak to her,” Tilda says, before she abandons him as well.

“Remember,” Hilda tells him, leaning against the doorframe. “Smaug died at Bard’s hands, not Durin hands.”

“I’m sure the Durins will …” Bilbo trails off. He shouldn’t assume the coordinates lead to wealth. “…uh, help rebuild.”

“We found a way to live without ’em once,” Hilda says. “We can do it again.”

Fíli and Kíli start shouting in the front yard. This wouldn’t be unusual if Ori wasn’t joining in.

Bilbo stands at the commotion. He doesn’t mind as much, because now he can make out Fíli’s cries as Thorin’s name.

A thought occurs to him, a terrible one that takes root quicker than weeds and stronger than any tree. All along, the question of why Thorin would pick him of all people has cropped up, a niggling thing that he couldn’t be rid of. And now, fear that Thorin would never want him, a now broken thing, grew gnarled and twisted within him. The fear consumes him, and not even the joy of reunion can offer any consolation.

Still, Bilbo’s heart flips as he hobbles to the door, emerging onto the porch and into the late morning air.

Bard has been knocked over by Bain and Tilda, who alternate between yelling at him and asking
questions. Exiting Bard's old red pickup is Dwalin, Oin, and Thorin. The three are currently busy fending off overenthusiastic hugs from Fíli, Kíli, and Ori.

It only takes Thorin a moment to notice Bilbo, standing at the edge of the porch and leaning against one of the supports. Thorin doesn’t run to him, but it’s a close thing. He’s grinning like the devil, and as he draws nearer, Bilbo cautions “careful, careful.” Thorin slows, strides shortening to purposeful steps.

“I thought I’d lost you,” Thorin says, taking Bilbo's face in his hands and leaning down to kiss him. “Never again. You’re safe.” He intersperses his words with light, fervent kisses. “I thought you were dead.”

“You should have more faith,” Bilbo chides, returning the kisses just as eagerly. “Are you hurt?” He then asks, pulling away to rest his forehead against Thorin's. “You look hurt.”

He shrugs. “It’s superficial.” Then his eyes darken. “What happened to you?”

“Nothing that the good doctor couldn’t fix,” Bilbo says, forcing a smile. To Bilbo’s relief, Thorin doesn’t press. “But Oin has been with me.”

“Bain wants to be a trauma nurse — oh, don’t make that face. Your nephews have given him a hard time already. He’s taken very good care of me.”

Thorin pulls away, one hand still resting in Bilbo's hair. They share a moment of silent communication, Bilbo wanting Thorin to quit worrying while Thorin has absolutely no intention of doing so. Finally Bilbo acquiesces, tilting his head to expose his neck. It looks awful and he knows it, and even if he didn't, the gasp that Thorin lets out would tell him everything he needs to know.

“Oh, Bilbo…” Thorin breathes, meeting Bilbo's eyes again before looking down quickly. “Shh! None of this is your fault. I could have turned back at any point.”

“But—”

“I’m not giving you another shovel to dig your pit of self-loathing,” Bilbo says, firmly but without heat. “It’s deep enough.”

“I hardly think…” Thorin trails off, defeated. “What did he break?”

“My collarbone,” Bilbo says, daring Thorin to look guilty with a stern glance. “In one place. Bain says it’s clean.”

“And that's all?”

“Yes.”

“Why are your arms wrapped?”

“A few burns,” Bilbo lies. “I fell close to a fire.” There was no point in riling Thorin up after the object of his rage was already dead. “I wouldn’t tell him what was in the safe, or anything else.” His throat hurts, but he feels like he needs to explain. He needs someone to tell him that he was brave, that he did the right thing, that everything had been worth it. “I wanted to, it would have made things so quick, so easy, but—”
“It’s over now,” Thorin interrupts, cupping his face with one hand. “And I swear you’ll never be hurt again.”

“Well that sounds a bit unreasonable. A florist’s job is very hazardous, I’ll have you know,” Bilbo says, staring at Thorin’s lips. He’s quite ready for another kiss.

“Mm, how so?”

“Well, sometimes a bunch of filthy bikers will break into your apartment and clean out your pantry, before whisking you off the other side of the country to steal for them.” Thorin opens his mouth to retort. “Worse, sometimes they’re devilishly handsome—”

“Oh no,” Bard mutters as he pushes past Thorin with too much force to be accidental. “You’re doing nothing in this house.”

Hilda, trailing after Bard, adds, “The cats are always watching.”

“Who said I minded an audience?” Bilbo retorts, then looks to Thorin for his reaction. It’s a pleasant mixture between horror, surprise, and anticipation.

“Good to see you alive,” Dwalin says. He’s about to put a hand on Bilbo’s shoulder before Thorin’s glare stops him.

“Bard said Smaug is dead.”

Bilbo nods.

“Azog is still out there with most of Smaug’s old guard,” Thorin snarls. “And he probably knows where we are by now.”

“If not where Hilda is, and therefore where my kids are,” Bard says, leaning over the porch. Bilbo shields his eyes to look up at him. He looks even more exhausted and grim than the night before, and his crossbow seems glued to his hand. “You’ve brought war to Esgaroth, Thorin Durin.”

“It was unavoidable,” Thorin snaps, wrapping a protective arm around Bilbo and pushing him behind him. Bilbo tries his best to be frustrated by this.

Bard gestures at the wilderness surrounding the cabin. “Twenty acres of state and natural parks on every side of Esgaroth, and it was still unavoidable. At least Thranduil had the common sense to start an evacuation before all hell broke loose.”

“If Thranduil hadn’t held us prisoner, maybe we would have had the strength and mobility to avoid this,” Dwalin growls.

“Thranduil was trying to prevent this,” Bard returns, rounding on Dwalin. “And with good reason, too. Esgaroth is a smoldering wreck. My home.”

This catches Bain and Tilda’s attention. “What happened to our house?” Tilda asks, hands balled up into fists.

“It burned down too, didn’t it?” Bain asks, sounding more defeated than angry. “Is Sigrid okay?”

“Sigrid is fine,” Bard says. “Why don’t you head inside? I’ll be in in a minute.”

“He just wants to swear at them where we can’t hear,” Tilda says, dejected. Still, she follows her brother in.

The door shuts, then the pot boils over.
"The entire fucking town, Durin. What the hell were you thinking?" Bard hisses.

"It wasn't as though we had a choice, Bard," Thorin replies heatedly.

Oin has sat Bilbo down on the porch, slowly unwrapping the gauze from around his arm. So much for Thorin not seeing the burns. "They’ve been going back and forth like this for a while," Oin says. "All three of them. I think they just like yelling."

"Okay, yes, a third of the town. But that’s beyond the point and you know it. No, you shut up. Let me finish. You’re lucky no one died. Gandalf can’t always clean up after you. You’re lucky Thranduil was there," Bard says, continuing some tirade Bilbo had only half paid attention to.

"Fuck Thranduil," says Dwalin.

Bard groans, running a hand through his hair in frustration. "It’s like arguing with a brick wall."

"I could introduce your face to a brick wall," Dwalin suggests.

Thorin's attention has drifted now, settling on Bilbo's arms. His eyes grow wide with realization and find Bilbo's. Now there’s a conversation Bilbo would rather avoid right now.

"Oh, enough already. All of you," Bilbo snaps, cutting Thorin off as he opens his mouth. "I went through quite a bit of trouble, I’d like to see where those coordinates lead to. Bard, I trust you won’t object?"

"You really should stay…" Bard says weakly.

"Do you plan on keeping me here?" Bard looks uncomfortable and does not answer. "That’s what I thought. Oin, would you mind helping me up? I think it’s time I go to see this mountain of yours."

Chapter End Notes

Hah! Cats.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Hello naughty children it's misunderstandings time.

Chapter Notes

**V:** We split this up into two chapters, the next one will be up this Friday or Saturday B)

**M:** Our roommates found the fic and we now type this from our cell in the Shame Basement. Send food.

It is a quieter, grimmer, and angrier group that departs from Hilda’s house in Bard’s old pickup. Bilbo wishes there were some way to prove — or, failing that, convince — Bard of the company’s innocence, but he can think of none. Instead, he sits between Oin and Thorin and stew in tension thick enough to cut with a chainsaw. For a moment, Bilbo envies Fili, Kili, Dwalin, and Ori, who are undoubtedly having a better time riding in the pickup’s bed.

Then the truck goes over another rut and he is thankful for the seatbelt and Oin and Thorin’s steadying presences.

“Quite far out,” Bilbo comments.

Thorin flinches at the sound of his raspy voice and Bilbo tells himself it is just at its suddenness. “Yes.”

“Where’s Esgaroth in relation?”

“Where was Esgaroth,” Bard mutters.

“It wasn’t our fault,” Thorin snaps.

Oin points off to their left, but a stand of aspens block anything Bilbo could have seen.

Bilbo tries to focus on the trees, the beautiful wildflowers, the tiny wisps of silver hair blowing across Thorin’s face — anything but the passenger seat’s occupant: Bard’s crossbow. Every time he looks at it, he can hear the faint puff of the arrow. Then Smaug falls, and Bilbo watches as the cruel lines melt from his face and the dark gleam fade from his eyes.

In the end, Smaug was merely a man afraid to die alone.

“Very far out,” Bilbo says, a little too loudly.

No one so much as glances in his direction and his eyes are invariably dragged back to the tiny flecks of blood on the bow and the memories of that night.
Alone.

After awhile, the sharp jabs from the constant jostling is a welcome relief from a much deeper pain.

Bilbo winces at the sudden deceleration, blinking in alarm at the change.

“We’re here,” Bard says shortly. As Oin helps Bilbo out of the truck, Bard adds, “And stay here. Esgaroth will turn you over to the police if they find out where you are.”

“Tell us if the feds show up,” Dwalin says, jumping down from the truck bed.

“I’m done doing favors for you.” Bard meets Bilbo’s eyes and hesitates. “Sorry I wasn’t there sooner.” Then he climbs back into the pickup and drives away.

“Was that about the burns?” Kili asks.

“What burns?” Thorin demands.

“Fell near a fire,” Bilbo says. He would hold up his arms to demonstrate if it didn't feel as if someone was taking an axe to his chest. “That’s all.”

Thorin grimaces and does not meet his eyes. “This way.”

Bilbo turns away from the road and the trees and beholds a completely different scene: a clearing filled by a copse of young aspens and a collection of ancient timber buildings sitting on a slope. The wood is bleached and worn by the elements, the windows empty of glass. The only signs of life are the aspens fluttering in the cool breeze.

“Are these the coordinates?” Bilbo asks.

“No,” Dwalin says. “This is Dale.”

Kili hesitantly lays a hand on one house. “Mom told us about this place. They used to own this place and she went camping here… It used to be a mining town — until the mine ran dry, anyway.”

“This way,” Thorin orders, and they walk single-file up the hill, following tire tracks where the company must have driven through earlier. The uneven ground bothers his collarbone, but Bilbo discreetly swallows another pain pill to mask the ache.

The crest of the hill overlooks a small, steep-sided valley bisected by a stream flowing from the mountain at its head. The brook is bracketed by trees, but mountain’s sides are bare and rocky, its sheer face broken only by the most resilient of pines. And although it is only noon, the peak has already cast the valley into shadow.

Two unfamiliar pickups — Thranduil’s, presumably, since one has the aforementioned minigun bolted to its bed — are parked off to the left. Both have windows nearly shattered from repeated shots. The doors are missing, appearing to have been pried off, as are several windows and the hoods.

“No one was seriously hurt,” Oin says, reading his look.

Upon hearing Oin’s voice, Bombur and Bifur edge out from behind the vehicles.

“Bilbo!” Bombur shouts, and both he and Bifur drop the truck door held between them. “You’re alive!”
“Not for long if we don’t barricade the tunnel,” Thorin snaps, and Bombur slowly picks up the door, the joy gone from his expression.

Bilbo frowns. While surly on the best of days, Thorin has never spoken to the company so harshly. Bilbo tries not to read too much into it. They are all tired and Thorin seems to be afraid of something.

Bifur meets his eyes and says something in Gaelic, jerking his head at Thorin’s receding back. Oin and Dwalin appear to understand and trade concerned expressions, but neither deign to enlighten Bilbo.

Slowly, because of Bilbo’s injury and heavy door, they pick their way along the side of the valley. Ori and Fili lose patience and rush ahead, with Kili limping close behind, all unheeding of Oin’s warnings. Dwalin sighs and lengthens his strides, not quite catching up with them, but not trying, either. After a moment, Thorin also pushes ahead, leaving Oin, Bilbo, Bifur, and Bombur to find a safe path around the rocks.

Again, Bilbo does not jump to conclusions with Thorin’s behavior, and is somewhat relieved to find him waiting for them.

“They’re inside,” Thorin says, falling in step on Oin’s other side.

Bilbo assumes he means in the cave from which the stream issues, not two hundred yards away. Bilbo is no tactician, but the commanding view it has of the valley has to translate to something strategic.

“Is this the place the coordinates led you to?” Bilbo asks of the otherwise unassuming hole in the cliff.

“It’s a mine,” Thorin says dully, pulling a plastic bag containing much-folded sheet of paper from his back pocket. “This is the deed. I’ve inherited it.”

“What’s in it?” Bilbo asks. While he is genuinely curious as to what his collarbone had been broken for, the more important part is to get Thorin out of his rut. His eyes are glassy, empty, eerily similar to Smaug’s—

Don’t think of it.

“Gold.” Thorin shrugs. Clearly, staggering wealth has ceased to affect him. “The mine is not dry. Grandfather must have found the new vein — we came here every summer and he loved exploring the tunnels with us.”

“That’s great!” Bilbo says. “With Smaug dead, I’m sure—”

“Azog is still out there,” Thorin snaps, and suddenly Bilbo understands the root of his fears. “And Thranduil. And Bard and the people of Esgaroth, no doubt, trying to force us to pay for damage we did not cause.”

They step into the cave mouth and cross the stream on a makeshift bridge of piled stones. From there, the tunnel bisects: one following the stream, and the other following a set of old rails. Fortunately, they take the drier path and almost immediately come across a makeshift barricade of old crates, BEWARE: ABANDONED MINE signs, and a rust-eaten mine cart.

All at once, the shouts start up and half of the company comes through the unfinished side of the barricade to greet him.
“Wait!” Oin shouts, holding out his free hand. “He’s got a broken collarbone and god knows what else.” He sniffs. “It seems he’s escaped a concussion, though.”

“What happened?” Bofur asks, halting at a safe but companionable distance.

“Smaug and I had a friendly chat about flowers,” Bilbo says. “Then Bard rudely interrupted us and here I am, covered in cat hair but very much alive.”

“It’s good to have you back,” Bofur says. “Now we’re properly together again, for however long that may be.”

“Ever the optimist,” Bilbo teases.

“The way I see it, I’ll either be proven right or made pleasantly surprised.”

Bifur says something in Gaelic, and Bombur says, “He says it’s a pity that Bard killed him, because if Smaug were alive, we would—”

Bofur’s suggestion is overridden by the rest of the company, each of them offering a different and more gruesome way to murder the bastard. Bilbo smiles at the better ones, until someone mentions hanging and he has to blink and steady himself against the suddenly blinding light.

“So who’s going to give me a tour?” Bilbo asks loudly.

“I will,” Thorin says, and Bilbo is instantly whisked deeper into the cave as quickly as his injury will let them. The air is cold and heavy, and Bilbo fights the urge to cross his arms over his chest.

Thorin gestures him into a side tunnel, where it is so dark that Bilbo can barely see. He uses his feet and his free hand to probe the jagged walls and floor. He can just sense caverns yawning out of the darkness, ready to consume the unwary.

“Do you think I would let you fall?” Thorin asks, amused. “I know these tunnels better than anyone alive. This one dead ends twenty feet back.”

“I doubt I’d even feel a fall at this point,” Bilbo says. “I didn’t even know I had dislocated by shoulder until Bard told me.”

He cannot see Thorin’s face but he senses that his attempts at jest have fallen flat.

A tremor rocks the cave, and Bilbo instinctively grabs the wall. “Get down!”

“It’s nothing,” Thorin says. His voice is once more toneless, dead. “My grandfather probably told Smaug he had found a mine, but didn’t tell him where it was. Smaug has been mining the area ever since. I thought it was for the iron, but …”

“Well now you have the deed,” Bilbo says. “You’ve won.”

“No, I haven’t,” he snaps. “We have suffered too much for a victory. You — you should never have confronted Smaug on your own. What the fuck were you thinking?”

“I deserved that,” Bilbo allows. “It was a stupid plan. But it doesn’t matter now. I found the coordinates. We’re here, at the mine. I did my part.”

“If you had gone home after the Carrock, I still would have considered your part done,” Thorin says. “You’ve done too much.”
Bilbo shrugs and bites down to prevent the hiss of pain from escaping his throat. “I’ve just done what anyone else in my position would do. Thorin … I’m still alive. I’ll recover.”

“You didn’t fall near a fire, did you?”

“…No.”

Thorin curses and Bilbo feels the air tickle his face as Thorin moves past him. It is surreal, not being able to see or touch Thorin, but knowing he is there. Bilbo surreptitiously swallows a few more ibuprofen, just in case he needs to use his arms.

“I’ll recover,” Bilbo repeats.

“You can’t go to a hospital,” Thorin says immediately. “Azog will have people watching all the local ones, and we can’t drive to one farther away.”

“I know,” Bilbo says. His foot strikes something hard, but it’s just another rock. “Maybe if we asked Thranduil—”

“I will not ask Thranduil for anything,” Thorin snaps.

“He leant you two trucks,” Bilbo points out.

“I ‘stole’ them so he could keep face.” Thorin is pacing again. “And he would never negotiate fairly with us, not when he has numerical superiority. He has already had his lackey lie to us about Azog’s location so we would try to rescue you. Oropherion hoped we would kill Smaug for him; it was what he wanted me to do at Mirkwood.”

“I doubt Tauriel lied,” Bilbo says, leading to her defense. “Azog wouldn’t have proved so hard to find if he didn’t have friends in high places.”

“You loyalty is admirable,” Thorin says. “It always has been. But now, you’re wrong. Thranduil would do anything to settle his debts and he will be looking for a scapegoat for Smaug’s murder.”

“Do you hear yourself?” Bilbo wonders aloud. “Because you’re not acting normally.”

“For once, I am being the reasonable one between us,” Thorin contests, and Bilbo shivers to hear the feverishness of his voice. “You are letting your good nature blind yourself to Oropherion’s intents. The safest place for all of us is this mine.”

Finally, Bilbo loses his temper. “This mine is a death trap. There is only one way in and out, we don’t have much food, and we don’t have any way out.”

“Have faith,” Thorin says, brushing against Bilbo’s good shoulder. “My sister is coming with the rest of the company in two days.”

Bilbo is surprised at this development. For one thing, he hadn’t thought it possible for Thorin to unbend himself far enough to request aid. He worries, though. If Dis is half the things the company has said she is, perhaps having her around would be more hindrance than help.

“We may not outnumber Thranduil or Azog, but we will fight them nonetheless.”

“Or we could try to negotiate with Thranduil, with Bard as an intermediary,” Bilbo suggests.

“I have admired your counsel, Bilbo, but in this I am certain. We are not negotiating with that creature.”
“And if Azog comes before Dis arrives?” Bilbo asks. “What then?”

“Then at least Thranduil won’t sneak into the mortician’s to yank out our fillings in order to fill his account,” Thorin snarls. “I am trying to keep us safe.”

“Yeah, and you’re being totally unreasonably about it!”

“You’ll see,” Thorin says. Bilbo hears his footsteps heading towards the mouth of the tunnel. “When all of this is over, I’ll have been right.”

But by the time Bilbo negotiates his way out of the side cavern, Thorin is not waiting for him. Instead, it is Balin.

“He’s gone into the mine,” Balin explains. “I don’t think you should try to follow him.”

“This doesn’t feel like a victory,” Bilbo comments, his voice ringing hollowly off the walls.

“Azog is still alive,” Balin says. “And you were injured. Thorin blames himself.”

“Of course he does.”

Balin points to the cave mouth, towards a fork that Bilbo had missed earlier. “On the right is an old explosives locker. We’ve put most of our things in there.” Balin gestures into the darkness. “With any luck, Thorin will come back out eventually.”

Bilbo instinctively takes a step to the left, but his fears stop him in his tracks. Shuddering, he turns right. “We’re alone out here.”

“Only for another few days,” Balin says, cheer touching his voice for the first time that afternoon. He guides Bilbo farther to the right. “Let’s get you settled in, shall we?”

“One question,” Bilbo says as he feels around his bottle for another pill. “I don’t suppose there are any painkillers lying around?”
Bilbo wakes immediately from his troubled sleep.

Thorin is calling his name.

The sound echoes hollowly off the walls and he rises from the ground, moving his upper body as little as possible. Half the company lies around him, snoring, twitching, and murmuring in their sleep. They seem not to have heard Thorin’s voice. It is just as well. They would try to stop Bilbo from going.

Thorin calls his name again, and Bilbo grabs a flashlight and quickens his steps, using one hand as a guide along the cave wall. The rock is damp and pleasantly cool under his palm, its smooth surface marred by the tiniest of cuts and pits.

“I’m coming!” Bilbo yells back, his voice bouncing down the shaft before him.

“Hurry!” Thorin shouts. His voice is faint, broken.

Bilbo walks faster, slowed only by his aching collarbone. He quickly glances over his shoulder, making sure he can see the cave mouth behind him. He hopes that Thorin is not down any of the side passages so it will be easy to find his way out, but that dream is dashed the moment he comes to a junction.

“Thorin?!”

“Down here.”

A hoarse whisper Bilbo can barely hear, coming from the left passage. He grimaces, knowing he will no longer be able to see sunlight if he takes this tunnel. But Thorin is down there, and he needs him.

Bilbo takes a deep breath of the cold, moist air and descends.

The path plunges into the heart of the mountain. His nostrils are filled with the smell of wet rock, and the faint plinks! of dripping water ripple through the passageway. The darkness is absolute within seconds and Bilbo flicks on his flashlight, keeping the beam trained on the floor so he does not trip.

He arrives at yet another intersection, but this one is a six-way, with rail tracks running through the
center. Old, shattered lamps bracket the passages, and Bilbo makes note of that for when he returns.

“Thorin?!"

No answer but the drops of water.

“Thorin!”

The mine sends back only Bilbo’s voice, warped by the craggy walls. A droplet of frigid water lands on his neck, worming its way down his spine. He shivers.

“Thorin, where are you?!”

“In here … Bagginses,” a voice purrs from the tunnel behind him. It is not Thorin’s. There is only one creature with that voice and he cannot be here, thousands of miles away.

Bilbo turns slowly, terrified of what he will find. But it is not that creature beneath the Appalachians. It’s Thorin. Bilbo releases the breath he’d been holding and levels the flashlight on his face. “That wasn’t funny! Christ. Everyone’s been worried. I heard…” Bilbo trails off when the flashlight beam hits Thorin’s face. His eyes are enormous, pale, bulging out of their sockets. His clothes hang raggedly off his skeletal body.

“This is all to protect the company,” Thorin says and the voice that comes from his mouth is Gollum’s. “All for the company.”

“This is a dream,” Bilbo whispers. He trembles, the flashlight beam dancing over the passage. By the time it finds Thorin again, he is closer, close enough to touch, and he smells like death.

His hand grabs Bilbo’s throat with crushing force. Bilbo does know if he is Thorin or he is the unnamed man he killed outside the mine with the letter opener. They are the same person, their faces flashing back and forth, forever stuck in a rictus smile.

Somehow, Bilbo twists free, tearing down the passageway, his shoes slipping on the damp stone. Far behind him, he hears the scrabbling of fingernails on stone, the heavy footfalls of his pursuer. He takes tunnel after tunnel, heedless of where he is going, as long as it is away from the nightmare creature.

He splashes across some subterranean creek, takes a right turn, and hits a dead end.

The creature is close behind him. He hears it fording the river not two hundred feet away. Bilbo distantly recalls he just passed one of those four-way intersections again, and so he flicks off the flashlight.

The sounds stop at the junction, then pass on. Bilbo slowly releases the breath he was holding, counts to thirty, and flicks on the flashlight again, only to find the creature waiting for him at the end of the tunnel, blood dripping from its waiting hands and—

“Mr. Baggins!”

Bilbo’s eyes fly open. He is right where he started his dream, in the chamber off the main tunnel. Ori stands over him, wearing a concerned expression. The company, minus a few, slumber around them.

Bilbo twists his chapped lips into something resembling a smile.

Ori shuffles away.
“Sorry,” Bilbo whispers, wincing. His heart still hammers from the dream, as if he actually had been running for miles beneath the earth.

“I brought you some water,” Ori says, offering him a bottle.

Bilbo eagerly gulps it down. It’s so cold that he feels its chill worming its way into him. The frigid mountain spring has been his only relief for the last two days, since the pain pills had run out. Even Bilbo knew better than to ask for more. Nori and Oin had driven to Esgaroth in the only surviving vehicle and had found it crazier than a kicked-over anthill, with half of its buildings in ashes and the other half crawling with state police and FBI. Both of them seemed to be working closely with Thranduil.

Nori’s report had sent Thorin into a seething rage, and no one has seen him for the last day.

Bilbo tries to set the water down, but pain spikes up his arm and, too soon, his hand springs open. The bottle falls, water splashing across the gravel floor. To make things worse, a muffled explosion reverberates through the rock, jarring Bilbo’s collarbone.

When he opens his eyes again, Ori is biting back a smile, which he hastily scrubs from his face. “Sorry, Mr. Baggins. It sounded like you dropping a water bottle triggered the — oh, never mind.”

“Bothering our uncle again?” Fili asks as he and Kili stride into the cave.

Bilbo doesn’t know when he became their uncle, but he isn’t contesting the fact. He’s been acting the part in Thorin’s stead, anyway.

“Leave him alone,” Bilbo chides.

“Has Thorin been here?” Kili asks.

“…No.”

Bofur sits up, his eyes still closed. “Is it time for watch already?”

“Not for another hour,” Ori says, and Bofur collapses back onto his seat cushion.

“He has to come out at some point,” Fili says nervously. “Hungry?”

Bilbo shakes his head. As it is, they have nine energy bars remaining between all of them; there had been survival packs hidden in the seats of Thranduil’s trucks. Dwalin had found them while taking them apart for the barricade. And the pain prevents Bilbo from keeping anything other than water down for long. He should not waste their resources. Not when Azog is still out there and the only proof that the Durins sit on millions of dollars’ worth of gold is perpetually clenched in Thorin’s fist.

Another blast rattles the pebbles at Bilbo’s feet. He adjusts his sling uncomfortably.

“I’d like to sleep at some point,” Fili grumbles at the distant miners. Even with Smaug dead, his mining business hums on, providing a constant background noise that makes steady sleep impossible.

“I’d like to go outside,” Bilbo announces suddenly, thinking that maybe the fresh air would clear his head.

“Sure!” Ori says, scrambling to his side. Bilbo’s left arm is in the sling, so he throws his right arm over Ori’s back and they slowly shamble into the main shaft. Fili and Kili trail behind glumly.

Even seeing the faint half-circle of sunlight banishes the dregs of his nightmare. Oh, he knows it will
not be forever: every sound echoes off the walls, and every voice sounds like Smaug’s, every breath sounds like that of the creature in the mine. Every crunch of gravel sounds like a Warg sneaking down the tunnel to murder all of them.

But the light will suffice for now.

“Stop,” Gloin orders, stepping in front of them.

“It’s just us,” Ori says, annoyed. The close quarters and high stress have worn patience thin.

“I know,” Gloin says, stepping closer. “Thorin says no one is to leave the mine.”

Ori bites his lip, ready to turn back.

“And where is he to stop us?” Kili challenges.

“Even if he isn’t around…” Fili says uneasily.

“Just five minutes,” Bilbo whispers. Even saying that much costs him precious strength, and he sags against Ori. “Just five minutes.” Maybe if he sounds pathetic enough, Gloin will let them out.

“You could be spotted,” Gloin warns.

“The entrance is barricaded,” Ori says.

“We’ll be careful,” Kili promises.

“To the barricade,” Gloin says after a pause. “No further.”

Bilbo nods gratefully and Ori brings him to the shaft mouth. The barricade now stands over his head, and he has to step onto the makeshift stairs to see over it. Beyond, the valley is placid, the grasses swaying gently in the breeze. It is unusually cold, hinting at the coming autumn. To think, it had been early summer when they had first started on this journey.

Bilbo does not know how he had expected this to end. Perhaps a week’s worth of riding in total, ending with a mystery solved and justice delivered, then parting ways with the company forever?

In any case, he had not expected to end up hiding in an old mine with a broken collarbone and itchy burns, and having come to love the motley assortment of bikers who had spilled into his apartment on a sticky June evening.

And having committed murder.

“Where is Thorin?” Bilbo asks, more to distract himself than actual curiosity. He already knows the answer, after all.

“Down there,” Gloin says, waving back the way they came. “I saw him last night, for a moment. Like Bigfoot, just a glimpse.”

“I went looking for him,” Fili says suddenly. “I got lost and he found me.”

“That’s where you were,” Kili says. “What happened?”

“He hauled me back to the surface and went back in without a word,” Fili hisses. “I tried to reason with him but he won’t listen. Thorin’s always listened. Always.”
“Maybe Dis’ arrival will bring him out,” Bilbo suggests. ‘Maybe Dis’ arrival’ is a mantra oft repeated these days.

“Or Azog’s,” Gloin says. “That would wake me up.” He yawns. “What time is it?”

None of them have a watch. Ori guesses based on the sun’s position, and Bilbo tries not to feel guilty. While he has been in and out of a pain-induced fugue, the company has watched the barricade every hour, day and night.

“Well Bofur should be along at any moment,” Gloin says, yawning again. The tell-tale crunch of someone approaching makes them turn. “That’s probably—”

“What are you doing?” Thorin demands, striding towards them. “Get away from there!” He grabs Ori’s shoulder and Bilbo loses his footing on the rocks, crashing to the ground with a shout of pain.

Bilbo opens his eyes to find Thorin recoiling, his bloodshot eyes wide.

“Oh no,” Bilbo hisses, sitting upright. “You’re not running away this time. Not without me.”

“You will return to where it is safe,” Thorin says sharply.

Bilbo scoffs. “Nowhere is safe! Nowhere in this mine, certainly.”

“The mine is the safest place for you,” Thorin says. His shoulder begins to turn and Bilbo makes a grab for his sleeve.

“Talk to me,” Bilbo growls.

“There is nothing to discuss. You’ve been hurt enough for one week, Baggins,” Thorin says. The use of his surname stings. “This is my mine and we follow my decisions.” Thorin points with the old deed now perpetually glued to his hand. “You have done your part. I will do mine.”

“Hiding in the dark is such a great help,” Bilbo says. “Really. If I could, I would be clapping for you.”

“I will get us out of this. If not …” He looks away. “…this … what happened would have been for nothing. Get away from the barrier. It’s there for a reason.”

“For protection, not to hide behind!” Kili shouts.

Thorin jumps, as if he had not seen his nephews. “What do you know? Nothing. Do as I say.”

“You didn’t teach us to blindly follow orders,” Fili says, stepping in front of his brother. “You taught us to think for ourselves, and right now Kili and I think you’re being stupid, hiding instead of trying to find allies or a way out, or—”

“You’re too young to understand,” Thorin snarls. “Your mother can explain it to you when she arrives. We have no allies.”

He turns around and the three of them watch his figure fade into the darkness.

“She’ll agree with us!” Kili yells after him. Fili looks as if he is about to cry.

“You tried,” Gloin offers.

Ori helps Bilbo to his feet.
“I only need one hand to slap him,” Bilbo mutters darkly, taking a step forward to follow him.

“If you could lift your arm above your shoulder,” Ori points out, carefully touching his shoulder to keep him from storming away.

“I’ll kick him.”

“Borrow Dwalin’s iron-toed boots,” Gloin suggests.

“I’ll…” Make a miraculous recovery so he stops blaming himself? I can barely stand without feeling out of breath … But this is hardly a new development, owing to his poor workout routine. He wonders what his doctor will say after this year’s physical. “I’ll catch him the next time he surfaces. Stand between him and the—”

The faint roar of bikes cuts off his last word.

“Get the others,” Gloin says, crouching behind the barrier. “A佐g is here.”

“No he’s not.” Kili jumps up to look over the edge. “I worked on that bike myself.” He turns to grin at them, his excitement palpable. “With Mom.”

Fili’s head jerks up. “Mom?”

“Get down!” Gloin says. He grabs Fili by the collar, but Kili dodges him, standing atop the barricade and waving his arms.

“Mom!” Kili yells. “It’s Mom! Mom, over here!”

Gloin gives in to his curiosity and pokes his head over the wall. “It is!” He laughs, turning to scoop Ori up in a crushing hug. “And never at a better time!”

Finally, Bilbo and Ori are allowed to see for themselves. A line of nine bikes are picking their way up the cwm, single-file and going slowly to avoid obstacles. At their head is an iridescent purple bike, its rider’s face hidden under a yellow, cat-eared helmet.

They pull up a hundred yards from the mine, where the terrain makes riding impossible, and walk their bikes to the top. The head rider looks the barricade up and down, and yells, “Who’s in charge of this circus and how do I join?”

“Climbing?” Gloin suggests.

“Trust Thorin to make me do everything.” The helmet tilts in Bilbo’s direction. “Where is he?”

“Not here,” Kili says quickly. He and his brother are quivering with excitement.

Dis shrugs and gestures to the barricade. The first woman up is possibly the most fierce and beautiful woman Bilbo has ever seen. Gloin hits her with the force of a freight train, pulling her into a rib-cracking hug, which she reciprocates. When they begin to kiss viciously, Bilbo decides that that is Gloin’s wife, about whom he’s heard many, many stories.

The others climb the barricade with less fanfare, save the second to last, a matronly older woman who frowns fiercely at Ori. “How did Dori let you get in this state?”

“Dori’s wife,” Ori says to Bilbo. “They share some interes—”

She yanks him aside to fuss with his hair.
Finally, Dis drops to the other side of their barricade and removes her helmet, shaking out her short brown hair. She and Thorin share a strong resemblance: the same bulky strength, the same brilliant blue eyes, and the same nose. But she has fewer tattoos, her brown hair is curlier — more like that attached to Frerin’s severed head — and she holds herself differently. Whereas Thorin is dignified, Dis seems ready to launch herself at anyone who comes within spitting distance.

At the moment, those unfortunate souls are her sons, who are immediately smashed against her chest. “Fili! Kili!”

“Mom, we’re dying,” Kili gasps.

“You weren’t the one sitting by the phone every hour of the day, waiting to see if your stupid uncle would get you killed or not,” Dis says, pulling them even closer. “I deserve this.”

“Take it out on Uncle Bilbo,” Fili says.

“Don’t be ridiculous. He’s wearing that sling for a reason.” Dis gives them a final squeeze before releasing them. Her smiles seem to be easier to come by than Thorin’s, and she grants a dazzling one to Bilbo. “So you’re the one who fucked my brother.”

“I suppose I am,” Bilbo replies, as proudly as his still-sore throat will let him. “Bilbo Baggins, at your service.” Ever a gentleman, he holds out his better hand.

She takes it but does not shake, grabbing just a little too hard. Not out of malice, he thinks. Just out of habit. “Dis Durin, and damn if it isn’t great to say that out loud. You and I have a lot to talk about. But first—” She glances around “—where is Thorin?”

No one has the chance to answer, as the rest of the company comes hurtling down the tunnel towards the newcomers. Girlfriends, wives, cousins, and even a daughter — Dwalin’s, Bilbo is absolutely shocked to learn — are all greeted with enthusiasm by the company. It’s clear they all know each other well, and Bilbo is left feeling the intruder.

Dis returns to his side after putting Dwalin in an affectionate headlock. “Welcome to the family, Baggins. We’re going to be seeing a lot of you in the future.”

"From what I hear, you’ve seen quite a bit of me already."

“Why my brother decided to go cross country with the biggest group of gossips is a mystery to me,” she says, tutting. “I’d heard your life story twelve separate ways by the time you left the Carrock. My sons love you, by the way.”

It means a lot to him to hear that. More than he had expected, at least. “They’re good kids.”

Dis laughs, a great, loud noise that catches the attention of several people nearby. “They are, but I don’t hear that that often. A handful, those two.”

“So what did they tell you? About me, I mean. I must admit I’m a bit curious,” Bilbo asks. “Afraid, but curious.”

“Later,” she says. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know,” Bilbo says quietly.

Her gaze flickers to the depths of the mine. “I see.” She sighs, and then her usual demeanor returns. “I saw no sign of Azog crossing this way through the mountains, so we should be able to leave that
way safety. We were only followed once; I hope you aren’t friends with the owner of a rusty pickup. Naina shot his tires out after he tried to follow us.”

Bard must be having a hell of a week. “We’re … acquaintances. He sheltered us after we escaped Thranduil.”

“I suppose I owe him some repairs,” Dis says with a shrug. “How did you escape Smaug? That must be a story.”

“He’s dead.”

Dis blinks and licks her lips. “What?”

“Smaug is dead.” Bilbo knows those words should ring from his lips, but they drop heavily instead.

“At last,” she breathes, before turning to the assembled people. “Smaug is dead!”

They cheer.

“Azog is still alive?” Dis asks. Bilbo nods. “And so is Thranduil, it seems…” She rakes a hand through her hair. “Where’s Dwalin’s girl? I’m going to have her take you somewhere. Don’t know where. Far away, though. And safe.”

"Why would I want to do that?’ he asks, falling short of the defiant tone he was looking for. If there is to be a fight, he doesn’t want to be present for it. Sitting in the damp darkness of the mine, the heart-rattling gunshots outside while he waits? Not his cup of tea, no thank you. But the idea of sitting somewhere else, safe and sound and not sure if everyone will survive? That is a different dimension of hell.

"You've done enough for us, Bilbo. I don't know if there's any more you can do. And even if there was, none of us would ask it of you," she says.

She is saying the same things as Thorin, but Bilbo immediately sees who inherited the charisma and who inherited the reason. “I would just be getting in the way here, after all. I can't very well hold a gun like this, can I?”

She smiles, looking very relieved. “You live to be interrogated another day.” She jerks a thumb at the depths of the mine. “I’ll find my brother and then we can go.”

“He doesn’t want to be found,” Fili says.

“I know where he is,” Dis says, unclipping the flashlight from her belt. “Wait here.”

“We’ve got company!” Gloin shouts, “Looks like Thranduil.”

“Thranduil?” Dis sprints to the barricade, shielding her eyes against the sun.

“Looks like it,” says a young woman with a startling resemblance to Dwalin, especially with the rifle slung over her shoulder.

“At last,” Dis whispers, grabbing her helmet. She turns back to the company. “Awful timing, I mean, but you know how well Thranduil and I get along.”

The company laughs.

“How many, Gracie?” Dis asks Dwalin’s daughter.
“Ten or so, in two trucks,” Gracie replies.

Bilbo creeps up another side of the barricade, watching two silver pickups park in the valley below. Even at this distance, Tauriel’s red hair is easy to pick out. Legolas’ hair reflects sunlight better than foil, and Thranduil is under his usual ratty John Deere cap.

Farther back is Bard and, to Bilbo’s surprise, Sigrid.

“Gracie, Gimli, Naina, Dwalin, with me,” Dis commands. “We’re going to pay Thranduil a visit. The rest of you, go over the mountain on foot. Try to reach Esgaroth and we’ll regroup with you there.”

“And Thorin?” Kili asks.

Dis looks from the mine back to Thranduil, indecision written on her face. “I could find him.”

“He’ll deal with Thranduil, and do a better job of it, too.”

Dis scowls and tosses her keys to Kili. “Let me put the fear of God in him first.” She stands on top of the barricade. “Hey! Thranduil!”

Thranduil freezes mid-step with the most deer-in-the-headlights expression Bilbo has ever seen.

“Dis?”

“That’s right, asshole,” Dis shouts back. “It’s me.”

Even a hundred yards out, Thranduil takes a step back when Dis jumps down from the barricade, flanked by her chosen few.

“Is she going to kill them?” Bilbo asks Balin anxiously.

“Only Thranduil, I think,” Balin says, nodding.

“Even if he has … other problems, he still gave us the bikes.”

“And he refused us shelter after Smaug arrived, and spent the next twenty years chasing us to collect on his debt.”

“I can smell you from here!” Dis yells. “God, you fuckin’ stink! When’s the last time you took a shower that wasn’t rain?”

“This is no time for childish rivalries,” Thranduil cautions. “Esgaroth has been leveled at your brother’s hand. I am not here on my behalf, but on theirs. I know better than anyone how slow Durins are to collect on their debts.”

“And I know better than anyone how you cry when I get my hands on you!” Dis says. “Don’t use them as your excuse, you filthy son of a bitch. This is about you. Everything is.”

“You can’t stay in that mountain forever,” Thranduil says. “Surrender now, before starvation makes you an even bigger fool than your brother.”

“I wouldn’t surrender to you if it would save my life!” Dis pulls an enormous silver handgun out of her shoulder holster, leveling it with Thranduil’s forehead. Guns fly up on every side, followed by a ripple of clicks as safeties are turned off and rounds chambered or bolted.

The beginnings of nausea stir in Bilbo’s stomach.
“This will end well,” Balin says, sounding unconvinced.

Thranduil sights down his hunting rifle. “Dis, I’ll—”

And that’s the last thing Bilbo hears before the mountain comes down around him.

Chapter End Notes

V: I think our next update will be in two weeks?

mudkippy and I damn near came to fisticuffs over what to name Dwalin's daughter. (She's a lawyer by day, MMA fighter by night.)

M: I can confirm our next update will be in two weeks. And Dwalin's daughter was named after Gracie Hart, the character that Sandra Bullock plays in Miss Congeniality. When we told you he was a fan, we weren't kidding around.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

The battle for the mine begins, and ends, with a bang.

Chapter Notes

V Sorry for the delay, mudkippy and I had to move back into college and shit, and then she beat me up and I cried.
M Vilelithe made me write this chapter all on my lonesome. Didn’t even give me a leg to stand on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Fili rubs the grit from his eyes and struggles to his feet. Around him, a few pebbles clatter to the ground, but he cannot hear anything else.

“Kili?” he calls into the darkness. He inhales a mouthful of dust and bends over in a coughing fit.
“K-Kili!”

“Fili?”

Someone is shuffling towards him, off to his left. It sounds like Balin. A hand brushes his shoulder, and Fili pats it reassuringly.

“It’s me,” Fili confirms. “What h—?” He descends into a fit of coughing. “What happened?”

“Rockslide, I suspect,” Balin said. From the change in pressure on his shoulder, Fili guesses that Balin is leaning down. “No, the rocks taste like explosives. This was not an accident.”

“Where are the others?” Fili asks, just as his name is called. “I’m over here, with Balin!”

“It’s Dori, with Bilbo, Nori, and Oin,” Dori says from distance away.

“Ow,” Bilbo mutters.

“Begging your pardon, Mr. Baggins, but I thought a few bruises might be better than being crushed under a ton of rock.”

“I am sincerely grateful,” Bilbo says, and sounds it. “Did I hear Fili just now?”

“We’re still many short,” Balin says. Fili begins to guide him in the direction of Bilbo’s voice. “At least we know the others are safe. They were too far away from the mountain.”

“They’re alone with Thranduil,” Fili says.

“Which may have been the point all along,” Gloin’s voice interjects from the right. “Thranduil
triggers the charges after we’ve sent out our best fighters out, separating them from us.”

“Help!” a woman’s voice rings out. It sounds like Dori’s wife. “Help!”

Fili changes course, tugging Balin with him. “Where are you?”

“Here! Bombur’s leg is stuck and Ori’s hurt!”

“Give me a moment,” Oin says. “I’m coming.”


“Tha mi glan,” Bifur says.

Fili pitches forward, catching himself on a warm and very solid mass.

“You’ve found me,” Gloin says. He fumbles for Fili’s hands and lowers them onto what feels like Bombur’s knee.

“Leg’s stuck, is all,” Bombur says. “ Doesn’t feel broken.”

“There are little lights in here,” Ori whispers. Fili glances around the pitch-black cave and concludes that Ori must have hit his head.

“Where’s Kili?” Fili asks, panic beginning to set in. He shuffles away from Bombur. “Kili!”

Nothing but echoes return.

No!

Dis sprints back to the collapsing tunnel, but Dwalin catches her arm.

“Fili!” she howls as the rocks continue to tumble from above. “Kili!”

Their barricade had been almost twenty feet back from the mine’s entrance. Perhaps … perhaps it had been far enough …

It is a full minute before the final stones click down the mountain’s face and Dwalin lets her go.

“Fili!” she yells, climbing onto the enormous pile of boulders. No, no, no, no. “Kili!”

Naina and Gimli step on her other side. “Gloin!”

Not again. Dis tugs a rock free from the pile, sending ten more crashing down in its place. Not again. She grabs another, barely noticing when she almost crushes her fingers. “Kili!”

“There’s nothing we can do,” Gracie says hollowly.

“Stop!” Dwalin warns. “You’ll bring the whole mountain down on us.”

She rounds on him. “I don’t give a damn.” Then her vision tracks farther back, focusing on that blond maggot, who looks unperturbed by the explosion.

Thranduil wanted reparations. Who better to wring them from than a single, grieving Durin? I can’t be the last.
She crosses the distance between them in ten steps, tackling him at the waist and pinning him to the ground before headbutting him.

“It wasn’t me!” Thranduil shouts, raising his arms in a futile attempt to protect himself.

Two strong sets of hands pull her back. She gets her foot under one, tripping him, before punching the other — some redheaded woman — in the gut and crawling back to Thranduil, grabbing his ankle as he attempts to stand. Blood pounds through her head, turning her vision red as she pulls one fist back to punch Thranduil in the jaw. She cannot be the only Durin left. Not again. She will not survive her children and her brother, just as she has survived her youngest brother and their parents and—

“Dis, wait!” Dwalin shouts. “I can hear them! They’re alive!” She looks up as he climbs onto the rock pile and begins to dig.

Dis releases Thranduil’s leg and runs back to the mine entrance, scrambling up the rocks to help Dwalin. Suddenly, she strikes something soft and warm, which immediately latches onto her forearm.

“Who’s grimy hand am I holding?” she asks.

“I’ve got a manicure scheduled for tomorrow,” Bofur says, letting go. “We’re all alive and accounted for, minus one. Two, if you count Thorin.”

“Fili and Kili?”

“Mom!” Fili says.

She laughs, giddy with relief. “I’m right here, Fili.”

“I can’t find Kili.”

“Where did he go?” Dis asks, troubled.

There’s another frantic round of scrabbling as each side makes the hole bigger. She can see Bofur’s eye and nose through the tiny opening, but he is quickly crowded out by Gloin, then Fili, then Dori, then Balin, as if they are all jostling for space.

“No one saw him leave,” Balin says. “But he was behind the barricade when the explosives went off. We would have seen him if he had been in front of us.”

“The explosion might have scared him back into the cave,” Dis says.

“He would have heard us,” Dori points out. “We’ve been hollering for him for a minute now.”

“He’s probably gone to find Thorin,” Dwalin says.

“Shit.” She leans closer to the hole. “Listen to me. This mine is a maze. If he doesn’t find Thorin, he’ll be lost within minutes.” She glances back to Thranduil’s trucks. There are still guns pointed in their direction, and Thranduil is yelling and gesturing at her. “Listen. Don’t go into the mine. We’ll dig you out and then I’ll help you find him.”

“Aye, aye cap’n,” Bofur says.

“Balin, keep this lot in line,” Dis orders, before sliding down the rock pile to face Thranduil again.
“Was this the plan?” she demands, stalking forward, ready for a second round. “Dynamite them inside? Let them starve before taking their gold for yourself?”

“I did not do this,” Thranduil says, patting at the blood trickling down his brow. “I stated my intent earlier. Need I do it again?”

“I can provide an alibi,” a crossbow-wielding man says, stepping forward. His dour expression means that this must be Bard. Kili has a knack for describing people. “We only learned of the coordinates three days ago, when I brought Bilbo from Hilda’s. Since then, I’ve been with Mr. Oropherion night and day. I would have known if he set the charges, or ordered them set.”

“I would have known, too,” a stringy blond kid says. “I’m his kid.”

Dis and Dwalin meet each others’ eyes. Dwalin gives a nearly imperceptible shrug, indicating he believes them. Dis knows she should be embarrassed after beating the hell out of an innocent man, but he is Thranduil and she secretly regrets the chance to finish the job.

“Then who did this?” Dis asks, setting her hands on her hips.

“Azog,” Gracie suggests. “As you suggested earlier, he may have dynamited the entrance to starve out the company.” She frowns at the setting sun. “But he may be planning to camp here in the dark, to surprise the company in the morning.”

“If that’s true, he’ll be coming over that mountain any second,” a blonde girl says.

All of them instinctively twist to face the mountain’s forests slopes. Nothing moves save for the branches bobbing in the wind.

“I’m not leaving,” Dwalin says, crossing his arms. “Not while the company is still inside.”

“I agree.” Dis jerks her head at Thranduil’s motley group. “Go, if you want. But I’m done with running.”

“I’m finished with this thorn in my side,” Thranduil says, voice now smoother. Dis has to admire him: he must hate Azog indeed to team up with her after his beating. “I believe it is to my benefit to help you remove Azog — free of charge, of course. This is more for me than you.”

Gracie’s smile has a dangerous edge. “Would you like me to draw up some documents, Aunt Dis?”

“No, no,” Dis says. “If I get any threats, my .45 and I will pay him a visit. I know where he lives.”

“Just keep it out of Esgaroth,” Bard says with a sigh. “Sigrid, sit in the truck and keep the keys in the ignition.”

“And now?” Thranduil asks.

Dis checks her spare magazine. “We wait.”

Thorin is deep in the tunnels when he hears a faint boom in the distance. He pauses to turn back the way he came. Only the most powerful explosions are loud enough to be heard from this depth.

What are they trying now? Thorin wonders, anger stirring in his bones. Either Thranduil is desperate to collect, or Azog has arrived … or the company is attempting something without his knowledge, even after he told them not to. He is the only one of them who has been here in living memory. He knows how best to defend it, and its inhabitants.
He strides uphill once more, hating the limp in his still-healing leg. If he must be the bad guy to make them listen, then he will be. Their safety comes before his reputation.

Thorin stops at an intersection to catch his breath and slap some feeling back into his injured thigh. He probes the walls with his free hand, absently wondering how long it must have taken to carve with only dynamite and pickaxes. Decades of miners must have labored in the darkness for Thorin’s glorious birthright.

He frowns and looks around again. While he has been navigating on memory and touch alone, he can now see the intersection. But he is too far from the surface for the illumination to be sunlight, if it even is daytime; in this he is absolutely sure.

Thorin creeps back the way he came, watching as the blue glow intensifies. Now he can hear the scuff of footsteps: two, perhaps three, and their flashlights.

He growls in frustration, his hands balling into fists. He came down here to be alone, so they would not try to sway him from defending the mountain, defending the only thing he had to hang on to after the hellish week. He cannot stay on the surface, where his friends doubt him, his family jumps whenever he made eye contact, and Bilbo’s agonized breaths fill the musty air.

Thorin has to do this one thing correctly. Just one thing, if only long enough to pass it on to Fili and Kili. Thorin cannot bring himself to care about the mine for its own sake. It has brought him too much grief.

He is about to berate whoever has come for him before he realizes that the passage does not come from the surface. No, that way leads to the back of the mine, towards the side of the Lonely Mountain facing Esgaroth and Long Lake.

The sounds of running come from a different passage, but the echoes make it impossible for Thorin to pick out which direction.

“Uncle!” Kili shouts. “Uncle Thorin!”

The people with the flashlight stop in their tracks and Thorin’s breath stops in his throat.

“Uncle?” Kili halts in the middle of the passage, shining with sweat. He balances on one leg, rolling his bad ankle as he looks around. Then he squints down the flashlight passage and gives a shout of surprise, yanking his handgun from his belt. Bullets pound into the wall behind him, and chips of rock ricochet off the walls. Kili bolts for cover in a perpendicular passage.

“Kili!” Thorin says, stepping into the light. Yes, he can do this right.

“Thorin!” Kili’s expression is equal parts relief and panic. “Two of them!”

Thorin checks the rounds in his magazine — only four. He thumbs the safety off, chambers a round, and stalks along the side of the intersection, sharply rounding the corner and squeezing off two shots at his attackers, aiming for their flashlights. One drops, and the other twitches as if hit, before shouldering his AK-47. Then Kili steps into the passage, firing once. The man’s head snaps back, and he collapses atop his companion.

Thorin and Kili run forward to investigate. Kili’s headshot killed the second one instantly, and Thorin has shot the first one in the heart.

“Don’t look, Kili,” Thorin says as he kicks their rifles out of reach. It never hurts to be careful.
“Nice to hear you still care,” Kili says hollowly, his eyes transfixed on the dead men.

“Of all the things you can say to me, you cannot say that I don’t care,” Thorin says. “Can’t you see that all of this has been for you?”

“No, I’ve kind of missed that,” Kili snaps, “since you’ve been hiding in the tunnels for the last few days, avoiding everyone.”

Thorin brandishes the deed before Kili’s eyes. “As long as I am down here, the deed is safe from anyone who would want to steal it. This deed is your future, Kili. Your life.”

“My life isn’t at Erebor or in this mine,” Kili retorts. “It’s with you, and Fili, and Mom, and everyone else I love. I don’t give a damn about the mine, and neither does anyone you’ve left on the surface.”

Thorin blinks, his eyes swimming with tears. Kili glares back at him, jaw set stubbornly in opposition.

“You think you’re helping anyone with this? We’ve needed you. And you’ve been gone. Fili has had to try and fill your shoes, and he can’t.”

Thorin swallows, working around the knot in his throat. The weight of the realization crashes over him like a wave. “I’ve made a mistake,” he rasps. “What was I thinking? What have I been doing?” The far off report of gunshots draws their attention for a moment, but Thorin can’t let this go. “Can you forgive me?”

Kili nods, wide and teary eyed, then grips him in a strong embrace, and Thorin knows that all will be well between them.

“I know I wasn’t supposed to look for you,” Kili says, “but Mom showed up and then Thranduil and I was going to find you when I heard an explosion but I wasn’t sure what to do so I kept running.” He sneaks a glance back. “Whatever is going on, we need you.”

Thorin kicks one of the dead men onto his back, revealing the red dragon stitched over his shoulder blade. “Azog.”

Balin gestures for them to stop. “I hear something.”

Dori and Gloin pause in their labors, holding a boulder between them, and the rest of the company freezes in place.

“I don’t hear anything,” Oin grumbles a moment later.

“You’re deaf,” Bofur points out.

“What did you say?”

“What’s going on?” Dwalin asks through the opening.

“Quiet!” Balin orders.

He had thought the faint buzzing noise had been an illusion. Instead, in the sudden silence, it appears to grow louder.

“I hear it,” Fili says slowly.
“Sounds like an engine,” Bofur says. “A small one, like a bike or an ATV.”

“In the mine?” Nori asks.

“It’s wide enough to drive in,” Bilbo says.

“We’re sitting in front of the only entrance,” Gloin says.

“Is it Thranduil, trying to come through the other side of the mountain?” Balin asks.

A moment later, Dis appears. “It’s not him.”

Bilbo stands, his face pale even in the darkness of the cave. “How close is the mine to the surface on the other side of the mountain?”

“A few hundred yards, if I remember correctly,” Balin says.

“And how long does it take to blast through that with dynamite?”

Balin licks his lips apprehensively as he thinks back to the explosions of the last few days. “Two days. Maybe three you’re trying to be stealthy.” He turns to the tiny opening that they’ve managed to make in the last twenty minutes. It’s too small for even Ori to squeeze through and they’ve proceeded by a matter of inches. “We’ll have to run.”

“Where?” Gloin asks. “You heard Dis. This place is a maze.”

“Anywhere,” Balin says, stepping away from the rock pile. “We’ll split up.”

“As if this plan wasn’t stupid enough,” Nori says. “We’re better off sticking together.”

“Then at least we’ll have the comfort of dying together,” Balin snaps. “Azog has too many men for us to face alone, but not enough to sweep the mountain.”

“And someone should warn Thorin and Kili,” Bilbo adds. “I mean … if someone finds them …”

A rifle clatters through the tiny opening, followed by a shotgun and four handguns, and their ammunition.

“All we can spare,” Dis explains. “Bard and I—”

“And me!” Thranduil shouts in the background.

“—are going to circle around the Lonely Mountain and try to catch them on the other end,” she finishes.

“Luck,” Balin says.

“Don’t get yourself killed,” Dwalin says.

“Same, although I don’t think even a bullet could go through that thick skull of yours,” Balin retorts.

Dwalin makes a vague grumbling noise in reply and disappears from view.

“I’ll take Dori, Ori, Nori, and the rest of my girls,” Dori’s wife says. Balin tosses her the rifle, knowing it is her preferred weapon. Nori also takes a handgun.

“Then I’ll stay with Gloin, Oin, Fili, Bilbo, Bifur, Bofur, and Bombur,” Balin says. Fili takes a
handgun, stuffing it into his belt, just as Thorin likes to. One of the remaining handguns goes to Dori, the other to Gloin. Balin takes the shotgun.

They walk to the first junction, Fili and Gloin with Bilbo slung between them, Nori with Ori leaning heavily on his arm. They glance around at each other in the gathering gloom.

“See you in a few days?” Ori offers.

They all laugh weakly at that and, after a moment of reluctant shuffling, head in opposite directions. It is not long before Balin’s company is completely enveloped in gloom. He flicks the flashlight on, illuminating Bilbo’s haggard face.

“Was death by starvation in the contract?” he asks.

Balin thinks about it for a moment. “Dwalin said I hadn’t overlooked anything, but it seems you’ve found the loophole.”

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The tires chew through the soft loam as the pickup climbs the steep mountain slope. It jerks to a halt, its undercarriage likely caught on a rock, and Bard has to floor the gas. With a roar, the truck lurches free.

“I hope you don’t fuck like you drive;” his passenger grumbles. Dís, she said her name was. As far as Bard is concerned, she is Thorin 2.0. “I think I’m going to throw up.”

“Let me drive, Da,” Sigrid says from the backseat. “I’ve always been the better driver.”

“No,” Bard says immediately as he swerves to avoid a stand of pines. “Your mother would never forgive me for forgetting to check the backseat before I drove off.”

A glance in the mirror tells him that Sigrid is still rather smug about her hiding abilities. “Then what’s one more crime?”

Bard’s final passenger, the ranger, Tauriel, says, “Please. I’ve seen enough laws broken in the past week to last me an entire lifetime.”

Dis turns around with a roguish grin. “I hear you’re quite a shot.”

Tauriel is wary. “What do you mean?”

“Well, if you ever tire of Thranduil’s employ, I can think of—”

“No recruiting in my truck,” Bard says loudly. He has no idea what the Durins have been up to in their exile, but it’s nothing Sigrid should know about. To accentuate his point, he accelerates again, jerking the women back in their seats.

“Is there really a path?” Tauriel asks when it is once more safe to speak. “It seems like we’re just driving through the woods.”

“The map said there was a path, and the GPS says I’m still following it,” says Bard through gritted teeth. Darkness has crept up the Lonely Mountain’s slopes, enough to impede his vision, but he doesn’t dare turn on his lights. The half moon is rising in the east, and, by its glow, Bard can avoid most obstacles in his path.

“I wish I had my bike,” Dis moans. “Fili and I worked on the suspension for weeks. You wouldn’t even know we were in the middle of nowhere.”
“I thought it looked rather nice,” Sigrid comments, a little too innocently.

Tauriel checks her watch and says, “We might be there after Thranduil.”

“Then it will be a matter of mopping up the stragglers instead of fighting them,” Dis points out. “Let Thranduil arrive first. He can take the brunt of Azog’s force. God knows enough of us have died.”

“Who is ‘us’?” Bard asks. “The people of Esgaroth? Because plenty of us have died, no thanks to your brother.”

“Azog set the fires.”

“Azog didn’t zip through town firing rifles left and right.” Bard meets her eyes. “There are orphans because of your brother.”

Dis glares at him, but their heat is not directed at him. “We have more important enemies at the moment.”

“At the moment,” Tauriel echoes.

The truck cuts through a tiny field, careening off a rock Bard hadn’t seen.

“Stop!” Dis shouts, and Bard curses her name as he slams on the brakes. Over the sound of the struggling tires, he hears the throaty howl of small, powerful engines.

“Thranduil took a pickup,” Tauriel says, sliding the bolt back on her rifle and rolling down the window.

An ATV whizzes past, carrying two jacketed men. Tauriel’s shot hits something in the engine, as the ATV stalls, jerks to the right, and hits a tree, sending its riders flying into the underbrush.

Dis muscles onto Bard’s lap and crushes his foot under hers as she accelerates forward, shoving Bard’s hands off the wheel so she can take control.

“Go back!” Bard orders. “We can’t drive right into—”

The ground vanishes under the truck’s tires and they fall down the embankment. Bard grabs the sides of his seat, curses hissing from the corners of his mouth.

The truck crashes to the ground at the edge of a grassy knoll filled with ten startled men, floodlights, a few ATVs, and an enormous hole blasted into the side of the mountain.

They stare at each other for a small eternity, Bard over Dis’ shoulder, the men from their positions around them. Then Dis opens the door and all hell breaks loose, with Azog’s men running for their weapons and Dis taking aim from behind the door.

“Sigrid! Get down!” Bard orders, twisting around to tuck his daughter’s head under the window level. Tauriel is already crouching, the barrel of her rifle balanced on the bottom of the rolled-down window.

Shots ring out on Dis’ side, and Bard fumbles for his crossbow. Dis had kicked it under the passenger seat in her rush to take the wheel, and it has caught on something beneath the seat.

A man’s scream cuts through the evening air and Dis laughs, a horrible, desperate sound. A machine gun chatters off to their left and the window over Sigrid’s head turns into a spiderwebbed mess of glass. The bullets punch indents in the metal door. Then Tauriel takes a shot, the sound of her rifle
gentle compared to Dis’ heavy handgun and the shotguns and semiautomatics of Azog’s men. The machine gun stops.

“There are too many!” Bard yells, grabbing Dis’ belt and pulled her back towards the vehicle.

“Fuck you Bowman,” Dis retorts, chopping down at his wrist. He gets a firmer grip and yanks her in, slamming the door behind them. Bullets thump into the window where her head had been moments before.

“It’s not you,” Bard snaps. “I’m just trying to keep as many people protecting my daughter as I can.”

Sigrid, white-faced, pops up from the backseat. “I can take care of myself.”

Bard steps on the gas, but the car refuses to move. He suspects some part of the engine must have been blown away.

“These doors won’t hold forever,” Dis warns, as the passenger door bows inward from the force of a shotgun blast.

“And you’d be dead by now if I hadn’t gotten you inside.”

“So instead of being shot, I get to be shot five minutes later,” Dis says, snapping her magazine back into the handgun. Bard realizes that he was wrong. Dis is not Thorin 2.0, but far worse. Tauriel leans forward and locks the doors as one of Azog’s men reaches for the handle. From the backseat, Sigrid sobs.

Another truck rips into the clearing, already spraying gunfire. The antlers mounted on its top are unmistakable. “Took that asshole long enough,” Dis growls.

Azog’s men scramble for cover as Thranduil’s truck swerves around the clearing, halting parallel to Bard’s truck. Dis and Sigrid open the doors and they dash out, Dis moving to fire shots over the pickup’s bed and Sigrid crawling into the backseat of the other truck.

Thranduil works through the crowd with ease, switching between shooting and using the butt to deal serious physical damage.

Bard, escaping notice from most of the others, rolls under his truck and comes out in front of a man taking aim at Dis. He fires his crossbow from ten yards away, easily sinking the arrow into his chest. Disgusted, Bard kicks the man over and pulls the arrow out, shaking the excess flesh off the arrowhead.

Two of the men make it to the ATVs, taking off down the passage before anyone can stop them.

Feren’s twin Berettas kick for the last time, toppling an especially large biker from his position behind a log. The hum of the floodlights fills the clearing as all of them stare at the tunnel, the darkness yawning before them.

“We can’t just stand here like idiots,” Dwalin says, walking towards the ATVs. He fishes a set of keys out of a dead biker’s jacket and sits atop one of the vehicles, gazing at them expectantly.

“Well?”

His fellow bikers — Dis, Gracie, Gimli, and Naina — divide themselves among the ATVs, while Thranduil studies at the tunnel pensively.

“Could a truck fit down this passage?” he asks no one in particular.
“No,” Dis says.

“Are you telling me that because you don’t want me to come along or because you genuinely believe it?” Thranduil asks.

“Both,” Dwalin snaps.

“Azog might still have men coming up from Esgaroth,” Tauriel points out. “We should guard this end — we know they can’t come in the other way.”

“And if only Dis knows the way through the mountain, then a smaller party would be better,” Legolas reasons from his position atop the pickup’s cab.

“Then we’ll take the ATVs into the Lonely Mountain to finish off Azog’s men and find the company,” Dis says. “You’ll stay here and …” She gestures at the bodies lying around them “… clean up.”

After the bikers disappear into the mountain, Bard hears the faint rumble of approaching engines and readies his crossbow. The night is not over yet.

Bilbo splashes through the frigid mountain stream, slipping on the slick rocks. Fili hauls him upright again, fear obvious in the white rim around his eyes.

“Come on, Bilbo,” Fili pants. “We still have far to go.”

Bilbo looks back, the gloom seemingly covered in a red haze. He can’t feel anything except the pain. It’s omnipresent, many-headed, unbeatable. Just when he feels as if he has it controlled enough to put another step forward, something will happen and he’ll be back to step one again. He feels like a kitten trying not to be swept away by a tsunami.

“Where are the others?” Bilbo asks, his voice slurred.

“Balin and the Ur brothers stayed behind to hold off an ATV. We’re not sure where Oin went, but Gloin split off to find him,” Fili says patiently. Bilbo suspects that this isn’t the first time he’s answered this question.

“Have we found Kili or Thorin yet?”

Fili shakes his head and does not meet his eyes. “No.” Then he grabs Bilbo’s arm and slings it over his shoulder. Bilbo yelps in pain, staggering against Fili’s side. “Come on. We have to keep moving.”

The faint echo of gunshots and engines ring through the tunnel. Bilbo doesn’t know where they come from or how close they are. A large part of him doesn’t care, either. He just wants to lie down, to sleep …

Fili stuffs the flashlight between his teeth and pulls Bilbo forward. “We’re far from the battle. We just have to go farther. Please, Uncle Bilbo. We can do this.”

Bilbo takes a step forward, just for Fili. Then another. He tries to make it three — third time’s the charm — but he overreaches and Fili has to catch him.

This time, Fili lowers him down, then maneuvers Bilbo into a fireman’s carry over his back. Bilbo’s collarbone makes its displeasure known, but he is able to tamp it down to a low moan.
Fili takes a heavy step forward, then moves faster after he accustoms himself to Bilbo’s weight. For Bilbo’s part, he focuses on the butt of the pistol stuck into Fili’s pants, on the shifting beam of light illuminating the way ahead.

Fili stops, then shrinks against the wall. “There are people coming.”

Bilbo nods his head a little to indicate he understood. Even he can hear them now, over the roaring in his ears.

But then he starts to slip and Fili hoists him back onto his shoulders. Bilbo is unable to prevent a groan from escaping his throat.

The people stop walking, and Fili turns and sprints back into the tunnel. Behind them, Bilbo hears shouts, and then gunfire ricocheting off the walls. Fili grunts, stumbles, and then presses on, taking three wild turns before staggering to a halt. He tries to take a step, then falls to his knees and gently deposits Bilbo onto the ground. Bilbo, too exhausted to move, just lies there as Fili curls in on himself.

“You have to keep moving,” Fili whispers. “Someone has to escape.”

Bilbo blearily thinks back to Fili’s wide grin when they first met. Fili, who has been unfailingly steady and optimistic this whole quest. Fili, who just carried him through the mountains.

“Not leaving without you,” Bilbo says.

Fili slaps his hand onto Bilbo’s, covering it in some dark liquid. “That isn’t motor oil.” Fili offers a ghost of a smile as Bilbo’s stomach drops. “I’ll crawl after you, I promise.”

“Not leaving,” Bilbo says, dragging himself closer on his damaged arms.

From here, he can see the dark stain spreading across Fili’s lower abdomen. Fili drags the gun from his belt with shaking fingers, pressing it into Bilbo’s palm. “Do it. Someone has to get out of here.”

“You will. You will.” Bilbo choke back a sob and heaves himself upright. He may very well die down here, alone, and he has somewhat reconciled himself with the fact. He will deserve it, at least, for killing that man in Kentucky. But not Fili. “I’m staying. Won’t get far on my own, anyway.”

Slowly, he draws Fili closer, probing for the entry wound and applying steady pressure through Fili’s ratty sweatshirt.

Fili’s lips twitch into a ghost of a smile. “Tell my brother that there wasn’t anything he could do. He’ll blame himself.” Fili grimaces and his eyes flutter shut. “He always does.”

And that is how Azog finds them minutes later, Bilbo with his arms around Fili, both of them slumped against the damp wall.

Bilbo blinks owlishly as the powerful beam cuts into his eyes. Too late, he reaches for the handgun that Fili had dropped somewhere nearby.

“Where is he?” Azog asks.

“No idea,” Bilbo croaks.

But someone behind Azog answers. “A hundred yards away. Maybe more.”

Azog nods. “He can’t be far if these two are here. We’ll draw him out.”
They stare at each other for a long moment, Bilbo with uncertain bravery and Azog with cool detachment. The biker has a cut over one eye and his left arm hangs limp at his side. Then Fili’s hand whips up and he fires, once, then twice. The person holding the light falls, screaming, and Fili’s arm drops back to his side, his eyes struggling to stay open.

“Do your worst,” Fili spits, and Bilbo wishes he had his defiance.


Azog waits another moment, then hefts his shotgun, presses it against Bilbo’s thigh, and pulls the trigger.

Chapter End Notes

Okay that's it. Bilbo dies, Fili dies, the end.

In other news, mudkippy and I are considering just going all out, editing the rest of the fic, and posting it this weekend. We want it out the door. No promises, though.

Translations:

*Tha mi glan* - I'm OK
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Decisions are made in the aftermath of the battle. Losses are counted and goodbyes are said.

Chapter Notes

New tags! Read 'em, yo.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The gunshot is impossibly loud. Bilbo screams, his hand flying to his leg, clutching at it as hot blood gushes the wound. Fili’s hands join his, and Bilbo clumsily shoves him away. Fili is hurt, and he needs to save him.

Bilbo finds the wet patch on Fili’s shirt and drapes his whole weight on it, moaning in pain as Fili applies similar pressure to his leg.

“No what?” one of Azog’s men asks.

“They’re as good as dead,” says Azog, his words echoing oddly in Bilbo’s head. “Let Thorin find them.”

Shots ring out and Bilbo pushes Fili down, throwing himself over him protectively. Azog swears as his men break, retreating up the passage before him. “Azog!” Dis bellows. Two pairs of footsteps draw near, their approach heralded by gunshots, but by then Azog is gone.

“Mom!” Fili cries. Thorin jumps, swinging the beam of his flashlight around. Bilbo cannot see past its light, but he knows how they must look from the horror in Thorin’s curses.

Dis yanks her shirt over her head, balling it up and pressing it to Fili’s stomach. “Hold this and press hard. Stay awake.” She offers Fili the flashlight. “Can you hold this?” Fili nods and takes it.

With trembling hands, Thorin rips at the fabric around Bilbo’s leg, and whatever he finds makes him suck in a harsh breath. “No, no, no,” he hisses under his breath. Bilbo reaches a comforting hand, but his head swims and he cannot find Thorin’s arm. He’s hardly paying attention to what Thorin’s is doing, just watches him in the bobbing light of the flashlight. Much of his hair has escaped its bun and falls across his face. The shadows cast him in dramatic lighting and he looks very, very beautiful.

Thorin pulls his belt from its loops as black dots crawl across like ants begin to encroach on Bilbo’s vision. There’s a sudden and intense pressure, and Bilbo sees that Thorin has wrapped his belt around Bilbo’s leg. For a moment, all he does is stare at the blood and Thorin’s hands, white-knuckle gripping the tongue and pulling. “That hurts, Thorin,” Bilbo mumbles.

“You’ll be alright,” Thorin rasps. “I’m going to make sure everything is alright. God, I shouldn’t
have brought you, Bilbo. You should have stayed at home, we never should have—”

Bilbo shakes his head, listing slightly to the side. “No,” he protests blearily. “No, it’s fine. ’m glad I came.” His head finds Fili’s shoulder, and he shakes his head one more time before he passes out.

He wakes to the sound of a faint, rhythmic beep.

Bilbo opens his eyes, blinking in confusion at the strong natural light filtering through the window opposite his bed. The clock along the wall reads 12:49, but he has no idea how long he has been asleep.

Exhaustion turns his eyelids to lead, but he fights off his drowsiness with paranoia. Where is he? Where is Fili?

He sits upright, dimly registering the fresh bandages wrapped around his healing arms. He feels a faint tug on his arm as he turns, then glances down at the needle and follows the pick line to the IV bag hanging from the metal rack beside his cot.

His bedside boasts an impressive array of machines, one of which is measuring his heartbeat — the beeping that had awoken him.

*I can’t be in a hospital*, Bilbo realizes with a faint shock. Smaug’s gloating smile aside Azog’s cold one appear before his eyes, and Bilbo grabs the IV, summoning the courage to yank it out of the vein.

“I wouldn’t do that, if I were you,” Gandalf says from his chair beside the door.

Bilbo releases the needle. “Gandalf?”

The old man smiles thinly. “Yes, it is I. Although it’s been so long since we last spoke, I wondered if you had forgotten me.”

“I lost my phone,” Bilbo says, struggling to remember through the haze of narcotics. “In … in a river. Couldn’t remember the number.”

“Then I shall recruit young Mr. Durin to tattoo it onto your wrist, if this is what you get up to when I’m not around!” Gandalf says with feigned affront. “Now lie down. I’m not supposed to be here and if your heart beats too fast, the game will be up.”

Bilbo reluctantly settles back into his cot. It feels like featherdown after weeks of sleeping on floors and in caves. “Where is Fili?”

“A few rooms over,” Gandalf says. “Unlike you, he did not hesitate to tear out his IV and was promptly re-admitted for infection. He will make a full recovery.”

Bilbo has to smile at that, but there is something lurking beneath Gandalf’s expression that makes him worry. “There’s something you’re not telling me. Is someone else…?”

“No,” he says quickly. He frowns and shifts in his seat. “Bilbo, you did not survive your encounter unscathed.”

Horror penetrates the drug-induced carelessness of his mind. Bilbo yanks the thin blanket away from his legs and his breath stops short.

“Oh no,” he hisses, breath hitching in his chest as he borders on panic. “No, no, no.”
His leg stops mid thigh.

He remembers a gunshot, deafening loud. His ears ringing. Burning heat, but not so bad as Smaug’s torture. Then pain. He squeezes his eyes shut and rubs hard, but when he opens them again, nothing has changed. This trip has meant redefining pain again and again, and now he knows the upper bounds of it.

His leg is gone. His breath comes in painful, stuttering gasps as the panic seizes him. It wraps tight fingers around his chest, and around his throat and it squeezes, and now his fear is blind and he can’t do this.

Gandalf puts a hand on his shoulder and Bilbo grabs it with all his strength, transfixed by his severed leg.

“Oh, Bilbo,” Gandalf says, with all the tiredness of his age and all the sympathy in the world.

At length, Bilbo’s head stops spinning and he slowly drags the blanket back over his legs — leg.

“Oh, Bilbo,” Gandalf repeats.

“Why, Gandalf, is that pity?” Bilbo asks, his tone falling just short of wry. He feels strange: giddy and scared and tired all at once.

Gandalf shakes his head. “No, my dear boy. Not unless you want it, that is.” The bed creaks as Gandalf leans on it, pulling an old pipe from his pocket. “I did not imagine things would end this way.”

“You know,” Bilbo mumbles as he watches Gandalf fumble with a match. “I should be very, very angry with you.”

“And at this point I would say I deserve it,” he says. Then he lights his pipe and raises his bushy eyebrows at Bilbo, waiting for him to go on.

“Absolutely livid,” Bilbo continues.

“As you should be.”

“But I’d be willing to part with some of that anger if you would pass me that pipe, whatever may be in it,” Bilbo says. He suspects he knows, but he is in too much pain to care.

“Absolutely not. Your doctor’s wrath is a storm I would not like to weather.” Then Gandalf looks up from his pipe, eyebrows crawling up his forehead much like two caterpillars. “And speaking of storms…”

He gives Bilbo’s shoulder a parting pat, then dashes out the door, leaving only the faint smell of marijuana behind him.

Not a minute later, a nurse enters the room, dressed in sunflower patterned scrubs and a wan smile. She sits at his bedside, introduces herself, and tells him that he had been airlifted to a hospital in Spokane, Washington. Then she begins to describe his injuries and how they were treated, but, before long, nausea crawls up his throat.

“I’ll read it all on the bill,” he says with a laugh, trying to make light of the fact he had just cut her off mid-sentence.
Fortunately, she does not seem bothered. “What can you tell me about the cause of your injuries?”

“I don’t remember anything,” Bilbo lies. He does not want to contradict a preexisting alibi, as he’s sure the company has given him. “Is that normal?”

“Yes,” she says. “It’ll come back to you.”

“There was a boy who came in with me,” Bilbo says. “He’s about twenty, and blond. Do you know anything about him?”

“He’s going to be discharged later today,” the nurse says.

Although he had heard as much from Gandalf, Bilbo feels even greater relief hearing it from her.

“Can you tell me what happened? Or Thorin? Can he come? I need to see him. Can he tell me, he was there.” He is desperate for news of the others, and he doesn’t know if he should trust this doctor. Would Gandalf be there to clean up their legal messes? Instinct tells him to remain quiet and play dumb. Not that he’s inclined to speak much, still numb by this new and staggering loss.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Baggins,” she says. “You’re not well enough for visitors yet. Too much excitement.”

He wasn’t expecting much. Thorin isn’t family, after all. “Perhaps if you told me what he said, it might jog my memory…”

She nods, brow furrowing in pity. “Your friend said you were in a hunting accident.”

“Oh … of course. I always hated those trips. Don’t think they’ll try and drag me along anymore, do you?”

“You broke your collarbone,” the nurse says, making a note on her clipboard. “It was left untreated for days.”

Leave it to the company to only half-ass his story. “I fell out of … Christ, what are those things called? “…a blind.”

“A duck blind? Aren’t those for hunting over water?” she asks.

Bilbo nearly hits himself, before he remembers that he has a concussion. “It was in a tree. We all had a few beers in us and no one thought anything much of it at the time, least of all me.”

“Mr. Baggins, we had to repair the damage with plates and screws,” she says, brow furrowing in concern.

“We were very far out in the woods,” Bilbo says. “Took us forever to get the owner’s permission.”

“There aren’t any legal hunting seasons in August.” She purses her lips and sets her clipboard down. “Mr. Baggins, please tell me the truth.”

“I’m not giving away that spot!” Bilbo yells. He thinks of cold caves, of Thorin, of well-arranged flowers — anything that will make his pulse race. “You just want it for yourself!”

The nurse anxiously eyes his increasing heartbeat and folds. “Of course, Mr. Baggins.” Her eyes drift to his arms. “What happened here?”

Bilbo can’t think of an answer quick enough. “I did it. To myself.”
She frowns, then points to his neck, still mottled with bruises and healing scabs. “And there?”

If he is going to lie, he might as well dive wholeheartedly into it. “Oh, I did that, too.”

The nurse immediately calls for the doctor and the hour ends with Bilbo on suicide watch and a veritable pharmacy of antidepressants flooding his veins. His evening meal is even cut up for him, by the same nurse who initially interviewed him.

Bilbo leans forward to read her ID badge. “Laurel, I’m perfectly capable of doing that myself.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Baggins,” she says, “but I can’t let you.”

“Oh well. I suppose you’re just doing your job,” he says with a sigh. “How was your day, then? I imagine that this job is terribly exciting.”

She fills the rest of his meal with talk of her day, but keeps trying to turn the conversation back to him and positive things in his life. Bilbo lets her, on occasion, and tells her about flowers and his shop in Boston. He does not talk about the last month and a half, and after awhile she stops asking.

Towards the end of their conversation, Bilbo sees something that catches his eye. He pretends to cough, then affects a hoarse, whispery voice. “I have to tell you something.”

As she leans in closer, he says, “These sheets have an astoundingly low thread count.” He steals the pen out of her breast pocket. “It’s like sleeping on sandpaper. I could scrape my skin off if I toss and turn too much.”

“Well, it isn’t the Ritz,” she says, picking up his tray. Bilbo slides the pen behind his pillow under the pretense of scratching one shoulder. “Would you like the lights off when I leave?”

At that moment, exhaustion hits him like a wave and he sags back into his pillows. “Yes, that would be lovely.”

But once he is alone, his hand slides down his thigh. He feels the thick bandages and goes farther, hoping beyond hope that soon his fingers will slide onto skin again, and then his knee and his shin and his ankle, and over the large mole on his calf, and down to his stubby toes and flat sole. He can feel it so acutely that it takes him a moment to realize his hand is hovering over thin air.

He stuffs his fist into his mouth and screams, finally surrendering to the panic and grief and incomprehension that had been building on the edge of his mind like a thundercloud. Nothing could have prepared him for this, nothing, and he is alone, in the dark, without so much as a nurse to call.

Perhaps now he has suffered enough to atone for murder. Perhaps now, living as a grotesque sideshow with his stump and his burn scars — too uniform to be accidental — and the bruise on his neck that never seems to go away, he can be forgiven.

More than ever, he wishes he had never left Boston. He thinks back to his flower shop, colored gold by the light filtering through the thick glass panes. He thinks of the tiny succulents lined up against the glass, the arrangements sitting in their porcelain vases atop the mosaic-topped tables, the gentle hiss of the sprinkler system, and the lush perfumes of dozens of different blooms. There, he had been safe.

*And unloved, and without purpose!* a small part of him cries, but it is a small part and quickly silenced by his grief.
Try though he might, he can’t convince anyone to let him cut his own food. Every meal comes with a slew of antidepressants, which he palms and hides in a napkin pinned between his bed frame and the wall. Flushing them down the toilet doesn’t feel right, so he thinks that he’ll give them to Nori. Somehow that makes him feel better, but maybe it’s just the reminder that the company is out there somewhere, even if he’s still isolated.

The nurses are all lovely people, though he’s as quick to befriend them as he is to get on their “difficult patient” list. Sometimes they tolerate him, and agree to pass on a billet-doux or two to the mysterious boyfriend he prattles on about.

A week later, after an awkward physical, an even more difficult call to his primary physician, and a psych battery, he’s taken off suicide watch.

“…and you should be clear to start physical therapy within the week,” his doctor concludes. “You’re recovering very well.”

Bilbo’s polite smile freezes on his face. He keeps his maimed leg under the blankets, where he can pretend not to see it. Sometimes — like now — he even manages to forget why he is really here. “I’m … glad to hear that.”

“Great,” the doctor says, oblivious. “I’ll check in with you tomorrow.”

The moment the doctor is out the door, Bilbo takes two of his hidden pills. His nurse returns to find him pleasantly groggy, and after that the nurses prepare to treat him for a suspected narcotics addiction. All discussion of physical therapy ceases.

However, his doctors must have taken pity on him, since he receives a visitor the next day.

Bilbo hears Kili long before he sees him. His heavy stomp carries easily over the wheeled carts and the nurses’ sneakers.

“You say he’s your… uncle?” he hears one of the nurses — Luke — say.

Kili groans in annoyance. “Close enough. My brother’s nurse said I can visit.”


“Nothing, Mr. Bag — Bilbo. You have a visitor. Your nephew.”


Luke, bless his heart, sputters and ushers Kili into the room, then swiftly excuses himself. Kili beams at Bilbo as he take his seat, and from the way he shifts in his seat, Bilbo knows that he is trying to stop himself from tackling him.

“You better than when I last saw you,” Kili says. Kili himself still has stitches over a cut on his face, and his hands are covered in dozens of tiny scabs and burns. He’s smiling, though, and familiar, and that’s all that Bilbo needs.

“I won’t break if you touch me, you know.”
“Oh, Uncle Bilbo!” he cries and leaps forward to hug him. And if it’s a bit too rough and leaves his various wounds throbbing, then Kili doesn’t need to know.

Once he has sat down again, Kili says, “Oh man, uncle is going to be so angry that I was around when the doctor said you could get visitors.”

“He was here?” Bilbo asks, even though he suspected as much.

“Someone always is,” Kili says. “Balin, Gloin, and Dori are helping me and Fili process the deed in Spokane, and everyone else is in Esgaroth. Thranduil gave our bikes back and they commute sometimes.” Kili scowls. “Thranduil dented my gas tank — accidentally, he says.”

Bilbo readily recalls how dinged up everyone’s bikes had been, but refrains from contradicting him. “Hmm, I’m sure.”

“We were all worried about you,” Kili says, suddenly serious. “The doctor was saying you were on, like, suicide watch and stuff. Balin and I kept having to stop Thorin from marching off and trying to yell his way through. If I tell him you’re getting visitors, he’ll probably be here soon… He spends most of his time in Montana, sorting things out.”

“How is that going?”

“Well, Thranduil’s deep pockets and Gandalf’s string pulling kept the worst of the feds off our backs,” Kili says, propping his dirty boots up on Bilbo’s bedside. “And with Azog dead, people were able to come forward and tell the FBI about all of the shitty stuff he and Smaug were—”

Bilbo feels his left leg twitch, even though it’s not there. “Azog’s dead? Really dead?”

“Well, yeah.” Kili leans forward. “You didn’t know?”

“No!” That probably should have worried him more, but he thought that if there was truly dire news, Gandalf would have told him.

“Well. Mom killed Azog, because he got you and Fili. Thorin was busy making sure you didn’t, y’know, die. And after that the rest of them got chased away and you and Fili got airlifted here and … yeah.” Kili shrugs, as if all of this is yesterday’s news. For him, it is; Bilbo lost four days during his blackout, on top of the week and a half he can remember. “So now — you won’t believe it — Thorin and Bard and Thranduil are all working together to get Esgaroth cleaned up. No one is happy about it and it’s hilarious to watch. We’ve auctioned off the bikes out of the warehouse, and that made a shit ton of money, and now we’re clearing out all of Smaug’s stuff out of Esgaroth and Erebor.” After a pause, Kili blurs, “I’m sorry about your leg.

Unsure of how to respond, Bilbo squeezes Kili’s hand. “Thanks,” he says uncomfortably. “I want more news. Good news, if there is any.”

“I went on a date with Tauriel!” Kili exclaims, then he sighs dreamily. “And Sigrid’s visited Fili a few times. He always complains about me and Tauriel, but he’s mooning over her, so he’s a huge hypocrite.”

“Bard’s daughter? Isn’t she a little … young?” Bilbo asks.

Kili scratches his head. “I don’t know. She can legally buy knives by herself, but Bard isn’t supposed to know that.” He points at Bilbo, almost accusatorial. “Hey, you’re way younger than Thorin.”
“That’s different,” Bilbo says defensively. “We’re older. I might have a thing or two to say about you and Tauriel as well.”

“Whatever, Uncle Bilbo. So why are you on suicide watch?”

“I told them that I did this,” he says, gesturing first to his arms, then his neck. “I thought that the real story might be … alarming.”

Kili makes a pleased grunt. “Good. Sorry you have to lie for us, though.”

“Nonsense,” Bilbo says, shaking his head. “I’ve done worse.”

Kili seems not to register the catch in his voice and continues to talk about anything he can publicly discuss. Bilbo, glad for the company, does not dissuade him, even though he is biting back yawns an hour before Laurel asks Kili to leave. Kili promises that Thorin and the rest will be coming to visit as soon as possible, and then ducks out.

As promised, Thorin comes a few days later.

He shows up not long after his therapist leaves. Visits from Craig always leave Bilbo irritated and, on occasion, likely to lose his temper with the next person to talk to him. He usually needs a few hours of silence (if not solitude) to get over the funk he’s left in.

So when Laurel opens the door, absolutely beaming, Bilbo frowns deeply and musters up his patience. "Mr. Baggins," she sing-songs. "You have another visitor, if you're in the mood.

"I'm afraid that depends on who it is. Is it Craig? Because I'm likely to kill the man if he steps in here again," he says, only half joking. He is tired of explaining how much he loves being alive and affirming that his relations will indeed help him overcome his crippling addiction to hydrocodone.

"No, though he'll be heartbroken to hear you don't enjoy your time together," she says. Then she turns to talk to someone over her shoulder and giggles. "A man named Thorin is here to see you.”

Bilbo immediately sits up, a hand automatically flying to his head to make sure his hair isn't in absolute disarray.

"Should I send him in?" she teases.

"Please," Bilbo replies. Laurel backs out of the door and Thorin takes her place, shuffling in shyly. He holds a bouquet of flowers behind his back, as if the sight of them might offend Bilbo.

"Bilbo," he breathes, as though Bilbo is so fragile that even an errant breath will send him blowing away. "It's so good to see you.”

"Oh, please, I look like shit and I know it. Come in. Take a seat," Bilbo says, patting the side of his bed.

There are two chairs lined up against the wall, well out of the way of the various monitors hooked up to him, and Thorin sits in one of them. "Not over there. The nurses probably won't check in on me for a while, since the therapist just left. They won't know you were up here." He pats the bed again, then realizes he’s been making assumptions. "If you want to.”

Apparently, Thorin wants to, or at least his guilt pushes him to sit carefully on the bed beside Bilbo. He awkwardly offers him the flowers and Bilbo takes them, examining the bunch with a critical eye.
“Daylilies for passion, dill for lust, valerian for readiness, and lupine for imagination.” Bilbo gives him a once-over. “Is there a message here?”

Thorin blushed and swipes the flowers back. “We’re in a hospital.”

“An audience. Even better.” Bilbo tries to pry the flowers from Thorin’s fist. “I really do want them. They’re beautiful. Thank you.”

“I’ve missed you,” Thorin says as he opens his hand. “While talking with Bard and Thranduil. I feel like you’d do it so much better. Bard always liked you more than all of us combined.”

“Only when talking to them?” Bilbo wonders.

Thorin rolls his eyes as he settles back, his shoulder just brushing against Bilbo’s. Bilbo can feel the roughness of his calluses as Thorin traces idle circles on the back of his hand. “All the time. But especially when Thranduil is going on and on about how much we’ve inconvenienced him. Which is often.”

Bilbo sighs, resting his head against Thorin’s shoulder. “I’d say that I’m sorry I can’t help, but I’m not. I never did apologize for giving him that nasty bump on his head.”

“I wouldn’t wish those two on anyone. I swear they’re fucking in the bathroom when they’re going on their ‘coffee runs,’” says Thorin, gesticulating to reflect his irritation, though he’s careful not to smack Bilbo.

Grinning, Bilbo leans up to whisper to Thorin exactly what he’d do if he was present for their meetings. Thorin turns bright red, and that just about settles it for Bilbo.

He’s going to fuck Thorin’s big gay ass.

Fifteen minutes later, the nurses come rushing in to a very guilty Bilbo and Thorin. “It was the heart monitor, wasn’t it?” Bilbo asks sheepishly, yanking a blanket over his lap while Thorin slowly eases himself off of the floor.

“It was,” Laurel says as the nurses behind her relax. “Mr. Durin, I’m going to—“

“Ask me to leave, I understand,” Thorin says, zipping up his fly. Before he turns away, Bilbo snatches his arm and tugs him down for a kiss.

“That was better!” Bilbo calls as Thorin leaves, half to praise him and half to see the looks on the nurses’ faces. It garners a spectacular reaction and makes the sharp reprimands he receives from his nurses worth it.

Over the next few days, the rest of the company filters in and out, bringing him flowers in every color and shape, and, in Dwalin’s case, still trailing dirt and roots. They tell him their stories about what happened in the mine that night, and what they are still doing in Esgaroth to pick up. Some of them visit for other reasons; Balin and Gracie use it as a convenient excuse to escape the lawyers and catch up on sleep.

Bilbo had hoped seeing them would banish his homesickness, but even when he is with Thorin, he feels it skulking in the back of his mind. In some ways, seeing everyone and hearing how they are keeping busy or celebrating their good fortune exacerbates his loneliness. They have accomplished what they set out to do, while Bilbo has done nothing except tag along and acquire some beautiful pens. His part in their story is over.
He does not share these feelings with Craig — mostly because Bilbo enjoys being able to cut his own food — or any of the company. When Thorin stops by again, Bilbo steels himself for the discussion, but he quickly discards it in favor of hearing about Fili and Sigrid’s attempts at flirting under Bard’s nose.

Four days after Thorin’s first visit, Bilbo snaps and calls Gandalf.

Less than fifteen minutes later, Gandalf appears, looking almost respectable in a t-shirt and blazer. “Are you ready to leave?”

“I … yes.” Bilbo glares at him. “How did you know?”

“As it so happens, I was already on my way for this same task,” Gandalf says. “Your grandmother has ordered transfer papers for you. You are being moved back to Boston.”

Bilbo groans and drops his head into his hands. “She didn’t.” That probably hasn’t been helping his reputation with the hospital staff.

“She has arranged the entire trip, if you’d like to go. Naturally, you’d be accompanied during your travels.”

“By?”

As though the answer was obvious, he says, “Why, me of course. We’re traveling by plane this time, so I doubt the trip will be half as eventful.”

“Give me a moment,” Bilbo says.

Gandalf nods. “The plane leaves in three hours from Spokane International, so do not take too long. I would hate to be late.”

“But you’re never late,” Bilbo points out. “You arrive ‘precisely when you mean to’.”

“Not on public transportation,” Gandalf says. “I’ll find the charge nurse.”

He leaves, and Bilbo pulls out his stolen pen and scribbles a note for the company on the back of a card Bofur had gotten him. He emphasizes that this is not forever and even leaves his home phone at the bottom. As an afterthought, he adds:

\textit{If any of you are passing by, tea is at 4:00 and there’s plenty of it. You are welcome anytime… Don’t bother knocking.}

Chapter End Notes

\textbf{V:} Here we are! Coming up on the end! OHHHHH MAN.

\textbf{M:} Bilbo's grandmother paid for his hospital visit. Otherwise, he would have had to
*slides on glasses* \textit{foot} the bill.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

And he lived happily ever after to the end of his days.

Chapter Notes

V: This is it! This is the end. This chapter was originally 8k words before funsucking mudkippy took away my toys.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It is ten minutes after opening and Bilbo is still struggling to finish his tasks. Even though the vase is light, he grips it in both hands as he limps over to the table. Physical therapy can only do so much, and Bilbo is still uncomfortable walking without a cane.

He sets the vase down, fixes any stems or blossoms jostled during their transport, and stares out the window. The early December sky is cloudy, promising more snow than the faint dusting Boston has received thus far. And although the day is still young, the scant sunlight already slants across the old wood floor.

One bar of light falls across an enormous St. Bernard, who is watching Bilbo with mild concern. Bilbo takes the few halting steps needed to bridge the gap between them and pets her just above her red service vest. These days, she is Bilbo’s shadow, and they’ve come to a grudging agreement to let each other do their jobs: the dog watches him and he watches the shop, and then they’re both comfortable.

They raise their heads in tandem as the bell above the door rings. Bilbo isn’t used to having customers so soon after opening, but he won’t begrudge anyone their early start. “Welcome to—Dwalin?”

“At your service,” he rumbles, picking his way through the shop with all of the care of a bull in a china shop. Bilbo tracks his progress with an eagle eye, but the joy at seeing a friend smothers most of his unease.

Dwalin is dressed in the same ragged clothes, but he walks as if a weight has been removed from his shoulders. It suits him, and Bilbo wonders if Thorin looks the same.

“What brings you? Surely not flowers,” he says.

Dwalin grunts a negative and pokes around a shelf of mosses had Bilbo lovingly arranged not fifteen minutes ago. “I’m here to deliver your birthday-slash-Christmas present from Fíli and Kíli, a letter from Dís, and then I’m heading up to her place for Christmas.”

He turns towards Bilbo, and Bilbo realizes his hand will collide directly with the first row of mosses. Almost without thinking, he surges forward, hooks the handle of his cane around Dwalin’s ankle,
and pulls. Dwalin crashes to the ground, tugging the cane from Bilbo’s grip. A few delicately situated pots rattle at the impact, but nothing falls.

“Sicc ‘em, Thistle,” Bilbo commands, watching with great pleasure as the dog lumbers over to Dwalin and slathers his face with saliva. “Be careful with my merchandise.”

“Aye, aye,” Dwalin cries, laughing. “Understood! Just call the beast off!”

“Thistle, come!” Bilbo says, pairing it with a short whistle. She picks up the cane as she goes, trotting around the counter to offer it to Bilbo. “I didn’t want you to get the goddamn— oh, fine. Good girl.”

“So, what’s this present they sent you all this way for?” Bilbo asks.

Dwalin finishes wiping his face off with his shirt, gets to his feet, and fishes a crumpled envelope and a small box from his pocket. “This is from the boys—” He puts the box on the counter “—and this —” the letter “—is from Dís. Merry Christmas.”

The box’s wrapping paper features Santa himself in unforgottably skimpy outfits. Dwalin snickers, no doubt pleased by the choice, so Bilbo points to a be-thonged Santa and remarks, “Looks a bit like Balin, doesn’t it?”

Dwalin is still choking on nothing as Bilbo unwraps the gift. It contains a silky leather box, which in turn holds a chunky black and gold watch. He pulls the watch free with a sharp intake of breath. “Why in God’s name would they feel the need to get me a Rolex?” Bilbo asks, even as he fastens the cold metal band around his wrist. “I don’t know how they ever expected me to accept a gift like this.” He holds his wrist up to admire it.

“Looks like you’re accepting it right now,” Dwalin says. Bilbo tries to look affronted, but the look falls flat. It’s such a lovely gift, after all.

“They’ve taken to affluence well,” Bilbo says instead.

“Balin keeps a weathered eye on them,” Dwalin says. “Makes sure they spend it wisely, on things like college and stuff that matters.” He admires one of the cactus terrariums hanging from the ceiling, although this time he has the sense to look rather than touch. “How much for one of these?”

“For you, twenty-five,” Bilbo says.

“The price tag says twenty!”

“Cost of doing business,” Bilbo says with a shrug. “Alright. Fifteen, because it’s a shame Balin isn’t coming back. The new neighbors run a ska café and their music is rather loud.”

“You win some, you lose some,” Dwalin says sagely as he hands Bilbo three fives. “Dís’ Christmas present.”

“Would you like a bag for that?”

“Nah, I can just hang it up on the coat hook,” Dwalin says.

“You drove a car here?”

“I am a man of many talents. Read that.” Dwalin points to the envelope, then goes about gingerly removing his newly purchased terrarium from the ceiling.
As Bilbo tears open the envelope, he says, “Let me give you a care card for that, I don’t know how well Dís knows to care for those.”

“Tell her yourself,” Dwalin says.

Bilbo looks back to the card. It’s a glossy photo of Harley in a Santa hat, drooling on an exasperated Thorin’s thigh. Dis is standing behind him, head thrown back in laughter, while Fili and Kili — both in poinsettia red sweaters and elf ear headbands — grin gleefully. The bottom reads,

MERRY CHRISTMAS FROM THE DURINS: FÍLI, KÍLI, DÍS, AND THORIN

On the back there’s a handwritten note:

_Bilbo: You are coming to Christmas one way or another. I’ve sent Dwalin to kidnap you if need be. ♥ Dís_

Bilbo looks at Dwalin. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’m at my lady’s command,” Dwalin says, cracking his knuckles affably. “Will we be doing this the easy way, or the hard way?”

Bilbo contemplates a few harsh words and some angry cane swinging, then submits to the inevitable. “Oh, very well. Just let me get my things settled this time.”

Bilbo notifies Sam and Frodo, who are taking inventory in the back room, that he will be gone, once more, for an indeterminate amount of time. Then he takes one last look around the shop and ushers Dwalin out the door.

His breath mists around his mouth as he exhales, and he instinctively shoves his hands in his pockets to ward off the chill. Then he overextends on his prosthetic and nearly trips. Thistle is there to save him, and afterward he keeps a hand between her shoulder blades as they climb the steps to his apartment.

Dwalin takes the stairs at Bilbo’s pace. They pause halfway up so Bilbo can catch his breath, and Dwalin says, “A fine beast, that dog.”

“She is,” Bilbo says, scratching the dog between the ears. “A very smart girl.” He starts on the steps again.

“What’s her name?”

“Thistle.”

The apartment is blessedly warm, and Dwalin peels off a few layers as he steps inside. He leans down to inspect the stack of poetry books on the table beside Bilbo’s armchair. “I still think it’s fruity.”

“If anything, spending a month on the road with you and yours increased my appreciation for the finer things in life,” Bilbo says primly. “Help yourself to the kitchen.”

When he reaches his bedroom, he falls onto the bed, rubbing the spot where his prosthetic meets what is left of his thigh. The sudden appearance of his pain pills on his sheets startles him, but he rubs Thistle’s head all the same. “Good girl.” He shakes a pill onto his palm and pops it into his mouth. “Can you help me pack, too?”
Thistle cocks her head sideways.

“No, I suppose not. You’re colorblind, after all. I want to look nice when I see Thorin.”

Bilbo ruminates on that as he packs. He’s going to see Thorin, which is a thought both terrifying and exciting. They haven’t spoken in two and a half months, both of them too busy to bother with the other. Or, at least Bilbo thinks so. Between running the store, grudgingly attending physical therapy, going to counseling — a condition of his release from the hospital — and fending off sympathetic or nosy relatives, he has had barely enough time for himself. And Thorin must be busy with Esgaroth’s recovery and settling ownership of the mine. Or he is bitter that Bilbo left without warning.

At least Christmas will give him a chance to know the answer.

Bilbo takes advantage of Dwalin’s car to pack heavily, and Dwalin raises an eyebrow at the size of the suitcase he lugs into the kitchen.

“You pack enough?” Dwalin asks.

“Not nearly. I had to leave my third-favorite awful Christmas sweater behind. My grandmother knitted it for me and I will not have it ruined. But we can go.” Bilbo pulls on a coat and does one last sweep of the room while Dwalin climbs down the stairs.

At the door, Dwalin picks up his newly purchased terrarium and waits for Bilbo to open the door. “You want a scarf or something? There are like, twenty here.”

Bilbo shakes his head as he opens the door. “I don’t wear scarves anymore.”

Bilbo falls asleep the moment they cross the Vermont border. He wakes up in the middle of nowhere. Trees flash by, all bearing at least a foot of snow on their bowed branches, and black rocks jut from the otherwise pristine landscape.

“Where are we?” Bilbo asks.

“‘bout ten minutes away,” Dwalin says. “Good thing you woke up. I thought you’d died.”

Bilbo meets this remark with relief. Thistle is trained to wake him if he has nightmares and Bilbo is glad that nothing of the sort has happened while he was in the car with Dwalin.

“Who should I expect?” Bilbo asks.

“Dís, Fíli, Kíli, Balin, and Thorin,” Dwalin says. “But more will be by for New Year’s.”

“You said Fíli and Kíli. Why didn’t they just wait to give me the watch?”

“They don’t know you’re coming. Huge loudmouths. They’d spoil the surprise.”

“The surprise,” Bilbo repeats flatly.

“You're Thorin’s Christmas present from me and Dís.”

“Oh?”

“You’ll be doing us all a favor. He’s been moping for months and thinks we don’t notice,” Dwalin says, and Bilbo pretends not to notice his accusatory tone.
“Well, yes, I understand why you wouldn’t want a surprise like that to be ruined,” says Bilbo.

The trees open up to farmland, and before long they are decelerating to pass through a small hamlet. It seems a charming place, complete with buildings dripping with icicles and Christmas lights that glow beneath a layer of snow.

But Dwalin runs the town’s only stoplight and they turn towards the twisting back roads, Dwalin barely slowing down as the tires take gamely to the fresh snow. They turn off onto a long driveway, which cuts down a gentle slope and through the woods, and ends at a house. It is not large, but its location and style suggests the Durins could not have afforded it in their exile. Smoke unfurls from a red brick chimney, with stacks of wood piled against the grey siding. The snow is still falling steadily, but in the front, armed with a snow shovel, Thorin is digging a path.

He’s bundled up so much that Bilbo can hardly recognize him, and might not have had Dwalin not immediately begun grinning like the devil. “All according to plan. Get down!” Dwalin hisses.

Bilbo rolls his eyes, but obliges. Thistle licks his face.

They stop in the driveway, and Dwalin rolls down the window. Cold air sweeps into the car, raising goosebumps on Bilbo’s arms. “Dís got you shoveling again?”

“It was this or wash the dog. Where the hell have you been?”

“Went to pick up your Christmas present. Don’t be a douche about it,” Dwalin says. “It’s in the back seat. Go on.”

The door behind Dwalin opens, and Thorin pokes his head into the car. “Bilbo?!” he cries, jerking so suddenly that he slams his head against the car’s ceiling. “Fuck!”

Bilbo grins, leaning over Thistle to grab at Thorin’s head. “Hi,” he says, otherwise speechless with the joy of seeing Thorin again. Then he realizes that Thorin isn’t wearing a hat, but that his hair, once so long, has been cut short. Bilbo rubs his hands over Thorin’s head, frowning. “Where did it go?”

Thorin pushes Bilbo’s hands off and stares at him in wonder, then climbs into the car. Bilbo laughs and leans forward again to meet Thorin’s kiss. “God, I can’t believe you’re here,” Thorin breathes. “I can’t believe you drove for hours with Dwalin to come up here. After that note you left, I thought I might never see you again.”

“I’m very fond of you, you know,” Bilbo teases. Then he decides that he likes kissing Thorin very much, and starts doing that again. Though he can’t help it if his hands slide up into Thorin’s hair, now devastatingly short. “It’s gone,” he moans, pawing some more at Thorin’s head.

“You two gonna come inside or fuck in the car?” Dwalin says sharply. This time Bilbo jumps, disturbing Thistle enough that she sits up.

“No, no,” Bilbo grumbles. “We’ll come inside. Would you get my bag for me, Dwalin?”

“Yeah,” Dwalin says. And then he’s gone, up the newly shoveled path with Bilbo’s suitcase and his newly purchased terrarium in hand.

That leaves Thorin, Bilbo, Thistle, and the sound of the settling snow.

The fresh layer of snow crunches beneath his boots as Bilbo maneuvers out of the car with Thistle’s help. Once he’s free, he lets Thistle out of her vest and urges her to play in the snow. As she tears off, Thorin comes up beside him. “You seem to be doing well,” he says stiffly.
“You too, but I can’t imagine what possessed you to cut all of that off,” Bilbo says.

“Dís and Balin thought it’d help me present a better figure while working everything out with the lawyers,” Thorin says, running a hand through his hair with a gloved hand. “But I’m done with all of that now. All of it is Fíli’s problem. And Balin’s.”

They start walking towards the house. Bilbo takes one of Thorin’s hands in his and smiles. It’s very warm. “I was wondering about that. Why not stay in Erebor?”

“I realized that maybe there’s something else I want more,” Thorin says, and this time it’s Bilbo’s turn to color.

“Well,” he says awkwardly. Thorin opens the front door for him. “I hope you find it.”

If Thorin has anything else to add, he doesn’t get to say it. Thistle nearly knocks his legs out from beneath him in her rush to follow Bilbo inside, and then moments later Kíli comes tearing down the stairs. “Uncle Bilbo!” he cries. “I didn’t know you were coming. Dwalin really pulled one over on us.” Kili goes in for a hug. When he pulls away, he looks down at Thorin and Bilbo’s linked hands and grins. “So … new uncle? Like, for real?”

Thorin makes a sound like a dying engine while Bilbo laughs nervously. “Oh. Wow. We’ll, ah. We’ll see about that. Hmm.”

“Okay. Right now we need to party or something. I knew Mom was hiding the alcohol for a reason.” Then, quick as he came, Kili is bounding into the house ahead of them.

Hours later, Bilbo finds himself fighting to keep his eyes open. He excuses himself, and Fíli — now as closely shorn as Thorin, which Bilbo does not believe is a coincidence — offers to show Bilbo to his room.

It’s down the hall, secluded enough that he cannot hear the still-raging party, but not far enough isolate him. It’s sparsely decorated in a way that could be artistic minimalism if you squinted, but most likely means that Dís didn’t know what to do with so much space.

Fíli hovers in the door as Bilbo searches through his bag and Thistle hops onto the bed. “I’m glad you’re here. Not just because Thorin has been brooding for so long. But because you’re, y’know, important to us. All of us. You’re family, even if stuff with Thorin doesn’t work out.”

It’s a bit disorganized, but Bilbo can figure out what Fíli’s trying to say, and he appreciates it. The concern that Bilbo feels pressured into a relationship with Thorin is understandable, but misplaced. Bilbo is uncertain about so many things, but not this. “Thank you, Fíli,” he says with a smile.

“Yeah. Night, Bilbo,” Fíli says, wandering back down the hallway. Bilbo calls a goodnight back, and sets about getting ready for sleep. By the time he has brushed his teeth and settled down, he’s exhausted, and drops to sleep immediately.

Three hours later, he wakes up trembling, an aborted shout leaving a bad taste in his mouth. Wet tracks of saliva cool on his face, and he scrubs at them with his sleeve as he reaches over to turn on the light.

Thistle is slumped over him, her head atop Bilbo’s chest and her large, brown eyes staring up at him with concern. The nightmare had been a repeat, but no less unsettling.

Bilbo times his inhales and exhales with the rise and fall of the dog’s chest until breathing comes
easily, but the afterimages of his nightmares refuse to leave his mind.

Rather than sit in the bedroom, he swings himself out of bed, taking up his cane and making his way into the kitchen. Thistle’s nails click on the hardwood floor as she follows.

The fireplace in the living room is still lit, and Bilbo, concerned, hobbles forward until he sees Thorin sitting on the couch with a book in hand and — more surprisingly — wearing glasses.

“Where’d those come from?” Bilbo asks as he settles onto the couch next to him.

“Got my eyes tested when I went to the doctor’s. Fíli needs them, too, but he wears them less than I do.” Thorin smiles faintly. “I wish you could have seen their faces when they realized how many shots they needed to catch up on.”

Bilbo chuckles at the thought. “I take it you couldn’t sleep, either?” Thorin shakes his head. “Good. We can keep each other company.”

“I’d like that,” Thorin says. Rather abruptly, he fits himself against Bilbo’s side, wrapping a thick arm around Bilbo’s shoulders. They stay like that for the whole night, the two insomniacs. Come morning, the two of them have fallen asleep against each other.

So of course, Kíli delights in the opportunity to wake them, and flings himself onto the couch without abandon. This gets him some rugburn on his elbow and a blow to his pride when Thorin wrestles him to the ground and doesn’t let up until Kíli cries “Uncle!” between his wheezes of laughter.

Thorin is laughing, too, and later Bilbo decides that that is the moment he knows, with complete certainty, that he’s in love.

With Fíli and Kíli now out of the house — Bilbo hears something about Tauriel and Sigrid being in town — and Thorin getting groceries, Dís, Dwalin, and Balin break into the wine cellar, as it’s their Christmas Eve tradition to get “piss fuckin’ drunk and wait for Santa.” They’re upstairs in a spare bedroom, with Dís and Balin on the bed while Dwalin takes up a cozy armchair in the corner. Pizza has been ordered, though it’s hardly three o’clock.

Against his better judgement, Bilbo lets them pour him generous glasses of wine until the doorbell rings and they all jump up. Everyone migrates downstairs to get the pizza, Bilbo a little behind as he and Thistle maneuver down the stairs. The wine has unbalanced him enough.

Dwalin takes care of the pizza, charging into the kitchen with a triumphant shout and pizza boxes held aloft. Dis whoops, yanking the boxes from his arms and placing them onto the counter.

“Thorin’s home,” Dwalin points out.

Bilbo looks around, but sees no sign of him. “How do you figure?”

Dwalin points out the set of keys on the key rack. “Car’s back, duh.”

“He’s on the porch,” Dis calls as she pulls down plates. “Must be smoking.”

“Ah,” Bilbo says, settling down in his seat.

“Yeah,” Dís continues in a tone heavy with meaning. “Only does it when he’s nervous, now.”
“That’s good to hear,” Bilbo says, purposefully being obtuse. They’re clearly goading him somewhere, but he won’t go easily.

Dwalin nods, showing the first signs of irritation. Balin keeps his silence, though Bilbo suspects that he’s hiding a grin behind his hand. “Been thinking all day, he has. Don’t know what he’s been thinking, but I’d even say he’s *brooding*”

Bilbo gasps theatrically. “Brooding? Well, perhaps someone ought to speak to him. Offer a good listening ear.”

“Oh, I agree,” says Dís.

“Then it seems we have a volunteer! How kind of you, Dís. What a wonderful sister you are,” Bilbo says, barely suppressing his laughter.

“Just go, Baggins,” Dwalin barks. Bilbo laughs as he slides off of the chair.

Thistle comes to his side from where she’d been waiting for dropped morsels. “Outside, you said?”

“He’s not smoking in here,” is Dís’ answer. “I’ll have more than his hair for that. Nothing you’d miss too much, though. Hell, I might be doing you a favor.”

Bilbo shrugs at that and finds his way to the back porch, which overlooks the sprawling field below. Overhead, the first stars are twinkling against the deep blue sky.

Sure enough, he finds Thorin leaning against the porch railing. The cigarette is a bright orange point in the thickening twilight, illuminating his hand as smoke curls languidly from its tip. Thorin exhales smoke and steam while Bilbo closes the door behind him.

“Dwalin says it’s a nervous habit,” Bilbo says, pointing at the cigarette. Thorin sighs and extinguishes it in the snow on the railing beside him. “Don’t let Dís see you doing that. I quite like you with all of your parts attached.”

“She was threatening life and limb this time?”

“Just limb. Talk to me.”

“Dwalin,” Thorin mutters. “Never shuts up. It was either this or *She Thinks My Tractor’s Sexy*, and I like my dignity intact.”

“Dwalin is always bothering you. Surely there’s more?”

“This—” he waves the extinguished cigarette “—was just to get my courage up.”

*Ominous.* “What for?”

“Well,” Thorin says. It’s a false start, though, and he swallows nervously. “First of all, I wanted to ask you for forgiveness.”

“Forgiveness? Whatever for?”

“For my behavior at the mine. I was too afraid to ask before, back at the hospital. I didn’t want to ask for something I don’t deserve, but I feel as though I should ask before my second question.”

“Of course I forgive you. I should apologize myself, for leaving with only a note, but I suspect you’ll hear none of it,” says Bilbo. He doesn’t know all the circumstances behind Thorin’s behavior back
then, but they’ll have plenty of time to discuss that later. It wasn’t as if Thorin had hurt him. “What else is bothering you?”

“Right. Then I wanted to ask if we’re … going steady.”

It would be awful of him to laugh at the word choice, so Bilbo just touches Thorin’s arm. “I should certainly hope so, after all of that kissing we’ve been doing. Was that all?”

Thorin’s shoulders sag in relief. The next question seems to come easier. “No, it wasn’t. I thought that maybe we could try living together? I know it’s early in the … relationship to really consider this, but I’d like it, even if it’s in a few months, or…” He cuts himself off and returns to fiddling with the spent cigarette. “I thought it’d be good for us.”

Whatever question he had expected, it certainly wasn’t that. “Huh,” Bilbo says, walking a few paces away before returning. “Hm.”

“Those aren’t answers,” says Thorin.

“No, no they’re not,” Bilbo says. “I’m going to think on it. I hope that’s alright.”

Thorin nods uncomfortably, already looking dejected. Bilbo thinks he looks very lovely, with the moonlight on his face and on the silver in his hair. It’s snowing, and the flakes cling to Thorin’s eyelashes before melting.

Bilbo reaches up to touch Thorin’s regretfully short hair. This spurs Thorin into action. He leans in to brush his lips against Bilbo’s, then kiss him more firmly. “Did you just shudder?” Thorin asks, amused.

“No,” Bilbo says, shaking his head. “Just cold. It wasn’t that spectacular of a kiss.”

“You’re only wearing a sweater,” Thorin points out. “Let’s go inside and I can try to make it up to you with a better one.”

“Inside? We’ll be heckled.”

“We can find some privacy, I’m sure.”

Dwalin retires early, but Dís and Balin are perfectly capable of maintaining a party by themselves. They are deeply involved in a loud, long story often punctuated by sips of whiskey, so it is easy for Bilbo and Thorin to slip off to the bedroom and, finally, the bed. For a while they just kiss, slow and steady with calm and wandering hands. Their fervor builds like a hailstorm, heart beats pounding like ice on a roof.

“Maybe you could come live with me,” Bilbo says. “You … me … that big apartment is too big for just me.”

“That would be — oh fuck, Bilbo — that would be nice, I think,” Thorin says, his sentence broken up by a gasp. Bilbo has found that his neck is particularly sensitive, and far be it from him to ignore that. “Maybe I could even make myself useful. In the shop, you know.”

“Hmm,” Bilbo hums against the soft skin behind Thorin’s ear, just before his hairline. “Maybe. But I think I’d need to see a resume first.”

Thorin takes off his shirt.
“Oh, yes,” Bilbo says, splaying his hands out on Thorin’s stomach and admiring the way the muscles twitch beneath them. “Oh, I think you’re very qualified.”

“I believe an interview is next,” Thorin prompts, his hands sliding down Bilbo’s chest.

“This is a button-up. If you want to take it off, you’re going to have to … have to work for it,” Bilbo says. Uncertainty drips into his voice, an ugly little thought from long ago taking seed. *He will not want you. Not anymore.* The thought is like a bucket of ice water, killing his arousal.

Thorin is too focused on the buttons of Bilbo’s shirt to notice. He kisses every inch of skin he bares, starting with the space between Bilbo’s waistband and his shirt. It’s then that Bilbo decides that he doesn’t want Thorin to see it all, he’s afraid, but if—

“Do you want to stop?” Thorin asks, eyes meeting Bilbo’s with utter sincerity. It feels … it feels like safety, and Bilbo doesn’t feel as wretched as he thought he would when he nods.

Thorin looks nervous as he pulls away. “What’s wrong?” he asks, enveloping Bilbo’s hand with his own large one.

“I’m … it’s the scars. They’re ugly, they’re disgusting. I’m not the same man that I was at Bard’s, I’m…” broken, repulsive, weak, weak, weak.

“You think so? I think that you’re still the brave, smart, indescribable, fussy florist I fell in love with. So I still love you, Bilbo,” Thorin says.

“Well, talking like that, how could I not believe you?” Bilbo asks.

Thorin doesn’t say anything. He smiles, and the two of them shift to get comfortable. They spend a few minutes in comfortable silence, during which Bilbo weighs Thorin’s words, trying them out in his own mind, ordering himself to believe them. He doesn’t, not by a long shot, but he can take the words to heart enough to laboriously throw himself into Thorin’s lap.

“You love me?” Bilbo asks.

“Without a doubt, a thaisce,” Thorin purrs.

Bilbo laughs, exhilarated, and dives in for another kiss. “I love you too, you know.”

It isn’t long before Bilbo’s shirt is discarded, piled at the top of a heap of their clothes.

A week after New Year’s, Bilbo climbs back into Dis’ car with more bags than he’d arrived with. He had not been left out of the gift giving, though he’d been able to reciprocate very little on such short notice. So, gift laden, he settles into the passenger seat while Thorin gets into the driver’s side.

It’s a sunny, blustery day in March when Bilbo’s doorbell rings. His stomach is a snake-filled pit of nerves and excitement all tangled together as he heaves himself out of his armchair and sets aside his book.

It is finally time.

Bilbo yanks the door open to the sight of Thorin, smiling shyly and adjusting his grip on his belongings. All he carries is a single cardboard box and a deflated duffle bag. To say it is half full would be generous. Thorin puts the box down to scoop Bilbo into his arms. “It’s nice to see you,”
Thorin says.

For months they’ve been calling, planning, and doing weekend visits. But now Thorin can move in permanently, and Bilbo’s never been happier. “Was the drive okay?”

“It was fine. Hit some traffic at the tolls,” Thorin says as he pulls away.

“Where’s your stuff? Unless you mean to tell me that this is it,” Bilbo says, gawking at the meager pile. Thorin nods, shrugging before bending over to pick up the box. It rattles slightly with the movement. “But where are your clothes?”

“In there,” Thorin says. “I don’t have that many. Just a few t-shirts, some jeans. I don’t really need anything else.”

“Oh no,” Bilbo says, tutting good-naturedly. “Absolutely not. You and I are going out this very second to get you a better wardrobe.” He takes the box from Thorin’s arms and looks him over. “Oh yes. I think you’d look much better in a well-tailored sport coat.”

Chapter End Notes

V: Wow!!! It was a wild ride. This was my first writing endeavor of any significant length, and I was really glad to be able to share it with y’all! Thank you to all of our readers, and especially to those who kudos, bookmarked, and commented! mudkippy and I have begun a new joint project and plan on having the first chapter up at some point in October. Until then, we also are working on independent works, too. Incredible.

M: And thus ends baby’s first fanfiction. Honestly. The very first. Lots of thanks to vilelithe, a.k.a the heart and soul of this fic, and also to all of our readers. We can’t wait to see some of your usernames again in October.

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