**Eidolon's Charade**

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**Eidolon's Charade**

by **MilkTeaMiku**

**Summary**

Bilbo often thought about when he would leave the warm, summery haze he was captured in, when winter would come and he would feel the chill of something unexplainable. A feeling of restlessness stirred inside him where he once thought there was nothing, and as if responding to a call, something unexplainable came trudging along.

Or rather, someone.

- In which Thorin is a ghost hunter and Bilbo is keeping some rather big secrets.
CASE ONE – THE DEAF GHOST

As a child, Bilbo had found the house he lived in quite daunting. It was, for lack of a better word, huge. The ceilings were unnecessarily high, and the hallways unnecessarily wide. The building itself was old, partially built before the Victorian Era, partially built after. Its structure was a strange kaleidoscope of features from different artistic periods, so mixed and fused together that it was difficult to tell where one building restoration ended and the next one began. Distinctly, he remembered often feeling lost, as though every turn had become a dead end and every door had become one that opened only to another endless corridor. Memories of that place made his head hurt, and although it was his childhood home he struggled to remember the path that lead from the front door to his bedroom.

Memories of childhood, as a whole, were difficult to recall. Like nature itself, they faded and bloomed consistently, but were never quite the same again. The fringes of his mind blurred and muddied the images he tried to keep a hold of, and as such his perception of the past was in a constant state of upheaval. Regardless of the turmoil and disorder his memory was in, Bilbo found that there were always a few things that remained relatively clear. The size of his house, for instance, was a dominant presence in the far reaches of his mind. Another was the sound of piano notes, and the smoothness of the keys beneath his fingertips as he tinkered away at them. Even now, the sound of a piano seemed to settle a fuzziness in his head and a burning in his veins like nothing else could. Lastly, from his childhood, he vividly recalled knowing a boy who went by the name of Frodo.

Frodo, unlike Bilbo, hadn’t seemed to age with time. At one point, Bilbo believed he might have thought that Frodo was the child of an employee who worked at the Baggins Manor, but he couldn’t be sure with a memory as fickle and weak as his own. He did recall, however, the icy shade of blue Frodo’s eyes had been, and how his voice had sounded too old for his face. Bilbo couldn’t quite remember anything Frodo had said that was of any importance, but he remembered Frodo's soft voice, because it had seemed to be just as beautiful as the sun and the all the stars when it had the company of piano keys. Whenever he recalled Frodo, there was always one more morsel of memory that drifted back through Bilbo’s mind, like the flash of a fish’s scales under the surface of a lake that dazzlingly reflected sunlight. When he thought of Frodo, he was always struck by the knowledge that Frodo had never once gotten lost in that big, old house.

Of course, just like the way a fish could disappear into the depths of darkened water, so too did that memory fade. The human mind could be quite capricious in that sense, though perhaps it was just
Bilbo. He did have quite the daydreaming streak, after all. Nevertheless, Bilbo didn’t remember much of his childhood home, mostly because he no longer lived there. Instead he resided in a school-funded apartment, one purposefully held for students. It was a small place, with just enough room for a little bed and a potted plant by the door in which Bilbo hid his spare keys. The school he attended – Erebor Private Academy – was very lenient when it came to students like Bilbo, who had been admitted on excellent grades rather than money, even though he had more than enough to spare (in his parents’ names, of course). He didn’t mind where he lived, even if many of the upper-class students found it off-putting, as they so often did. He was rather content with his life, as it was.

But life wasn’t partial when it came to keeping things content. In lieu of contentedness, it had quite a nasty streak, and seemed to enjoy dredging up bad experiences where it thus lovingly laid them down on the future paths many chose to wander. Bilbo often thought about when he would leave the warm, summery haze he was captured in, when winter would come and he would feel the chill of something unexplainable. A feeling of restlessness stirred inside him where he once thought there was nothing, and as if responding to a call, something unexplainable came trudging along.

Or rather, someone.

“They say the third classroom on the third floor is haunted!” Hamfast whispered keenly. “Let’s tell ghost stories in there after class, okay?”

“Mmm,” Bilbo hummed, his voice quiet. Hamfast was a boy with a rounded face and hair lightly coloured gold by the sun. At heart he was a gentle person, but he sometimes tended to do reckless things when he thought they might be exciting. He’d always been interested in ghost stories and things of the paranormal, so his suggestion hadn’t struck Bilbo as strange. He’d known Hamfast for… Well, he’d forgotten for how long, if he were being honest. That memory too had begun to fade. Still, he enjoyed Hamfast’s company well enough. He wasn’t really one to make friends, at least not easily, so it had been a weight off of his shoulders when Hamfast and another boy who went by the name of Milo had decided to befriend him.

Telling ghost stories wasn’t a particularly interesting pastime for Bilbo, but it wasn’t that it was uninteresting to him, either. Like with many things, he remained neutral towards it. Hamfast enjoyed it though, so Bilbo made an effort to remember to find his way to Classroom 3-3 at the end of the day. Expectedly, both Hamfast and Milo were already in the room, having pulled down the blinds and made space on the floor for them to sit. If Bilbo were being honest, he could have been persuaded to excuse himself if either one of them noticed his reluctance and mentioned it, but it seemed that his friends – if he could call them – were in a particularly excitable mood, that day. So, despite his averseness to remaining at school after hours, he took a seat on the floor and flicked on the battery powered torch that was pressed into his hands and pretended like he was any other boy his age.

Alas, much of it went in one ear and out the next without any lasting impact. Bilbo had always had trouble concentrating on things, mostly because his mind tended to wander away without him realising so. There were some things, however, that not even a person as prone to distraction as he happened to be could miss. One such thing was the fast-paced rumour that broke over students from all grades, as rumours often did, concerning a ghostly spirit that lingered at their school. It was said that if a group told ghost stories to entice the spirit closer, then turned off all the lights in a room, it would appear. Bilbo never quite heard the part about how one could tell if the spirit was really there or not, but like most things students fawned over, he treated it like nothing more and nothing less than factitious.

“The old school building, past B Block, was said to have been first built back during the war time,” Milo said, leaning forwards as though his voice wasn’t already loud enough in the silent classroom.
“Many people died in that building, include two nurses they say committed suicide-”

“Does it really count if that was their intention?”

“Shh, Bilbo.”

“It does,” Milo stressed, “because of the reason why! Years after the war, the building was still being
used as a medical facility, right? Apparently, everyone who died in that building – including the two
nurses – reported seeing a little boy crying the day before they passed.”

Hamfast sucked in a small breath, but Bilbo remained silent.

“They say that the little boy looked real; solid – that he couldn’t have been a ghost if he was so
genuine,” Milo continued. “But everyone who spoke to him was so suddenly terrified that they were
cursed that it was like they went senseless!”

“Why?” Hamfast gaped.

“I’m getting there! Only those who had seen the boy would suddenly die, so their deaths have to be
considered strange, don’t they? There’s no reason for people whose health was improving to
suddenly die like that, let alone two perfectly healthy nurses. But they say that the little boy who
looked so real would suddenly, out of nowhere, start screaming! His mouth would open and
everything, but absolutely no sound came out. The walls would start to shake, hard enough to rattle
paintings, and then… Gwahh! The victim would be found by a co-worker, or by a patient, passed
out on the floor as though they had been struck by something.”

Admittedly, Bilbo did startle at that. Perhaps more because of Milo’s excessively loud exclamation
then because of the story.

“And then, the next day, they’d die!”

Hamfast jumped, his eyes wide with a combination of fear and delight. Bilbo himself felt a little
taken aback, because it was an eerie tale after all, one he’d never heard before. He’d walked past that
very same building more than a dozen times, and he knew it was finally scheduled for demolition in
the next few months, so it wasn’t as though he was unaware of it. When it was mentioned, he could
see it in his head, just like a photograph. The building itself was old and outdated, and he knew it
was unsafe to enter. That was why no lessons were held in the building, aside from its
incompatibility with modern technology. He’d never found the building particularly unsettling, but
then again it had never really captured his interest in the first place.

“Turn off your light,” Milo whispered fervently.

Bilbo flicked the switch, and soon enough the room was bathed in dimness. It wasn’t entirely
impossible for Bilbo to see his classmates, mostly because it was still late afternoon on the other side
of the blinds, but the darkened room certainly helped set the mood Hamfast and Milo had strived to
create. For a moment, nothing happened, and Bilbo exhaled. As a yawn built up in his throat, Bilbo
lifted a hand to cover his mouth, and shut his eyes.

Then it struck him.

Suddenly his yawn became lodged in his throat as though a hand had gripped him around the neck,
and his lungs stung with the struggle for oxygen. His eyes flew open in surprise, but the room had
abruptly become so dark he couldn’t see anything. A frightful chill ran down his spine. He tried to
speak, and felt his mouth moving, but not a sound would come forth, not even when he tried to raise
his voice. Loud rattling noises began to echo in the room, as though waves of an earthquake were
striking the school. The chairs and tables they’d pushed aside to make room on the floor started to jitter, hard enough for them to drag across the floor in short little bursts. In a sudden flash of light, Bilbo was able to see again, and he lurched to his feet.

“Watch out!” Hamfast shouted.

Bilbo whimpered, and clapped his hands over his ears as the rumbles became too loud for him to handle. Milo blindly grasped his elbow and dragged him forwards, but the bookshelves against the wall of the room had already started tipping over. Textbooks and trinkets clattered to the floor and skidded several feet away, and then the heavy bookshelf fell too. Something solid pushed against Bilbo’s back, and he cried out as his head abruptly met the floor. Distantly, he heard someone shout his name, and Milo’s too. It faded into a ringing noise that bounced between Bilbo’s ears and had him fluttering his eyelashes as pain blossomed across his forehead.

Indeed, something unexplainable had finally happened.

That was only the beginning.
Bilbo’s feet were bare. He couldn’t quite remember taking off his shoes or socks, and the more he thought about it the more he started to wonder if he’d had any on in the first place. If the floor hadn’t been so cold beneath the soles of his feet, he might not have noticed at all. As he wandered down the hallway, he found that his sudden shoe-less attire was quite a thought-consuming concept, more than it had ever previously been. He watched his feet as he walked, and was a little shocked to find that they were smaller than he remembered them being. His skin was exceptionally dirty, as though he had walked bare-footed through a dirt field for days, and there were bruises forming that said he hadn’t taken a rest in quite some time, either. Now that he reflected on the matter, his legs were quite shaky, as well. They trembled. When was the last time he’d slept in a proper bed, with the warmth of cotton blankets that didn’t itch his thin skin? He couldn’t remember. How strange.

Perhaps it wasn’t just the floor that was making his feet cold. When he glanced up, tall wooden walls loomed around him, ones that only seemed to grow the more he stared. Had the ceilings in this building always been that high? The lights were swinging ever so slightly, but not enough to make them creak. In fact, he couldn’t hear anything at all – not the swinging lights, or the sounds of cicadas outside, or the voices of people he sensed were close. After a moment, he realised he’d come to a standstill, and began to walk again. He didn’t particularly know where he was going, or even where he was, but he must have gotten to this place somehow.

Down the hallway, a door silently slid open. Bilbo’s eyes were drawn to it – he remembered the door seeming larger than he expected – and from behind the doorframe, a woman appeared. She wore a crisp white uniform, and had her hair tied up in a bun that sat under a small, white hat. Her eyes were surrounded by dark circles, and despite the alertness Bilbo could see in them she appeared thoroughly exhausted. When she shut the door behind herself, her eyes darted across to Bilbo, as if she hadn’t heard his footsteps approaching. He watched her through widened eyes, and opened his mouth to ask… something- and he felt his lips moving, too, but he couldn’t hear his voice. He was overcome with the urge to ask, “Am I saying the right words?” and “What does my voice sound like?” and “Please, can you hear me?” but no sound reached his ears.

The woman approached, but instead of feeling reassured, he grew frightened. She seemed to grow taller as she walked closer, like Bilbo was shrinking, like he had to tilt his head back to see her pale face. He tried to take a step back, tried to turn away, but bony, unbreakable hands had gripped his ankles and were holding him firmly in place. The woman stopped in front of him, and stooped closer. Her mouth was moving, and her hand was reaching forwards. Her shoes had hard soles, but he hadn’t heard her approach at all. As her hand stretched forwards, a fabric band on her arm
emblazoned with a red cross flashed across his view, but he couldn’t focus on it. Fear had a
terrifyingly cold grip on his throat, and he was soon swallowed up into a silent, lightless void. He
slammed his hands over his ears, felt them under his palms, and tried to scream. Nothing came out,
and he panicked—where was he? Who was he? There were no voices, no footsteps, like this place
had been completely removed from the rest of the world, and it horrified him.

The woman jerked back as Bilbo cried, so hard she lost her balance and toppled over. She landed on
the wooden floor, and her wrist skidded out from under her. She let out a shout, and Bilbo gasped,
his eyes snapping open. He’d—

He’d heard her—

The light overhead creaked quietly as it swung back and forth. Bilbo’s eyes were open, but it took a
moment for the world to fade back into existence. Everything seemed slightly hazy, bathed in a
gentle glow, and he faintly registered a warm breeze ruffling the curtains by the open window before
it travelled across his sore head. He breathed in deeply, once, and then exhaled. He could feel his
chest expanding with each careful breath, could hear the air rushing from his lungs. Somehow, it was
a reassuring sensation.

For a moment, he simply took it all in, and waited for his memories to return. Sleep always blurred
the line between existence and absence, and with each time the sun rose Bilbo opened his eyes to a
world he had momentarily forgotten. He carefully counted his fingers, just to make sure all ten were
still there, and reached up a hand to touch his aching head. It pounded numbly in a place he couldn’t
soothe without medication, and a wince twisted his face when his fingertips brushed against a
particularly nasty lump. After a moment, he pushed himself upright, and folded away the blanket that
had been lightly thrown over him. His feet, covered in white socks, were poking out from the bottom
where the sheet had rumpled up. As the world came rushing back, he found that he was in the
infirmary at school, and that the sun was close to falling beneath the horizon through the open
windows. He almost forgot to breathe as his gaze was caught by the gentle fluttering of the curtains
by the windows, but as he exhaled once more everything settled back into the warm dreariness it had
always been.

He was completely alone, but that wasn’t too unusual.

It only took him a moment to find where his possessions had been stashed under the bed, and even
less time to put his shoes back on. As he was tying the laces, his mind wandered back to the dream
he’d had, where he’d not been wearing any shoes. Experimentally, he wiggled his toes, but his feet
felt no different from usual. It puzzled him for a moment. “Then what was that?” He murmured to
himself, as he slipped off the bed. It certainly didn’t make sense, but then again he found that a lot of
things could be like that, in his world.

Without the school nurse in sight, Bilbo took his leave. The school corridors were oddly eerie after
hours, but he took some subtle form of comfort from the rhythmic taps of his feet against the ground.
The infirmary was on the first floor, so he easily avoided Classroom 3-3, but his mind drifted back to
it, unbidden. He wondered what had happened, and found that he struggled to recall what the ghost
stories that he’d heard had been about. The more he tried to remember, the sharper the pain in his
head became, until it built up to the point where he had to stop and lean against one of the pillars
outside as he waited for the pain to subside. He could see the school gate in the near distance, and he
thought about just going ahead despite his dizziness, but it was like his legs couldn’t move. A light
glinted across his eyes, just briefly, and his attention was drawn towards it.

The old building stood a little ways away, partially obscured by a line of overgrown trees. Through
their leaves, the disappearing sunlight broke through and reflected off the dusty windows. Distracted, Bilbo forgot about the pain in his head, and straightened his back. The building itself had been constructed mostly out of timber, so he had an idea that the internal corridors were wooden. He couldn’t see much through the windows – half of them had been boarded up – but the longer he stared at the building the more he seem to notice about it. The entrance doorway, of which was always locked, was now pressed wide open, almost enough that it looked as though the rusted hinges might completely snap off. The path to the door itself had long since been worn down to nothing but unusable dirt, and he thought that if he hadn’t been wearing his shoes that his feet might become quite smeared with dust. When he observed the path a little closer, he felt a shock run through his system, because he could see little footprints in the dirt, as though a child had just recently walked through it. A sudden breeze picked up and he was forced to cover his eyes, but when it settled and he could see that the footprints had completely disappeared.

Standing there, however, was a man.

He was dressed in dark, effortlessly formal clothes, but that wasn’t the most striking thing about him. His eyes, of which were set in a face that looked too stern and too sharp for his apparent age, were a striking blue colour, so pale they looked almost completely translucent. Against the backdrop of his thick lashes and dark hair, they seemed so bright that they were glowing.

Bilbo had only see eyes like that on one other person in the entire world, and he wasn’t too sure that person was even real.

The man was watching him, Bilbo realised. His face was completely unflustered, like the surface of a lake that was left untouched by the wind. It unnerved Bilbo, felt unnatural. From that man, he distinctly felt a sense of danger, one that made him bristle. It was like that man had never smiled in a way that reached his eyes, not even once, like he’d stared at completely unexplainable things and remained utterly unruffled. He might have been the only person in the world who could look like that. Even Bilbo, with his admittedly diminutive and instinctively quiet nature, couldn’t have ever managed to remain so composed in the face of something unknown and feared.

Feeling as though there was a hand pressing against his back to nudge him on his way, Bilbo ducked his head and made off. Even when he wasn’t looking at the man, he still felt unreasonably apprehensive, like all of his secrets had been revealed with nothing more and nothing less than a single look. He could feel eyes burning into the back of his neck, and it made him shiver uncomfortably. He hoped he should be so lucky as to never come across that man ever again.

“Mr Baggins, you’ve been excused from this lesson…”

Bilbo carefully observed his teacher’s face, wondering what could prompt such a thing, but the teacher had already moved on to beckon Hamfast forwards, too. Knowing he had been dismissed, Bilbo stood, and picked up his bag. Together with Hamfast, Bilbo exited the classroom, and starting heading in the same direction as his companion – seemingly, to the third floor.

“Where are we going?” Bilbo murmured, eyeing Hamfast warily.

“To the spare classroom, the one with the adjoining storeroom,” Hamfast answered. “The school hired a bunch of paranormal experts, didn’t you hear? Everyone’s talking about it. They’re questioning people who’ve experienced strange things here. Milo has been with them all morning, I think.”

Bilbo anxiously rubbed his arm. That didn’t bode well. He’d never been particularly comfortable
around things to do with the paranormal, aside from ghost stories, of course. Perhaps it was more the people he was worried about, rather than the ghosts themselves. Humans felt like they were a lot more difficult to deal with. They were much more unpredictable, more irrational, and were more frequently causing trouble for those around them. Humans, they felt real. Ghosts didn’t.

“Do I have to?” Bilbo asked sulkily.

“Of course!” Hamfast exclaimed. “You were there yesterday – you were injured! Doesn’t that freak you out?” He shook his head, looking a little frustrated. “How’s your head, by the way?”

Bilbo absently reached up a hand to touch the bruise blossoming across his forehead. “Fine,” he said. “But my back kind of stings.”

“Let me see,” Hamfast said, grabbing Bilbo by the arm to stop him abruptly. “Where?”

“I-in the middle,” Bilbo answered, flustered. “Towards the top.”

Hamfast grabbed the edge of his uniform and unceremoniously yanked it up. Bilbo let out a startled noise and tried to move away, because it was unlike Hamfast to act so forcefully, but Hamfast’s grip on his arm was too strong.

“Bilbo…” Hamfast said, stepping back. “There’s a handprint there.”

Bilbo straightened up, and fixed his shirt. He was feeling increasingly nervous, and his lips had gone dry. “I-is that so?”

Hamfast gave him an incredulous look, but didn’t say another word. He looked vaguely upset. The spare classroom was at the end of the corridor on the third floor, and they reached it in silence. Every step Bilbo took felt like it was heavier than the last. Even though it still hadn’t gone cold with autumn and the shifting seasons, he was feeling strangely chilled. Something about this certainly didn’t feel good.

“Excuse us…” Hamfast murmured, as he pushed the door to the classroom open. From behind him, Bilbo could see Milo’s head full of blonde hair, where he was seated at a large table. The classroom was void of any desks and chairs, but looked more like it was being used in the same style an office might be used in, and it had been outfitted as such. A rush of stagnant air overwhelmed Bilbo, and his knees started to shake. The urge to run away was boiling just under his skin, like an itch he couldn’t quite scratch.

There were several other people in the room, too, that Bilbo didn’t recognise. Their presences seemed to pale in comparison, however, to the piercing blue eyes that speared over Hamfast’s shoulder to fix on Bilbo’s face with an intensity that absolutely terrified him.

“My name is Thorin Oakenshield,” the man said, as he dragged a chair free from the table. “Please, have a seat.”
“When all the kings’ men, and all their horses, can’t find a way to save you… What then?”

Sometimes, despite his poor memory, parts of Bilbo’s past came flitting back to him. Like shards of a broken mirror, some pieces turned and in their reflections he was briefly able to see something that he’d long since been unable to. It was a sensation he’d describe as being similar to waking up after a long and deep sleep, though he was never slumbering when it happened to occur. Rather, the small pieces he regained were always prompted or stimulated by something – or, in this particular case, someone.

Thorin Oakenshield was an enigma.

Even though Bilbo spared quite a bit of thought towards it, he couldn’t quite remember his answer to the question, or who in particular had asked a child such a thing, but he had a feeling it would come back to him soon enough. He kept his eyes on the back of Hamfast’s head as he reluctantly entered the room, and remained politely quiet as Milo greeted them. He let Hamfast take the seat Thorin had pulled out, instead choosing to linger closer to the door. If anything, he was somewhat curious about what would be said. Perhaps that was the only thing keeping him from excusing himself. Curiosity, as it was, happened to be quite a dangerous and insatiable thing, one that made him grit his teeth in frustration towards himself. He didn’t particularly want to get involved in anything to do with ghost experts, mostly because they unsettled him, but he didn’t know if he had another choice, in this instance.

Among the people Bilbo didn’t recognise was a face that was familiar. After a moment, a name sprung to mind – Mr Haldir. He worked as a guidance councillor at the school, though Bilbo knew he had only recently transferred from a school quite a fair bit away from here. He wasn’t a particularly quiet man, but he had a stiff air about him, as though he hadn’t quite adjusted to the demographic of people at Erebor Academy yet. Regardless, his presence did nothing to quell the unease finding a place in Bilbo’s stomach.

“Hello.” A man gripping a spare chair wondered over and placed it down beside Bilbo. His eyes lingered on Bilbo’s face, like he was searching for something. “My name is Bard. Take a seat, and we’ll get to it.”

Bilbo tensed, but did as asked, and gingerly sat down. The seat felt unnaturally uncomfortable. Anxious, he startled to fiddle with his fingers, and tried to ignore the immense sensation of being
watched he was experiencing. He’d never been relaxed around strangers, but this was something entirely of its own.

Mr Haldir cleared his throat, and moved to stand beside the students, on the other side of the table. “These are the people our school hired to… fix the problems we’re having,” he said carefully, as he gestured across the room. “Mr Bard, Mr Oakenshield, and his assistant Mr Carc have been the first to arrive, and as such they intend to carry out the investigation immediately.”

Bilbo startled at that. Thorin certainly didn’t appear old enough to be the person in charge of the investigation, but if he had an assistant… Mr Carc, the assistant, looked much older than Thorin, too. If anything, Bilbo would have assumed it would have been Carc, or at the least Bard who held the reigns. In either case, the vibes he was getting from all three were not pleasant at all.

“Just tell them everything you know, okay?” Haldir said. “We’ve had everyone who’s got something to say come in here, so don’t worry too much.”

“Um- where should we begin?” Hamfast asked hesitantly.

“There was an incident yesterday,” Thorin said, matter-of-factly. “Start there.”

Hamfast baulked at Thorin’s attitude, but made no comment on it. “We were telling ghost stories, after class,” he said. “There’s a rumour about a spirit showing up when that happens. We were just doing it for fun…”

“What classroom?”

“Classroom 3-3,” Hamfast answered. “The third classroom on the third floor. Everyone says it’s haunted.”

Thorin looked unimpressed, but he didn’t refuse Hamfast’s vague explanation. He glanced at his assistant – who was dutifully typing away at a laptop – before turning back to the three of them. “What was the story about?”

“Ah…” Hamfast glanced at Milo, who gave him a weak shrug. “It was about the old school building, past B Block. No one really goes there much, because it’s kind of out of the way unless you’re going to the front entranceway from behind that block, but it’s mostly visible from some of the classrooms, and from the sports field.”

“What about the building?”

“They said it was used as a medical facility, and that a lot of people died there after seeing a little boy they didn’t realise was a ghost,” Hamfast said. “After we told the story, the room started to shake.”

“Shake?”

“Like an earthquake,” Hamfast frowned. “The tables and chairs started rattling, and everything was falling off of the bookshelves.”

“Was it cold?”

“Cold?” Milo repeated. He rubbed a hand through his hair absently. “It wasn’t cold, but it was really dark. Darker than before we started, but not because we’d closed the blinds… It was weird.”

“You are the one who told the ghost story, are you not?” Thorin asked. “Where did you hear about it?”
Milo frowned in thought, and glanced away. “I’ve heard it a few times, from different students. I can’t remember who first told me it, or where they heard it from. Most people at this school know it.”

Bilbo hadn’t, but he didn’t mention that. He would be glad if he had no obligation to answer any of these questions, if only Hamfast and Milo would keep talking. He wasn’t sure if he had the ability to form the right words anymore, not when he was being scrutinised so thoroughly.

“Does the ghost have a name?” Thorin asked.

“It’s Maki,” Bilbo found himself murmuring. At the deafening silence that greeted him, he suddenly startled, and lifted his eyes. So much for keeping quiet. Thorin's eyes were entirely too intense as they stared at him. Bilbo couldn’t keep his gaze for more than a second, but he felt panicky at the thought that Thorin had seen too many deeply personal things about him, just through that one second of contact. How had he known...?

“How did you know that, Bilbo?” Hamfast asked, standing up in surprise. “Milo, did you know that?”

Milo shook his head, lost for words.

“Me either!” Hamfast exclaimed. “Bilbo?”

“An upperclassman,” Bilbo lied. “I overheard them talking…”

Hamfast looked like he wanted to protest, and for a moment Bilbo thought that maybe his expression was too open, but Haldir quickly silenced Hamfast with a chastising look.

“Did anything else happen in Classroom 3-3?” Bard asked. “Anything with the students, or a teacher, perhaps?”

Hamfast frowned, but shook his head. “Not while they were in the classroom, at least,” he finally said. “Just after hours, but I did hear that the bookshelves have fallen over before. Not like this, though. No one had really been injured in the room, I don’t think.”

“You were injured?”

“Not me,” Hamfast said. “But yesterday, the bookshelves fell on Milo and Bilbo.”

“Were you hurt?” Bard asked, his brow furrowing in concern.

Milo shook his head. “I wasn’t, really… I mean, the bookshelf barely missed me and I fell over, but Bilbo…”

Bilbo flinched as eyes turned towards him. He squared his shoulders, and faintly noticed how Haldir put a reassuring hand on the back of his chair. “I wasn’t…”

“Yes you were,” Hamfast argued. “You were knocked out cold by that bookshelf, Bilbo. Just tell them.”

“You lost consciousness?” Thorin asked. “Did the bookshelf fall on you?”

Bilbo pursed his lips, and forced out a muttered, “Yes.”

“So that’s where that bruise came from, huh?” Bard sighed, eyeing Bilbo’s forehead. “Must have hit you pretty hard to cause that sort of discolouration. You don’t have a concussion, do you?”
“The school nurse had stayed back yesterday, to do a stock take,” Haldir said quickly. “She patched him up, and gave him the all clear.”

Bilbo glanced up at the teacher briefly, but didn’t say anything. The nurse hadn’t been present when he woke, so he couldn’t confirm that, but what reason did Haldir have to lie? Of course, Bilbo was unsure about how Haldir knew of anything that had happened yesterday, either, so he didn’t bring it up. He didn’t feel like it was his place.

“Is that all?” Thorin asked.

Bilbo thought about the handprint on his back, and the way he’d felt so suffocated yesterday – the dream, too, but in the end he nodded his head. “That’s all.”

“No it’s not,” Hamfast said, turning to Bilbo. “Tell them what happened, Bilbo.”

A strange sensation came over Bilbo. Hamfast was never usually so forceful with his words, and never questioned Bilbo’s reluctance towards situations just like these. He winced at the sudden shift, and shrank into his shoulders. He wondered if he looked as nervous as he felt.

“The handprint, Bilbo,” Hamfast insisted, as he took a predatory step forwards. “Show them.”

“Handprint?” Thorin inquired, standing to lay his hands flat on the table. “You have a mark?”

Bilbo started to shake his head as his eyes turned to Thorin, but suddenly Hamfast lurched forwards to grip Bilbo’s arm painfully tight. “A-ah, Hamfast that hurts…”

“Why are you lying?” Hamfast demanded. “Why are you lying, Bilbo?”

“Stop it.” Bilbo’s face twisted, and in a rush of emotion he yanked his arm back hard enough to knock himself out of his chair. He landed on the floor loudly, and felt his entire body recoil as Hamfast stepped forwards to loom over him.

Hamfast reached down for the edge of his shirt, ignoring the way Bilbo pushed at his hands. “Show them, Bilbo! Why are you always like this? It’s so annoying!”

Bilbo’s eyes widened. “I…” He floundered, overcome by a feeling of helplessness that took his breath away. Had Hamfast always felt that way about him? Bilbo had never acted any different to how he did now, that he was sure of, but Hamfast was being completely different. Even Milo appeared quite shocked at Hamfast’s sudden outburst.

“Mr Gamgee-” Haldir started.

Hamfast clenched his jaw, and in a display of strength Bilbo didn’t realise he had he pushed Bilbo’s arms to the side and pinned him to the floor. Bilbo’s head bounced off the hardwood, and he let out a small, pained noise. For a moment everything spun, and he thought that maybe his head wasn’t so good after yesterday’s battering after all- But then Hamfast was yanking up his shirt, exposing Bilbo’s soft stomach and his lightly freckled hips. Tears sprung into Bilbo’s eyes, and he tried to squirm away, but Hamfast’s grip on him was too heavy, too confining.

“That’s enough!” Thorin’s voice cut through the confusing haze of the room, and then his hand was coming down onto Hamfast’s shoulder, not unkindly.

Hamfast jumped as though he’d been burned, and his eyes fluttered. A moment of clarity washed over him, and he jerked his hands away from Bilbo, allowing Bilbo’s shirt to fall back down. A horrified look screwed up his face. “B-Bilbo, I- I’m so sorry-”
Bilbo scrambled to his feet, heart pounding, only to be dazed by a wave of dizziness that had the room spinning. He stumbled, and reached up to grip his head with a hand as he choked off a pained moan. His temples throbbed, like he’d been beaten all over again, and for a moment he was sure he was going to become well acquainted with the floor once more.

But unfamiliar hands gripped his shoulders, holding him upright. They were warm and steady, something Bilbo explicitly noticed, as they contrasted the full body trembles that racked him. He rationally knew it was Thorin, and refused to think that maybe the touch wasn’t as frightful as he first thought it would be.

“Mr Baggins, are you alright?” Haldir leaned closer, and gently pressed a hand to Bilbo’s head. “Oh no, there’s a lump forming. Are you dizzy? Are you able to you stand?”

“I’m going to be sick,” Bilbo muttered, covering his mouth with his hand as he felt his stomach heave.

Haldir frowned fiercely, and gently took a hold of Bilbo from Thorin. “I’m taking you to the infirmary right away,” he said. “Milo, return to class now please. Take Bilbo’s things with you.”

“R-Right…”

“Bilbo-” Hamfast started shakily, reaching out. His face fell when Bilbo visibly flinched.

“You’ve done quite enough, Mr Gamgee,” Haldir scolded. “Go wait in my office now.” His eyes turned towards the investigators, and after taking in a deep breath he gave them a stoic look. “That’s enough, for today. Refrain from contacting the students again until tomorrow, if you will.”

Thorin and Carc said nothing, but Bard nodded, and with that Haldir helped Bilbo stagger away from the room.

He held something small and cold in his hand, when he opened his eyes. Like before, his little feet were bare, and dirty. He wanted to open his fist to see what he held, but his fingers wouldn’t cooperate. Whatever the object he held was, he felt that it was very important, and that he shouldn’t accidentally lose or misplace it. Just to be sure, he tucked it back into the pocket of his ragged clothing, and tapped it twice to make sure it was actually there.

When he lifted his head, he found that he was outside. Everything seemed bathed in a sepia-toned glow, like even the sun couldn’t be entirely bothered to shine properly. The ground, the trees, even the buildings of which he knew were dull in the first place all seemed twice as insignificant as usual. He wondered if there was anything he could do to prevent the people from this place from becoming like that too, but startled when he realised he wasn’t completely sure why he thought that was necessary in the first place. It was as though the thoughts weren’t his own, like they had a foreign colour to them, one that was very different to his own. It was unnerving.

As consciousness started to trickle back in, he turned his eyes to his surroundings. He was outside, sitting underneath a tree that was but one in a line of many that stretched down a dirt path. The building was the only thing of interest in his view. On the side he faced, all the windows were open to let in the gentle breeze. As he glanced up, he saw that the leaves of the tree were moving, but they made no noise. A flutter of movement caught his eye, and he saw that a fidgeting cicada sat diminutively on a branch. It too was silent.

It was scary.
When he looked back towards the building, there was a man standing by the back entrance. He was dressed in very plain clothing, and although his feet were bare, they were clean. One of his arms was wrapped in a fresh sling, and one of his eyes had a patch over it. The other watched him with rapt attention, and then he was beckoning Bilbo forwards, and his mouth was moving. Was he making sounds? What was he saying? Bilbo couldn’t figure it out. The man’s mouth was moving in a way he didn’t understand, and he had no voice.

He was frightening, too.

Bilbo’s heart was pounding when he came to. He hadn’t actually fallen asleep this time, but rather he’d become so lost in his thoughts it was as though he had. As his eyes focused, he found himself exactly where he remembered being – on the bed furthest to the right in the infirmary, closest to the windows with a view of the old school building.

It looked as it always did. Run down, particularly obscured by overgrown trees, and dusty. There was nothing that was interesting about it, nothing that made Bilbo believe he could become so absorbed in it that he lost all sense of reality. When his bearings finally came back, he found himself feeling more frustrated than he had been in the last several years. Prior to that ghost story, he hadn’t thought the building had been anything special. Now, however, it was as though it had become the focus of all his energy. It was consuming him, and those strange, disorientating dreams he was having weren’t helping at all. When he looked at that building, he undeniably felt uneasy.

The school nurse had given him pain medication to help with the swelling and the headache he was developing, but other than that Bilbo didn’t remember much of what she’d said. He’d completely drifted away, and he only had himself to blame. But, as he glanced around, he noticed that she’d left the room, and that made irresistible thoughts start to stir. He experimentally wiggled his toes, and bent his knees. Upon feeling no pain, he resolutely slipped them off the bed, and stood. His head only spun for a moment before he felt stable enough to walk.

There was something in that old building that was not good, and he wanted to know what it was.
Predictably, the old school building smelt thickly of dust when Bilbo heaved the heavy front doors open. They creaked loudly, but stilled with no noise, as if they were more used to being in that position than being shut and locked. He was a little surprised that they opened without much resistance, given the age of the building and how fervently its rumours had begun to spread throughout the school. Perhaps its last visitors had forgotten to lock the doors after they left, which was a dismal prospect. He hoped that they didn’t return to rectify their mistake until he’d managed to finish whatever it was he was intending to do.

If he were being honest with himself, he was apprehensive about being in this place. It didn’t feel right. He expected it to feel cold and vacant, but the interior was suffocatingly warm, like the air of summer was trapped between its walls. Bilbo had to pause just to breathe before he inched inside. He hadn’t expected much, but the interior was startlingly dull. There was no pieces of furniture, and no pictures on the walls. If there had been any in the past, then not even an imprint of them remained. There weren’t even any hooks left in the surface. When he peered into the first room he came across, he found that there was still some furniture after all, but it was very old and likely unusable. He guessed that it had once been destined for the junk yard, but forgotten. For a few moments, he simply wandered around, and made sure to note which corridors led to where. Even with the humid air he still felt chills, and he absently rubbed his arms to drive them away.

Something insistently tugged at the back of his mind, and he didn’t recognise it as anything important until he turned down a hallway that was terrifyingly familiar. Wooden walls loomed over him, bracketing a corridor that began to stretch further than Bilbo could see. His eyes shifted to the door he remembered a nurse walking out of, but it remained as it was. Tentatively, he started walking forwards, and tried not to cower too much when he realised his shoes had stopped making sounds against the floor. The door before him looked bigger than he thought it had been, and when he reached out to grip the doorknob he found that his body had noticeably slowed down. He thought that he might have been too uneasy to actually open the door, but he squeezed his eyes shut and forcefully flung it open.

A rush of air overwhelmed him. His eyes snapped open as his hair twisted away from his forehead, and for a moment he was completely blinded by the whiteness of the curtains that fluttered in the wind.

But then he blinked, and the room was completely still. The door bounced off the wall and unhurriedly came to a gentle stop, but it was completely silent. The room itself wasn’t anything
special. A single bed, a small bedside table and a chair were the only pieces of furniture in the room. The bed wasn’t furnished, but there were faded curtains hanging stiffly on either side of the locked window. Like he expected, everything was covered in a thin but noticeable layer of dust. He could already feel his nose twitching in irritation. This building seemed so fictitious that he felt rather stupid believing that anything real could have ever happened here.

That is, until a small, barely audible chiming noise caught his attention. His head whipped around, and he felt his heart jump straight into his throat. Standing at the end of the hallway from where he’d come was a small child. He wore ragged clothing, and his feet were bare and dirty. His eyes were ravensively and intensely fixed on Bilbo.

Bilbo breathed out. “Maki.”

Thranduil’s face twisted in disdain as he observed Erebor Academy. It paled in comparison to the school his family was intricately involved in – Greenwood Academy – but he had no choice but to come here. With as much poise as he could muster, which coming from him was proudly quite a fair bit, he confidentially sauntered his way into the school. It wasn’t long before he was greeted by the principal, who led him to the room set up for all the investigators they had hired. Thranduil found it vaguely insulting to have his abilities questioned or doubted in such a way, as he knew he was perfectly capable of fixing any problems this dingy school could possibly have accumulated alone, but it was out of his hands.

“You’re acquainted with these men, then?” The principal asked as he opened the door to the spare classroom he had led Thranduil into. Inside waited the people Thranduil had to get along with for the next few days, and he couldn’t say he was all too pleased with the arrangements.

“I am,” he murmured, tilting his chin up. “Though I hardly believe some here are old enough to be referred to as men.”

Oakenshield’s eyes narrowed, but he didn’t rise to the bait. Instead, he glanced surreptitiously at Carc, who looked thoroughly troubled but nevertheless slid a thick folder across the table. “Catch up quickly, if at all possible,” Oakenshield said.

Thranduil eyed him rather dismissively, but accepted the folder. He might not have liked Oakenshield, but his assistant was decent at compiling information in a way that was generally quite simple to read and comprehend. “Anything in particular I should know about beforehand?” He asked curtly as he picked up the folder.

“This might be more complicated than we expected,” Bard said as he came into the room from behind them. His eyes widened a little when he caught sight of Thranduil, and he wordlessly nodded in greeting. He had always been a little quiet around Thranduil, though Thranduil could never figure out why. He didn’t particularly care, in any case.

“How so?” Thranduil asked as he absentmindedly flicked through the files he’d been given. He saw floor plans for the school and the old building that was separate from the main campus, as well as reports on the rate of subsidence and leeching in the area, both of which were too low to cause any major structural problems that could be interpreted as paranormal. “It appears rather standard.”

“The kids here are strange,” Bard said. “They’re acting different to usual.”

“And how do you know that?” Thranduil said, doubtful. “Teenagers change all the time. I would be surprised if they weren’t nervous when in a room with you three.”
Bard took the barb for what it was, and only frowned a little. “We interviewed one student, and got a reading on the personalities of his two friends before they came in. Their attitudes were far outside of the normal parameters we could expect.”

“How so?”

“The student described one friend as very gentle,” Bard explained. “But he rushed straight to violence and almost beat up his friend right in front of us.”

Thranduil raised his eyebrows. That was certainly strange, even for this school. “And the other?”

“He was described as being quiet too,” Bard said. He rubbed the back of his neck, and frowned even harder. “But he was… Well, he was certainly quiet, but he was a little more defensive than I expected. He definitely seemed uncomfortable around us, more so than usual. I sense something strange about him, but I don’t know what it is. He was injured the worst yesterday.”

“Is that so?” Thranduil murmured.

“There’s a handprint on his back,” Oakenshield said, without glancing away from his paperwork. “It’s the wrong size to belong to one of his friends, and too perfect in shape to be from a slap to his back.”

“Oh?” Thranduil gave him an accusatory, somewhat taunting look. It was unlike Oakenshield to focus so intently on a case - from the few Thranduil had worked with him, he strived to get the job done as quickly as possible, and didn’t often spare words he wasn’t obligated to voice. “You seem quite interested in this boy.”

“Of course he is!” Bard snorted. “That kid is cute, in a drowsy sort of way. Thorin’s only eighteen.”

The look Oakenshield donned was so sour Thranduil wanted to laugh. If anything, Oakenshield’s killer stare only intensified as he aimed it towards Bard. “If you can’t be serious, then leave,” he rebuked. “And don’t drop name honorifics with me. We are not that close.”

“So cold,” Bard sighed.

Out of nowhere a man burst through the door. “Is Bilbo here?” He cried.

Bard straightened up. “No,” he answered. “What’s wrong?”

“He’s not in the infirmary,” the man panted, leaning over his knees. “Not in the classroom, either. No one saw him leave, and we can’t find him!”

“Is this the student that was injured?” Thranduil asked.

“The one with the handprint, yeah,” Bard confirmed. His face was twisted with concern. “Come on, we have to find him. He could have a concussion.”

“What if he went into that building?” The man fretted.

Oakenshield’s head lifted at that. “We haven’t had a chance to set up the cameras yet,” he stated. “Bard, go check that building with Haldir. Thranduil, you go with him. See if you can sense anything from that place.”

A delicate scowl touched Thranduil’s lips. He didn’t appreciate being ordered around, especially not from someone like Oakenshield. He wasn’t Oakenshield’s subordinate, or even his employee, and
thus had no reason to follow anything Oakenshield said. However, he kept his annoyance to himself, just this once. Despite his disdain for Oakenshield, Thranduil could respect his intelligence. There was a reason he was at the top of his field running a successful research team, after all. Thranduil wasn’t brash enough to realise Oakenshield was ordering him around not because he wanted to exert power over Thranduil, but because there was an innocent student at risk. Regardless, he crossed his arms, and looked down at Oakenshield. “And where will you be going?”

“The infirmary.”

That was acceptable. If anything, Thranduil felt that the division Oakenshield had ordered was decent. He wouldn’t say he was intrigued by this case, but even he couldn’t be completely unaffected when he heard a child had gone missing, and an injured one no less. He had a child of his own, after all.

Somewhat touchily, he turned to face Haldir, the teacher that had interrupted them. “Take me to the building,” he said, after placing down the files for later. “If there really is something going on here, then I’ll solve it.”

Bilbo clutched his heart as he leaned against the doorway leading into the infirmary for support. He could feel sweat dampening the small of his back, and his hands were clammy. He felt like his stomach was being wrenched upwards, but he forced a hand over his mouth so that his lips wouldn’t open. It wasn’t that he felt shaken, or particularly frightened, but he felt off. Disturbed. Something wasn’t settling right in his body, but he couldn’t tell if it was in his stomach or in his head. Maybe he did have a concussion, after all.

“Mr Baggins!”

Bilbo jumped as the school nurse appeared by his side. She gripped his elbow, and carefully guided him back into the infirmary where she had him lie on one of the beds again. He closed his eyes as his head throbbed, and tried not to think about how he’d gained either of the bruises that were appearing.

“Where did you go wandering?” She chastised as she pressed a hand to his forehead. “Everyone is really worried! You can’t go walking off on your own.”

“I wanted some fresh air,” he smiled thinly, trying to placate her. “I just went down the hall…”

The nurse sighed. “Troublesome students. Perhaps it would be best if you rest for a little here, and then head home. Sleeping off all this stress would be for the best.”

Bilbo was hardly listening, but he nodded anyway, and clenched a fistful of the bedsheets beneath him. He felt like he could sleep for an eternity. His thoughts strayed back to the old school building, and he couldn’t help but shiver. He hadn’t known what he had wanted to see while he was in there, but what he’d experienced was too unsettling for him to comprehend. He wasn’t the type of person who could stomach such a thing. He was socially fragile, and too weak to interact with others like himself. Anything more than basic contact was difficult, so this… It was too much. He’d never felt like he was ready to be swallowed up by the ground, until then. It was as though his very core had been touched by hands that were able to reach past every wall he’d ever built to keep himself safe.

“Let me see if I can find someone to escort you home,” the nurse murmured. Even someone like Bilbo could tell she doubted that anyone would be free, just from her voice. He couldn’t blame her – everyone was in class, after all. He wondered if he’d be able to make it home by himself-
“I can take him.”

Bilbo cracked open an eye, and hoped the look he sent Thorin wasn’t too withering. He resisted the urge to childishly turn away and instead avoided Thorin’s critical eyes.

“I’ll go get Mr Haldir…” The nurse said carefully. “And no more wandering off, Mr Baggins.” She gave Thorin one more meaningful look, but he hardly seemed concerned. He watched her leave, and only approached as the door was shut. The tension in the air was uncomfortably thick, and it made Bilbo grit his teeth. He thought back to the old school building, and resolved himself to figuring out what was happening on his own. Thorin’s interference was unwelcome.

“You went to the old building,” Thorin stated. He walked closer, and observed Bilbo with eyes that were entirely too intelligent.

“I didn’t,” Bilbo muttered.

“Your shoes have dust on them,” Thorin answered. “You did.”

For a moment, silence suffocated Bilbo. His head throbbed, and he turned his face away. Hair fell across his eyes, but he made no move to fix it. Then, he murmured, “I didn’t.”

“What did you see?” Thorin asked. When Bilbo didn’t reply, he didn’t push the issue further. This time, Bilbo was unable to resist the urge to turn away, so he rolled onto his side and buried his face in his arms. Shutting his eyes to the painful light of day was relieving, but only for a short moment. He felt almost as though he might pass out, as if something was pressing down on his head and over his eyes. For a brief moment, all he could think about was how much he wanted to go to sleep, even if he never woke up again.

“You’re an enigma, Bilbo Baggins.”

Bilbo opened an eye, and glanced at Thorin. He was watching Bilbo carefully, eyebrows drawn together ever so slightly. It was the first expression Bilbo had ever seen on him, and it was unnerving. He wasn’t so afraid to hold Thorin’s eye contact this time. “I don’t… Understand you,” he murmured. “Who are you?”

For just a fraction of a second, Thorin’s eyes constricted, like he’d seen something that was truly terrifying. But the look quickly disappeared, so fast Bilbo came to think it was probably just a trick of the mind. He breathed out deeply, and shut his eyes again. Really, what was he meant to do? He’d gotten himself involved now, and he couldn’t see a way out. He felt cornered, and he knew he didn’t have the spirit to fight back. He was too weak, he always had been.

Still, even as he closed his eyes the sound of a little bell chiming continued to ring between his ears.

The train rocked smoothly, and while the movement jostled Bilbo he wasn’t particularly bothered by it. Flashes of orange light reflected by the setting sun showered the back of his head. Dimly, he watched his shadow continue to block out a shape of sunlight against the floor of the train. The window behind him was leaving square-shaped segments of light on the surfaces it touched, and Bilbo couldn’t bring himself to turn his eyes away. It was hypnotizing, and to watch as the light flickered through the train carriage soothed the pain in his head.

“How are you feeling?”

Bilbo wondered if it was possible to look any more miserable, but if anything could make him feel
worse it certainly was Thorin’s concern. “Tired,” he said. It was probably the most honest thing he’d ever told the man.

Thorin didn’t answer him, but Bilbo had a feeling he didn’t need to. The more he was in Thorin’s presence, the more stoic Thorin became. Bilbo had never met a person like him, and that had nothing to do with his apparent profession. He was too aware of just how close Thorin was seated next to him, of how with every jostle of the train their elbows almost touched. To anyone else, they would have appeared to be nothing more than acquaintances, but it was more than what Bilbo was comfortable with. Quietly, the train came to a stop, and Bilbo gathered his things. His bones felt too heavy to move, but he trudged onwards. The platform was as empty as expected, considering the strange time of afternoon it was. Despite the few people that lingered, Bilbo was painfully aware of just how much distance was between him and them in comparison to the distance between himself and Thorin. As he began to walk along the platform, the train took off. For the second time that day, a rush of air blew past him. It tangled its fingers in his hair, and sent disquieting chills down his spine.

“Don’t follow me home.” Bilbo paused in his steps, and felt his shoulders tense. “I don’t want to have anything to do with this anymore.”

“I don’t believe that’s your choice,” Thorin answered. He was watching Bilbo’s back, Bilbo could feel it, but he refused to turn around.

Offhandedly, a voice floated into Bilbo’s head. He closed his eyes, and exhaled once, before bringing a deep breath of fresh air into his lungs. “When all the kings’ men, and all their horses, can’t find a way to save you… What then?”

Thorin was deafeningly silent for a moment. “What?”

Bilbo turned around completely, and forced himself to meet Thorin’s eyes. “What then?” He repeated. “Tell me.”

Thorin watched him, eyes sharp, and didn’t say a word. Bilbo waited for what felt like forever and a day, but it soon became clear that Thorin had no answer for him. His face twisted with annoyance, and a small, scoffing noise escaped him as he turned back around to stalk away.

“Don’t follow me home,” he muttered. He didn’t want anything to do with Thorin.
Etiolated

Chapter Summary

Restless sleep and an unsettling discovery.

Chapter Notes

Etiolated - having lost vigour or substance; feeble.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bilbo’s home had never been particularly cosy. He didn’t have much sense when it came to interior decoration, so much of his furniture was incredibly basic, but it wasn’t exceptionally bothersome. Of course, there were parts of Bilbo’s house that offered him a sense of familiarity, like his admittedly feminine, yellow bedsheets and the thriving succulent on the kitchen windowsill and the way his kettle was always stained with faint fingerprints. To him, his home was nothing more and nothing less than a place to live. It was a place of quietness, where he could do things freely without worrying about how his actions would be perceived by others. No one other than himself had stepped foot inside since he had moved in, and he liked it that way.

That night, he didn’t have any more of those strange dreams. He wondered if he was too far away from school to be affected by them, or if his interference in the old building earlier that day had done something to prevent them. Despite his dreamlessness, he found that sleep was difficult to maintain, and he woke up several times that night. It left him restless and somewhat exasperated at himself, mostly because he couldn’t seem to stop his thoughts from spinning in every possible direction. It seemed as though every time he settled into sleep the sound of a chiming bell would startle him into wakefulness. Eventually a headache began to set in, and he reluctantly gave up the notion of sleep and instead spent much of the early morning sulking by his bedroom window with a stone cold cup of tea.

If anything, he wasn’t looking forwards to going back to school. He knew the other investigators would start arriving, and he was already too involved in the entire mess. He still felt apprehensive thinking about Hamfast, as well, because he’d never acted like that. Bilbo didn’t want to admit it, but his feelings had been a little hurt by what Hamfast had said. He couldn’t really remember ever having friends before coming to this school, and that had never made him feel disappointed, until now. When he thought about it directly, he understood that he wasn’t getting anything other than companionship out of his relationship with Hamfast and Milo, but was that really so bad? He wouldn’t have once thought so, but now he felt doubtful. He was sure he would have no problem returning to a time when he lived in solitude, but it didn’t feel right. He hated thinking that, but he couldn’t help it.

Hesitantly, Bilbo thought about staying home that day. When he glanced in the mirror and really looked at himself, he thought it might be for the best. To put it simply, he looked exhausted. The bruise on his forehead had only gotten bigger and darker overnight, and the circles under his eyes were deep. He thought that he might have been a little pale, and took his temperature just to make
sure he wasn’t coming down with anything, which he didn’t seem to be. After only a moment more of thought, he decided to ring the school and excuse himself. From all the times he’d been in the nurses’ office recently, it wasn’t too surprising that he stayed home. His voice was probably sluggish enough to convince them to let him stay home, anyway.

As the sun came up, Bilbo returned to his bed. He made sure to have a bottle of water on the bedside table, and to have the curtains mostly shut. After a moment of uncertainty, he reached over to turn on music from an old CD player he kept stashed inconspicuously under the bed. It whirred for a moment, but then soft music burst forth to wash over Bilbo’s mind like a soothing balm gently applied to an old wound. The music itself was classical in genre, but predominantly focused on piano compositions. It was familiar, and consoling. Bilbo had always been very inclined to the piano as an instrument, more so than any other hobby he or others tended to pick up. Although he couldn’t remember when he started playing it, he remembered always having a piano accessible, and as such the music was often something he resorted to playing when he was stressed or anxious. He hoped it would help him fall asleep, accompanied by the revealing rays of the rising sun peeking through the gap in the curtains.

It did.

Strangely, Bilbo finally had a dream that morning - one of his childhood home. In his dream, he was a child again. No matter how far he walked, he never found himself in a place that was deeply and undoubtedly familiar. He recalled the corridors with a faint sense of awareness that wasn’t consoling, but rather frustrating. Such was the nature of his mysterious childhood home, but it seemed like the more he walked the more the house seemed to grow. He’d never experienced a dream that made him tired like that, but even so he continued to walk. He wondered if there was something he was meant to find, but the moment he felt close to discovering what that thing was, he woke up.

When his eyes opened, it was to sunlight falling against his face. For a moment he thought he saw the curtains fluttering in a breeze he couldn’t feel, but when he blinked he found they were as still as they always had been, and that he had, in fact, left the window shut when he went back to sleep. Almost leisurely he allowed himself to stay in bed for a while longer, nuzzling his pillow and his comforter until he was tangled and warm. He spent a moment trying to think back on his childhood house, to see if any other memories could be prompted into returning, but nothing came. With a small sigh he pushed himself upright, and felt around under his pillow for where he’d left his phone. As soon as his fingertips brushed against it, it started to buzz. He almost wanted to frown, and wondered why he’d woken up just as he was being contacted, but the thought left his head almost as quickly as it came.

“Hello?” He murmured sleepily.

There was muffled static for a moment, then, “Bilbo!”

“Milo…?”

“Bilbo, something bad has happened!”

Bilbo frowned, and rubbed at his eye with a knuckle. “Pardon?”

“There was a fire in Classroom 3-3 last night,” Milo said in a rush. “The entire room burned! But only that room. The hallway, the outside of the building, the adjoining class – nothing else was affected.”
Bilbo’s eyes widened. “H-how?”

“The teachers haven’t addressed it, but everyone’s saying that a definite cause can’t be distinguished,” Milo said. “You weren’t at school today, but I wanted to warn you. Are you alright?”

Bilbo thought about telling the truth, just for a moment, but dismissed the idea. “I’m fine,” he murmured.

“How’s your head?”

“Sore. I couldn’t sleep well.”

“Is that why you stayed home?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” Milo let out a deep breath. “Okay. You know those guys that talked to us yesterday?”

“Yes?”

“What do you think of them?”

“I… I don’t…” He struggled for words, and closed his eyes. “I don’t trust them, but I don’t think they’re unreliable, either.”

“They were looking for you today,” Milo said quietly. “After what happened yesterday, I thought they might… But I’d hoped they wouldn’t. You’re a good person, you know? Everything’s just going so wrong.”

Bilbo laid back against his pillows, and rested his hand across his forehead. “I… I’m not a good person,” he finally murmured. “Don’t mistake me for one.”

Milo didn’t seem to know how to answer that. “Hamfast is being weird, Bilbo,” he whispered after a moment. “He’s not acting like himself. He only talked to me today to ask if I’ve seen you. Do you think he could be possessed, or something? Like, by a ghost?”

A frown touched Bilbo’s lips again. He thought about the handprint on his back, and the way Hamfast had seemed so fixated on it. “Is that sort of thing possible?”

“I don’t know,” Milo groused. “But… But I think you should avoid him, just for a little while. Those researchers, too. I don’t get a good feeling from them. Maybe you should stay home for a few more days – the school probably won’t allow that though, huh?”

“Maybe.”

“Ah, I’ve got to go. Bilbo, don’t answer the phone if anyone else rings, okay? Something is definitely not right about this place anymore. I just want it to go back to normal.”

Bilbo didn’t reply. There was something undeniably sad about Milo’s voice, and Bilbo wondered if he’d caused whatever it was. In any case, he didn’t bring it up to Milo, mostly – and selfishly – because it made him feel uncomfortable. Perhaps it would have been best if he’d not made any friends, it seemed. His dream of his childhood and of his home, both of which had been rather isolated, only seemed to enforce that idea. After he’d put his phone away, he buried himself into his comforter once again. It smelt like the fabric softener he always used, and a little like himself. Distantly, he wondered if he had a scent that was perceivable by others. It was only a drifting
thought, but it entertained him for a little while. Milo’s words, however, soon overwhelmed his mind. There was no conceivable reason for the classroom to have caught fire. All power sockets were turned off completely at the end of the day, and could only be activated by a key the teacher kept. The only rational explanation was that someone must have purposefully set the fire, but then an accelerant like gasoline or fire starters should have been present.

Could a ghost have done it? Bilbo thought back to the day they’d told ghost stories, and felt himself shiver. He pulled the comforter up to his chin, and tried to let the tension leave his body. Now that he thought about it, that was a scary thing to have happened. If he hadn’t fallen forwards he would have certainly been crushed by that bookshelf. Absently, he reached over his shoulder to touch where he guessed the handprint might be. Had he been pushed? He remembered feeling as though he had, but there was no way either Hamfast or Milo could have done it. The handprint was where he’d felt the touch, too, but that simply didn’t make sense. What could have caused such a striking mark? He hadn’t properly seen it himself, but if others were reacting so fervently to it, then it must have been very troublesome to see.

That old school building was certainly troublesome, too. He now had no doubt that it must have been used as a medical facility some time ago, but after the war ended it was like no one had ever used it again. He knew the school had once tried to convert it into something useable, but soon gave up on doing so. After a moment, he stood and made his way towards his computer. He didn’t know why the reconstruction had stopped on that building, but he was sure he could find out.

A quick internet search only brought up more questions. An old newspaper article told of the building’s construction – it was from so long ago that not much of its content was relevant, but it definitely confirmed that it was used as a medical centre. When the war began, that was where the overflow of patients from a larger, more important facility went. Those that were treated but in need of rest or care before they could be discharged were sent to be housed in that building. It was like they weren’t as important, like they could be easily shuffled around despite grave injuries. Bilbo knew that that was the unfortunate truth, that with the amount of injured soldiers coming in some had to be prioritised over others. It left him feeling a little sick to his stomach, to think of all the suffering that had gone on in a building he passed regularly. Not many people in that place would have ended their lives peacefully.

When he dug around a little deeper, he found records on the school’s reconstruction plans. An article detailing the projected ideals gave him some information. It seemed like the school had intended to turn it into another classroom block, which made sense considering its size. At least two extra classrooms could have been added on, with only a short walk to the main building. That would have allowed the school to have more students in each grade, which would have increased the annual revenue. Bilbo thought it was a reasonable idea, so why hadn’t they gone through with it? Why hadn’t it been demolished completely, and added onto the neighbouring sports field, when its reconstruction hadn’t worked out? Only when he got to the very darkest corner of the page did he realise why.

With his heart thudding in his throat, he searched up a digital copy of the local newspaper for the corresponding date. Tucked into the smallest column on one of the back pages was the article he was looking for. He felt himself swallow heavily as he began to read what little information was written.

“Someone… died? No… No, they were killed,” he murmured, leaning back. A man who was hired as a part of the construction team reportedly died in “suspicious, undisclosed circumstances” after claiming to see a little boy in the building the day before he died. Just like in the ghost story Milo told, the little boy had seemed real enough to warrant the man to approach him. He’d been found by a co-worker, weak and unconscious, and he died in hospital the next day. The truth to his death was never discovered, but he’d told his co-workers of the child, and that was enough to halt all process
on the building.

It was chilling.

Bilbo couldn’t read anymore, after that. How many people had died in that building? The two nurses from the ghost story, the construction worker… Countless soldiers, maybe even the one with the eyepatch in Bilbo’s dream. That little boy they all reported – it had to be Maki. But how did Bilbo know his name in the first place? He felt like he couldn’t breathe. None of it seemed logical, but he could tell he was starting to succumb to it. Maki certainly wasn’t alive, but if that was so he had to be a ghost, and Bilbo didn’t want to believe that. Briefly, he searched for any connection a young boy named “Maki” had to the building from the time it was constructed to the current date, but not a single thing came up.

For now, he couldn’t stomach a single word more of it. He shut down his computer, and crawled back into bed, where the weight of his blankets and the scent of his pillows made him believe that not even ghosts could touch him. He had to go back to school tomorrow, back to a place where so many people had died, to a place were bad things were happening. He really didn’t want to.

The train ride to school saw Bilbo hunched over in his seat. Peaceful sleep continued to evade him, and although he’d had no more strange dreams about the old school building, he couldn’t stop thinking of Maki. If… If the dreams he was having were being forced onto him by Maki, could that mean they were Maki’s memories? Somehow, that seemed to make a little sense to him, perhaps because nothing else did. The building in his dreams looked very different to how it did now, so it was conceivable that perhaps Maki had seen it when it was first built. That would explain the wounded soldiers, and the nurses, too. It had been summer in all his dreams, which was why the windows were always open, and the curtains were always fluttering.

Just thinking of it had a cool breeze drifting across his skin.

Frowning, Bilbo tried to distract himself with his surroundings. Thinking of Maki and the old school building was only giving him a headache, and it would be no good if he had to suffer at school all day in pain. Instead, he turned his gaze to the passengers on the train. There was a man sitting at the front of the carriage, a book in his heads. Opposite Bilbo, a student from a different school stood by the doors. The next stop was probably his. A pair of girls were a few rows behind Bilbo, chatting about a television show or music, he wasn’t sure. The closest person to Bilbo was a boy probably a year older than him, who wore headphones perched on his head. As the train rolled to a stop and the doors opened, a brief moment of silence allowed Bilbo to hear the music coming from his headphones. A strange tingling began at the top of his spine, like there was an important thought gaining speed in his head, and he felt himself sitting up a little straighter. He stared at the back of that boy’s head, or more specifically at his headphones. The boy by the door moved to the side as someone else boarded, and then he disappeared from Bilbo’s peripheral vision, but suddenly something crossed in front of him that had his eyes widening.

It was a woman. There was nothing particularly interesting about her, but she was being led around confidentially by a service dog. She walked past Bilbo to the doors that joined the train carriages, where the dog led her, and reached out her hand. Her fingers came into contact with the brail on the wall that led her to press the button that opened the doors, and then she disappeared, but Bilbo stared long after she was gone. He’d seen her a handful of times, remembered her chubby, dutiful dog, but he’d never considered her blindness seriously, until now. It had always been a trait about her that rose and faded as quickly as she walked past him, just like how some people had their ears pierced or how others had a cute pin on their bag.
Today, however, he felt a little clearer. Sensory deprivation – it suddenly became the answer to all of his questions.

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to write more, but I ran out of time, ugh (,.ʃ₈ ʃ., )
Finding a way into school without being seen wasn’t something Bilbo thought he would ever have to do, and yet here he was frowning furiously at himself as he tried to avoid the prying eyes of anyone he didn’t want seeing him. He’d spotted a new investigator with long blonde hair by the old school building, and while he’d wanted to go back in there before class started for the day, he didn’t think it was very wise. Instead, he made his way to his own classroom to take his seat. Only a few other students besides himself had arrived, but he wasn’t particularly friendly with any of them. He busied himself with reviewing the work he’d missed yesterday, of which his teacher had left under his desk. Still, it was hard to keep his mind off recent events when it felt like he was being watched from all angles.

It wasn’t that he was especially frightened of the researchers the school had hired, but he thought it was best to avoid them until they left. Fixing paranormal problems was their job, was it not? They didn’t feel notably untrustworthy in regards to their profession, and he’d seen a level of assured confidence in Thorin that wouldn’t be present in someone who didn’t completely believe in what they were doing was utterly credible. He didn’t know how they operated, but the researchers wouldn’t be here forever. However, what would happen after they left? Things would go back to normal, like Milo wanted, but… He couldn’t really remember what “normal” was. How had he acted last week? What facial expressions had he worn, what words had he spoken? The more he thought about it, the further the memory seemed to fade.

“Bilbo, you’re back!”

Startled, Bilbo glanced up as Milo rushed across the room. “G-good morning,” he murmured.

“Good morning!” Milo replied. “How are you feeling?”

“Alright,” Bilbo said, frowning a little. He wanted to ask about yesterday, but chose not to say anything. Milo already looked a little frazzled, and Bilbo knew he’d never had the toughest heart, but still it seemed as though Milo really was alarmed about the recent happenings. Even a person like Bilbo knew when to hold his tongue.

“Have you been Hamfast this morning?”

Bilbo shook his head.
“Okay,” Milo let out a long breath. “Okay, that’s good. Is that a bad thing to say? He’s acting so weird, Bilbo. He didn’t talk to me at all yesterday.”

Bilbo glanced away. “I don’t understand,” he said quietly.

“Me either!” Milo grumbled. “Ever since we told those stupid ghost stories, nothing has been the same. What do you think of it all, Bilbo?”

Briefly, he thought back to the articles he’d read the day before, and what he’d seen in the old school building. His dreams crossed his mind, too. He felt like he knew so much more than Milo, and even though Milo was a good person, Bilbo didn’t think he should know the extent of it all. “I… don’t think there’s much we can do about it, now,” he eventually said.

Milo’s eyes widened, and he quickly glanced away. He was silent for a moment. “I think you’re right,” he finally said. “But I still think the same thing I said yesterday. Just be careful, alright?”

“Alright.”

Halfway through the day, Bilbo was called into the guidance councillor’s office. Haldir was waiting for him at his desk, and thankfully the room was empty. Bilbo still had a small frown on his face, but it wasn’t like he had any other option but to go. He didn’t want to get into trouble with his teachers.

“How are you feeling today?” Haldir asked.

“Fine,” Bilbo answered, as he took a seat across from Haldir. “Why am I here?”

“I’m worried about you,” Haldir answered. “It’s my job to worry, you see. Have you spoken to Hamfast recently?”

Bilbo shook his head.

“He’s acting differently, so I was concerned that something might happen again.” Haldir paused for a moment, then sighed. “I’m apprehensive about the investigators the school has hired,” he said. “Especially in regards to the wellbeing of the students. All these strange events are starting to get a little dangerous, and with students acting so out of character… It’s definitely unusual. I thought the investigators would be able to fix whatever was wrong, or that they’d say there was nothing at all, but even their results are turning up inconclusive.”

Bilbo glanced up. “How so?”

Haldir frowned. “I’m not sure I’m meant to tell you, but in light of recent events I will. It’s definitely something unnatural that’s going on – apparently, the land the school is built on is stable, so they’ve decided that it has to be something else causing all these problems. There’s one man who arrived later – Thranduil – who’s a medium, and he says that he senses quite a number of residual spirits brooding here.”

“Residual spirits?”

“Spirits of people who died here, or are connected to this land. Most likely that old building past B Block, but no one’s used that building in years, so they can’t figure out why the spirits are acting up now, of all times. It doesn’t make sense.”

Bilbo didn’t answer.
Haldir sighed. “I’m not at liberty to mess with their investigation, but I want you to be careful, at least until this is all resolved. I’ve told other students the same thing, but none of them have been as involved as you.” He looked away for a moment, then back at Bilbo. “Is your back alright?”

Bilbo tensed, clenching his fingers, and nodded. “It’s fine,” he lied.

Haldir nodded. “Alright, I’m glad,” he said. “Just try to steer clear of the research team until they’re done, alright? That’s all I wanted to say. Can you send Milo on down when you next see him, too?”

Bilbo nodded, and stood. He couldn’t help but think of Thorin and his companions now. He’d wanted to avoid them, but at every turn they were appearing, again and again. It unsettled him, but it was something that was completely out of his control. Even if he’d wanted to completely ignore them, it wasn’t like the ghosts at his school would suddenly disappear, too. Despite his aversion to it all, he still found his thoughts driven back towards the old school building. He couldn’t see it out of the windows in the hallway from this side of the school, but it was like he could sense it simmering and broiling just a short walk away. He was far too aware of it. Perhaps he might of thought that the main school building was safe from its influence, but after all the incidents in Classroom 3-3 he wasn’t so sure anymore. He still wanted to go back to the building, partially to see if he could find Maki again, but it was still an intimidating concept. He still wasn’t sure that he wouldn’t be hurt, and if Maki wasn’t the only spirit there, then the others became completely unknown entities. That, in itself, was terrifying.

When the end of the day rolled around and club activities started, Bilbo decided to linger at school to see if he could find a way into the old building. He hadn’t attended his club in a long time, but the club advisor, Mr Daeron, wasn’t particularly strict with the members. He was very absorbed in his own music, after all, which was somewhat why Bilbo had decided to join the club in the first place, aside from having free access to a piano. The old school building could be seen from the windows, too. The club room had been moved recently, so with its new view it became the perfect place for him to be.

“Nice to see you again, Mr Baggins,” Daeron murmured as Bilbo quietly made his way into the room. “I hear you’ve been having a bit of trouble, lately.”

Bilbo bristled at that. He hadn’t always gotten along with Daeron, but not many people did. He was a very quiet man, but his presence was easy to feel, and that made him difficult to approach. Regardless, he nodded in greeting, and sat down at the piano. There were other students in the spacious room, all of which were working with an instrument of some form or another. As soon as the piano keys were bared before him, people were easy to ignore.

“The results of the fire investigation came back.”

Thranduil glanced up from his place, inconspicuously tucked into a corner of the office, to frown at Oakenshield. “And?”

“Inconclusive.” He laid down the paperwork, and took his seat once more. “There is no trace of any accelerants, and the school’s alarm system wasn’t triggered. It’s impossible for anyone to have started it.”

“It has to be a spirit, then,” Bard concluded. “Why that classroom specifically?”

“I looked into its uses over the past five years,” Oakenshield said. “It’s primarily been used as Classroom 3-3 from the time when the school opened, but the school used to use it for club activities,
as well. Specifically, for the music club.”

“Did they move the location of the music club?”

“Yes, to a larger room built on the second floor specifically for music. Classroom 3-3 doesn’t have a view of the old school building, but the new music room does.”

“What’s so important about the music club, then?”

“It may not be the club itself, but the club members,” Thranduil said as he sat straighter, his chin tilted up. “Am I right?”

Oakenshield nodded. “None are particularly noteworthy, but Bilbo Baggins is in the music club. His attendance to club activities isn’t the best, but it’s still a red flag. The club was only recently moved to another room, and that room is soundproof. It’s a weak theory, but that could have been the trigger for the spirits bound here. Perhaps the music soothed them? It’s plausible, but seems unlikely.”

Thranduil hummed dismissively. “So the club room was moved, and then the spirits and the old building begin to act up… It could be connected, but why is music so significant?”

Oakenshield simply shook his head.

Thranduil sighed. “The spirits here aren’t behaving normally. They’re certainly attached to that old building, so it’s unusual that they’ve chosen to damage a completely different room. Of course, that classroom is the site of a lot of spiritual energy – several groups of students have told ghost stories and similar things that have probably enticed the wrong kind of spirits closer, but they seem to be fairly isolated incidents.”

Bard nodded in agreement. “I did some digging and found that a lot of people have died in the old building, but there have been no reports of any deaths or even serious injuries at the main building. If anything, the ghosts should only be located at the old building, and yet they’re here as well, attacking students… Possessing them too, if I’m not mistaken.”

“You’re not,” Thranduil answered, before Oakenshield could. “I can sense it.”

“This all seems to come back to Bilbo,” Bard said, sighing. “He’s being injured, and his friends are being possessed… I get a weird feeling from him, like he’s hiding something. Didn’t you talk to him yesterday, Thorin?”

Oakenshield closed his eyes, his face expressionless. “I did.”

“Where did he disappear to?”

“The old school building,” Oakenshield answered. “Though he was adamant he hadn’t.”

“He was lying, then.”

“He doesn’t trust us,” Oakenshield said instead. “He’s protecting himself.”

“From us?”

“From something.”

Thranduil narrowed his eyes. “I want to see him,” he said.

Bard glanced over at him out from the corner of his eye. “You think you can sense something from
“Can’t hurt to try.” Thranduil had no doubt that he’d be able to sense something from the student. He’d always been able to – it was why his name was so widely renowned in the field; that and his good looks. He filed away the paperwork he’d been reading over, and stood. “Shall we go?”

The music room wasn’t difficult to find. Thranduil had done a sweep of the entire school the day before, and he had an excellent memory, thus he never got particularly lost. He made sure to walk with a high head, though that might have been a feature born more of muscle memory than of conscious effort. He was always sure to conduct himself properly on cases, and was never discourteous. He would have hated to leave a bad impression, after all. When he finally reached the music room, ahead of Oakenshield and Bard of course, he knocked politely to excuse his intrusion and opened the door. Instantly, he was completely overwhelmed.

The sound of a piano played unlike any other he’d ever heard reverberated through his head. He felt a chill rush over him, because he could see everything that was going on, things that no other person could see.

“Thranduil?”

He wondered how different his expression was. It was undoubtedly shaken if even Bard was questioning him. “That child,” Thranduil said, his eyes fixated on the messy-haired student seated at the piano, “he’s completely surrounded by spirits.”

Chapter End Notes

I have an event to attend tonight so I didn’t get to write as much as I wanted, which is frustrating... Perhaps I should add more later? Idk ^^"
Empirical

Chapter Summary

A well-timed fire and a tinkling bell.

Chapter Notes

Empirical - based on, concerned with, or verifiable by observation or experience rather than theory or pure logic.

Playing the piano, to Bilbo, had become something that was nothing more than second nature. Despite taking breaks in which he did nothing towards practicing or keeping up his skills, he was always able to return to the last place he’d been. When his fingertips first touched the piano keys, his mind always tumbled back into memories, however sparse and unclear, of his childhood. Playing the piano became a voluntary act of submission that made him vulnerable to the drifting way his thoughts often disconnected from his body. The world faded, and he became immersed in the chase of memories he wanted to see, to keep. There were not many things that were startling enough to rouse him from the haze he fell into while he played.

A fire alarm, however, was one of those things.

His heart lurched as the piercing wail of the alarm ricocheted throughout the empty school. His fingers slipped on the keys and the gentle lullaby he’d been playing was abruptly cut off. As his head jerked up, Bilbo felt his blood run cold. The research team was standing in the doorway – Thorin, Bard, and the tall man staring at him as though he had grown another head who must’ve been Thranduil were all there, and the sight of them intimidated Bilbo. More so than their presence, however, was the fact that not only Thranduil was watching him with a startling look on his face. No, Thorin stared at him with such an intensity that Bilbo felt himself starting to flush under the scrutiny. Thorin’s unnaturally bright eyes made him feel exposed, like he was being looked at from under a microscope that only Thorin could see through. It gave him goose bumps, and made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

That, however, wasn’t something he could focus on when the fire alarm was blaring. The sheer loudness of it muddled his thoughts and sent him into a panic that was difficult to work through. He could only watch, feeling choked for breath, as Mr Daeron dragged the last few students remaining in the club room out of the door, shouting directions. The physic researchers disappeared as soon as it became clear that smoke was billowing down from the third floor, and distantly Bilbo wondered how a burnt classroom could catch on fire again. When he stood from the piano, a ferocious chill shot up his spine, pinning him in place. For a brief moment, the room seem to spin and pulse as though it was being shook, and he felt his heart get caught in his throat.

The old building would be empty now, wouldn’t it? The researchers were preoccupied with the sudden fire, the students would all be sent home, the teachers too… Unintentionally, his eyes darted over to the windows from which he could see the building. Even from the second story it seemed to
loom, to impose itself on Bilbo’s thoughts like a poison that had long since been steeped into his bloodstream. Before he knew it, his feet were moving, and his body was listening to a command given by someone other than him. The fear in his head shortened his breath, but something akin to an unasked for curiosity pushed him forwards. More than anything, he needed to see Maki again. He needed answers, and the unexpected sound of a bell he’d been hearing for days suddenly chiming once again only served to further solidify his resolution.

The doors to the old building were unlocked when he pushed them open. An uncomfortably humid rush of air swelled over him, where it condensed in the pit of his stomach like a sickness. His hands trembled with fright but he took a step into the darkened entrance hall nevertheless, where he saw a camera seated on a tripod. Although he knew it must have been from the research team, it was surprisingly easy to ignore. Instead, his mind was overcome with the suffocating atmosphere of the building, and the way the back of his neck and his hands seemed to grow damp with anxiety and sweat. He took another step forwards, and forced himself to inhale deeply. He could feel his lungs struggling to accommodate the oxygen, and it made him crave the safety of his home. Regardless, he knew he was undoubtedly stuck in the place, and he had been since the first moment he’d stepped in past the front doors.

Out of nowhere, the doors slammed shut behind him. The sound boomed and echoed, and he couldn’t help but flinch hard enough to make his shoulders go tense. Thick darkness consumed the room like a hungry entity, and Bilbo couldn’t help but let out a small noise. He clenched a hand in his shirt, and inched past the camera. There was no point in turning back now, and it didn’t seem like he would be able to even if he had wanted to in the first place. Those doors definitely wouldn’t open again. Instead, he moved forwards, and listened for the bell. When it began to chime quietly, he followed the sound. Even in the darkened building he was able to recognise the hallway that he was led to, the one from his dreams. He stood at its end, and watched as each of the open doors suddenly slammed shut. He flinched at the motion, but the doors made no sound.

Then, at the end of the hallway, Maki appeared.

Bilbo went to call his name, but silenced himself. After taking another deep breath, he started walking forwards. As soon as he reached the first closed doorway, a man appeared in front of the door. His face was hallowed, and his eyes were so dark Bilbo thought that he’d be swallowed by them. His arms were the only part of him not covered by his hospital gown or bandages, and his skin was partially transparent. Bilbo quickly covered his mouth with his hand to muffle the noise of surprise that forced its way out of his throat, and took a step back. When he turned away, those dark eyes followed him, and it spurred him on. In the next doorway, just like the first, another ghost appeared – the man with the eyepatch from his dream. The farther he ran, the more the doorways became filled with soldiers, and eventually the two nurses dressed all in white with visibly bruised necks, too. It made his eyes water with horror. He rushed past them, eyes turned away, and tried not to drown in the intensity with which they stared after him. He could feel their eyes looking right through him. He felt like they could see all of his secrets, like he was completely and utterly exposed to them, like they could do with him whatever they wished. It was more revealing than he’d ever felt, more laid open, even more so than the moment Hamfast had yanked up his shirt in front of the psychic researchers.

Maki hadn’t moved from the place where he stood. Up close, he was much smaller than Bilbo remembered him being. His face was full of youth that remained trapped in a place where the sky couldn’t be seen. His eyes, eyes that would have once seen so much, now seemed listless, like an endless void of repression and loneliness and anger. One of his hands was clenched around something, and almost unwillingly Bilbo could feel it in his own palm, like it had left an impression in his skin. Maki’s other hand, however, slowly lifted. His fingers spread, like he was reaching for something but didn’t expect it to ever fall to him. Bilbo felt the urge to reach out, and so he did,
stretching as far as he could. The moment his fingers touched Maki’s wrist, he was overwhelmed by only one thought.

He was solid.

He breathed in deeply, and tasted a summery sweetness on their air. When he glanced around, he found himself outside of the old building, but it wasn’t so old anymore. Instead the building was fresh and coloured with a vitality that Bilbo had never had the opportunity to witness. It seemed that everything he looked at was a shade or two brighter, warmer, like it was seen through the eyes of someone young and living. Even so, he felt weak. His heart hurt when it beat, and his hands trembled uncontrollably. He wanted to sleep, but somewhere deep inside he knew he shouldn’t. It felt like a limit he shouldn’t cross, but oh how heavy and burdensome his eyelids felt.

Still, he pushed himself up. Briefly, when he braced himself against the ground, he could feel each individual blade of grass between his fingers. They were cold and smooth, and made his heart flutter. When he stood, he found that his legs wouldn’t work, so much so that he even stumbled and had to grab onto the tree trunk he’d been resting against for support. Its hard bark cracked under his fingers, and an empty cicada shell silently fell to the ground. He couldn’t help but feel a strange sense of sadness when he saw it, a sort of sadness that had long since been submerged in his heart. He’d never gotten to hear the cicada sing. When he glanced back up at the building, it had suddenly become a little more foreboding. It felt familiar, though quite unwelcoming. However, he had no other choice. Inside that building were the doctors and the nurses – God’s Angels. That was what everyone called them, those that wore pure white, adorned with red crosses. They knew how to fix humans when no one else could.

The inside of the building was just like how Bilbo remembered, but brighter, and furnished. His body – was it even his own? – moved on a set path like it was being controlled by someone else, like its destination had already been designated and all he had to do was to get from point A to B. Regardless, it gave him a feeling of nervousness that was strong enough to make him feel dizzy. When he finally came across the hallway he’d become familiar with, he found people walking around. Injured soldiers, and nurses too, they ignored him when he tried to reach for them. He’d never been able to talk with people, never been able to form the right words, and he remembered that someone had taught him how but no one here was giving him the chance. When a nurse walked by, he reached out his hand desperately for her, and her mouth had started to move but no words came out and when he only stretched up higher, trying to communicate properly, she’d gotten angry and slapped him away.

He stayed against the wall at the end of the hallway after then, bruised and sore and dirtied. He couldn’t help but feel resentment coil in his stomach, guided to completion by feelings of fright and frustration and anger. His eyes started to droop, but before he let them close he reached for his bell. It was little and he could feel something rattling inside it, but it made no noise. Just to check, he shook it a few times, but like everything else it remained utterly silent. After that, he closed his eyes, and they did not open again until the world had changed.

Bilbo was panting when his eyes focused on the dusty floor he was kneeling on. He felt sweat drip down his forehead, but he was too distracted to wipe it away. It was so hard to breathe that he was struck with the idea of giving up, but that was impossible. He blinked several times to clear his eyes, and then glanced forwards.

Maki was watching him. It took a moment for Bilbo to realise that he was clutching Maki’s wrist,
and that it felt solid and chillingly cold beneath his palm. He felt like he’d seen so much of Maki’s life, even though it had been so shockingly short. He swallowed heavily, and released Maki’s wrist before sitting back on his knees. He wondered what he should say, how he could convey his feelings to the ghost of a child who was ignored and subsequently died, and he felt absolutely at a loss. His heart ached just thinking about how alone Maki had been in a place that was so foreign and unwelcoming. In the end, he took a hold of Maki’s outstretched hand and brought his fingertips to hover just about Bilbo’s lips. Despite how solid Maki felt, his fingertips were truly ghosting just above Bilbo’s lips, and left nothing more than a faint, cold impression.

“Can you understand me now?” He asked.

Maki’s eyes went wide, and suddenly a light came flooding into them. With an intensity Bilbo had never seen on anyone living, the little boy nodded.

Bilbo let out a shaky breath. Maki could undoubtedly feel it. “I’m sorry,” Bilbo said, “for what happened to you, that they didn’t help you. It’s not your fault.”

“It is,” Maki said. His voice was warbled, and if his pronunciation had been any worse the words would have been completely unrecognisable, but Bilbo could see the way his lips moved, could read them.

He shook his head. “No, it wasn’t,” the Bilbo said softly. “It couldn’t be helped. It must have been so scary for you.”

Maki’s fingers flexed.

When Bilbo was riding the train one morning, he’d watched a mother bring her child’s hand to her lips so that the child could feel the way her mouth moved when certain words were spoken. It was a spur of the moment sort of action, one that Bilbo only remembered when he was faced with a deaf ghost trying to reach a place where words could be heard. “I’m sorry,” he repeated. “But you died.”

Maki glanced down. His eyes grew watery, but when the tears fell they disappeared before they could hit the floor. “All those people died. They saw me, and died.”

Bilbo gripped his wrist a little tighter. “Humans are fickle. They trick themselves into believing that there is a place for them after death, like heaven or paradise or something else, and they can’t comprehend that there are some people who linger in a world they weren’t ready to leave.” It had to be the longest sentence he’d ever said, but his words were making Maki’s expression loosen, like he truly believed them. “Don’t blame yourself for their deaths, because there was nothing you could have done. There’s a better place waiting for you somewhere else, somewhere that’s not this building.”

Maki nodded, and scrubbed at his eye. “I’m sorry,” he said. “You got hurt too.”

Bilbo smiled. It was a strange sensation on his face, but it made Maki watch him with shining eyes. “You just wanted to hear the music, right? All the ghosts here, too.”

Maki nodded again. “I couldn’t hear it.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t know if you ever will. But… But it sounds nice,” he said. “It sounds the same way grass feels between your fingers, the same way the sun feels when it’s morning time in summer. Can you understand that?”

Even as he let out little whimpers, Maki nodded. “I can, I can!” He unfurled his closed fist, and inside a little bell rested. “What does this sound like?”
Bilbo frowned in thought. “It… It sounds kind of lonely,” he murmured. “But it’s the sound that led me here. Even in my dreams I could hear it.”

“Is it a good sound?”

“It is.”

Maki shook the bell, and again Bilbo heard it tinkling. Even though Maki would never be able to, it was like that burden of that was a little easier to bear, now. “What happens next?” Maki murmured.

Bilbo sighed. “There’s a better place for you, so you should go.”

Maki nodded. “And the others?”

Bilbo glanced behind him. The soldiers and the nurses, they were all standing in the doorways, watching Bilbo lifelessly. “I think they’ll go, too,” he said. “The fires will stop, the shaking will stop, and everything will continue on.”

Unexpectedly, Maki shifted his fingers forwards a little more, until they touched Bilbo’s lips firmly. “How sad,” he said. “Don’t cry.”

“I’m not…”

Maki grinned. It was a childish grin, so youthful that it made Bilbo’s words disappear in his mouth. Just like that, with nothing more than that single smile, Maki was gone.
Elucidate

Chapter Summary

Answers given and a stubborn offer.

Chapter Notes

Elucidate - *make (something) clear; explain.*

“When all the kings’ men, and all their horses, can’t find a way to save you… What then?”

“Then I’ll save myself, and all the kings’ men, and all their horses, too!”

Classroom 3-3 was swallowed in thick black smoke that seeped into the corridor the very moment Bard threw the door open. Thorin took a step back as the acrid scent of the smoke burned his nose, and lifted his hand to shield his eyes as Thranduil snatched up a fire extinguisher from outside the classroom. When he pulled out the key, white extinguishing foam fizzled into existence, smothering the flames that suffocated the room. The smoke cleared as the secluded fire was quelled, leaving him with a view of the charred remains of desks and chairs that had only been lightly burnt the day before. It was insistently frustrating to be confronted with something Thorin wasn’t able to immediately solve.

“There’s nothing here.” Bard let out a deep breath. He was just as frustrated at Thorin, but significantly less talented at hiding it. “How can there be nothing here? What’s the point of the fires anyway?”

“Thorin.”

He turned at the sound of his name to face Carc, who walked up with a briskness in his pace that wasn’t commonly seen. “The cameras are picking up strange things.”

The fire was easy to disregard at that. Thorin followed Carc back to the room they’d been provided by the school where they’d set up all their equipment without hesitation. Monitors and rows of screens were connected with wires that ran throughout the room to give him a clear view of every place he’d set up a camera or microphone. Carc was bent over his own small setup, and after tapping away at the keyboard he brought up the feed from the camera in the entry way to the old school building.

“This is from the moment the fire started,” he said, clicking play. The screen lit up with the feed from the camera, and for a moment it seemed just as empty and still as ever, but then it suddenly went dark. The camera only cut out for a few seconds at most, but when the feed flickered back on the hallway was darker, and all the doors that had been open were shut. “The microphone didn’t turn back on,” Carc said. “It’s still offline.”
“What about the others?” Thorin asked, folding his arms.

Carc jerked his head away, and silently ignored the question. That in itself was enough of an answer for Thorin. He moved to double check that the connections for the microphones were still in place, and only felt a little more frustrated when he found that they were completely untouched.

Out of nowhere, Bard suddenly jumped forwards, his eyes trained on the screens. “Someone’s in the building!” He exclaimed. “Thorin, look!”

“It’s Bilbo,” Thranduil said. His voice was just above a whisper. “He’s going to get hurt.”

They watched, helpless, as the camera picked up the darkened shape of Bilbo edging into the hallway. He almost looked like he was shaking, and from what was visible of his face it was clear he was frightened. The usual expressionless mask he wore seemed to be slipping. Thorin leaned closer to the screens, trying to figure out what exactly Bilbo thought he was doing, when Bilbo suddenly jumped so hard that even Thorin flinched.

“The doors in that hallway shut,” Carc said, straightening. His face was pinched in something faintly akin to apprehension.

Thorin gritted his teeth. “What are the other cameras picking up?”

“The thermal readings are getting higher,” Carc said, bringing up the new feed. Most of the rooms had turned red with the rising temperature. “The cameras are struggling to pick up actual images, but that spirit Thranduil sensed the other day is in the third hallway.”

Thorin hummed sourly, and turned back to the cameras. “What is he doing?”

“Bilbo’s going towards the spirit,” Thranduil said. His eyes were narrowed, like he was having thoughts he hadn’t cared to share confirmed. Thorin watched him cautiously – he’d never fully trusted Thranduil or his abilities, mostly due to his involvement with the media and commercial activities. Thorin himself had never cared for such things, and generally went out of his way to avoid them. Thranduil, on the other hand, gravitated towards them. He was a very proud person, and enjoyed flaunting himself when he knew there was no way for him to be upstaged. In a sense, it showed just how intelligent he was, but his attitude was too different from Thorin’s for them to ever get along well.

Abruptly, all the screens started to rattle, as if someone were shaking them. The feeds plummeted into static, one by one, until only muffled images could be seen. Even through all the static Thorin could still make out Bilbo’s shape. He was nearing the corridor where the impression of a spirit was being picked up, and he was definitely frightened now. His shoulders were noticeably tense, and he was clutching his shirt like it could protect him from things that lurked in the dark. Thorin had always been able to notice the small things like that, had always been able to read humans through their body language – but Bilbo had remained completely and utterly unreadable until that moment. Even just this small glimpse into him was enough to spark Thorin’s interest.

Silently, Thorin watched the scene unfold. Bilbo was staring at the doors down the hallway as they all were flung shut. His eyebrows were draw up in fright as he stared at the doorway like there was something there, but the camera wasn’t picking up anything with the darkness of the hallway. He looked like he might collapse, but then he started running, eyes fixed firmly on the space ahead of him. The further he went the more obscured he became. The camera was too far away to pick up his figure properly anymore, and wordlessly Carc switched the feed to the thermal camera. Instantly the screen became brightened by shades of red and orange. Each doorway was too warm for it to have been empty, as though there was someone standing right there, but more worryingly was the way
Bilbo fell to his knees at the end of the hallway before a smaller figure.

Thranduil staggered back from the screens, and turned his head away. “I’m going,” he stated, his voice fierce with determination. In his voice Thorin could hear a paternal protectiveness that ultimately led his actions. He knew Thranduil had a child around Bilbo’s age, perhaps a year or two younger, and he’d always had a hidden soft spot for children. Thorin watched him leave with uneasy thoughts in his head, and eventually moved away from the screens to follow. Thranduil only gave him a dismissive look as he wordlessly caught up, which Thorin disregarded.

The doors to the old school building were shut tight when they arrived in front of them. Thranduil pushed against the handles, but they wouldn’t open until he forced them with a shoulder. A rush of air crashed over them like a wave, accompanied by the sound of a chiming bell and the stench of musky dust. Thorin’s face twisted at the feel of it settling in his throat, but dutifully followed Thranduil as he stormed straight ahead. Even in the face of danger he still held his head high and walked with assured confidence.

What they came across seemed to make that confidence waver.

Bilbo was slumped against the wall, head lolled forwards. As soon as they stepped foot into the corridor something dark with no exact shape let out an inhuman shriek and lunged forwards. Thranduil jumped back and immediately reached into the pocket of his jacket from which he withdrew a small glass vial. Within only a few seconds he had murmured something in a language Thorin didn’t understand and threw out his arm. A thin stream of water briefly condensed in the air before completely evaporating, and with it went the dark spirit. Nothing was left behind other than a lingering heat and the feeling that something quite sad had finally been subdued.

It was a form of exorcism.

Thorin moved past Thranduil to Bilbo’s side. He crouched and pressed two fingers against Bilbo’s throat, just under his chin, and felt his face go slack when he felt nothing but cold skin. Then, suddenly, rhythmic beats pressed against his fingertips and he couldn’t help but feel his expression twist. As gently as he could, he slipped his arm under Bilbo’s legs and hauled him upright. Thranduil was watching him with intensely critical eyes. It made Thorin question just how badly Thranduil had been frightened for Bilbo when he saw him surrounded by spirits in the music club room. Thranduil had never been known as the one to take a client’s wellbeing as his first priority, and yet his eyes were trained on the way Thorin handled Bilbo as though a single mistake would prompt him to turn on Thorin, too. There was something undeniably different about this case, about Bilbo.

He cursed himself when he realized he’d already started trying to figure out what it was.

Bilbo couldn’t bear to meet Thorin’s eyes. Instead, he clenched his hand tighter around the little bell he felt solidly pressed against his palm in his pocket, and tried to suppress an insistent yawn that was building up in the back of his throat. He couldn’t remember falling out of consciousness, but he could somewhat remember waking up, and it had been to the view of the infirmary, once again. At least he wasn’t injured, this time.

“So you say the ghost’s name was Maki,” Thranduil said. He was a man with very fine features, Bilbo noticed. His eyes were nicely shaped, and his hair was long and blonde, like starlight. He thought it might have been beautiful enough to never get tangles.

Bilbo nodded.
“Did he die there?”

Again, Bilbo dipped his head in acknowledgment. He couldn’t find the words to speak, and somehow felt like he was being chastised. He really just wanted to go home before he forgot exactly what home was.

Thranduil sighed, and leaned back. “The rest of the spirits will need to be exorcised,” he said, turning to give Bard a pointed look. “You can manage at least that on your own, can’t you?”

Bard gave him a displeased look, and left the room. He didn’t look particularly angry, so Bilbo guessed that Thranduil made comments similar to that one frequently. It seemed like a trait that fit his character well.

Thranduil turned back to Bilbo. “You seem to be quite spiritually sensitive,” he said. “Were you able to sense anything notable about that building?”

“Only when Maki wanted me to,” he said quietly. “I think.”

“Perhaps your sensitivity is geared more towards children, then,” Thranduil said.

“That’s possible,” Thorin agreed. “It explains why you were so affected.”

“But Hamfast…”

“Is related to you, as your friend,” Thranduil explained. “It seems that the spirits here were reliant on the music from the old club room to entertain them – essentially, it kept them from doing other things, and it served as a distraction. You said that Maki was deaf, wasn’t he? Their attraction to the music you played, combined with your spiritual sensitivity, made you the perfect target.”

“Maki- he didn’t hurt me,” Bilbo argued. “The others were the ones who did bad things.”

“That’s because of the nature of their deaths,” Thorin said. “From what you’ve told me, it’s likely that Maki’s soundless hauntings prior to their deaths is what instilled in them the desire to retain sound. Sometimes speech can be harder to comprehend, but music has always been comprehensible to spirits. It’s why old stage theatres and show rooms are often haunted.”

“Either way, it appears as though you ended up quite involved,” Thranduil said as he sighed. “I’ve never met someone like you.”

Bilbo flinched, and glanced away. He didn’t say anything to that.

“Still,” Thranduil continued, “I can’t explain away why exactly it was you in particular that the spirits started reacting to, and why now of all times. If anything, the activity should have began the moment the club room was moved to a soundproof place the spirits couldn’t sense, and yet… In either case, there’s definitely something to this that I can’t quite grasp. How frustrating.”

“I’m concerned about that handprint on your back,” Thorin said. “If nothing else, it’s quite unusual. The ghosts here were primarily carrying out actions like a poltergeist would – rattling, knocking over things, setting fires. Even possessions can be accounted for. Physical marks like yours, however, are undeniably strange. Do you still have the mark?”

Bilbo shrunk into his shoulders. “I don’t know.”

Thranduil gave Thorin a pointed look, and stood. “I’ll check,” he declared, moving to stand completely in front of Bilbo. “Just tilt your head forwards.”
Bilbo did as asked, and only stiffened when Thranduil carefully pulled the back of his shirt away from his neck. He felt much less exposed with the way Thranduil did it. In fact, he was left feeling a little more comfortable when Thranduil finally pulled away.

“It’s still there, but it’s significantly faded,” he said, taking a seat on the end of the bed Bilbo sat on. “Just like a bruise. Are you certain neither of your classmates gave it to you?”

Bilbo nodded.

Thranduil hummed. “It’s possible that one of the spirits at the old building could have done it, but their presence became quite diminished whenever they moved away from that site. Even when they moved into the school they were never able to physically affect students – they could pass into the music room with ease, and set fires without accelerants, but never mark anyone.”

“I agree,” Thorin said. “It’s improbable that they did it.”

“What did, then?” Thranduil tilted his head back. His long hair fell over his shoulder like a wave of sunlight, but he hardly seemed to notice. “I doubt Bard would know.”

Thorin didn’t comment. Instead, he moved to take Thranduil’s previous seat on a chair across from Bilbo. “You mentioned that Maki showed you dreams.”

“Yes…”

“And those were memories from his life?”

Bilbo nodded.

“That’s how you knew how he died,” Thorin said. “And how he was deaf.”

Again, Bilbo nodded. That wasn’t quite true, but it was close enough. It had taken him a while to realize that his dreams were never seen with sound, but he understood them now.

Thorin watched him with inquisitive eyes. “Why did you lie?”

Thranduil’s gaze turned sharp as he glared at the side of Thorin’s head. Bilbo only flinched once more. “P-pardon?”

“Since the moment we arrived,” Thorin clarified, “you’ve hardly spoken a word of truth.”

“Oakenshield!” Thranduil berated. “Have you no civility?”

“Since the moment we arrived,” Thorin clarified, “you’ve hardly spoken a word of truth.”

“Oakenshield!” Thranduil berated. “Have you no civility?”

Bilbo’s face twisted into a frown. Tentatively, then with more confidence, he met Thorin’s gaze. “I don’t trust you,” he murmured. “Your eyes are the eyes of ghosts.”

Thorin jerked at that, his eyebrows drawing together. His eyes were full of shock, or fright, like he’d been truly startled. He didn’t seem to have anything to say to that, and, feeling small, Bilbo turned his eyes down again. He could feel the bell in his pocket rattling, but he held onto it tighter so that it wouldn’t make any noise.

“I think that’s enough for today,” Thranduil said, standing. “The case has been resolved, so it’s time for us to leave. Take care, Bilbo,” he murmured, briefly touching Bilbo’s hair as he walked out.

Bilbo watched him, confused by the way Thranduil’s palm had left a small amount of warmth against his head. It was a comforting touch, one that Bilbo couldn’t ever remember experiencing.

Thorin watched Bilbo a moment longer, before he too left. Regardless of his silence, Bilbo could feel
the weight of his stare long after he’d left the room. Absently, he dug out the bell he’d found in his pocket. It was little and worn by time, but there was no rust on it, and it wasn’t tarnished. As he watched it, it started to rattle in his palm, and the room was filled with a tiny tinkering noise. It was a lonely sound. When he pressed his other hand to his face, he could that his eyes were damp.

“How sad,” a voice in his head echoed. “Don’t cry.”

He didn’t.

A week easily passed after the psychic research team left. Just like Milo had wanted, everything seemed to settle back into normalcy. After four days, the rush of paranormal rumors began to simmer and dissolve. As was with adolescence, something new erupted around the school, a fresh tale that senselessly entertained for as long as nothing else came to life. Despite the ease that returned to the air at school, Bilbo found himself restless.

Summer was finally starting to turn into autumn, but he felt reluctant to leave the warm haze he’d been captured in.

It was strange to sink back into the life he’d been living. He wore Maki’s bell as a bracelet, and every time it chimed he couldn’t help but wish he’d had another moment with the ghost. His mind was churning with possibilities, with the desire to see something so unexplainable again. Although he felt satisfaction at resolution, his hunger for something new to disentangle seemed to become obsessive. Sometimes he caught himself staring at the old school building through a window, wondering if there were any spirits left in that place. For it to experience so much death and sadness, only to become an empty shell, felt somewhat wrong. Even when he played the piano he had a distant hope that maybe someone would hear it and be drawn to it in the same way he was.

One day, while he took the train home with his nose tucked into a scarf, his phone rang. The number was unknown, but he knew who it was even before he answered. Either way, he murmured a quiet, “Hello?” into the receiver.

“Hello, Bilbo.”

Even over the phone, Thorin’s voice gave him chills. He didn’t know if they were particularly good, but they certainly made him feel more alert. Petulantly, he frowned into his scarf. “What do you want?”

“Work for me.”

Bilbo was silent for a moment. “Pardon?”

“Work for me.”

He closed his eyes. If he tried hard enough, he could imagine he was some place far away from here, in a world where he’d never met any ghosts or psychic researchers or real, living people with eyes like Thorin’s. It was only faint, but he could imagine it. However, that was not where he was. “No.”

“It’s temporary,” Thorin said. “I’ve got a case you might enjoy.”

Enjoy? How irritating. “I said no.”

Thorin was silent. Bilbo could feel himself starting to crack under Thorin’s inquiry. He’d always gotten the sense that Thorin could be stubborn, that he was intelligent enough to always get his way,
but this was just exasperating. On the other end of the line, Thorin let out a soft, almost unrecognizable exhale. “You will enjoy it,” he finally said. His tone held no room for arguments, held a confidence that was absolute. With just four words, Bilbo could see exactly how he’d become so successful at such a young age. It was maddening, but... It made him oddly ravenous.

“Allright.”
CASE TWO – THE CHILD WHO LOVED THE MOUNTAIN

Bilbo couldn’t help but yawn as his mind tired from the tediousness of travel. He hadn’t slept well the night before, and craved the feeling of his bedsheets against his skin again. Seated by a window in the small van being calmly driven by Carc, he couldn’t help but rest his head to the side and close his eyes. He wanted to sleep to make the trip go faster, but that seemed unwise when he wasn’t quite sure where they were going in the first place. Regardless, the view of the mountains and the surrounding forest was soothing, and gave him a feeling of home. The trees remained bright and vibrant despite the colder autumn air, and were bracketed by an overcast sky that still somehow managed to look stormless. He wondered if his childhood home was in the mountains, and although he couldn’t remember where it was he felt a little comforted by the notion that it was perhaps in a place like this.

“You should sleep, if you’re tired,” Thranduil murmured, as he leaned across the aisle to lay his jacket over Bilbo’s chest. Like Bilbo, he had chosen a seat where he could sit by himself, but he still remained able to watch everyone if he so chose to. “There’s still another hour or so to go before we get there.”

His jacket was warm, and smelt like the cologne he wore. It wasn’t a harsh or spicy scent like one would imagine, but rather something that was softer and nostalgic. Bilbo wondered if Thranduil had children of his own, and thought it was likely. He found himself falling quiet quite quickly after that. He didn’t exactly drift off to sleep, but it was close enough to it to make him feel rested. Warm and comfortable, he allowed himself the small reprieve, and tried not to think too much about the way he noticed Thorin glancing back at him in the rear view mirror every now and then.

When he opened his eyes – when had he closed them? – it was to an effervescent meadow. Grass swayed gently in a breeze that cooled his skin, like an ocean of green. Before him was a view unlike any other, a view from the summit. From here, he could see the mountains spread out before him, just waiting to be seen. Everything was covered in thriving plants, so bright and opulent that it made his heart flutter. When he concentrated he found himself able to see the smooth leaves on the trees that surrounded him, and the small sprouts of clover that blanketed the ground before him, and the way that small, fluttering creatures would dip out into the open sunlight before retreating to the shade and safety of bursting foliage.
This place made him feel like something wonderful existed. He watched the trees with a heightened sense of anticipation, a sense of excitement and wonder that condensed in his heart and brought colour to his cheeks. He expected to see something, to see a creature of true beauty wander out from the trees to experience the trembling sensations he was. He felt like there was something irrefutably earnest seeping into his veins, and even though his vision was blurred with sunlit haziness around the edges, his still lifted his hands to see if his veins had turned golden. Under the dazzling rarity of the world he was glimpsing at, he felt like anything was possible.

Perhaps anything was, from here. He quietly dropped his hands after noting the unusual paleness of his skin, and turned to watch the grass sway in the wind. He knew there was a cliff face ahead of him, and he wondered if the world could continue to be as beautiful in a place that was farther away from here. He imagined that maybe, only from the place where he stood, could the world be seen so strikingly. After that cliff, after the place that signified danger, the world became cruel again.

He would stay here until something that was, without any doubt, astoundingly miraculous came along.

“Bilbo, Bilbo wake up, we’re here.”

“I’m awake,” Bilbo murmured. He lifted his head, cringing when he felt an ache in his neck, and clutched Thranduil’s jacket tighter. “I’m awake,” he repeated, because he felt like saying it again was necessary. When he glanced at Thranduil, he found the tall man watching him with searching eyes, as though Bilbo had just said something strange.

“You look a little flushed,” Thranduil said, pressing his palm to Bilbo’s forehead. “You don’t feel particularly warm… Are you alright?”

Bilbo made an apprehensive noise, and pushed himself upright. “I’m fine,” he said quietly. “I…”

“What did you see?” Thorin asked.

Bilbo startled at his voice, and looked at Thorin broodily. He knew Thorin was remarkably perceptive, but the way he seemed to know what Bilbo was thinking was a little upsetting. “It wasn’t much,” he said, frowning. “Just… Just scenery.”

Thorin nodded, and finally looked away.

Bilbo let out a breath, and stood. He folded Thranduil’s jacket over his arm, and picked up his overnight bag before making his way out of the van. The air was crisper than he thought it would be, but the first breath of air he inhaled filled his lungs with a pleasantness that only the mountain could offer. It chased away any pain in his head that had started to develop, and it left him feeling a little more at ease than he previously had been.

“This way, Bilbo,” Thranduil instructed. Bilbo watched him begin the trek up a path carved by wooden stairs, and moved to follow. This place felt quite secluded, he noticed, and the only indication that anyone lived so far out in the mountains was the single road they’d taken to get here and the noticeably manmade steps. It didn’t look like their clients had any neighbours, and he wondered if they had electricity this far out from the main grid.

Eventually, the house came into view. It looked old, but well maintained, and very traditional. Much of it seemed to be made from timber, including a wraparound porch that was sheltered with a platform that extended from the main tiled roof. There was a meticulously contained garden that was
full of plants and flowers not native to the area, but Bilbo could hear the rhythmic tapping of a water feature from a different location, possibly on the other side of the house. Despite how traditional the house seemed, it gave off a modern atmosphere that Bilbo could easily recognise. To him, it seemed less like a well-lived in home and more like a relaxation resort. He wondered what a place so isolated from the world could possibly be having trouble with.

Their clients were standing at the entrance to the garden. They wore traditional clothing that only seemed fitting with the house, and didn’t look particularly expressive. A man with dark hair and hooded eyes stepped forwards to greet them. “My name is Elendil,” he said. “Welcome.”

Thorin stepped forward to shake the hand that was offered. “My name is Thorin Oakenshield,” he said.

“You’re the manager?” Elendil asked, surprised. Thorin was very young, after all. “I thought…” His eyes briefly flickered over to Carc, who remained impassively where he was.

Thorin only offered an unoffended look. He must have been used to the scrutiny he fell under due to his age. Even Bilbo had questioned him when he was unaware of Thorin’s talents, so it was a mistake he could understand. Still, not all people thought in the same way he did, and Elendil looked reasonably doubtful.

Despite that, Elendil moved on. He gestured to the people standing beside him. “These are my two eldest sons, Isildur and Anárion, and my wife Trieda.”

Much like Elendil, his sons wore composed expressions. Isildur was taller, and looked somewhat older. He carried an air about him that made him seem a little intimidating, and he never once looked lower than eyelevel. Anárion appeared somewhat less sombre. He had a childish tilt to his lips, and wasn’t afraid to stare any of them in the eyes. In either case, they both remained respectfully quiet, and clearly took after their father. Trieda appeared much quieter, more out of nature than respect, and although she was quite beautiful she hid part of her face under her hair, which she wore twisted to one side. She looked like she was the most nervous of them all.

“The rest of our residents are out for the day,” Elendil said. “But please, come inside. It must have been a long journey here.”

After taking off their shoes, they were led inside. The interior of the home was much like Bilbo expected – there was an entrance area where they left their shoes from which a hallway connected the rest of the house. Each room they were shown was large and fairly similar, with only sparse decorations and no distinguishable colours. Most of the doors were sliding doors made from wood and paper, with some adjoining bedrooms having folding partition-like screens instead of walls. Although it was very bare, Bilbo thought it gave a nice atmosphere.

“These are the rooms we set up for you,” Elendil said, showing them two adjoining bedrooms with a shared bathroom. “The screen can be folded back to make the room bigger, if needed. The office next door is where you can set up your equipment.”

Thorin nodded. “If you wouldn’t mind, I’d like to leave the briefing for tomorrow. For now I think its best we focus on setting up and getting a feel for the area.”

Elendil nodded, and left them on their own. Bilbo glanced around the room. There was space for three futons in this room, and it was likely the same on the other side. He felt uncomfortable thinking about rooming options, but thankfully Thranduil seemed to decide for him. With a hand on the back of Bilbo’s shoulder he guided them into the second room, which was predictably just like the first.
“I’ll get the futons,” Bilbo murmured, as he placed down his carrier bag.

“Alright,” Thranduil said. “Set up three.”

Bilbo glanced at him inquisitively.

“My son is coming tomorrow,” Thranduil said. “Oakenshield’s usual associates are unavailable and with an area this big we might be understaffed, so my son offered to help out.”

“Is he like you?”

“Spiritually, yes,” Thranduil said. He looked somewhat proud. “He’s very talented, but he’s young. He has a tendency to get overexcited, but I think you’ll get along.”

Bilbo nodded, and busied himself with setting up the mattresses. Thranduil was laying out quilts and pillows after Bilbo was done, and soon the room was prepared. He couldn’t help but lower himself down onto his makeshift bed, closest to the folding screen, to take a moment to breathe. It was only faint, but this place definitely didn’t feel quite as serene as it looked. It wasn’t particularly frightening, and he didn’t feel apprehensive. Rather, he felt like something was just out of balance, like one side of a scale was just a little too heavy. He thought about the dream he’d had, how that place had been so perfect, and doubted anything like that could be in a place like this.

It didn’t seem plausible.

Thranduil sighed as he finished setting up the monitors in their designated office. He hadn’t liked that he had to be involved in the grunt work, but usually Bard would have done it, and he didn’t want Bilbo to have to carry all the heavy equipment up the steep entry way. He’d be sure to make Oakenshield pay for the extra work he was doing, because it made him grumpy. He’d woken up halfway through the night, thinking he’d heard a child laughing, and found that Bilbo had been awake, too. He’d looked at Thranduil with an anxious expression, and Thranduil knew that he must have heard something as well. Thranduil had felt reluctant to sleep until Bilbo drifted off again, so he hadn’t had much sleep until the early hours of the morning.

The clients were strange people. He wasn’t too fond of them, and found that there was something that felt unstable about them. He thought they might have suffered something tragic recently, or that they might have been keeping a secret. He didn’t trust them. It seemed that living so isolated from the world hadn’t done them any good, and he couldn’t fathom why they chose to do so. It just seemed unproductive, though perhaps he was biased. He was very involved in the life of the city, after all, and his profession hinged largely on community-based responses.

By mid-morning, the remaining tenants of the house arrived. It seemed they’d gone to the nearest town to get food, and once again Thranduil was roped into doing physical labour. He was really starting to despise the steps that led up from the driveway, but it wasn’t something he couldn’t handle.

“This is my advisor, Balin,” Elendil introduced after everyone had gathered in the dining room for tea. “He does not reside here, but he visits often.”

The man he gestured to appeared to be quite normal. His hair had started to turn white, and his face was kind. He gave off an intellectual air, but Thranduil couldn’t see himself interacting with Balin often. Rather, he was drawn more to the other two people.

“I’m Nimrodel!” A child, who could have been no more than seven, exclaimed. His hair was very
pale, much like Bilbo’s, perhaps more so, and his eyes were bright. Thranduil sensed something strong from him, but he couldn’t quite comprehend what it was. To him, it seemed that the child must have had something to do with ghosts, or spirits, but many children were like that. Children tended to be more sensitive to preternatural occurrences, so Thranduil expected to feel something from any child that was in a house that required their assistance, but what he felt was entirely unnatural. It was too poignant, too noticeable. When he glanced to his side, he found that even Bilbo had his eyes firmly fixed on Nimrodel, and distantly he wondered what Bilbo could possibly be feeling.

“My name is Nora,” The woman who sat beside Nimrodel said. Her voice was quite soft. “Nim is my sister’s child, and he’s currently in my care.”

She sounded gloomy, Thranduil noticed. In her face he could see a faint resemblance to Nimrodel, but their hair colours were so startlingly different that at first he likely wouldn’t have picked them out as aunt and nephew. While Nora’s hair was a simple brown colour, like roasted chestnuts, Nimrodel’s was might lighter, as though its original colour was brown but had since been mixed with white. Thranduil knew that such a colour didn’t particularly feel unusual, but there was something off about the shade. It looked more like how a painting might appear if the artist used a little too much white for a brunette, and yet there sat Nimrodel, strange hair colour and all.

Thranduil couldn’t help but glance at Bilbo’s hair every now and then with each thought he dedicated to Nimrodel’s appearance. He’d had similar thoughts to the ones he had about Nimrodel when he had first seen Bilbo, and considered that maybe Bilbo had once dyed it. Bilbo’s hair might have originally been a rich brown and honey colour, perhaps streaked with gold when he spent too much time under the sun. When he looked at Bilbo, he could see that the colour Thranduil pictured him with in his head suited him, but now his hair had faded, as though someone had turned down its brightness. It was much lighter in real life, more of an unnatural beige colour. Regardless, it was quite a soft colour, and it went well with the slight waves in his locks.

It muddled Thranduil’s mind to think about, but he thought that Bilbo’s hair might have been a shade lighter than it was the first time they met.

Elendil cleared his throat. “Nora works as our housekeeper,” he explained. “They live here.”

Oakenshield nodded, and waited until Carc had pulled out his laptop before turning back to Elendil. “I’ll be asking questions now, but perhaps it would be best to start with just you and your wife.”

Thranduil agreed, but he knew Oakenshield was only saying that so Nimrodel wouldn’t be in the room. Oakenshield wouldn’t have taken on this case if he hadn’t had any information about it, and of course he’d had to reveal the details to Thranduil before Thranduil agreed to come, too. Going off what he already knew, it was wise to speak to only a few people at the time so that they could better control the situation.

Oakenshield conducted investigations in a very different way to Thranduil. For one, he used all of his equipment, and conducted interviews based on a need to gather specific information. As Thranduil was contracted under Oakenshield for this case, it wasn’t his duty to interview the clients, so he wordlessly listened as Oakenshield did so. The information was generally what they already knew – strange things had started happening three months ago. Nimrodel’s mother, Níniel, had fallen ill about that time and was transferred out of this home, where she’d lived for many years, to a hospital while her illness was treated. Despite the medical attention she received, her health only declined, and she was as such unable to return to the home at the time she expected. Nora was thus brought in to act both as Níniel’s replacement and Nimrodel’s temporary guardian.

Originally, only small objects in their household went missing. Chopsticks, hair combs, the odd set of keys or easily replaceable jewellery pieces – they were easy to misplace, and thus not noticeable.
However, the strange activity started to increase until it was concerning. Entire rooms of furniture would be turned upside-down, even rugs on the floor and heavy closets or shelving that was impossible to move without several people there to heave it. It was clearly concerning, but that had only been the start of it.

One month after Níniel was hospitalised, Nimrodel disappeared.

Then, a month later, he returned. There was no way he could have survived in the mountains on his own, and yet he returned without a scratch. Any child that had gotten lost or kidnapped would be outstandingly affected, that was a given, and yet Nimrodel hardly seemed changed at all. Looking at him today confirmed that there was definitely something odd about him, because he was far too chirpy and enthusiastic to have had gone through such a traumatic experience. It was disconcerting to think about.

“Things have only gotten stranger after Nimrodel reappeared,” Elendil murmured. “We’ve all heard a child’s voice during the night, when Nimrodel is clearly asleep. The furniture is still being moved around, and Nimrodel is acting strange. I sometimes see him talking to himself as though there’s someone else in the room, but there never is.”

Oakenshield sighed, and folded his arms. “I think I know what happened to Nimrodel,” he said.

The wife let out a little noise, her eyebrows rising in concern. “What happened?” She asked fervently. “How can we help him?”

Oakenshield frowned a bit. “I believe,” he started, “that Nimrodel was spirited away.”

Chapter End Notes

I might change the case name, if I can think of anything better ^^" I'm not too fond of it ahhh
“Would you mind finishing this for me, Bilbo?”

Bilbo glanced up from the paperwork spread in front of him, and nodded as Thranduil handed him a new stack to sort. It was pretty basic work that he’d been able to pick up with little difficulty, and mostly involved organising the files Carc always managed to produce into their relevant sections. He found that a lot of it had to do with the location of the case – measurements of the entire house, the frequency of sudden temperature drops, the slope of the mountain and how much it decreased or increased over a certain amount of time. It wasn’t all that interesting, but it resolved a lot of questions that were in the way of paranormal theories.

“Where are you going?” Bilbo asked as he watched Thranduil pull on his jacket. It was nearing nightfall, and although they hadn’t done much more than interview the house tenants and set up their equipment he wouldn’t have thought Thranduil was up to doing anything more.

“I believe my son has arrived,” Thranduil said on a sigh. “I can sense it.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you could…”

“No like that.” Thranduil waved a hand. “Parent’s intuition.”

Bilbo only nodded, and turned back to the paperwork. They’d set up a low table in a corner of the room, away from the futons, where they could sort out the files easier. Without Thranduil in the room, Bilbo became increasingly aware of Thorin and Carc just on the other side of the folding screen. He hadn’t ever spoken to Carc, but he found the man to be much like a raven; ravenous, with a gaze so intense and a wingspan so wide and dark that all opponents bulked. He wasn’t easy to get along with. Thorin, on the other hand, was surprisingly simple to talk to, but Bilbo still had trouble. He felt too exposed when Thorin looked at him, as though Thorin could read his thoughts and his emotions without any difficulty. Bilbo had never met anyone with such an impactful personality. In many ways, it was Thorin’s wild intelligence that intimidated Bilbo.

It must have only been a few minutes of silence before Bilbo started to hear something strange. For a moment, his attention was captured by the way the bell on his bracelet started to ring. It often jingled when his hand moved, but this was completely different. His arm was still, resting comfortably against the desk, and yet the bell started tinkling as though he were waving to someone. He paused to watch it, but the chiming was quickly replaced by the sound of a piano.
The noises that rippled around the room made his heart jump. It wasn’t a piece he recognised, but with each ringing note he felt more and more apprehensive. He wasn’t scared, but he was close enough to it to abandon the paperwork in favour of making his way to the folding door. He felt eyes on his back, and forced down a cringe as he gripped the folding door to push it open. “Do you hear that?” He asked without pause, eyebrows furrowed in concern.

Thorin and Carc had seemingly been talking amongst themselves, but they quietened as soon as Bilbo pushed the door open. Slowly, Thorin placed down the files he’d been holding. “Hear what?”

Bilbo jerked back around, his eyes frantically searching the room, but there was nothing there. Nothing was out of place, and nothing had noticeably changed. Even his bell had stopped ringing. He couldn’t help but grip the door tighter as he slouched, feeling all his strength leave his knees. A startlingly shaky breath left his lips, and he anxiously ducked his head. “The piano…”

“Bilbo…” Thorin murmured, standing. He was interrupted by the door opening.

A boy who appeared to be around Bilbo’s age strolled in. His eyes were full of youth and were coloured like the summertime sky, and his hair was long and blonde. It was easy to tell that he was Thranduil’s son. He was about Bilbo’s height, but it was clear he had some growing to do if Thranduil’s height was any indicator.

“Legolas,” Thorin greeted simply as he took his seat again.

“I see you’re as stiff as always,” Legolas said, placing a hand on his hip. “Don’t you know how to smile?”

Bilbo blinked at the upfront way Legolas spoke. Oddly enough, around people who were quiet and secretive, it was a refreshing attitude.

“Legolas, don’t be crude,” Thranduil chastised light-heartedly as he carried in Legolas’s bags. “It’s unbecoming. I want you to meet Bilbo.”

Legolas’s eyes slid across to him, and Bilbo couldn’t help but straighten. Legolas watched him with a gaze that was extremely perceptive, just like his father. In a way, Bilbo thought that Legolas was viewing more than a normal person would. However, it only took a second before Legolas was seeing him the same way he put himself forward.

Still, Bilbo was surprised when Legolas let out a wide-eyed exclamation. “You’re so cute!” He cried, enthusiastically reaching forwards to grab both of Bilbo’s hands in his own. “We get to share a room, right?”

“R-right…” Bilbo answered nervously.

Legolas grinned broadly, with a sly tilt to his lips. Even at such a young age, he was quite handsome.

Thranduil let out a rough sigh, and gripped the back of Legolas’s jacket to pull him away. “You’re too excited,” he chastised. “Don’t act inappropriately towards your co-workers.”

“But,” Legolas protested, a pout coming to his face as he turned his wavering eyes back to Bilbo, “I’ve never met anyone with an aura like his. It’s strong… It’s like,” he paused, and reached out a hand to hover against Bilbo’s cheek, “I can feel it.”

Bilbo’s heart thudded, and he couldn’t help but let out a small, questioning noise.

“Enough,” Thranduil said sternly. He handed Legolas his bags. “Go and put your things by your
bed, then come back here. We’ve got a lot to cover before I can put you to work.”

Legolas, if possible, only pouted harder, but did as he was told. When he disappeared into the second room for a moment, Thranduil let out a sigh and turned to Bilbo. “I apologise for his behaviour,” he murmured. “Like I said, he’s far too excitable.”

“No, it’s fine,” Bilbo replied hastily. “Just unexpected.”

“If we can proceed…” Thorin interrupted.

Thranduil eyed him petulantly, but Thorin completely avoided his gaze. Regardless, they all gathered around the table to review everything Thorin and Carc had come up with. Bilbo couldn’t help but jump a little when Legolas reappeared to take a seat close by Bilbo.

“So?” Legolas said. “What’s been happening?”

Most of what they filled him in on had to do with their interviews. More importantly, it was what they had been told about the strange happenings, including the child’s voice that Thranduil and Bilbo had woken up to the previous night. Throughout the day Thorin had looked into the previous owners of the house, and they’d all been from Elendil’s family line, which wasn’t anything strange considering how long ago this house appeared to have been built. In fact, Elendil’s family appeared to be mostly insignificant. It was only with Nimrodel and his family that strange things were notably happening, though perhaps the strangest thing was actually Nimrodel himself.

“Then it’s definitely something paranormal, right?” Legolas concluded. “Could it be a mountain spirit, or something similar?”

“Mountain spirit?” Bilbo questioned.

“There are hundreds of old tales that tell of spirits living in mountainous regions,” Legolas explained. “Humans have always regarded mountains as sacred, as they are the points of the Earth that are closest to Heaven, and therefore the Gods. There are creatures said to appear in one-hundred-year-old trees, and others that say there are spirits that are able to replicate sounds they hear in the mountains, of which then become echoes.”

“I see.”

“It’s unlikely,” Thorin said curtly. “Nimrodel is clearly being targeted, and his disappearance and subsequent reappearance complicates matters regarding this case.”

“This morning you said he had been spirited away,” Thranduil reiterated. “How is that possible?”

“The term ‘spirited away’ refers to a mysterious disappearance that people believe occurred by the hands of a God that had been angered,” Thorin explained. “In modern interpretations, the person is soon after returned to a place of worship, where they frequently tell a tale of being swept away by a God to a place that isn’t typical.”

Bilbo’s eyes widened. That sounded familiar.

“And you believe Nimrodel was spirited away?” Thranduil asked. “Did the people here anger a God?”

Thorin glanced away. “There is a shrine near here, but it’s not run by this family, nor has it ever been,” he said. “Moreover, Nimrodel didn’t reappear at a place of worship, but rather here at the house. It sounds like he was spirited away, but the circumstances don’t match up. Add to that the
timing of his disappearance with his mother’s worsening illness, and it’s clear that some importance has to be placed on their family.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Thranduil said, “it sounds plausible. However, if he was being possessed by a spirit of the mountain rather than being led by an angered God, wouldn’t it make sense that the spirit would turn its anger on this house?”

“Perhaps,” Thorin answered.

Bilbo thought back to first meeting Nimrodel, and he couldn’t help but think there was something different about him. He’d been missing in the wilderness for a month, but he was just as happy as any other child, maybe even more so. When Bilbo looked at him, he felt a strange tightening in his chest, as though he were going to cry. Nimrodel reminded him of something so strongly, but he couldn’t quite remember what. It bothered him.

“For tonight, I think we should get some rest,” Thorin said. “All of the readings from each room will have been processed within the hour, so without anything new to go off it’d be best to leave it for the night. Tomorrow I want Legolas to get a feel for the tenants, and then we’ll begin the investigation based off of the information we compile.”

That seemed like the most logical path to follow.

“Alright,” Legolas said as he tretched leisurely, and stood. “I’m going to the bathroom, then.”

“I’ll go with you,” Bilbo murmured before he truly realised what he had said. At the inquisitive stares he received, he couldn’t help but glance down. “I… Get the feeling that we shouldn’t go anywhere alone.”

“I’m not protesting,” Legolas said brightly. “Come along, Bilbo. We’ll finally get some alone time to meet properly!”

As Bilbo stood, he cast Thorin a quick glance. Although he expected it, he still startled when he found Thorin watching him. He said nothing, but Bilbo found that he felt as though they’d had a proper conversation. Wordlessly, Bilbo fixed his gaze elsewhere, and moved to follow Legolas from the room. It wasn’t like he didn’t trust Legolas’s abilities, because although he had yet to see them he knew that Legolas was talented enough to be actively used by Thorin to further the investigation. That was something that couldn’t be treated lightly, couldn’t be dismissed. It was more that he felt extremely apprehensive, and he was very conscious of how Legolas and he were the youngest people in the house, aside from Nimrodel.

Despite the way Legolas made mindless chatter, Bilbo found he couldn’t get himself to relax. He tried to focus on Legolas’s questions – “Are you single?” and “What school do you go to?” and “Do you want to share a futon with me?” – but it was increasingly difficult. He felt like the air was getting colder, and absently rubbed warmth into his arms. They must have only been halfway down the long hallway before Legolas suddenly went quiet. Bilbo hardly noticed he’d stopped in his tracks until he walked nose-first into Legolas’s back.

Standing before them was Nimrodel.

The child let out a happy noise, and bounded forwards. “Do you want to play?” He asked, grinning widely.

Bilbo took a step back, surprised. He’d never been particularly good with children, and hadn’t interacted with anyone who wasn’t in his age bracket or above in many years. He didn’t know how
to talk to a child. “A-ah…”

Legolas glanced at him for a moment, just out of the corner of his eye, before turning to give Nimrodel a charming smile. “What do you want to play?” He said, offering a hand.

Nimrodel’s face suddenly changed. His eyebrows came down into a frown, and his eyes went dark and blank. Somewhat harshly, he slapped away Legolas’s offered hand. “Not you,” he muttered, before reaching out to grip Bilbo’s hand. When he glanced up, his gaze was so gripping that Bilbo froze. “Just you.”
Enfeebled

Chapter Summary

Unanswered questions and an old piano.

Chapter Notes

Enfeebled - make weak or feeble.

It was during the second night spent at the house in the mountains that Bilbo’s sleep was again interrupted. With the confrontation between Nimrodel and himself from the previous evening weighing heavily on his mind, he hadn’t been able to find sleep easily. When he had finally fallen asleep, it was only to a restless few hours, during which he woke up several times to the sound of a piano only he could hear. By the time morning came around and it was time to get back to work, he was beyond exhausted and incredibly tense.

That was only the start of it. At every turn he felt like he was being watched, and although it was a sensation he became accustomed to it certainly wasn’t pleasant. He found it difficult to concentrate, and mindlessly followed Thranduil around as he took readings of each room for the morning. He couldn’t find the energy to reply to basic questions, and struggled to keep himself from asking if he could rest some more. He was here to work, after all, and he felt like if he made himself vulnerable and alone then something bad would happen. It was a feeling that kept him on edge and jumpy, and it made him incredibly frustrated.

That, and the way Nimrodel followed after him like a lost puppy.

“Eh? You don’t want to play?” Nimrodel asked, eyes wide with disappointment.

“S-sorry, I’m working.” Bilbo forced a smile. “Maybe later.”

“Isn’t that the fourth time he’s asked you today?” Thranduil asked quietly as they made their way back towards the office. “He’s persistent.”

Bilbo nodded miserably, and kept his eyes down. His gaze was drawn towards the bell he wore on his wrist, and as though it could feel his stare it started to ring. Bilbo stopped walking, and turned his wrist over to look over it properly. Even when he was still it continued to chime, and a heavy feeling sunk in his stomach. “Thranduil-” He started nervously, only to be interrupted by a sudden scream.

Thranduil whipped around. “That came from the living room!” He exclaimed, starting in that direction. “We were just there!”

Bilbo hurried to keep up with him, his heart racing. Thranduil was first to reach the room, but Bilbo caught sight of Thorin, Carc and Legolas coming down from the other end of the hallway. When Thranduil wrenched the door open, he was greeted by the sight of a room in complete disarray. All the furniture had been completely knocked over, even the heavy bookshelf by the wall, and the room
was completely suffocated in an air that was so cold Bilbo’s breath instantly started to fog. A rush of cold wind blew past him, and it sent frightened chills down his spine. Trapped under an overturned table in the middle of the room was Nora. She had her arms over her head, and tears in her eyes.

“Nora!” Anárion shouted as he pushed past Bilbo to enter the room. “What happened?”

“There’s something here.” Thranduil gritted his teeth, and threw out an arm to herd Bilbo further away from the door. “Or, there was. It’s left a horrible scent.”

Bilbo couldn’t smell anything, but he gripped Thranduil’s arm tightly regardless.

“I thought I heard Nimrodel in here,” Nora said shakily, as Anárion pulled the table off her leg and gently helped her to her feet. “When I came in here, the door wouldn’t open, and suddenly everything started to shake.”

“Well this happened,” Thranduil summarised, frowning. “Was Nimrodel in here?”

Nora shook her head, and winced as she put pressure on her ankle. “I have to find Nimrodel… What’s going on here…?” She whimpered.

“The temperature in the room dropped more than seven degrees,” Carc said. “But it’s going back up.”

Thorin frowned deeply. “Thranduil, perform a cleansing to be on the safe side,” he instructed. “Everyone leave this end of the house, and make sure to never go anywhere alone.”

Anárion had a stern expression, but he nodded regardless. “I’ll tell my father,” he said with a small nod, before he made his way out of the room supporting Nora. Bilbo watched them leave with a concerned expression. He didn’t like that whatever was here had escalated into actually hurting a person, even if it was only a bruised ankle that was the injury in question. This perceived escalation would certainly lead to more, and that frightened him.

“Legolas, return to the office with Carc to see if there are any other temperature drops in the house,” Thorin said. “You know how to write protective charms, don’t you? Make one for each person in this house, including us, and distribute them.”

“And you?” Thranduil questioned.

“Bilbo and I will go locate Nimrodel,” Thorin answered easily.

Thranduil narrowed his eyes. “Why you and Bilbo?”

“Nimrodel seems to prefer Bilbo’s attention over any of ours,” Thorin replied. “I want to ask him some questions. It only makes sense that we go.”

Bilbo glanced at him, but thought it was a logical explanation. Still, it felt strange for Thorin to come to such a conclusion when he still seemed somewhat unfriendly towards Bilbo. He felt apprehensive when he thought about Nimrodel, too, but he didn’t say anything. After all, Nimrodel hadn’t done anything particularly strange that Bilbo had witnessed other than his weird attitude the previous night. Perhaps he was just picky about who he played with. Some children were like that, weren’t they?

After a silent moment, they moved to follow Thorin’s instructions. Bilbo watched Thorin leave the room, and after a last glance at Thranduil he did the same. The hallway was silent as Bilbo hurried to catch up with Thorin, and he couldn’t help but gently grip the bell around his wrist as he felt it started
“Didn’t you sleep well last night?”

Bilbo jumped at the question, and turned his eyes up to Thorin’s as he slowly shook his head. “Is it obvious?”

“The others haven’t noticed, if that’s what you’re asking,” Thorin replied. It was strange to think he was so concerned about Bilbo that he’d notice such a small thing himself. “What disturbed you?”

Bilbo glanced down, and pursed his lips. He thought back to the times he’d been woken, and the tune that he’d heard on a piano he’d never seen. If he thought hard enough then it was like the sounds came flowing back through his ears, unbidden. It gave him goose bumps, and filled him with a tight feeling in his chest. He didn’t want to think about it anymore, and he ended up saying nothing to Thorin’s question.

“Do you sense anything strange from Nimrodel?” Thorin asked instead, after a small pause in which he searchingly watched the side of Bilbo’s face.

“I…” Bilbo trailed off, and gripped his bell tighter. “I sense something.”

“Is it strong?”

He only nodded. It was unlike anything he’d ever felt. He thought back to the dreams Maki had given him, and the way he’d felt when he first saw Maki, but it was nothing like this. Maki had felt like a ghost – despite his solidarity, Bilbo knew that he’d died. He’d seen Maki’s death, had felt it deep down inside him where he’d never been able to reach. But Nimrodel felt completely different. There was something completely indescribable about him, and Bilbo wondered if he were being possessed by something, but even that thought didn’t feel right. When he looked at Nimrodel, he was struck with an insurmountable feeling of wistfulness, like he was remembering something unfairly sad that once happened. He couldn’t remember what Nimrodel reminded him so strongly of, and he felt like he never would. Regardless, his confusion towards Nimrodel translated into something that was akin to fear, and as such he couldn’t help but avoid the child.

Thorin sighed. “Do you have any idea where he could be? Your intuition has proven to be useable in a situation like this.”

It was a strange way to word a compliment, but Bilbo took it for what it was. He paused, and frowned deeper as he let himself take a moment to breathe. Against his palm, he felt the bell rattling more and more, and he instinctively knew he was heading in the right direction. “He’s… Probably this way,” Bilbo finally murmured as he began to walk again. He found himself unable to meet Thorin’s questioning gaze, and instead he let himself wander aimlessly, knowing full well that he’d come across Nimrodel at any moment.

It didn’t quite feel as frightening anymore, though he wasn’t sure why. Maybe Thorin made him feel safe.

Nimrodel was sitting on the back porch by himself when Bilbo found him. The backyard was quite a beautiful place – instead of grass there was a traditional dry landscape garden; a Zen garden, a miniature stylised landscape comprised of carefully composed of an arrangements of rocks, shaped trees and moss. Like he first suspected, there was a dripping water feature that caused a bamboo pipe to rhythmically tap against a rock every time the water that flowed through it became too heavy. It gave Bilbo a very relaxed sense, even with Nimrodel so close. He felt like he was calmer as he took in even lungfuls of the crisp, outdoor air.
“Nora is looking for you,” Bilbo said to the child.

Nimrodel tilted his head back, and his eyes found Bilbo. “She’s always looking for me,” he muttered. “She won’t leave me alone!”

Bilbo hesitated for a moment, before he crouched down beside Nimrodel. “She cares,” he said. “Why does that make you upset?”

Nimrodel frowned, and drew his knees to his chest. Like that, Bilbo could see just how young he was. “She never leaves me alone,” Nimrodel repeated miserably. He glanced up at Bilbo again, and slowly reached for Bilbo’s hand. “Can we play now?”

Bilbo snatched his hand back, and startled when he heard his bell chime at the movement. Nimrodel quickly fixed his eyes on the bell, and those eyes churned with a wildness Bilbo hadn’t ever seen. He opened his mouth to answer, but his throat was suddenly dry, and the words wouldn’t come.

“Bilbo is still working,” Thorin cut in, placing a strong hand on Bilbo’s shoulder. “He can’t play yet.”

Nimrodel glared at Thorin, and dropped his hand. He turned back to the garden without a word.

Bilbo stood back up, and glanced at Thorin, who wore a brooding expression. Bilbo wondered what he was thinking, and what Thorin thought of Nimrodel. It was clear that there was something abnormal about Nimrodel, but what was it? Bilbo couldn’t have been the only one sensing something weird; after all, even Legolas had gotten a strange sense from him. Could it have had something to do with his month-long disappearance? It must, there was no other way a child could have survived on their own for so long, and found their way back home completely unharmed.

“Let’s get back to work,” Thorin said, moving his hand to the small of Bilbo’s back to guide him away.

“Ah, but didn’t you…?”

Thorin shook his head, and his eyes clearly said that he’d got the answers he was looking for. His sudden change of action left Bilbo confused, but he felt that it was unwise to question Thorin. He must have known what he was doing, considering how much knowledge he had regarding his profession. Bilbo couldn’t even begin to comprehend the amount of information Thorin had stored in his head, and knew it would take years before he knew as much as Thorin did.


Thorin glanced at him, appearing somewhat surprised at Bilbo’s question. “I’m not sure yet,” he answered. “But his fixation on you is strange.”

Bilbo glanced away, feeling somewhat flushed. He hadn’t ever had a casual conversation with Thorin, so this felt odd. Add to that the fact that he was surprised at Nimrodel’s attention, and he felt thoroughly embarrassed. “Was he really spirited away?” Bilbo asked quietly.

“I’ve never come across it, but I’m familiar with it happening,” Thorin said. “A month, however, is far longer than the usual disappearance time. His circumstances are out of the normal constraints of such an occurrence, but the parameters that paranormal societies have in place can only be treated as estimations.”

“I sort of feel sad when I see Nimrodel,” Bilbo said. He struggled to find the right words to explain what he felt, but it was difficult. Thorin, however, remained patiently silent. “It’s the same sort of sad
when Maki disappeared, but a little different. It’s like… It’s like Nimrodel isn’t who he used to be, even though he seems as if he is.”

Thorin watched him curiously. “Do you think he’s being possessed?”

Bilbo thought about it for a moment, but shook his head. “This is different,” he said. “He’s not acting like Hamfast did.”

Thorin nodded in acceptance of what Bilbo had said. “Regardless, I think his fascination with you is concerning, so make sure you don’t go anywhere alone while we stay in this house.”

Dinner was a quiet occasion. Nora’s ankle had been bandaged, but she seemed quite shaken, and made no conversation. Tireda watched her with worried eyes, but didn’t say anything. The silence in the room was suffocating, and even when Nimrodel started chattering in the childish way children often did, it didn’t do anything to alleviate the tension. For some reason, Bilbo’s mind kept drifting back to the piano music. Nora’s face somehow reminded him of it, though it never had before. He wondered if the house had a piano in one of the rooms he hadn’t opened, and resolved to ask when the next opportunity arose.

As it so happened, the next opportunity was at the end of dinner. Tireda went to collect plates, and with only a moment of hesitance Bilbo stood to help her. He felt Thranduil’s surprised gaze on his back, and only gave him a meaningful gaze that he hoped conveyed his thoughts.

“Thank you for helping me,” Tireda said quietly. “Nora usually does, but…”

Bilbo nodded, and glanced up at Tireda’s face briefly. “Can I ask you something?” He questioned in a rush, before he could convince himself that this wasn’t a good idea.

Tireda looked a little surprised, but nodded politely.

“Do you have a piano?”

Her eyes widened. “How did you know?” She asked. “Did someone mention it?”

“N-no.” Bilbo quickly shook his head, holding up his hands. “I was just wondering…”

Tireda sighed, and turned her head away. “We do,” she murmured. “But Nîniel was the only one who could play it decently. It’s been in the family for generations so it’s quite old and worn down, but she often said it was beautiful. She’d play it for Nimrodel any time he asked, you know. He loved it.”

“Is that so?” Bilbo murmured. Again, his heart was gripped with an unforgettable feeling of sadness from a place he didn’t recognise. “Can I see it?”

“Do you play?”

Bilbo nodded. “I… I can’t remember who taught me, or when I learned, but I think my Mother might have.”

Tireda’s face softened as she watched him. “Nîniel wanted to teach Nimrodel, too,” she said quietly. “I’ll show you it, though it hasn’t been touched since Nîniel was admitted to the hospital.”

Like he’d expected, the room Tireda led him to wasn’t one that he’d been in before. He’d almost
forgotten how large the house was, but thinking about it now he couldn’t quite comprehend how someone could live in a place like this. It brought up memories of his own childhood home, though that place was shrouded in an impenetrable mist of mystery that he couldn’t see through.

The piano itself looked inconspicuous. It was clearly old, and looked much more European than the rest of the house and furniture did. It seemed to have gathered a thin layer of dust that spoke of its abandonment. One way or another, it seemed lonely. Bilbo felt an unignorably fierce urge to see it up close, to touch its keys and figure out all its secrets. Pianos were meant to be played, were meant to make music, and yet this one had been left alone and unplayed for what felt like an eternity. However, the moment he stepped foot into the room he was suddenly overwhelmed by something that struck his head like a hurricane.

Piano music filled his ears. It was beautiful, and soft, and reminded him of sleepily murmured “goodnights” and the way night time clouds looked like napping sheep. When he glanced at the piano, he saw that it was different to how he remembered. It was clean, and brighter, as though someone who truly loved playing cared for it. When he glanced up, he saw that there was, in fact, someone seated at the piano. His eyes couldn’t go higher than her hands, of which were poised above the shining piano keys, as though his memory had been erased from that point upwards.

Still, she played beautifully. It was like what he was seeing was a stilled snapshot, a piece of something from a time that was warm and comfortable. He wanted to watch her play more, but with each moment that passed the memory seemed to fade until there was no more sound and her music became obsolete.

He blinked, and the world had changed to something that felt a little more familiar to him. For a moment the sunlight blinded him, but then his eyes were open to a view of the world from the top of a mountain where the only thing that separated him from the view ahead was a cliff. He’d said he’d stay here until something marvellous came, and now that feeling only felt stronger. Seeing that woman play, hearing the sounds that that old piano had been able to produce…

He wanted to see something even more amazing, because he just knew it was out there. He knew it. All he had to do was wait.

Bilbo was collapsed against the doorframe when his eyes properly focused. His bell was ringing loudly, but he thought that might have been because of the way he trembled. Everything felt completely unstable inside him, and it took several moments for his thoughts to sync back up with his body well enough for him to understand what exactly was happening. He’d never felt so disconnected, never felt so feeble, and yet even so he was able to immediately sense when eyes fell on him. When he managed to glance up, he saw that it was Nimrodel watching him, peering out from the end of the corridor. He looked upset, but his eyes were honest, more so than Bilbo had ever seen them be. The child quickly disappeared a moment later, and only then did Bilbo realise Trieda was speaking to him.

“What’s wrong?” She asked frantically. “Are you alright?”

“I-I’m sorry,” Bilbo panted, “I feel really weak. Can- can you help me back to the room, p-please?”

She didn’t hesitate to do so, and only frowned worriedly the entire way back. Without her support Bilbo thought he might have completely collapsed already, and the moment she opened the door to the bedrooms his knees finally gave out. Trieda let out a shocked noise as her grip on him slipped,
and he was sure he was going to hit the floor, but arms were suddenly steadying him.

“What happened?” Thorin demanded as he adjusted his grip on Bilbo, his hands tense. Bilbo couldn’t help but slump against him, feeling completely drained of all his energy.

“I don’t know,” Trieda said as she shook her head. “He suddenly collapsed.”

Dimly, Bilbo was aware of the fact that Thorin sent Trieda away with a promise to take care of him, before he was moved into the second bedroom. He heard more than saw Thranduil and Legolas let out shocked noises at the sight of him, but he felt far too weak to tell them he was only tired. Gently, Thorin laid him down on his futon, and let Thranduil pull the blanket up over him.

“What happened?” Legolas asked as he took a seat beside Bilbo.

“I saw something,” Bilbo whispered. “In the- in the piano room-”

“Rest, now,” Thranduil said firmly. “Tell us in the morning.”

Bilbo didn’t have the energy to protest, and turned his eyes to Thorin. Surprisingly, Thorin looked a little concerned, and only nodded his head in agreement. Against the two of them Bilbo knew he had no hope of arguing, so he only nodded and rested against the futon. He wasn’t in his pyjamas, and he only just managed to remember to kick off his socks before Thorin was leaving the room. Legolas gave him a small look before he followed, a frown making its way onto his face. He flicked off the light switch, but left the folding screen open so that the room wasn’t completely dark. Thranduil too made a move to leave, but in a moment of panic Bilbo gripped his sleeve, eyes wide.

Thranduil gently took his hand, and didn’t say a word as he took a seat again. His grip was warm and comforting, and reminded Bilbo that he was in a place with people who were real, that he wouldn’t soon forget. Thranduil didn’t leave until he’d fallen asleep.

“We can play now, right?” Nimrodel said as he pulled Bilbo along by the hand.

Bilbo nodded, and murmured a quiet “Yes” without thinking. His mind felt fuzzy, like he wasn’t properly awake, or fully conscious. When he glanced around, he found that he’d been walking along the back porch with no recollection of how he’d gotten there. It was dark outside, early morning at the latest, and the rocks of the garden seemed to glow dimly under the moonlight. Where was he? Was this a dream? It must have been, considering how little he remembered about what he was doing.

“I really like your bell,” Nimrodel said. “Where did you get it?”

“A friend,” Bilbo answered. He didn’t exactly think about answering, but rather he talked on instinct, like he wasn’t controlling what he was saying. It made the smallest spark of fear travel through his veins, but he was too far gone to recognise it. “Where are we going?”

Nimrodel stepped off the porch. His feet made noises against the rocks, but before Bilbo could concentrate on it he was being pulled down. The rocks were cool and smooth against his feet, of which were bare. As they walked towards the forest, the rocks suddenly changed into dirt. It felt…

Nimrodel glanced back at him. “Someplace amazing.”

Bilbo sucked in a horrified breath of air when he suddenly realised it. The dirt felt real.
Thranduil sighed as he cradled a warm cup of tea between his hands. It was getting quite late, and he could see that Legolas was already falling asleep at the table, but it felt like there was more they still had to cover. He didn’t feel comfortable sleeping just yet, mostly due to Bilbo’s restlessness. He could hear Bilbo fidgeting from the other room, and it concerned him. Bilbo hadn’t had restful sleep since they arrived here, and he was clearly tired. In some ways, Thranduil thought that they all were being worn down by the tense air in the house, but there wasn’t anything he could do to fix that until he knew what was causing it.

As far as he was aware, the only way they could progress was if something worse happened while they were there to witness it, or if Bilbo had another one of his strange dreams. He hated thinking it, but that was the truth. There were times, just like this, when they couldn’t solve anything without forcing the hand of whatever it was that was causing trouble. Unfortunately, to do so, it seemed like Bilbo had to temporarily suffer.

“Did you know this would happen when you hired him?” Thranduil asked, glancing over at Oakenshield.

He looked up from the paperwork he was reading over, and shook his head. “I didn’t,” he answered. Thranduil frowned. “Bilbo's sensitivity towards children is astounding,” he murmured.

“It’s certainly unexpected,” Oakenshield agreed.

Thranduil glanced back at the second bedroom. He heard Bilbo let out another small noise, and felt frustration rise in him. They were all being affected, yes, but Bilbo was bearing the brunt of it. He seemed lost, more so than he had been on the previous case at his school. Thranduil knew that Bilbo was accustomed to situations like these, and he certainly wasn’t a professional. He couldn’t have expected Bilbo to be so affected by something like this, but when he thought about it he believed that bringing him here was for the best. After the case with the child ghost at his school, he’d become exposed to a world that he had been blissfully unaware of, and once that exposure had begun it was difficult to ignore. For now, he had Thranduil and even Oakenshield watching out for him. That was all they could offer after unwillingly bringing him into their worlds.

Still, it made Thranduil uneasy. He knew that his own child could look out for himself in this house, but who did Bilbo have to rely on? He didn’t know any warding spells, and couldn’t defend himself. Whatever was here was clearly attached to him, but what did it want? The more he thought about it,
the more his thoughts strayed to Nimrodel. The child clearly wasn’t fond of anyone from the paranormal research team, not even Legolas, who was always a big hit among children. Nimrodel almost completely ignored them, and never sought them out unless they were with Bilbo. It was unnerving, and Thranduil was sometimes tempted to request that Nimrodel be kept busy while they carried out the investigation, but it wasn’t in his nature to cause problems with his clients like that.

Out of nowhere, Legolas suddenly lifted his head. His eyes fluttered open and they quickly focused with an intensity that Thranduil was all too familiar with. A cold feeling overcame him, and the moment Legolas hurriedly stood a small cry erupted from the second room. Thranduil felt a jolt go through him, because that was clearly Bilbo’s voice, and he’d never heard Bilbo make a noise like that before. He stood and rushed after his child to the second bedroom, where Legolas threw open the door to cast a brighter light on Bilbo’s futon.

“Bilbo!” Thranduil dropped down beside Bilbo, and gripped his shoulders. The boy was shaking hard enough for Thranduil to feel it. He was sitting up, and had his hands over his face. Thranduil thought he might be crying, but then Bilbo lowered his hands, and instead his pupils were completely constricted with fear. “Bilbo, what happened?”

Bilbo just trembled. He turned his face into Thranduil’s shoulder, and Thranduil was so surprised by the motion that he almost toppled over. From Bilbo, it was completely unexpected, and he knew that something had deeply unsettled Bilbo, more so than anything else he’d experienced. He pursed his lips, and held onto Bilbo tightly.

“What did you see?” Oakenshield questioned, lowering himself down beside Bilbo. His eyes were firm and unnaturally bright, but in them Thranduil saw no coldness. Rather, Oakenshield looked quite concerned, and it was unusual to think that that concern was aimed towards someone other than himself.

For a moment Thranduil thought that Bilbo was too upset to reply, however he then sucked in a deep breath, deep enough and strong enough for Thranduil to feel the way his ribcage expanded. But then he pulled his head back, and his eyes seemed to have settled a bit. “I…” He croaked, before clearing his throat once. “It was so real, I thought- I thought I was actually…” His words choked off, and his eyes became downcast. He looked extremely vulnerable, and Thranduil felt his heart ache. Bilbo had been put in a very compromising position, and it frustrated him. It wasn’t fair to Bilbo, but there was little he could do himself without endangering everyone in the household.

“You’re okay now,” Thranduil said. “It was just a dream.”

Bilbo shook his head. “No,” he said shakily. “No, it felt different.”

Oakenshield narrowed his eyes in thought. “How so?”

Bilbo tensed again. “It… It felt so real,” he repeated. “And… and it wasn’t like the dreams Maki gave me. It wasn’t a memory. It felt like it was actually happening, and I couldn’t control anything…”

“What exactly happened?” Thranduil frowned.

Bilbo glanced up at him. His eyes were frightened, and covered in a thin layer of water that made it seem like he was almost ready to cry. “I was spirited away.”

Bilbo wasn’t allowed to be alone after that. He seemed thankful for the extra company, if nothing
else. Despite that, he jumped at every small noise, and seemed unaware of the way he frequently grabbed onto someone’s arm to steady himself. The first time he did it to Oakenshield amused Thranduil to no end, because it didn’t particularly bother Thranduil, but it certainly startled Oakenshield.

For the majority of the day, Bilbo stuck by Oakenshield. The research team didn’t have a need to separate into groups again, so they spent a lot of time working through paperwork and cleansing each part of the house room by room. It was tiring work, most of which was up to Thranduil to complete, but by midday he was too exhausted to complain about it. Rather, he simply ate, and kept a close eye on both his child and Bilbo. For what it was worth, Legolas appeared a little on edge, too. He was constantly bartering for Bilbo’s attention, though perhaps that was more because he’d taken an instant liking to him, but he seemed apprehensive whenever Nimrodel was in the same room as them, which he often was. The child seemed unable to stop asking Bilbo to play, and although Nora had scolded him for it already he was relentless. Even Oakenshield seemed frustrated by the constant interruptions.

It was halfway through the afternoon when something happened. Thranduil had been watching Legolas finish his protective charms. Most of them had already been distributed, but they still had to give Nimrodel his, and both Oakenshield and Carc hadn’t taken any until the rest of the household had. Legolas had just finished the last charm when a loud crash reverberated throughout the house. It made the ground rumble, and then the sound of crashing plates starting to rain down. Thranduil flinched and gripped Legolas’s shoulder as his child bulked under the noise. Across the room he saw Bilbo cry out and latch onto Oakenshield’s arm as he squeezed his eyes shut. He looked terrified as the crashing continued and continued, and even Thranduil started to feel anxious. Another scream rose up from somewhere in the house – it was Trieda’s voice – but the noise of the crashing quickly drowned it out.

When it finally stopped, Thranduil stood. “Let’s go,” he said. Legolas got to his feet and followed, and after a small struggle Oakenshield got up too. Bilbo was still latched onto his arm, and although Oakenshield looked a little astounded at the fact that Bilbo was looking to him for support he didn’t shake Bilbo off. Thranduil might have thought Legolas was a little jealous at the attention Bilbo was giving Oakenshield if the pout on his face was anything to go by, but Bilbo hardly seemed aware of what he was doing in the first place.

They found several of the family members standing by the door that led into the kitchen. Trieda was sitting on her knees, her face a picture of terror, and when Thranduil rounded the corner into the kitchen he could see why. The cupboards that were permanently built into the wall had all been torn free, as if the entire room had been ripped apart. Cupboard doors and handles were strewn about the room, kicked in and dented as though someone had taken their anger out on them. All the tableware and dishware, of which had been neatly stacked on the shelves, was covering the floor, broken into thousands of pieces. Not a single plate had been spared, not even the ones that had been in the family for generations, or the dishware that had been given to them as wedding gifts over the years.

Thranduil smelt something entirely too distasteful in that room. It was saturated in an uncomfortable coldness that fogged his breath and sent chills up his arms. He could sense something really bad, but when his eyes avidly searched the room he didn’t see anything that could be considered out of place for the situation. When he glanced down at Legolas, he saw that his child had a similar expression on his face, and he knew that Legolas must have been sensing something similar. He recognised so much of himself in Legolas, everything from his looks to his talent and his attitude.

“What happened?” Legolas demanded. His eyes were searching the room frantically; Thranduil could sense the frustration radiating off of him, like he wanted to finally see something, to gain answers. He understood how Legolas felt, but it would do them no good to be reckless.
"I had just finished putting all the dishes away," Trieda answered shakily. "Isildur was with me, and as soon as we left the room this happened."

Isildur nodded in agreement as he carefully helped his mother upright. He didn’t say anything, but his arrogant air appeared to be somewhat unstable. Thranduil hadn’t gotten a particularly friendly sense from him the first time they met, but he supposed it couldn’t have been helped. Now, however, he seemed more receptive to their presence in his home, and with the increasing amount of strange occurrences he was looking a lot more apprehensive.

"At least you weren’t hurt," Thranduil said with a deep sigh. He could see the charms Legolas made tucked into their pockets, and was glad Oakenshield had ordered them. Trieda and Isildur would have certainly been hurt if they hadn’t had them, Thranduil was sure of that.

"We’ve got to give this to Nimrodel," Legolas said, holding up the charms he carried. He handed two to Oakenshield and Carc, and then the last to Bilbo. "You’ll probably come across him first, Bilbo."

Bilbo frowned, but took the charm. "I suppose so," he said.

Thranduil watched Bilbo with a growing feeling of concern. He looked like he didn’t want to see Nimrodel, but there was something about the child that was igniting his curiosity. He sincerely hoped Bilbo would be alright, but he wasn’t sure what he could do to soothe Bilbo’s worries other than offer him comfort whenever he needed it. He wished that was enough.

The constant interruptions were starting to wear on Thorin’s mind. He wanted to get stuck into the investigation, but every time he started to mindlessly concentrate Nimrodel could come along and disrupt the balance. Thorin was sure he wouldn’t have been bothered by the child at all if he wasn’t with Bilbo, but leaving Bilbo with someone else made him feel frustrated. He wasn’t quite sure why, but it did, and he had long since learned that it was best to trust his instincts in such high-tension situations.

Regardless, the way Bilbo constantly clung to his arm was a distraction. Bilbo’s presence was warm and soft, softer than Thorin expected, and while he knew that Bilbo hadn’t quite realised what he was doing, Thorin certainly had. In fact, he couldn’t stop noticing, and it made him increasingly confused. He’d never been particularly friendly with anyone, let alone his employees, but he felt responsible for Bilbo’s discomfort. He’d been the one to convince Bilbo to come here, after all. He hadn’t expected the effect on Bilbo to be so great.

Thorin watched Bilbo out of the corner of his eye as Bilbo turned the charm over in his hands. It was written on special paper, in a language that Thorin wasn’t too familiar with, but they worked well when done right. Legolas was especially talented at writing them, which is why Thorin had him make enough for everyone. The only person who hadn’t been given one was Nimrodel, mostly because he had a way of avoiding Nora’s careful eyes with relative ease. Still, his tendency to wander off alone didn’t intimidate Thorin, mostly because Bilbo had proven to be perfectly able to find him.

This time, however, Nimrodel found them.

"Are you still working?" He asked, staring up at Bilbo with big, pleading eyes. He looked like any other child who was anxious to play, but Thorin knew better.

Bilbo went to deny him, but Thorin held out a hand. "Bilbo’s only free for a little while," Thorin
said. “But I want to play, too, so Bilbo can only play if I come along.”

Nimrodel frowned furiously, and gave him a withering look that was out of place on such a young child. He completely ignored Thorin, and instead reached out to grip Bilbo’s hand to pull him down the hallway, hard enough to separate Bilbo from Thorin’s arm. Thorin followed close behind, and inconspicuously gripped the back of Bilbo’s sweater when Bilbo’s anxious eyes darted over to him. He knew Bilbo feared disappearing like he had in his dream, though it likely wouldn’t happen.

They were lead to the room with the piano. Bilbo instantly tensed, and Thorin made sure to stay close enough that Bilbo could see him out of the corner of his eye.

“Play with me!” Nimrodel requested, grinning widely. “You can, can’t you?”

Bilbo nodded, and took a seat at Nimrodel’s insistence. He was breathing a littler heavier than before, and his hands noticeably shook when he lifted them to rest above the piano keys. Thorin could sense his trepidation, but the call of a piano had always seemed to draw Bilbo in. Thorin had only heard him play just the once, but even he could understand Bilbo’s connection to that particular instrument. He was incredibly talented, after all, so it only made sense that he loved pianos.

“Play!” Nimrodel said eagerly, eyes bright as he leaned up against the side of the piano.

Bilbo took in a shaky breath, rested his fingers on the keys, and played.
Extrinsic

Chapter Summary

Two different kinds of flowers and a window into another world.

Chapter Notes

Extrinsic - *not part of the essential nature of someone or something; coming or operating from outside.*

Bilbo could feel the teacup he held burning his hands, but it was a feeling he hardly registered. He felt completely drained and disconnected, like he hadn’t slept properly in weeks rather than days. Even the breeze, of which was cold and refreshing, did nothing to stir him from his thoughts.

He couldn’t stop thinking about the piano.

His fingers itched to play. He could feel lingering impressions of smoothness from the worn keys against his fingertips. When he closed his eyes, all he could see were the notes he ached to play, and how enticing the old piano had come to be. He could hear that mysterious tune in his head, being played over and over and over as though it were on an endless loop with no stop button. While he understood that he’d always had a strong affinity for pianos in particular, of which a lot could be blamed on the vague memory of one from his childhood, that desire to play was completely different from this. That desire was entirely willing, completely derived from his own pleasure at playing. This unrelenting urge, however, was more of a compulsion, as if someone were compelling him to play and would continue to do so until he gave in. It gave him a headache, and he thought that maybe it would go away if he just played that melody. Once that thought entered his mind, he couldn’t erase it, and it was driving him mad.

“Bilbo,” Thranduil murmured from behind him. “You’re going to hurt your hands.”

Bilbo hardly heard him. He only realised someone had spoken to him when Thorin leaned over to gently untangle his fingers from around the cup. He watched Thorin do it and didn’t protest, not even when Thorin placed a concerned hand on his shoulder. He just couldn’t stop thinking about the piano. In some ways he knew that his thoughts were making him crave the feeling of the keys under his fingertips again, and he wondered if it was becoming obsessive. More than that, however, he wondered if Nimrodel wanted to play again.

A hand suddenly gripped his chin and turned his head up. “Bilbo,” Thranduil said sternly. “What’s gotten into you?”

Bilbo blinked several times, and sucked in a deep breath. “I’m fine,” he said, even though it was a lie. Thranduil clearly didn’t believe him, but only sighed and dropped Bilbo’s chin. Bilbo glanced down, feeling an odd mix of guilt and frustration that left him unable to meet Thranduil’s eyes. His thoughts were too scattered, and he couldn’t find the strength to pull them all back together.
“Bilbo?”

He jumped at the small voice, and turned around to find Nimrodel watching him. Although his heart raced at the sight of the pale-haired child, he didn’t get the same startled feeling anymore. It was like he expected Nimrodel to appear in that moment, though he hadn’t exactly realised that. While it was certainly disconcerting, those worried feelings were quickly overshadowed by the complex fascination he suddenly had towards Nimrodel. He wanted to know what it was that was so different about Nimrodel, what had led him to disappear for a month only to reappear as if nothing at all had ever happened. He couldn’t remember ever feeling so driven, and it was making him extremely uncomfortable. He wanted it resolved as quickly as possible, and that will made him significantly less apprehensive towards Nimrodel.

“Do you want to play?” Nimrodel asked him.

Thorin shot Nimrodel a displeased look and went to answer him, but Bilbo interrupted him with a nod. “Alright,” he answered shakily. “But not the piano.”

Nimrodel’s face lit up, and with a happy cry he rushed forwards to grip Bilbo’s hands. His skin was surprisingly cold, but his grip was solid, and firm. Bilbo couldn’t help but find his gaze fixed on the child as Nimrodel guided him off of the porch. The moment his feet hit the rocks he felt all his strength leave him, and if not for the way Nimrodel held his hand he would have surely fallen over.

“Bilbo,” Thranduil cautioned. His voice clearly said that he was more than ready to step in, as did the hard stare Bilbo could feel boring into his back, but he didn’t avert his attention away from Nimrodel. It was more like he couldn’t. For now he ignored his uneasiness, and instead allowed Nimrodel to lead him through the garden. He heard the rocks crunch behind him, and knew that at least one person had followed to keep him in sight, and that reassured him a little. He wasn’t too afraid of disappearing, not while the sun remained in the sky, but it was an ever present presence in the back of his mind that simply wouldn’t go away.

“What do you want to play?” Nimrodel asked cheerfully. He turned his head up to glance at Bilbo, and for the first time since arriving at the house Bilbo got a close glimpse of Nimrodel’s eyes. Much like his strangely coloured hair, they were pale and unusual. He had the distinct impression that perhaps Nimrodel’s eyes should have been a different colour, a richer and deeper brown, and yet they stared back at him, light and beige. The more he looked at Nimrodel, the more the familiar feeling of being reminded of someone came to him. Bilbo still couldn’t remember who or what it was that Nimrodel reminded him of, but he thought that whatever it was, was important, and he wished he could have remembered it properly.

“Ah, look!” Nimrodel exclaimed. He rushed over to a row of trimmed bushes, pulling Bilbo along with him, and crouched beside the garden bed. “Look, Bilbo.”

He crouched down beside Nimrodel, and followed his gaze. Nestled under the tree was what looked like a growing patch of weeds, although one of them had bloomed into a flower with yellow petals. “It’s a weed, isn’t it?” Bilbo asked quietly.

Nimrodel giggled, and reached out to pluck the flower. “But isn’t it pretty?” He replied, twirling the flower between his little fingers. He went silent as he watched it, and a very strange expression passed over his face. It was just brief, but Bilbo saw it, and it made that same deeply sad feeling overcome him. Then Nimrodel smiled brightly, as if the sad look had never passed over his face, and he stood to carefully tuck the flower behind Bilbo’s ear. “It’s pretty!”

Bilbo’s eyes widened at the gesture. “I- I suppose it is,” he stammered. “There are lots more flowers in the front garden, aren’t there?”
“Mmm.” Nimrodel nodded in agreement, and fidgeted with the flower for a moment. “But they didn’t grow on their own. This one did.”

It only took a moment, but then Bilbo suddenly understood what Nimrodel was saying. To think a child could come to understand the struggle that some people faced in such a cruel world… At such a young age, too. Maybe his spiriting away really had taken an impact on him. Still, even Nimrodel had come to realise that with enough persistence even a weed could bloom and be beautiful. The flower started to feel a lot like it was more than just a plant, in that moment.

“There are other flowers, in the mountain,” Nimrodel said quietly, crouching down once more to hug his knees. “High, high up in the mountain.”

“Are there?” Bilbo asked quietly.

Nimrodel nodded. “Mmm. They’re little, only this big,” he held his fingers apart, “but they’re really pretty. Mama said that they’re her favourite, because they can only be found here, and she really likes this place.”

Bilbo had almost forgotten about Nimrodel’s mother, but the reminder of her made his heart ache. Strange behaviour or not, Nimrodel was still a child, and he still loved his mother. He likely hadn’t seen Níniel since she was admitted to the hospital three months ago, considering the long distance it takes to get there, and the fact that he’d been missing for one of those months. To go twelve weeks without seeing his mother at such a young age must have been really upsetting for him, and it made Bilbo feel a small twinge of sympathy. He didn’t remember his own mother that well, but he was sure he would have missed her dearly if he had been in Nimrodel’s position.

Tentatively, he placed his hand on Nimrodel’s head, just like Thranduil had done to him a few times before. “What colour are they?” He asked quietly. “The flowers on the mountain.”

Nimrodel glanced up at him, eyes light. “They’re purple,” he said. “Light purple, and glowy.”

“Glowy?”

Nimrodel nodded. “Mama said so, too. They shine really prettily.”

“Sounds nice,” Bilbo murmured, his voice gentle. “Do they have a lot of petals?”

Nimrodel shook his head. “Not too many, not like the ones in the front garden,” he said. “They have really round petals, but they’re kind of pointy at the end. They grow from the ground and cover an entire field.” Nimrodel glanced down, and his voice grew quiet. “Mama said it’s like a purple sky…”

Bilbo didn’t know what to say to that, so he remained quiet. He watched Nimrodel stare at the growing weeds, and wondered exactly what the child was thinking. He absently rubbed his hand over his bracelet, and faintly realised that the bell wasn’t ringing.

A loud clap of thunder rumbling in the distance made Bilbo jump. When he glanced up, the sky had become very overcast and dark, and there was no sign of the sun to be seen. Bilbo was sure the day had been fine, if a little chilly, and he hadn’t seen any reports of a storm brewing that day. It made his stomach churn anxiously, and as he stood both Thranduil and Thorin came over.

“We should head inside,” Thranduil said. “Storms grow fast in areas like these.”

Bilbo nodded, and followed them in. Nimrodel disappeared down a corridor, and as soon as he was gone Bilbo was overcome by a wave of dizziness. He slumped against the wall, head bowed, and tried to catch his breath. It seemed like Nimrodel only served as a distraction to defer his mind away
from just how exhausted he was, but it hadn’t lasted.

As if he sensed Bilbo’s fatigue, Thranduil sighed, and dropped a hand down to land on Bilbo’s head. “Why don’t you rest for a bit?” He suggested. “We’ll wake you for dinner.”

The thought of sleep sent shivers down Bilbo’s spine, because he had no doubt that something would happen. However the moment Thranduil led him to an armchair in one of the sitting rooms, he was completely out. Just before that, however, he reached up behind his ear, trying to feel for the little flower Nimrodel had threaded through his hair.

It wasn’t there.

A sky of purple reflected back at him. Bilbo rubbed his eyes to clear their fuzziness, and was met with a sight far greater than any other he’d ever seen. The meadow that had become so familiar to him was glowing with the magnificence of hundreds of purple flowers, each of which was beautiful on its own. He reached out a hand as if he could grasp the light they gave off, and watched his hand as it hovered above the field of purple.

And then he was falling.

Bilbo woke up with a violent start. He barely suppressed a cry, and felt tears gather in his eyes as his stomach lurched. He quickly covered his mouth with his hand, doubling over, and spent several moments with his head between his knees to fight off the nausea in his stomach. He knew that cliff was there, had seen it in his dreams, and yet he’d fallen, hadn’t he? It felt so real that just remembering the sick way his stomach dropped made him retch again.

“Are you alright?”

Bilbo jerked upright, his heart catching in his throat, as Nimrodel placed his little hands on Bilbo’s knees to peer up at his face. “Nimrodel?” He whispered.

Nimrodel smiled widely. “You’re awake!” He said. “Are you alright?”

Bilbo shook his head, his words failing him. He tried to glance around the unfamiliar room, searching for Thranduil or Thorin or Legolas or even Carc, but his eyes were physically unable to focus on anything other than Nimrodel.

“I want to show you something,” Nimrodel said, reaching for Bilbo’s hand. He pulled Bilbo upright, and led him over to the window. “Look out there.”

Bilbo did. He expected to see the garden, but beyond the window was the living room. The edges of the room were hazy, as if a fog had rolled in, and it was so out of place that Bilbo could hardly comprehend it. Seated at the table in the room was Isildur, Anárion, and Trieda. As Bilbo watched, Nora came storming in, followed by Nimrodel, who was crying and rubbing his red eyes.

“I followed Aunty around a lot,” Nimrodel said. His eyes were blank as he watched the view from the window, but the hand Bilbo held trembled, and gripped his own tighter. “I cried too much.”

“What…?”

“Watch.”
Again, Bilbo did. As he watched, Nora started to yell, rounding on Nimrodel with a harsh expression. She lifted a hand as though to hit him, but his violent flinch made her lower it. She gritted her teeth, and with an annoyed glance at Nimrodel she left the room. When Nimrodel only cried harder and tried to follow, she slammed the door before he could. Isildur, Anárion and Trieda only watched in tense silence, and Bilbo instantly knew that that had become a scene that was common.

“Why was Nora yelling at you?” Bilbo asked, glancing down at Nimrodel. The child’s face was framed by the white light coming in through the window, so much so that his eyelashes left small shadows on his cheeks.

“I…” Nimrodel trembled a little more. “I was scared. I didn’t want to be left alone, I thought that something bad would happen. She didn’t like that I wouldn’t leave her alone, but I just wanted my mother home.”

Bilbo squeezed his hand tighter, and bit the inside of his cheek. “I- I don’t understand,” he admitted, even though it was painful. “I don’t remember my mother. I… I trick myself into believing that I remember parts of her, but I can’t even remember her face, let alone her name. I sometimes remember her voice, or something she once said to me, but it doesn’t feel like enough. I don’t understand how you feel, but I’m sorry.”

Nimrodel’s eyes glazed over with water as he stared out of the window. “Is she alive?”

“I think so.”

Nimrodel looked down. Bilbo thought he would cry, but he didn’t. “We’re the same, then,” he whispered. It made something sharp go through Bilbo’s heart. “I was frightened of the dark, of being alone, and of sleeping, you know. What’s out that window, it happened all the time, in different ways. I wanted someone to play with me, but no one did, and even the piano grew dust. I could feel something bad, something I didn’t like, right…” He glanced up at Bilbo, and reached up to press a hand flat over Bilbo’s chest. “Here.”

Bilbo jolted as if he’d been physically pushed, so hard he fell from the chair he was resting in. His knees hit the ground hard enough to bruise, and he let out a small cry as a stinging pain ricocheted up his legs. He shakily pushed himself upright, and searched the room for his companions. A cold thread of fear unravelled inside him when he found himself in an empty room, and he couldn’t help but grip the place above his heart, where he could feel that his skin was unnaturally cold. Blindly, he ran from the room, ignoring the way his breath instantly fogged the moment it left his lips.

Thranduil was in the office with Legolas when Bilbo threw the door open.

“Bilbo?” Legolas exclaimed, bolting upright to catch Bilbo the moment his knees buckled. “What happened? Where’s Thorin?”

“Bilbo!”

He glanced up at the sound of his name and saw Thorin and Carc rushing down the hallway. “You… You left me alone!” He gasped.

Thranduil stood. “You did what?” He demanded, eyes fixed on Thorin.

“It was only for a moment,” Thorin said, frowning. “He had the charm, he should have been fine-”

“How could you!” Bilbo shouted, lifting his head. “I said- I said not to! Don’t you understand how
scared I am?"

Thorin recoiled at Bilbo’s sudden outburst, and began to frown. “Calm down, Bilbo-”

“Don’t!” Bilbo snapped. “You don’t get it, do you? I didn’t want to be alone! Don’t you understand what could have happened? Are you really that heartless? You’re like-” He bit off his words as a voice floated through his head, whispering about king’s men and their horses. “You’re like a selfish king who’s lost his kingdom!”

Thorin’s eyes grew dark. “Grow up,” he said. “This is work, and you can’t always have what you want. If you couldn’t handle it, you should have outright refused.”

“I did!” Bilbo shouted. He could feel his pulse leaping, could feel a tightening in his throat. It was more than he’d felt in a very long time. “You insisted! Why can’t you just do your job? Why do I have to suffer because of your downfalls? It’s cruel!”

“You can’t do anything for yourself!” Thorin snapped. “Even with our help you still put yourself in trouble. I can’t always account for you Bilbo, and having you be so desperate for attention is a distraction! It’s hard to work when you’re constantly around, doing nothing!”

“Oakenshield!” Thranduil snarled. “You’re going too far!”

“If you didn’t want me here, you should have just said,” Bilbo whispered. “I want to go home.”

Legolas let out a small noise as Bilbo’s weight fell on him heavier. “Come on, you should rest,” he murmured. Without a word further he helped Bilbo into the second bedroom, where Bilbo collapsed against the futon with a pained noise. He felt fevered and anxious, and was too riled up to even thank Legolas properly. He would make sure to do so in the morning, but for now Legolas simply pulled the covers up over him, and left him alone.

Bilbo didn’t want to be alone.

He was scared.

Thranduil frowned as he watched the storm rage outside. The rain had started not long after Bilbo had passed out, and soon the wind had picked up, too. It was messing with their equipment, which wasn’t helping the evident tension in the room. The four of them had remained in the second bedroom, and had forgone dinner. Thranduil was undeniably angry at Oakenshield, because even he could see how terrified Bilbo was. He hadn’t ever seen Bilbo that scared, and he certainly hadn’t seen Bilbo scared enough to raise his voice like he had. It gave him an awful feeling in the pit of his stomach, because he knew Bilbo must have dreamed of something truly horrible.

By the time they all went to bed, the storm had only worsened, and so had their attitudes. No one said a word to each other, and Thranduil was thankful that they were sleeping in separate rooms, even if the rooms were openly adjoined. He fell asleep restlessly listening to the storm outside and the gentle way his child breathed, and hoped that things would improve in the morning.

However, halfway through the night he was woken up by a loud, blood curdling scream.

Instantly the light from the first bedroom was on. Thranduil jerked upright and staggered into the room, quickly followed by Legolas, just in time for them to hear feet running down the hall.

“Nimrodel! Nimrodel!”
It was Nora screaming. Oakenshield yanked the door open just as she burst in, followed by Trieda and Anárion. “Have you seen Nimrodel?” Nora demanded. Her eyes were bloodshot and wide with terror, and her face had been drained of all colour. “Have you seen him?”

“No,” Oakenshield answered. “What’s happened?”

Nora started to sob, and fell to the ground. “I can’t find him!”

“There’s no one in the house, we’ve searched everywhere,” Trieda said shakily. “All the doors are locked from the inside, the windows too. The storm is too much for him to go outside!”

Suddenly, Legolas let out a sharp scream. Thranduil felt his stomach drop, and he whipped around to find his child slouching against the folding screen. He instantly gathered Legolas into his arms, pulling him close as he felt his heart race. “What is it?”

Legolas had tears in his eyes, and he pointed into the room. Thranduil followed his gaze towards Bilbo’s futon, saw Bilbo’s jacket with his protective charm sticking out of the pocket and the lumps of his blanket, and felt his heart stop.

Bilbo wasn’t there.
Ennuye

Chapter Summary

Disappearance, reappearance and the emergence of human emotion.

Chapter Notes

Ennuye - affected with ennui; weary in spirits; emotionally exhausted.

They searched the entire house, but Bilbo was nowhere to be found. His shoes, his phone and all of his clothes had all been left behind, and when Thranduil went to check the front and back doors he found them still locked from the inside. No matter how he looked at it, it was impossible for Bilbo and Nimrodel to have disappeared in the way they had. The storm outside had persisted straight through the night and well into the morning, and it was so strong that even Thranduil wouldn’t dare to brave the outside until it had settled. It was too dangerous.

And yet Bilbo was gone, just like that.

The house became very distraught as morning grew into day. Nora couldn’t be consoled, not even by Trieda, and even the more stoic of the family members were looking quite grievous. Legolas was quite upset as well, and Thranduil wouldn’t let him out of his sight. He feared for Legolas, because he knew his child had never handled situations like these well, and he was aware that Legolas had taken an instant liking to Bilbo. He didn’t often do that, mostly because Legolas had an uncanny ability that allowed him to sense the type of character a person had. Thranduil had known that Legolas would get along with Bilbo, but he hadn’t expected Legolas to grow as attached to Bilbo as he had. Legolas didn’t have many honest friends, so Thranduil hoped that they’d find Bilbo as soon as possible.

Even Oakenshield looked tense. He was snappish and constantly brooding, and it made Thranduil pity him. What if Oakenshield’s last conversation with Bilbo was to be an argument? One that Oakenshield was in the wrong for, too, not to mention that Bilbo was only on this case because Oakenshield had insisted. The fact that they hadn’t had a chance to make an apology to one another gave Thranduil a sense of turmoil in his stomach that he didn’t enjoy. He didn’t particularly like Oakenshield, nor did Thranduil enjoy his company, but he wouldn’t have wished for this to turn out as it had and for Oakenshield to be hurt by it. Even with the way Bilbo was quiet and withdrawn, everyone had come to appreciate his companionship, and that included Oakenshield.

The first day that Bilbo was missing, as soon as the storm allowed, they all went out to search the forest. There was no sign of either Bilbo or Nimrodel, but it was likely the storm had washed away any evidence if they had happened to go that way. Legolas spent a lot of time trying to sense for Bilbo or Nimrodel – they both gave off very strong auras, after all – but he only grew more and more frustrated when he was unable to. If anything, the spiritual presence in the house had completely diminished until even Thranduil struggled to sense it.
“The storm interfered with the camera signals,” Carc murmured as he turned away from the screens he had been watching. “The footage is nothing but static until two in the morning, when the feed was automatically reset and the connection stabilised.”

“Is there anything?” Oakenshield simply asked.

Carc shook his head.

“Then they must have disappeared before that time,” Oakenshield concluded. “We were roused at four forty-seven by Nora, so we knew that they were missing for at least a few hours before we woke.”

Thranduil sighed, and ran a hand down his face. They’d searched the woods for hours all day, until the sun had set and it became too dark for them to actively search any longer, and he was completely exhausted. “What do we do now, then?”

“If he’s been spirited away, then he’ll likely show up in a day or two,” Oakenshield said. “Worst case scenario, it takes just as long as it did for Nimrodel to appear, or he’s injured.”

“Or he doesn’t come back at all,” Legolas snapped.

“Legolas,” Thranduil chastised.

His child only huffed, and turned so that he had his back to Oakenshield as he rested his cheek against Thranduil’s shoulder. He was being stubborn, Thranduil could recognise it, but he knew that his child was just very concerned. He was as well, but he knew better than to let himself show it, because if he did then surely Legolas would panic. In situations like these, Thranduil had to be strong, even if he was distraught on the inside.

“Nimrodel wasn’t injured,” Oakenshield continued, “so we can only hope Bilbo isn’t, either. The identity of the spirit is still unknown, but if it’s a mountain spirit then it’s unlikely they will hurt Bilbo, considering Bilbo hasn’t done anything to insult or offend them. It’s more likely that there’s a spirit attached to Nimrodel, and bearing in mind how strange he has acted since he first disappeared that isn’t completely improbable.”

“If Bilbo’s been spirited away, will he be returned to the nearest place of worship?” Thranduil asked, more to himself than to the others. “Nimrodel turned up here, however, and there’s nothing in the history of this property to suggest it was ever used as a shrine.”

“The closest shrine is quite far from here,” Oakenshield said. He reached for Carc’s laptop, and brought up a map of the area. “This house is halfway up the mountain, and it is unlikely any developers would have the confidence to build a structure any higher up. The terrain gets quite unstable, and there are cliffs and protruding rock forms that would make constructing a house completely impossible from this point onwards.”

“Then the shrine is located lower on the mountain?”

Oakenshield nodded, and gestured to a lower spot on the map. “This is where the shrine is,” he said. “It’s much further west than here, and it’s not run by this family, nor has it ever been. Realistically, it’s unlikely that Bilbo will turn up there, so there’s no reason to send someone over.”

“What if this isn’t a spiriting away?” Thranduil suddenly asked. “We might have been looking at this wrong.”

Oakenshield frowned. “Typical spiriting aways have only ever been reported as lasting a few days,
but Nimrodel went missing for an entire month. He didn’t speak of any Gods or spirits, did he?”

Carc shook his head.

“For appearance’s sake, it seems like it could logically have been a spiriting away,” Oakenshield murmured. “Why else would Nimrodel disappear? It couldn’t have been a kidnapping, no one else lives out here or has a reason to travel here unless it’s to this house, and all the doors were locked from the inside…”

“Then a spirit led him away the day his mother was first meant to return,” Legolas murmured. “He was upset about his mother, right? A spirit took advantage of him, returned him when he believed his mother would return home after her first failed release date, and came back to wreak havoc when that didn’t happen.”

Thranduil hummed thoughtfully. “That could very well be possible,” he said. “But it doesn’t explain why Bilbo was taken, too.”

“Isn’t he spiritually sensitive to children?” Legolas asked. “Like, exceptionally?”

Thranduil nodded. “Yes. Perhaps the spirit – whoever or whatever it may be – took advantage of that, considering it’s attachment to Nimrodel… Could the spirit be a child, too?”

“Wouldn’t Bilbo have seen it?” Legolas questioned. “You said he saw the one at his school.”

“Yes, that spirit was definitely a child,” Thranduil said. “But Bilbo was completely unable to see the spirits of adults even when they completely surrounded him. He only saw them when he was confronted by the spirit of the child, and only because he’d entered the place they were bound to. Anyone would have been able to see them in that moment, especially someone spiritually sensitive.”

Legolas pouted at that, and curled up tighter into himself. Thranduil could feel how tense he was, and he couldn’t help but absently rub Legolas’s back like he had when Legolas was but a child.

“We need to identify the spirit, and exorcise it,” Oakenshield murmured.

Thranduil nodded in agreement. He might not have agreed with Oakenshield’s way of doing things, but at least that he could understand. “And Bilbo?”

For a fleeting moment, a pained expression crossed Oakenshield’s face, but it was quickly gone. “We’ll find him.” Is all he said. His voice was so confident that Thranduil felt obliged to believe him.

Two days later, when dusk was beginning to descend over the mountain, Bilbo appeared. Everyone had been inside, where the air was quiet and stifled, and the sound of the rocks out the back crunching had alerted them to someone’s presence. Legolas had been the first to notice, as he often was, and he was up and out of the room before Thranduil could properly comprehend that he’d even stood.

Bilbo was staggering down from the slope behind the garden. His clothes were dirty and his skin was scratched up, but from just a glance he didn’t look injured. His face was pale, and his eyes were frighteningly blank, but he didn’t look injured, and just that thought sent a wave of relief unlike any other straight through Thranduil’s heart.

“Bilbo!” Legolas cried. He ran forwards and caught Bilbo the moment Bilbo collapsed, holding onto him so tightly that Thranduil feared Legolas might hurt him.
Thranduil crouched down beside Legolas and fervently ran his eyes over Bilbo. He seemed to have only passed out for now, but his forehead was a little hot, and his paleness was worrying. Thranduil gently coaxed Legolas to let go of him, and carried Bilbo straight inside. If he saw Oakenshield anxiously watching him – or rather, watching Bilbo – then he chose not to say anything.

Nimrodel reappeared not long after Bilbo, and just like the first time he was completely unaffected and in perfect health, if only exhausted. The both of them slept for a long time, but Bilbo was the first to wake. No one from the research team was ready to leave Bilbo’s side, and even Carc remained in the same room despite his indifference towards Bilbo.

“How do you feel?” Thranduil asked gently, leaning over Bilbo as his eyes began to flutter open.


“You were missing for two days, Bilbo,” Thranduil said. He passed Bilbo a glass of water they had ready for him, and waited until Bilbo had taken it before continuing. “Do you remember anything?”

Bilbo’s eyes flickered, and he glanced down. He didn’t say anything, and it set Thranduil’s hair on end.

“Where were you?” Legolas asked. He leaned closer, and made sure that Bilbo had no choice but to look at him. His eyes were wide and imploring. They were a shade of blue that was enticing and impossible to ignore; Thranduil knew that from experience.


Legolas frowned. “With Nimrodel?”

Bilbo hesitated, and then nodded.

“What did you see?”

Bilbo let out a deep sigh, and glanced to the side. “I… I saw what was in my dreams. Nimrodel showed me.”

“How?” Legolas asked, puzzled.

Bilbo only shook his head, and handed the glass back to Thranduil. He looked troubled, and Thranduil instantly knew he was hiding something, something important. For a moment, he felt so frustrated by it all that he wanted to force Bilbo to tell him what it was, to shake the answer from him as though any amount of yelling would make Bilbo buckle. He rationally knew it wouldn’t, and instead forced himself to understand that Bilbo only hid things like this because they were incredibly sad, or because he was trying to figure out a way to fix it that only he could come up with. It had been the same for the case at his school – if the research team had known that the child ghost was deaf and that he’d died at the old school building, then the investigation would have been significantly different. However, that wasn’t information that the ghost had wanted them to know, and as such it had become deeply personal information that only Bilbo was privy to. Thranduil sometimes forgot that the ghosts they hunted were once human, too, that they could sometimes still be susceptible to human emotions like fear and anguish and regret and terror. He had to trust Bilbo on this, because there was now no way for him to fix it without Bilbo first opening a door for him to see through.

So he forced down his questions, and cleared his mind. To keep his hands busy, he took Bilbo’s
temperature once more, and gave him pain medication. He had already cleaned and bandaged the small cuts on Bilbo’s arms and legs, of which had only likely come from branches up in the mountain. For the most part, he was able to focus on the relief he felt at Bilbo’s reappearance. He never wanted to experience anything like that ever again.

“You should rest,” Thranduil murmured. He glanced at Oakenshield, who had had the same pained dip in his eyebrows that was almost completely unnoticeable, and sighed. “We’ll talk more in the morning, alright?”

Bilbo started nodding, but they were quickly interrupted by the sound of feet running down the hallway. The bell Bilbo wore on his wrist started to chime, and before they knew it Nimrodel had burst into the room and was swiftly making his way straight towards Bilbo. Thranduil only just moved back in time to avoid being hit before Nimrodel was diving straight for Bilbo’s arms.

“Nimrodel!” Nora rushed into the room behind him, looking flustered. “Get back here right now!”

Nimrodel whimpered, and rubbed his face against Bilbo’s neck.

Thranduil could tell that something wasn’t right. He hadn’t ever seen Nimrodel act so childlike, let alone so fragile. His eyes moved up to Bilbo’s face, and he saw that Bilbo’s expression had broken into one of worry. He didn’t carry the same apprehensive air around Nimrodel like he once had. It made Thranduil wonder exactly what had happened up on that mountain.

“Do you want to play?” Bilbo suddenly asked.

The room became quiet for a moment. Then, Nimrodel tilted his head back, exposing his watery eyes and his stunned expression. He let out a confused noise, but soon nodded, and made no complaint when Bilbo pushed him away to stand. Even though Bilbo was shaky on his legs, he gripped Nimrodel’s hand firmly, and started to lead him from the room.

Thranduil went to say something, but Oakenshield quietly cut him off with a glance. Instead Thranduil simple pursed his lips, and followed close behind Bilbo. Nora did too, and soon enough Trieda and Elendil appeared, and Legolas was coming, as well. Bilbo entered the room with the piano, but when they tried to follow, it was as though instincts had arisen that told them not to. Instead the entire group lingered outside of the door, and watched as Bilbo and Nimrodel took a seat at the piano. Oakenshield in particular looked quite frustrated in that moment.

Bilbo started to play. It was a quiet, melancholic tune, and reminded Thranduil of the one he’d heard Bilbo play at his school. Nimrodel watched Bilbo’s fingers move across the keys avidly, but Bilbo was oblivious to his stare. Bilbo merely played like he always had; honestly, purely, and from the heart, more so than Thranduil had ever head. He goaded the notes into cooperating, into sounding just the way he wanted them to, as if the piano had become an extension of his thoughts rather than an instrument. He always lost himself in the music - that much was clear even to an outsider like Thranduil, but it was always startling to witness. He didn’t think he’d ever become used to the way Bilbo played, no matter how many times he came to hear it.

Thranduil wasn’t sure how long the song went for. Rather, Bilbo seemed to play it in a loop over and over, though it never quite sounded the same twice. Eventually, Nimrodel placed a hand on Bilbo’s arms, and the notes quietened.

“I’m sorry,” Nimrodel said. His eyes were watery again, and when he ducked his head Thranduil saw that he was beginning to cry. “I’m sorry.”

Bilbo watched him. His eyes weren’t as blank anymore, and they wavered. Thranduil wanted to
know what Nimrodel was apologising for, because Bilbo clearly understood, but it wasn’t his place. Instead he waited, holding his breath, as Nimrodel’s grip on Bilbo tightened enough to crinkle his clothing.

“I’m sorry,” Nimrodel repeated, lifting a hand to rub at his wet eyes as tears started to drip off his chin and his small, hiccupping cries became louder, “for spiriting you away.”
Thranduil felt his heart abruptly drop. He watched Bilbo’s face, saw the way his expression crumbled under the strain of Nimrodel’s choked confession, but somehow he thought that maybe Bilbo had known what had truly happened all along. His fingers paused over the piano keys and the music tapered off into silence, but it was deafeningly loud.

“What?” Legolas murmured, gripping Thranduil’s arm tightly. “Nimrodel spirited Bilbo away? But…”

But that shouldn’t be possible.

Bilbo, looking troubled, turned his eyes away from Nimrodel and back to the piano. “Let’s play, okay?” He said. His voice was wavering, and the fact that he was now the one insisting on playing the piano was disconcerting.

A fresh wave of tears came to Nimrodel’s eyes, and he lowered his head. He clenched his small fists in his shorts, and nodded. He didn’t meet Bilbo’s eyes, not even when Bilbo pressed his fingers against the piano keys and began to play again. Bilbo played a tune that Thranduil had never heard. It was unlike the one he previously played, and gave off a stronger, more prominent feel. Thranduil was instantly overcome by it, as though it could penetrate straight through to his heart like only the most special music pieces ever had. He felt enraptured by it, as though he were completely bent to the will of the one who brought it into fruition.

“That melody…” Nora gasped, pressing her hand to her mouth. “How does he know it?”

Oakenshield gave her a piercing look that clearly told her to explain.

Nora flinched at his gaze, but lowered her hand. “That’s Níniel’s melody,” she said shakily. “She composed it, and never wrote it down on sheet music. She only ever played it for Nimrodel.”

Oakenshield frowned. “Bilbo said he’d been hearing piano music,” he murmured. “Could that be it?”

“Níniel is still alive!” Nora argued. “How can he know it?”

Thranduil turned back to watch Bilbo. His posture was perfect, and he played with gentle hands that looked as though they were hardly heavy enough to bring forth a note from the keys. In some ways, it was as though Bilbo had seemingly disconnected from the world, like he was so focused on the way his fingers moved that he simply didn’t have the energy to concentrate on anything else.
Thranduil knew that that was how it looked, but he still caught sight of the little glances Bilbo sent towards Nimrodel, and how his face changed expressions, just slightly, anytime he struggled to recall what notes came next.

Somehow, it left Thranduil feeling extremely sad.

“Bilbo, I don’t know if I want to play anymore,” Nimrodel said, tugging on Bilbo’s arm gently. “I’m scared.”

“I know,” Bilbo said. “But this is what you wanted, isn’t it? I can’t give you everything you deserve, so this is the best I can do.”

Nimrodel let out a small whimper, and rubbed his eyes. He gripped Bilbo’s sweater tightly, and leaned closer to hear the music Bilbo was playing. Despite how sad he seemed, the music was making his shoulders look less heavy. He cried, but his expression became softer, more so than it had been since the research team arrived at the house.

As Bilbo played, the ambience of the room began to change. The house had always been somewhat on the colder side, but with each passing minute it seemed as though the temperature was stabilising. The corners of the room didn’t appear so dark, and the tension that had previously been constant began to dissipate. Thranduil couldn’t understand it, could barely wrap his mind around it, but he could sense it. The changes were almost tangible, like a draft against his skin or the lingering taste of something on his tongue. He wondered what Bilbo felt, but knew it had to be much greater that the faint senses he was experiencing.

“Bilbo…” Nimrodel murmured. “I’m tired.”

Bilbo continued to play. He didn’t flinch when Nimrodel rested his head against his shoulder, and only closed his eyes. “You can sleep,” he said. “Can’t you?”

Nimrodel murmured incoherently, and nodded his head. “Will you play until I do?”

Bilbo squeezed his eyes shut tighter, and nodded. “Mmm.”

And so he did. He played and played and played, and never once opened his eyes until Nimrodel was only but a touch away from sleep. While Nimrodel seemed more peaceful at the sound of the lullaby, Bilbo became sadder, until his eyes were shining with a sheen of water that was almost like a layer of tears. He continued playing until his arms seemed to grow heavy and his shoulders began to sag.

“Bilbo?” Nimrodel asked sleepily.

“Mmm?”

“It’s okay to sleep, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

Nimrodel’s eyes flickered shut several times, and his head began to nod. “You’ll miss me, right?”

“I will.”

“Don’t be sad,” Nimrodel whispered. “The flowers will still bloom, won’t they? So don’t be sad.”

Bilbo closed his eyes again, like he couldn’t bear to hear what Nimrodel was saying. “They will,
won’t they?” He said on a shaky sigh. It was a rhetorical question, Thranduil knew that, but it still
seemed like Bilbo was only guessing at an answer, like he couldn’t be sure of it.

Nimrodel reached out for Bilbo’s hand, and gently touched his fingertips to the top of Bilbo’s palm. Bilbo didn’t stop playing, but the touch seemed to make him tremble. A stream of sunlight began to filter in through the window, and although it was cold it was still effortlessly brilliant. For a moment, Thranduil was blinded, and he couldn’t help but lift his arm to shield his eyes. The melody ended and the room went quite. When the sunlight faded and Thranduil’s eyes fluttered open, only Bilbo remained at the piano, and rested across his still and trembling hands was a single purple flower.

Nimrodel was nowhere to be seen.

Bilbo held the flower in his palms as though it were made from glass. He himself felt like he was just as fragile, as though any sign of weakness in his thoughts would suddenly make him crack and burst into tears. He ached for a long and proper rest, but he already knew that his sleep would be restless. Instead he found himself seated across from the paranormal research team, wrapped in a blanket with a fresh cup of tea.

“Please explain now, Bilbo,” Thranduil coaxed.

Bilbo knew that he owed them an explanation, at least. After taking a small sip from his tea, he brought his eyes up from the flower he held, and exhaled. “I… I don’t know where to start.”

“The melody you played,” Thorin murmured. “Was it the one you’ve been hearing?”

Bilbo nodded.

“And you memorised it.”

“Not… Not exactly,” Bilbo said. “It was more like I couldn’t forget it.”

“Who showed it to you?”

“Nimrodel,” Bilbo said. “He died a long time ago.”

Legolas let out a small, shocked noise, unable to help himself. Thranduil looked at him in disbelief, and even Thorin looked a little wary at that. “How?” Legolas asked. “He was perfectly real!”

Bilbo frowned meekly, and glanced to the side. “When Nínriel didn’t return, he went out into the mountain.” Absently, he placed the flower down on the table, and folded his hands together. “She… She loved these flowers, but they only grow in a certain spot, and Nimrodel wanted to get them for her…”

Thorin reached for the flower, and gently picked it up. “These were what he wanted, then?”

Bilbo nodded. “There’s a meadow, high up on a cliff, where the scenery is completely untouched by anything from the outside,” he said. “I… I saw it in my dreams, a few times. These flowers grow there, and turn the meadow into a purple sky.” He lowered his eyes, and tried to recall exactly what he’d seen. “Nimrodel went searching for them, but he- he…”

Legolas gripped his hand. It was a surprisingly reassuring touch.

“He slipped,” Bilbo whispered. “And fell.”
Legolas tightened his grip. “It’s okay,” he said quietly. “His spirit returned a month later, right?”

Bilbo nodded. “When Níniel didn’t return, because her health had only worsened, Nimrodel’s spirit became despaired. That’s why all those strange things were happened, but he couldn’t help it!”

“Spirits aren’t like humans,” Thorin said. “They think and act differently, and are primarily driven by only the strongest of emotions. It makes sense that his despair and anguish caused the activity in this house, and that it only worsened as time went on and his desire to see his mother wasn’t fulfilled.”

After taking in a deep breath, Bilbo continued. “Nimrodel felt really alone after his mother was hospitalised,” he said quietly. “He didn’t know Nora too well, and she grew tired of his crying. His fear and his pain only worsened as each day passed, and when Níniel didn’t return after a month…”

“I understand,” Thorin said. “That was Nimrodel’s spirit we’ve been seeing, and it’s been him causing all the problems here.”

Bilbo nodded. “He spirited me away,” Bilbo said.

“You were sympathising with him,” Thorin explained. “You’re exceptionally sensitive to children, and it’s likely you started to become affected by any lingering feelings Nimrodel had. That’s probably why you didn’t want to be alone, and why you became so exhausted.”

Bilbo flushed in embarrassment. “Sorry…” He murmured.

“Don’t apologise,” Thorin replied.

Bilbo offered him a tentative, weak smile. It felt strained, but it was all he could manage. Regardless, he understood what Thorin had said. It was a roundabout way of apologising, and even though he hadn’t spoken the exact words Bilbo felt a little more relieved. He hadn’t really been himself when he’d yelled at Thorin, and he was more than glad to put it all behind him.

“So Nimrodel’s spirit has moved on?” Legolas asked. “I can’t sense anything strange here anymore.”

Thorin nodded. “It would appear so,” he said. “He was purified.”

“Purified?” Bilbo asked quietly, turning to Thranduil.

“Purification is another form of exorcism,” Thranduil said. “It’s a way of compromising with a spirit to allow it to peacefully move on and let go of its attachments, whereas exorcism is a way to completely erase them.”

Bilbo nodded. “Then Nimrodel wasn’t in any pain?”

Thranduil shook his head. “He didn’t appear to be,” he murmured. “You did well, Bilbo. How did you know the way to purify him? It usually takes a lot of effort to figure it out, and one has to realise that the spirit is actually a spirit to do it…”

“Trieda told me that Níniel would play to Nimrodel often,” Bilbo said. “All Nimrodel wanted me to do was play the piano, and when I kept hearing that song I just thought… I thought he might find solace in it. When…” He paused for a moment to gather his words. “When I was up on the mountain, I think that a lot of what I saw was from Nimrodel’s memory. He was waiting for something good to finally come along, and I think that meant he wanted to see his mother one last time. That- it wasn’t going to happen, but if I could just play him that song again…”

“It gave him comfort,” Thranduil summarised. “It was the right thing to do.”
It didn’t feel like the right thing. Bilbo felt uncomfortably upset, mostly because he knew he’d never see Nimrodel again. Even though Nimrodel had been smiling when he left, just like Maki had, Bilbo felt incredibly sad.

“We should begin packing up,” Thorin said, glancing over at everyone briefly before his eyes settled on Bilbo. “Rest here for now, Bilbo.”

He made no complaint at that. Bilbo felt much too exhausted to be walking around carrying expensive equipment, and instead buried himself further into the blanket Thranduil had draped over him. He half-heartedly watched Thranduil and Legolas leave the room, and did the same when Carc dismantled their setup and began to carry it out to the van. Thorin remained in the room seated across from Bilbo, watching the flower in his hands.

“Nínief should have that,” Bilbo said quietly.

“You don’t want to keep it?” Thorin asked. “Nimrodel did gift it to you.”

Bilbo shook his head. “It should be for her. When... If she returns home, it won’t ever be to her child.”

Thorin remained silent at that. He observed the flower for a moment longer, before standing. He moved to sit down beside Bilbo, and carefully pressed the flower into his hands. “Then give it to Nora, so that Nínief may have it,” he said softly, as he stood again. Just briefly, his palm touched the back of Bilbo’s head, like a reassuring lover might touch their beloved. “You did well, Bilbo. You made Nimrodel happy.”

If Bilbo’s eyes became incessantly watery, then neither of them mentioned it.

Before they left, Bilbo made his way out into the back garden. It was an oddly calming place, as it was intended to be, and gave him a moment to think. Nimrodel had really loved this home, had loved the mountain. It didn’t seem fitting, however, that he should die the way he did. It was too heart wrenching to think about. When the family had been informed, they were understandably distraught, and Bilbo had escaped into the garden to avoid being tangled up in their grief. It wasn’t his place.

When Bilbo came across a familiar place, he found himself reluctantly bending down to brush away the lowest leaves of a bush. Hiding under their shadow was a small cluster of weeds, from which a single bud had bloomed. He felt his heart clench at the sight of it, and almost without thinking he plucked it up and carried it inside to carefully tuck it into his suitcase so that when he returned home, he could press it between the pages of a thick and heavy book.

Before he did so, however, he spared one last glance at the mountain looming before him. Nimrodel had certainly been a child that loved that place, but Bilbo hadn’t.
A hollow feeling starts to emerge, and a new case begins.

**CASE THREE – THE GHOST IN THE SAND**

“T-the beach?”

Thranduil nodded as he absentmindedly stirred his cup of tea. “That’s right,” he answered, sighing. “It seems that Oakenshield was goaded into this case by an old sponsor who he owed a favour, so I suppose he had no choice in the matter… He certainly wouldn’t have taken this case if the situation were any different.”

Bilbo nodded hesitantly, and gripped the strap of his schoolbag, which he had under the table, tighter. He had been hesitant when Thranduil called him to explain the next case, and he still wasn’t quite sure why they’d ended up at an obscure café waiting for Legolas to arrive. He knew that some people had already recognised Thranduil – he was a media personality, after all, and his looks were unmistakable – but no one had approached them, so Bilbo was only vaguely uncomfortable. “Then,” Bilbo began uncertainly, “the case is at a beach?”

“Somewhat,” Thranduil answered. “Perhaps beside the beach would be a more appropriate description. The client is a wealthy contractor. He’s having a sea-side resort built, but every night the sand from the beach is mysteriously transported into the building site.”

“Could it be the currents, or the wind?”

“The sea is relatively gentle in that area,” Thranduil said, leaning back in his chair. “There’s a large sandbank a couple hundred meters away from the shallow end of the shoreline, so the surf isn’t too large – it breaks against the sandbank, and thus makes the location perfect for a relaxation resort like the one being built. The wind hasn’t reportedly been that strong, either.”

Bilbo frowned, and carefully used the decorative fork he’d been given to break off the tip of his afternoon cake. He hadn’t particularly planned on eating until he was home, but the strawberry shortcake had looked really nice, and Thranduil had insisted after he’d bought himself and Legolas something, too… Well, he wouldn’t complain now that he’d started eating it. Still, wasn’t it strange for a school student like himself to be having afternoon tea with someone like Thranduil? Even if Legolas were to come, did that not only make it more unusual? He sighed, and tried to put the thoughts behind himself, though it was difficult when Thranduil was watching his face so avidly.
“It’s your choice if you want to come on this case or not,” Thranduil said quietly. “After last time, no one would blame you.”

Bilbo made a contemplative noise, and ate another bite of strawberry shortcake. “It’s not that I don’t want to,” he murmured. “It’s just… Would I really be of any help? I only seem to cause trouble, and if there aren’t any children involved I doubt I would be able to do anything at all.”

Thranduil chuckled. “I believe that you’re quite helpful with the manual work, too,” he said. “Oakenshield often contracts other spiritualists to help on cases, because he refuses to permanently hire anyone other than Carc.”

“Why Carc?” Bilbo asked. “He doesn’t speak much.”

Thranduil hummed. “His family has long since served the Oakenshield family,” Thranduil said. “As far as I’m aware, their bloodlines have been closely linked for dozens of generations, and although servitude has since become uncommon in the modern world, Carc has always been with Oakenshield.”

Bilbo blinked, and silently took another small bite of cake. As he had said, he wasn’t reluctant to return to the job. When he worked on a case, he found that all his previous worries disappeared. With something to occupy his time, he wasn’t able to focus on all his uncertainties, like how he struggled to remember things and the way he felt stuck in summer, like it was a haze of unbreakable solitude and heat.

But winter was coming, and the air was beginning to chill. Bilbo wondered if the ocean would still be warm enough to swim in, but he couldn’t ever recall going to the sea in the summertime, let alone autumn. Rather, when he tried to think of a time he had visited the ocean, no memory came. It didn’t particularly sadden him, but it left him feeling a little hollow inside. He wondered if it showed on his face, but perhaps thought that his expression had always been that way – until he’d met the paranormal research team, that is.

Around them, his expression had changed, so when Thranduil gave him an odd look he thought that maybe it was now noticeable.

“Bilbo!” An energetic voice called out.

He lifted his head at the sound of his name, and barely put down his fork in time to brace himself for the embrace Legolas gave him. As always, Legolas was overtly affectionate and unafraid to all but seat himself in Bilbo’s lap, despite the fact that they were in public and the chastising look his father was giving him. Instead he only gripped Bilbo tighter, and insistently rubbed their cheeks together much like a cat would.

“It’s so nice to see you again!” Legolas cooed.

“L-Legolas…” Bilbo muttered, embarrassed. He gently pushed Legolas away, unused to such an interaction, but Legolas didn’t even notice.

“Your uniform is so cute!” Legolas exclaimed, purposefully looking Bilbo over. “I should transfer to your school so we can spend more time together!”

Bilbo didn’t believe his school uniform was anything special. It certainly wasn’t as nice as Legolas’s, which consisted of a smart blazer and a tie. His school logo looked like it had been embroidered into the breast of the blazer, too. It must have been much more expensive than Bilbo’s, despite Bilbo attending a fairly prestigious school himself.
Thranduil laughed at his son’s behaviour, and teasingly lifted his phone to take photo. Bilbo tried to duck his head, but only ended up frowning harder as Legolas pressed a palm to his face to keep his head up. Legolas was all smiles and cheekiness, and there was no doubt he could sense Bilbo’s tenseness, but he still pulled his seat as close to Bilbo as possible, and wasn’t afraid to steal Bilbo’s fork to try his cake. Bilbo had never met anyone so forward.

“You’re coming on the next case, right?” Legolas asked, his eyes imploringly wide. “We’ll get to go to the beach together!”

“Legolas, don’t be so forceful,” Thranduil cautioned. “It’s Bilbo’s decision.”

Legolas pouted, and gripped Bilbo’s arm tightly. “You’ll still come, right?”

Bilbo bulked at that, and let out a small, choked sound. “I…"

The way Legolas watched him was so earnest. He carried an air of honesty that Bilbo didn’t think he’d ever seen in anyone else. He thought that perhaps Legolas had some sort of sixth sense that had something to do with people, and he briefly wondered what Legolas saw when he looked at him. It surely couldn’t have been anything good, so why was Legolas so adamantly about being his friend? Why did Legolas want to spend time with him? Bilbo couldn’t understand it, and he doubted that he ever would. It wasn’t in his nature.

Bilbo let out a sigh, and took his fork back from Legolas so that he could take another bite of his cake. “I think I’ll do it… Probably.”

The view from the walkway was more than Bilbo imagined it would be. He pulled his jacket tighter around himself as the wind blew. It tasted like salt, and sent strange chills down his spine. Seeing the ocean now, he was sure he had never visited it before. Surely he would remember such a brilliant place, would he not? The ocean was all but glittering under the autumn sun as it gently rose and fell across the shore.

“Bilbo, this way.”

Bilbo startled, and turned his attention back to the task at hand. He picked up his overnight bag as well as a fairly light trunk of equipment and followed Thorin into the parking lot entrance of the resort. They’d been given a fully furnished room to stay in as though they were paying guests, despite the resort not being complete. Bilbo had seen the room, and it was far more extravagant than he thought they needed. A common room with a kitchen led off to three bedrooms, each with two lavish beds. Bilbo wasn’t sure who was rooming where, but he wasn’t particularly fussed. Either way, he was more concerned with carrying in the equipment where it was to be set up in the common room by Carc. It was tiring work, but it was what he was hired to do, so he didn’t complain.

“When do we get to go down to the beach?” Legolas whined as he gave Thorin a tired glare. “I want to see Bilbo in a bathing suit!”

Bilbo huffed and felt a scowl touch his lips. He placed down the equipment he’d carried in, and pressed his hands against the small of his back. “Must you say things like that?” He mumbled. “It’s embarrassing.”

Legolas grinned slyly. “That means you’re comfortable with me, Bilbo!” He said far too cheerfully as he sauntered closer. He had much too much gracefulness for someone of his age. “Isn’t that
sweet? We should room together!"

Bilbo didn’t know how to reply to that, and let out a small noise of surprise as Legolas suddenly reeled him into an affectionate hug. He was struck with a strange urge to return the embrace, mostly because Legolas had been giving him to them so often, but he didn’t know how. It wasn’t particularly frustrating, and he didn’t despise the fact that he was unable to react like a normal person would have, but again he was only filled with a hallowed feeling.

Thranduil gave his son a tired look and placed his son’s hand on his shoulder. “We’ll be sharing a room, Legolas,” he said firmly. “Bilbo can have his own room.”

“Ah, Carc has already claimed his,” Thorin murmured, gesturing to the only closed door with a bland expression. “A lot of the equipment is in there, too.”

Bilbo glanced up. Thranduil was giving Thorin an extremely dry look, and after a moment he turned his gaze down to Bilbo. Although he didn’t speak, Bilbo could clearly understand what he was asking. When Bilbo didn’t protest or complain, he sighed, and turned his head away. Bilbo picked up his bag from where he’d left it at the door, and after a last glance at Thranduil, he made his way into the second bedroom. Both of the beds looked equally comfortable, and only after a small moment of hesitation he decided to take the one closest to the balcony, where light was freely let in by wide windows.

“We likely won’t be doing much today,” Thorin said as he entered the room a moment later. He placed his bag down on the bed, and turned his head to watch Bilbo out of the corner of his eye. “You can rest here, if you wish, or accompany Legolas down to the beach.”

“It’s fine,” Bilbo said. “I’m here to work.”

Thorin eyed him for a moment, then turned away. “I’ll be interviewing the client soon, and then we’ll continue setting up the equipment in areas of interest,” he said. “By that time it should be night, so what you want to do is your choice.”

Bilbo nodded, and began to unpack his things. It was only when he came across his pyjamas did he realise exactly what sharing a room with Thorin meant, and why Thranduil had been apprehensive about it – it meant vulnerability. It meant silly little things that had never mattered to Bilbo before, like the fact that Thorin would see him in his pyjamas, that they would be in the same room together, alone, for quite some time, that Bilbo would be asleep in the bed across from him. Those things had never mattered to him before because he could only remember living alone. No one had ever stepped foot into his apartment beside himself, and he’d never slept at his friend’s houses. Did he even have friends? Milo and Hamfast were people that came to mind, and even Legolas, but he could never be sure of their intentions. What did they expect from him? How was he supposed to act? What was he meant to say, what facial expressions was he meant to wear?

He really didn’t understand.

Chapter End Notes

I had to cut this short after I received some bad news, so sorry for the length. Tomorrow’s chapter should hopefully be longer.
Throughout the remainder of the day, Bilbo found himself carrying out rather simple tasks. He set up cameras and microphones, guided by Carc, and then was goaded into helping Legolas unpack his things. Before the sun began setting Legolas was sent to the local grocery store to pick up food for the research team, and Bilbo accompanied him. Even though Legolas made him carry around the basket (“Like my knight in shining armour!” Legolas had insisted, though Bilbo clearly struggled and had red indentation marks on his arms for quite some time afterwards) Bilbo found that it wasn’t an entirely bad way to spend his time.

It was on the walk home that Bilbo started to feel strange. It wasn’t the usual sort of strangeness that he found he often developed on cases, but rather he felt like it came more from himself than anything spiritual or paranormal. Not even the breeze being stirred by the ocean could still his thoughts, and he restlessly turned his head to watch the waves move up and down the shore. He could see the building site for the resort in the near distance, and although he wanted to be there the sight of the ocean was quite distracting.

“Bilbo?”

Bilbo frowned as Legolas walked back to stand beside him. He wordlessly watched the ocean, watched the water turn orange with the reflection of the setting sun, and wondered if he’d truly ever been here before. More and more he could feel his oldest memories fading into nothingness, and no matter how hard he tried to think of them, to recall them, they simply wouldn’t come.

“Haven’t you ever been to the beach?” Legolas asked, peering at Bilbo’s face curiously. His intuition was uncanny, and it irritated Bilbo, a little.

“I don’t remember,” Bilbo answered.

“Hmm? You don’t remember?”

Bilbo shook his head. He turned to look at Legolas, who was watching him with wide, inquisitive eyes. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” Legolas said. “It’s just, you look sort of sad.”

A strange feeling went through Bilbo’s chest. Was that the sort of expression he was showing? He
couldn’t tell. He felt as though he’d always been this way, and that his expression hadn’t particularly changed. Rather, he hadn’t consciously changed it, or been aware of it changing. Had his expression always been like that?

“You really don’t remember if your parents have ever taken you to the beach?” Legolas asked.

Bilbo blinked. “I don’t remember my parents,” he said carefully.

Legolas’s eyes widened. “You don’t remember your parents?” He questioned. His voice had changed, had gone softer, and Bilbo wondered if it was out of consideration for his feelings. “Are they…”?

“They’re alive,” Bilbo said. “I… I can’t remember them ever dying, so I think they’re alive.”

“Bilbo, you’re not making sense,” Legolas shook his head, and reached out one hand to grip Bilbo’s arm. “You don’t remember anything about your family?”

Bilbo couldn’t help but shy away from Legolas’s questioning. His reaction to Bilbo’s words only made a nervousness begin to stir in Bilbo’s chest, like it invigorated any previous thoughts he’d had on the matter. He watched Legolas with a growing frown. He thought that maybe his expression showed his concern, and eventually Legolas just shook his head and forced a smile.

“Let’s not worry about it for now, alright?” He said. “We should get back before the sun goes down.”

“A-alright…” Bilbo agreed. He felt frazzled, on edge, and when Legolas pulled away from him he was unable to stop himself from reaching forwards to grip the hem of Legolas’s jacket. Legolas startled at the touch, and spared Bilbo a quick glance before simply carrying on. For once, Bilbo was thankful that Legolas had his strange sixth sense, because he didn’t think he could explain himself or his actions at all.

When they arrived back at the resort, Legolas seemed to have put the entire incident out of his mind. It calmed Bilbo, mostly because Legolas continued to treat him as he always had. Legolas was still lively, and he continued to joke around and tease Bilbo in that careless manner of his. In some ways, Bilbo envied him. He seemed to be quite a bit freer than Bilbo felt, and would likely be able to make friends very easily, not to mention he was full of unbridled confidence. Bilbo thought that deep down he might have started to fear losing Legolas’s companionship if any part of him changed and become unfamiliar, and yet when he told Legolas parts of himself that even he was anxious about, Legolas hadn’t changed at all. Would all people be like that, if Bilbo let himself open up a bit more? If he spoke his mind a bit more?

The whole ordeal certainly gave him something to think about as he helped Legolas prepare dinner. Thorin, Carc and Thranduil were finishing up for the day, and when they returned the thoughts that had been troubling Bilbo completely disappeared. It was easier to concentrate on the case rather than on his own problems.

“It only happens at night,” Thranduil explained after he cleared the table to lay out their paperwork. “For the last four weeks, every second night there has been a pile of sand moved from the beach to somewhere in the work sight, seemingly unaided. For the last week, it’s been happening every night.”

“They ruled out natural causes, right?” Legolas said. “And it can’t be some neighbourhood kids?”

“The site is completely locked down after the day workers leave,” Thorin said. “There are sensors
that are triggered by movement, and they’re perfectly functional, but they’ve never been set off.”

“So the sand is mysteriously appearing," Legolas frowned thoughtfully. “You think it’s a spirit, right?”

Thranduil nodded. “It’s extremely faint, but I sense something. If it wasn’t for the sand then it could have been brushed off, but…”

“If something happens tonight, then we’ll know for sure," Legolas concluded. “Where does the sand appear?”

“There’s no pattern to it," Thranduil said. He unrolled several blueprints of the building site, and dug out a red marker from his bag to begin marking off several places. “For the most part it seemed to have been happening where there was wet concrete, or paint, or anything newly finished,” he explained. “It was primarily outside, but there are incidents of it appearing inside now. The contractor said the sand was never in these rooms, hence why we have them, but to be sure I’ll write some charms in the morning.”

“Alright,” Thorin nodded. “Let’s leave it at that, then, and begin again tomorrow.”

Bilbo had gone to bed before everyone, and after changing into his pyjamas he’d buried himself in the thick bed sheets and spent a lot of time watching the ocean from the window. It was hypnotising, and eventually he found himself sleepy enough to drift off. He was still awake enough, however, to hear when Thorin entered the room. It made his heart beat strangely, but he put it down to nervousness. He’d felt completely different when he shared a room with Thranduil and Legolas, but he didn’t know why. Maybe he was just more aware of Thorin.

Still, he didn’t really think he had much to be nervous over. Thorin quietly changed, slipped into his own bed, and turned out the remaining bedside lamp. The room was hardly any darker, and Thorin’s quiet breaths were not as obtrusive as Bilbo had thought they might be. Rather, it was oddly comforting to have someone else in the room while he was staying in a foreign place, even if that person was Thorin.

“Are you awake, Bilbo?”

Bilbo startled at the voice, and rolled over to face Thorin. In the dark he could hardly see at all, but Thorin’s unnaturally bright eyes were clearly distinguishable. “I am,” he whispered.

“What do you think of this place?”

“I don’t sense anything,” Bilbo answered. “But… but the ocean is nice, isn’t it?”

Thorin nodded in agreement. “This area is nice,” he said.

Bilbo glanced away, feeling oddly flushed. He hadn’t had many conversations with Thorin before, but could this be counted as one? It was hard to keep up with such social interactions, sometimes.

“Did you want to come on this case?” Thorin suddenly asked.

Bilbo blinked in surprise, and made a small, troubled noise. “I did,” he said quietly. “But not because I’m particularly interested in paranormal researching.”

“Then why?”
“It’s a good distraction,” he admitted, absentmindedly turning his head to face the ceiling. “I like having something to focus on.”

Thorin hummed. “I can understand that,” he murmured. “I’m glad you’re here.”

For a moment, all Bilbo could hear was the steady pounding of his heart. Thorin had just told him something important, he knew it, and yet he felt unable to understand it at all. He pushed himself upright, lips slightly parted as he tried to find his words, and half leaned out of the bed. “What do you mean?” He asked.

Thorin frowned, and sat up, too. “Pardon?”

Bilbo licked his lips, finding them suddenly quite dry. “W-what do you mean by-” He paused as something fell onto his shoulder, making him jump. He lifted his hand as something again fell onto him, and was startled to find that it was sand. “What…?”

“Bilbo, watch out!” Thorin said, lurching forwards to pull Bilbo from the bed. Bilbo let out a startled cry as his knees hit the floor, but then a rain of sand was suddenly crashing down onto his bed where it spilled off the edges and quickly buried his feet. He squeezed his eyes shut tighter and gripped onto Thorin’s arm until it stopped, before letting out several surprised breaths.

“Sand?” He whimpered, staring at his bed. The sand was everywhere, and if Thorin hadn’t grabbed him he surely would have been buried under it. He wouldn’t have been injured, but it was still enough to frighten him.

“Are you alright?” Thorin asked, glancing down at him. Bilbo could only nod in reply.

The door to their room suddenly burst open and light filtered in. Thranduil rushed forwards, and his face dropped at the sight of the bed. “Bilbo, what happened?”

“It appeared out of nowhere,” Thorin said, standing. He helped Bilbo to his feet without being asked and guided him onto his bed, where Bilbo sat with an uneasy frown on his face.

“I don’t sense anything in here,” Thranduil let out an aggravated sigh, and ran his fingers through his hair. “This has to be a spirit, there’s no way all that sand could get in here from the beach!”

Thorin nodded in agreement. “We’ll tell the manager in the morning. For now, get some rest.”

“But where will Bilbo sleep?”

“I’ll take the floor,” Thorin replied.

Bilbo watched him with concerned eyes, and only after giving Thranduil a small nod did he leave the room. Bathed in darkness again, Bilbo felt like he could breathe easier. He watched Thorin stretch once, and felt a weird feeling settle in his stomach, one he didn’t think he’d ever felt before. “We can share,” he offered quietly.

Thorin glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. “I don’t mind taking the floor,” he said.

Bilbo glanced down. “I’ll feel bad.”

Thorin let out a small sigh. “If you’re sure.”

Bilbo didn’t know what it was that he was sure of, but he knew he would feel bad if Thorin had to sleep on the floor because Bilbo’s bed was covered in sand. He’d chosen that bed, hadn’t he? And
Thorin hadn’t complained at all. It didn’t seem fair that he had to suffer on the floor, a lot of which must now be covered in sand, just because of Bilbo. And it really didn’t seem like much of a problem to share a bed, either. The bed itself wasn’t too narrow, and the covers were big and thick. If needed, it probably wouldn’t be hard to find more. He didn’t have anything to be worried about, did he?

After all, it was only a bed, wasn’t it?

Chapter End Notes

I couldn't bring myself to write much today, so I apologise. Hopefully I'll be back to normal soon.
When Bilbo thought about how he went to sleep every night, there was nothing in particular that came to mind. He could remember a vague collection of nights he spend sleepily burrowing into his yellow bedsheets, thinking of things that slowly flowed through his mind with no chosen rhythm or significance. Generally, his routine never varied, and as such most nights blurred into a single memory that he repeated at the end of every day. It wasn’t anything special, and while he found that sleep was something he somewhat enjoyed, his routine made it so that his nights weren’t anything memorable. That night, however, was one he was sure he would remember.

It was different trying to sleep when he was not the only person resting in the bed. He didn’t think anything was particularly different, but he was so aware of Thorin’s presence that it was difficult to concentrate on anything else. The mattress was dipped towards him, and the covers were loosely stretched to cover the both of them. It was pleasantly warm with twice the amount of body heat, and from this close Bilbo could clearly hear each breath Thorin pulled in and out.

“I know you’re awake, Bilbo,” Thorin sighed. “Go to sleep already.”

Bilbo startled, and shrunk into his shoulders. He felt an apology touch his lips, but he held it back. There wasn’t anything for him to apologise for, was there? It really made no sense for him to be nervous or flustered, so he let out a soft sigh and turned his face further into his pillow. When he shut his eyes and made sure to keep them shut, sleep was easier to achieve.

Even though he slept fine, Bilbo was quite tired in the morning. Legolas had woken him when he hadn’t appeared for breakfast, and even though Legolas’s attitude was invigorating, Bilbo could only mumble and doze throughout breakfast. By the time he was put to work he certainly had woken up a little, and he’d managed to dress himself.

“Did you sleep alright, Bilbo?” Thranduil asked him quietly as they cleaned away the morning’s dishes.

“Fine,” Bilbo nodded. “I feel really rested.” It wasn't exactly the truth, but it worked well enough to reassure Thranduil.

Thranduil looked at him for a moment before chuckling. “This is a resort, I suppose,” he said. “Even if your bed is filled with sand.”
“I suppose I’ll have to clean that today,” Bilbo sighed.

“I’ll have the management here do it,” Thranduil said, lifting a hand to pat Bilbo's head gently. “We’ll get straight into work today, so it’s fine for them to do it.”

“Alright…”

Work, as it turned out, meant a lot of research into the history of the site and the company building on this lot. Bilbo wasn’t as good at researching as Carc and Thranduil, so he mostly compiled what they gave him into something readable, that he then handed to Thorin. Legolas did much the same. It wasn’t the most interesting thing to do, but it was necessary, and Bilbo found that its repetitive nature was rather distracting. He wasn’t the type of person to become bored by work like this, but Legolas certainly was.

Eventually, Legolas simply threw himself down onto the table and let out a rather petulant whine. “This is ridiculous!” He exclaimed. “Nothing seems out of the ordinary.”

“Legolas, don’t whine,” Thranduil scolded gently.

“This site isn’t anything special,” Legolas complained. “There weren’t any deaths here, or any accidents, and this place hasn’t ever been the location of a shrine or church. I don’t understand why there’s a spirit here!”

“Perhaps we should focus on identifying the spirit instead,” Thorin murmured. “If there’s nothing unusual about the location, then it must be the spirit. Has anyone died here, or had their death relate to this place if not?”

“It’s not uncommon for people to die on the beach,” Thranduil said. “The shore extends for three and a half kilometres in either direction from here, and the offshore currents change depending on the time of day. There are safety flags put in place, of course, and there are lifeguards, but drownings aren’t exactly unheard of.”

“Are any recent?”

Thranduil frowned, and started to shuffle through their paperwork. Wordlessly, Bilbo handed him the relevant page he’d marked with a thin, coloured tab. “Thank you, Bilbo,” Thranduil nodded. “It seems that there was a man that drowned eight months ago, and before him a woman who got caught in a riptide.”

“Did they have any relation to anyone involved in the construction of this building?”

“None that are obvious,” Thranduil said. “Their social classes are different, their careers are in different fields – even their homes are in all different prefectures.”

Thorin frowned thoughtfully. “Perhaps the spirit didn’t die on the beach, then?”

“What reason would they have to haunt this place?”

“What if… What if it’s haunting because of the contractor, instead?” Bilbo hesitantly offered.

“Well, we haven’t looked into his connections,” Thranduil said.

“Look into it,” Thorin said. “It could give us some insight. Good idea, Bilbo.”

Bilbo felt a strange sensation in the pit of his stomach at the praise Thorin gave him. He wasn’t sure
if what he said would be helpful in the long run, but it couldn’t hurt to look into, could it? He wanted
to be useful while he was on these cases, more so than just being able to sense the ghosts of children.
There was more to paranormal research than the things he’d already done, wasn’t there? He hardly
knew a thing about Thranduil and Legolas’s talents, let alone if Thorin and Carc were spiritualists at
all. He thought back to the case at his school and knew there was another spiritualist, Bard, and he
didn’t know anything about him, either. What other spiritualists did Thorin employ? Where did their
talents lie?

“The contractor is our client, right?” Legolas asked. “Should we really be investigating him?”

“There would be no point in solving this case if we were to be gentle with the situation,” Thorin
answered in a strict tone.

Legolas frowned, and let the subject drop. In some ways, Bilbo had the same thoughts as him. If
their client knew they were investigating him, he surely wouldn’t be happy. Bilbo doubted that
anyone with enough money to build a place like this would enjoy being questioned more as a suspect
than as a victim, and it surely wouldn’t bode well for Thorin. From what Bilbo could tell, Thorin was
extremely reluctant to be involved in the media, and had only taken a case from such a socially
dominant person because Thorin owed him, in one way or another. He doubted Thorin would have
taken this case in any other circumstance.

“We should go take a look at the building site while the cleaning team comes in,” Thorin said,
standing. “Thranduil, have you finished those charms?”

“Ah, yes,” Thranduil nodded. “Shall I put them up?”

Thorin nodded. “In every room, with an extra for each person.”

“Alright.”

“Legolas, you stay and help,” Thorin said. “Carc, give Bilbo a temperature indicator and an
electromagnetic field sensor. We’ll take daytime measurements of each of the places where sand has
appeared and compare them to yesterday’s readings while you compile the night’s readings.”

Carc nodded, and disappeared into his room for a moment. He reappeared with two small, hand-held
devices, and after turning them on and clearing the settings he handed them to Bilbo. On the previous
case Bilbo had been shown how to use them, so Carc didn’t need to explain anything, though Bilbo
doubted he would have in the first place. Out of all the new people Bilbo had met, Carc was the
quietest. Bilbo struggled to recall if Carc had ever spoken a word to him, or in front of him. In fact,
Bilbo wasn’t even sure what Carc’s voice sounded like, though for a person who carried himself in
such a silent way it was somewhat expected.

After picking up a clipboard, Bilbo followed Thorin from the room. “How many places are there?”
He asked.

“The sand has appeared twenty-two times, including last night,” Thorin said. “It doubled up in some
locations, and others are spacious enough for it to be dumped several times, like on the ground floor
when they were laying down tiles.”

“Twenty-two is a lot…”

Thorin nodded. “We have thirteen sites to visit,” he murmured. “Not including our bedroom.”

Bilbo frowned a little, and glanced down at the clipboard. Did he bring enough paper?
“Ah, it’s so hot,” Bilbo mumbled, ducking into the shade of the half-constructed southern end of the resort. “This is the last site, right?”

Thorin nodded, and ushered Bilbo further into the shade. “How are the readings?”

“As expected,” Bilbo said, glancing down at his clipboard. “It’s only a few degrees hotter than yesterday, and the thermometer readings are lifting accordingly.”

“And the electromagnetic field sensor readings?”

“It’s picking up something, in some places,” Bilbo frowned thoughtfully, and flipped back through his readings. “The more recent sites are the most prominent.”

Thorin nodded. “Alright, take this site’s reading and then we’ll head back upstairs. I’m sure Legolas is positively brooding over your missing attentions.”

“He’s… He’s quite energetic,” Bilbo agreed. “I can’t quite figure him out.”

Thorin hummed. “He’s good at his job, and that’s what matters,” he said. Bilbo watched him for a moment, before returning to his work. He absentmindedly took the readings and recorded them, and wondered why Thorin’s tone sounded a little strained. Had he said something wrong? He didn’t think he had. Perhaps Thorin was just feeling the heat, too.

“The readings changed when the sand appeared,” Thorin said as he brought up the table of recordings Carc had created. “The temperature drops every time the sand appears, and the electromagnetic sensor picks up some paranormal activity. It’s clearly a ghost, but I doubt its site bound, considering the clean history of this location.”

“There wasn’t much on the client that our initial search brought up,” Thranduil said. “I did, however, call in a favour, and found this.” He slid forwards a printout of what looked like a news article, of which a small section had been circled in red marker. “Our client, Ulbar, was involved in an affair that was briefly covered by this online publisher, but Ulbar’s lawyers quickly had it taken down. Of course, once something is on the internet it’s completely impossible to eradicate, but this copy is one of the only ones that remains. It’s unlikely there are any digital ones left.”

“Isn’t he married?” Legolas asked.

Thranduil nodded. “He is, or was. His wife was the daughter of a rich man, and she divorced him six months after the affair was exposed. That was a year ago now. It’s rumoured that he received a big payout because all their accounts had been joined and they hadn’t had prenuptials.”

“Who was the woman he had the affair with?” Thorin asked.

“The article doesn’t state her name, but she was apparently a maid at their manor,” Thranduil said. “She was ten years younger than him, too.”

“Is it possible to track down employment records?”

“I already did.” Thranduil pulled out another stack of papers and placed them on the table. “They had several manors, none of which they lived in for more than a few months at a time, all over the country,” he said. “They had workers and house sitters at each, and because the article didn’t
specifically confirm if she was a cleaner or not I pulled all the records of any female workers that were at least five years younger than Ulbar.”

“That’s a lot of workers,” Legolas sighed. “Are they all alive?”

“A few have passed, considering there’s so many,” Thranduil said. “Five in total. Two were from natural causes – cancer, or a similar ailment – and one died in a car accident.”

“And the other two?”

“One woman is missing,” Thranduil said. “She went hiking in the mountains and never returned, and they assumed she’d been lost to the elements. The other’s death, however, was classified as suspicious.”

“Suspicious?” Legolas frowned. “How so?”

“She died from a blow to the back of her head,” Thranduil said. “But she had bruises on her wrists that were consistent with defensive wounds.”

“Like she’d been tied down?”

“More like someone had held her down,” Thranduil corrected. “She was nine years and eight months younger than Ulbar.”

“How did they meet?”

“Ulbar used to be a mariner,” Thranduil said. “It’s likely they met on or around the ocean.”

“What’s the woman’s name?”

“Emerië Aldarion,” Thranduil replied. “She was from a middle-class family, but she appeared to be a hard worker. It seems most likely that, out of the women who have since passed, she was probably the one having an affair with Ulbar. She worked at the manor they visited most often, and had a steady income that was noticeably higher than the other employees. It seems that Ulbar and his wife had a revolving door of workers, but she remained for quite some time.”

Bilbo frowned a little. “Isn’t Emerië the name of the suite at the western end of the resort?” He asked. “Ah, but its spelt E-M-E-R-Y.”

Thranduil glanced at Bilbo for a moment, and dug out the floor plans again. “Each of the bigger suites have been named, haven’t they?” He murmured to himself as he traced a finger along the hallways to the west side. “They’re all typically female names, aren’t they? Ah, here’s the ‘Emery’ suite.”

“What are the names of the other suites?” Thorin asked.

“Eldanna, Uinen, Nísinen, Rómenna and Almaida.”

Thorin glanced at Carc. For a moment Carc focused on his laptop, and then he slid the screen towards Thorin. “All those names are names of Ulbar’s employees,” Thorin murmured. “Emerië included.”

Thranduil leaned back, a frown on his face. “Could he have been having an affair with all of them?”

“Only Emerië died, though,” Legolas said. He’d taken Thranduil’s paperwork and was reading it over. “The others are alive. Half of them are still employed.”
“We’ll have to contact them,” Thranduil sighed. “I doubt they’ll appreciate being asked about their sex life.”

“Do that tomorrow, then,” Thorin said. “Tonight we have to see if we can catch the ghost, and find out if it’s Emerië.”

“Alright.”

Thorin turned to Bilbo. “Would you mind coming with me for a moment, Bilbo?”

He started at the question, and resisted the urge to shrink away from Thorin’s imploring stare. He could sense Thranduil tensing up on his behalf, but he rationalised that he didn’t have anything to fear. He’d had many conversations with Thorin today, hadn’t he? They had to count for something. Perhaps Thorin needed the readings, or he might have been unable to read Bilbo’s handwriting, though he thought it was neat enough. He was likely worrying over nothing, so he nodded, and pushed away from the table.

“Alright.”
Bilbo followed Thorin into the hallway, away from the ears of their companions. The temperature in the hallway was a little more uncomfortable than the temperature in the room, and it made Bilbo feel sticky. He wondered if the beach was always this warm, even during the autumn months, and was so absorbed in his thoughts that he hardly noticed Thorin had stopped walking until Bilbo almost bumped into him.

“What is it…?” Bilbo asked nervously. He spared a brief thought towards his expression, and what sort of face he was showing, though he believed it was probably something neutral that didn’t betray what he was feeling.

Thorin pulled something out of his pocket, and held it up for Bilbo to see. He held something that was strung on a fabric chain. It was small, and rectangular in shape. It looked to be made out of a dark blue brocade, and was patterned with golden flowers. It had a rigidity to its shape, however, that made Bilbo believe it wasn’t just fabric. He hadn’t ever seen one before, and he wasn’t sure what it was, but it certainly seemed important.

“This is called an Omamori, or a Japanese talisman,” Thorin explained, lifting his other hand to hold the talisman flat. “A spiritualist I’m acquainted with has an assistant who makes them. This one was made specifically for myself, and bares the colours of my family.”

Bilbo blinked several times, and was unsure how to reply. “What is it for?” He asked carefully.

“They’re usually used to bring luck or fortune, but they’ve been known to serve other functions,” Thorin said. “This one is for the safety of the wearer and the avoidance of evil.” He paused for a moment. “Supposedly.”

“S-supposedly?”

“I’m familiar with the lore, but it’s not something I’ve ever tested out for reliability. Still…” He looked over the talisman, turning it over in his palm. “It seems quite useful, and I can’t find a way to fault its trustworthiness,” he said. “Its maker has talent with these, and as such I don’t believe such a gift should go to waste on someone like myself. I want you to have it.”

“P-pardon?”

“I don’t believe I can treat last night’s incident as a coincidence,” Thorin explained. “Both Thranduil
and Legolas are capable of performing warding spells, and Carc and I are able to defend ourselves adequately enough. You have yet to learn such skills, and with the sand last night I would prefer if you were as protected as you could be if you should ever find yourself alone. This is my solution.”

Bilbo felt a small frown touch his face. “Are you sure?” He said. It felt incredibly personal to receive such a thing from Thorin, especially because Thorin had seemingly always carried it around. Is this the sort of thing companions did? He couldn’t be sure, but he definitely felt strange accepting such a thing from Thorin. It had Thorin’s family colours, didn’t it? He didn’t know what to think of Thorin’s offer, but he felt like there was something more behind it that he wasn’t aware of.

“Here.” Thorin reached for his hand, turned his palm upright and gently folded the charm into his fingers.

“A-alright,” Bilbo stuttered. “Just for this case…”

Thorin shut his eyes for a moment, and then walked past Bilbo. “Let’s get back to work.”

Bilbo nodded, and held the talisman tighter. It was soft but solid in his palm, and gave him a strange feeling. It wasn’t quite safety or comfort, and nor was it apprehension or worry. It was a feeling that was somewhere in between those things, and the more he lingered on it the more confused he became.

After dinner, they locked up the room and headed out into the quiet construction site to await the ghost. Bilbo walked beside Legolas – or rather, Legolas walked beside him, and cheerfully linked their arms – so Bilbo wasn’t too uneasy. Legolas was comfortably chatting about a holiday he had been on, and Bilbo found he didn’t particularly mind listening to Legolas’s little escapades.

The ocean looked quite different at night. Bilbo could see the water from the ground floor and out of windows, and it was much darker than he expected it to be. He’d seen the ocean just last night, and yet tonight it looked completely different. The currents were different, the way the water moved was different, and even the reflection of the moon seemed different. Bilbo didn’t think that was by any paranormal means, but rather it was just nature. Still, he found it quite entrancing to look at. He liked the ocean, he decided. He didn’t think he’d particularly mind coming back to it.

The team was walking along the path where the workers had been laying tiles in the foyer when Legolas suddenly stopped talking. Bilbo watched him with a frown, but Legolas’s serious expression certainly made him tense. Across the foyer Thranduil was looking just as stern. He had been talking to Thorin about something, and without his voice quietly murmuring in the background the foyer seemed entirely too silent. When Bilbo glanced around he didn’t see anything particularly out of order, and he instinctively grabbed onto Legolas’s arm as the temperature started to noticeably drop.

“Calm down, Bilbo,” Legolas soothed. “Don’t panic.”

It was different when Bilbo couldn’t see the ghost. With Maki, and Nimrodel too, he’d been able to visually comprehend them, and he’d been given pieces of their memories that made them seem less frightening. Without that insight he felt like he was at a loss, and it occurred him how completely unprotected and unprepared he was for a situation like this. He could feel the weight of the charm Thorin had given him in his pocket, and it made him feel a little safer. It was more than nothing, wasn’t it?

“Come here, Legolas,” Thranduil ordered.
Legolas grabbed Bilbo’s shoulder and steered him across the room. It was definitely getting colder in the room, Bilbo could feel it. Thranduil pulled the both of them in closer, eyes sharp, and despite being so close to someone so capable Bilbo still found himself rather apprehensive.

“Thranduil, create a barrier,” Thorin said. “Around the freshly laid concrete.”

Thranduil eyed him for a moment, and nudged Bilbo in his direction. Only after Bilbo had found his way behind Thorin did Thranduil pull out a small vial from inside his coat. When Bilbo glanced at Legolas he saw that Legolas had a similar one, and within a moment they had both placed themselves on either side of the drying concrete.

“What are they doing?” Bilbo murmured, looking up at Thorin.

“They’re creating a seal,” Thorin replied. “So that the spirit will be briefly trapped here, which gives us a time to communicate with it.”

“Communicate?”

“The ghost likely materialises each time the sand is dumped,” Thorin explained. “If we cannot persuade it to leave, then it will have to be exorcised.”

Bilbo nodded, despite the hardened feeling he got at the mention of an exorcism. Rationally he was able to understand that some spirits were too dangerous to reason with, and the ghosts from the old school building came to mind. He has communicated with Maki, hadn’t he? The others, though, were too terrifying to approach, let alone try and understand. He thought that their spirits had been too twisted, and that their intentions couldn’t have been anything other than bad.

“Is this spirit bad?” Bilbo asked Thorin quietly.

Thorin glanced at him. “I don’t believe so,” he said. “It’s only moving sand.”

Somehow, Bilbo felt a little reassured at that. He turned back to watch Thranduil and Legolas, who were both murmuring something in a language he didn’t understand. After a moment, they sprayed the air with water from the bottles, of which briefly hung before almost completely dissipating. They stood on opposite sides of the concrete so their arms moved in opposite directions, but it was like they were a reflection in a mirror. Bilbo hadn’t truly realised just how similar they were until they stood across from each other and did the same thing. While Legolas’s motions still lacked the refined finesse that could have only come from Thranduil’s greater years of experience, he more than made up for it with the delicate way his movements seemed to carry a weight of power. In either case, it was completely hypnotising to watch.

As soon as they finished, a wind began to pick up. Bilbo cringed back as it washed over him, sending chills down his spine. Thorin put out an arm in front of Bilbo, but his eyes were intently focused on the concrete area. When Bilbo peeked over his shoulder, what he saw made his eyes widen. It was as though something had truly appeared there, and while it had clearly taken most of a human’s form it didn’t look completely human. It glowed white, and seemed to fade in and out periodically, as though it were a candle’s flame being brushed by a breeze. Out of nowhere, a high voice echoed around the foyer. It clearly came from the spirit above the concrete, but Bilbo couldn’t quite make out any distinct words. It was just like white noise.

Thorin approached the spirit. “Your name is Emerië Aldarion,” he said. “You died.”

The spirit shifted shape, and through the light Bilbo thought he could make out a woman’s face. Her hair was long and flowed like stagnant smoke, but it was oddly alluring to look at. Her eyes were
completely white, just like the rest of her, and she was utterly focused on Thorin.

“"A blow to the back of your head killed you," Thorin said. “You worked for a man named Ulbar, and this building site is his. You are haunting here.”

She didn’t protest that. The faint buzzing at the back of Bilbo’s head continued to ring, and although it made him feel uncomfortable it wasn’t anything he could fix. Instead he tried to focus on Emerië, wanting to figure out if anything she was saying was comprehensible.

“Tell me, do you remember how you died?”

The white noise became louder, and her mouth started to move. There was nothing understandable coming from her that Bilbo could possibly decipher, not even when he tried to listen harder. The sounds were all jumbling together as though they were being played on rewind, and it was incredibly frustrating.

It seemed that Thorin was unable to understand any of it as well. “Was Ulbar having an affair with you?” He asked instead.

Again, the noise became much louder, expect this time Emerië was nodding her head frantically. Bilbo still couldn’t understand a word of what she was saying, but her answer to the question was clear. Ulbar was definitely having a secret relationship with her while still being married to his wife, and that made him one of the most dishonest people Bilbo had ever come across.

“The seal is weakening," Thranduil murmured. He had one hand extended, palm outwards, just as Legolas did. Bilbo could see that Legolas’s arm was beginning to shake, just slightly, but Thranduil’s was solid in its strength. Still, Bilbo had the feeling that the seal was breaking not because of Legolas’s fatigue but rather because they were simply out of time.

“Allright,” Thorin said. “Is exorcism possible?”

“It is,” Thranduil replied. “But I don’t think it’s wise. We need to figure out what she’s saying before she’s exorcised. If Ulbar has done something illegal, then figuring it would should be considered, ethically.”

Thorin frowned in thought, but eventually nodded. “Release the seal. We’ll have to deal with the sand for tonight.”

With a graceful flourish of his hand, Thranduil released the seal. Legolas immediately let out a loud exhale, but it was utterly drowned out by a screeching wail of white noise and the avalanche of sand that immediately blanketed the drying concrete.

There was an irritating thought at the back of Bilbo’s mind that he couldn’t quite shake. As he watched Legolas shake sand out of his shoes, he thought over the encounter a few times, and tried to recognise what exactly had transpired. He’d never had any trouble understanding a ghost when they talked directly to him, and hadn’t Emerië done just that? Granted, it wasn’t in his dreams, but even Nimrodel had clearly spoken with intention and comprehensiveness to others. There must have been something he was missing, right? With a start, an idea came to his head, and he turned to Carc.

“That was recorded, right?” He asked. “With microphones, too?”

Carc glanced down at him, and nodded.

“Would it be possible to play the recording backwards?”
“The first question that you asked was whether she remembered how she’d died.” Thranduil said. “And when the recording is replayed backwards…”

A burst of static came from the recording, but as it was rewound the white noise started to turn into something different. A shout of, “Of course I do!” burst through, and was then followed by a less aggressive, “I hit my head.” That in itself wasn’t too helpful, but it served to further confirm that the ghost was, in fact, Emerië Aldarion. She had died from a blow to the back of the head, after all, and there was no other person it could possibly be.

“Then you asked about Ulbar.” Thranduil continued. “If they were having an affair.”

“That’s right.” Thorin nodded.

Bilbo watched with a small frown on his face as Thranduil started the recording again. Out of the laptop came the same voice as before, though it was much louder this time. “That rat of a man lied to me! He lied to everyone, and he won’t get away with it!”

Thranduil paused the recording, and let out a deep sigh. “She sounds like a deeply scorned woman.” He murmured. “Her voice is warped, but it’s comprehensible enough. She’s definitely holding a strong grudge against Ulbar, so I believe it’s safe to say he was definitely having an affair with her.”

“Then it might be difficult to purify her.” Thorin said, folding his arms. “Even more so if she’s holding such a strong grudge against someone living.”

“It might not be impossible to talk her out of this.” Thranduil said. “To bribe her, in a sense. We simply need to figure out what it is she wants, and how to realistically achieve it in the quickest time possible.”

“And if that fails?”

“Then I’ll exorcise her.” Thranduil said without hesitation.

Bilbo tried not to frown again, and instead took another look over Emerië’s file. She’d only just turned twenty-seven when she died, and even though Bilbo was just about a decade younger than her, he still felt like she’d passed way too young. She seemed like she had so much ahead of her, so
why had she become involved in Ulbar’s undertakings? How many years would she had lived, if she’d not hit her head and died? In either case, what mattered more was how Ulbar could be involved in her death. The way she spoke sounded as if her death was her own fault, or that it was an accident, so what reason did she have to haunt Ulbar aside from the affair? Had he provoked her into doing it?

“We should rest for tonight.” Thranduil eventually sighed, leaning back in his chair. “There’s not much than can be done now, considering she only shows up once a night.”

Bilbo was somewhat relieved at the idea of sleep. His bed had been cleared of sand during the day, and when he’d checked in on it briefly during lunch he was surprised to find that it was just how he’d first seen it. After saying quiet goodnights, Bilbo decided to head to bed first. He wanted to change before anyone had the chance to bother him, and after putting on his pyjamas he crawled under the covers and tried to imagine that he was at home, in his own bed with his familiar yellow sheets.

This night, he fell asleep facing Thorin’s bed rather than the ocean.

The moment he opened his eyes, he knew he was dreaming. It was the first time he’d ever been struck with such a sense, and it instantly shook him. He was in a place that he didn’t completely recognise, but as he began to walk blurred memories started to flitter into his mind like a kaleidoscope of photographs that he couldn’t quite focus on. This was his childhood home, and he was utterly lost.

The house itself seemed like a mix of styles from several different periods. High ceilings and chandeliers and stepping stones, even inside, were things he frequently noticed. The further he walked, the more puzzled he became. Parts of the building were western in style, but he walked through rooms that were completely eastern on the inside. At one point he thought he’d found his way outside, but when he opened another door he found that he’d simply walked through a room that had been turned into a fully-fledged garden that flourished as though it had been built outdoors in the sunshine.

He didn’t know where he was going, but he opened door after door, and walked down hallway after hallway. No matter how far he went, he still didn’t find any place that was immediately familiar. Rather, it seemed as though he were stuck in a place that was set on a loop, and the more he saw the more confused he became. He wasn’t quite sure if he was looking for something, and if he was then he didn’t know what that something happened to be, until he opened a door and was faced by a grand piano.

The instrument was old, but extremely well-maintained, and intricately ornate. It was the only thing in the room, other than the piano seat. It was an intimidating thing to look at from where it was positioned by an open window. The window had seemingly been left open, and from it leaves and various other pieces of natural debris had floated in to land on the floor as well as on the piano. Pieces of broken and decaying orange leaves were scattered along the top and keys of the piano, and it looked like there was soil, too. Regardless Bilbo walked closer, even as his heart began to beat faster with something that was undoubtedly fear.

Gently, he sat on the piano seat, and placed his hands between his knees. He’d always been drawn to pianos, always had an urge to play at the sight of one, but this piano only filled him with apprehension. He didn’t want to play this one. He watched it and felt his head start to spin, felt his hands go damp with sweat and his heart start to pound.
“This is what you’re good at, right?” A voice said.

It sounded suspiciously like himself.

“Then you should just do it.” The voice said. “Stop trying to do something that you’re not good at. You won’t be praised for it – you’ll just be a hindrance.”

He shrunk into his shoulders, and squeezed his eyes shut. He wanted to wake up. This had to be a dream, hadn’t it? Still, a creeping feeling of doubt began to spread through his mind. He knew he’d always been good at the piano, for as long as he could remember. He must have played this one during his childhood, right? And yet it sat here in front of him, completely abandoned in an empty room of a house that didn’t make sense.

“Maybe you should just disappear.”

His heart gave one big, echoing thump, and that was that.

Bilbo gasped for air as his eyes snapped open. His lungs struggled to pull in enough oxygen, and the more he tried the more his chest started to burn. His mind was whirling, unable to concentrate on the place in front of him, on the present, when the past was so ramparting roaming through his memories.

“Bilbo… Bilbo!”

He glanced up. Thorin was hovering over him, pinning his arms down. Thorin had clearly just been asleep – it was hard to make out his face in the dark of the room, but his thick hair was tousled, and his eyes weren’t as bright and eerie as they usually were.

“Are you alright?” Thorin asked. He loosened his grip on Bilbo’s arms, and backed off a little to give Bilbo the space to sit upright.

“I’m fine.” Bilbo said. He didn’t sound convincing, not even to his own ears, and as his head started to pound he lifted a hand to grip it.

“Were you having a nightmare?”

“S-something like that…” Bilbo murmured, fixing his eyes to the side. He gritted his teeth, and slipped his legs off of the bed. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

Thorin took a seat on the edge of his bed. “It’s not a problem.”

Bilbo stumbled upright, and made his way to the en suite. He could feel Thorin’s eyes on his back, but he quickly shut the door to avoid them, and hunched over the sink. He didn’t want to look at his face in the mirror, because when he did he was sure he would see someone that he didn’t recognise. Instead he splashed his face with water, and took a moment to sit on the floor and gather his thoughts.

Maybe it was best if he didn’t remember his childhood, after all.

The next night it was harder to track down Emerië’s location. Eventually Legolas sensed something from the western wing, and after a moment they found her in what looked like a reception room
where counters and marble had been freshly laid down. Thranduil and Legolas hurried through making the seal, and within seconds Emerië had appeared, smoke-like hair and all.

This time, they’d come prepared with the right equipment. Carc was controlling microphones that would pick up all the sound in the room and, via a laptop, instantly replay the sound in reverse. Theoretically, it should allow them to communicate with Emerië before the seal wore off.

“Did someone kill you?” Thorin asked the moment Emerië’s spirit materialised.

The white noise crackled through the air, and Carc started typing at the computer. A moment later, Emerië’s voice appeared. “No one killed me.” She said. “I tried to kill myself.”

Thorin’s eyebrows went up. “Yourself?”

“I was upset!” She said. “But nothing works out the way you want, right? I died by accident.”

Thorin frowned. “How is Ulbar involved?”

“He told me he loved me!” She shouted. For a moment the room seemed to shake, and dust fell from the ceiling. “But I caught him sleeping with another woman, and she wasn’t even his wife!”

“Why are you haunting here?”

“To destroy his life, the way he destroyed mine!”

Bilbo cringed as her voice became more aggressive. She only seemed to become more angered with each question, and the temperature in the room was dropping to show that. He didn’t know how long the seal would last either, but it was clear that Thranduil and Legolas were tiring.

“You have to move on.” Thorin said. “You cannot linger here anymore.”

“If you get an apology,” Bilbo rushed out before Emerië could get any angrier, “Will you be satisfied?”

“He’ll never apologise.” She snarled.

Thorin glanced at Bilbo for a second, before turning back to Emerië. “We’ll expose his secrets, then.” He said. “And you will leave.”

“Do as you wish.”

Legolas let out a gasp and dropped his arms. He bent forwards to lean on his knees, and as soon as the seal was released a rush of sand filled the room. There was much more than there had been on the two previous nights, enough to quickly cover the floor and bury Bilbo’s shoes.

“Sorry.” Legolas murmured even as Thranduil rushed to offer him support. “It’s exhausting keeping that up.”

“We got what we needed.” Thorin said. “I’ll speak to Ulbar tomorrow.”

“What do you think of Emerië?”

Bilbo glanced up at the question. He was sitting on the balcony of the bedroom with a warm cup of tea between his hands, watching the ocean. Thorin had come to stand in the doorway, and observed
Bilbo with intense eyes. Bilbo met his gaze for a moment before turning back to his tea. “She seems sad, in a way.” He said.

Thorin took a seat beside him. His posture was always straight and stiff, and it made Bilbo think he’d grown up with certain expectations weighing down on his shoulders. Now, however, there was a noticeably relaxed quality to him, as though his back wasn’t so tense and he wasn’t afraid to hunch forwards, even if just a little. Bilbo didn’t think anyone else would have noticed such a thing, and yet even in the dark of the night he did.

“She tried to commit suicide, right?” Bilbo continued. “How many times did she try to kill herself before accidentally dying…? It’s sad.”

“Put that way, I suppose it is.” Thorin sighed. “Ulbar must have really had her wrapped around his finger. He’s the type to manipulate people for personal gain.”

Bilbo glanced away. Ulbar had done that very thing to Thorin, hadn’t he? Bilbo knew that at one point Ulbar had sponsored Thorin’s business. All that equipment surely couldn’t be cheap, after all, not to mention Thorin hired high-standing people like Thranduil. “How are you going to force him to apologise?” Bilbo asked. “He’ll not want to do it, and Emerië will become even angrier.”

Thorin frowned. “Emerië has to be removed to clear my debt to Ulbar, but I wouldn’t have taken this case regardless of that if I didn’t have anything on him, either.”

Bilbo’s eyes widened. He glanced up at Thorin as Thorin stood, and for the first time he could understand why people were so off-put by his young age. How could someone so young think and act like Thorin did? He seemed far too mature, and yet he wasn’t that much older than Bilbo. “Blackmail…?”

Thorin regarded him with careful eyes, and then turned to walk inside. “It’s the easiest way to get people to cooperate.” He murmured. “People like Ulbar rarely do anything that can’t one day be used against them if they’re not careful. Secrets can’t be kept in their world,” He said, “Unless one of them is dead.”

Chapter End Notes

teaDragon / teaxdragon on tumblr drew a gorgeous piece from this story here

❤ Ahh, I love it so much! Thank you for the support, teaDragon ❤
Exculpation

Chapter Summary

A moment of reprieve and a small, intact shell.

Chapter Notes

Exculpation - to clear of guilt or blame.

By the next morning, there was a front page article on almost every newspaper detailing the entire ordeal. It filled Bilbo with a sense of turmoil he hadn’t felt before, but he knew that it was for the best. To close one door, another had to be opened, didn’t it? Emerië would surely be pleased, but Ulbar’s reputation was completely ruined. Was it really okay to please the dead if the living had to suffer in return? In some ways Bilbo thought that Ulbar deserved it, considering what he’d done to Emerië when she’d lived, to everyone he’d toyed with.

Bilbo had only read the article once, and it certainly didn’t paint Ulbar in a nice light – he’d been embezzling funds from his workers for years, and with so many of them no one had ever noticed, not to mention he’d stolen a substantial amount from the bank account he shared with the wife he cheated on more than a dozen times. It seemed that he’d really played Emerië for a fool, and when he’d acted like it was just a normal thing to be found cheating on someone by the person he was cheating on his wife with, Emerië had clearly developed a grudge. Bilbo thought she stayed as a ghost because it was Ulbar’s depravity that drove her to try and kill herself. It seemed unfitting that her death, in the end, was just an accident, but what was there to do?

Regardless, Emerië seemed pleased with the outcome. Bilbo got the distinct feeling that she’d passed on throughout the day after finally getting her revenge, and when she didn’t appear that night he knew that must have been the truth. It was strange to think the case would end, just like that, but somehow it was a welcome change of pace. He felt less tense in his shoulders as he helped store away all the equipment in the van, and was relaxed enough to fall deep in thought. After Maki’s case, and Nimrodel’s especially, he’d felt like he was still haunted by ghosts that no longer existed. At nights he sometimes dreamed of them, had conversations with them as though they still lived in the same place as him. He was often struck with thoughts about how well they would have gotten along, and the knowledge that they would never meet always saddened him. If he was destined to be as he was now, with the relationships he’d developed with the ghosts of children, then why did it hurt so much?

“This should be the last of it, right?” Legolas sighed as he carefully placed a trunk of equipment into the back of the van. “There isn’t anything else to carry down?”

Bilbo shook his head, and tentatively took a seat on the open boot of the car. “She’s really gone, huh?”

“Who, Emerië?” Legolas glanced at him, and then took a seat, too. He tilted his head back to keep his eyes out of the morning sun. “Yeah. But I think that’s for the best.”
Bilbo nodded. “What did you think of her?” He asked quietly.

Legolas hummed thoughtfully. “She’s a lot like the other ghosts I’ve come across.” He said. “Exorcism would have been the easy way out, but…” He turned his head down, and for a moment his eyes seemed to turn warm and hazy, as though he were remembering something fondly. “I’m glad we could satisfy her.”

“Is that so?” Bilbo murmured. “What about Ulbar?”

“Ulbar?”

Bilbo nodded again. “What do you think of him?”

Legolas frowned. “He deserved what he got, for all the bad things he did. For how many years did he deceive all the people he employed, and the woman he’d married? I wonder if their marriage had ever been happy with the way it ended.”

He found himself unable to reply at that, and instead turned his head to watch the ocean. It was quite calm today, with small, repetitive waves and little people. This end of the beach was almost completely deserted; only in the far distance could Bilbo see people starting to appear. What was one meant to do on a beach, in the first place? When he looked at the ocean he thought that it would have been nice to walk through it, but was there more to do? He really didn’t know, but he thought that it might have been nice to go to the beach with friends.

“You know, why don’t we ask to stay here, for the day?” Legolas said, peering at Bilbo’s face closely. “It’s a really nice day.”

Bilbo glanced at him, eyes going a fraction wider. “Can we?” He asked quietly.

Legolas’s eyes glittered with something Bilbo wasn’t familiar with, and he grinned brightly. “I’ll go ask, shall I?”

Bilbo hardly had a chance to nod before Legolas was heading back towards the building. He watched Legolas go, and got the distinct impression that Legolas was a lot smarter than he sometimes acted. He thought that maybe Legolas could understand him, in some ways. He didn’t understand how it was possible for Legolas to smile so brightly, but he thought that he might not mind seeing more of those smiles, in the future.

Absently, he turned to watch the ocean again. A breeze was always coming off the waves, salty and refreshing. He let it wash over his face, and closed his eyes against it. The air by the sea was different to the air in the suburbs, and to the air in the mountains. It tasted different, felt different. He thought that here all worries could disappear, even if only for a little while. The ocean was a completely different world, separated from the land by a stretch of sand that seemed completely immovable and yet somehow inviting all at once. Would it be so bad to linger in this place for a moment?

“Bilbo!” Legolas shouted from across the parking lot. Bilbo opened his eyes and looked across at him, and found that Legolas was standing beside the rest of the team, lifting an arm in a wave. “Bilbo, we can stay!”

Bilbo’s eyes widened, just a little. He glanced at Thorin imploringly, and at Thorin’s short nod he felt his heart begin to race. His face flushed faintly in something somewhat akin to eagerness. They could stay, then.
Bilbo watched Thranduil slice up a watermelon they’d bought from a nearby grocery with focused eyes. The sun was bearing down on his back warmly, and only after he’d been all but smothered in sunscreen by Legolas had he been allowed out from under the shade of the wide umbrella they’d propped up in the sand to follow after Thranduil.

“Will it be enough for everyone?” He asked.

Thranduil moved the cut slices to a plate they’d borrowed from the resort. “We bought two, so there should be more than enough.” He said. “Are you sure you don’t want to go play in the water instead of watching me do this? It’s certainly not as interesting.”

Bilbo didn’t reply, and continued to watch Thranduil. Legolas had thrown himself in the water as soon as he’d finished persuading Bilbo to rub sunscreen onto his bare shoulders. He’d had the foresight to pack a swimsuit for the case, but Bilbo didn’t think he even owned one, and he wasn’t fond of the idea of having his clothes stick to him in all the wrong places. Perhaps when Legolas had worn himself out he’d go stand in the shallows, but for now he was content to stay on the dry sand.

“Did you sleep alright last night?” Thranduil asked instead, when it became clear Bilbo wouldn’t answer his previous question. “Yesterday was a long day.”


“A bad dream?” Thranduil repeated, frowning. “What about?”

“My childhood home, I think.” Bilbo said. “I don’t really remember it well.”

Thranduil made a thoughtful noise. “You should have woken me.” He said. It certainly sounded like the words a parent would say, which puzzled Bilbo.

“I accidentally woke Thorin.” He said.

Thranduil glanced at him. “Oh? Was he mad?”

Bilbo shook his head. He didn’t believe Thorin had been mad. Rather, when he thought about the way Thorin had hovered over him, he felt a little warmer on the inside. He’d had nightmares before, but he’d never really come to terms with any of them, until now. Instead he’d only ever pushed them from his mind and tried to completely forget them, which had never worked out too well for him. This time he felt a little better, like all his lingering pain from the night before had disappeared.

“Alright, here we go.” Thranduil placed down the knife, and offered Bilbo a calm smile. “Thanks for keeping me company. Shall we go eat, now?”

Bilbo nodded, and carefully picked up one of the two plates. The watermelon slices looked really nice, perfect for the warm weather. While Thranduil called Legolas back over, Bilbo took the first plate to where Thorin and Carc were seated in the shade of the large umbrellas. They had towels laid down on the sand, and they’d even borrowed a few beach chairs from the resort for the day. Still, Bilbo sat down on the sand, and offered the plate. Carc politely refused any, but Thorin took a slice, and after placing the plate down on an empty chair Bilbo took one as well.

Soon enough Legolas and Thranduil made their way over, too. Thranduil took a seat on the chair after moving the plates onto the fourth one they had borrowed, but Legolas sat down beside Bilbo. He smelt a little like salt, and the ends of his hair, which he’d tied up, dripped with water. He looked like he’d enjoyed himself, and somehow that made Bilbo feel good. As he took a bite of watermelon and watched the sea, he thought that it might have been nice to stay in a place like this, after all. It was much nicer than staying in the same summery haze he felt like he’d always been in.
After the watermelon had all been eaten, Legolas stood and stretched. “I’m going back into the water!” He declared cheerfully. “Want to come?”

“In a little bit.” Bilbo said, holding up his half-eaten slice of watermelon as a way of explanation. He watched Legolas go, and after a moment Thranduil stood to follow him. It was beginning to turn into the afternoon now, and he was sure they would have to leave soon. Once he’d finished the slice, he stood as well, and dusted the sand off his legs. Absently, he cast a quick glance at Thorin. “Are you coming, too?”

Thorin glanced up at him, looking faintly surprised, and stood. “Alright.”

Like Bilbo had expected, the sea was cold when the water washed over his toes. He paused to roll up the hem of his shorts, just to make sure they didn’t get wet, before walking to the place where Thorin was standing. The water only came up a few inches above his ankles, more if there was a wave, but it was a feeling Bilbo hadn’t ever felt before. He watched the water with fascinated eyes, watched the way sand formed clouds beneath its surface and the way it was all dragged back, ready to be moved again with the next wave.

Suddenly, something white caught his eyes. He made a small, inquisitive noise and crouched down, placing his hands on his knees. Settling in the sand by his feet was a curved shell, one that was spiral shaped. It was coloured a mixture of brown shades and white, and looking mostly intact. When he reached for it, a wave washed over the sand, and it moved out of his reach. Unbidden, his expression fell, and he stood again.

Thorin watched him with curious eyes. As the water moved back up the shore, he reached down and scooped up a small handful of sand. Water dripped from between his fingers, taking with it the sand, and left in his palm was the small shell. Thorin observed it for a moment, before outstretching his palm towards Bilbo. “Here.”

“Ah…” Bilbo gently took the shell from Thorin, and held it in his palms. It was lighter than he expected, and its texture was rougher. “Thank you.” He said in a small, surprised voice.

It wasn’t long before Legolas spotted them, and he was quick to pull Bilbo into his antics. Still, Bilbo kept a tight grip on the shell, and was careful to tuck it into his pocket when Legolas became a little too excited with him. Regardless of Legolas’s endless enthusiasm, Bilbo enjoyed his time in the ocean. He walked through the sand and watched Legolas show him how to bury his toes into the sand so that he could feel when it was dragged back out by the waves, and even helped Legolas build a small, oddly-shaped castle on the line where the wet sand met the dried shore. It was easy to forget everything when there was so much to distract him.

He enjoyed it, he thought. If that was what enjoying time with others was, then he was satisfied.

Still, he was the first to excuse himself when he started to get a little hot under the sun. Legolas pouted, but Bilbo only offered an apologetic look and made his way back to the umbrellas. It was much cooler in the shade, and although his feet were covered in sand and his skin felt sticky with salt he found himself laying back to relax. He was the only one under the umbrellas, for a little while. Carc had returned to sit at the benches on the path above the sand by the car, and seemed to be quite content to read by himself. After a few minutes, Thorin wandered up, and sat down beside him. Bilbo cracked open an eye, and pushed himself upright, even though his head spun sleepily.

“Did you enjoy yourself?” Thorin asked.

Bilbo startled at the question, and after a moment he nodded. “Mmm.”
“Legolas said this was your first time coming to the sea.” Thorin said. He propped a knee up, and rested his elbow on it. He was watching the ocean, but Bilbo didn’t find that particularly off putting, even though Thorin was speaking to him directly.

“I can’t remember ever being here before.” Bilbo said around a yawn.

Thorin eyed him for a moment. “You can sleep, if you wish.” He said. “I’ll wake you before we leave.”

“Alright…” Bilbo murmured. He laid back down, and rested his head on his hands. He hadn’t rolled down his shorts, and he could feel the shell pressing gently against his thigh, but it wasn’t difficult to fall into the place between sleep and consciousness.

For a while, he thought he had fallen asleep. It was like he was dreaming, but his dreams had never seemed to be good to him. As soon as his mind dipped off into unconsciousness, images of a piano by wide, grand windows and the voice of a child that sounded too much like himself haunted him. He fidgeted restlessly, and couldn’t stop the small noises that came from his throat.

He didn’t want to be pulled back into that place. It frightened him. With each passing minute the images that flickered behind his eyes seemed to become more vivid, more tangible. He tried to pull away, to think of the beach and the way the shell felt against his leg and the faint smell of Thorin’s cologne that drifted across on the gentle breeze, but none of it stuck. Would this memory fade into nothingness, too? Would all he ever be able to recall was a house that made no sense and a piano he didn’t want to play?

“Bilbo?” Thorin murmured quietly. “Are you alright?”

Bilbo let out a small, barely audible whine. He heard more than saw Thorin shift closer, and he fearfully grabbed onto Thorin’s thigh with shaking fingers. “I don’t want to leave.” He whispered.

“Leave?” Thorin repeated. “Leave where?”

Bilbo trembled, and gripped Thorin’s leg harder. His fingers were surely pulling on the fabric uncomfortably, but Thorin didn’t make a single complaint. He squeezed his eyes shut harder, and tried to pull away from the hands of sleep that were insistently reaching for him, but it only made him dizzy. “I don’t want to forget again…!”

“Forget what?” Thorin asked carefully.

“Anything…!”

A gentle, hesitant touched the back of his head to smooth down his hair. It was warm, and heavy, and felt very real. “You won’t forget, Bilbo.”

“But I forget everything.” He whimpered, leaning into Thorin’s touch. “I can’t… I can’t remember…” He couldn’t remember what was important.

“Calm down,” Thorin soothed, “It’s just a nightmare.”

He didn’t think it was.
CASE FOUR – THE MISSING BROTHER

When autumn had finally settled in and all the leaves had turned orange and brown with age, Bilbo was offered another job by Thorin. He’d noticed that Thorin was being quite selective with the cases he brought Bilbo on, only because Legolas so frequently insisted in messaging Bilbo about all the things he did each day. Through Legolas, Bilbo was kept up to date with the latest cases Thorin solved, all of which seemed to be rather short and rather simple. While Bilbo didn’t mind the contact with Legolas, it was a little too constant for him to keep up with. His phone vibrated so many times a day that Milo had curiously asked him on the side if he was seeing someone, which Bilbo didn’t understand at all.

It was Thorin that explained the next case to him rather than Thranduil, this time. “A fairly wealthy family has contacted me recently about their household being haunted,” he’d said over the phone one evening. “They wish for us to conduct an investigation and cleanse the building.”

For all intents and purposes, the case appeared to be fairly normal. Houses were often haunted by ghosts, and the occurrences that the clients had reported were typical of poltergeist activity. Knocking, electrical interference, and the movement of objects seemingly by nothing were incidents that Thorin told him the family had reported, and with the absence of a larger, more pressing case at hand Thorin had accepted. It wasn’t anything too unusual. Bilbo knew that the family, due to their relatively high social status, would want to keep the case out of the public’s eye, and he thought that Thorin took that fact into account as well when considering this case. He preferred to remain as far from the eyes of the media and the public as he could, did he not?

Bilbo didn’t have any troublesome thoughts when he accepted Thorin’s offer to work on the case. His school allowed him the time off so long as he caught up again, mostly because he was on a scholarship, and even so Thorin most often asked when Bilbo was on break or had free time. Bilbo always thought that the cases offered a good distraction for his thoughts so he had yet to decline one, and he still remembered their time at the beach fondly, too. Even though he got regular messages from Legolas, and even the occasional one sent to him from Thorin, he found himself wishing for their physical company again. Even if they weren’t friends, as colleagues they had the opportunity to spend time together, and in many ways he thought that that’s all he’d ever wanted.

The Mahtan Estate was the location of their next case. It was big and grand, and built with the most modern facilities available to someone of their status. It was located in an upper middle class neighbourhood, where most of the neighbouring properties had been turned into similar estates with
similar houses and designs. The house itself wasn’t quite as large as Nimrodel’s home in the mountains had been, but it was close enough to it to surprise Bilbo. It was quite different to his quaint little apartment, after all. When the van pulled into the long driveway, the Mahtan family were waiting to greet them, dressed in perfectly presented clothing and appearing to be quite respectable.

The father introduced himself as Fëanor. He was a man of average stature with a slim face and eyes that appeared quite determined by nature. He’d married a pretty woman who went by the name Nerdanel, and together they had a son named Amras. Their child looked to be only a year or two younger than Legolas, and his eyes were politely downcast. Bilbo didn’t get a particularly strong sense from him, but he thought that maybe Legolas had, judging by the way Legolas’s bright eyes lingered on the child with a strange fascination. While introductions were kept short and simple, they were allowed an appropriate amount of time to set up their equipment. Thorin conducted the interviews with Thranduil, which left Legolas and Bilbo doing the physical labour, guided by Carc. It took a little longer than usual with just them doing the heavy lifting, though mostly because Thranduil had to relay messages dictating where exactly any phenomenon had occurred as told during the interviews, but they got it done well enough in the end. By mid-afternoon, the entire team regrouped in the office they’d been given to use so that Thorin could give them proper, updated details about the case.

“The first thing they noticed was knocking noises,” Thranduil said, laying out a blueprint of the house along the table, a marker in hand. “Mostly on doors, and predictably there was no one there when the doors were opened, but then the knocking escalated to walls and the ceiling, too.”

“It couldn’t have been an animal, right?” Legolas asked.

“The family thought it might have been, and had the house professionally exterminated. The sounds persisted.” Thranduil reached across the table to mark several places on the blueprints with the marker. “These are the rooms where furniture has been moved by means other than human. It seems like there’s no specific pattern to it, however…”

Legolas peered closer inquisitively. “That’s Amras’s bedroom, isn’t it?” He asked, pointing to a section on the blueprint. “Where the occurrences are generally originating from?”

Thranduil nodded. “Most of the occurrences originate within or close to Amras’s room,” he said. “The young are always more perceptive towards paranormal entities so it’s not particularly surprising, but I’d keep it in mind regardless.”

“Electrical devices are also malfunctioning,” Thorin continued. “Computers and phones were replaced, but the problems continued. Kitchen ware has also started to become affected, as well as light fixtures. I doubt it was the device or the wiring in the house that was the problem.”

“Then it’s definitely a spirit, right?” Legolas asked. “It couldn’t possibly be anything else. It doesn’t seem to be, all things considering.”

“We thought the same,” Thranduil agreed.

“Has anyone in their family passed away recently?”

Thranduil shook his head. “We asked about recent deaths going back as far as ten years, but there isn’t anything significant. Perhaps there is a spirit attached to this house, rather than to the family?”

“But what reason would it have to suddenly appear as it has?” Legolas said, frowning. “The Mahtan family has lived on this property for several generations, haven’t they? It makes no sense at all for a spirit to just suddenly appear and start causing havoc as it has. What reason could something
suddenly become so active, with no provocation?"

Thranduil hummed thoughtfully, and surveyed the blueprints. “For the most part I don’t sense anything malicious,” he said, “but this house doesn’t feel entirely empty, either. With all these strange occurrences I can’t pass it off as anything residual, or as something from my imagination. Do you sense anything here, Legolas?”

“Only something faint,” he said. “From Amras.”

“What do you perceive of it?”

Legolas frowned once more. “It’s nothing malicious, just like you said,” he murmured. “But I don’t think it’s completely averse to harming others to get what it wants, either. Poltergeists often harm people if left unsolved or unattended, don’t they? Eventually.”

Thranduil nodded. “Pinching, scratching and tripping are injuries that are often linked to poltergeists,” he said. “People are often hurt by moving furniture, too. But no one has been injured in this household, not even Amras.” For a moment, Thranduil was silent, and then he turned to Bilbo. “Do you sense anything here?”

Bilbo startled at the question, and shook his head. “Not really…” He said quietly.

“We’ll have to do more research into the family background, then. Into the history of this property as well,” Thorin decided. “And see what happens tonight. Any poltergeist that’s been in a single location for a period of time should be able to sense an intrusion like this. Something is bound to happen sooner or later.”

It was a relatively quiet afternoon, that day. The air was still a little warm outside, but Bilbo didn’t think it would stay that way for long. He’d packed a scarf in his overnight bag, just in case, and an extra jacket. Throughout the afternoon, Thorin had Bilbo doing research in the office with Carc while both Legolas and Thranduil were moving around the house taking readings. Thorin was himself questioning the staff at the estate, but that was something he could do alone and as such Bilbo ended up with Carc as company. He didn’t find the air in the room with Carc to be all that comfortable, mostly because Carc didn’t really speak often, but it was easy to get used to. Bilbo had never found silent situations like these difficult to bear because he was a rather quiet person himself, but he thought it might have been nice to have a conversation with Carc, too. It was easy to get lost in the work at hand, at any rate.

The Mahtan family was one that had been around for quite a lot of time, it seemed. Their family line dated back several generations, all of which had had something to do with this property, at least in some small way. It had been built a substantial amount of years ago, but refurbished only in the last fifteen, and the interior boasted both furniture and design that was modern and tasteful. Bilbo hadn’t seen the entire house, but he had no doubt that it was probably one of the nicest in the neighbourhood. The family’s money was old and came from wisely placed investments, none of which appeared to be out of order. It all seemed rather honest.

Bilbo struggled to figure out where exactly their mysterious ghost could have originated. No one had died on the property that he could find, and it didn’t seem like the Mahtan’s had made any enemies among their social circles. In fact, they were a part of several long-standing clubs, and seemed to have treated the community rather well. Amras went to a respectable private school and had decent grades, and both Fëanor and Nerdanel had respectable careers that they’d seemingly maintained and progressed through hard work and dedication. They appeared to be quite a normal family, all things
considering.

It was only when he searched up their names in old news articles and papers did something finally show up. He was directed onto a website where there was a scan of what looked like a newspaper from at least ten years ago. It was a page of small obituaries, and if the search had not sent him to that specific page he doubted he would have ever thought it significant. Located in the mix of articles was a small passage titled “Amrod Mahtan.” That wasn’t a name he recognised, and the article didn’t give away much more – it offered condolences, and spoke of Amrod as a “lively, handsome boy” and not much else.

Regardless of how little information the tiny article provided him, it gave him something to go off. Upon searching up the name “Amrod Mahtan” and the corresponding year from the article, he found a series of medical files. Typically they would have been sealed, but the nature of the investigation allowed Bilbo to read into them with permission from the family. As he read through the records, a sudden thought came to Bilbo.

“What Amras this year?” He asked.

Carc glanced at him out from the corner of his dark eyes. “Thirteen,” he answered monotonously.

Bilbo frowned. “I think I found something,” he said, standing to take the laptop over to Carc. “If Amras is also thirteen, then…?”

Carc read over the file much quicker than Bilbo had, and leaned back with a frown. He wordlessly nodded his head to answer Bilbo’s question.

Bilbo only sighed, and returned to his seat. “Then Amras had a twin.”
The Mahtan Estate was large enough for each of the paranormal research team members to be given a guest room to stay in for the duration of the investigation. Bilbo’s was in the middle of the guest wing corridor, and he thought that that had been an intentional thing, though he wasn’t quite sure why. Perhaps Thranduil, and maybe Thorin too, were still uneasy after Bilbo had been spirited away by Nimrodel. Bilbo himself certainly hadn’t come to terms with it, but it wasn’t something that particularly hindered his actions or sleep patterns, either.

Bilbo slept relatively well, for the half of the night. The room was simple but comfortable, and the bed was much the same. He didn’t think he’d been dreaming and his sleep hadn’t been all that deep, so it didn’t take much for him to awaken. When his eyes first fluttered open he thought that maybe someone was knocking on his door, but as his consciousness became sharper he realised that the sounds that had woken him were not coming from his door, but rather they were coming from the walls.

He sat up straighter, letting the covers fall into his lap as he looked around the room. It was quite dark, with only the faint light of the moon to give him any visibility. He didn’t see anything that was out of place, and the door was still shut, just as he’d left it. When his eyes first fluttered open he thought that maybe someone was knocking on his door, but as his consciousness became sharper he realised that the sounds that had woken him were not coming from his door, but rather they were coming from the walls.

He sat up straighter, letting the covers fall into his lap as he looked around the room. It was quite dark, with only the faint light of the moon to give him any visibility. He didn’t see anything that was out of place, and the door was still shut, just as he’d left it. A strange feeling of coldness came over him, like he’d left the window open, but when he’d glanced over at it the window was still latched shut. Shakily, he slipped his legs out from beneath the covers, and made his way over to the door. The doorknob was colder than he expected beneath his palm, but it turned easily, and he quietly pulled the door open.

The light was on in the hallway, illuminating the space, however when he peered out of his door he didn’t see anything odd. He flinched when the knocking noises started up again, faster and a little louder than they were before. The door down from him opened quietly, and then Legolas was peering out, his eyebrows furrowed in concern. His hair was loose and tousled from sleep, and he was only wearing pyjama bottoms, which made Bilbo think he’d been woken by the noises, too.

“You hear that, right?” Legolas asked as he inched along the wall towards Bilbo.

Bilbo nodded.

Legolas jumped as the knocking got louder. He reached out to grip Bilbo’s arm, and moved a little closer. “That has to be the poltergeist, right?”

“You hear that?” Bilbo began uncertainly, only to be interrupted by a figure appearing at the
end of the hallway. For a moment his heart jolted, but the face was familiar, and hesitantly he asked, “Amras?”

The boy at the end of the hallway certainly looked like the Young Master of Mahtan. However, when Legolas tensed beside Bilbo and tightened his grip on Bilbo’s arm, Bilbo knew that it couldn’t be Amras. When he looked closer, he thought he might have been able to see the wall through the figure, and it set him on edge.

“You’re Amrod, right?” Bilbo said. Although his voice didn’t have a notable waver, he could feel nervousness creeping up his throat, and he forcefully swallowed it down.

Amrod’s head jerked up at the sound of his name, and warily Bilbo took a step back. His eyes were completely void of colour, and Bilbo found them impossible to focus on. Still, Amrod stared straight at him, as though he were seeing straight through Bilbo to view all the secrets he’d ever locked away. It gave Bilbo uncomfortable chills, and somehow he started to think that purifying Amrod was going to be a little more difficult than they had first thought.

“Bilbo…” Legolas murmured, before letting out a small cry as Amrod suddenly jolted forwards. Bilbo sucked in a gasp and was knocked to his feet as Amrod passed through both himself and Legolas. His body felt like he’d been dunked in the Atlantic Ocean, and he let out a small, choked noise as a large shiver wracked through his chest. Legolas was panting against his ear, and his grip had turned bruising on Bilbo’s arm.

“Are you alright?” Bilbo asked the moment he got his breath back.

Legolas nodded shakily. “Yeah… Yeah, I think I’m alright. Are you?”

Bilbo nodded too.

Legolas let out a deep breath, and slowly the tension drained from his shoulders. “I don’t sense anything anymore.” He whispered. “The knocking has stopped, too. Do you think it’d be fine just to go back to bed and tell everyone about this in the morning? I’m so tired…”

It was uncharacteristic of Legolas to sound so worn out, but if Bilbo were being perfectly honest he didn’t think he was faring much better. Without thinking he simply nodded in agreement, and pushed himself to his feet.

“At least you were right about the twin thing, huh?” Legolas said as he stood, too. “I’m going to stay with you tonight, by the way.”

Bilbo glanced at him, puzzled, but he didn’t protest it. Any other time and he would have, but Legolas looked quite shaken. Bilbo could see that Legolas was trying to play it off, but his eyes told Bilbo everything his words didn’t. Legolas was younger than him, after all, and in some ways Bilbo thought it was only right for him to look out for Legolas at times like these. In either case, there was only a handful of hours remaining until morning, and Bilbo was sure he could cope, until then.

Waking with another person in the bed was a strange thing. This time it was the morning sunshine streaming in through the window that woke Bilbo. The light fell across his face, and as he turned away from it to sleepily open his eyes, he was faced with a different kind of sunshine.

Legolas’s hair looked really gold, up close.

Bilbo, for a moment, forgot why Legolas was in his bed in the first place. When the memories did
return he couldn’t help but frown and turn his face further into his pillow. His skin still felt faintly
cold from where Amrod had passed through him, and it only made him frown harder. If Amrod had
died more than ten years ago, then what was he still doing here, and why had he only just recently
started acting up? It didn’t make any sense. He didn’t seem particularly harmful, but then he wasn’t
all that friendly, either.

Bilbo sighed, and closed his eyes. He thought that he might have been able to fall asleep like that,
listening to the soft way Legolas breathed, if not for the sudden banging on his door. He jumped at
the loud noise, and burrowed further into the sheets, reluctant to move.

Thranduil burst into the room a moment later. “Bilbo, have you seen Legolas? He’s not in his room-
!”

Legolas mumbled something unfathomable and peeked open an eye crankily. “I’m right here,
Father.” He murmured. “Stop being so loud!”

Thranduil let out a shaky, relieved breath. “I was so worried!” He chastised harshly, but not
unkindly, before leaning his head back out of the doorway. “He’s in here!”

“In Bilbo’s room?” Thorin repeated quietly as he wandered over. “Why is he in here?”

Thranduil glanced at Legolas, frowning. Thorin came to stand beside him, observing the situation
with carefully guarded eyes. “Legolas?” Thranduil prodded.

Legolas let out a wide yawn, and sat up. “Bilbo was keeping me company!” He whined. “You’ve
ruined our romantic morning.”

“Legolas.” Bilbo said tiredly. He felt strange having Legolas say such a thing in front of Thorin,
though he wasn’t sure why. He took a moment to sit up and rub the sleep from his eyes. “I heard
knocking noises last night.” He explained quietly. “Legolas did too, and he found me out in the
hallway.”

“You should have woken me.” Thranduil frowned. “Are you alight?”

Legolas nodded, and stretched his arms up. He really should have put a shirt on, Bilbo thought.
“We’re fine.” Legolas said. “But Amrod appeared.”

“Amrod?” Thranduil repeated, eyebrows furrowed. “Amras’s twin?”

Legolas nodded. “Yeah. Looked exactly like Amras and all.”

Bilbo rubbed at his chest absently. “He passed right through us.” He said, straight to the point.
“Legolas didn’t want to sleep alone.”

Legolas pouted. “You put it so bluntly, Bilbo. And here I was making you out to be my knight in
shining armour!”

Bilbo only glanced away. He didn’t like the idea of being a knight all too much.

Halfway through the day, the knocking noises began again. Bilbo had been assigned to help Thorin
all day, even if it was to do mundane tasks that he generally did by himself. Bilbo didn’t complain,
but he certainly found it strange. They’d been taking readings in one of the spare bedrooms when the
knocking had begun. It was coming from Amras’s bedroom, and in a rush they found themselves at
his door. Legolas and Thranduil appeared just around the corner, as did Fëanor and Nerdanel.

The moment Thorin opened Amras’s door, a loud crash reverberated throughout the room. Bilbo jumped, and gripped the back of Thorin’s coat tightly. The room behind the door was completely chaotic. It looked like the bookshelf had been knocked over, which had sent books and trinkets sprawling in every direction. Amras was crouched in the middle, eyes squeezed shut with his hands on the back of his head. The bookshelf had missed him, and every single book had, too, instead forming a circle around where he’d crouched as if someone had batted them away.

“Amras!” Nerdanel cried, rushing forwards to hold her child tightly. “What happened, are you alright?”

“I heard a knocking noise.” Amras said shakily. “And then the bookshelf fell forwards.”

“Oakenshield,” Thranduil murmured, “It’s here.”

Bilbo glanced around, and sure enough Amrod had appeared by the side of Amras’s bed. He looked much more obscured than he had the previous night, so much so that Bilbo couldn’t make out his face, as though he were a television set to a static channel. Has Amrod attacked his own brother?

“What is it?” Nerdanel demanded, turning her eyes to pin Thranduil in place. “You were meant to fix this problem, and look what’s happened!”

“It’s Amrod.” Thranduil said, eyeing Amrod’s form with cautious, firm eyes. “He’s causing all your problems.”

Nerdanel’s face went pale. “T-that’s not possible- it’s…” If anything, her face only went paler as she caught sight of Amrod. “Please, no…”

“Who’s Amrod?” Amras said, eyes wide with apprehension. “Mother, what’s going on?”

“He’s no one-” Fëanor started sharply, only for Amrod’s figure to suddenly burn brighter. Like a flame he grew in mass until his figure was somewhat distinguishable, and he filled the air with an awful warping noise that sounded as though someone were crushing wood. He was angered, and unafraid to show it.

“Who’s Amrod?” Amras demanded, standing suddenly. He looked like he was being affected by Amrod’s anger, and Bilbo thought that it must be because they were brothers.

“You didn’t tell him?” Thranduil demanded. “Amrod is his twin!”

Amras’s face fell. Bilbo knew that he had to find out, but it still somehow felt wrong. “I have a twin?” Amras asked, voice wavering. “His name is Amrod?”

The spirit – was it proper to call it Amrod? – seemed to settle down, if only for a moment. It was watching Amras far too intently, and Bilbo didn’t think anything good would come from that sort of fascination.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Amras demanded, turning to his parents. “Where is he?”

“He… He died.” Nerdanel whispered. “Ten years ago.”

Amras swallowed heavily, and ducked his head. “How?”

“Amras-”
“How!”

“He was hit by a car.” Fëanor cut in before his wife could suffer anymore. “You were playing with a ball in the front yard when we lived in a smaller house, and you threw the ball too far out into the road. Amrod chased it, and the car didn’t stop.”

Tears welled in Amras’s eyes. “I killed my own brother?”

“No, no you didn’t, Amras.” Nerdanel said quietly, placing a gentle hand on her child’s arm. “It wasn’t your fault. It- it was mine, I wasn’t watching you properly-”

“It was no one’s fault.” Fëanor said. “It was an accident.”

Amras pressed a hand to his face, and ran from the room. Nerdanel cried out for him, and soon she was gone, too. The moment Amras left the room, Amrod’s spirit dissipated, as if it were no longer interested in any of the proceedings without Amras present. Bilbo finally released Thorin’s coat, and looked at him questioningly.

“What is going to be done about this?” Fëanor asked quietly. “I don’t want to see my family hurt anymore.”

“I don’t think purification is possible.” Thorin murmured.

“But it would be cruel to exorcise him!” Legolas protested. “After everything they’ve been through, we have to figure out why he suddenly started appearing now, and we have to help them!”

“Legolas…” Thranduil said.

Thorin was frowning deeply. He glanced at Bilbo as if to ask him something, but Bilbo only watched him with wavering eyes. He thought that exorcism, in this case, would indeed be cruel, but what else was there to do? He had no knowledge on these kinds of things, and if Thorin didn’t know what else could be done, then Bilbo was clueless.

After a moment, Thorin frowned deeper, and turned his head away. “There… Might be something that can be done.” He murmured. “I’ll have to make a call.”

“Please, do whatever you have to.” Fëanor said. “We’ll compensate you. I just want my family to be happy again.”

Thorin sighed, and dug out his phone. As everyone leaved to continue their work, although begrudgingly, Bilbo followed Thorin. After a moment of staring at his phone screen, Thorin dialled a number, and pressed the phone to his ear. He was only silent for a moment.

“Hello, Elrond.”
Enfeoffment

Chapter Summary

A newcomer and a doll.

Chapter Notes

Enfeoffment - to give as a fief.

During the middle of the day, Bilbo was overcome with a sudden unexpected tiredness. They were waiting for Thorin's acquaintance to arrive at the estate, or for Amrod to reappear. Bilbo didn't believe the latter would happen for quite some time yet, but he knew that Elrond would be here by mid-afternoon, most likely. He never really slept during the day, but even so he had starting thinking that maybe a few hours of his time could be spared that day.

He'd wandered away before he'd really noticed what he was doing, and eventually he found his way out into the glass sunroom that connected the house to the back gardens. It was a quiet place, pleasantly warmed by the heat of the sun, and he easily found himself a wooden bench with padded cushions to rest on. It was quite a bit more comfortable than it looked, and the moment he closed his eyes he was asleep.

The view before him was surrounded by a blurry haze, but it was easy to focus on the scene at hand. The living room of a quaint little house was the chosen playground for a pair of young toddlers, who sat together on the floor dressed in matching clothes. There were piles of blocks spread out between them, and they seemed happy. Bilbo almost felt sad at the sight of it, because he didn't feel so out of it that he couldn't understand the children were Amras and Amrod.

As he watched, it seemed a different memory from the past came into focus. It was at their manor, in a room Bilbo recognised. Amras was older, perhaps by a few years, and he was seated at a table with a book perched between his hands. He looked like he was a quiet child, and for a moment Bilbo thought that perhaps he was lonely. It was only with a sudden start that Bilbo realised the room was not, in fact, as empty as he had first thought – no, because seated across from Amras was someone who looked just like him, right down to the clothes they wore and the way their hair was parted. Amras glanced up, and caught sight of his brother, then smiled.

The memory shifted again, revealing Amras when he was a little older, walking down a hallway. Amrod was beside him, dressed in the same pyjamas, as though he were still alive and solid and real. When Bilbo looked at them, he felt a strange feeling in his chest. Even as the memory shifted again, over and over, he thought that it only became sadder. Each time Amras changed – when the baby fat dropped from his cheeks, when his hair was cut, when he got a scrape on his knee – Amrod would change accordingly.

In some ways, Bilbo thought that they’d never really been apart. If Amrod had been there all this
time, then Amras couldn’t have ever been lonely.

But children grew up. Bilbo knew that children were much more sensitive to paranormal activity, and as he watched Amras age he started to notice that his interactions around Amrod were a little different. It started off simple – incidents were Amras didn’t smile at Amrod as he once had, or when he didn’t glanced up from his book to see Amrod seated across from him. At first Bilbo didn’t notice, but as the memories became ragged at the edges, as the air turned colder, it became apparent that Amras had indeed forgotten Amrod.

One last memory burst forth. It was the hallway outside of Amras’s room, and standing before his bedroom door was Amrod. It was like the door was a physical barrier that not even he could pass, but then the door was opening, and Amras appeared.

And just like that, Amras walked straight through him.

“Are you waking up, now?”

Bilbo let out a small sound, and slowly opened his eyes. He could feel the warmth of sunshine resting against his back, but his face was in the shadows. He couldn’t remember laying down, but when he fully came to he found that he’d acquired quite a warm pillow. “Thorin?”

Thorin’s hand was warm and gentle in his hair, and the feeling of him calmly brushing strands of Bilbo’s hair away from his face was almost enough to lure him into sleep again. “You shouldn’t wander off on your own.” Thorin said quietly. He made no move to nudge Bilbo’s head from his thigh, and didn’t appear too mad even though he had scolded Bilbo.

After allowing his eyes to drift shut for a moment, Bilbo opened them again. “I had a dream.” He said.

“One of your special ones?”

Bilbo nodded sleepily. “They were always together, huh? Never apart.”

“The twins?”

Again, he nodded. “Amras could see Amrod.”

Thorin hummed in understanding. “He can’t anymore, can he?” He sighed. “Such is the price of growing up. That explains why Amrod is upset.”

“What can we do about it?” Bilbo asked quietly. “Amras will be said if Amrod is hurt.”

Carefully, Thorin brushed a strand of pale hair behind Bilbo’s ear. “That’s what I called Elrond for.” He said. “He has a… Talent, I suppose you could say, that may be useful here.”

“Mmm?”

“He makes dolls.” Thorin said. “A lot of different kinds. Amrod won’t be purified in his current state, but Elrond will be able to transfer his spirit into the doll, which then can act as a proxy and be purified in Amrod’s place.”

Bilbo glanced up at him. “Will it work?”

Thorin watched him for a moment. His eyes were bright. “I believe so.”
Elrond was a tall man with dark hair and incredibly intelligent eyes. The way in which he carried himself reminded Bilbo a lot of Thranduil, and he thought that in some ways the two of them were extremely similar. He watched Bilbo in a rather calculating manner, though Bilbo couldn’t blame him. He was the only member of the team that Elrond had never met, and he was just a high school student, after all.

Still, after he spent an hour evaluating the situation, Elrond began to work. Bilbo was strangely curious about the whole process, and luckily Thorin had decided to remain with Elrond, which meant Bilbo could, too. The doll Elrond produced was ball-jointed, and had already been made and strung together with elastic. Its face was blank, but Elrond began to paint it as soon as he had a place to comfortably sit.

“Painting a doll like that usually requires several layers of sealant to be used between each layer of colour.” Thorin explained quietly as he caught sight of Bilbo’s curious expression. “But for this purpose it isn’t particularly necessary.”

“Have you ever seen a doll like this?” Elrond asked.

Bilbo startled at the question, and shook his head.

Elrond eyed him for a moment, before offering him a friendly smile. “Come here.” He said, placing down his delicate paintbrush.

Bilbo glanced at Thorin once before inching his way closer. Elrond had reached into his bag and pulled out a second doll, but this one was complete. It had a delicately painted face and wore a wig that was long and white. Its eyes were white, too, but it wasn’t off putting. When Elrond passed the doll into Bilbo’s hands, his heart began to flutter. It was heavier than he expected, and its joints clicked as he changed his grip to hold it more comfortably.

“These types of dolls are cast in resin.” Elrond said. “It doesn’t react well to sunlight, and turns yellow with age, but they’re quite beautiful, aren’t they?”

Bilbo nodded, silent. With tentative hands he gripped the doll’s wrist and turned it, fascinated by the way the tiny fingers were sculpted and how easy it was to move the joints. As Bilbo continued to fawn over the doll, Elrond returned to painting his, and Thorin watched with a strangely satisfied expression.

It took several hours for the doll to be finished, and as soon as it was Elrond dressed it in simple clothing, and gave it a similarly simple wig and pair of eyes. “This should work just fine.” He said, offering the doll for Thorin’s approval. “Shall I commence the transference?”

Thorin looked over the doll before nodding in approval. “I asked Thranduil to clear a space in Amras’s bedroom for you.” He said. “It should be prepared by now.”

Elrond nodded, and stood. He carried the completed doll in his hands, and moved to follow Thorin from the room. Bilbo reluctantly placed away Elrond’s doll back into his bag before hurrying after them both. Just like Thorin said the room had been cleared, with a large space in the middle left empty aside from a low table and a cushion. Elrond sat knees first on the cushion, and then placed the doll on the table before withdrawing a small leather bound book from his coat.

Bilbo moved to stand beside Legolas, who was with his Father. He felt a little more protected by
them, mostly because Thorin was preoccupied with Elrond and Carc was nowhere to be seen. He didn’t think anything particularly bad would happen, but he wanted to be close to Legolas and Thranduil, just in case.

Quietly, Elrond began to read from the book he held. Just like when Thranduil performed exorcisms or purifications, Elrond’s words weren’t in a language Bilbo could understand. It sounded soft and similar to the language Thranduil spoke, but the dialect was different, and he knew they couldn’t be exactly the same. As he watched, Amrod started to materialise, like wisps of smoke that began to shift and form his figure. As Elrond continue to speak Amrod’s expression began to change; it turned softer, and his eyes closed as though he were thinking of something important. Then, as though a breeze had begun to blow, his figure started to disappear. The doll on the table didn’t move, but its hair shifted as though the breeze had affected it, too, and just like that Amrod was gone.

Elrond sighed, and shut the book. “He’s been transferred to the doll.” He said. “You should be able to purify him.”

Thranduil nodded, and moved forwards. He sat across from Elrond, and withdrew a vial of water from his jacket pocket. After allowing it to drip on the doll’s forehead, he murmured something quiet and indistinguishable, and the temperature in the room became warmer.

Amrod was gone, just like that.

In the end, Elrond gifted the doll to Amras. He’d cried when they’ve revealed the conclusion of their investigation, and held the doll tightly, probably tight enough for his body heat to seep into the resin. Nerdanel looked incredibly upset, and Bilbo knew Fëanor was as well, but he hid it well.

“What happens to the doll, now?” Bilbo asked Elrond tentatively.

“It’s just a doll, now.” Elrond said. “Thranduil purified it, and Amrod’s spirit has passed on. I doubt anything will try to possess the doll, but in either case it’s in Amras’s care, now. He can do with it what he wishes.” Elrond glanced down at him for a moment, and hummed thoughtfully. “Have you ever painted something like a doll before, Bilbo?”

Bilbo shook his head.

“Would you like to try?”

Surprised, Bilbo lost his words. “C-can I?”

A small smile came to Elrond’s face. “Many people learn to paint them at my plantation.” He said. “I have a small manor by the sea with enough acreage to grow and farm apple trees.”

“Isn’t it a problem with the sea so close?” Bilbo asked, frowning.

“A little.” Elrond said. “But the area is elevated, and sheltered by large tree roots that grow like pathways around the hills and cliffs. It’s quite idyllic, and perfect for concentrating on such tiny details.”

“Then, if you wouldn’t mind…” Bilbo said nervously.

“Not at all.” Elrond reassured. He reached into his pocket and withdrew a business card which he handed to Bilbo. “If you have some free time, just ring this number. My assistant, Lindir, will most likely answer the phone, but I’ll inform him of your call beforehand. Don’t be shy, alright?”
Bilbo nodded, and held the card tightly. He was quiet as they bid Elrond farewell, and only offered
the card as an explanation to Legolas’s curious look.

“Come along, Bilbo.” Thorin called from across the hall. They still had to pack away all the
equipment, and after tucking away Elrond’s card into his pocket Bilbo moved to follow Thorin’s
call. He was glad that the case had been resolved, and that Amras had some sort of closure now. He
was glad for Amrod, too. He could now pass on to where he was meant to be, couldn’t he? He
wasn’t missing anymore.
CASE FIVE – THE STOLEN CHILDREN

In a small suburb far away from the city where lazy mornings were common and there were only a few thousand people present, the next case began. It was a dreary town, the name of which never particularly remained in Bilbo’s mind for long, and yet the people somehow managed to make up for the quietness of the area. The unobtrusiveness of the town, at first, only confused Bilbo, but soon enough he came to realise that there was a quiet buzz of life in the air, just faintly, one that wasn’t immediately recognisable.

It was a nice enough place.

“They claim their house is haunted.” Thorin said, handing Bilbo a stack of files over the back of the front seat. “The family moved there recently, and have reported a lot of strange things happening.”

“Strange enough for you to take their case?” Thranduil asked, taking the papers Bilbo offered him. “A typical haunted house isn’t something you generally take.”

“Bard requested it.” Thorin said simply.

Bilbo glanced at Bard, who simply watched the view from the van window. He’d been quiet for a while, and didn’t say much, but Bilbo thought he was nice enough. Thranduil had explained to him what Bard’s profession was though it still left Bilbo somewhat puzzled. He’d been a Monk at a small village that sat upon a lake in an extremely isolated area, but had since left the monastery to avoid the strict regulations that were imposed upon him. Thranduil wouldn’t say why he’d left. In essence, his actions could be acclaimed as apostasy, though he still regularly practiced his religion. Bilbo thought that the negative connotation regarding apostates simply couldn’t be applied to Bard, just because he didn’t seem to be the type of person who’d anything irrationally or selfishly.

Thranduil hummed thoughtfully. “What is the family like?”

“They’re good people.” Bard said. “They’re very involved in the community, and I want to help them, if I’m able to.”

Thranduil glanced at him. Bilbo thought that perhaps they had some sort of history together, but he didn’t question it. Bard couldn’t meet Thranduil’s eyes and shied away from Thranduil when the car turned a corner and they were inevitably leaning to one side. Maybe it had something to do with their
differing religious beliefs? Though neither of them seemed the type to quarrel over such a thing. Instead of worrying over such a thing he turned his attention to the papers Thorin had handed him.

Eventually, the house came into view. Much like the town it reflected a quaint, quiet aura that looked welcoming, from the outside. He knew from the information that Thorin had provided that the house was very old, though it had been maintained exceptionally well. It was one of the nicest on the street, and fairly large, with an expansive second story. It looked like a nice place to live, but the moment they exited the van and Bilbo stood before the house, he felt a shock go through him.

Instantly, his stomach recoiled. He felt his throat constrict and muffled a pained moan as he put his hands over his mouth. Something cold and sharp spread down his spine and through his lungs, and suddenly he found it difficult to breathe. His knees starting shaking before they buckled out from beneath him, and he fell to the floor in a trembling heap.


Bilbo reached for Thranduil’s hand to stand, but instead his stomach lurched again, and he let out a terrible dry retch.

Thranduil rubbed his back firmly. “Travel sickness?” He murmured to himself. “Come on, Bilbo, we should get you in the house so you can rest-”

“No!” Bilbo gasped, cringing away. “No!”

“No, what’s the matter?” Thranduil repeated. His voice had taken on a tone of concern, and his eyebrows were furrowed. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

Bilbo only shook his head. He didn’t know what was wrong, but when he glanced up at the house, it didn’t seem so welcoming anymore. Rather, it loomed over him, buried him in a shadow that hadn’t been visible before. He was frightened. He didn’t want to go there.

Thorin appeared by his side, and reached into Bilbo’s pocket. Bilbo remembered that he’d mentioned in the car that he still had to return Thorin’s charm because he’d forgotten to bring it on the last case, and Thorin fished it out of his sweater pocket. He pressed it into Bilbo’s palm, curled his fingers around it. The charm became something Bilbo could focus on, something that he could feel. It cut through the intimidating aura of the house, and soon Bilbo could breathe again.

Still, a foul taste lingered in his mouth. The house certainly wasn’t as idyllic as he had thought.

The person they were introduced to was a man named Irmo Lórien. He worked as an important figurehead in the town, and had admired this house quite some time before it was put on the market and his family moved in. His wife was a lovely, gentle faced woman named Estë who worked as a nurse at the local hospital. She had an aura about her that seemed to cure Bilbo of his weariness, and her smile was the softest Bilbo had ever seen. She was very welcoming, and even served them tea.

Irmo and Estë had a single child together. Eru was eight years old, and had wide, bright eyes that were the same deep brown as his father’s. Although the child had his mother’s soft complexion, he seemed to have a very close connection with Irmo. Rather, it was more like Irmo was very in tuned with Eru’s wishes, as though any slight change in Eru’s expression was something that Irmo could easily and fluently comprehend. In many ways their relationship reminded Bilbo of the one Thranduil had with Legolas.

Out of all the residents of the house, Bilbo had the strongest reaction to Eru. He seemed like a child
that was quite different to both Maki and Nimrodel, and there was no doubt in Bilbo’s mind that Eru was real, that he was living. However, there was something about Eru that caught Bilbo’s attention, and he couldn’t quite figure out what that thing happened to be. He thought that maybe Eru was a little too timid, that his eyes were a little too frightened. He didn’t know Eru, didn’t know his mannerisms or his personality, but it was hard to disregard the strange things he was sensing.

“The strange occurrences started small.” Bard explained as they sat in the small room Irmo had provided them. “A light would flicker out, even when changed, and the kettle would begin to screech long before it should have finished boiling.”

“Could it be a problem with the wiring of the house?” Thranduil asked.

Bard frowned. “Irmo thought the same, and had the house checked by an electrician. Nothing was out of place, and if it were only those sorts of problems plaguing them, I wouldn’t have asked you to come here.”

“What else has happened?”

“The main problem is with Eru.” Bard said. “His behaviour has changed quite a lot since they moved to this house, and it’s worrying.”

“How so?”

“He used to be a very bright and cheerful child.” Bard explained. “He wasn’t afraid to greet strangers, and was very independent. Now, however, he’s much quieter, and refuses to go around the house without either Irmo or Estë accompanying him. He wakes up crying at night, and is terrified of his bedroom. I do admit it’s quite a strange place, but I can’t fathom any reason other than by paranormal interference he would begin to act as he has.”

“His bedroom is on the second floor, right?” Thranduil asked. “The one with the antique knocker on the door.”

Bard nodded. “This house was built many decades ago and had quite a few eccentricities like that, so I didn’t think anything of it.”

“There have also been incidents where Estë has seen and heard strange things.” Bard said. “Heavy footsteps on the upper level, and a dark figure in the basement, for example. She’s home alone often, and although she won’t say anything I can tell she’s apprehensive. Irmo is concerned.”

Thorin frowned. “The land here is even, is it not? I believe this isn’t anything natural.” He murmured. He glanced at Bilbo, and only frowned further. “I think some deeper research into the history of the house is necessary.”

Thranduil nodded in agreement. “Our initial search didn’t bring up much, did it? Nothing more than title handovers and renovation records…”

“For now we should focus on setting up equipment and taking preliminary measurements.” Thorin said. “Eru’s room is a place of interest, as is the second story corridor, the staircase, and the basement. We should focus on there for now.”

At night, Bilbo became very uneasy. After finishing the readings he’d stayed with Carc in the office, compiling information and sorting paperwork. It was mundane and repetitive, and while that sort of work would usually distract him well enough it only made him more restless. His agitation grew to
the point where even Carc was looking at him with strange eyes. After murmuring an excuse, Bilbo made his way from the room, and out to the back porch to breathe in the cool air.

It was late autumn, now. The trees were starting to shed their leaves, and the sight of their bare branches reaching to the dusk sky made Bilbo think this winter would be a particularly harsh one. A strange prickling sensation tingled at the back of his neck, and he anxiously drew his knees up and lifted a hand to cover the itching spot. He glanced around, eyes wide with trepidation, but there was nothing there.

He wasn’t quite sure how long he sat on the porch. Eventually, the pitter-patter of little feet had him drawing his head up, and he found that Eru was standing on the other side of the porch. After receiving no rejection from Bilbo, the child inched closer, and took a seat beside him.

“Can you feel them?” Eru asked quietly.

Bilbo jumped at the question. “Feel who?” He whispered back. It was like they were sharing an incredibly important secret.

Eru shrunk into his shoulders. He couldn’t meet Bilbo’s eyes, and turned his head away. “The basement is scary.” He whispered. “There’s fire down there. Don’t go, okay? Don’t go.”

Bilbo felt a shiver crawl down his spine. “A fire?”

Eru didn’t answer, and only buried his face between his knees. He almost looked like he was shaking, but when Bilbo looked at him harder, looked at him properly, he saw that Eru was terrifyingly still.

“Are you alright, Bilbo?”

He glanced up at the sound of his name, and found Thorin watching him. They were sharing the smaller of the two guest rooms, and somehow that made Bilbo feel a little better. Still, he found that words wouldn’t come when he tried to answer Thorin, and instead he gripped his fingers tighter around the bedsheets.

Thorin frowned, and took a seat beside Bilbo on the bed. His eyes travelled down to Bilbo’s hands, where the corner of his charm was peeking out between Bilbo’s fingers. He gently unravelled it, and turned it over in his palms quietly. “What’s wrong?”

“The basement is scary.” He whispered. His mind felt hazy, like his thoughts weren’t connected to the way his mouth moved. “There’s a fire down there. Don’t go, okay? Don’t go.”

Thorin took Bilbo’s hand, pressed the charm back into his fingers, and held it. “Who told you that, Bilbo?”

“Eru did.”

“Did he say anything else?”

Bilbo shook his head. But Eru had, hadn’t he? He asked about something, about “them”. It frightened Bilbo, made his heart race, but he didn’t say anything. It was frightening Eru, too.

Thorin watched him carefully. “Will you come with me, for a moment?”
Bilbo didn’t protest. Thorin gently guided him to his feet, and although it was getting late he took Bilbo across the hall to the room Carc, Bard and Thranduil shared. Bilbo felt too lost in his own thoughts to comprehend, and instead tried to push away the anxious feeling that was beginning to swallow up his heart. Absently Bilbo realised that Thorin had called out Thranduil, who had taken Bilbo’s face in his palms and was surveying his expression with sharp eyes. After a moment, Thranduil had Bilbo sit down on one of the beds in the room, and he went to find objects from his bag. Bilbo glanced at Thorin who only watched him passively before returning to his thoughts.

Thranduil returned with his glass vial and a paper charm that looked a lot like the ones Legolas had made at Nimrodel’s home. The writing on this one was different, however, and it looked more intricate. Gently, Thranduil stuck it to Bilbo’s forehead, and hushed the small, confused noises he made. He pressed his thumb almost completely over the vial’s opening before moving his arm in a wide arch. Briefly, just like it always had, the droplets of water condensed in the air before completely disappearing. He murmured something that Bilbo didn’t quite catch, but a moment later a piercing sensation raggedly shot through Bilbo’s mind, and he let out a pained noise. “It’s alright.” Thorin soothed. He placed a hand on the back of Bilbo’s head to catch him when Bilbo collapsed, and carefully laid him on the bed as his consciousness began to fade. “Rest for now, Bilbo.”

There was something really, really bad in that house, and he didn’t want to know what it was.
Execrate

Chapter Summary

Quiet comfort and a terrifying spirit.

Chapter Notes

Execrate - feel or express great loathing for.

“I was possessed?”

Thorin nodded, and handed Bilbo a steaming cup of tea. They sat alone in the kitchen while the rest of the household began to wake. “By nothing malicious, it seems, but you definitely weren’t yourself. Do you remember last night at all?”

Bilbo frowned, but nodded. “I do.”

“How did you feel?”

“Really… Really uneasy.”

Thorin hummed thoughtfully. “That sounds about right.”

“But I still feel that way.” Bilbo said, clutching the teacup tighter. “I… I-”

“Don’t get too worked up, Bilbo.” Thorin said. “I think you’re quite susceptible to any spirits lingering in this house, and one might try to possess you again.”

Bilbo pursed his lips, and nodded. He took a long sip of tea, and ignored the way the liquid burned the inside of his mouth. He hardly felt it. He didn’t feel like he’d been possessed by anything, but the strangeness of the night before still remained in his mind. He left a little more like himself this morning, but did that mean he truly hadn’t been himself the night before? He didn’t like the idea of being controlled by someone else, even if that person didn’t have any bad intentions.

“For now I’ll have Thranduil make you a protection charm.” Thorin said. “I want you to hold onto mine, as well.”

Bilbo didn’t protest that. He thought about Eru, about the way he’d trembled and the words he’d spoken, and it made Bilbo’s heart race. “Could Eru be possessed, as well?” He asked quietly.

Thorin glanced at him. “Do you think he is?”

Bilbo lowered his eyes to watch steam billow up gently from the surface of his tea. “I get a strange feeling when I’m around him.” Bilbo said quietly. “But I can’t tell if it’s him, or if it’s this house. But I think… I think it’s the house.”
Thorin took a seat beside Bilbo. “The history of this house is proving difficult to uncover.” He said. “It seems that a lot of the formal documentation here was left unattended, or has been missing for decades. I believe that a lot of the oldest transactions weren’t recorded, but instead were done over a handshake, for a lack of better words. It will take a little more digging to uncover the previous history of this residence, but we can still do our own investigations at the moment.”

Bilbo nodded. “What about the basement?”

“You’re really apprehensive about that place.” Thorin pointed out, not unkindly. “What about it is setting you on edge?”

“It doesn’t feel welcoming.” Bilbo said. “I feel like it’s a place I shouldn’t go.”

“Make sure not to go anywhere alone.” Thorin said. He stood, placed his hand on the back of Bilbo’s neck, just for a moment, just tentatively, before putting his teacup in the sink. “Shall we go?”

During the day, the temperature in Eru’s bedroom dropped. It was noticeable enough to draw Carc’s attention, who then directed the team there from the office. Bilbo made sure to stay close to Thorin because he knew that nothing good could come from any occurrence in this house. As the door to the room was opened, a blast of unnaturally chilled air crawled over Bilbo to settle in his stomach like a stone. He peered around Thorin’s broad shoulders, but there was nothing in the bedroom that looked out of place. In fact, the room looked like it’d always had, if only a little darker.

Suddenly, a shrill scream from the first story shattered the quietness of the house. Bilbo felt himself freeze, but it wasn’t because of the scream; no, it was because there were hands that were as cold as ice gripping his upper arms, as if to shuffle him further into Eru’s room. He didn’t feel welcome in this room, and felt his breath leave his lungs as he realised that the team had already run downstairs to discover the source of the scream. Bilbo had never felt so startlingly alone, and with each passing second he felt himself start to panic. Out of nowhere, a deep, rushing sound echoed throughout the room. It sounded like someone was breathing, in and out, in and out. It came closer and closer until it was right beside Bilbo’s ear and he couldn’t pull away. The grip on his arms became bruising and he couldn’t help but squeeze his eyes shut because there was something there-

And suddenly, it pushed him.

Bilbo hit the ground without any warning, and a pained cry left his lips. He felt hands on his arms, holding him down, and a cold feeling began to spread across his stomach. He couldn’t move, couldn’t thrash, couldn’t scream, not even when he struggled and whined.

“Bilbo!”

Warm hands grabbed at him, pulled him upright. They broke the hold on him, and the stinging coldness on his arms began to fade. Thranduil’s worried face swam into view and suddenly Bilbo could breathe again. He inhaled deeply, eyes focusing on Thranduil’s face, and felt his expression crack. He wasn’t going to cry, but he was close enough to it that he started to tremble. He didn’t make a noise when Thranduil drew him into a comforting hug, and instead focused on his breathing, taking in the faint scent of Thranduil’s cologne and the warmth that was finally starting to seep back into the room. He tried not to think about how much Thranduil’s embrace reminded him of a parent’s because he didn’t know if he was close enough to Thranduil to think so selfishly.

“I’ll go work on that charm right now, alright?” Thranduil murmured. “I won’t have you being attacked like this right under my nose. It’s not right.”
Bilbo stood with Thranduil’s help and stumbled his way from the room. As soon as he crossed out of the doorway a relieved feeling overwhelmed him, like the air had returned to normal. It was completely unnerving, and he added Eru’s bedroom as a place he didn’t want to ever go to. He glanced back at it, just once, to take in the strange door with its misplaced antique knocker and the room’s darkened interior before jerking his head away.

The research team regrouped in the office. Thorin pulled Bilbo aside for a moment, just to make sure he was okay, before they began to review the footage that had captured the morning’s events. Bilbo made sure to sit close by Thorin, and refused to meet anyone’s eyes when they glanced over at him. He listened as Carc and Bard went over the footage, and only looked up when the initial temperature drop that had lured them from the room came onto the screen.

“The temperature dropped seven degrees within thirty seconds, and had dropped a further two by the time we made it to the room.” Bard said as he glanced over the readings. “Then Eru screamed…”

“Eru did?” Bilbo murmured, looking up at Thorin nervously. “Is he alright?”

Thorin nodded. “Yes, he’s fine. Just shaken. He was standing in front of the basement door, of which was open. It had been locked – Irmo still has the key on him – so I assume it was opened by paranormal means. He said that a ‘scary man’ was in the house again.”

“A-again?”

“Irmo mentioned that he’d been having nightmares, so I assume it was about this man.” Thorin explained. “Eru said that the man wanted something.”

Bilbo shivered. “There was someone in his room, just before.” Bilbo said. “I couldn’t move.”

Thorin frowned, and glanced over at Carc. His assistant was bringing up the camera feed in Eru’s room from a few minutes ago, and sure enough Bilbo was standing there, stiff as a board. Bilbo watched the screen anxiously, and after a moment something appeared. The screen turned into static for a moment as though something had cumbersomely shifted the camera, but the feed remained steady, and a dark shape appeared behind Bilbo. It had no distinct shape but seemed tall and hunched, and Bilbo couldn’t help but cover his ears as he felt the lingering feeling of someone breathing on them.

Carc leaned closer to the screen, frowning. He leaned back after a moment, and turned to face Bilbo. “Your arms.” He said.

Bilbo startled, and glanced at Thorin, who had started to develop a worried crease in his brow.

“His arms?” Bard murmured to himself, peering closer at the screen. After a few seconds he leaned back too. “Would you be able to take your sweater off, Bilbo? I want to see your upper arms.”

Bilbo shrunk away from the question, but did as asked. As conservatively as he could he pulled his sweater off over his head, thankful he’d worn a shirt beneath it, and folded the garment across his lap. He rolled up one of his shirt sleeves, and what he found made his head spin. His arm was completely covered in deep bruises that were clearly finger shaped, and he couldn’t help but feel the tight grip that the ghost had had on him again. Frazzled, he checked his other arm and found similar dark bruising.

“Calm down, Bilbo.” Thorin reminded him gently, quiet enough for only them to hear. He took Bilbo’s arm in his hands and surveyed the bruise with a hard look in his eyes. “These bruises will be here for a while, it seems…” In a way, Thorin looked angry. Bilbo feared that Thorin’s anger was
aimed towards him, for getting himself into the situation he was in.

“Alright, this is finished.” Thranduil said, holding up the charm. He stood and took a seat beside Bilbo, and coaxed Bilbo into pulling down his sleeves so that he could put his sweater back on. “Make sure to keep it with you, alright?”

Bilbo nodded, and took the charm. “Thank you.” He said quietly.

Thranduil ruffled his hair. “Nonsense.” He said. “It’s the least I can do.”

“Have you found anything on the house, yet?” Thorin asked.

“Not much.” Bard replied. “We found the construction date of the house and a handful of its tenants, but none are noteworthy. We’re having trouble finding an exact timeline of residents here, but there are a few death certificates we uncovered that list this house as the place of death.”

“The people that died here were all women.” Thranduil said as he handed a stack of files over to Thorin. “All young, late teens to mid-twenties. Aside from age, however, there isn’t much that discriminates them from one another.”

“All their deaths are primarily clustered within approximately forty years.” Thorin murmured. “Who owned the house at that time?”

Bard shook his head. “We’re still trying to determine who it was.”

“There are deaths after those decades, too.” Thranduil pointed out. “But none are subsequent, and they don’t overlap one another. They’re much sparser.”

“Find out who owned the house at the time, and if there are any other deaths related to this house.” Thorin said.

With everything that had happened, Bilbo knew there were more deaths here than they had already accounted for. He still felt chilled, and hoped that they’d solve this case soon. He didn’t want to remain in this house for much longer.

During the evening, once everyone had retired to their rooms, Bilbo and Thorin stayed up to go over the day’s recordings. Nothing had particularly happened after the morning’s events, but the tense feeling in the house remained, and Bilbo made sure to stay firmly beside either Thorin or Thranduil at all times. He felt a little safer in the closed room with Thorin, and he had both the charm Thorin had given him and the one Thranduil had written in his pocket, too.

As Bilbo was half-heartedly skimming through the information they’d gathered, he noticed something. All of the death records they had for the women who had died here – only seven, but seven was still quite a worrying number – had been signed off by the same doctor. He pointed it to Thorin, who made sure to note it. He pointed it to Thorin, who made sure to note it. He’d have to look further into that doctor, tomorrow, or ask Carc to.

Eventually they packed away the files, turned off the lights and crawled into bed. Bilbo couldn’t help but worry about the events of the day, and found it difficult to settle his mind. Tentatively, he called out for Thorin.

“Mmm?” Thorin murmured.
“T-today,” Bilbo started nervously, “Were you mad at me?”

Thorin rolled over, looking surprised at the question. “Mad at you? I wasn’t.”

Bilbo huffed out an exhale. “Alright…”

“I wasn’t mad, Bilbo.” Thorin insisted. “Did I look mad?”

Bilbo, feeling oddly flushed, pulled the covers up more. “A little.”

Thorin sighed. “I apologise.” He murmured. “I was frustrated with myself, not with you, not at all. I didn’t meant to upset you.”

“You didn’t!” Bilbo said, eyes wide. “I mean, it wasn’t that, I just…” He’d never had friends before. What if he upset Thorin? He knew that Thorin wasn’t like Legolas, or even like Thranduil. Legolas could see right through Bilbo’s insecurities, knew how to disregard them, and Thranduil was old enough to have developed a sensitivity towards those who had similar personalities to Bilbo’s. Thorin, however, still felt like an enigma. Bilbo didn’t treat him like he treated Legolas or Thranduil, or even Milo and Hamfast. Thorin was different, and he didn’t know why, but the thought of angering him or upsetting him made Bilbo feel bad.

“It’s alright.” Thorin said. In the dark, his voice sounded much less strict then it usually did, like he was more relaxed, and a little friendlier. “How about we try and get some rest?”

“I…” Bilbo frowned, and pulled the covers just a little tighter over himself. “What if I have one of those dreams again?”

Thorin watched him. His eyes were bright and blue. “Are you frightened?”

The words got stuck in Bilbo’s throat, so he nodded his head a little instead. The sheets rustled in response, so even if Thorin couldn’t quite see him well he could hear it.

“You’ll be alright.” Thorin said. “You have the charms, yes?”

Again, Bilbo nodded. The paper charm from Thranduil was tucked under his pillow, and when comfortable Bilbo could have his hand pressed over it. Thorin’s charm, however, was tucked into the pocket of his pyjama shirt so that he could feel it against his skin.

“I’m right here, if you need me.”

Somehow, that was more comforting than anything else. He hoped that he didn’t dream about anything, that he didn’t have a nightmare, but things were never that simple.

As soon as he closed his eyes, he was plunged into darkness.
Egregious

Chapter Summary

Ice-cold fear and information uncovered.

Chapter Notes

Egregious - *outstandingly bad; shocking.*

He was surrounded by white orbs, when his eyes fluttered open. He felt suspended, or perhaps disconnected, from the real world. He tried to remember but found himself unable to recall what it was that was “real” in the first place, and thinking of it more only began to hurt his head. Instead he focused his eyes on the orbs, on the way they drifted through the air as though guided by a gentle breeze that he couldn’t quite feel. They were illuminated, and soft around the edges. One floated past his face, and emanating from it he felt something warm and unmistakably childlike.

He wanted to do nothing more than hold them.

So he drew one closer. He felt weightless in this space, like there was no air, no water, no sunshine. He cupped his palms around the closest orb, watched it, drew it closer. Its warmth saturated his palms and bounced across his cheeks, and for a moment he heard the echoing sound of a child’s pure laughter drip through his mind like honey. He was filled with a strange gentleness as he watched the orb hover just about his fingers, like he’d found something that was so pure and untouched that all the anger that lingered in his heart was slowly being consumed.

There were so many of them. He glanced around, trying to count, but it was difficult with them moving and with such a hazy mind. Every time he got into the thirties he miscounted and would try to start again, but there were simply too many. He instead moved his eyes beyond them, to find the place he happened to be at. It looked familiar, but only faintly. He was in a room, but the walls, the floors and ceiling were all transparent. What only remained were faint impressions of the structure of the building, as though someone had forgotten to put all the colour back into place, and instead only a shadowy blackness remained. He tried to recall exactly where he’d seen this home before, and only after a moment did he realise he was in Eru’s home. From where he was, he could see the entire house, through all the walls and the ceilings and the floors.

Unbidden, his eyes drifted down to the basement. He could see the impression of the stairs, and where the door was. Beneath the transparent floor he saw that the basement was the darkest place in the entire house, and most of the orbs were condensed there. They were so thick that he didn’t even begin to try and count them, and instead only watched as they began to drift from the room, falling through the walls and up through the floor to spread and drift aimlessly. More took their place soon enough, like a cycle they couldn’t escape, and he anxiously held the one in his hands closer. He started wondering what they were, and why they were here. He didn’t want them to linger in a place as dark as this, not when he felt like there was somewhere better for them.

He pulled the orb to his chest, and closed his eyes.
When his opened his eyes once more, the orbs had disappeared, and his hands were cold. He was in a dark place, with his feet firmly on the ground. A chill ran down his spine as though someone had dragged their cold nails down his back, and he felt himself freeze. A coldness overcame his arms, just like it had before, and he tried to scream but no sound came from his mouth.

Suddenly, he was being walked forwards. He tried to stop but his body wouldn’t cooperate. He felt heavy, like something was weighing him down, and he was extremely nauseous. One wrong step and he would surely pass out. He tried to struggle, but the moment his head turned he felt his blood run cold. There’s a shadowy figure, tall and willowy and hunched, with bone like fingers that gripped his arms to steer him towards the staircase that led to the second level. Bilbo didn’t want to go, tried to shake his head and pull away or do anything to free himself, but he couldn’t move, had no control over his body. He felt his heart starting to hammer against his chest harder and harder with every step up the staircase, but he couldn’t do anything about it.

Eru’s bedroom door was shut. The knocker looked clean, newer, as though it had only been in place for a few years rather than several decades. Bilbo’s stomach churned at the sight of the room and his entire body froze up, but he couldn’t stop walking, not even when he tried to dig his heels into the floor. The shadowy figure let go of one of his arms to press uncomfortably over him, and a moment later the door swung open. The spindly hand withdrew from the doorknob and returned to his arm, digging into his skin, and then he was pushed inside.

The room was startlingly different. The windows were covered by black curtains, and the wallpaper was simple and dark. There was no child’s bed, no furniture, no paintings hanging on the wall. Instead there was a single surgical table in the centre of the room. A huge, glaring light hung above it, and it was surrounded by a portable tray that was covered in tarnished, glinting equipment. Bilbo felt bile rise in his throat.

There was blood on the table, on the floor, and on the equipment, too. The entire room reeked of copper and bitterness.

“No,” Bilbo said, but no sound came out, “No, no!”

He shut his eyes, and the room shifted. He opened them to a view of the ceiling, and to a sudden looseness in his limbs. He tried to sit up, but found that he’d been strapped down to the table at the neck, wrists and ankles. He struggled and thrashed, but the shadowy figure was there, pinning him down. A needle flashed under the round light, and it was hastily pressed into his arm. A sick coldness ran through his veins and muddled his mind, and he let out pitiful whimpers that he wasn’t sure were audible.

The figure now wore a facemask, but dark eyes that were inhumanely wide and bulging still stared at him. Those sharp fingers ran down his arm and to his stomach, where he prodded with a strange, obsessive fascination. Bilbo was only dressed in a thin gown, one that looked like it might come from a hospital, but there was a panel missing from the stomach, revealing his bellybutton and the slight pudginess of his hips. Somehow it didn’t quite look like his own stomach, but he couldn’t comprehend that. No, his mind had started to turn hazy with pain, and his head lolled back as he felt saliva collect in his mouth. What had he been injected with?

Bilbo glanced up again, trying to lift his head, and saw that the shadowy figure had reached for the metal tray and picked up a utensil. A scalpel with a somewhat rusted blade – rusted by blood – gleamed in the light. There was blood on the handle from where it had lay pooled on the tray, and it dripped down the man’s wrist, but he didn’t even notice. The man’s breathing had turned heavy like he was enjoying this, heavy and rough and terrifying, and then he lowered the blade.
“Stop!” Bilbo screamed. “Stop, please! I don’t want to do this anymore!”

The breathing echoed in his ear, hot and damp, and he felt the ice-like press of the blade against his skin. He thrashed and tossed his head to the side, trying to break the bonds, but then the man’s hand slammed down against his face. Bilbo’s whine was muffled against his dirty palm and he felt himself bite his lip hard enough to draw blood at the impact, but he couldn’t focus on that, couldn’t focus on anything because-

Because the blade had been plunged into his stomach.

Bilbo screamed. He knew he was screaming, could hear the noise bouncing around in his head, but he couldn’t stop it. Hands grabbed at his arms, but not harshly, and eventually he heard someone calling his name, someone who was real and solid and right next to him.

“Bilbo!” Thorin shouted, reaching up a hand to touch Bilbo’s face. “Bilbo, wake up!”

A choked sob left Bilbo’s lips. He gasped in sharp breathes, clawing at his chest as his lungs burned for air, but Thorin gripped his hands tightly, pulled them away. Bilbo felt hot tears pool in his eyes and spill down his cheeks. He squeezed his eyes shut to block out the way Thorin looked at him like he was scared for Bilbo, and instead threw his arms around Thorin’s neck. He knew he’d get tears all over Thorin’s shoulder but he didn’t care. He couldn’t stop shaking, and felt like he was going to throw up, like someone had torn up his stomach and left it in tatters.

Thorin seemed surprised for a moment, but he quickly held Bilbo tightly. His arms were thicker than Bilbo expected them to be, but with all that heavy lifting he did on each case it felt expected. Bilbo could feel Thorin’s hand pressed openly against the back of his shoulder, and it left a warm impression on his skin. He couldn’t stop crying, not even when Thranduil burst into the room and threw on the light, followed by Bard and Carc. Bilbo couldn’t quite make out the words Thranduil said, but he felt Thranduil’s reassuring hands on his shoulder, then in his hair as he took a heavy seat on Bilbo’s bed. His presence was comforting, but all Bilbo wanted to do was cry.

And so he did.

He didn’t get much sleep that night. He couldn’t stop trembling, not even when Thorin comforted him for hours throughout the remainder of the early morning. He slept in Thorin’s bed because his own felt tainted, and Thranduil moved into the room after putting up at least a dozen more protective charms in both the bedrooms and the hallway. Even Bard performed warding spells around the rooms, just to be sure, and yet Bilbo felt no more safe than he had before. He slept cradled in Thorin’s arms but it was fitful at best and the circles beneath his eyes only deepened.

No one asked Bilbo what he’d dreamt about until mid-morning, after he’d been consoled with a sugary cup of tea and pain tablets for his growing headache. Thranduil had made him a light breakfast at some point but Bilbo couldn’t stomach much of it.

“There were these… Orbs.” He started. Thranduil took his teacup from him when his hands started to shake, and instead Thorin gripped both of them in one of his own. “They were everywhere, in every corner of the house.”

“What do you remember about them?” Thranduil asked. His voice was gentle, and soothed Bilbo.

“They were warm.” Bilbo whispered. “They shouldn’t be here.”

“Could they be spirits?” Bard wondered. “Many ghosts appear as orbs in photographs.”
“I believe they probably were.” Thranduil nodded in agreement. “Do you remember how many there were, Bilbo?”

“Too… Too many to count.” He lowered his head. “There were at least fifty of them, probably more. A lot were in the basement, and more just kept coming…”

“What happened next?” Thranduil asked.

“The dream changed.” Bilbo said. He clenched his fists tighter to try and stop them from shaking, but it was futile. “This- this m-man appeared like before, and he- he took me upstairs, to Eru’s room, and-”

“It’s alright, Bilbo.” Thorin murmured quietly. “Take your time.”

Bilbo swallowed heavily. “There was a surgical table, in the room.” He whispered. “And blood everywhere. He- He strapped me to the table, and I couldn’t move, I really couldn’t. I tried- tried to scream, but there was no sound, and he was breathing so heavily.” He sucked in a deep breath, and let it out slowly. “He had all this equipment, a-and a needle, and he… He…”

Thorin rubbed his hands soothingly. “I understand.” He said. His voice was tense and his jaw was clenched, but the gentleness of his hands told Bilbo that Thorin’s anger wasn’t directed at him.

“He had this… This scalpel, or b-blade.” Bilbo said. “I was wearing a gown or something, like people wear in the hospital, and my- my stomach was exposed, and…” His face twisted and he felt his throat get tight. His stomach churned uncomfortably just at the memory of it, and he couldn’t help but hunch over his and Thorin’s hands to quell his nausea. It didn’t help much.

“I’m so sorry, Bilbo.” Thranduil whispered. “You should have never been subjected to something like that.”

Bilbo didn’t reply. He clutched Thorin’s hand tighter, and made sure to focus on his breathing. He didn’t want to pass out because that meant he might have another dream, and he didn’t want that. They had a lot to get through still, and he wanted the case done as soon as possible so that he could leave this house. He didn’t want to be here anymore.

The day was spent researching the house more thoroughly. Carc had called in some favours and by lunch time they were being faxed over important records that someone had dug out of locked archives for them. Bilbo hadn’t of thought Carc had connections like that, but he didn’t really know much about the man, did he? He wasn’t in the mood to find out, either. Rather, he spent the entire day glued to Thorin’s side, suspiciously eyeing every dark corner and flinching at every loud noise that reached his ears. Thorin didn’t seem to particularly mind, and almost always had a comforting hand pressed to the small of Bilbo’s back.

“The person who owned the house at the time of all those deaths was a woman named Rhoslyn Beren. She seemed like a fairly respectable woman – it was unusual for women to own houses themselves at that time, but her family was somewhat wealthy. She doesn’t seem to have any particular significance, but the person she quickly signed the house over to does.” Thranduil said after he’d finished reviewing the paperwork they’d been sent.

“Who did she sign the house over to?” Bard asked.

“A man named Doctor Gorlim.” Thranduil said. “He seemed to have been in love with her, though they didn’t marry. He was older than her by eight years, so I doubt she had any interest in him. It’s
unknown why she signed over the house, but…” He paused, and pulled out more paperwork, before sliding a photo across the table. “This is them, apparently.”

The picture was old, and had faded significantly. It was a picture of the house, though it looked much newer, and there weren’t any additional extensions like the porch and front fence. A man and woman stood in front of the house with a respectable distance between them. The woman’s stomach was rounded.

“Was Beren pregnant?” Bard asked.

“I thought so.” Thranduil said. “But there are no birth records regarding it.”

“Did she miscarry?”

“There are no death records, either.”

Bilbo dug his fingers into Thorin’s arms. He couldn’t take his eyes off the doctor because he was so familiar that it terrified him.

“Bilbo?” Thorin murmured. He watched Bilbo’s face for a moment, before turning to the table to cover the photograph with another file. “You’re alright.” He comforted quietly. “That’s him?”

He could only nod in reply.

“This Doctor has a strange reputation about him.” Thranduil said. “He was apparently certified as a paediatrician, but he wasn’t a practitioner with a business, nor was he private.”

“What did he do, then?” Bard asked. “If he didn’t work at a centre or as his own business, why did he become certified in the first place?”

Thranduil shook his head. “It’s unclear.” He said. “But that’s not why his reputation is strange.”

“Then why?”

“There are rumours that he did certain operations illegally, but he was only trained as a paediatrician, so it must have something to do with children or childhood diseases, mustn’t it?”

A dawning sensation began to weigh on Bilbo’s shoulders. He fished out the photograph again, and looked at it closer. Rhoslyn was certainly pregnant, though it was like she had tried to hide it. “Was she married?” He asked quietly.

“No.” Thranduil answered. “Why?”

“If… If she wasn’t married, then she couldn’t keep the baby, right?”

Thranduil’s face went blank for a moment. He took the photograph from Bilbo and observed it carefully. “She couldn’t.” He said. “It wasn’t socially acceptable. She would have been punished.”

Bilbo whimpered, and pressed a self-conscious hand against his stomach where the iciness of a blade still tingled against his skin. Thorin pulled him closer, his hand warm on the back of Bilbo’s neck, and didn’t say a word when Bilbo started to tremble with fright again.

“Then…” Bard began uncomfortably.

Thranduil sighed. “Then Doctor Gorlim aborted the baby.”
“I found another one.”

Bilbo turned his face further into the back of the couch as though he could block out the noise of the room. He laid still, and tried not to let anything he’d learned that day affect his heart. After the team had discovered Doctor Gorlim’s name it then became much easier to find information on his practice. He was indeed a black market doctor, for a lack of a better term. He performed abortions on all those who came to him – and all those that didn’t. In one entry from a woman’s diary they found she explained that she’d wished to keep her child despite the social ramifications such actions would have, but somehow Gorlim had convinced her not to, and just like that her child was gone.

There were so many similar incidents that it was astounding no one had ever caught Gorlim. He’d been trained as a paediatrician, certainly, but not as a surgeon. Those woman easily contracted infections and could have had haemorrhages, which many undoubtedly did, and he treated it as though it were all just a game to play. The death certificates they found relating to this house were deaths all caused from surgical complications and Bilbo had no doubt that it was Gorlim’s fault. He killed women and children alike as if it were nothing to him, and he still remained here, doing the same thing.

“I’ve got another.” Thranduil sighed, aggravated, as he tossed a stack of files onto the table. “How many children did he abort? This seems like an impossible number.”

“Thirty-seven, so far.” Bard murmured. “And those are only the ones with records that reflect it.”

“Thirty-eight including Beren’s child.” Thranduil took a seat on the armchair beside Bilbo, and absently pulled a blanket higher across Bilbo’s shoulders. “It must be him that’s haunting here.”

“Him and all the spirits of those who died here.” Bard agreed. “Is it possible to exorcise something that has become so twisted and attached to this house? I have no doubt he’s still feeding on the spirits here. Can he even be considered a ghost anymore?”

“I wouldn’t say so.” Thorin answered as he entered the room carrying a tray of balanced teacups. Carc wondered in behind him with a plate full of sandwiches which he set on the edge of the table before returning to his seat.

“What is he, then?” Bard asked.
“Ever heard of a wraith?” Thorin asked.

“Is that not just an interchangeable name for a ghost or spirit?” Bard questioned, frowning. “Like how phantom and apparition are used to mean the same thing as ‘ghost’.” Thorin nodded. He gently moved Bilbo’s legs further towards the back of the lounge before taking a seat on the edge. “Yes, but in recent decades it’s come to be used not only as an interchangeable way of describing ghosts but also as a way of distinguishing spirits that remain here by means of something darker or more violent than a grudge or an unfulfilled wish.”

Bilbo turned his head to peer at Thorin inquisitively.

“Emerië, for example, was bound to the resort because she had a grudge against her employer.” Thorin explained. “Maki, on the other hand, was bound to the school yard because he wished for someone to understand him. Once their desires had been met, they were able to pass on without the need for the exorcism.”

“Then why is Gorlim here?” Bilbo asked quietly.

“It’s probably because he’s so obsessed with his job.” Thranduil concluded. “He’s too fouled to purify, I wouldn’t even begin to question whether that was possible… But an exorcism? I’m not sure if it would work.”

Thorin frowned. “Considering what he’s capable of, I can’t say for sure if there is a way to be rid of him.” He said. “He’s proven to be a very deep rooted spirit here, and I have no doubt that there’s been something much darker involved in this house over the years. This site is saturated in death.”

Bilbo shivered. He thought about Estë and what would have happened to her if she was pregnant when her family moved into this house. She seemed like quite a lovely woman, and to think of her being hurt or even killed in the same way Bilbo dreamed… It made him sick to think about. What sort of experience had all those women had, here in this house? What kind of blood-curdling fear was strong enough to render them vulnerable to Gorlim’s torture?

“If you can’t exorcise him, then what?” Bilbo asked, glancing up.

Thorin looked away from him, and frowned harder. “The only other option is to destroy the house.” He said. “Fire would be the best option.”

Bilbo flinched at the mention of the fire. “What about all the spirits here?”

“They would be destroyed, too.” Thorin sighed.

“But… But we have to help them.” Bilbo protested. “They’re trapped here.”

“If Gorlim can’t be exorcised, then there’s no way to help them.” Thranduil said carefully. “Even if we wanted to, Bilbo, we don’t know their names or their birth and death dates… It’s likely most weren’t even named…”

Bilbo turned his face away and curled up tighter under the blanket. His chest felt tight. He wanted to help all those spirits he’d seen in his dream. Didn’t they at least deserve peace? They hadn’t even had the chance to live, and yet they were trapped in a place that only those who had died could go. He just wanted to help them, but there wasn’t anything he could do. He wasn’t even able to protect himself, let alone try and protect someone else. He hadn’t felt this useless in a while.

Thranduil sighed, and reached across the lounge to gentle ruffle Bilbo’s hair. “Try and eat something, alright?” He said. “We’ll figure this out.”
That night, Bilbo went to bed before his companions. He held the blankets tightly around himself, and only truly fell asleep when he felt Thorin’s weight press against the mattress beside him. He’d never slept in the same bed as anyone else before, but the way Thorin’s body heat was constant and the way his breathing sounded up close was oddly reassuring. Regardless, the moment his mind descended into unconsciousness he began to dream.

When he opened his eyes, he was surrounded by the orbs once more. They glowed brightly, and drifted around on their imaginary breezes. He was in the house again, but it was exactly as he remembered. It was so realistic that he wondered for a moment whether he was dreaming or not, but there would be no other explanation for what he was seeing. When he glanced around, trying to take in the situation, he found that he was wearing his pyjamas, but the charms he’d been given were no longer in his pockets.

A figure appeared at the end of the hallway. Like the orbs it glowed with warmth, and for a moment Bilbo didn’t recognise who it was. Then, all of a sudden, the name came rushing back to him, and he murmured, “Frodo?” before he could stop himself.

Frodo’s eyes were so bright and blue. It was eerie, and sent chills down Bilbo’s spine. Just like from the fragments of memory he still sometimes recalled, Frodo wore a small, hardly noticeable smile that invited him to play. Frodo’s face didn’t seem like the type to often show such an expression, but when it did it was something to treasure, and he took a step forwards before he could help himself. Frodo was surrounded by the orbs, and as Bilbo watched him, riveted, one passed through him. He didn’t seem to notice, and instead only beckoned Bilbo closer.

In the darkness of the house Bilbo didn’t realise that Frodo was standing in front of the open basement door until he was beside him. He felt his heart start to beat erratically but Frodo’s expression hadn’t changed. He lifted a pale hand and pointed down the stairs. Unbidden, Bilbo’s eyes followed, and the view into the basement was illuminated. There was a figure down there with a horribly hunched back and too-wide eyes, and Bilbo knew that it was Doctor Gorlim. He had bloodstained hands and a mask pulled down under his chin. As Bilbo watched he crossed the room and wrenched open a heavy metal door to reveal a furnace.

“There’s a fire down there,” A voice in his head whispered. “Don’t go down there.”

Frodo watched him with fascinated eyes, and frightfully Bilbo turned to meet his gaze. “What happened in the basement?” He asked. His voice sounded warped, like the air in the hallway wasn’t quite breathable.

A rush of breath flew up from the basement. Bilbo let out a terrified sound and jerked in the direction of the door. Doctor Gorlim was watching him with those bloodshot eyes of his, and a wide grin full of teeth was stretching at his cracked lips. He dropped the tray of utensils he has been carrying to the sink in the basement. They clattered noisily, and splashed blood everywhere. Then, with a heavy purposefulness, Doctor Gorlim began to climb the stairs.

Bilbo’s throat tightened. He gripped the door and slammed it shut as hard as he could and without thinking he grabbed Frodo’s wrist. “We have to go.” He said, pulling Frodo along. The boy followed him easily, and soon enough Bilbo’s thoughts turned to Thorin. Thorin would be able to help, wouldn’t he? He wouldn’t let anything bad happen, right?

Panicked, Bilbo ran straight for the bedroom. The corridor seemed twice as long as it usually was but eventually the door came into view. He gripped the knob and threw the door open, ready to run inside, but the sight that greeted him stopped him in his tracks. It wasn’t the bedroom.
No, it was a corridor at his childhood home.

Bilbo’s breath got caught in his throat. Frodo made a move to enter, but Bilbo yanked him back. “No!” He gasped. “Not in there, don’t go there!” He quickly pulled the door shut, and glanced down the hallway. He could see the basement door, just faintly, and it was rattling. It filled him with fear, and he began to run down the hallway again, searching for another door. The next he found he knew to be the room Carc and Bard were sharing but when he pulled it open he was again confronted by a room from the manor in his memory. “No…” He whimpered, slamming the door shut with all his might.

The next door, and the next, and the next… They all led to that manor, no matter how far he ran or how many rooms he came across.

“Thorin!” He shouted, releasing Frodo’s wrist in favour of grasping fistfuls of his pyjama shirt over his chest. “Thorin, where are you? Please! Please…” He didn’t want to be here anymore. He was going to die.

Frodo places his hands on Bilbo’s back, and pushed him. Bilbo fell forwards through the open doorway, and let out a shocked sound as he hit the marble floor on the other side. He shook his head to clear his thoughts, but when he looked back up the doorway and any connection to Eru’s home had completely disappeared. He glanced around nervously, but he knew deep down that he was trapped at his childhood home again.

Slowly, he stood. The air was cold, and the floor felt too solid beneath his feet. His blinked his eyes several times, finding them watery, and looked straight ahead. The hallway was long and narrow, filled with archways and beautiful paintings that seemed too dusty and expensive, and as he looked harder, orbs started to appear. At first there was only one, and it drifted past his face, close enough to make him jump. But then another one appeared, and another, and another, until there were far too many for him to ever count. These ones didn’t fill him with warmth like the ones at Eru’s home did. No, these ones were cold, and they felt entirely hallow. He didn’t dare touch them.

As he began to walk, Frodo appeared. He held out a hand invitingly, but Bilbo didn’t take it. The sound of a piano began to reach his ears, and his eyes widened. He recognised the tune from his childhood, but it was being played maybe a beat too slow, as though it hadn’t been mastered. He didn’t want to see who was playing because he thought he might already know who it was, but Frodo had taken his hand without warning, and his feet were moving. Each step echoed in his head like the thick chime of a bell, and it made his heart thump painfully. He thought he might have been trembling, or crying, but he couldn’t tell. He didn’t want to remember this.

Frodo opened the room to a familiar room. Large windows let in the light of a bright moon of which illuminated a grand piano. It was the only thing in the room, aside from its seat and its player. A child sat before its keys, hands stretched up to play music. His hair was a dark honey colour, and curled like vivacious leaves under the heat of the sun. A breeze tousled his locks away from his face, revealing chubby cheeks and hooded eyes.

It was like looking in a mirror.

The child’s hands stilled. He turned around, lifting one leg to accommodate the wide seat, and his eyes found Bilbo. “Who are you?” He asked. His voice was high, and small. It sounded too sad to come from a child.

Bilbo couldn’t answer. He’d already forgotten who he was.

The child watched him for a moment, waiting an answer, before lowering his eyes. “I guess it
doesn’t matter.” He said quietly. “Mama wants me to forget, so… I won’t remember…” His words trailed off as though he’d forgotten what he was meant to say. Then, he lifted his hands, and began to play again. Over and over he played that sad melody. Even as the wind blew and leaves from the tree beside the open window began to flutter in he didn’t stop. Playing the piano would come to be the only thing he remembered.

“Stop.” Bilbo whispered, shaking. He shook off Frodo’s hand, but it was too easy, and when he looked to his side he found that Frodo had disappeared as though he’d never been there in the first place.

Still, as though his voice didn’t reach around the room, the child continued to play. How many nights had that melody haunted Bilbo’s dreams? How many times had it burst into his head when he thought he’d finally let it fade into the nothingness at the edge of his mind? How many times had he burned with a tired, simmering frustration at his own inadequacy?

When had he started to hate himself so much?

“Stop…!” He said, louder. He pressed forwards, but it was like something was holding him back. Would he always go on in life, just so he could re-forget everything that was important? He struggled and struggled, feeling something burn at the back of his eyes. “Stop…!”

The music continued. Over and over it echoed in Bilbo’s head, as though it was the only thing left that mattered. He tried not to get lost in it, but it was so hard, and he wanted to give in. He had something important to return to, didn’t he? He had memories to remember, and memories to make, didn’t he? He had someone to return to, right?

So why couldn’t he remember their name anymore?

Desperately, he lunged forwards, and wrapped his arms around the child. Everything seemed to shatter when Bilbo’s arms passed right through him, as though he’d become a ghost. In anguish, he let himself scream.

“Stop it!”
A mistaken reality and an unpleasant conclusion.

Enmity - *a state or feeling of active opposition or hostility.*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A hand smacked across his face. The sound reverberated – he could feel it in his teeth, and the pain was like a cold splash of water. He blinked several times, feeling his eyes burn, and turned his gaze back to the person who stood in front of him.

Thorin gripped his shoulders tightly, face flushed with concern. One of his hands was still raised. “Bilbo?”

His head was pounding and his cheek was stinging and his heart had never beat so fast, but Bilbo was relieved. He could feel the pain in his cheek properly, could still hear the ringing in his ears from when Thorin’s hand had collided with his skin. He felt awake, could feel oxygen moving into his lungs with each quite inhale. When he looked around he almost expected to find himself in the bed they shared, and yet he came face-to-face with the basement door. A chill crept down his spine because he suddenly couldn’t tell what part of that dream had actually been a dream. More than that, however, he was afraid of what parts of it had been real.

“Bilbo,” Thorin repeated, lifting a hand to touch Bilbo’s cheek gently, “Are you alright?”

Bilbo felt his face twist, and he shook his head. “W-what happened?” He rasped. His throat ached and he felt tiredness in every limb, like he’d been running for hours.

“You were screaming.” Thorin said. His grip on Bilbo’s shoulder just got a little bit tighter. “You disappeared from the bed while we were sleeping, and you came out here.”

“Gorlim… Gorlim was-”

“It doesn’t matter.” Thorin said firmly. “What matters is that you’re safe. Your charm must have fallen out of your pocket.” He reached into his own pocket and pulled out the omamori, “Here, make sure to hold onto it tightly for tonight, alright?”

Bilbo took the charm with trembling fingers. He swayed on his feet a little, feeling overwhelmed, but Thorin was quick to catch him, to hold him upright. “I didn’t just dream of Gorlim.” He whispered, before he thought about it rationally. “I dreamt of something scarier.”

Thorin tensed. Bilbo could feel the muscles of his side stiffening from where he was leaned against them, but still Thorin’s grip on him didn’t turn any less gentle. “What did you dream of?” Thorin
asked quietly. His eyes were sharp and intense, and once again Bilbo found himself surprised at just how blue they were. How could anyone have eyes that were that colour? That were so bright?

He turned his head away. “I...” He swallowed heavily, and his voice became nothing more than a whisper. “I dreamt of someone with your eyes.”

“We can’t keep going on like this.” Thranduil hissed. “Not only isn’t it fair, but it isn’t safe! What are we to do if he gets seriously hurt?”

Thorin let out a deep sound. He sounded irritated. “I understand that. We must make a decision.”

“There’s no way to exorcise Gorlim.” Thranduil said. “He’s too deep rooted in this house, too twisted. He’s no longer a ghost we can hunt.”

“We can’t just make the Lórien’s completely homeless.” Bard argued. “They’re good people, they deserve better! Isn’t there anything we can do?”

“Do you have any ideas?” Thranduil growled. “Have you ever hunted anything that wasn’t a ghost, Bard?”

Bard didn’t reply.

“That’s what I thought.” Thranduil said.

The room was oddly silent for a moment. Bilbo remained under the covers of the bed, and feigned sleep. He felt like he hadn’t slept for long, even though he’d rested all throughout the early morning. He could feel Thorin’s hand moving through his hair, and it left him feeling warm. Warmer than he would have been otherwise, in any case.

“There is no way to cleanse Gorlim from this house.” Thorin said. “Let the Lórien’s make their decision.”

“You’re not giving them much of a decision.” Bard snapped.

Thorin’s hand stilled in his hair for a moment. “Don’t raise your voice.” He said. His tone held no room for arguments, more so than Bilbo had ever heard. His fingers started to move through Bilbo’s hair again. “It’s not our place to do anything other than advise them, from this point on. There’s no point in arguing over something that’s impossible to change.”

“Then we’ll offer them what we’ve found, and let them make their decision.” Thranduil summarised. “Technically, the investigation is complete. The identity of the ghost has been uncovered, and we know what it is that’s been troubling them. If there’s nothing more we can do...”

Bard made an aggravated noise. “There must be something we can do for them!”

“Don’t you understand how dangerous this place is?” Thranduil argued. “It’s not safe for Bilbo to stay here. You would risk his health to help a family over something that isn’t fixable? This house isn’t worth it.”

Bard clenched his teeth. Bilbo could hear the click of his jaw. “I’ll tell them, then.” He muttered. “They deserve that, at least.”

Bilbo heard the door open, then shut. After that the room was quiet, and Bilbo let his eyes flutter
open. He was resting in the bed he shared with Thorin, but Thorin merely sat on its edge. Thranduil was standing in front of the bed, arms crossed. He had a deep frown on his face, but Bilbo couldn’t figure out exactly why. He knew Thranduil was frustrated with Bard, but he’d been frustrated with Thorin before and he’d never quite made that expression. Bilbo wasn’t exactly sure of Thranduil’s history with Bard, but he knew there must be something confrontational there. He didn’t want to pry, but he wouldn’t say he wasn’t curious, either. He liked Thranduil, so he didn’t want Thranduil to be upset.

Thranduil let out a sigh, and turned to face them. He caught sight of Bilbo, and moved to sit on the edge of the bed. “I’m sorry if we woke you.” He said.

Bilbo shook his head.

“How are you feeling?”

“Tired.” Bilbo answered. “How long was I sleeping for?”

“Only around four hours.” Thranduil sighed again. “We’re going to pack up the equipment today, but I don’t expect you to help. Would you like to have something to eat, then rest in the car?”

Bilbo nodded. “Alright…”

Breakfast was a quiet affair. Bilbo ate slowly, and spent a lot of time staring into space. He couldn’t stop thinking about all the spirits here that would never get the chance to move on, and of all the spirits that saturated his childhood home. Those orbs were spirits, were they not? Why would there be so many spirits in the home he grew up in? It didn’t make any sense. Why would he dream of such a place in these circumstances? Frodo’s appearance only complicated matters. He certainly set Bilbo on edge.

More than that, however, was the problem at hand. Bilbo thought about the basement, forced his mind to linger on it. It was a place he’d never been and yet he got such strong feelings about it… He didn’t ever want to think about that basement again, but he did. There was no doubt in his mind that dark things had happened down there, and he knew that Gorlim wasn’t the only problem. His influence on this place had undoubtedly driven others to perform dark things, and it only made the situation worse.

There was the matter of that furnace, too. For a while Bilbo didn’t know what its significance was, but all that talk about a fire from Eru and the spirits here made him understand. If Gorlim was stealing children, then he needed a way to make them disappear, didn’t he? The bodies of the women he killed, too. All the spirits congealing in the basement seemed to make more sense when he made that connection.

After breakfast, Bilbo bid his farewells to the family and made his way out to the van. He most likely looked tired enough to get away with it, and no one protested or asked him why he wasn’t helping. If he were being honest, staying in that house had drained him of all his energy. He feared sleep, but he craved rest. He wasn’t used to sleeping as little as he had throughout the week, and he knew it was having a bad effect on his body.

It was surprisingly comfortable in the van when one was so tired. He had a spare jacket stuffed under his head as a makeshift pillow and his legs were pulled up tightly to his chest so that they didn’t stick out and somehow he found himself comfortable enough to drift off. It wasn’t like he could sleep with the noise of the equipment being loaded into the back of the van, but somehow it was comforting
because he knew he would never be alone outside for too long. It was simple to fall into a state of drowsy relaxation in such a circumstance, which he did so easily.

At some point during the day Thorin wandered over to check on him. He crouched down beside the side of the car where Bilbo’s head was, and rested a hand in Bilbo’s hair. “How are you feeling, Bilbo?”

Bilbo made a barely inaudible sound, and turned his eyes to glance up at Thorin. “Why do you always do that?” he asked, blinking owlishly. “Touch my hair…”

Thorin lifted his hand. “I apologise…”

“I… I don’t mind.” Bilbo murmured. He turned his head away, and let the tension drain from his shoulders as Thorin resumed petting his hair. “Feels good.”

Thorin chuckled quietly. He had a nice laugh, Bilbo thought. He would have liked to hear it more often, though he knew Thorin wasn’t the type to show such an emotion frequently. Still, he thought it was a pleasant sound. “You should try and sleep, if you’re tired.” Thorin said.

Bilbo nodded in agreement, though he didn’t think he could do anything more than doze. He knew that now he was out of the confines of the house it was unlikely Gorlim could reach his dreams, but he thought that Frodo and the other spirits might still be able to. He was sensitive to them, after all, and through them Gorlim had freely attacked him. As much as he liked the feeling he got from the pure spirits in the house, there was nothing he could do for them.

He wasn’t strong enough.

It was easier to rest after Thorin had visited him. He slept lightly, but it lessened the pain in his head, and for that he was thankful. Most of the equipment had been packed away when he’d came to, and he found that Bard was resting against the side of the car, looking pensive.

“Bard?” Bilbo asked tentatively.

Bard glanced down at him. “Feeling okay?”

Bilbo nodded. “How do you know Thranduil?” He asked. “I-If you don’t mind me asking…”

“It’s impossible not to pick up on the tension between us, huh?” Bard sighed. He folded his arms, and glanced back at the house. “I know him personally through Thorin, actually, but otherwise I’ve only ever seen him in the media. He’s a bit of a figurehead when it comes to this profession, so it’s unlikely you’ll ever come across a spiritualist who doesn’t know his name.”

A moment of silence stretched between them. Bilbo didn’t want to press the issue further, but he thought that Bard might have wanted to get it off his chest, so he waited for Bard to speak again.

“It’s not that I don’t value Thranduil’s talents.” He eventually said. “And I can bear with his attitude. It’s his parenting style I don’t agree with, that’s all.”

“Are you a parent?”

Bard nodded. “I have three children. Two girls and a boy.”

“I didn’t know…”

“It’s alright, I don’t speak of them often, not in an environment like this.” Bard said. “They’re lovely
kids, and Legolas is too, don’t get me wrong. But I wouldn’t dare to bring my children into this world, especially not when it’s a well-known fact that children are more sensitive to spiritual activity. I just can’t understand why Thranduil would willingly expose his own child to something like this, even if Legolas has a talent for it.”

Bilbo hummed thoughtfully. “I suppose I can understand that.” He said.


Bilbo blinked in surprise. “I- I guess not.” He said. He couldn’t quite remember how to smile in the first place. It was an expression that was entirely foreign to him. “Sorry.”

“It’s nothing to apologise over.” Bard waved a hand. “You don’t see Thorin smiling much, either. Try not to get too down, okay? When there isn’t a case bothering them, these people can be quite entertaining.”

Bilbo nodded, and muffled a yawn into his hand. He glanced back at the house, but couldn’t watch it for more than a moment. He would be glad to forget about a place as horrific as that.

Chapter End Notes

I had my first day of university today. My schedule is pretty bad and the hours are long, so please excuse any mistakes~ I'll fix them up tomorrow when I'm not so exhausted, ahh ^^"
With the distance it took to arrive at the Lórien’s house, Thorin decided it would be best to stay at a hotel overnight. It was mid-afternoon by the time they left the home, and it wasn’t wise to have Carc drive through the entire night, so Bilbo thought that staying in the hotel was a good decision. He liked the idea of sleeping in a bed more than sleeping, hunched over, in the van for another handful of hours. Thranduil didn’t seem to mind when Bilbo’s head fell to his shoulder, but Bilbo thought it was too forward of him, and eventually his neck started to ache, as well.

The hotel they stayed at was nice enough. Bilbo didn’t expect Thorin to take them somewhere that was dingy or located in a bad area; he didn’t seem the type to settle for something like that. They checked in for the night, and carried their bags up to the rooms. The hotel didn’t have many rooms available at that time, so in the end Bilbo and Thorin shared a bed again. Bilbo didn’t know what the big fuss about sharing beds was about. He didn’t think he was a particularly rough sleeper, and Thorin didn’t tend to become restless when asleep, either. He thought it was comforting to have someone else in the bed.

They had arrived at the hotel late enough that it wouldn’t be worth going down to the restaurant to see if they had any vacancies, so instead they decided just to get food from the 24-hour cafeteria. It certainly wouldn’t be the best, but it was better than nothing, wasn’t it? In the end Bilbo accompanied Thorin down to the cafeteria, just to stretch his legs before returning to sleep properly.

“How are you feeling?” Thorin asked.

“Alright.” Bilbo answered. He paused for a moment, before quietly adding, “Better than before.”

Thorin nodded. “I’m glad.” He said. “Are you hungry?”

“A little.” Bilbo said.

“I must apologise to you, Bilbo.” Thorin said quietly. “For placing you in danger, again.”

Bilbo startled at the apology, and turned to look up at Thorin. “It’s not your fault.” He said. “You couldn’t have known…”

Thorin glanced away. “Regardless, you could have been injured- were injured, and that blame falls on my shoulders.”

“Thorin…”
He shook his head. “No,” Thorin interrupted, “Let me speak. I am the one who hired you, am I not? I knew you had no way to defend yourself other than the charms I offered, and that you are exceptionally receptive to the spirits of children. I may not have known the state of the spirits at the house, but I should have pulled you out the moment you had that first dream. In fact, I should have realised you were vulnerable in regards to this case the moment you stepped out of the car. I overlooked that.”

Bilbo turned his head away, and frowned. He couldn’t exactly argue with Thorin’s reasoning, because it sounded quite rational, and like Thorin had thought about it for a long time. Bilbo hadn’t thought Thorin would think so deeply about something like that, but he had, and that was because of him. He didn’t want Thorin to feel bad in any way, but he wasn’t sure how to tell Thorin that. He wished he knew how.

“I’m sorry, Bilbo.” Thorin said.

Bilbo thought back to the house, and to the dreams he had. He thought about the basement, and about Eru’s room, and what had gone on in those rooms. He thought about the way they’d made him feel, and the terrible nightmares he’d undoubtedly have because of them. In a way, Thorin’s apology made him feel a little more reassured, like the weight of it all had been lessened. “You didn’t know what would happen.” Bilbo said quietly. “I don’t blame you for anything that happened at that house.”

Thorin sighed. “Still, I’m going to ask either Thranduil or Bard to teach you something you can defence yourself with should the need arise, if you want to continue working with me on these cases.”

Bilbo nodded his head. He still wanted to work with Thorin. He wanted to work with Thranduil and Legolas, and the others, too. He didn’t know if he particularly enjoyed the job, but it was something to do, was it not? He felt a little better with himself after each case, like he’d done something that was important. He liked spending time with Thorin. With Thranduil and Legolas, as well. He thought it might have been impossible to see them if they weren’t on a case together, and that saddened him. What connection did he have with them if he was not involved in the cases? He certainly enjoyed their company, and would miss them if he never got to see them again.

The only problem was that he couldn’t put a name to the feelings he felt regarding the people he’d met. He knew that he was an acquaintance of Carc, and perhaps a friend of Bard and Elrond. The others, though – they confused him. He felt that Legolas’s affection was greater than that of a friend, but not that of a lover. Bilbo had never thought about having a lover, though he knew it was a common enough thing for people his age. Who exactly was Legolas to him? He didn’t think he could answer that, and he found that it was much the same for Thranduil. He could understand that Thranduil’s presence soothed him, and that he enjoyed Thranduil’s company. Thranduil was a very responsible person, even if it didn’t seem so on the outside. He would have had to have been blind not to notice that Thranduil tended to come to his defence without being asked, though Bilbo didn’t know for what reason. He was a little envious of Legolas, in some ways, to have a father like Thranduil.

Thorin was the biggest mystery of them all. Bilbo had watched him interact with others, and knew how others treated Thorin, but he didn’t feel as though he fit into any of their archetypes. He couldn’t think of Thorin as just a colleague or acquaintance because that didn’t feel right. Most of the paranormal researchers treated Thorin like a boss and nothing more, though Bilbo knew that the more frequent of his employees – Thranduil and Legolas, mainly – most likely thought of Thorin as a friend, even if they’d never admit it out loud. Bilbo himself wasn’t sure what he thought of Thorin. He liked spending time with Thorin, of course, and when he thought about Thorin’s physical looks it
was easy to admit that Thorin was quite handsome, even with those eerie eyes of his. For what it was worth Thorin seemed to enjoy his company, as well. Bilbo thought that maybe some of Thorin’s touches were affectionate in nature – especially those in his hair or on the back of his neck – but he didn’t know exactly what affection was, and he couldn’t be sure if Thorin was offering it.

“What do you want to eat?” Thorin asked as they entered the cafeteria. There was a self-serve checkout and refrigerators of neatly packaged food.

Bilbo hummed thoughtfully, and peered at the refrigerators. There were displays of food behind moveable glass doors too, and he took a moment before deciding on chicken sandwiches and a bottle of juice. “Is this alright?” He asked.

Thorin glanced at him from where he was getting a tray of plain rice and vegetables for Carc. “Yes, that’s fine.” He said. “Could you get me the same?”

Bilbo nodded and did as asked. “Thranduil wanted this, right?” He asked, gesturing to a package of crisp, leafy greens and croutons. “It doesn’t look that tasty…”

“That’s what he asked for.” Thorin said, nodding. “He always eats like that.”

Bilbo made a noncommittal sound. He sometimes forgot that Thorin had known Thranduil for a long time, and likely was familiar with his eating habits. It was nice to think about, actually. “What did Bard ask for?” Bilbo questioned.

Thorin retrieved an appetizing pasta dish for Bard, and after paying they began the trek back to the room.

“I wonder what they did.” Bilbo murmured when the silence became too much. “The Lórien’s.”

“We did as much for them as we could.” Thorin said. “I’m sorry we couldn’t help the spirits of the children.”

Bilbo lowered his eyes. “There was nothing we could do, right?”

Thorin made a quiet sound of agreement. “I know it must be hard on you, considering the connection you have with them. But I don’t know how to satisfy them, not with Gorlim in the way.”

“I understand.” Bilbo said. “But it’s sad.”

Thorin nodded. “It is.”

Dinner was nice. Somehow, the convenience food seemed to match the air of the hotel, and Bilbo found it fitting. They all managed to eat in the same room, though Bilbo didn’t know how Thorin had convinced Carc to join them. Still, it was nice. He thought it might have been even better if Legolas were there because of his bright attitude, but Bilbo still enjoyed himself. Thranduil and Bard tended to bicker without quite noticing, and it was somehow enjoyable to listen to.

After dinner, Bilbo followed Thranduil outside to dispose of their rubbish. Thranduil looked like he was well rested, but he had a contemplative expression on his face. “Do you like Oakenshield?” Thranduil asked him, after a moment.

Bilbo looked up at him, confused. “How so?”
“Do you enjoy his company?”

Bilbo nodded.

“You seem quite comfortable around him.” Thranduil remarked. “It’s nice to see.”

Bilbo felt a little flushed at that. “I… I don’t understand…”

“Hmm?”

“About how I feel.” Bilbo clarified, fidgeting awkwardly. “I don’t understand.”

Thranduil chuckled. “Haven’t you ever had a crush on someone?”

“A- A crush?”

“As in a fondness.” Thranduil explained. “Affection.”

Bilbo’s cheeks burned. “I-I don’t know…”

Thranduil placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “It’s alright, Bilbo. You’ll figure it out.”

Bilbo didn’t think he would. He wasn’t capable of understand something like that, no matter how hard he thought about it. He didn’t think he’d ever be able to come to a decision without the right prompting, not on his own. “But… Isn’t it bad?”

“Bad?” Thranduil frowned. “Why would it be bad?”

Bilbo nervously wrung his fingers together, and fixed his eyes to the side. “Because I’m not… I’m not a girl…”

Sighing, Thranduil pulled him into a gentle hug. “You don’t have to be a girl to like boys, and nor does a boy have to like girls.” He said firmly. “Like who you want to like, alright? You like Thorin, don’t you?”

Bilbo shrugged helplessly. He wasn’t sure what he felt, couldn’t make sense of it. He’d never come across a situation like this, never had the need to assess himself and his actions. It made him very insecure, and almost reluctant to do or say anything that wasn’t business related. He was frustrated at his own inadequacy, but didn’t know how to improve.

“Why don’t you ask Thorin to escort you somewhere, and start talking? About things that aren’t to do with work.” Thranduil suggested. “Or to do something that other teenagers do? I don’t think he’d refuse you.”

“But isn’t it weird?” Bilbo asked quietly. He could feel a hot nervousness coiling in his stomach “He’s my employer.”

“Couldn’t hurt to ask.”

That night, before everyone departed for their own rooms, the late night news broadcast came on. In a small, idyllic town where nothing ever particularly happened, a fire caught. The entire house burnt to the ground, right down to every brick and every piece of furniture. The inferno blazed for hours, and was almost unmanageable. In the fire, a single child was injured, but he didn’t die.
Bilbo didn’t know what the cruellest part of it all was – whether it was Eru’s life-long injury or the fact that the death of hundreds of innocent, unborn children could be easily wiped away from the earth with nothing more than a match.
CASE SIX – THE TWO-DIMENSIONAL DREAM EATER

“You haven’t been in contact with him?”

“No. I called him once, but he didn’t answer.”

Thranduil felt a frown tug on his lips. “He hasn’t replied to Legolas in two days, and Legolas is getting worried.”

“He always replies!” Legolas said, leaning as close to the phone as he could without physically shouldering Thranduil aside. “Even if he’s tired.”

“How much does Legolas message Bilbo, anyway?” Oakenshield murmured despondently. It was more to himself than to Thranduil, so Thranduil didn’t reply and instead waited for him to speak again. “Perhaps he’s busy with school work?”

Thranduil glanced down at his child, and winced at Legolas’s petulant expression. “Bilbo does have to catch up when he misses days from being on cases.” Thranduil reminded Legolas gently. “He might just be tired from the Lórien case.”

“If that’s all you need…” Oakenshield started.

“Yes, that’s all.” Thranduil sighed. “Contact me when you have another case.”

“Can we go visit him?” Legolas asked the moment Thranduil lowered his phone from his ear. “Even if he’s tired he contacts me.”

“So you’ve said.” Thranduil sighed once more. “You shouldn’t bother him so much.”

Legolas pouted. “I’m not bothering him!” He argued. “Bilbo likes talking to me.”

Despite wanting to think Bilbo was simply tired, Thranduil found himself worrying a little, as well. He knew that Bilbo lived alone from what he’d learnt during the case at Bilbo’s school, and after a case like the Lórien’s he didn’t think it was wise for Bilbo to be alone, even more so when he went without contact with others. He could have been wrong about everything and Bilbo may just have been tired or preoccupied, but something deeply instinctual inside him told him that Bilbo was lonely and scared.
In many ways, Bilbo reminded Thranduil of Legolas. They were similar enough in age to offer such a comparison, and even if Bilbo carried himself much more maturely than Legolas they both had a clear, unmarked view of the world. He thought that they saw a lot of the things in the same way, and that they came to the same conclusions frequently. Thranduil knew that Legolas had a way of seeing straight through the façades of strangers, and he thought that Bilbo might have been able to do the same thing, to some extent. The only difference was that Legolas understood the actions of others as well as the impact it had on him personally, and Bilbo did not.

It was sad that Bilbo seemed so restricted by that inability to understand others actions, especially when they were directed at him personally. Thranduil thought to the way Oakenshield acted towards Bilbo, and even the way Legolas did, and he knew Bilbo couldn’t fully comprehend their intentions. Perhaps one day he might be able to, but he certainly didn’t now. It was why Legolas was so persistent with him – even Thranduil could see that Legolas was, in a way, forcing Bilbo to comply with his own whims, mostly because Legolas tended to be a little selfish like that. He thought it would benefit Bilbo in the long run, which was why he never forcefully interfered, but he wished Bilbo was a little more confident in himself.

“Maybe we should go see him.” Thranduil murmured to himself.

Legolas eyed him with interest, and after a moment Thranduil sighed and nodded. They went to gather their things, and Thranduil scrounged up the paperwork he had from the case at Bilbo’s school. He still had a file on Bilbo, though he hadn’t touched it since the case ended. He generally disposed of the paperwork after the case had ended for privacy reasons, but for some reason he’d kept the files from Maki’s case. Somehow he’d thought they might be useful one day, and he was glad he’d kept them.

Bilbo lived in a school-appointed housing facility. It was a small place, and somewhat difficult to find, but eventually Thranduil and Legolas came across his front door. Legolas, predictably, ran ahead to see if Bilbo was home, but when he found the door unlocked, he went confusingly still. He only glanced back at Thranduil once before quietly opening the door to peer inside. “Bilbo?”

When there came no response, Thranduil followed Legolas in. Bilbo didn’t seem the type to leave his home unlocked if he were not home, and Thranduil doubted there was any way he wouldn’t have heard Legolas calling for him.

“It’s kind of bare in here, isn’t it?” Legolas mumbled.

The house was quite bare, now that Thranduil looked properly. He hadn’t quite known what to expect, but he certainly had expected more. There was a potted plant by the front door and a neat line of shoes, but there were no pictures on the walls, and nothing to decorate the minimal pieces of furniture. It was almost as though no one lived in the home. Even Bilbo’s presence in the house was faint at best, and almost indistinguishable from the coldness that lingered in the corners of the rooms.

While Legolas was busy inspecting the living room and kitchen, Thranduil headed to the bedroom. He didn’t hear anything that would indicate someone was home, but he spotted Bilbo’s phone on the kitchen table. When he pushed the bedroom door open he was greeted by the sight of yellow bedsheets and wispy, white curtains that fluttered in a breeze he couldn’t quite feel. Sticking out from the wrong end of the bed sheets were tufts of light coloured hair that set his heart fluttering in an uncomfortable mix of anxiousness and relief.

“Bilbo.” He said quietly, crouching down beside the bed to reach out a hand. He shook Bilbo’s shoulder lightly, and tilted his head when Bilbo began to stir at his prompting. “Wake up, Bilbo.”

Doe like eyes blinked open, revealing a fuzzy expression and sleep-darkened irises. “Thranduil…?”
“Yes.” Thranduil said. He pushed the blanket away from Bilbo’s head, and tried to catch his sleepy eyes. “How long have you been sleeping?”

Bilbo made a small noise, and lifted his head upright. “I just went to get tea…”

“It’s stone-cold.” Legolas said as he walked in. “The teabag is still in, too.”

“Legolas? I was just… Messaging you…”

Legolas frowned, and shared a glance with Thranduil, who only sighed. “I think you’ve been asleep for a while, Bilbo.” He murmured softly. “Why don’t we go have some tea?”

Thranduil drained the last drops of tea from his cup as he watched Legolas and Bilbo chat on the balcony, though Legolas did almost if not all of the talking himself. Thranduil’s concern for Bilbo had only worsened as the evening went on, though he thought he could play off much of Bilbo’s strange behaviour to tiredness. Bilbo seemingly hadn’t been aware that he’d slept for two days without waking even once, and he was quite disorientated for a while after he woke. Food seemed to have helped some, even though it was nothing much; Thranduil couldn’t find anything worth cooking in Bilbo’s cupboards, so the meal he’d made had been quite basic.

As he washed up his teacup, Thranduil debated calling Oakenshield. He didn’t want to interfere with them too much, but sometimes people like Oakenshield needed a little… Push. He had no doubt that Oakenshield was worried about Bilbo, so in the end he rang.

“Did you find him?”

“Yes.” Thranduil said as he leaned against the counters. “He slept for two days.”

“Two entire days?”

“Mmm.” Thranduil hummed. “He didn’t realise. It feels unnatural, but the Lórien case took a lot out of him.”

Oakenshield didn’t answer. “I have another case.” He finally said.

“Oh? And are you hiring me?”

“You, Elrond and Bilbo.” Oakenshield said.

“Not Bard?”

“He’s busy.”

Thranduil made a noncommittal sound. “Is Legolas coming? He’s going to get jealous, you know.”

“Jealous?”

Thranduil didn’t think it was possible for Oakenshield to sound anymore perplexed or disgruntled. “Of course. He rather enjoys Bilbo’s attention, haven’t you noticed? I’m sure someone like you can figure even this sort of thing out for yourself.”

Again, Oakenshield didn’t reply. Then, he said, “Legolas can come, too. The extra hands will be useful.”
Thranduil tried not to chuckle, and after receiving the necessary information from Oakenshield, he went out to tell Legolas and Bilbo the news. He hoped the new case would treat them better than the last.

Bilbo hadn’t expected the location of their next case to be a school, but it was. Edain High School was a fairly large school, though basic in its foundations and smaller than Erebor Academy. It looked plain but somehow that was captivating, as though it had become a staple presence in the lives of those who lived in the area. Bilbo thought that the buildings must have been around for a long time, but he didn’t sense anything particularly troublesome from them, not like he expected to.

He wasn’t sure who their client was, but he believed it was the Principal. They were guided in by the Student Council President, a girl with a friendly face and long hair whose eyes lingered noticeably longer on both Legolas and Thorin. It was after school hours when they arrived, so they were easily able to transport their equipment inside without incident.

“I’ve already done the first stage interviews.” Thorin informed them. He rolled out a blueprint of the school, and started marking certain areas with a red marker. “Here is where we will set up cameras, including infrared devices and microphones. After that is done the files should be ready for review and the secondary interviews can be carried out. Make sure to set up the equipment out of the way of the students.”

Bilbo picked up the equipment he had been assigned, and glanced at Thorin. He hadn’t assigned pairs like he usually did, and hadn’t instructed Bilbo to follow him. Bilbo thought for a moment before lifting the equipment and edging his way to stand beside Thorin. “Do you want to come with me?” He asked quietly.

Thorin gave him a surprised look, but nodded with hesitation. “Alright.” He said. “Do you need help carrying that?”

“Ah…” Bilbo rearranged his grip on the equipment, and offered one of the cases to Thorin, who took it wordlessly. Bilbo left the room feeling oddly satisfied with himself, though he baulked when he realised he didn’t know what came next. He thought about conversations with Milo and Hamfast, but found them frustratingly difficult to recall.

“How are you?” Thorin asked him, before the silence could stretch on for too long.


Thorin hummed. “Thranduil told me you slept for two days.”

Bilbo turned his eyes to the side. “I guess I did…”

“Were you tired?”

He nodded.

“It’s alright.” Thorin said. “This case shouldn’t be so hard.”

Bilbo glanced back up. “The client is the Principal, right?”

Thorin nodded. “It seems as though there’s something paranormal meddling with the students. There’s been reports of students falling asleep at unexpected times for no apparent reason, and other cases where they say paper has been possessed.”
“Paper?”

Thorin nodded again. “Generally it’s only living things that get possessed, but it’s not uncommon for spiritual beings to have an influence on non-living objects. Typically its electrical devices that suffer the most, but objects that are important for religious or superstitious purposes are commonly linked to hauntings. Dolls and effigies, for example.”

Bilbo thought back to Elrond and the pretty dolls he worked with, before making a small noise of agreement.

“Paper, however, is quite the mystery.” Thorin continued. “Regarding the supernatural, paper is generally used as a medium, not an object. Paper charms like the ones Thranduil creates, for example. Other times paper is used to write curses or requests on, when other surfaces are unavailable or unusable.”

“Then isn’t it unlikely that it’s the paper being possessed?” Bilbo asked.

Thorin gave him an appreciative look. “I was thinking something like that, actually.” He said. “It seems more likely that it’s the person getting possessed and taking action on the paper, rather than the paper itself being possessed. The students who made the claims have to be interviewed before any of that can be determined, however.”

Bilbo nodded, and they lapsed into a comfortable silence. Thorin helped him set up the cameras and microphone in the first classroom on the first floor where there had been reports of strange activity. It was a comfortable companionship, Bilbo thought. He didn’t feel so pressed to make conversation now, though he wouldn’t be particularly opposed to it, either. He liked that Thorin was quiet.

Afterwards, when they were done, Thorin led Bilbo around the exterior of the school. It was nice to see the sun set from the sports field, and they even stopped by a vending machine that was located in a tucked away corridor by the volleyball gyms. Bilbo felt content as they walked back to the room they were staying in, and quietly watched the sky settle into a late afternoon orange as the sun began to dip beneath the horizon. For a brief moment, he wondered how Edain High School could possibly be troubled.

He didn’t have to wait long to find out.

It wasn’t unusual for their workspace to be covered in neatly placed stacks of paper. There were readings for the structure of the building, the area, and various other records of natural phenomenon that they used to remove natural interference from the list of causes that were likely behind paranormal activity. Bilbo had been sat at one of the desks facing the window, bathed in a warm orange glow as he read over the files guided by the last light of day. He hadn’t expected anything to happen as he turned over the pages as he read. The backs of the pages were blank. His hand slipped, but it wasn’t an out of place gesture, and the papers fell across the table. It wasn’t disruptive enough to bother anyone else in the room, so for the most part Bilbo didn’t think much of it. As he’d reached for the paper, however, something caught his eye.

Against the blank whiteness of the page, a face appeared. Its angle was high, and only the top of the person’s head and a skewed proportion of their facial features was present. They wore a wide grin, almost too wide, and suddenly their head jerked up. A shadowy arm thrust out from the paper, and a hand gripped Bilbo’s wrist even as he let out a started cry and jerked upright.

“Bilbo!” Thorin shouted, but Bilbo hardly heard him.

The girl in the paper looked at him, and her head twisted to the side, like she was tilting it. Her grin
grew bigger, and her eyes got wider. “Do you want to play a game?”
Thorin lunged forwards to grab Bilbo by the arm. He pulled back, ignoring Bilbo’s pained cry, and jerked the both of them away from the table as Thranduil immediately threw up a warding spell. The ghostly figure in the paper seemed to let out a grating, frustrated screech before completely disappearing, leaving nothing but a crumpled up piece of paper in its place.

“Are you alright?” Thorin demanded, his eyes hard as steel as they searched Bilbo’s face and figure fervently. “Your wrist…”

Bilbo glanced down at his hand. His skin was stinging with cold, and was blotched with quickly darkening spots of blue and purple. No wonder his wrist was aching. “What was that?” He asked, looking up at Thorin with wide eyes. “It hurts…”

Thorin rubbed his arm gently, soothing warmth back into his skin. “That appeared to be what’s been possessing the paper at this school.” He said with a grimace. “You still have my charm, do you not?”

Bilbo nodded. He could feel the weight of the charm in his pocket. Even after all this time he still couldn’t bring himself to give it back. Despite Thorin making no move to ask for it back – in fact, he insisted that Bilbo hold onto it – Bilbo still felt a little bad. Without it Thorin was more vulnerable, wasn’t he? Bilbo had never seen him defend himself like Thranduil and Bard did, and Thorin had made no inclination that he had any such skills. Bilbo didn’t want Thorin to get hurt because of him.

“Make sure to keep it with you.” Thorin murmured to him before turning to the group. “Just to be certain, I want you to place protection charms in the rooms where we rest, Thranduil.” He said. “Legolas, I want you to write protective charms for everyone, including yourself. If the spirit here is already showing itself I doubt it will wait long before reappearing.”

“Bilbo, come here.”

He started at the sound of his name, but didn’t hesitate to wander over to Elrond, who gestured for his arm. Bilbo offered it, and only winced a little as Elrond rubbed a bruise cream into his skin.

“This is quite a mighty bruise.” He said, as Bilbo took a seat beside him. “You tend to attract spirits, don’t you?”
“Usually only children…” Bilbo said uneasily.

“The spirit here is likely a child.” Elrond stated. “Considering this is a school, I find it unlikely any adults would linger here. Is it only children that you’re sensitive to?”

Bilbo nodded. “That’s what everyone says.”

“How peculiar.” Elrond remarked. “Perhaps you have an aura that’s interesting to children.”

“Aura?”

“Everyone has one.” Elrond explained. “Those with stronger auras generally attract ghosts and spirits more. There are many people who can read auras, and use them to tell fortunes and predict the future. Of course, not many people can do it accurately, but it’s an interesting concept, isn’t it?”

Bilbo nodded again. “Can you read them?”

A small, teasing smile came to Elrond’s face, and he only held a finger to his mouth in reply. Bilbo wanted to know more, feeling himself become curious, but his attention was quickly diverted to Legolas, who’d finished writing the protection charms and instead had been instructed to roll out the futons in the room they were staying in. Despite always remaining on location overnight, Bilbo hadn’t thought they’d stay at the school. It made sense to, but his mind hadn’t made the connection. They were in a wing of the school building that wasn’t frequented, and only extra-curricular classes were in session, so it wasn’t like there would be hundreds of students present.

“Bilbo, come help me!” Legolas demanded, giving him a wide-eyed, pleading look.

After offering Elrond an apologizing glance, Bilbo went to help his friend. Legolas grinned brightly when Bilbo crouched down beside him to help roll out the futon. “Like this?” He asked quietly.

Legolas nodded. “We can roll out our futons next to one another!” He declared. “It’ll be like a sleepover, isn’t that fun?”

Bilbo hummed, and slipped into a comfortable silence as Legolas began to chatter away. He’d noticed that Legolas liked to talk a lot, and he seemed glad to have someone that would listen. Every now and then Legolas would ask a question of him that required both an answer and knowledge of the conversation, of which Bilbo diligently paid attention to. He wondered how many people had befriended Legolas due to his father or his looks, and thought it might have been a lot of people, considering how much Legolas pursued his friendship with Bilbo.

“They say its paper being haunted here, right?” Legolas asked as they moved onto the next futon.

“Yes.”

“That’s weird. I’ve never heard of that happened. What do you think?”

“There’s… Something here.” Bilbo said. “Maybe it’s using paper to communicate?”

“Hmm. That sounds plausible.” Legolas said. “Spirits often use other mediums to communicate when they can’t project themselves on a spectrum that humans can see. Do you think it will possess anyone?”

“I don’t know.” Bilbo answered. “I hope not.”

Legolas laughed. “You tend to be the one who gets targeted in these sort of situations, don’t you?”
He said, “Don’t worry, I’ll protect you!”

Somehow, even with Legolas’s teasing grin, Bilbo felt reassured. He didn’t feel like he was being targeted on this case, but rather he had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Still, Legolas’s unwavering confidence felt like something he could count on. Bilbo had never met anyone quite like him, and he doubted he would ever come across someone like Legolas again, either. He was glad to be Legolas’s friend, if he could call himself that. It felt nice to know someone like him.

During dinner, Bilbo felt distracted. There was something fading in and out at the edge of his mind, as though someone were going to tell him something, then thought better of it. It was quite infuriating but he just couldn’t focus on anything. He watched the room anxiously, trying to work out if it were something physical bothering him, but nothing appeared out of place.

It was when he noticed one of the school posters on the wall that he realised something was amiss. As his eyes focused on the poster, the image on it seemed to fade, and a darkened figure appeared. It was the same girl as before, but her body was more visible now. The paper was larger, and Bilbo could see her more clearly. She had short hair pulled into two buns and was wearing a school uniform. She was undeniably terrifying, and Bilbo thought that her image was being warped into something it wasn’t.

Suddenly her hands reached out, fingers outstretched. Bilbo’s heart dropped when he realised that it was Legolas seated in front of the poster, blissfully unaware of what was going on. He lurched forwards before he knew what he was doing, arms reaching for Legolas. “Watch out!” He cried. He pushed Legolas aside, and tried to ignore Legolas’s winded whine. Cold hands suddenly slipped around his neck, and they tightened.

“Bilbo!” Legolas gasped.

A choked noise came from Bilbo’s throat. He felt his blood pulse, could hear it ringing in his ears, but a moment later the hands were repelled away, and the spirit disappeared. Bilbo fell to the ground, sprawled half across Legolas, and panted for breath. He faintly touched his pocket, where he thought that Thorin’s charm might have been a little warmer than usual.

Hands were then pulling him upright, and belatedly Bilbo realised he should probably apologise for pushing Legolas over. Still, it was hard to think when Thorin was gripping his face, eyes firmly planted on his neck. The ghost had only gotten a hold of him for a second, but Bilbo had no doubt it would bruise, just like his wrist.

“It’s using any paper to materialise.” Thranduil said angrily. He stood, and ripped down the poster, then continued to do the same to every other poster in the room. “This is ridiculous. Why is it targeting children?”

Legolas’s eyes wavered. He reached out a hand to grip Bilbo’s, and gave him a small glance. “Thanks.” He whispered, quiet enough for just Bilbo and subsequently Thorin to hear. “You got hurt because of me…”

Bilbo just shook his head, and focused on calming his breaths. “She’s a student.” He said after a moment. “The ghost. She’s wearing a uniform.”

Thranduil glanced at him, and quietly poured him a glass of water. “Well, without any medium to travel there’s no way it can reappear in here.” He said.
“I’ve covered up all the files, just in case.” Elrond said. Bilbo’s eyes moved over to him, where he was had just placed a blanket over the table they’d been using as a desk. “What a cunning spirit. I believe it will be difficult to exorcise if it only shows itself to the younger people here. Thorin, I would take caution, too. You’re not that much older than Bilbo.”

Thorin nodded, and helped Bilbo stand. “Let’s call it a night, for now.”

Bilbo slept relatively easy, for the most part. It was strange sleeping in a school, but it was comforting to have other people in the room. Even Carc’s quiet presence at the edge of the room was noticeable. Halfway through the night he woke after accidentally rolling onto his wrist. He went to fetch a glass of water and lingered by the one window they’d left open, where the moon and its blanket of stars were visible in the night sky.

He wasn’t too surprised when Thorin wandered over to sit beside him. “What woke you?” Thorin asked quietly. His eyes were still soft with sleep, and his hair wasn’t as neat as he usually kept it.

Bilbo held up his wrist in answer. “What about you?”

Thorin only shrugged. It was the most casual gesture Bilbo had ever seen him use. “Are you alright?” Thorin questioned him. “No dreams?”

Bilbo shook his head, and took a sip of water. The charms were doing their job, and with the absence of a paper surface in the room it seemed like the spirit was unable to contact them after all.

Thorin’s fingers suddenly brushed against Bilbo’s throat, just gently, making his skin burst out into goose bumps. “That’s one large bruise.” Thorin murmured quietly. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Bilbo said quietly. “I don’t like to think that Legolas could have been hurt.”

“I don’t like seeing you hurt.” Thorin told him clearly. He seemed to go quiet for a moment, and drew back his hand. “What do you think of Legolas?”

Bilbo made a small, confused noise, and regarded Thorin with careful eyes. He didn’t quite understand what sort of answer Thorin was looking for, and his mind briefly went back to the conversation he’d had with Thranduil at the end of the last case. “I like Legolas.” Bilbo finally said. “He… He understands, I think, what it’s like to… To…” He struggled to find the right words, and frowned deeply. “He understands how I interact. It feels different to talk to him that it does to others, because he does a lot of the talking, and knows my limitations. He’s a good friend.”

Thorin nodded. “I understand.” He said. “He’s quite an enigmatic person, in some ways, but he’s brutally honest in others. He’s quite a unique character.”

It was strange but not unwelcome to hear such a thing come from Thorin. Bilbo had never really thought that Thorin looked into things so deeply, but it was reassuring to know he wasn’t the only one. “How long have you known Legolas?”

“About five years.” Thorin answered. “I met him a year or so after I met Thranduil, though I wasn’t running a business back then.”

“That’s a long time.” Bilbo said, surprised. Thorin must have only been twelve or thirteen when he met Thranduil, and Legolas would have been nothing more than a child. It was quite a long time to know someone. Bilbo didn’t think he’d known anyone for that long. He didn’t even think he’d known himself for that length of time.
“You should get some rest.” Thorin said. He stood, and almost without thinking he drew Bilbo into a warm hug. “Goodnight.”

The imprint of Thorin’s hand on his back was warm and comforting. Bilbo’s eyes fluttered. Even after Thorin released him and they both returned to bed, Thorin’s scent lingered in his clothes, just faintly. Bilbo didn’t think he could get any redder, and if he weren’t so tired he thought he might not have been able to sleep at all.

Thorin may have thought Legolas was enigmatic, but he was too. Bilbo wanted to understand him, wanted to know why Thorin made him red in the cheeks and why he always got a little nervous around Thorin. It wasn’t a bad kind of nervousness, but it still made his heart flutter and his palms damp. Was that normal? He didn’t know, but he wanted to. Perhaps he should talk to Thranduil about it. Regardless, he drifted off to sleep easily after that, buried in his sheets. Thorin’s gentle, familiar warmth lingered, and quietly lulled him to sleep.
Thorin spent much of the next day interviewing the students that had reported something strange happening at the school. Bilbo and Carc were assigned to help him throughout the day, and although Legolas pouted at it Bilbo didn’t think it was a particularly bad idea. They conducted interviews in the office after packing away the futons for the day, so it was the safest place for someone unprotected and unable to defend themselves to stay, like Bilbo.

After the interviews for the morning were complete and documented, Thranduil, Legolas and Elrond returned, and they settled around the table with fresh cups of tea. Bilbo finished sorting out the relevant paperwork, and handed out their latest update of information so that the others could catch up on the morning’s events. He took his seat once everyone had gotten themselves comfortable, and put aside his paperwork in favour of lifting his steaming teacup to his lips.

“Six months ago, a student from this school committed suicide.” Thorin started. Even though Bilbo had heard the same thing that morning throughout the interviews, it still surprised him. “That was two months after another student from the same grade passed away in an accident.”

“Were they friends?” Thranduil asked.

Thorin nodded. “Everyone said they were very close.” He explained. He slid forward two photos. “The first was Nessa. She was a great dancer, but died when she was struck by a drunk driver. Heidi was a close friend of hers, and died by hanging.”

Thranduil frowned. “How cruel.” He murmured, sliding the photos closer. “Do you recognise either of them, Bilbo?”

Bilbo tensed, but nodded. Under the table, he felt Thorin touch his hand reassuringly. “The one in the paper is Heidi.” He said. “I think. She always looks distorted, and sometimes her face is hidden, but…”

“Then Heidi is our ghost.” Thranduil concluded. “Has it been her causing all the problems at this school?”

“I believe so.” Thorin said. “Multiple students have been injured in a similar way to Bilbo over the past few months. At first the appearances were sparse, but they’ve become frequent in the last month or so. All the students claim that the apparition appeared out of paper.”
“Then Heidi is definitely using it as a medium.” Thranduil said. “By why paper? And what reason would she have to haunt the students at this school?”

“That’s what we have to figure out. I think there’s more to this than the students are revealing.” Thorin answered. “But for now, I think it would be best if we could lure Heidi out in a controlled situation and seal her. She acts and can be repelled by traditional means; protection charms, and things of a similar nature.”

“Walking around the school should be fine with the charms Legolas wrote.” Thranduil said, leaning back. “As long as we stay away from paper then the ghost shouldn’t be able to reach us.”

“Her classroom was 3-1.” Bilbo said. “Would she appear there?”

“That’s quite possible.” Thorin nodded. “Thranduil, Elrond, can you exorcise the rest of the third floor? We’ll follow behind, and have Thranduil and Legolas raise the seal when she appears.”

Exorcizing every room on the third floor was a repetitive and time-consuming process. Heidi had only ever appeared where there were two things – people and paper. The school was empty of students, and so there was no reason for her to appear on any other floor than the one they were on. The first classroom on the third floor was left until last, and only after they’d all gathered in the room did Heidi appear.

Again, it was through a poster on the wall. Its colour faded, and then Heidi appeared, leering out of the wall like something straight from a bad dream. Thranduil and Legolas were quick to create the seal, and within moments Heidi was making terrible screeching noises as shadowy wisps began to saturate the room.

“Your name is Heidi.” Thorin said. His voice was loud and commanded attention, and seemed to do the job well enough. “You died.”

Somehow, Bilbo expected Heidi to respond on the same way Emerië had. Instead Heidi was silent, but a low, hissing noise began to buzz throughout the room. It sent chills down his spine, but Thorin remained unruffled.

“Why are you haunting here?” He asked. “This is no place for you to linger.”

“Would you like to play a game?” Heidi started to laugh. It was a deep, bone-chilling sound that made Bilbo’s heart flutter. Why would she start laughing like that? His mind spun with possibilities, and he got a sinking feeling that told him he’d missed something incredibly important. When the seal started to break under Heidi’s pressure, it suddenly hit Bilbo.

The protective charms were made from paper.

His mind went blank for a moment. They all carried the protective charms on them, but would they negate Heidi’s penchant for paper? The moment Heidi broke free from the seal, he knew they wouldn’t.

“Thorin!” He cried, as Legolas stumbled back from the seal as though he were pushed away by some ferocious, unknown force. Thorin’s attention snapped from Heidi to Bilbo, and with a grunt Bilbo pushed him over. He fell across Thorin and was momentarily blinded by pain blossoming up his arm, but he felt Heidi pass over his head a second later, as though cold hands were touching his back and neck. Thorin pushed Bilbo under him before Bilbo could understand what was happening. He could feel Thorin’s hand cradling the back of his head to prevent it from hitting the floor, but
Thorin’s attention was focused entirely on Heidi within seconds. His eyes were frightfully blue.

Eventually the room settled, and Heidi disappeared. The poster she’d appeared in was crumpled and curling off the wall, as though it had been held above a flame. Thorin pushed himself to his knees, expression stormy. He looked just as much if not more frustrated than Bilbo felt. He stood and gingerly helped Bilbo to his feet, and after a moment his face fell back into the calm expression he most often wore.

“Are you alright?” He asked Bilbo quietly, lifting Bilbo’s chin with the very tips of his fingers.

Bilbo rubbed the back of his neck, and nodded. “Sorry for pushing you…”

Thorin only shook his head, and lowered his hand to the small of Bilbo’s back to usher him from the room. “Back to the office.” He ordered. His fingers tightened in Bilbo’s sweater, just enough for Bilbo to feel. It seemed that Heidi had really rattled him, but Bilbo didn’t know why. It worried him. He didn’t like to think that Thorin was uneasy about anything because he never had been. Out of all the people had met, Thorin was the bravest, and to see such a strong person shaken really troubled Bilbo. Was it selfish of him to rely on Thorin’s courage so heavily? He lowered his eyes as the thoughts roamed through his mind, and tried to ignore the warmth spreading through his skin from where Thorin’s hand rested against his back.

Legolas and Bilbo were the ones directed to get dinner that evening. Bilbo waited outside of the convenience store for Legolas to join him after he finished paying for the food, thankful for the moment alone. He allowed himself to breathe in and out deeply, repetitively, and tried to ignore the new bruises he could feel expanding along his arm from when he’d fallen on Thorin earlier in the day. He really was amassing quite the number of them.

He hadn’t expected anyone to approach him, so when a quiet voice asked for him, he jumped.

A girl who looked only a year younger than him stood before him. She had a bag over her shoulder, and Bilbo saw the Edain school logo embroidered into the side. She was holding a box in her arms tightly, and had a very anxious expression.

“Can I help you?” Bilbo asked quietly.

“Y-You’re from the Oakenshield Psychic Research firm, aren’t you?” She asked nervously. “I go to Edain High School…”

Bilbo nodded.

“People have been saying that the ghost there is Heidi, from third-year.” She said quietly. “It’s all over the forums, and everything. She was my friend, sort of…”

“Sort of?”

Her eyes turned to the side. “She was a little hard to get along with, but she wasn’t a bad person, you know? She only really liked Nessa – the girl from her grade that died. They were really close.” Her words trailed off, and she pursed her lips. “They were dating.”

Bilbo’s eyes widened with surprise.

“But they didn’t tell anyone.” The girl rushed to correct. “Not because Heidi didn’t want to, but because Nessa said not to. Heidi always listened to her, always believed everything she said even
when it didn’t make sense.” She paused, and a sad look crossed her eyes. She thrust out the box in her arms. “I think you need this.” She said. “Heidi gave it to me the night before she- she, you know.”

Bilbo nodded, and took the box so that the girl’s hands would stop trembling. “What is it?” He asked gently.

“Heidi and Nessa were always passing notes.” She whispered. “Heidi would take any piece of paper she could find, just so she could talk to Nessa. I even passed a handful of the letters around for her. Nessa didn’t send as many back, but Heidi kept them all, anyway. That’s what’s in the box.”

The box didn’t feel particularly heavy, but Bilbo knew why now. He watched the box with pensive eyes, and tried to comprehend what the girl was telling him. He didn’t know what any of it meant, but he thought he had an idea. “Was Nessa just… Using Heidi?”

The girl flinched, and buried her nose in her scarf. “It was like it was a game to her.” She whispered. “Heidi was just a game. How could she not have known that Heidi was so in love with her? It’s not fair.”

Bilbo thought she might have started talking to herself more so than Bilbo, so he didn’t comment. “What sort of game was it?”

Her eyes flashed up to him, and Bilbo thought he might have said something very wrong, and very insensitive. He made to apologise, but the girl just let out a deep exhale, and turned her eyes aside again. “It was the game of the mind, you know? Manipulation, isolation, dependency… Nessa knew how to control people, and Heidi wanted to be controlled. She didn’t know how to stop herself from wanting that, and… It just wasn’t Nessa’s place to take advantage of her like that. If it really is Heidi haunting the school, then I hope you can help her soul rest in peace.”

“I…” Bilbo swallowed, and found that his words were failing him. He tried to think of what Thorin would say in such a situation. “We’ll try our best.”

The girl nodded her head once. “That’s all I can ask.” She said quietly. “Leave that box in the front office when you’re done with it, I’ll pick it up when school starts again.”

She left after that, and Bilbo watched her go with a heavy heart. Legolas appeared a moment later, and his cheerfulness disappeared as Bilbo told him what the student had said. Their walk home was quiet, but not entirely unpleasant. Legolas had a natural warmness to him that Bilbo enjoyed, so it wasn’t difficult to get caught up in Legolas’s whims.

That night, Bilbo dreamt of the girl he’d met at the convenience store. It was a dream as vivid as a memory, and felt so real he thought that he was living it again for the first time. He’d never experienced something so realistic, something so tangible. He didn’t come to comprehend that it was a dream until the image before him starting to fade, and the sound began to flicker in and out before it disappeared altogether.

The scene before him began to crumple at the edges, as though it were a photograph someone gripped too tightly in their hand. Bilbo watched as the scene collapsed in on itself, and before he knew it he was face-to-face with Heidi. Her skin wasn’t so grey now, and she looked more like her photo. Bilbo could see almost all of her face, aside from the parts covered by her brown hair. She looked frightening, like she was angry, but her eyes were damp. Bilbo once more felt like he’d done something wrong, like he’d heard something he wasn’t meant to, and just like that the dream ended.
In the morning, when Bilbo woke, he felt strange. Something inside him had slipped and tilted, like a pillar that bore a weight so heavy it had begun to lean unevenly to one side. He found it difficult to focus on, and the more he tried the easier his mind became distracted by simple things. He found himself staring out of the window, tea cold in its cup nestled between his hands, trying to recall exactly what it was that he was doing.

After breakfast, they met around the table to determine what should be done next. Bilbo listened on in a state of haziness, unable to concentrate on anything more than the shape of the clouds that could be seen out of the windows. He tugged his eyes and surveyed the room, taking in what he saw. He spotted a smudged whiteboard, their rolled up futons, his overnight bag, Thorin’s tea-stained cup, an unfamiliar box, and stacks of paperwork he probably had to go through that day. His mind coiled and recoiled as his thoughts tumbled over one another. He was unable to get a firm grip on any of them.

“Bilbo?”

He didn’t jump at the sound of his name. Instead, he slowly turned his eyes to Thorin, who was watching him carefully.

“You seem tired.” Thranduil remarked, as he took a seat across from Bilbo. “Did you have a dream last night?”

Bilbo felt himself pale. He watched Thranduil with stricken eyes, and quietly said, “I don’t remember.”

Thranduil didn’t seem to think anything of it – or rather, he didn’t notice. His focus was on the box in his hands, and he gently placed it on the table for everyone to see. “Tell me about the girl you met yesterday, Bilbo?”

“I… I didn’t meet a girl yesterday.” Bilbo said, confused.

Legolas’s head snapped over to him. “Yes you did.” He frowned. “Outside the convenience store.”

“Did I?”

“She gave you this box.” Thranduil said. He was watching Bilbo now. “You met a girl yesterday.”

“I didn’t…” He trailed off.

“Bilbo,” Thorin started carefully, as he stood, “What do you remember about yesterday evening?”

Bilbo’s afflicted eyes turned to him, as though to plead for answers. “I don’t remember anything.”
Bilbo shook his head, and turned his eyes away. He was tiring of all the questions, and only became more frustrated as each one was asked. Not once did his answer change, and every time he replied with a shake of his head he only became more and more discouraged. He wanted to help, he really did, but he felt completely unable to. It made him resent himself, a feeling that only deepened with each passing moment.

Thranduil had a concerned frown etched on his face. He watched Bilbo with worrisome eyes, and was sharing looks with Thorin and Elrond that Bilbo couldn’t comprehend. Absently Thranduil handed Bilbo another cup of tea as he took a seat across the table, and Bilbo politely took it. He’d only been awake for an hour and it was already his fourth, but he didn’t want to turn down Thranduil’s offer. Thranduil had been making them all morning for just about anyone who would take the cup, seemingly without realising so.

“Legolas, what do you remember?” Thranduil asked.

Legolas took a seat beside him, staring at his third cup of tea with a somewhat bitter expression. “I was in the store, but I definitely saw a girl walking away. Bilbo had that box when I came out.”

“Did he say anything?”

Bilbo shrunk into his shoulders. He felt like he wasn’t a part of the conversation anymore, and mulled over his thoughts quietly as he watched the tea in his cup tremble ever so slightly. Were his hands shaking? He didn’t know why.

“He said that the girl had given him the box, but he didn’t elaborate.” Legolas answered. “I didn’t ask, I just assumed it was for the case.”

If possible, Thranduil’s frown deepened. He looked lost for words. It was an expression Bilbo had never seen him wear before, and it made his stomach sink to think he was the one causing it. “I’m not exactly sure what’s happened to make you lose your memory.” Thranduil said. “Do you remember dreaming anything at all last night, Bilbo? Did you wake up, or happen to hear anything?”

Bilbo felt his lips turn down, and he couldn’t help but turn his eyes away.
“If I may interject,” Elrond began, “I think I may be able to help.”

Bilbo’s eyes flitted over to the tall man. He was watching Bilbo with a soft look in his eyes. Somehow, Elrond reminded Bilbo of the dolls he made. The dolls were regal, and soulful, and in the same way their faces became elusive to things of darkness and disparity so did Elrond’s.

“Bilbo, if you would come with me.” Elrond said. His eyes lingered on Bilbo’s face, and for the first time he could remember, Bilbo felt like he had a path to make his own choice. It was a sense of freedom he hadn’t quite tasted before, and for a moment he was utterly confused. The way Elrond spoke hadn’t been in a questioning manner, and in any other case Bilbo would have followed his instructions blindly, without incidence. This time, however, he felt as though he could afford to think on it clearly.

For some deeply instinctual reason, Bilbo trusted Elrond.

Quietly, he stood. He couldn’t meet anyone’s eyes, not even Thorin’s, as he followed Elrond from the room. Elrond slid the door shut behind them, silently indicating he did not wished to be followed. Even without Thranduil or Thorin’s protection, Bilbo felt safe in Elrond’s presence. He did not know the extent or origin of Elrond’s abilities, or even what he was capable of other than exorcising rooms and his work with the dolls. Somehow, Elrond seemed more powerful when he was alone, and his presence was completely unmissable. In a room full of people like Legolas and Thranduil he tended to dominate the background, but alone he was completely different.

“I believe you had a dream last night.” Elrond said as he led Bilbo down the hallway. “Thorin and Thranduil have told me much about your peculiar abilities. I find them quite interesting, and have been doing a bit of research on what it could possibly be.”

Bilbo glanced up at him, surprised.

“Not everything can be done with technology, as you have seen.” Elrond told him, not unkindly. “Some things, like doll making for example, must be done by hand, and learned from personal experience. Many things regarding the paranormal are only available in hard copies and by word of mouth from someone who has seen the phenomenon personally. I personally much prefer the older methods of gathering information. Thorin’s method, as successful as it has been, has one major drawback.”

“Drawback?”

Elrond hummed. “Yes. The internet breeds lies, does it not? How is one meant to develop a taste for honesty when information is gathered through an unseeing, unspeaking screen? It’s why interviews are still necessary in this line of work.”

Bilbo nodded in understanding. “That makes sense.” He said. “What... What did you find out?”

“You’re quite the mystery.” Elrond said. “Though it is not a particularly bad thing. It’s not uncommon for some to be spiritually sensitive to children specifically, but it’s not often seen, either. That much is true of your abilities, however there are some inconsistencies. Your piano playing, for example.”

“The piano?”

Thranduil said that it attracted spirits, and that when you played, certain spirits became soothed and purified.” Elrond explained. “I’ve never heard of music purifying spirits like that, and no one I spoke to had, either. Add to that the fact that you were spirited away, and that you frequently are privy to
dreams from the dead, and you’ve become quite the enigmatic person.”

Bilbo pursed his lips. “I don’t want to trouble anyone anymore.” He said quietly.

“Some things cannot be helped.” Elrond said. “I believe it was them who involved you in the first place, Bilbo. I’ve not known you long, so to me you are more of a puzzle than anything else. I must admit I am quite susceptible to riddles like the one you spin. I want to unravel it.”

A deep breath escaped Bilbo’s lungs. Elrond spoke in a way that would be incomprehensible to many people, but Bilbo understood. The words made sense in his head, like they’d been tailored to his thoughts, and he found himself nodding again. “I don’t remember dreaming last night.” He finally said.

“Yes, I believe I know why that is, too.” Elrond murmured. “Ever heard of a dream eater?”

Bilbo hadn’t, and so he shook his head.

“Theoretically, they do just as their name says. It’s a phenomenon recorded in ghosts with noticeably vengeful personalities. Just in the same way ghosts can give you memories, some take them, though it’s exceedingly rare, and there has never been a proven case of it.”

“There hasn’t?”

“There’s no way to accurately measure memory, after all.” Elrond said. “You didn’t even realise you’d lost it, isn’t that correct? However, I think the spirit here is targeting you because of your unintentional involvement. You haven’t had the best of luck, it seems.”

That wasn’t very unusual. Bilbo had always struggled with memory problems, even when he had no involvement in paranormal occurrences. To think that a ghost was eating them worried him greatly, because there were some he really didn’t want to forget.

“I think there’s a way to recover the memories you’ve lost.” Elrond said. “Or at least to certify if they’ve been irrevocably removed.”

“How?” Bilbo asked. His mind flashed back to the memories of his childhood, and he wondered if he could force those fragments back.

“It’s something I was taught by my father.” Elrond said. “My religion, if one can call it that, is quite similar to Thranduil’s, in the sense that they originated around the same time, but later diverted to develop different foundations. In a sense, my talents are more passive than Thranduil’s, and are thus not constructively reflective of jobs that are taken on by Thorin. It’s why he seldom hires me.”

Bilbo nodded.

“In your case, I believe a form similar to hypnosis will help to invigorate your memories.” Elrond said. “It will allow your mind to be cleansed of distractions, and will bare to me the extent of your memory loss. Would you be willing to undergo something like that? I must warn you, it will make you feel quite vulnerable and disorientated.”

“Will it work?”

“It’s never failed before.”

“Then… Then I want to do it.”
“What’s he going to do to Bilbo?” Legolas asked, glancing across the room at Thranduil with a sour expression.

Thranduil shook his head. “I cannot predict Elrond’s actions.” He said. “But he wouldn’t hurt Bilbo. There’s no way I can determine if Bilbo’s lost his memory or not… If it’s possible, Elrond can do it.” If anything, Thranduil was more aware of Elrond’s capabilities than one might believe. He’d known Elrond for quite a long time, and was familiar with how unnaturally perceptive the man could be. He worried for Bilbo, but knew that Elrond could protect him if need be.

Legolas bit his lip for a moment, and came to take a seat beside Thranduil. “When we were at the beach,” Legolas began slowly, “Bilbo told me something funny. He seemed sort of distant about it, so I didn’t press, but…”

“What is it?” Thranduil asked, frowning.

“He said he didn’t remember his parents.” Legolas said. “He couldn’t even remember if they had died, or not.”

Thranduil sat up straighter. “He can’t remember his parents?”

Legolas shook his head. “It was the way he said it. People sort of forget things after years and years of passing time, don’t they? But this was different – he spoke like he’d seen them the day before, and forgotten, just like that. He looked so confused, I didn’t know what to do.”

“Could this be linked to that, then?” Thranduil asked. “He hasn’t been in any accidents, has he?”

“It seems too coincidental.” Thorin murmured. “Even more so now that it’s reoccurring. Perhaps we should look into it.”

Thranduil eyed him thoughtfully. He wasn’t blind to Thorin’s sudden interest in this conversation. He knew that Thorin was carefully caring after Bilbo’s safety, even if either of them had yet to realise it. He too was concerned about Bilbo’s wellbeing, but he knew his concern came from a different source than Thorin’s.

“Whatever Elrond is on to, I believe we should let him do it.” Thranduil finally said. “He’s never lead me astray before, and he’s more equipped to work with the mind than any of us.”

“But…” Legolas stated, but he quickly turned his eyes away. “Bilbo’s too vulnerable.” He murmured. “The ghost here is targeting younger people, student-aged people, right? What reason does she have to hurt Bilbo?”

“There must be something provoking her.” Thranduil finally said. “Hand me the files again, please.”

There was much to go through, but Thranduil only skimmed, painstakingly looking for a connection of some sort. He focused on the reports the students gave, and tried to figure out what exactly was similar between them all. Gender, age and appearance varied considerably, so it couldn’t be that. The students were targeted at different times throughout the day, too, and were doing different things when they were injured. Some were sitting on desks during breaks with their friends, some were walking corridors, and others were passing notes. After a moment of rereading the files again, it finally clicked.

“None of them were alone.” Thranduil said, looking up.
“What do you mean?” Legolas frowned.

Thorin’s eyes scanned the files, and he nodded. “You’re right, they were all interacting when they were injured.” He said. “The students were all in a relationship.”

Thranduil leaned back in his seat. “Then Heidi is targeting students in a relationship? Why would she do such a thing? She wasn’t dating anyone-”

“Anyone that we know about.” Thorin interrupted. He was eyeing the box Bilbo had carried in with interest, and before anyone said anything he lifted the lid and spilled its contents. Bits of folded paper and letters came spilling out across the desk.

Thranduil felt something important tug at his mind. He replayed it in his head once, and watched Thorin absently as it then become clear. If Heidi was targeting couples, then technically there should be no reason for her to hurt anyone on the paranormal research team. However, Legolas was openly affectionate with Bilbo, sometimes overly so. Heidi must have interpreted that as romance – and yet she’d gone after Thorin after the seal he’d placed on her broke, too.

He didn’t think Bilbo and Thorin were in a relationship, but… Perhaps there was something more to it, after all. He knew he’d given Bilbo advice on the situation before, but it wasn’t his place to interfere any further than that, and he hadn’t expected anything to come from it. It was clear that Thorin had yet to make the connection between himself and Heidi, but Thranduil knew it was only a matter of time.

It was cruel how ghosts could reveal a person’s deepest desire.
Bilbo dreamed. It was a strange, disconcerting experience because he could not remember when it was he had closed his eyes or what had led him to falling asleep in the first place. Still he knew he must be dreaming because he did not feel like himself, nor did he feel like he was in the right place. He dreamed of Heidi, though he did not know why. He dreamed of Nessa too, but she did not feel right. Her face was twisted, like she was a station set to static, and seeing her filled his heart with a strange, saddened longing.

When he woke, because one must awaken after a dream, it was to Elrond leaning over him. Like always, Elrond’s face offered him calmness unlike any other, perhaps with the inclusion of Thorin. He was holding Bilbo’s hand, though it took Bilbo a moment to recognise the warmth of his grip for what it was. He found that he was lying down in what appeared to be the infirmary, and only Elrond was in the room. His mind searched for the reasons why he was where he was, and with a start he realised that Elrond had searched through his mind for any of his missing memories.

“How are you feeling?” Elrond asked.

Bilbo tried to sit up, but his head spun, so he remained slumped against the pillows. “Alright.” He answered quietly. “Did it work?”

Elrond shook his head. “It seems as though those memories of yours are truly gone.” He said. “Have you had memory problems in the past? You seemed quite troubled by it.”

“Did I?”

Elrond nodded. “There wasn’t much you could answer.” He told Bilbo. “It’s natural not to remember the interview, but beyond this last hour I can’t account for your lost memories. There seems to be quite a few of them…”

Bilbo frowned, and turned his eyes away. His mouth wouldn’t form words, and eventually silence reigned the room. He felt like there were questions building up inside him, but he couldn’t word them, couldn’t decide if any of them were important enough to ask. He wanted to ask for something – comfort? Reassurance? Help? – but he felt at a loss when he tried to speak it. He didn’t deserve such things, did he? Not when he was causing so much trouble for everyone.

“Did you dream of anything while asleep?” Elrond asked. “It’s not uncommon with this method of
“I did.” Bilbo answered. “I… I think I did. I didn’t really see anything, or hear anything, but I felt something. It… It’s hard to explain, but Heidi felt really-really blank when she died, but there was this underlying current of confusion and anger… I think Nessa did something bad, before she died.”

“What sort of feeling did Heidi have towards Nessa?” Elrond asked. “What sort of relationship did they have?”

Bilbo closed his eyes, and tried to remember exactly what he’d dreamt of. Much of it was hazy and fading, and he struggled to grasp it properly. “It… It wasn’t what I expected.” He finally said. “But I don’t really understand much of it.”

Elrond hummed. “Alright.” He said. “Shall we head back? I’m sure your friends are getting quite worried.”

Bilbo nodded, and accepted the hand Elrond offered him to help him up. They walked back in silence, and it gave Bilbo quite a lot to think about. He got a very strong feeling that he’d forgotten something important, again. It only made him feel worse than ever, because not only wasn’t he unable to help but now he was hindering the investigation. Perhaps he shouldn’t have come on this one, after all.

During the day, everyone carried out various tasks. Elrond and Thranduil were cleansing rooms to limit the places Heidi could appear, and were taking down posters and covering up paper so that there was a smaller chance of her catching them off guard. Carc was compiling information and generally being his usual, silent self. Legolas and Bilbo sorted through all the information they had on Heidi, and were eventually joined by Thorin after he finished helping Carc. It was a very quiet afternoon, and for some reason the quietness bothered Bilbo. It never had before, and yet he found himself wishing someone would talk.

Legolas was carefully sorting out the contents of the box when he started to frown. Bilbo watched him out of the corner of his eye, wondering what could make Legolas don such an expression, but after a moment Legolas looked up.

“Could Heidi and Nessa have been dating?” He asked, sliding a handful of notes across the table at Thorin. “These notes are all quite romantic, though more from Heidi’s side… The one signing off as ‘N’ is probably Nessa, right? It’s not too hard to consider that they were in a relationship with these notes as a reference.”

Thorin read over the notes, and frowned. “You could be right.” He murmured. “It would explain a lot… What reason does Heidi have to linger here, then, if Nessa is not alive? I doubt she would have died if Nessa had not.”

Legolas nodded in agreement. “Maybe something bad happened?” He mused. “It does seem like most of the romantic inclinations were on Heidi’s side. Perhaps their relationship didn’t end well, and Heidi became vengeful?”

“We might have to seal her again, and see if she will answer questions.” Thorin murmured. “Do you think you’re up to it?”

“It should be simple enough.” Legolas answered. “She’s not anything extraordinary when it comes to sealing, as long as paper isn’t used. The only noteworthy aspect of her is…”
Bilbo cringed. He knew Legolas was referring to the way Heidi was able to consume dreams and memories, and he knew that he was quite susceptible to that. He wouldn’t have been surprised if Heidi was able to sense that he had memory troubles, and had targeted him specifically based on that information. It didn’t help that there was no way for Bilbo to defend himself, simply because he didn’t know how to.

“Let’s go lure her out, then.” Thorin decided.

Just as it was before, luring Heidi out wasn’t difficult. Elrond and Thranduil cornered her in her old classroom, and then Thranduil and Legolas sealed her. This time, however, Heidi seemed more enraged. The seal seemed to shake a lot more than it had before, like she was pressing against it harder. She must have gotten stronger, somehow. Did eating dreams do that to a ghost?

“Why are you haunting here?” Thorin demanded. His eyes were icy, and seemed to capture Heidi’s attention. When it became clear she wouldn’t answer, Thorin narrowed his eyes. “You were involved with a girl called Nessa.”

At the mention of her friend, Heidi appeared to become more enraged. A low buzzing sound filled the room, echoing in Bilbo’s head like the ringing of a heavy bell. It hurt his ears, and he couldn’t help but cover them with his hands.

“How about we play a game?” Heidi rasped, before she began to laugh. In the blink of an eye she disappeared, and both Thranduil and Legolas stumbled forwards as the pressure on the seal vanished. Bilbo felt a chill run down his side, and then suddenly cold hands were gripping his neck. He let out a started cry, and instantly Elrond was reaching for him, eyes shocked, but before he could reach him Bilbo felt his mind black out, and then everything went dark.

“Bilbo!” Thranduil shouted. Elrond grabbed onto him when Bilbo abruptly dropped, completely limp. There were finger-shaped bruises rapidly spreading across his pale throat, and for a moment Thranduil feared the worst. But Elrond was pressing two fingers just under Bilbo’s jaw, and his gentle sigh was enough to quell Thranduil’s immediate fears.

“How did she break free?” Thorin pressed, crouching beside Elrond to pull Bilbo’s figure into his arms. Elrond allowed it surprisingly easily. Thranduil wasn’t blind, he could see that Elrond and Bilbo had some kind of connection he didn’t quite understand. He thought it was because they had very similar temperaments, and Elrond recognised qualities in Bilbo that he was deeply familiar with.

Thranduil shook his head. “She was stronger this time.” He murmured. “She pushed hard enough that when she unexpectedly drew back the seal broke. There’s no way I could have predicted that.”

Thorin turned his eyes down to Bilbo. “Is she going to erase his memories again?”

A deep frown twisted at Elrond’s face. “It’s… It’s likely. I believe there’s more to Bilbo’s memory loss than we know, however.”

“What do you mean?” Legolas asked. “Is this about what he told me?”

Elrond nodded. “I discovered that the extent of his memory loss doesn’t just include the incidents on this case. There’s no way to recover what he’s lost here, but there are other basic things that he should remember, of which he has no recollection of. It’s not just his parents, either.”

Legolas eyes wavered. “What is it?” He asked. “What did you find out?”
Elrond turned his eyes down to watch Bilbo’s troubled face. “I think if you care for him as a friend more so than as a colleague, then you should have a look into his past.” Elrond murmured. “I believe there’s something there that’s haunting him.”

Thorin’s expression was stormy as he gave Elrond a suspicious glare. “That’s a breach of his privacy.” He murmured.

“I understand that.” Elrond answered. His voice was gentler this time, like he could tell just how thinly Thorin’s patience was wearing for him. “In any other case, I would have simply said to ask him, but that’s the problem. Bilbo doesn’t remember, and there’s no way to bring forth those memories, if they remain.”

“That doesn’t feel like the right thing to do.” Legolas fretted. “Even if he doesn’t remember-”

“Let me put it this way.” Elrond said. “If you don’t investigate him, then I will.”

It was night time when Bilbo woke. He felt disorientated and dazed, and only after staring at the ceiling for several minutes did he finally recall what had happened. He felt his stomach recoil at the thought of it all, and he wondered if he’d lost any more memories. He couldn’t even remember if he’d had a dream or not, and it made him feel sick. When his nausea had passed, he pushed himself upright and went to get a drink from the pitcher of water they kept on the table throughout the night.

He felt a little better after he’d sated his thirst, but he knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep for a while. Instead he sat by the table, absently rubbing his bruised neck. Heidi had really done a number on him – the previous bruises hadn’t even begun to fade yet.

“Does it hurt?”

Bilbo jumped at the voice, and pressed an anxious hand over his heart as Thorin took a seat beside him. Tentatively, he shook his head. “Not really…”

Thorin poured himself a glass of water, and sighed as he drank it. “You got hurt again. Heidi targeted you specifically this time.”

Bilbo pursed his lips. “Why?” He asked quietly.

“I fear it’s my fault.” Thorin murmured. “I’ve not been treating you exclusively like a colleague.”

Bilbo flushed at the admission. He knew it himself, but hearing the words spoken really made him feel flustered. He hadn’t hoped to avoid the conversation, per say, but it still made him nervous to think of approaching such a subject with Thorin. “It’s just our luck, huh?” He tried to sound light hearted, but his voice only came out subdued and tired. “To- to have a ghost with that kind of predisposition…”

Thorin watched him out of the corner of his eye for a moment, before lifting his arm to drape it across Bilbo’s shoulders. He didn’t say anything, but only rested his hand in Bilbo’s hair to draw him closer. Bilbo felt his eyes burn. Any progress he felt like he’d made with himself seemed to be completely wiped clean by Heidi. He didn’t want to forget anything important, not when he was experiencing things he wanted to remember. He liked spending time with Thorin, with Legolas and Thranduil and Elrond, too. And not just because it offered him a distraction to his thoughts, not anymore. He wanted to be around these people that were so different from one another, were so bright and intelligent and everything he wasn’t.
“What if I’ve forgotten something, again?” He whispered quietly.

Thorin’s fingers shifted in his hair, just slightly, like he was stopping himself from petting Bilbo. “It’s not you who’s forgetting anything, Bilbo.” He answered. “You can’t help that your dreams are being eaten by a ghost who steals through two-dimensional surfaces. I’m sorry that this is causing you stress, and I cannot stop it.”

Bilbo pressed a hand to his face, and hung his head. “I can’t do anything.” He whispered.

“Don’t think like that.” Thorin said. He pulled Bilbo’s hand away, and Bilbo let it drop limply. “I know how you feel, but you must understand that it’s beyond your control.”

Bilbo glanced up at him. “You know how I feel…?”

Thorin glanced away. He was silent for a while. “I have two siblings.” He eventually said. “Had. I had two. My younger brother, Frerin, died when I was meant to be caring for him. My little sister was too young to understand, and she didn’t realise he was gone because his spirit was still around, and she could see him.”

Bilbo’s eyes widened. “I-I’m sorry…”

“Don’t be.” Thorin shook his head. “Frerin was easy to purify, once I figured out how to contact him. He helped alleviate my guilt, and then he left. He’s the reason I pursued this career.”

Bilbo could only nod. He didn’t understand what it was like to have siblings, and couldn’t comprehend what Thorin was feeling, but he wished he could. There was still so much about Thorin he didn’t know, even though he felt like Thorin was familiar to him.

“In either case,” Thorin continued, “Spirits are just as deeply complicated as humans, as are their desires and their thoughts. What makes them different is that the consequences of being alive no longer affect them – social limitations, physical limitations, the eventuality of death; none of it weighs on their mind, and as such they are the only beings who are capable of pursuing a single emotion without influence from others. It’s why revenge and anger are very prevalent in spirits.”

“That makes sense.” Bilbo said quietly.

Thorin nodded. “Regardless of how trained you are, there are some things that you will be susceptible to, and that is no fault of your own. Your sensitivity to young spirits and the conditions of this situation are not in your favour, but you are not to blame for that. We’ll figure out your memory problems, alright? I hate to think you’re troubled over it.”

Bilbo flushed again. Thorin’s words settled his heart, just a little. He’d never heard Thorin say anything that wasn’t logical, and every word he spoke was always well thought-out and honest. In many ways Bilbo appreciated his frank nature, though he knew others would find it off putting.

“We should get some rest.” Thorin sighed, after a quiet moment. Bilbo nodded in agreement, and stood. He followed Thorin over to the futons, and when Thorin moved over to his, Bilbo reached out to grip his sleeve. Thorin turned and gazed him a questioning look, but Bilbo only stared hard at the floor, eyes wavering. He didn’t know how to ask for what he wanted. Thorin shook off his grip and for a brief moment Bilbo felt his heart plummet, but then Thorin gripped his hand. His fingers were big and warm when they wrapped around Bilbo’s.

Even though he was still in his day clothes, Bilbo didn’t care. He settled down onto Thorin’s futon and closed his eyes against the darkness and his embarrassment at the current situation. The tension drained from his aching shoulders, and then Thorin pulled the blanket over the both of them and laid
down, too. He expected that they’d go to sleep with nothing else said, but then Thorin’s fingers touched his jaw, and his eyes opened.

Thorin was watching him. Even in the dark his eyes were bright and icy, but they didn’t startle Bilbo as much as they once had. Instead, he watched them searchingly, even as Thorin traced the shape of his face with gentle fingertips. Eventually, he fell quietly asleep to it.
The next day, Thorin decided that the case had to be ended. If Heidi could not be purified, then she must be exorcised. Bilbo wasn’t sure if he would ever fully understand what Heidi had been through while she lived, but after everything that had happened and all the parts of her life he’d become privy to, Bilbo was sure there was more to the games Nessa had played than he knew about. He thought that their relationship had been a lot more manipulative than Heidi had realised, and there had been no way to rectify the situation or make the truth come to light after Nessa had died.

Thranduil was the most suited to performing an exorcism on Heidi. Legolas wasn’t experienced enough, and Elrond was better suited to cleansing rooms and transferring spirits, rather than eradicating them. Bilbo could only watch as Thranduil prepared to exorcise Heidi. They were in Heidi’s old classroom because that was where her connection remained the strongest. Bilbo remained by Legolas’s side, strategically avoiding any questions Legolas had regarding why he’d woke up on Thorin’s futon instead of his own. Even if Legolas wore his petulant pout for the rest of the day, Bilbo would remain tight lipped. He was much too embarrassed to say anything about it, after all.

Bilbo found himself increasingly uncomfortable as they lured Heidi into manifesting. Thranduil seemed prepared enough, and Bilbo had no doubts about his talents, but the thought of Heidi only unsettled him. Every time she appeared he seemed to lose more of his memory, and he only had so much of that left. He thought about the way Thorin’s fingertips had traced his skin last night, and the feeling he’d experienced when he woke up and found his head nestled in the crook of Thorin’s arm, and he really didn’t want to forget that.

Without a barrier to trap her, it was difficult to pin Heidi down once she’d appeared. They’d taken down the posters from the walls and covered all the papers that she could possibly appear out of. They could not, however, remove the protective charms in the room, and as such Bilbo wasn’t particularly surprised when Heidi emerged from one and the charm was destroyed.

Still, Thranduil reacted quickly. He cast water from his vial, and began to talk quietly. Bilbo felt Legolas stiffen beside him, and he didn’t complain when Legolas gripped his arm tightly. He knew Legolas must understand the words Thranduil was saying, and that they must make him nervous. Bilbo didn’t think he’d ever witnessed an exorcism, not like that. The ghosts in the old building at his school had been exorcised by Bard when Bilbo was in the infirmary, and Nimrodel hadn’t needed exorcising. It was the same for Emerië, and the wraith at Eru’s home along with all the spirits that were trapped there had been destroyed. As he watched Heidi’s spirit writhe and thrash, he suddenly understood why the spiritualists of the team leaned towards purification.
Exorcism seemed unnecessarily cruel.

Eventually Heidi gave a final screech before she completely disappeared. It felt like the air had been sucked out of the room, and Bilbo’s mouth went dry. Without Heidi’s underlying presence the school seemed colder, like its previous significance had faded into nothing more and nothing less than simplicity. It was incredibly sad. Anything that could have made the school something more than what it was had been removed, and even if it was for the best Bilbo was left with a lingering sourness in his throat.

Thranduil looked worn out as he leaned against a desk. He tucked away the vial he kept in his jacket pocket, and let out a deep sigh. “What a persistent spirit.” He murmured. “I think if we’d left that another day or two there would have been nothing I could do to exorcise her.”

Elrond let out a small, considerate sound. “Then eating dreams really did increase her strength.” He said. “How intriguing. There isn’t much solid knowledge on dream eating, so I’ll have to keep that in mind…”

“Are we done now?” Legolas demanded. His eyes were troubled, and he was frequently darting looks at his father like he saw something Bilbo didn’t. He probably did.

Thorin nodded. “I’ll inform the client.” He murmured. “Elrond, do a sweep of the school and see if there’s anything lingering here that was drawn in by Heidi’s activity. If so, cleanse it. The rest of you can help dismantle the equipment.” He eyed Thranduil for a moment. “If you’re up to it.”

Thranduil almost sneered at the insinuation. It was an expression he used to wear when Bilbo had only just met him, and for some reason it filled Bilbo with a lightness that was startlingly different to the heaviness of the situation. Thranduil must have been alright if he could still act like himself, he thought.

By late afternoon, the equipment had been packed away and stored in the van and all the posters they’d taken down had been placed up on the wall again. They’re returned the room to how it had been before they rearranged it, and soon enough they were leaving the school behind. Bilbo hadn’t known what to do with the box of notes so he’d left it in the classroom where someone would eventually find it. There didn’t seem to be anything more they could do with it, and if Bilbo were being honest he wanted to put it all behind him.

If Heidi and Nessa were in a romantic relationship, then they were like him, were they not? A lot of that sort of thing still confused him, and he struggled to comprehend it properly, but he was frightened to think that anything he pursued could end up like that. He knew he struggled with things of a social nature, and romantic inclinations only seemed a step above that. He simply couldn’t understand any of it, no matter how hard he tried, and yet… Anytime he was with Thorin, and it was just them – it was like none of those struggles mattered. He didn’t feel like Thorin had any expectations of him, and to others that would have been irritating but to Bilbo it was comforting. He had the freedom to follow his instincts at his own pace, and that soothed him.

After the case, Bilbo spent a lot of time thinking about the things that had transpired. He’d sit on his bed at home and wonder exactly what had led Heidi to become so angry with everyone. He thought that a lot of her anger might have been directed at Nessa, but the blind way she adored her classmate left her anger misdirected and fluctuating. If that were true, it was no wonder she became such a vengeful spirit. All those notes she’d sent Nessa, all the effort she’d poured into them… It was sad to think that they’d gone to waste, or that they’d been for naught.
Out of all the cases Bilbo had gone on, this one had to be the least resolved of them all. In a sense it was quite frustrating, but Heidi was gone, and there was nothing further for them to do. It wasn’t their job to soothe spirits, but rather to solve and remove the possibility of problems that those spirits caused. That is what clients requested, what clients paid for. He supposed he was lucky to have not come across a situation like this before. He had a feeling that they were entirely too common when it came to Thorin’s work.

It was a few nights after the case had ended when there was a knock on Bilbo’s door. He wasn’t expecting anyone, and nothing appeared to be out of the ordinary. He’d been mulling around his kitchen with dinner in mind when the sound had echoed throughout his empty home, and curiously, he went to see who was at the door.

He was rather surprised, however, to find that it was Thorin standing on the other side of his door, and not someone more logical like Legolas and Thranduil, of whom he knew had visited him before. He wasn’t quite sure how everyone knew where he lived, but that was hard to concentrate on when Thorin was looking at him with a vague sort of nervousness in his eyes. “Forgive the intrusion.” He murmured as he held up a plastic bag full of steaming Tupperware containers. “I brought dinner.”

Bilbo flushed, and opened the door wider. He became increasingly aware of his state of dress – a loose shirt that tended to slip off his shoulder and a pair of shorts – not to mention he hadn’t brushed his hair or teeth. He was in no way prepared to meet with anyone, and felt incredibly out of place next to Thorin, who was still impeccably dressed for work. Thorin didn’t seem to notice, so Bilbo put it out of his mind. “I wasn’t expecting you…” Bilbo said quietly.

Thorin didn’t reply for a moment, and instead set the bag down on the table. “I thought it would be nice to visit.” He said simply. “Have you eaten yet?”

Bilbo shook his head, and began to rummage through his cupboards for bowls and cutlery. He set the table and got glasses of water before taking a seat at his small dining table across from Thorin. He had to move his flowers out of the way, but then he could see Thorin, and despite his nervousness the thought of sharing a meal with Thorin excited him. He’d never done anything like this.

For what it was worth, the food was nice. It was from a small takeaway restaurant near Bilbo’s school, so he knew Thorin must have picked it up on the way over. He’d never shared a meal with Thorin alone, and although it took a moment to pick up the conversation was surprisingly pleasant. At times it was hard to keep up with Legolas when they were on cases, and Thranduil was much the same, though for a different reason. Carc never spoke, and Bilbo wasn’t too familiar with Bard. Elrond was easy to talk to, but quiet. Thorin, however, when on his own, was surprisingly simple to speak to. If asked, Bilbo probably couldn’t say what they talked about. Conversation topics flowed like clear water, and it was soothing to experience.

“How long have you played the piano?”

Bilbo hummed as he thought. “For as long as I can remember.” He said. “I think my mother encouraged me to, when I was a child, but I don’t have any memories of it. Do you play an instrument?”

If possible, Thorin looked a little embarrassed. “The harp.” He answered.


“Yes, well, both my mother and sister can play it, as well.” Thorin explained. “It’s a loose tradition to
learn the harp, in my family."

“What’s your sister like?”

Thorin chuckled. “Indescribable.” He said. “She’s several years younger than me, but can be just as mature. She’s quite stubborn, and once she’s made up her mind there’s no way to change it. I admire her unwavering will.”

The way Thorin spoke was quite gentle. His tone was one that Bilbo had never heard, and he was suddenly struck by the thought that perhaps having a sibling would have been nice. As far as he was aware, he was an only child. The only other child he had any memory of was Frodo, and even then Bilbo wasn’t too sure exactly what Frodo was to him.

“How do you enjoy working on the cases?”

Bilbo met Thorin’s eyes, confused. He thought that it was an important question, one that had more meaning than he understood, and so he spent a moment to think on it properly. “I… I do.” He finally said. The words felt honest in his mouth, and distractedly he glanced around at his apartment. It was barer than he ever remembered it being, and he wondered how he could have possibly spent so much time in such a place. “I enjoy spending time with everyone.”

“Even if it causes you pain?”

Bilbo met Thorin’s eyes again. “I don’t really understand.” He said quietly. “But I understand things now more than I ever have before. I don’t want to forget that.”

Thorin’s eyes wavered. He reached across the table and pressed his palm against Bilbo’s cheek. “What an odd thing to say,” He remarked. “I appreciate it, though.”

A small smile touched Bilbo’s lips. He pressed his cheek into Thorin’s hand, and gripped his wrist. Thorin was watching him with an uncharacteristically surprised expression, and he absently squished Bilbo’s cheek, making him squeeze an eye shut. He let out a small sound, perhaps one that sounded like a laugh, and a satisfied look came to Thorin’s face. Bilbo wasn’t quite sure what about him was provoking such a reaction in Thorin, but whatever it was felt really good. It was something he felt that he could effortlessly become accustomed to.
Effulgence

Chapter Summary

A frightening dream and an idyllic estate.

Chapter Notes

Effulgence - a brilliant radiance; a shining forth.

CASE SEVEN – THE DOLL MAKER

Generally, during Bilbo’s breaks from school, Thorin contacted him with a case to solve. He’d always been vigilant when it came to Bilbo’s schoolwork, and never contacted him when there was a lot of work to be done. After his exams Bilbo had a long break in which he thought that Thorin would take on another case, but that didn’t happen. Instead, he found himself without much to do, and after a day of thinking on it he contacted Elrond.

Like Elrond had said, it was his assistant that picked up the phone. Lindir was a man with a quiet, somewhat unsteady voice. He was polite and to-the-point, and absentmindedly Bilbo thought that Lindir was a good match for someone like Elrond. After the simple phone call, Bilbo began to pack his bags. Elrond seemed completely serious about having Bilbo take up his offer, and if Bilbo were being honest he liked the idea of seeing Elrond’s dolls again.

Elrond’s Manor, a place called Rivendell, was nestled in a cove by the sea. The smell of salt was prevalent in the air, but as Bilbo rounded the driveway towards the main entrance he was treated to the sweet scent of fruit. The manor itself was divided into several sections that littered the foothills of the mountain it rested on. Each section was connected with winding paths cut into stone and along the increasingly thick tree roots that sprouted from the ground in great arches. Bilbo hadn’t thought so many trees could grow beside the side, but wherever he looked greenery burst forth from every crevice. It was idyllic in every sense of the word.

“Bilbo, it’s nice to see you again.” Elrond greeted warmly as he met Bilbo at the main entrance. “I’ve already had your room prepared, if you’ll follow me.”

Bilbo nodded, and picked up his bags. There were many people at Rivendell, all of whom carried themselves with grace and soft expressions, regardless of their size or shape. An air of calmness and clarity seemed to thickly permeate the air, and rather than stifle Bilbo it filled him with a lightness he hadn’t felt before. When he closed his eyes he could feel the lulling breeze from the sea as it faintly washed along the cove through the leaves in the trees and the winding paths that Elrond began to lead him down.

“I hope you’ll enjoy your stay here.” Elrond said pleasantly. “I’m sure there is much you can learn here.”
Bilbo nodded as he surveyed the area. In the distance, behind a thicket of trees and a man built stone wall he could see the tops of apple trees reaching towards the sun.

“After you’ve settled in, it’ll likely be dinner time.” Elrond said. “Feel free to wander around until then, or rest if you wish. I’ll have Lindir fetch you.”

Bilbo nodded again, and allowed himself to be led through the manor to a small series of houses nestled between large, protruding roots and the trees from which they grew. The cottage Elrond led him too was much more than he expected to be given, and when he expressed that to Elrond, Elrond only waved away his concerns with a gentle smile. After showing him around the little house, Elrond departed, and Bilbo was left to his own devices. He spent some time getting himself familiar with his surroundings before collapsing against the soft bed with a small, barely audible sigh.

It was easy to rest in such a quiet place. He could hear the ocean in the background, and the quiet chiming of birds as they settled in for the afternoon, and the ever present rustle of thousands of leaves. He rested against the bed sheets and watched the trees through an open window. He thought it would have been nice to stay at a place like this, that it would be nice to call this place home. Would Thorin like this place, too?

Before he knew it, he’d fallen asleep.

Bilbo dreamt of something strange. His eyes opened, and he was in a room that he didn’t immediately recognise. There was a bed covered with a thick, white comforter, and the windowsill was lined with succulents of all shapes and colours. A bookshelf was lined with thick tomes, the names of which were inlaid in gold that glinted in the soft sunlight that streamed in through the windows. There were little things around the room that made him believe it was a child’s room – a plush bird nestled against the pillows on the bed, a crudely drawn garden pinned to the wall, a splattering of wooden blocks beside a half-opened toy chest.

He pushed himself upright from where he lay on the bed, and swung his legs over the edge. It wasn’t particularly cold in the room but he still shivered. The carpet felt unbelievably real beneath his toes. When he looked around the room again, he was startled to find that Frodo had appeared beside him. He watched his companion with confused eyes, and tried to figure what exactly he wanted to ask Frodo. Instead, he blinked once, and found that Frodo had completely disappeared.

A small, puzzled frown touched Bilbo’s lips. He stood, leaning against the bed for support, and glanced around for the door. He startled when he realised there wasn’t one, and instead moved over to the window. The view was almost completely obscured, but he was able to tell that he wasn’t on the first floor of the building, and that there were no houses next door.

He turned back around, and surveyed the room again. Nothing really seemed all too strange – except a closet pushed too close to the wall. He approached it, and cautiously pulled one of its doors open, and although he expected to see clothes he wasn’t too surprised to find that there were a corridor on the other side of the wardrobe instead. When he stepped through, the corridor opened up in a wide walkway from which several closed doors led to unforeseen rooms. It was only with a sudden sinking feeling did he realise he was dreaming of his childhood home. He was struck by the urge to retreat back into his room, but when he pulled on the door from the other side – of which looked remarkably like an ordinary door, and not a wardrobe – it simply wouldn’t budge. He swallowed a heavy lump that had appeared in his throat, and turned back around.

The entire corridor was filled with orbs. They drifted and tumbled through the air at a leisurely pace, without any specific meaning or noticeable rhythm. Bilbo recognised them as spirits, but he couldn’t
sense them, couldn’t feel them or touch them or hear them. Just like before when he’d dreamed of his home at Eru’s house, these spirits felt hollow. It was like their vitality had been drained, and it made him feel cold. He started walking down the hallway without quite realising what he was doing, but he didn’t dare touch the doors. He had no inclination to go anywhere, nor did he know his way, and yet he walked as though he had a destination in mind.

At the end of the corridor, Frodo appeared again. Bilbo reached him, and allowed Frodo to take his hand. He felt a lot like a child being led around, but he didn’t complain. His voice seemed to have left him. Frodo walked with more conviction than Bilbo did. He gave Bilbo the distinct impression that he’d been living, if it could be called that, in this place for far too long. Bilbo tried to recall seeing Frodo when he was a child, but remembering things from that long ago hurt his head. Frodo didn’t seem to notice his face twisting in discomfort and continued to drag him along as though he weighed nothing.

“Wait,” Bilbo tried to say, gripping his head, “Wait, where are we going?”

Frodo’s unnaturally bright eyes darted towards him, but he didn’t speak. He stopped walking, and turned his head away, and the moment Bilbo’s focus fluctuated he was gone. Bilbo almost stumbled at Frodo’s sudden disappearance, and instead wrapped his arms around himself as the room became incredibly cold. He watched as the spirits began to weaken, like whatever was remaining of their strength was being taken away. Out of the corner of his eye he saw something flicker, like the flash of a bird’s wings under a beam of sunlight that had burst through the leaves of a tree. He focused on it intensely, and saw that it glowed brighter than the rest. Very faintly, just at the edge of his mind, he felt its presence bloom into existence.

Then, right before his eyes, something dark and rotten appeared. Like smoke it enveloped the spirit until not even a glimmer of its light was visible, and then a moment it slunk away. It moved like it was tangible, and left behind a hollowness in the slowed orb that made Bilbo’s breath catch in his throat.

It devoured the spirit.

With a start, Bilbo woke. The sun had almost completely set, and despite his racing heart he was immediately able to appreciate the warm orange glow that consumed the room. After several moments of rushed breathing, he lifted his head, and surveyed the room. It was exactly as he’d left it, with nothing missing or out of place. The sight of it somehow comforted him, and after exhaling he pressed a hand over his heart. He could feel it frantically beating beneath his skin, but with each passing moment that pace slowed until he felt relatively at ease again.

After washing his face in the bathroom sink, he changed his clothes and brushed his hair. Lindir knocked on his door not too long after that, and Bilbo accompanied him back to the main dining hall. Lindir was eager to explain all the feature points of Rivendell, and seemed elated that Bilbo was interested enough to listen. He thought that perhaps Lindir’s enthusiasm for such a subject would have easily bored others, but he was quite curious about Rivendell, and enjoyed hearing what Lindir had to say.

Dinner was a pleasant occasion. The food was incredible, though Bilbo expected nothing less from a man such as Elrond. Most of the people who lived in Rivendell ate together, but they were separated on platforms of various height around low tables with comfortable cushions to sit on. Even though Bilbo had only been in Rivendell for an afternoon he was welcomed very warmly. Most people spoke softly, or allowed those with bigger personalities to control the conversation, and it was so soothing to be in such a situation that Bilbo felt comfortable enough to speak his own thoughts every
now and then, too. He wondered how the people here had all become so aware of their own limitations and of their own position in social situations, and he thought that perhaps Elrond had only chosen to invite the people who needed to figure it out to Rivendell.

At night, before Bilbo was asleep but after he’d crawled under the covers, he found that he’d received many messages from Legolas. It wasn’t an uncommon occurrence, and somehow the familiarity of it was reassuring. Legolas told him of all the things he’d done in the day, even if they were small or insignificant deeds. Bilbo knew the time he’d woken, and type of juice he’d had with his lunch, how many birds had sat on the railing ahead of him as he waited to be picked up from school. Through Legolas’s extensive messages, he felt like he was never excluded, like he had spent his time with Legolas rather than on his own.

Buried in all of Legolas’s friendly messages was one from Thorin. Bilbo was surprised, as Thorin didn’t often message him if it were not for work, but a feeling of excitement still began to flutter in his stomach. When he opened the message he found that it was simply a kind greeting, and that Thorin had taken the opportunity to inquire about Bilbo’s day. He wondered if Thorin wanted to feel connected, too, and spent several minutes describing the train ride over and the lovely scenery at Rivendell.

After sending the message, he placed his phone on his pillow, and closed his eyes. He didn’t mean to fall asleep and even though he had he felt strangely warm on the inside. He wanted to be connected to Thorin, too.
Ebb

Chapter Summary

A gift and a realisation.

Chapter Notes

Ebb - *the movement of the tide out to sea and/or (of an emotion or quality) gradually decrease.*

Up close, the brushes with which Elrond painted his dolls were much tinier than Bilbo expected them to be. His fingers trembled around the handle, and more than once Elrond had to steady him. He’d spent the entire morning learning everything about the materials used to paint and seal the dolls, and what worked best with the resin. In a way it was quite a cathartic process, one that reminded him greatly of playing the piano. This, however, was something unfamiliar to him, and he was unable to lose himself in the process when he was busy continuously learning. It refreshed him.

The workshop in which Bilbo sat was a little platform built high enough to have a serene view of the sea. The small structure was connected to the main building by stone walkways. A series of columns lined the walkway and extended to a half-circle balcony from which one could take in the glistening view. It was a well ventilated area that was sufficiently protected from both the sun and the wind coming from the sea.

“Sealing the colour in layers builds up intensity.” Elrond said as he rhythmically brushed eyelashes onto the doll head he carefully held between his fingers. “Finer details are easier to emphasise with a space that already contains colour, and leads to features becoming more natural in appearance.”

Bilbo nodded. He painted on a practice head, one that was made from a cheaper material that felt and looked the same as resin. His work was nowhere near the calibre of Elrond’s, and he doubted it would be for a number of years yet. Regardless, he quite enjoyed the quietness of the task. He sat on a cushion by a low table beside Elrond, and they shared colour palettes and equipment. No talk was required, for which Bilbo was thankful. He doubted he could speak and concentrate so intensely at once, and much preferred to listen to Elrond quietly instruct him.

“I think there’s a case I want to have Thorin investigate.” Elrond said out of the blue.

“A case?” Bilbo asked, surprised.

Elrond nodded. “I would generally take care of it myself, but it might be easier for him to look into.”

“What is the case about?” Bilbo asked, puzzled.

“A strange object washed up on the shore here.” Elrond said. “This area acts like a passage for spirits. They drift in and out as though guided by something, and never linger. They drift down from the mountain or in from the sea and scatter. I believe it’s a peaceful process.”
Bilbo hadn’t sensed anything other than tranquillity since arriving at Rivendell, but he believed Elrond. There was a refreshing gentleness about Rivendell that couldn’t only come from its idyllic location.

“Perhaps Thorin is more familiar with the object and what exactly is attached to it than I am.” Elrond continued. “It’s common for spirits to drift through this place, but not to end up here. I think that perhaps there is something different on these shores, now.”

Bilbo glanced up from the doll head he was holding, and surveyed Elrond’s calm expression carefully. “What exactly appeared on the shore?”

“A ring.”

Thorin would arrive in two days, it seemed. Bilbo, in some ways, was excited to see him. He always missed the company when he was not involved in a case, and at times physical presence couldn’t be substituted with text messages, no matter how detailed they may be. He never really thought about missing someone in the way he missed them, let alone in the way he missed Thorin. It was comforting to know that there were some people he could appreciate like that. Although it was a foreign feeling, he welcomed it.

For as much of the day as he was allowed, Bilbo spent his time working on the dolls with Elrond. While they waited for the sealant to dry he would show Bilbo the casting process, and how people sculpted and strung together the dolls with long strand of tight elastic.

“Would you like to choose one, to keep?” Elrond asked as he watched Bilbo look at all the dolls in the storeroom.

Bilbo hardly heard him for a moment. He was browsing the rows and rows of shelves and glass displays were the dolls were seated on proportionate lounges and at tables. Some were blank, but others were completely made up, with clothing and hair and eyes and paint. He marvelled at the ones that had fantastic attachments – pairs of sculpted wings and dynamic face painting and dainty manicures fascinated him endlessly. Elrond’s question, however, startled him. “Aren’t they quite expensive?”

Elrond nodded. “They are… But I think you’d do something nice with one.”

Bilbo’s eyes wavered. He did want one, but it felt selfish to take up Elrond’s offer. After seeing all the hard work and time it went into making each individual doll it seemed cruel to take one without properly compensating the artist.

“It’s really not a problem.” Elrond said, smiling a little as he took in Bilbo’s hesitation. “I’m offering.”

Tentatively, Bilbo nodded. “I-if you really don’t mind…”

“Not at all.” Elrond assured. He pressed his hand just gently to the small of Bilbo’s back, and led him from the storeroom. “Shall we go and choose a sculpt now?”

“N-Now?”


Bilbo allowed himself to be pulled along. The room he was eventually led to was inside the main
building at the manor, and was filled with soft light akin to sunlight despite being windowless. There was a large cupboard that lined the wall, and tables that displayed half-sculpted dolls. Elrond spent a moment searching through the drawers before he pulled out a container and set it on one of the tables. Bilbo looked around the room curiously while Elrond set out the contents on the container, and after a few moments he was called over.

“The body will be about forty centimetres, so these heads will all fit accordingly.” Elrond said. “Smaller than what we worked on in the morning, but I have no doubts you’ll be fine with this size. Have a look, and choose your favourite.”

Bilbo’s eyes widened as he surveyed the table. There were perhaps twelve sculpts laid out for him to choose from, all of which were fairly similar in size but varied in colour. He looked over their features carefully, taking in the shape of the eyes and mouth in particular. He knew that all the sculpts would make beautiful dolls, but in the end there was only one he was immediately drawn to. The head had a little, somewhat rounded nose and a shapely mouth, the top lip of which was just ever so slightly larger than the bottom. Its eyes were big and he knew its expression would intrinsically be something doe-eyed and gentle no matter the style of paint that was applied to its face.

“Is that the one you want?” Elrond asked.

Bilbo nodded, and carefully lifted the sculpt from the table. He watched Elrond pack away the remaining ones and fetch the corresponding body. Elrond fiddled with it for a moment, and soon enough the head was attached to the body and something more lifelike was given to Bilbo. He held the doll with gentle hands, and marvelled at the fact that it was his.

“Eyes and a wig next, then?” Elrond asked.

Bilbo nodded, and carefully lifted the sculpt from the table. He watched Elrond pack away the remaining ones and fetch the corresponding body. Elrond fiddled with it for a moment, and soon enough the head was attached to the body and something more lifelike was given to Bilbo. He held the doll with gentle hands, and marvelled at the fact that it was his.

“Is there a colour you favour?” Elrond asked. He separated a section of the drawer and pulled it free. “This size should fit that head well.”

Shaking his head, Bilbo surveyed the selection Elrond had displayed. He chose a pair that were a light brown colour, perhaps simple compared to the glittering purples and shimmering silvers offered, but still pretty nonetheless. In a similar fashion Elrond showed him the stock of doll wigs he had at the manor, and from them Bilbo chose a wig that was also pale brown in colour. It was somewhat curly, and when Bilbo sat it on the doll’s head it was remarkably easy to tame the wisps into a tousled, wind-blown look. He knew the wig was made from synthetic fibres, but it was so soft that he, at first, thought it was perhaps alpaca fibres instead.

“The only thing left now is clothing, and of course to paint its face.” Elrond chuckled as he watched Bilbo fawn over the doll. He guided Bilbo from the room back through the structure towards the cottage Bilbo was staying in. “Are you happy?”

For some reason, the question struck Bilbo as odd. It seemed like the type of thing to ask someone after giving them such a precious gift, and yet from Elrond it seemed strange. In many ways Elrond was just like Thranduil, Bilbo thought. It was more than the air they carried themselves with – it was something deeply set in their attitudes, in the way they worded questions and the way they could sense emotions as though they were widely broadcasted. After a moment of delicate contemplation, Bilbo nodded his head. “I am.” He said. “I really like the dolls.”
Elrond smiled pleasantly. “I’m glad.”

That night, Bilbo woke and felt as though he were dreaming. He’d left the window open, and the curtains fluttered on the gentle breeze that drifted up from the sea. For a moment his eyes were fuzzy with sleep and he thought he could see dozens of glowing orbs floating through the air, but he blinked and rubbed his eyes and they were gone. Without any tiredness dragging on his bones he stood and went to the window to watch the sea in the near distance. It was dark, marred by ripples of wind and the drifting reflection of a high moon.

Without quite thinking he rummaged around for the doll Elrond had given him. It felt surprisingly solid in his hands for a dream, and as he sat on the edge of the bed to admire it he felt a strange feeling brewing in his chest. Gently, with nothing more than a fingertip, he traced a path from the tip of the doll’s nose up between its eyes and across its forehead. He became familiar with its features, carved them into a place into his head where forgetting things wasn’t an option. He locked them away tightly, never to be loosened, and watched the doll until his eyes became fuzzy and his body seemed to move on its own.

“Elrond sent me a recent photo of Bilbo.” Thranduil said as he took a seat around the table he shared with Legolas, Bard, Oakenshield and Carc. “It’s from earlier that day, though I doubt Bilbo realised it was being taken.” He offered his phone screen to present the image. Bilbo was sitting comfortably at a table, his hair pushed behind his ear as he stared intently at the doll he was painting.

“He looks happy.” Legolas murmured. Out of everyone at the table he was perhaps the most reluctant to look into Bilbo’s past without his consent, and he made his views on the matter very clear. Thranduil hated seeing Legolas upset, but just like everyone else at the table he felt backed into a corner. Despite his placid exterior, Elrond could be quite strategical, and he was firm with his actions. In many ways he intimidated Thranduil, and Thranduil was wise enough not to cross paths with him.

“I have a photo of him from a few months ago.” Thranduil said as he turned his phone back. He skipped back several photos until he came across the one he’d taken of Legolas and Bilbo in the small café they’d met up at. Almost instantly he noticed a startling difference, one that made fear begin to creep up through his veins. He turned the phone back towards the table. “Here.”

Oakenshield frowned deeply, though perhaps for more than one reason. “There is quite a difference.” He murmured.

Thranduil nodded in agreement, and flicked through the photos again, as if he could prove his eyes had deceived him. They hadn’t, and again he was met with a recent picture of Bilbo, in which his hair was incredibly lighter that it had been in the previous years. In person it was difficult to notice, but in photographs it was glaringly obvious.

“That couldn’t just be from the sun, could it?” Legolas said edgily. “Or from dye?”

“The colour is too obscure.” Bard said. “It’s gone well into autumn now, and the sun is less harsh. I don’t know of any reason for his hair colour to fade so drastically in such a short time.”

Legolas shrunk into his shoulders. “What is it, then? I’ve never seen anything like that.”

“I haven’t either.” Thranduil murmured. “I wish that there was a logical explanation for such a quick
change, but I doubt there is. His hair reminds me of Nimrodel’s.”

Legolas stiffened, and his expression turned withering. “Bilbo isn’t dead, though.” He said. “He’s alive and breathing just as much as the rest of us.”

“What a mystery this is.” Bard murmured. “Perhaps it was right of Elrond to threaten you so.”

Oakenshield’s eyes had gone dark with something Thranduil could only describe as frustration. Perhaps, however, it was closer to fear, for Bilbo’s sake. “Elrond has hired me for a private case at his manor.” Oakenshield murmured. “I’ll be there while Bilbo is, too.”

“Then you can keep an eye on him.” Thranduil said before Legolas could do anything more than let out an indignant huff. “I am sure that Elrond would never harm Bilbo, but he’s quite perceptive, and I’d hate for him to do anything based on knowledge we do not yet have.”

Oakenshield nodded. For a moment Thranduil didn’t notice but after thinking on his words, he found that he couldn’t quite remember when they’d turned from being a team of people placed together to work into being something more, something closer to friendship or companionship. He didn’t particularly mind, but he knew that whatever connection they now had hinged entirely on Bilbo.
“Bilbo, what are you doing up so early?”

It took a moment for the words to reach Bilbo. He blinked slowly, and turned his head up to meet Elrond’s eyes. A puzzled looked crossed his face as he glanced around him. He was dressed in casual clothes, though he couldn’t remember picking them out. He’d somehow made his way to the room he’d been in with Elrond the previous day, and clutched carefully between his fingers was the doll head he’d picked out. Its face was almost completely painted, but when Bilbo looked at it he was struck by the sudden thought that he couldn’t have been the one to paint it.

“Have you been up for a while?” Elrond asked, peering over his shoulder to glance at the doll head. “Did you paint that?”

A sinking feeling plummeted in Bilbo’s stomach. There were paint stains on his fingers and he still held a little paintbrush, so he must have, mustn’t he? Hesitantly, he nodded. He couldn’t remember waking at night, or walking out here, and yet there was no other explanation for it.

Elrond hummed quietly. “It looks good.” He said simply. “Shall we go have breakfast?”

Bilbo’s heart raced as he nodded. Had Elrond not noticed the skill from which the doll have been painted? It was far beyond anything Bilbo would ever be able to do on his own – the face was so realistically painted that it frightened him. He knew he was incapable of creating anything like that, and yet he held it in his hands. Somehow, he painted it.

Much like the previous day, Bilbo was taught many things about the dolls and the manor alike. Elrond was busy during the early afternoon so he assigned Lindir to keep him company. Lindir was not quite as knowledgeable on the dolls as Elrond was, but he’d picked up many things over the years he’d worked for him. As it turned out, Lindir was the one who made the omamori. He spotted Thorin’s in Bilbo’s pocket, and could recognise his own work immediately. He was entirely too happy to explain all about his specialities, including the creation of the omamori, but Bilbo enjoyed his company.

After an early dinner, Elrond pulled him to the side. “I want you to have a look at the ring before Thorin arrives.” He said. “Your eyes will see something different to his, and to mine as well.”
“Alright.” Bilbo said. He followed Elrond to a part of the manor he hadn’t ever been to. The doors were locked but Elrond had a key. A short walkway led them to an area with a decorative pavilion that stretched high above his head and sheltered the area from the sun. In the centre of the circular area was a round table, of which the ring sat on a white piece of cloth. It was most likely made from gold, though it did not shine.

“This is what washed up on the shore.” Elrond said. He circled the table, eyes sharp as he took in the ring. “I sense something from it, but it’s nothing I can decipher. Perhaps if it did not give such an aura then it would have gone unnoticed for quite a long time.”

Bilbo surveyed the ring carefully. It seemed insignificantly small, and replaceable. Yet as he approached the table, everything seemed to fade in favour of it. Whispered, inaudible words touched the back of his mind like cold tendrils of fog. He felt an inexplicable urge to reach out and take the ring for his own, and for a moment he was lost in those sudden, possessive thoughts. Something dark took a hold of his heart, and he couldn’t tear his eyes away from the ring.

Out of the corner of his eye, Frodo appeared.

Bilbo jumped so hard his shoulders ached, his eyes going wide. He stared hard at the place Frodo had been just a moment before but he was nowhere to be seen. His heart had leaped into his throat, and he hastily swallowed it down. He glanced back at the ring, but the sight of it was no longer so alluring. Rather, it was repulsive.

“What do you sense?” Elrond asked. His eyes were incredibly perceptive as they watched Bilbo. It was as though he could see all of Bilbo’s secrets without a single word spoken.

“Nothing good.” Bilbo whispered quietly. He rubbed his arms anxiously, and looked anywhere but the ring. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Elrond nodded, and ushered him from the room. Bilbo couldn’t help but cast one last glance over his shoulder at the ring, but his stomach lurched at the sight of it. He never wanted to see it again.

That night, after Bilbo had replied to Legolas and Thorin’s messages, he took out his doll and assembled it all together. At some point in the afternoon Lindir had taken Bilbo to pick out clothes for it, and now it was complete. Its face still confused him, but the longer he stared at it the more he became attached. His lost memories were frightening him, but it seemed mostly harmless this time. At least, that was how he rationalised the situation. What else could he do?

It was a calm night. Like the previous night Bilbo had left the window open, and was pleasantly surprised to find there was still a gentle breeze blowing about. It chased away the lingering humidity of the day and cooled his skin like a soothing balm. He spent quite some time watching the sea from the window, holding the doll in his arms like a child might hold a stuffed animal. Without the harsh rays of the sun present it was safe to have the doll out; the resin was protected from discolouration, and he took advantage of that.

For a brief moment, the breeze changed. He turned his head back towards the room to follow it, and there sitting on his bed was Frodo. As always, his eyes were unnaturally bright and blue. Almost petulantly he dropped back against the bed to watch the ceiling like it contained something endlessly captivating.

Compelled by something he didn’t understand, Bilbo moved to lay down beside him. He carefully placed the doll on the pillows so that it would not get damaged, and then joined Frodo. He watched
Frodo carefully, taking in all of his features thoroughly. He had quite a childish face, Bilbo thought, but not in the sense of frivolity or self-indulgence. Rather, he had features that appeared quite youthful, like his upturned mouth and big eyes. Bilbo wondered how old he was, because he appeared to be Bilbo’s age, and was even a tad taller.

He tried to remember where he’d seen Frodo before, or where they’d met. He believed that he’d known Frodo for a long time, despite having no connection with the paranormal. Before he’d become involved with Thorin his mind had never strayed to Frodo, he didn’t think. If it had, he’d never considered Frodo a ghost, or rather he hadn’t thought of Frodo being anything other than someone Bilbo knew. In a sense it was as though he didn’t realise Frodo was a spirit, or that he’d forgotten, despite once knowing so.

Somehow, Bilbo fell asleep like that. He didn’t dream that night.

Thorin arrived late the next afternoon. Bilbo spent all day learning about the dolls, so much so that he almost forgot Thorin was coming that day. It was only after Lindir sent him back to the cottage that he remembered, and with a quiet farewell Bilbo made his way back to the home he’d been lent. He’d learned the way by now, and was quite content to wander the path on his own. After taking a quick shower and changing into clothes that didn’t smell like resin and paint, Bilbo took a seat by the window again. He really did have just the most wonderful view, and it was one of the prettiest things he’d ever seen. Even though the window faced towards the sea, every so often the smell of sweet fruit would drift in. He wanted to go see the orchards before he left.

Not long after Bilbo had finished a cup of tea, Lindir came to fetch him. It seemed that Thorin had arrived, and that Elrond had requested they both to go back to the pavilion. Bilbo’s stomach coiled at the thought of seeing that gold ring again, but he pushed down his illness and followed Lindir. There wasn’t anything he could do about that ring and the sickness he felt from it, but it hadn’t proven to be particularly dangerous yet. He hadn’t had any nightmares since he’d seen it, and there had been no sudden accidents. With the weight of Thorin’s charm in his pocket, he thought he would be alright.

Like before, the ring was seated on the table. Bilbo felt uneasy in its presence, but was easy able to focus on something else. Thorin was standing across the table speaking quietly to Elrond, but he stopped when Bilbo entered the room and instead offered a warm smile. “Bilbo, it’s nice to see you again.”

Bilbo flushed, and could only manage to nod. He approached the table, and listened to Elrond explain how he’d found the ring, and what both he and Bilbo experienced around it. Thorin seemed a little put off to find that Bilbo had already been exposed to it, but he made no comment. Throughout the entire conversation Bilbo made sure to keep his eyes away from the ring, even though he could feel its presence.

After Elrond’s explanation, Thorin evaluated the ring. He took several photos of it on his phone and most likely sent them to Carc to research. “It certainly seems like there’s something attached to it.” He murmured. “Though I don’t know what.”

Soon enough his evaluation was over and Bilbo was suddenly faced with free time. He nervously followed Thorin around, but as the minutes passed he felt himself starting to relax. With nothing better to do, he decided to take Thorin to the cottage. “This is where I’m staying while I’m here.” He said. “There’s a really nice view of the ocean.”

“I’ve only been to Rivendell a small handful of times, but I’ve always stayed in the main building.” Thorin said. “This is quite idyllic.”

Thorin hummed. “Yes, places like this do tend to have that affect.”

“Places like this?”

“Locations that act as a cycle for spirits.” Thorin explained. “Spirits lost out at sea wash up here, as do those that are on land, from which they then purify themselves. It’s a cathartic process.”

Bilbo nodded again. “Elrond said something similar.” He said. “Would you like some tea?”

At night, Bilbo woke up feeling feverish and anxious. He gasped for air, hair wild from a restless sleep, and he immediately kicked off the sheets. The air was cold but not uncomfortably so. Without any thought he pulled on a jacket and shoes and made out into the night. There were lanterns lighting the main structure, but only the moon guided him. He walked without thinking about it, as though someone else had control of him.

He found himself standing in front of the locked room that led to the pavilion. He reached for the handle, aware that Elrond had locked it when they left, but as he pressed against it, it clicked open. He didn’t think long on why it did so, and instead rushed down the hallway. Soon enough the table and the ring came into view. Like before, it seemed to whisper to him, and after swallowing back the sickness creeping up his throat he picked up the ring and shoved it into his pocket. It weighed heavily on him, and felt incredibly cold to the touch.

With the ring safely tucked into his pocket, he made his way down towards the harbour as quickly and quietly as possible. His footsteps were soft and despite the quietness of the night there was no noise. Soon the ocean appeared before him like a sea of ink, lit only by the light of the moon far above it. There was a wharf that extended out into the ocean, one long enough to dock big sailing boats, and he made his way down it. His footsteps were louder on the wood, but the sound of the ocean muffled them.

Ahead of him, he could see where the currents began to pick up beneath the surface of the ocean. From this short distance the ripples in the water were visible, and after inhaling deeply he reached for the ring again. Despite being cold it burned his skin and made his hand tremble. His eyes were fixed on it intently, but he squeezed them shut before he got lost in the sensation. The image of it was seared into his mind and he saw it when he closed his eyes – saw the way it was tarnished and the small, completely unnoticeable inscription written on the inside of the band. In one big rush he swung his arm back as far as it could go and released the ring.

It sailed through the air far, far away before sinking into the ocean, never to be seen again. As he opened his eyes to watch it sink, the inscription on the band began to run through his head, over and over. It filled him with a sickly feeling of dread, but it was only a single word.

Belladonna.
Bilbo did not sleep easy that night. He tossed and turned for hours and although his mind did eventually fade into unconsciousness it was not restful or fulfilling. By the time morning came around he was anxious and fidgety, and only after several cups of tea did he finally start to feel awake. When the sun had risen above the horizon he was interrupted by a gentle knock on the door. It was Thorin who had come to visit him, which set Bilbo a little more at ease.

“How are you feeling?” Thorin asked as Bilbo handed him a cup of tea. “You look a tad tired.”

A waned look came to Bilbo’s face. “I didn’t sleep well.” He admitted.

“Did you have a bad dream?”

Bilbo shook his head. “No.” He said quietly. “I don’t know what it was.” It wasn’t an entirely true statement but for the most part Bilbo believed it was. He knew that the ring had made him incredibly uncomfortable, and when he remembered what he had done a feeling of guilt struck him. Still, when he thought about it very carefully, all he could remember was moving without thinking. He hadn’t consciously decided to toss the ring into the ocean. It had been like someone or something else controlled him and his actions.

Thorin hummed thoughtfully. “Have you eaten this morning?”

Bilbo shook his head again. “Not yet.”

“Shall we go get breakfast, then?”

Sharing a meal with Thorin was as enjoyable as it always had been. Bilbo never really quite realised how bland food tasted when one ate on their own. Thorin wasn’t too chatty with the other people at Rivendell though it didn’t seem to bother him. He’d never been the most talkative person anyway, so Bilbo didn’t find it particularly strange. Thorin seemed content to eat and do nothing more. Bilbo did much the same. The food served at Elrond’s manor was always nice no matter what it was. He sat beside Thorin quietly, watching the scene unfold before him. He’d only been at Rivendell for a handful of days and yet it felt deeply familiar to him, like he’d been there for longer. He didn’t think that his feelings towards this place had anything to do with the paranormal but rather it was just because of the nature of the area. It really was peaceful.
Halfway through breakfast, Elrond appeared. He had a very troubled expression, and Bilbo knew he’d discovered the missing ring. Quietly he gestured Thorin over, and Bilbo watched him anxiously, wondering if they knew what he’d done. When Thorin returned a moment later wearing a deep frown, he knew that they hadn’t. He was quiet as Thorin took his seat again, and couldn’t meet Elrond’s eyes as he joined them for breakfast.

“Why don’t you visit the orchard today, Bilbo?” Elrond suggested after some time. “The frost was light this year, so they’ll be in bloom for a little while longer yet.”

Bilbo glanced up at him, thoughts momentarily forgotten. “Can I?”

Elrond chuckled. “Of course.” He said. He paused for a moment, and gave Thorin a thoughtful look. “Why don’t you accompany him? I don’t believe you’ve seen my orchards either.”

A disdainful look touched Thorin’s face. “I’m not really interested…”

“You don’t want to go?” Bilbo asked, eyebrows drawing up. He wanted to go see the orchards, and would it not be better to see them with Thorin?

A strange look passed through Thorin’s eyes as he watched Bilbo, and after a moment he jerked his head away. “Alright.” He murmured quietly. “When shall we go?”

A pleased look came to Elrond’s face. “Splendid. Shall I have a lunch prepared? You can spend all day there, if you wish. It’s a great area to explore.”

Bilbo nodded before Thorin could turn him down. He tried not to let his excitement get ahead of him, and finished his breakfast at a casual pace. He felt flushed with energy. He didn’t think he’d ever been like this before, aside from the time when they’d visited the beach with the other members of the paranormal research team. He hadn’t ever been to an orchard before, so was it alright for him to feel excited? It was certainly a foreign concept, but perhaps it was alright. And even if there was something wrong with it, he was distracted enough by the upcoming day that he didn’t dwell on it long.

It didn’t take long for Elrond to bring Bilbo a basket full of food he’d had the chefs make. An hour after breakfast, Bilbo found himself making his way to the orchards accompanied by Thorin. It took ten minutes to walk there, but it was a pleasant walk. The day was shaping up to be quite pleasant, with warmth from the sunlight and only a gentle breeze to stir the trees. For late autumn it was still quite warm, but this far from the city Bilbo didn’t expect it to get exceptionally cold.

“Have you ever been to an orchard?” Thorin asked.

Bilbo shook his head, and tightened his grip on the basket. “I haven’t.”

A small smile touched Thorin’s face. “No wonder you’re excited.”

Bilbo’s eyes widened. “You can tell?”

Thorin looked over him curiously. “You’re not a very expressive person, but I can tell.” He nodded. “You seem a little happier.”

Bilbo’s heart fluttered. That concept had come up a lot in recent days, not only from Thorin. It made him wonder if what he felt at Rivendell really was happiness. It seemed impossible, and yet... It could be possible, could it not? Even someone like him had to be capable of experiencing happiness, even if he didn’t quite understand it. Right?
“Ah, here we are.” Thorin stopped beside a tall wooden gate. He unlatched it, and it quietly swung open to reveal the orchards on the other side. It was like a completely different world, and instantly Bilbo felt overwhelmed by its beauty. He could see rows and rows of trees that looked like they’d come from a painting. Many were bare of fruit, but along the way he saw that there were still some apples hidden among the vibrant leaves.

“There’s so many trees.” Bilbo breathed. Thorin held the gate open for him as he walked in. From inside the orchard the view seemed so stretch on forever. It filled Bilbo with a sudden, expanding sensation, one that was warm and light and welcoming. “Thorin, look at them all.”

“I’m looking.” Thorin reassured him. He paused for a moment, then reached forwards to lightly touch Bilbo’s hand. When Bilbo didn’t complain, he wrapped his fingers around Bilbo’s loosely. “Shall we go wander around?”

Bilbo nodded, and let Thorin lead him around. Everything he saw seemed to burn itself into his mind. More than anything he never wanted to forget this place. “Do you think Elrond will mind if I take an apple?” He asked tentatively, as he eyed the fruitful trees.

Thorin shook his head. He glanced across the trees that still bore fruit, and led Bilbo to one with an apple hanging low enough for him to reach. Bilbo still had to stand on his toes but it was easy to pluck it from the tree. The fruit was rosy and red, and felt solid in his hands. For some reason, he felt delighted to hold it. He knew it was nothing more than an apple, and yet it felt like something more.

They had lunch when the sun was at its highest. After exploring the orchards and its attached gardens for several hours, they found a shady tree to sit under and opened up the basket. It was filled with little sandwiches cut into triangles and slices of fruit. There were two thermoses of cool water, the lids of which were also cups. It was a quaint little lunch, one that seemed to match the mood of the day.

The conversation was pleasant as they ate. Bilbo felt like he learned a lot about Thorin, though they didn’t speak of anything important. He learned more about Thorin’s family line, and how closely Carc’s was tied into it, and how he first met Thranduil and Legolas. “Legolas was really small back then.” Thorin mused thoughtfully. “He was less… Rowdy, too, though I’m sure he was quite the handful to Thranduil.”

Bilbo couldn’t help but agree with that. “Was Legolas a cute child?”

Thorin chuckled. “Of course he was.” He said. “If nothing, that family has their looks.”

Bilbo took a bite of his sandwich and let the words mull over in his mind. He did think both Thranduil and Legolas were remarkably handsome, though they had wonderful personalities too. He could see why they had such a following, aside from their talents in the paranormal field.

“Do you remember much of your family?” Thorin asked.

Bilbo lowered his eyes. “Not particularly.” He said quietly. “I… I can’t really remember much. The names of my mother and father, their faces or their voices… It’s difficult to remember.”

Thorin let out a thoughtful hum. “Did you have an accident?”

Bilbo shook his head. “I just can’t remember.” He was quiet for a moment, and a frown touched his lips. “Is that a bad thing?”
“I’m not sure.” Thorin answered honestly. “We’ll figure it out, eventually.”

“Okay.” Bilbo nodded. “Do you remember your parents?”

“Yes. My father died when I was younger, but my mother is alive. My sister lives with her.”

“Do they live far?”

“Only about an hour and a half by train from the main office.” Thorin said. “I visit them often, and they’ve been to the office a handful of times.”

“Do they mind you living so far away?”

“A little, but they don’t disapprove of my work.” He explained. “It helps support Dis and her schoolwork, and eases the pressure off my Mother’s shoulders. In either case I don’t mind the way I live. This job isn’t always a chore.”

“Is Dis your sister?”

Thorin nodded. “That’s right. She’s younger than me, but she’s quite mature for her age. I’m glad she’s not spiritually sensitive, and that she has no interest in this line of work. I don’t think she’d do well in it.”

Aside from his family, Thorin also talked about the things he liked doing. Bilbo learned about how Thorin had started playing the harp, and how he’d been in high school. It was comforting to learn that Thorin had such a human side to him, one that made glaringly obvious errors and strived to fix them. Bilbo couldn’t quite picture Thorin going through school and doing things that normal teenagers did, but it was still an entertaining thought.

After they’d finished eating, when Bilbo was packing away their containers, Thorin asked him a question.

“Thranduil showed me a photo of you and Legolas.” He said. “Can I take one with you too?”

It was such an earnest request that Bilbo couldn’t help but flush and nod. Even Thorin seemed a little embarrassed, but Bilbo found that he didn’t mind. He shuffled closer to Thorin as he unlocked his phone and held it up. The soft sunlight that fell through the trees casted patterns across their skin, but not glaringly so. When Thorin snapped the photo, Bilbo thought that they both might have been smiling.

Restlessness plagued his dreams again. He tossed and turned under the covers, and although he’d spent his entire afternoon learning about Elrond’s dolls after he’d returned from the orchard he still couldn’t find sleep. He felt tired enough to, but it would not come. The name inscribed into that golden ring haunted him, but with every time it endlessly echoed in his head it started to fade a little. He didn’t know who Belladonna was, and had no desire to find out. He just wanted to forget about it all.

It must have been only around midnight when there was a knock on his door. Tired and a little disorientated he stood to answer the door, and was surprised to find Thorin standing there.

“Thorin…”

“Are you alright?” Thorin asked. He was frowning deeply and casting critical eyes over Bilbo’s dishevelled appearance. “I had a bad feeling…”
“I can’t sleep.” Bilbo said. His voice was strained, and he felt exhausted.

“You look tired.” Thorin agreed. “What’s keeping you up?”

Bilbo shivered as a breeze washed over his skin. He simply shook his head. He didn’t know what was keeping him from sleeping, but it wasn’t anything good. He worried about the ring, about Elrond figuring out what he’d done to the ring, and what Thorin would think of him. “Can you stay with me?” Bilbo asked. He was too tired to edge around his words, and even though he felt embarrassed all he wanted to do was go to bed and find sleep.

“If… If you want me to.” Thorin answered carefully.

Bilbo held the door open.

Sleeping with someone in the bed other than himself was a lot different to sleeping on his own. Bilbo took comfort in the sound of Thorin breathing, and in the weight of his figure pressing down on the mattress. He still felt anxious, but it was easier to close his eyes.

With Thorin there, he could sleep.
Chapter Summary

A small reprieve and the dismissal of the ring.

Chapter Notes

Encumber - restrict or impede (someone or something) in such a way that free action or movement is difficult.

Bilbo woke when the sun was beginning to rise over the ocean and its light reached his room. It was a chilly morning, but not uncomfortably so, and Bilbo had the distant thought that perhaps the traditional coldness of the season would begin to set in soon. He didn’t feel particularly tired, and he thought that that morning was the first in a long time he’d woken with no apparent issue. It was likely due to the fact that he shared a bed with Thorin, he thought, which wasn’t a bad thing at all.

For what it was worth, the sun’s rays had not yet touched Thorin. He had one arm stretched comfortably across the pillows and it was with a faint amount of embarrassment that Bilbo realised he had his head rested against it. The bed covers were haphazardly thrown across their legs, and just lightly Bilbo could feel Thorin’s knees pressing against his own. It was warm under the sheets, and for a moment Bilbo wondered if he’d be able to fall asleep again.

Thorin’s expression was quite gentle. He usually wore a rather petulant look, and often frowned. He had a harsh set to his face, though that was complimented by the angles of his jaw and his nose. He was quite handsome, but in a different way to Thranduil and Legolas. He was colder, for sure, but easy to get along with once a more familiar connection was established. Bilbo thought that Thorin might have just been quite selective about the people he chose to befriend, but he could have been wrong.

After spending a little while observing Thorin – for his own selfish reasons – he carefully moved out from beneath the covers to begin the morning. He made sure to brush his teeth before Thorin woke, and half-shut the bedroom door as he turned on the kettle. There wasn’t any food in the cottage aside from bare necessities like bread and milk so they would have to return to the main manor for breakfast, but Bilbo could at least make tea. It was after the water brewed that Thorin woke. Bilbo could hear the taps running, and as he set the mugs down on the kitchen bench Thorin wandered into the room dressed and groomed for the day.

“Good morning.” He said, as he picked up his mug. “How did you sleep?”

“Better.” Bilbo answered.

“I’m glad.” Thorin said with a short nod. “What do you have planned for today?”

Bilbo shook his head. “I’ve been learning about Elrond’s dolls while I’ve been here.” He said. “How to paint them, and care for them, and paint them. I enjoy it.”
“That’s good.” Thorin said. “Elrond doesn’t often invite people here to Rivendell, so you must be an exception.”

It was a compliment, and made colour come to Bilbo’s cheeks. Thorin wasn’t the type of person who easily gave out praises, but even in such a roundabout way Bilbo could recognise it for what it was. “What are you doing today?”

Thorin gave him a thoughtful look. “I have to work on Elrond’s case today.” He said.

“Is Carc coming?”

Thorin shook his head. “Elrond doesn’t appreciate having so much unnecessary technology in Rivendell, and I must respect his wishes. He seemed adamantly that this case would be simple, but…”

But the ring had disappeared. Bilbo knew that, knew that that was what Thorin had been going to say. A sick feeling of guilt wound around his heart, but he didn’t say anything. If not for him, Elrond would have spoken the truth. He had a feeling that his secret would be safe so long as he kept it to himself, and so he did.

For the most part, the time he spent at Elrond’s was peaceful and relaxing. Bilbo grew accustomed to the smell of the ocean and food he was given. He learned to like the smell of resin, and the feel of a doll beneath his fingers. Although he was utterly incapable of replicating the painting he did on his own, he slowly managed to improve his skill. He even started to learn to sew clothes, though he wasn’t very good at it. He felt like he was drifting when he stayed at Rivendell, like his bones had become lighter and air could freely pass through his lungs. He wondered if Elrond had known he would feel this way when he invited Bilbo to stay, but somehow Bilbo thought he had.

Every night Thorin stayed in Bilbo’s cottage. Neither Bilbo nor Thorin ever brought it up in words, but it was a surprisingly easy routine to settle into. Bilbo felt like he was a little closer to Thorin when they shared the bed, and he started to learn things about Thorin he would have otherwise never know. Thorin was a late riser in the morning, though he took a very short time to get ready. He preferred his tea with only a small amount of sugar, and he never let dirty dishes sit in the sink or on the bench. He liked things to be clean and orderly, though he never mentioned it if Bilbo left his cup on the table or didn’t make the bed. For what it was worth he was perhaps the most considerate person Bilbo had come across just because he kept to himself and wasn’t obtrusive when it came to the habits of others.

Towards the end of their stay, Thorin closed the case. “Without the ring reappearing I see no reason for me to be here.” Thorin told Elrond as they shared lunch together one day. “I had Carc research its size and shape, but it’s too generic to pull any reliable information on it.”

“Didn’t it have an inscription?” Bilbo asked, frowning.

Thorin glanced at him. “No.” He said. “It was bare.”

“Unless you saw something we didn’t.” Elrond added.

“Maybe I dreamed it, then.” Bilbo answered. His voice was surprisingly calm considering how nervous he was, but it seemed that Elrond couldn’t fault him. He’d never been more thankful that his voice was steady.

“In either case,” Thorin said, “I doubt there is anything more I can do. I can only tell you that that ring was no ordinary ring, and that perhaps it was used in some sort of ritual and thus had gained
either an attached spirit or a dark aura of some sort. If it reappears then contact me, otherwise there’s little more I can say.”

Elrond nodded, accepting Thorin’s words with little complaint. “You’re welcome to stay here until Bilbo leaves, if you wish.” He said. “I’ll compensate you for your time.”

Thorin shook his head. “It’s unnecessary.”

Again, Elrond nodded. After he left them to finish their meal, Bilbo glanced at Thorin curiously. “You won’t ask to be compensated?”

“No.” Thorin answered. “He’s offered accommodation well past the restraints of the case, as well as amenable facilities. And…” He paused as though searching for the right words, and turned his head to the side. “I feel as though I’ve gained more than what a pay could offer me here.”

Bilbo’s eyes widened. A strange feeling came to his chest, one unlike anything he’d ever felt before. He always came to experience new emotions and sensations when he was with Thorin, even if he did not quite understand them. Regardless, they were what he could describe as pleasant, so he was never particularly put off by Thorin’s offhanded comments. Deep down in a place he didn’t recognise, he quite liked them.

On the last night of Bilbo’s stay at Rivendell, he dreamed. He hadn’t had a dream or even a nightmare since he started sharing a bed with Thorin, so he hadn’t expected it. He didn’t recognise that it was a dream when he first opened his eyes, and instead found himself in an unfamiliar but unfrightening place – he was in a garden. Just faintly, images of Elrond’s garden and the orchard drifted through his mind, and he found that he couldn’t be afraid of such a green place. There was greenery overflowing from every garden bed, but Bilbo thought that was because no one had cared to look after it in a while. He was seated on a bench, one that was made from wood and wrought iron. It was dirty, but he couldn’t seem to bring himself to care.

Distantly he wondered if he’d ever been to this place before. He felt as though he should remember it, but any such memory he had of it had long since faded and disappeared completely. When he looked around, trying to see if the memory could be prompted into returning, there was nothing that seemed instinctively familiar.

As he went to stand, something pulled on his limbs. His eyes slowly drifted down, and a spike of fear chilled him. The plants had grown over where his wrists lay limply on the bench. Similarly his feet had disappeared under leaves and tightening vines, and the more he realised he was stuck the tighter the bonds became. He could feel leaves brushing against his throat, and when he tried to tilt his head he knew that vines had wrapped around his throat. How long had he been sitting there, to have the plants grow over him as they did? Had no one noticed him there, or had they too forgotten, just as he had? The more his thoughts strayed towards it, the tireder he became, and soon enough he could do nothing more than slump against the seat. He gave a weak tug on his wrist, but the plants didn’t loosen, and so he stopped.

He’d been here for too long, hadn’t he? Waited in the dreary haze of lost memories and time until it was too late to escape. This place was the only place he would be safe, and if he were to leave then he would become like everyone else, and perhaps that was the only thing worse than death. Even if he were to wait here for all of eternity, for so long that even he became a part of the garden, was that not better than fading away and being consumed by something so dark and terrifying his soul would never find rest?
There wasn’t much more that he could do, was there?

It was only when he woke that he realised he was dreaming. For a moment it was like he wasn’t even breathing, that his lungs had stopped working and his mind had disconnected from his body. After the initial alarm of that thought had passed he found that he’d simply slept in late, and that Thorin was awake.

“You were dreaming.” Thorin whispered. His fingers were in Bilbo’s hair, gently pulling apart the knots that had developed while he had slept. “Did you have a nightmare?”

Bilbo shook his head, but not hard enough to dislodge Thorin’s fingers. “I don’t think so.” He said quietly. “It was strange.”

“Do you have a lot of strange dreams?”

Bilbo hummed thoughtfully. “Sometimes.” He said. “But I can’t remember them well.”

“You looked a little uneasy.” Thorin said. “There was a frown on your face.”

“Because it was strange.” Bilbo answered simply.

Thorin chuckled. “If you say so.” He said. “But you are awake now. What do you want to do today?”

“I don’t know.” Bilbo said. “I have to pack, but it would be nice to see the ocean up close.”

“Then do you want to go down to the wharf?”

The wharf only reminded Bilbo of what he’d done, but the only time he’d seen it was during the night. Even with the lingering guilt in his heart he thought that perhaps the ocean could still be an inviting place, so after a moment he nodded. “Would that be alright?”

“Of course.” Thorin said. “When do you want to go?”

Bilbo shrugged, and rested his head against his pillow again. He felt comfortable as he was, and was reluctant to move. The feeling of Thorin’s fingers carding through his hair only relaxed him further in a state of drowsiness, and he thought that it wouldn’t be so bad to stay in bed for a little while longer.
CASE EIGHT – THE DARK MANOR

Bilbo finished school without much incident. He did well on all of his exams, but not noticeably so. Graduation was a simple affair, and after promises to keep in contact with Milo and Hamfast made they went their separate ways. He had been quite surprised to find Thranduil and Legolas sitting in the audience as he was awarded his certificate. It was hard to miss people such as them – their long blonde hair alone made them stand out considerably so. Bilbo hadn’t asked them to come, but hearing them clap politely for him just like everyone else’s parents and family had done for them made his heart feel exceptionally warm.

Soon enough, the problem of accommodation came up. Bilbo’s home had been one funded by the school and as he no longer attended it was inevitable he had to leave. His memories of his home were all so similar it seemed as though there were none at all, but some things he couldn’t help but recall when he thought of the house he’d lived in for so long. He remembered when Legolas and Thranduil had come over; they’d been the first people he’d ever had in his home, even if he had not quite invited them in. Thorin had been there too, and they’d had dinner together. He looked on that memory fondly, and believed he would miss the house, even if just a little. And although he didn’t particularly believe he’d done anything to deserve it, Thranduil offered him a place to stay.

It hadn’t been long since he moved in with Thranduil that they were offered another case. Thorin had called Bilbo – he often did, and no longer relied on Thranduil to pass on the message – and had been
a little surprised when he found out Bilbo’s current residential situation, but he wasn’t fussed by it. For a brief moment Bilbo was worried Thorin would feel upset, but for what reason would that possibly occur? He dismissed the feelings, unable to comprehend them, and handed the phone over to Thranduil so that he could take down the important details. After he hung up Thranduil let out a sigh, and leaned back in his seat at the kitchen counter.

“What is it?” Legolas asked.

“A haunted house.” Thranduil said. “On the surface.”

“And beneath that?”

Thranduil frowned. “Oakenshield said that it was a worker at the house that contacted him, and not the owners of the house themselves. That in itself presents several problems, because without their permission we are not legally allowed to enter their property.”

“What is it?” Thranduil asked.

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“And beneath that?”

Thranduil frowned. “Oakenshield said that it was a worker at the house that contacted him, and not the owners of the house themselves. That in itself presents several problems, because without their permission we are not legally allowed to enter their property.”

“Have they given their permission?”

“It’s hard to understand.” Thranduil said, shaking his head. “The owners are the ones the workers want Oakenshield to investigate, along with the house. It seems as though there is something strange with them as well, though I believe they have given permission. Apparently it’s difficult to approach them.”

Legolas made a puzzled noise, and frowned. Bilbo was struck by the thought that both Legolas and Thranduil had the same frown. “What are we going to do?”

“I believe we’ve been welcomed to the house.” Thranduil answered. “But I don’t have a good feeling about it.”

Their location was more than a day’s drive away, and so they stopped halfway through the day to stay at a small motel beside a river. Carc was always the one to drive and he was reluctant to continue through the night, and it wasn’t too expensive to stay at the motel. In either case the area was quite beautiful. Autumn had turned most of the trees bare and the water in the river quite cold but still sunshine bared down on the ground. Bilbo had taken to wearing scarves and a beanie when outdoors now, and he wasn’t the only one to start favouring winter clothes.

Lunch was a quaint affair. They bought food from the nearest little shop at the local town and ate at a picnic bench beside the water. The food was warm and settled in Bilbo’s stomach nicely. After the food had all been eaten Carc retired to his room, but the rest of the team stayed outside to enjoy the refreshingly cold air. Legolas went to explore the creek bed with Thranduil, but Bilbo was content to sit beside Thorin for a little while longer.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t come to your graduation.” Thorin said, after a moment.

Bilbo gave him a surprised look. “It’s fine.” He said honestly. “I didn’t expect anyone to go.”

“Was it nice to have Thranduil and Legolas there?”

Bilbo nodded, feeling bashful. “Everyone else had someone there for them, so it was nice. I didn’t ask them too, but they came anyway…”

Thorin smiled faintly. “Of course they did, they’re quite fond of you.” He said. “Legolas enjoys your company. He always complains when I don’t ask you to join us on the cases he’s involved with.”
“He’s certainly quite lively.” Bilbo remarked.

“Do you enjoy living with them?”

Bilbo nodded again. “I don’t quite understand why Thranduil offered, but I’m grateful that he did.”

Thorin looked over him curiously. “He offered because he cares for you.” Thorin said. “That’s what people do, Bilbo.”

“I see.” Bilbo said thoughtfully. Put like that, it seemed to make a little more sense. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever be able to understand the feelings and whims of others, but perhaps Thorin could help him.

The conversation was pleasant as they watched Thranduil and Legolas linger along the river bed. When the two of them returned to the picnic bench, Bilbo was bent over Thorin’s phone watching him play a game. He never thought Thorin was the type to play such things, but even he must get bored every now and then. Bilbo enjoyed his time with everyone, even if all they did was sit outside and talk.

Half-awake, Bilbo heard people talking. He didn’t usually sleep in the car but that morning he’d still been quite tired. Although Thorin usually sat in the front seat with Carc he had switched with Thranduil, and somehow Bilbo had ended up in the centre of the backseat rather than by the window. It was an unusual arrangement, though Bilbo was too sleepy to think much of it. When Thorin had quietly offered his shoulder, Bilbo didn’t give it a second thought before he lowered his head and drifted off to sleep.

“I don’t think I’ve seen him smile.” Thranduil said quietly. “At least, not properly. He’s a very quiet person, Legolas.”

“I have.” Thorin murmured. His voice as deep and reverberated through his throat and chest. “Seen him smile.”

“Really?” Legolas asked. “No fair.”

Thorin dug around in his pocket, and then Bilbo heard the click of his phone unlocking. The van was quiet for moment, but then he heard Legolas make a small sound. In his sleepiness he wasn’t quite sure what kind of noise it was.

“He has a nice smile.” Legolas said. “I want to see it properly. You didn’t tell me you went to Rivendell with him.”

“It wasn’t intentional.” Thorin said. “I thought you knew.”

“I did, Bilbo told me.” Legolas replied. There was a pout in his voice. “I want to go with him next time.”

“Did he enjoy himself?” Thranduil asked. “Elrond wasn’t too hard on him, was he?”

“No, he seemed happy.” Thorin said. “Elrond was quite accommodating towards him. They’re very similar, though Elrond has a deeper understanding of people.”

Thranduil hummed in agreement, and the conversation shifted again. Bilbo was tempted to lift his head and shake away his sleepiness, but it was easier to sink deeper into it.
He dreamed of bad things. He couldn’t remember how long it had been since his sleep was plagued with something unforgiveable, and yet he found himself in a place he did not want to be. The odd architecture of the room and the coldness that lingered in its corners immediately told him that this was his childhood home.

There were people coming in and out of the door like it was revolving. They weren’t exactly people, however, but rather they were indiscriminate shadows. Bilbo found it incredibly difficult to focus on them, and when he looked through them or beside them, they turned into orbs. Were they spirits, then, and not living people? He didn’t know, but they made him nervous. He didn’t think he’d ever been good with people, least of all when he was a child, and if these people were in fact spirits how was he meant to interact with them? Was he meant to in the first place?

He shrunk against the doorway and escaped down the hallway. He didn’t know where he was going, but he felt as though he had to avoid those spirits at all costs. They didn’t feel whole, and he didn’t know if they were dangerous. However, they seemed to be wherever he went. The polluted the hallways and drifted through walls. They had no sense for him, and seemed unafraid to drift in his direction despite his obvious fear. The more that appeared, the faster his heart began to race, and the more he began to run.

The room he came across was dark. He’d entered it through a door that was just like every other in the corridor, but he didn’t think this room was similar to any in the entire house. When he glanced down at his feet he found that he wasn’t wearing shoes and that his bare toes were wriggled into damp dirt. He looked up and discovered that he was in a garden, but there was no sunlight. It was like the house had been built around it, and with a lingering feeling of dread he began to inch down the path carved by rows of hedges and overflowing garden beds.

Suddenly, a figure appeared before him. His heart leapt into his throat, and with a breathless voice he asked, “N-Nimrodel?”

It was definitely Nimrodel. The child’s eyes were just as bright, and although his hair was darker than Bilbo had ever seen it everything about him was the same. There was a purple flower tucked behind his ear. “You shouldn’t be here.” Nimrodel said.

Bilbo’s breathes came out sharp and short, and it took him a moment before he could form any words. “What are you doing here?” He whispered. “Y-You’re meant to be gone now, to be at peace.”

“I am.” Nimrodel said. “You helped me, so I want to help you.” He reached out a hand, and ignored Bilbo’s flinch as his fingertips brushed against Bilbo’s palm. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“What do you mean?”

“This is a bad place.” Nimrodel wrapped his fingers around Bilbo’s, and pulled him down the path. “Don’t come here.”

“But...”

“No.” Nimrodel shook his head. “This place is dangerous. Don’t come here.”

Bilbo swallowed his words as though they were a physical lump in his throat. “Why are you here?” He asked. “Why can I see you?”

Nimrodel’s eyes flickered up to him. They reached a door, and Nimrodel looked away to push it
open. The hallway on the other side was brightly illuminated, so much so that Bilbo couldn’t see more than a few paces down it before the hallway disappeared into smudges of light. Nimrodel led him forward out from the darkened garden, and gripped his hand tighter. “I’ve always been here.” Nimrodel said. He shook Bilbo’s hand gently, drawing attention to it. His palm was surprisingly warm. “Don’t come here, alright? I don’t know if I can protect you for long.”

Nimrodel shouldn’t have to protect him, Bilbo thought. He was just a child, and he’d suffered so much. He deserved to be happy, not to be stuck in a dark and dangerous place. Panic condensed in his chest, and he gripped Nimrodel’s hand tightly. He’d only ever wanted Nimrodel to be happy after everything that had happened. This place was turning into something more frightful than he ever thought it could be.

Bilbo woke with a start. Thorin was shaking him, calling his name, but it took Bilbo a moment to register it.

“We’re almost there.” Thorin said quietly. “Are you alright?”

Bilbo shivered. He felt cold on the inside, and drained of energy even though he’d slept for so long. “I’m fine.” He said stiffly. Thorin gave him a doubtful look, but didn’t press him further. He placed a warm hand on Bilbo’s thigh, and didn’t say anything when Bilbo closed his eyes to focus on that spot of growing warmth on his leg. It grounded him, and after a few moments he felt his breathing calm down.

Eventually, the location of their next case came into view. Bilbo’s heart immediately kicked up again, and he couldn’t help but clutch Thorin’s arm tight enough to bruise. Thorin cringed at Bilbo’s sudden grip, and he shot him a concerned look. Bilbo remained silent as they exited the van, and refused to leave Thorin’s side even with some prodding from Legolas.

A man greeted them. He was wearing a suit, and was likely the butler of the house. He was older in age, and even as he introduced himself nervously Bilbo couldn’t focus on him. The house looked incredibly strange on the outside, and was the biggest house Bilbo had ever seen. He couldn’t count all of its chimneys and windows, and felt sick to his stomach the longer he stood in its shadow.

Suddenly, a woman burst out from the house. She had long, dark brown hair that curled wildly, and a little nose. She was wearing very luxurious clothing of which moved around her body as though gravity did not affect it. Bilbo couldn’t have guessed her age, but she was perhaps older than Thranduil by no more than a decade.

Out of nowhere, she leapt forwards and flung her arms around Bilbo, holding him tight enough to pull him from Thorin. “Oh, Bilbo!” She cried. “I’ve missed you so much!”

Something dark and painful uncurled in Bilbo’s head. He felt like he was going to pass out. His fingers twitched as though he was going to return the embrace, but his forced his arms to stay still. “H-hello, Mother.”

Chapter End Notes

This is the start of the last case :’(}
Eleutherophobia

Chapter Summary

Unfamiliar faces and persistent fears.

Chapter Notes

Eleutherophobia - the fear of freedom.

“Mother?” Legolas said incredulously as he stepped forwards to grab Bilbo’s wrist. His voice was higher with concern than usual. “Bilbo…”

The woman’s eyes flashed with something dark as her gaze slid towards Legolas. A cold thread of fear ran down Bilbo’s spine, and without thinking he stretched out his arm to push Legolas behind him. His mother’s eyes, distracted by the motion, shifted back to him and the darkness in those irises disappeared.

“I must tell your father you’ve returned.” She said. With not a single word more she turned on her heels and dashed back towards the house. Bilbo watched her go with a sinking feeling of dread. Her face had appeared like the missing piece of a puzzle he no longer wanted to put together, and no matter how hard he tried to place it the thoughts seemed to only drift away further. Absently he grabbed at his chest. His heart was beating painfully fast, and he couldn’t stop it, not with his mind in such a disarray.

“I wasn’t aware our clients were your parents.” Thorin said. He reached out a hand, pressed his palm to Bilbo’s shoulder. It was comforting. “Their last name is different.”

“I don’t know their names.” Bilbo whispered. “I can’t remember them.”


Bilbo pursed his lips, but didn’t complain. Legolas released his wrist, and Thorin pulled him along with a hand on the small of his back. Bilbo recoiled at the sight of the house, and swallowed heavily as they passed through the front doors. The air was cold and stagnant on the inside of the entrance, and filled his lungs with unpleasantness. A sharp pain struck his heart and his face twisted. Thorin grabbed at his waist to keep him upright, and didn’t let go even when Bilbo somehow managed to regain his feet.

The butler led them to a large common room. Its interior design was from an era Bilbo couldn’t quite place. Despite all the plush armchairs and chaise lounges, and the wide open windows that let in a fair bit of light, the room felt cold and desolate. He thought that perhaps it had once been welcoming and rich with liveliness, but all the life had long since been drained from it. Thorin had him sit on one of the tiny lounges, and took the seat next to him.

“Are you alright?” Thorin asked quietly.
“It hurts.” Bilbo whispered. Thorin rubbed his back with a gentle hand. If anyone else noticed the more-than-platonic touch, then it went unmentioned.

“Young Master,” The butler murmured, “Here.”

Bilbo took the offered glass of water with shaky hands. The coolness of the liquid soothed his throat. He wondered how the butler knew that that would work for such a strange type of pain. The man didn’t seem familiar, but Bilbo knew that the man had to be at least somewhat familiar with him. “You shouldn’t call me that.” He murmured anyway, eyes downcast.

A waning smile came to the man’s face. “I didn’t expect you to return here.”

“When did I leave?”

The butler shakes his head. “If I am being honest with you, Young Master, I am not quite sure myself. Are you still having memory troubles?”

Bilbo nodded, feeling uneasy. “How… How did you know?”

“You told me quite some time ago, Young Master. Do you not remember?”

Bilbo lowered his eyes and frowned deeply. He couldn’t remember anything to do with this man, and neither could he remember his parents. He only had faint impressions of memories, only partial pieces of a puzzle that were impossible to fit together. He had ghostly feelings and little imprints of the house, but nothing solid. If one asked him to go to the room he’d lived in as a child, he would be utterly unable to guide them there.

“For the time being, I think it would be best to avoid the eyes of your parents.” The butler said quietly. “If you’ll pardon my rudeness in saying so.”

Bilbo shook his head. He didn’t feel like he had much of a connection with his parents, or if he did he had forgotten it. While he certainly recognised his mother as soon as she put her arms around him, there was a place deep inside that rejected her as any sort of parental figure. He didn’t even remember her name. Would it be appropriate for him to call her by such a familial name? She’d been quite enthusiastic at his return, so perhaps it wasn’t wrong.

“In either case, I will accompany you until it’s time to retire for the night.” The butler said. “It’s not safe to wander these halls alone, so if you wish to go anywhere I insist that you contact me. At any other time I would have offered you each a room, but I think it would be best for you all to stay in the same place as much as possible.”

Bilbo clutched at Thorin’s arm. He agreed with what the butler had said. From his dreams and his memories he knew that this house was a maze in a maze, and that one wrong turn could result in something very bad happening. In separate rooms it would be hard to protect one another – what if something came to take one of them away? Just the thought of it made him feel sick to his stomach.

“I think it would be best to only grab the light equipment.” Thorin said. “And set it up in this room. If we stay here the night, can you get us futons and blankets?”

The butler nodded. “I’ll accompany you to get your equipment, then fetch you what you need. I must thank you for helping us, and…” He paused for a moment, then sighed. “And for bringing our Young Master home, even if unknowingly.”
By the time the equipment was set up – a few cameras, including infrared ones, as well as microphones and the corresponding computers – it was well into the evening. Bilbo only became more and more apprehensive as the sunlight started to fade. He compulsively pulled all the curtains shut as far as they would go, and felt compelled to lock every door that led into the room except for the main one. Only after they’d been brought all the things they needed to sleep peacefully had Bilbo finally been able to lock the door without anyone needing to leave again.

While most of the team members disappeared into corners of the room and adjoining bathroom to get ready for bed, Legolas came to sit beside Bilbo. He’d had a concerned frown on his face all day, and looked just as jumpy as Bilbo felt. “This house is filled with a bad feeling.” He murmured quietly. “But I can’t understand it. It’s like it’s muffled.”

Bilbo thought about how he felt that the spirits he’d seen in his dreams felt hollow, and nodded. “I don’t like being here.” He said. “I want to go home.”

Legolas offered him a weak smile. “Me too.” He was quiet for a moment. “Do you really not remember this place?”

Bilbo shook his head. “I don’t.” He whispered. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologise.” Legolas reprimanded lightly. “I don’t think it’s your fault. This place is really odd. Even I can’t understand what’s going on.”

Bilbo wished he could help out more. Wasn’t this place the home he grew up in, and its occupants the people who raised him? For what possible reason could his memory have been so full of holes, as it was? It frustrated him, but more than that it filled him with an overbearing sense of helplessness. He felt paralysed by fear and uncertainty, and no matter how hard he tried to organise his thoughts they kept slipping out of his grasp.

When it came time to sleep, Bilbo found that his mind wouldn’t rest. He was in the middle of the room, though it wasn’t intentional. In the dark he couldn’t see much more than the outline of Thorin’s figure, but he knew Thorin wasn’t sleeping. He only hesitated for a moment before shifting across the futons. His fingers brushed against what he thought must be Thorin’s shoulder, and silently Thorin lifted the edge of his blanket. Bilbo dragged his own over and added it on top before burrowing into the space Thorin had created.

“I’m scared.” He mumbled. “It hurts to be here.”

Thorin hummed quietly, and slid a hand around to touch Bilbo’s back. “Physical pain?”

Bilbo nodded. “In my chest.”

A soft sigh came from Thorin. “Do you still have my charm?”

Bilbo nodded again. “It’s in my pocket.”

“I’ll have Legolas write you one in the morning.” Thorin said. “I’m concerned that the pain is physical. Only malevolent or revengeful spirits usually cause physical harm, and only for very specific reasons. That might make this case a little more difficult…”

“I’m sorry…”

“Don’t apologise.” Thorin murmured. “None of this is your fault.”

“But what if… What if it becomes my fault? I can’t remember anything, Thorin. I’m really scared.”
“I know.” Thorin soothed. “We’ll do our best to figure it out, alright? I won’t let anything hurt you.”

Bilbo bit his lip, feeling upset. Still, Thorin’s words comforted him in a way he didn’t quite understand him. In the same way that Thorin could so easily promise such a difficult thing, Bilbo felt like he could do the same. He thought about all his strange dreams, about Nimrodel’s warning and the pain in his chest and his mother’s unnaturally sharp eyes and he knew he’d do anything to protect those he cared about from such dangerous things. Even if that meant he got hurt, or that something bad happened to him, as long as they were safe he would endure it. That was what friends did for one another, was it not?

“What are my parent’s names?” Bilbo asked quietly.

“Bungo Baggins and Belladonna Took.”

Bilbo’s eyes went wide with fright. Belladonna – that was a name that had haunted him for countless nights. His hands started to tremble as he thought back to that ring at Rivendell, about its strange appearance and an inscription only he could see. What could that ring possibly have to do with his parents?

“Are you sure you’re alright to stay here, Bilbo?” Thorin asked. “If anything, I think I might prefer if you head home. This case is already proving to be quite foreboding, and if it gets any worse I will withdraw before anyone has a chance to get hurt.”

Bilbo shook his head. “No…” He said. “I have to know what’s going on. I don’t want to be preyed upon by this anymore. It’s too much.”

“I understand.” Thorin murmured. He smoothed back Bilbo’s hair, and carefully adjusted the covers. “Try not to worry too much, Bilbo. We’re going to do everything carefully here, alright? We’ll take it one day at a time.”

Bilbo thought about the ring again, and all the strange dreams he’d had. He hadn’t even told Thorin about any of it, and the words lingered on his lips for a moment before he banished them. Thorin would be in danger if he knew about that. It was a strange instinct he had, but he trusted it. He didn’t want Thorin to be threatened by anything that clearly wasn’t meant for him, because if he knew he would surely be hurt.

“Try and get some rest, alright?” Thorin murmured. His fingers stopped moving through Bilbo’s hair, and instead cradled the back of his head. Bilbo found himself in a position that was warm and comfortable, and although the lingering threat of his childhood him flittered around the edges of his mind it was easy to push aside. From this close, Bilbo could smell Thorin’s scent. It was a soft scent, one that was clean and pure and perhaps even a little bit masculine.

“Goodnight.” Bilbo whispered.

His eyelids had already started slipping shut when Thorin pressed his lips to Bilbo’s forehead, just softly, like he feared Bilbo might jerk away. “Goodnight, Bilbo.”
Although he felt incredibly sluggish, Bilbo spent the next morning carrying in and setting up equipment at Thorin’s direction. It was a slower process than usual mostly due to the fact that they were unable to split into groups. The house itself wasn’t making the whole ordeal go any smoother; it had so many twists and turns and unusual, impractical designs that it would have been impossible to navigate without the butler, Erling, guiding them.

Throughout most of the morning Bilbo was able to forcibly push aside thoughts of the house in favour of concentrating on work. He was always extra careful with the equipment, and it gave him something to focus on. Of course he felt reassured by the steady weight of Thorin’s eyes on his back, and Legolas’s mindless chatter was always easy to listen to. By the time mid-morning came about, however, Bilbo’s uneasy feeling began to worsen. He was preparing to ask Thorin if they could return to the room when Belladonna suddenly strolled in. On her elbow was a man a few inches taller than her, with brown hair that curled at the ends and eyes that deceiving seemed quite gentle. In his face Bilbo could see traits he recognised, traits that were his own. That man must have been Bungo Baggins – his father.

“Bilbo, dear,” Belladonna said brightly, “Won’t you come eat with us? We have so much to catch up on.”

The hair on the back of Bilbo’s neck stood up. The words to reject the offer choked him, and under Belladonna’s careful scrutiny he felt as though he had no choice to agree. Although he could see Thorin rising to refuse them just out of the corner of his eye, he nodded his head. “A-alright…” He murmured. These people were his parents after all, and he had a feeling that if he were to refuse them in any way than some sort of punishment would be doled out. He cast Thorin a single, worried glance before he followed his parents from the room. As the door shut behind him he only became more uneasy.

The hallway was exceptionally cold without anyone he cared about present. He anxiously rubbed his arms, and watched his parents as they walked ahead of him. Although their appearances were normal, Bilbo knew there had to be something dark lingering under the surface. His heart was going wild, and he was incredibly nervous to be around them. He didn’t feel like anything good could come from being alone with them, but he needed answers. He didn’t like the thought of never knowing why he was like he was, and he could be glad to get rid of all the strange experiences he’d had regarding the house.

“This way, Bilbo.” Belladonna instructed. Wide doors appeared before them, and Belladonna
pushed them open. Revealed was a remarkably large dining hall. There was an outstanding display of food already placed on the long table, though noticeably towards one end. Although the room looked clean and well-used the scent of dust and stagnant air filled his lungs.

“Take a seat.” Bungo said. His voice was soft and soothing, and in any other situation Bilbo was sure he would have been reassured by it. In this instance, however, he felt unsettled. He watched Belladonna and Bungo take a seat on one side of the table, though neither of them sat at its head. Bilbo was reluctant to sit across from them, to be so firmly under their gaze, and with a great deal of reluctance he took the seat at the head of the table. At least there he felt a little more sheltered, like he could escape easier if need be.

“How have you been?” Belladonna asked. “I hardly expected you to show up with those... People.” Bilbo pursed his lips. “They’re my friends.” He said.

Belladonna stared at him curiously. Her eyes were as sharp as ever. “Yes,” She said slowly, “So you say. How is school?”

“I graduated.”

“Congratulations.” Bungo said. “Did you do well on your exams?”

Bilbo clenched his hands tightly, and didn’t answer the question. He kept his eyes firmly fixed on the table. “What is the meaning of this?” He asked quietly. “Why am I here?”

“Why, aren’t you the one who came home yourself?” Belladonna said. “It’s lovely to have you home.”

This wasn’t his home, but Bilbo kept the thought to himself. He thought of home, and only his own school-funded rooms came to mind, and Thranduil’s house. That was what home had become. “I don’t remember you.” He finally said.

The jovial expression on Belladonna’s face began to slide. “Of course you don’t.” She said simply. “You never had.”

He stiffened. “What do you mean?”

“Come now,” Bungo interrupted, “This surely isn’t the kind of talk to have over a meal. We should catch up, don’t you think? We’ve missed you greatly, Bilbo. Have something to eat.”

Bilbo glanced at the food spread across the table. It certainly looked appealing, but his stomach churned at the thought of eating. He swallowed down his sickness, and shook his head. “No.” He murmured. “Tell me what’s going on.”

Belladonna’s eyes fixated on him. She didn’t look so cheerful anymore. “You should listen to your parents, Bilbo.” She murmured. “You always have, haven’t you? You’re a good kid.”

Bilbo shivered. She spoke as though she wasn’t Bilbo’s mother, like she had disconnected from that role during Bilbo’s absence. He felt his hands to begin to tremble, and with a start he pushed himself away from the table. “I have to go.” He said.

“Bilbo-”

He left the room before anyone could stop him. The doors slammed shut loudly behind him, and he found himself in a hallway he didn’t recognise. Just like in the nightmares he had he was lost and
riled up, and with the lingering presence of his parents pressing against his back he took no chances and rushed off in the first direction he saw.

His breaths became laboured as he turned down hallway after hallway. No matter where he went nothing became familiar – he saw arches and square doorways, sunlights and hallways with windows into other rooms, and doorways where there simply shouldn’t be doorways. He went up a staircase before he realised he’d never gone down one in the first place, and just like that he was lost. When he turned to head back down a floor, the staircase had completely disappeared.

He pressed his hand over his heart as he feebly glanced down the hallway. The interior styling had changed, had turned richer and darker in colour. Anxiously he reached for his pants, trying to search for the weight of his phone, but his pockets were empty. With no way to contact anyone he was completely stranded in the biggest house he’d ever seen. He inhaled deeply, and began to walk down the hallway. He made sure never to open a door, and instead searched for a staircase back down. Gradually the light seemed to fade from the hallways even though he knew the sun had to be rising outside.

Then, out of nowhere, orbs began to materialise in the air. They were soft around the edges and glowed faintly, and just like in his dreams they felt hollow and dull. He didn’t think he’d ever seen one in person, outside of a dream, and as such they somewhat frightened him. His body went stiff as he watched them, and then one drifted straight through him. The breath in his lungs was sucked out as pain ricocheted through his body, and he let out a pained cry as he fell to his knees.

The orbs were starting to saturate the hallway. He stumbled to his feet and moved back down the hallway, clutching the wall for support. Another orb drifted through his arm, and he bit back a second, pained groan. He hurriedly pushed up his sleeve to bare his skin, and marring it was a darkening mottle of blue and purple. It frightened him more than he liked to admit, and in a rush he pulled down the collar of his shirt to peer at where the first orb had drifted. Sure enough there was a dark bruise spreading across his skin there, too.

He pursed his lips, and stood again. This hallway was a bad place, then. He thought it might have been a guest wing, or a place for the employees at the manor to reside, but he didn’t know. He didn’t want to find out, either. It didn’t feel safe.

At the end of the hallway, Frodo appeared. Bilbo startled hard enough to physically jump, but Frodo seemed unfazed. His eyes weren’t quite as bright as usual, and they didn’t seem as lively either. He beckoned Bilbo forwards, and without any reason to mistrust him Bilbo complied. Frodo led him down a hallway he hadn’t noticed, one that went in a different direction to the spirits. Eventually, the hallway became familiar. Bilbo glanced away from Frodo’s back just for a moment, and he disappeared. He paused, but shook his head, and carried on. Frodo was a spirit, that much was clear. He came and went as freely as he wished, though he often appeared when Bilbo was in trouble, didn’t he? Feeling frustrated, he pushed the thoughts away, and followed the hallway down to the room they’d been given by Erling.

He didn’t want to think about it.

“It seems that the Tooks hail from France.” Thorin said as he passed out paperwork. “At least distantly. Your mother and father met there, Bilbo, though they moved here when they were young, it seems. Aside from their immigration records, we couldn’t find anything else on them except a marriage certificate.”

Thranduil flicked through the paperwork, and a frown appeared on his face. “Where’s Bilbo’s birth
certificate? It should be listed under their names. Legolas’s is under mine.”

“That’s the strange thing.” Thorin murmured. “His record isn’t accessible. Do you have a copy of it, Bilbo?”

Bilbo shook his head. Under the table, he grabbed fistfuls of the hem of his sweater. He’d never seen his birth certificate, but he knew he had a birthday, and that his last name was Baggins. If that much was so, then he must have a birth certificate, mustn’t he?

“Perhaps you should check the hospital records.” Thranduil suggested. He held up a page from the papers Thorin had handed him. “This says that the Took’s have lived here for longer than Bilbo has been alive, so it’s likely he was born at a hospital, close in relation to this location, right? He would have a record at one of them, even if he’s only visited the hospital just once.”

“That’s true.” Thorin nodded. He glanced at Carc who was already typing away at his laptop. “The other noticeably strange thing about this is the design of the house. It simply doesn’t make sense.”

“How so?” Legolas frowned. “Because it’s so big?”

Thorin shook his head. “No, it’s statistically flawed.” He explained. “Some rooms, when measured from the outside, should be rectangular, but from the inside they are perfectly square. There are other rooms that have windows, but when opened they don’t lead to the outside but to yet another room with no door that shouldn’t be able to fit where it’s located. There are staircases that lead up a level, but when one circles back in the same direction they are on the same floor.” He glanced at Bilbo, who nodded. That was what he experienced. “Each section of this house seems to have been built during a different time period. I doubt there has been a period of longer than five years wherein an addition to this house hasn’t been made.”

“That’s why it’s so large.” Thranduil nodded. “Are there floor plans?”

Thorin shook his head. “None, not even from the original building. Carc pulled the employment records related to this house as well, and it seems that they’ve had a revolving door of workers for more than a decade, though only noticeably so after the Took’s moved in.”

“What are we going to do, then?” Thranduil asked. “There’s no way to cover every inch of this house.”

“I agree.” Thorin murmured. “For now we’ll continue to take measurements so we have something to work off, and I want Legolas to begin writing as many protective charms as possible before you run out of materials.”

“That’s a lot.” Legolas frowned.

“I know.” Thorin answered. “Then we’ll begin interviews, and continue researching. We’re going to figure this out to the best of our ability, but I want everyone to be cautious. I don’t believe we are safe here.”

Bilbo hadn’t told Thorin about the bruises the orbs left on him, or about Frodo. As he changed into his pyjamas he cautiously glanced over the marks littering his skin. They were as large as the orbs had been, bigger than Bilbo’s fist, and were painful to touch. As every minute passed they seemed to darken, and if he turned around there was a matching one where the orb had exited him. He hadn’t known they’d be so painful.
“Bilbo?”

He jumped at Thorin’s voice, and quickly pulled on his pyjama shirt. Thorin was waiting outside of the bathroom door, a frown on his face. “Sorry.” Bilbo murmured. “Did I stay in there too long?”

Thorin shook his head. Bilbo followed him to the futons, and hesitated for a moment before lowering himself down onto Thorin’s. When no complaint arose he pulled over his blanket and rested his head on his pillow.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” Thorin murmured as he carefully fixed the blankets. “You seem frazzled.”

Bilbo frowned. “I don’t like being here.” He whispered. “This place doesn’t feel good.”

Thorin hummed, and slipped his arm over Bilbo’s waist. “Try to get some rest.” He said. Bilbo thought about telling him about the bruises and about everything he’d dreamed of, but he held his tongue. So far he was the only one who’d been hurt, and he didn’t want Thorin to have to suffer the same thing.

“Goodnight.” He said quietly.

Thorin kissed his forehead gently. It was a warm gesture, one that made the tension drain from Bilbo’s shoulders. “Goodnight.”
When Bilbo opened his eyes, the world around him seemed hazy and misshapen. For a moment he felt as though he had completely disconnected from his body, but after blinking several times the images around him began to clear. He lifted himself upright and sluggishly glanced around. It must have only been early morning as the sun hadn’t quite risen yet, and in his tiredness he wondered if he was dreaming. The room felt oddly chilled, more so than usual, and it was blurry around the edges.

For the first time, the paranormal research team were present in Bilbo’s dream. Thorin was sleeping beside him, his hands tucked under his pillow. Legolas was sprawled out on his other side. His long hair was visible in the low light, as was Thranduil’s. Bilbo could only see the faint outline of Carc’s figure, but he knew he was there. He watched everyone for a moment, frowning, as he tried to sort out his jumbled thoughts. He couldn’t quite understand why he’d woken, and what he was dreaming.

Absently, he stood. He felt like there was something he had to do, something that was burning at the back of his mind insistently. Thoughts of his friends and of Thorin soon faded, and before he really knew what he was doing he had opened the door to the room and left. He shut the door behind himself quietly, and somehow he knew he wouldn’t be able to get back in before he figured out what he was looking for.

The corridor was cold, but he hardly felt it. His shoes made small, muffled sounds against the floor; it was the only sound in the empty hall. When he listened carefully, however, the sound of a piano began to reach his ears. The hair on the back of his neck prickled, but with nothing else to guide him he followed the sound. Within minutes he was in a section of the manor that he didn’t recognise and although it frightened him he knew it was inevitable.

Eventually orbs started to appear. At first they were sparse but they thickened in numbers within moments. Bilbo cautiously avoided them, but it was impossible to when so many appeared that he couldn’t see the end of the corridor. When he didn’t snatch his hand back in time and one drifted through his palm he was struck with pain so harsh he couldn’t help but cry out. He cradled his hand as it trembled, watching as a dark bruise begin to spread across his palm and the back of his hand.

He pushed on. It soon became impossible to avoid all of them, and in his rush he became clumsy. The sound of the piano became louder but he lost his bearings he pushed open the first door he came across in an attempt to escape the orbs. He expected to come across a room on the other side but he was faced with yet another hallway. This one was noticeably sparse of both doorways and windows, but the lights were on. When he looked at them closer he realised that the lights were not normal
ceiling lights but rather outdoor lamps that were embedded into the wall where they travelled up and across the ceiling. The still lights themselves hung from the centre of the ceiling all along the hallway.

At the end of the hallway were a pair of narrow doors. When he pushed them open he could once again hear the sound of the piano. It was louder now, and with no orbs in sight he was able to find its source. After he turned a corner he came across a door that was familiar. His heart thudded in his chest as nervousness flooded him. Behind those doors he knew he would find something he wished to never uncover, and yet he walked closer in spite of his fear. The piano music got louder and louder, so much so that it even drowned out the pounding of his heart, but the moment his fingers came in contact with the door handle it abruptly cut off.

He inhaled deeply, and pushed the door open. It swung with a great creak and came to a sudden stop, revealing the room behind it. Just like in his previous dreams the room was large and remarkably bare. The only piece of furniture was an old piano seated just before the far wall of tall windows. A cold breeze washed over Bilbo as he lingered in the doorway. The window beside the piano was pushed wide open, and the trees that lurked outside had bared their leaves into the room. The piano itself carried an air of importance, one Bilbo was immediately hesitant about. It commanded his attention but not for the right reasons, and the longer he looked at it the more he felt his stomach churn.

The door suddenly slammed shut behind him. The noise of it was so loud that he jumped and startled out of whatever frame of mind he’d been in. He rushed back towards the door and pulled on the handle, but it wouldn’t budge. A feeling of panic swelled in his chest, and when he pulled on the door as hard as he could it sprung free. He fled the room as soon as the hallway opened up before him. He knew there would be no conceivable way for him to find the room he was staying in again, not on his own, but he had to get away from that area. Something very bad had happened there, and he didn’t want to stick around for long enough to find out what it was.

Suddenly, his foot slipped on something and he tumbled to the ground. His bruised hand bore the brunt of his weight, and he cried out in pain as shockwaves ricocheted up his arm. He pushed himself upright and jerked his head back to see what he’d slipped on and felt bile rise in his throat. A smear of blood marked the floor. His eyes followed it to its source, where it seeped out from beneath a tightly closed door. His heart pounded wildly in his chest, and he tensely climbed to his feet. His shoe slipped on the floor and it was only with sickness in his throat did he realise it was sticky with blood from when he’d slipped. He glanced at the door, and before he could think of anything better to do he twisted the doorknob and pushed the door open.

The smell of blood immediately seeped out from the hallway in thick bursts. Bilbo gagged and quickly covered his mouth with his hand to stop anything escaping his lips. The hallway was soaked in blood; it saturated the carpet and splattered across the wall in clumps that didn’t look any more than a few hours old. He screamed before he could stop himself, and ran from the door. For several steps his feet left bloody imprints but they faded soon enough. He ran as fast as he could down hallway after hallway and through room after room. Nowhere looked familiar, and it didn’t matter how far he ran. When he turned a corner a staircase appeared, one built so immediately that it did not have a landing and was so flawed in design that he had no time to brace himself. He tumbled down the stairs with a pained yelp, bracing his head.

“Bilbo!”

He flinched at the sound of his name, and lifted his head. Legolas and Thranduil were frantically rushing down the hallway. The sight of them sent an immense wave of relief through Bilbo, so much
so that his eyes started to tear up.

Thranduil reached him first, and carefully lifted him upright. “Bilbo, are you alright?” He demanded, eyes full of worry. “What happened?”

“I… I was dreaming…” Bilbo stammered. His throat felt sore, and he couldn’t form words properly. When he wobbled on his feet, Thranduil lifted him up from the ground.

“We should get you back to the room.” Thranduil said. His frown had deepened. “You don’t look too well, Bilbo.”

“I’m going to be sick.” Bilbo groaned. Thranduil’s arms tightened under him, and with a firmly set expression he began to swiftly walk back the way they came. Legolas flitted after him, expression twisted with concern, and wordlessly he reached out to cradle one of Bilbo’s hands.

How could that have not been a dream? The things that had happened, that he’d felt and seen; they’d always occurred exclusively in his dreams, and he couldn’t fathom that they could become real. And yet the fatigue in his bones and the lingering smell of blood that clung to his clothes couldn’t be mistaken. How was it possible that such horrors could actually occur? When he glanced at his palm, at the dark bruise spreading across his skin, he knew it was terrifyingly real.

What had he gotten himself into?

Thorin was deeply unsettled for the rest of the evening. Bilbo never once felt the weight of his eyes leave, and yet he felt no safer than he would have been if Thorin had not cared so persistently. This time, Bilbo had told them everything that had happened – the orbs, the room with the piano, the blood. He’d left out the bruises on his skin, though the one on his palm was visible and could be easily explained away but his fall. It was difficult to explain that he’d dreamed of the room with the piano before, so he’d omitted that as well. He was tired enough as it was without having to try and clarify exactly what he’d experienced.

He didn’t even understand it himself.

No one dared leave the room that morning. It was easy enough to spend the day compiling all the information that the cameras had received during the night. There was a camera at the end of the hallway just outside of the room that had captured Bilbo wandering the hallway. His figure had been stiff and his expression had been lost, and the sight of himself in such a state frightened him greatly.

Eventually everyone settled down at the table to review the information they’d gathered. Bilbo remained tightly cocooned in his blanket as he huddled on his seat. Legolas brought him a fresh cup of tea, and it was all Bilbo could do but offer him a wan smile in thanks, though he had no doubt it was more of a forced grimace.

“Our search for Bilbo’s birth certificate came up negative.” Thranduil said as he laid out papers across the table. “I checked with hospitals outside of this area, but there’s nothing. The Tooks haven’t lived in any other house before or after Bilbo’s birth, so realistically there’s no other place for Bilbo to have been born unless it was a home birth. But even then… There should be at least something, and there’s simply not.”

Thorin hummed, deep in thought. “I was looking for photographs of the Tooks from before Bilbo was born, but I haven’t found any. It’s as though there’s no trace of them before Bilbo’s birth, aside from their names on the contract for this house.”
Bilbo cringed. This was feeling less like an investigation about the house and more like an investigation on himself. While he wanted answers, he wasn’t sure if he was ready for them. If they were only going to bring him pain, then were they worth all the trouble? He liked the person he had become, the one who could message Legolas every day and crawl into Thorin’s futon freely and made tea for Thranduil in the morning. He didn’t want to lose that person, and he feared he would. If this was as far as he could go with memories, and more were starting to surface, then would he begin to lose the ones he already had?

He sunk into his shoulders, and closed his eyes. He didn’t want to be afraid anymore.
Interviews were conducted after they ate a small lunch. Bilbo was still too weary to properly take notes so he sat by Legolas rather than by Thorin, and watched as Legolas continued writing protective charms. He always carried materials on him for charms and other sort of warding that he could do, and it was disconcerting to watch him burn through so much of it on just a single case.

For the most part, Bilbo was able to avoid doing work while the interviews were being conducted. He did notice, however, that all the employees at the manor were older in age. He didn’t think there was anyone under the age of fifty, and he thought that perhaps Erling was in his late sixties. It was strange to think that the entire manor could be run and cleaned by just a handful of elderly workers, however capable they may be. Would it not make sense to have younger, more physically able workers to do outdoor work and heavy lifting?

Eventually he felt as though he should be doing something productive, so he dragged one of the laptops towards himself and began to read over everything they already knew. Carc liked to keep precise notes and documents so it wasn’t too difficult to get through it all. It made no sense that he wouldn’t have a birth certificate, especially not when he’d been born and raised in the same country all his life. When he searched for his parents’ birth certificates he found them easily. There was nothing odd about them either, so he dismissed them with a frustrated frown. Again, his mind strayed back to the workers. Hadn’t it been mentioned that there had been a noticeable amount of employees hired, more so than would normally be considered usual? With that thought in mind he began to dig up the employment records for the manor. There were a lot that initially weren’t difficult to uncover. For the last fifteen to twenty or so years there were more than forty employees altogether. Most of them were older, but there were about ten to twelve younger workers.

The rest of the employees, however, were more difficult to uncover. He found a newspaper article reporting about how the manor briefly functioned as an orphanage, though it was mysteriously shut down only a decade after it opened. He tried to find records on what happened to the children who came to live in this house, but they proved impossible to find. He set that aside for now and instead continued searching for the employment records from several decades ago.

Eventually he came across a couple. Most seemed to have been unfiled or destroyed, but the ones that remained started piling up. Soon enough he had more than a dozen, though their digital copies were almost completely indecipherable. Much of it was handwritten in a style he couldn’t quite always comprehend. Fortunately most names and dates were readable, and he was surprised to find that the duration of the workers’ employment was never longer than a handful of months. He set that
information aside, and began to search up the names of the employees.

The elder employees checked out relatively simply. Many had stopped working at the normal retirement age, and had all since died of natural or explainable causes. It was only when Bilbo started going checks into the younger workers that strange happenings started to appear. At first he almost didn’t notice – a handful of workers here and there would mysteriously vanish, and missing persons’ reports would surface correspondingly. However the more Bilbo dug into the records the more such things started to appear. Soon enough there were missing people in every second record, and some had even died of “suspicious or undetermined” causes that sent chills down his spine. How had so many people connected to this house died?

He shivered at the thought of all those orbs. They suddenly made sense – all those missing people must have died here. He thought back to the orphanage and all of its missing records, and he just knew those children had been killed here, too. How could he have been raised in such a blood-stained place? He felt sick to his stomach just thinking about it, and hurriedly pushed the laptop away.

“How’s wrong?” Legolas asked quietly.

Bilbo shook his head and pursed his lips tightly. There was something deeply unsettling in this house, and he had no idea what it was. All those deaths had occurred before he was born, many before his parents had been born, too. And yet even after the owners of the house changed every generation they continued. He had no doubt that any young workers that came here would be killed.

“What’s wrong?” Legolas asked. He put down his pen and turned to face Bilbo properly. “Did you find something?”

Bilbo nodded, and turned the laptop towards him. He watched Legolas read over all the documents he had pulled up on the screen, and drained the last dredges of tea from his teacup while he could. Legolas’s face went paler and paler the more he read, and Bilbo almost felt bad for showing him something so sickening. It wasn’t as though he wouldn’t find out in the end, but some part of Bilbo wished that Legolas didn’t have to experience such a negative thing. He was too pure for it, too kind hearted.

“This explains a lot.” Legolas eventually said as he pushed aside the laptop. “But what could have killed so many people and gone unnoticed for so long? And what do your parents have to do with it?”

Bilbo shook his head. He hadn’t the slightest clue. “I can’t find my birth certificate, either.” He said quietly.

“Maybe you were born in secret.” Legolas offered tentatively. “We’d have to ask your mother to find out. The records might just be missing, or completely sealed outside of Carc’s range…”

Bilbo hummed. Somehow he didn’t think that was the case. If he’d ever visited the doctor, or the dentist, or if he’d had to go to the hospital, there would be a record. Even if his parents had hired a private practitioner there would be records in place that Carc could easily find. Just fleetingly, the thought that perhaps he hadn’t been born at all floated through his mind. He clenched his fists tightly as his mind lingered on those thoughts, and he wondered how it could have been possible. The only way he thought he might have been able to figure it all out would be to ask his parents, and that alone was a frightening concept.

Anxiously, he stood. “I’m going to go find my parents.” He said.
Legolas’s eyes snapped up. “Bilbo, you can’t.” He argued. “It’s too dangerous.”

Bilbo met his gaze. “I have to.” He whispered. “I don’t think they’ll hurt me, Legolas.”

Legolas clenched his jaw. “But what if they do?” He demanded. “They might not hurt you, but what if something else does? What if you lose your memory again, or you get lost?”

“I…” Bilbo glanced away. “I have to know. I’m sure I’ll be fine.” It was a lie, and perhaps Legolas could tell, but he simply frowned and turned away. Bilbo felt awful for putting Legolas in such a situation, but he had no doubt Legolas would get hurt if Bilbo sat idly and did nothing. He’d already been lured from the room once by something he didn’t understand – what if it got impatient and attacked Legolas, too? He doubted any spirit here would come to Legolas’s rescue, nor would any spare him the harshest of experiences. To think Legolas could of witness what he had, felt what he had… He wanted nothing more than to keep Legolas and everyone else safe.

He left Legolas brooding at the table and slipped from the room without anyone noticing. He had no clue as to where his parents could possibly be, but he had a feeling that if he wandered around for long enough they’d come find him whether he wanted them to or not. Sure enough, within minutes Belladonna appeared at the end of the corridor, dressed just as luxuriously as always.

“Ah, Bilbo!” She exclaimed, lifting a hand in a delicate wave. “Won’t you join me for tea?”

The sight of her seemed to make him freeze, and without the ability to talk he did nothing more than nod. Nevertheless Belladonna looked pleased at his acceptance, and eagerly led him through the winding corridors without any trouble with directions. He wondered how many years it took her to learn the layout of such a complicated house. The room she led him to was relatively small in comparison to others he had seen. It had windows that let in cold sunlight, and furniture that seemed stiff and structured. His father was seated at the table, carefully pouring hot cups of tea.

He took his seat uncomfortably, and accepted the teacup Bungo offered him.

“It really is just so lovely to have you back, Bilbo.” Belladonna said. “I’ve missed you terribly.”

Bilbo kept his eyes focused on his teacup. “Do you have a copy of my birth certificate?” He asked.

“Why, we should have one somewhere.” Bungo remarked. “Do you need it for something?”

Bilbo bit his lip anxiously, and then shook his head. “No, no, I just…” He paused, trying to sort out his words, before exhaling. “There’s a lot of weird stuff about this house.” He whispered.

“Oh, do you mean the design?” Belladonna asked. “It is quite strange, isn’t it? But it’s charming in its own way, too.”

“Not like that.” Bilbo insisted. “Like- like ghosts, and bad things. Why are there no records of my birth? Was I born here?”

“You were.” Belladonna said. “What sort of stories have those friends of yours been spinning? You must know not to believe in such tales by now, Bilbo.”

He shrunk away from her criticism, feeling oddly chastised. “You know the history of this house, don’t you?”

Belladonna’s eyes were sharp as she watched him. Neither she nor Bungo answered his question.

“Who taught me to play the piano?” He asked instead.
“I did.” Belladonna answered. “You’ve always played so beautifully. I often had you play for me when you were just a child.”

“What do you have pictures of me?” He asked. “When I was a child?”

“Yes, of course.” Belladonna said, affronted. “I’ll find them for you.”

“Perhaps you have a bad memory.” Belladonna said.

Bilbo lifted his eyes. “It’s not that.” He said. “I couldn’t remember you – not your name or your face or your face. That isn’t normal.”

Bungo watched him impassively. “Do you think we can possibly have an answer for you, Bilbo?” He said. “We are not in control of what goes on in your head.”

“But you’ve done something!” He snapped, standing. “This isn’t natural, none of this! How can you think I can live without knowing anything about who I am and who I was?”

“Are you living at all?”

Bilbo felt his blood run cold. Belladonna was watching him with those strident eyes of hers still, like she could see right through him. For a moment he feared he had gone as transparent as a ghost. Distantly, he wondered how these people could be his parents. Was it possible that they weren’t, or were they? He got confused thinking about it. Without his birth certificate he wouldn’t know, but even so he had a feeling it was undeniable. They looked so alike that it would be possible to mistaken him as anyone else’s child, and yet...

Cautiously, he backed away from the table. When neither Belladonna nor Bungo made a move to stop him, he exited the room and escaped down the hallway. He must have only rounded a couple of corners before he suddenly got the distinct feeling that he was being watched. When he spun around, eyes wild, there was a figure behind him.

It was Maki.

Bilbo felt his heart give a painful ache. Before he could help it tears sprung to his eyes because he’d never thought he’d have the opportunity to see him again. He didn’t think before he crouched to fling his arms around the child. Maki felt undeniably real beneath his hands; he felt solid and real and warm. When Maki’s little fists came up to rest against his back, Bilbo had to squeeze his eyes shut.

He reached for Maki’s hand, and pressed his fingertips against his lips. “Why are you here?” He asked, eyebrows furrowed in concern. “I thought I thought you had been purified…”

Maki nodded. “I wanted to protect you.” He said. “You were sad still.”

Bilbo’s eyes widened. “What do you mean?”

Maki shook his head. He gripped Bilbo’s hand, and began to lead him down the hallway. Bilbo couldn’t take his eyes off of him. Maki looked just like he always had, but his cheeks weren’t so
hollow, and his eyes weren’t so sunken into his face. With a start Bilbo realised that somewhere along the way he’d forgotten about Maki’s bell, but he knew it was in his overnight bag. How could he have possibly forgotten such an important thing?

The room Maki led him to was one Bilbo hadn’t been in before. Maki pushed the door open, and it moved silently, revealing what appeared to be a great archive inside. Bilbo came to the sudden realisation that if his birth certificate existed, it would surely be in here. With that thought, he began the search.
Espy

Chapter Summary

Birth certificates and missing hours.

Chapter Notes

Espy - catch sight of.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The sheer amount of books and documents located in the archive stunned him; for a moment, Bilbo wasn’t sure where to start. Where would important records like birth certificates be filed? He only hesitated for a moment before staring at the most logical place – the beginning.

He found stacks of boxes with hundreds of papers that had no particular organisational system. He dragged several over to the closest little table, and although it wasn’t comfortable he found that it would make do. He wasn’t sure how long it would take to go through all the boxes looking for just one single document, but what other choice did he have? At least Maki was around to keep him company.

It felt like hours passed with no conceivable way of measuring them as he searched through every box he found. Most of the papers weren’t relevant to what he was looking for, and after searching through at least three of the boxes he anxiously looked around the archive and wondered if his birth certificate would be among its shelves instead. When he glanced over at Maki, who made no move to correct his search directions, he shook his head and continued. He knew that Maki wouldn’t lead him in the wrong direction, and if he made no complaints about what Bilbo was doing then it must pay off in the end, mustn’t it?

He went through box after box after box trying to find something useful. For a little while he forgot what it was that he was searching for. He felt like hours had passed before something finally appeared. Buried midway through one of the boxes was a birth certificate, but it wasn’t Bilbo’s. No, when he cleared away the dust that had smeared it to reveal the name, he found that he held Frodo’s birth certificate in his hand.

He was born six years after Bilbo. For a moment the dates didn’t align in his head, because any time he had seen Frodo, they had appeared to be around the same age. However, his confusion only ran deeper when he noticed one glaringly obvious thing on the certificate – Frodo’s last name was listed as Baggins. Bilbo frowned as he read over the document again. Frodo’s birth parents were listed as Drogo Baggins and Primula Brandybuck, so he knew they must not be brothers. In what other way were they related? Were they cousins? Perhaps that was why Frodo had always been around him.

“Are you alright?”

Bilbo jumped at the sound of Maki’s voice. He’d almost forgotten Maki was there at all, though looking at him sitting peacefully across the table it was easy to image why. “I’m fine.” He said with a
nod of his head. Maki’s eyes watched his lips and Bilbo was sure to speak clearly so that he would understand.

Absently, he turned back to the paperwork. He carefully set aside Frodo’s birth certificate, though it was harder to displace his thoughts on the matter. He had found no death record for Frodo in the piles of paperwork from the boxes, but he knew Frodo must have died somewhere along the line. He wouldn’t be a spirit, otherwise. Bilbo tried to think back on the earliest memory he had of Frodo, but he was just a child when he’d first seen him, and those memories were almost completely unattainable to him.

He sighed, and dragged forwards another box. He thought he might have come across his birth certificate by now, but after all this searching he was starting to think that perhaps it didn’t exist after all. It was certainly discouraging, and because he didn’t want to be away from the rest of the team for too long he wondered if he should just give up and return another time. However when he looked at Maki, he was struck by the urge to stay, if only to be with him for a little longer. He certainly was a special child, and Bilbo mourned the fact that he had died in such an awful way. Maki truly deserved happiness, if such a thing were ever attainable.

And so he continued searching. He was anxious about the time, though he had no way to tell what it was. It was easy to get lost in all the paperwork after a few minutes. He sorted as fast as he could, but nothing came up. It was frustrating, but Bilbo never let his irritation get the best of him. He found that Maki’s presence soothed him, much like the gentle tinkering of a bell might do.

Eventually he couldn’t stand sitting any longer, and with a tired huff he pushed away from the table. Maki’s eyes followed him, and a small crease appeared in his brow. Bilbo offered a tired smile, and reached for Maki’s hand. Maki offered it without hesitation, and Bilbo gently pressed Maki’s little fingertip to his lips. “I’m going to search the shelves.” He said. “I’m tired of boxes.”

Maki nodded, and drew back his hand. Even when Bilbo wandered towards the shelves he could feel Maki watching him, and somehow it was comforting.

The shelves reached all the way up to the ceiling, of which was much higher than usual. They stretched in long rows from the beginning to the end of the room, too, and somehow Bilbo doubted he’d ever have enough time to scour even half of it. Regardless, he approached the shelves with his shoulders set. He could only see the books from the ground to just above his head, and while he flicked through the titles he wondered where his birth certificate could possibly be hidden. It certainly did make more sense for it to be stored away in one of the boxes just like Frodo’s had been, but there was something driving Bilbo towards the shelves, and he thought it would be best to follow whatever it was.

One book suddenly caught his eye. It was only titled “Ghost”. Tentatively, Bilbo reached for the book, and pulled it from the shelf. It didn’t feel nearly as heavy as it looked, despite its larger-than-average size. When he opened it to the first page, he found that it was completely blank. The next page was, too. Fretfully he flicked through the pages of the book, but just like the first few they were completely blank.

Who would keep an empty book?

Out of nowhere, an envelope fell out from between the pages. He shut the book and carefully placed it back on the shelf before bending to pick up the envelope. It looked like it hadn’t been opened in years, and as he wiggled the tab-seal free he found that the glue had mostly dried up. His heart raced as he pulled out the document hidden inside, and with an unsettling mixture of relief and fear he found that it was indeed his birth certificate. It listed everything he thought he already knew about himself – his date of birth, his name and his parents, who were indeed Bungo Baggins and
Belladonna Took. If everything was how he thought, then what was the purpose of finding his birth certificate?

He pushed away those thoughts, and held the certificate tighter. It told him that he had been born, and that he was living. When he thought about all the ghosts he’d met, and how in some ways they were undeniably similar, he knew that the birth certificate was a lot more than just a way to clarify who his parents were. He returned to the table with his birth certificate in hand, and collected Frodo’s, as well. He wanted to find out more about Frodo, because if his birth certificate was here than there was no doubt that he had something to do with this all.

Saying goodbye to Maki was hard, though the child seemed to understand it perfectly well. He gripped Bilbo’s hand tightly, and hugged him warmly just the once, and then he was gone. Bilbo hated to think that someone like Maki could disappear just like that, as though they meant nothing to the world. It saddened him greatly.

The corridor outside of the archive didn’t seem so frightening now that Bilbo had what he wanted. While he was still anxious about anything happening, he found that making his way back to the room wasn’t too difficult. He was, of course, lost – but not for long, as the architecture soon became familiar and he was able to guide himself back. Still he felt unnaturally tired, and when he pushed the door open he was surprised by the darkness he could see out of the windows. He had only been in the archive for a few hours, and it should have been mid-afternoon. Had the sky been overcome by clouds?

“Bilbo!” Thoriexclaimed the moment Bilbo entered the room. “Where have you been? I was so worried!”

Bilbo let out a surprised noise as Thorin jerked him in a tight hold. “I- I was talking to my parents, and then I went to the- the archives… I was only gone a few hours…”

“Bilbo, you’ve been missing for almost twelve hours.” Thorin said. His eyes were full of concern as he glanced over Bilbo’s figure sceptically. “You weren’t hurt, where you?”

“No.” Bilbo shook his head. “I was… I was just…”

“It doesn’t matter.” Thorin let out a shaky breath, and steered him towards the table where both Thranduil and Legolas stood tensely. Bilbo hated to think he’d been the cause of their worry, and when Legolas threw his arms around Bilbo to hug him tightly Bilbo was struck with a sense of guilt. He’d already put them through so much, and yet he was only making matters worse…

“I’m sorry.” He mumbled.

Legolas shook his head. “Don’t be.” He said. He sounded out of breath, but he still smiled, although it was strained. “How did the talk with your parents go?”

Bilbo frowned. As best as he could, he explained what they’d told him. His explanation only seemed to make everyone unsettled, though he didn’t blame them. Eventually he produced his birth certificate, though he kept Frodo’s to himself. He hadn’t told anyone about Frodo, after all, and for some reason it felt wrong to. It was like Frodo was a secret that he had to keep all to himself, and so he did.

It was quite late, and so Bilbo retired to bed soon after he returned. He didn’t know where all those hours had gone, but to think he spent them with Maki was heartening. He still had to be brief on how the interviews went and on all the data the cameras had collected from the previous night, but he thought that that could wait until morning. All he wanted to do was rest, and soon enough everyone
turned to the futons to sleep, too. When the lights were turned out and Bilbo felt Thorin lower himself down onto his futon, he rolled over to face him.

“You should get some rest.” Thorin murmured quietly. He absently pulled Bilbo’s blanket up higher before making himself comfortable. “This house does strange things to you. I’m worried.” Bilbo frowned and went to apologise, but Thorin just shook his head. “Even if we’re on a case, this is still your home, Bilbo. Our clients are your parents, too. I’m not sure how to approach such a situation, but it’s wrong to think that you wouldn’t interact with them or the house.”

“This… This isn’t my home.” Bilbo whispered. “I don’t like it here. You saw all the things I pulled up on the laptop earlier, didn’t you? All those deaths?”

Thorin nodded. “Try not to think about it.” He murmured. He reached across the small gap between their futons to press his palm against Bilbo’s cheek. “It will do you no good.”

Bilbo leaned into his touch. Thorin’s hand was warm and comforting. Bilbo wasn’t sure when he had become so accustomed to Thorin’s touch, but it was a special type of soothing that he didn’t think anyone else was capable of offering. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever figure out what was so alluring about Thorin, but whatever it was certainly set his heart racing.

Thorin seemed content with the way Bilbo settled after that, and after rubbing his thumb against Bilbo’s cheek for a moment he withdrew his hand. “Goodnight, Bilbo.” He whispered.

Bilbo offered a small smile, and hoped that it conveyed his feelings. “Goodnight, Thorin.”

Chapter End Notes

I had the worst day today, I could barely write anything decent ;^;
Bilbo dreamed that he was playing the piano. It was a quiet tune, one that soothed his thoughts into absenness like nothing else could. He thought that perhaps he’d always known this tune, that it was so finely grained into his bones and his memories that he’d never forget it, even if all his other memories should one day fade. In any other place he thought that playing such a dainty melody would have been comforting, but he recognised the piano almost instantly, and it sent nothing but dread sinking through his stomach.

Why would he dream of playing the piano in his childhood home when he feared it so fervently? He could never understand the purpose of dreams such as these, but his thoughts were diverted when he realised he was not quite alone. No, there was a child seated next to him, one he didn’t immediately recognise. The young boy couldn’t have been more than two years of age, but his eyes were big and blue and alert. He had dark, curly hair and a little nose, and although his skin was noticeably pale he seemed to be rather content.

“What’s your name?” Bilbo asked as his fingers slowly stilled.

The child glanced up at him. For a moment Bilbo thought he might not speak, but then he whispered, just softly, “My name is Frodo.”

Bilbo blinked owlishly, and frowned when Frodo copied the motion. “Are you alright?” He asked.

“Mmm.” Frodo nodded. He reached out to tentatively grip Bilbo’s arm, and looked up at him imploringly. “Won’t you play some more?”

For a moment Bilbo was overcome by thoughts of Nimrodel. That child had had a rather deep connection with a melody brought forth by the piano, and in some ways he thought that Frodo might have been the same. Did his melody console Frodo? Did it comfort him? Did it bring forth a memory he had forgotten, or a feeling he desired? If that were so, then he would play, and he would play for as long as Frodo needed him to.

“Bilbo, wake up.”

He groaned, and as his eyes fluttered open he found that it was still dark out. “Thorin…?” He whispered. He pushed himself upright, rubbing at his eyes with his knuckles, and glanced over at
Thorin who hovered beside him. “What is it?”

“Your breathing was getting quite slow.” Thorin murmured. “Come, get up.”

Bilbo let out a small, confused noise as Thorin heaved him up by the arm. He felt sluggish, but was unsure if it was because he was tired or for some other reason. Thorin gripped him firmly and did not draw back his hand as he led Bilbo across the room, where he fetched a glass of water and prompted Bilbo to drink.

“I sensed something was wrong, and when I woke you had gone almost completely still.” Thorin murmured. In the dark Bilbo only briefly saw Thorin’s hand as it reached for his neck, and he couldn’t help but swallow heavily as Thorin pressed his fingers under Bilbo’s chin. “Your pulse is picking up again.”

Bilbo pressed his lips together tightly, and lowered his eyes. Had he been in danger from such a gentle dream? Anxiously he rubbed his arm, and lifted his eyes again. “Can I show you something?”

A surprised look briefly crossed Thorin’s face. “Of course.” He said. “What is it?”

Bilbo only shook his head. He could feel his heart racing, and although it was somewhat painful he ignored it. He’d spoken without thinking, but he thought that maybe showing Thorin the piano would ease some of the apprehension in him. He reached for Thorin’s hand, fingers spread and trembling, and only when Thorin gripped them tightly did he feel that perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad.

Like he expected, the corridors were completely dark when he led Thorin from the room. The floor was cold beneath his bare feet but he didn’t care. Even without light to guide him, he knew the way to the piano room. He’d seen it so many times in his dreams that it felt impossible for him to lose his way if he were searching for it intentionally. In any case Thorin followed him with no complaints, and only held Bilbo’s hand tighter the further they wandered into the house.

“Where are we going?” Thorin asked quietly.

“A place I remember.” He murmured in reply.

“You remember something?”

Bilbo nodded. “…I think I always have, but… It’s not good.” He said. It was silent for several heartbeats, and it made him tense. “I dream about it.”

“What sort of dreams?”

“Never good ones.” He whispered. “I don’t like them, they’re frightening.”

“It’s alright, Bilbo.” Thorin said. He pulled Bilbo a little closer, and watched his face intently. “Why show me now? I get the feeling you would have never brought it up, had you not needed to…”

Bilbo’s eyes wavered. “That’s… That’s correct.” He said. “But I think it’s getting worse.”

“What is?” Thorin questioned. “This house?”

“Something like that.” Bilbo muttered. He didn’t like the thought of involving Thorin in anything that had to do with his memory, but he was going to regardless. “Remember on the case at my school – that handprint…”

“The one on your back?”
Bilbo nodded. “I think I know what it was. Who is was.”

“I assumed it was one of the spirits in the old building.” Thorin murmured. “Was it not?”

Bilbo shook his head. “I would have been crushed by that bookshelf if it hadn't pushed me.” He said quietly. “I think it was the spirit of someone I know.”

“How can you know if it was or not?”

“I… I’ve seen him.” Bilbo admitted. “In my dreams, and- and outside of them, too…”

Thorin frowned. “Why didn’t you tell me?” He asked. His voice wasn’t harsh, and it wasn’t cold. Rather he sounded merely curious, and for that Bilbo was immensely relieved.

“He was my friend.” Bilbo said simply. It felt sad to admit out loud, and left him with a mixed feeling of grief and loneliness. “My only friend.”

Thorin rubbed the top of Bilbo’s hand with his thumb once. “I understand.” He murmured. “Has he always been a spirit?”

Again, Bilbo shook his head. “No.” He whispered. “That dream I had tonight – it was a memory, I think, from when I was younger – he was in it. He was alive, but he was just a child.”

Thorin listened patiently. He had a contemplative look on his face. “Were you a child then, too? You must have been.”

“Yes.” Bilbo said. “But he isn’t what I’m taking you to.”

“Then where?”

Bilbo didn’t reply. They came across a familiar pair of doors after rounding a corner, and Bilbo hesitated for a moment before reaching for the handle. The door felt heavier than it had ever been before as he pushed it open. The stagnant air inside the room rushed out in one great heap, and it was so suffocating that for a moment he physically recoiled. Just like in all of his dreams the room was only occupied by the same old piano he’d always seen. The adjacent window was open, and through it Bilbo could see the stiff, darkened branches of a tree. The room seemed to carry a completely foreign air at night, one Bilbo wasn’t accustomed to.

“What is this place?” Thorin murmured. There was a deep furrow in his brow and his hand almost dropped from Bilbo’s absently, but Bilbo held on. “Is this where you learned to play the piano?”

Bilbo went stiff, but nodded. Instinctively he moved towards the piano. It looked dusty, but not terribly so, and when Bilbo sat down on its seat it felt cold and rigid. When he played for Frodo it had felt welcoming and warm, but now it was nothing more and nothing less than abandoned. Had he been the one to cause such a thing? He knew he must be, because he had been the only one to ever play it.

“I still don’t know why I left this house.” He said distractedly. He lifted his hands to rest his fingers on the keys and tried not to think about the how close Thorin was seated beside him. When he pressed his fingers against the keys and deep sounds began to reverberate around the room, he wondered if his memory would return. He hadn’t played a piano in quite some time – not since he played for Nimrodel – and yet he knew exactly what to do to produce notes that sounded good together.

“You’ve always played well.” Thorin whispered.
Bilbo smiled faintly. “Have I?” He replied. “Frodo seemed to like it.”

“Frodo?”

Bilbo hummed. His eyes watched the keys, but he knew he didn’t need to. Playing the piano had always come naturally, and it was something he relied on. He liked the sound of piano music, however sad it may be, but more than that he liked to be the one to play it. “Nimrodel liked it, too.” He said. “He’s here.”

Thorin’s frown was getting deeper and deeper by the minute. “What do you mean?”

“Maki as well.” Bilbo continued easily. “He helped me find the birth certificates.”

“Bilbo, you’re not making sense-”

Of course he wasn’t, but it didn’t matter anymore. He just wanted to play the piano. “Frodo died here, I think.” He whispered. “He came here when he was really young, but I don’t know why. He was the only other child I ever met. Maybe his parents worked here, but I know we must be related somehow. We share a last name.”

Thorin was silent. He reached for Bilbo’s hand, but stopped just short from touching him.

“I’ve seen Frodo for a long time.” Bilbo continued aimlessly. “It’s like he never died, but he must have. He’s grown up with me, though I think I often forget him lest he appears before me. Is that cruel of me, to forget something so important? It’s the same with Maki, and Nimrodel. I don’t remember which book I pressed Nimrodel’s flower in.”

“Bilbo, their deaths aren’t your fault.” Thorin murmured quietly. When he reached out his hand again he didn’t hesitate in stopping Bilbo’s fingers. “You mustn’t blame yourself.”

Bilbo turned to look at him, eyes wide with distress. “But what if it is?” He insisted. “What if those children are stuck here because of me? What if Frodo died because of me?”

“You were only a child Bilbo.” Thorin asserted. “You still are. Nothing that has happened here is your fault, and you know it. Don’t sink into that hole, Bilbo, because I am not sure if I can pull you back out.”

Bilbo ducked his head, and grit his teeth. Thorin’s answer wasn’t satisfying. He thought it should have been, that Thorin’s words should have offered him some measure of comfort, but they didn’t. His fingers crushed the keys beneath them, and the sound they produced was jarring and awful. There was something fluttering around the edges of his mind, a memory perhaps, but he simply couldn’t grasp it no matter how hard he tried. “I want to believe that.” He finally whispered. “I do, Thorin, but… But I just don’t.”

“We’ll figure it out.” Thorin vowed. “Just… Promise you won’t do anything rash. I have an awful feeling that something’s going to come up that you don’t like, and it frightens me. I don’t want you or anyone else to get hurt.”

Bilbo’s lips moved to voice the promise, but the words suddenly wouldn’t come. Thorin was watching him pleadingly and Bilbo wanted to comply with his wishes, but he found himself utterly unable to. He’d already done rash things, hadn’t he? He’d followed the ghosts of children he thought had been purified, and something – or someone – had lured him away with the guise of a dream. Some things he was completely vulnerable to, and what if that were to happen again?

“I can’t promise that.” He eventually said. He felt upset to think he might distress Thorin because it
was not his intention, but what else was he to do?

“At least try.” Thorin murmured. “Or if you must wander off, take me with you. I don’t want to lose you here, Bilbo.”

He nodded before he could stop himself. Thorin seemed so concerned; it made Bilbo’s heart ache. “I’ll try.” He whispered.

Thorin nodded and let out a deep sigh, before drawing Bilbo closer. “You have such a strange relationship with pianos.” He whispered. “But you play beautifully, Bilbo. Even I can tell that much.”
The interviews Thorin had conducted only brought up more questions. Bilbo read over the notes as he ate breakfast, and with every sentence he only became more and more puzzled. All of the workers at the manor were indeed of an older age, and all had been working here for at least five years. There had been younger employees hired fairly regularly, but they never stayed longer than a week, and no one quite knew what happened to them after they left. Bilbo thought of the bloody hallway he’d seen and felt sick to his stomach.

Those employees probably weren’t alive anymore. When Carc checked out their names, all of the employees had been reported missing, though many didn’t have any family within the state. Bilbo thought it would be difficult to track down their parents, and that perhaps they had been chosen to work here for that exact reason.

Out of all the employees, Erling was the most interesting. He had worked at the manor for the longest period of time, almost ten years. He was the only employee who knew of Bilbo personally, though it seemed that the others were at least familiar with him from his parent’s chatting. Erling’s memory had apparently been somewhat twisted by his time at the manor as he couldn’t remember much about Bilbo at all. It was most definitely intentional, though Bilbo didn’t know why any spirit, ghost, or even his parents would wish for Erling to forget about him. Still, the questions he had couldn’t really be answered by Erling’s interview. He could describe Bilbo’s temperament as a child – “quiet, unobtrusive, really quite easy to care for” – but beyond that he seemed unable to bring forth honest answers. He didn’t know the age Bilbo had left, or why, and he was unable to answer questions regarding Bilbo’s parents’ disposition towards him.

It was frustrating, to say the least. Bilbo only felt more on edge as the day progressed, and when he thought back to the conversation he’d had with Thorin the night previous he felt chastened. He hadn’t wanted Thorin to know that, but he did, and there was nothing Bilbo could change about it now. He knew Thorin hadn’t told anyone, though Thorin must be quite suspicious of Bilbo’s sudden revelations. He wasn’t quite sure himself why he’d decided to tell Thorin such things, but in some sort of selfish way he felt relieved to be free of at least part of that burden.

As he finished off his tea, he couldn’t help but glance over Frodo’s birth certificate again. He had some time before anyone would come over to eat their own breakfast, so he pulled Carc’s laptop close and tentatively searched for Frodo’s parents. It took some digging which he only could have done on Carc’s computer, but eventually he found exactly what he was looking for.
Drogo Baggins and Primula Brandybuck, for all intents and purposes, seemed like a perfectly happy family. Frodo was six years younger than Bilbo, and was born perfectly happy and healthy. Two years later, Drogo and Primula were killed in a boating accident. He read the article with apprehensive eyes, and felt his heart ache as details started to come to light. The accident was treated as suspicious, but it was never resolved. Without appointed godparents or a legal guardian Frodo was sent to live with his closest next-of-kin, which happened to be his Uncle, Bungo Baggins. Due to some sort of legal loophole in Drogo and Primula’s will, it was actually Bilbo who was meant to take guardianship of Frodo, but he was far too young so that was transferred over to Drogo.

Then that was why Frodo was at the Baggins Manor. Such a misfortunate accident hadn’t stopped wreaking havoc, had it? To think Frodo would lose his parents and end up in such a dark place… It was incredibly sad. Drogo and Primula had seemed like wonderful people, and distantly Bilbo wondered how his father could have ever have been related. It seemed impossible to think about, and yet the facts were all laid out before him. Frodo was his cousin, and after being sent here he was killed. But by who?

His parents? Or something more sinister? He supposed that was what he had to figure out. Nothing had appeared to be of significance in any other owners of the house, but the deaths had been occurring for so long that Bilbo suspected it was not an owner of the house, but rather a tenant. Vaguely, he thought back to Heidi, back to the way she had become stronger after consuming Bilbo’s dreams. It had seemed as though she was a special case when it came to gaining strength in such a way; that is to say, her type of dream eating was a rarity among even within the paranormal realm. But what if such a way to gain strength was accessible by other means?

“Thranduil.” He called quietly. The man’s head turned towards him, and upon seeing the frown on his face Thranduil immediately wandered over. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.” Thranduil said as he slid into the seat beside Bilbo. “How can I help you?”

“It’s about spirits.” Bilbo said. “Heidi grew stronger by consuming dreams, right?”

Thranduil nodded.

“Is… Is it possible for other ghosts to do the same thing? To gain strength by some means?”

A small frown crossed Thranduil’s face. “Dream eating is an extremely rare phenomenon, but by another method, perhaps it is possible.”

“Have you ever come across something like that?”

“I believe I have.” Thranduil answered. “A few times, in fact. Many ghosts feed on negative emotions, especially those that have caused them to linger in this place. Vengeance, sadness, anger – it all becomes something tangible that they seem to thrive on. It allows them to possess people, and to take advantage of those that are living. In some senses that makes them infinitely more powerful.”

Bilbo frowned. That certainly made sense, but it wasn’t the type of answer he was looking for.

“Anything else?”

Thranduil frowned in thought. “Well, it’s not uncommon for spirits to feed on each other, too.” He said. “They cannibalise on the energy of weaker spirits and in turn grow in strength and often in size. In places that are full of spirits it’s not uncommon for the number of spirits to decrease until only one incredibly powerful spirit remains.”

Bilbo’s eyes widened. That must be what was happening here, right? There were so many spirits, far
too many for him to ever count, and they were all so hollow – they had been consumed. It made
sense, and the more he thought about it the more the world seemed to fade and his heart began to
race. What could have consumed so many spirits and remained undetected? How far would it go
before it ran out of prey and began to hunger for something more?

A feeling of dread started to coil heavily in his stomach. Nimrodel and Maki, Frodo too – they were
here at this manor because of him. If something truly was consuming the spirits trapped here, then
they would be in danger, and it was all his fault. He swallowed heavily, and pushed away from the
table. He had to do something, he had to find them. What if they got eaten, too? They’d never truly
find peace then, not like he thought they had. Ignoring Thranduil’s confused call of his name, Bilbo
rushed to his overnight bag. Buried beneath his clothes, wrapped in a sweater to keep it safe, was
Maki’s bell.

When he held it in his hands, it started to ring frantically. He felt his mouth go dry, and his hands
started to tremble. The bell had always rung when something bad was happening, or going to
happen. The sound of it sent tingles rocketing down his spine because he just knew that one of the
children were in trouble. His heart plummeted, and in a panic he pulled on the bracelet and ran from
the room.

“Bilbo!” Thorin shouted.

Bilbo’s throat felt constricted. He had to find him- had to find Maki and Nimrodel and Frodo before
they got killed- consumed, whatever it was! He didn’t know where to go but he ran anyway,
desperate to find someone. He knew that Thorin and Thranduil couldn’t keep up with him – they
didn’t know the twists and turns of this house than he did, and even though he was largely unfamiliar
with it he was guided by instincts that only came from living in the house for who knows how many
years. He might not have been able to navigate his way to a certain place, but he knew he could find
a person if he tried hard enough.

A sudden, high pitched scream echoed down the hallway. Bilbo startled at the sound of it, going
pale, and against his wrist Maki’s bell started to ring frantically. He turned in the direction of the
scream and heaved open the doors that stood in his way. On the other side of the doors was a room
that was large and expansive. It had no windows and Bilbo assumed that was because it was in the
centre of the house, but along its walls were partially torn off window shutters, as though windows
had once been there. He didn’t dwell on the strangeness of it for long, however, as his attention was
swiftly diverted.

A misty figure stood in the centre of the room. She had long pale hair that was a faded white colour,
and her skin was almost completely transparent. Bilbo couldn’t see her face as her back faced him,
but she seemed so familiar that he was sure he had seen her somewhere before. She wasn’t the most
worrying thing in the room, however. No, Bilbo’s eyes were instantly drawn to the place where her
harsh hands were wrapped tightly around Nimrodel’s throat.

“Don’t hurt him!” Bilbo screamed. The ghost physically recoiled at Bilbo’s voice, and an
unforgiving screeching noise filled the air as Bilbo rushed towards Nimrodel. Just as he neared the
ghost it suddenly disappeared, and he scrambled to catch Nimrodel before the child hit the ground.

Nimrodel’s chest was heaving as he lay limp in Bilbo’s arms. His eyes were blurry and unfocused,
and he looked paler than Bilbo had ever seen him. His fingers clutched weakly at Bilbo’s chest, and
he gasped as though to say something but he couldn’t voice the words.

“You have to leave.” Bilbo pleaded. “It’s not safe here, you can’t protect me. Please, you’re going to
get hurt.”
Nimrodel only whimpered. Bilbo held him tighter, huffing out a weak breath. Nimrodel felt so warm and solid in his arms that Bilbo refused to believe he was anything less than real. His heart was hammering in his chest much too fast and he couldn’t stop it. He never wanted to see anyone so vulnerable again. The image of Nimrodel as he was now would never leave his mind.

“Bilbo, what are you doing?”

He jumped and twisted around to face his mother. Belladonna was standing in the doorway, a frown touching her lips. “I…” He started. His grip tightened around Nimrodel, and he felt himself begin to sweat.

Belladonna’s eyes lingered heavily on Nimrodel. “Oh…?” She murmured. “A friend of yours?”

Bilbo hid Nimrodel from her view. “He’s my friend.” He said. “I don’t want him to get hurt.”

“And if he does?”

Chills burst along Bilbo’s skin. Nimrodel was trembling in his grip, but Bilbo didn’t waste a moment to comfort him. “Then I’ll be angry.” He whispered. “I’ll be upset.”

Belladonna watched him for a moment, before turning her gaze away. “I see.” She murmured. “You’ll be upset? We can’t have that, now can we...? Bilbo, won’t you come with me, for a moment?”

He frowned, eyes narrowed in suspicion. His bell had stopped ringing now, but he could feel it moving against his wrist gently, and it put him on edge. “What is it that you want?”

An uncharacteristically soft look came across Belladonna’s safe. “To dance.”

Chapter End Notes

It's my birthday on Wednesday, and I have a tough assessment due this week, but hopefully I should be able to keep up with the chapters! I hope this case hasn't been moving too slow, but I really want to include a lot, especially considering it's the last ^^
Chapter Summary

A dance and a song played on the piano.

Chapter Notes

Evanish - *vanish or die away.*

Belladonna’s hands were cold as she led him through the winding manor corridors. Bilbo had long since lost his way, but somehow he doubted Belladonna would hurt him. Perhaps he still believed that his parents could be at least somewhat like Thranduil.

The room he was taken to was large and effortlessly luxurious. It was quite obviously a ballroom of some type, with romantic decals and too many details for him to take in. The room was empty but that didn’t appear to be unnatural for such a place. Bilbo thought that there might have once been beautiful events held in this location, but now it seemed lonely and stony. He still wasn’t sure why Belladonna wanted to dance, but he followed her regardless. When she suddenly spun around held out her hand, he only hesitated for a moment before taking it.

“We haven’t danced together in so long.” She sighed. Bilbo was surprised to find that she took the lead, though he was somewhat thankful for it considering he didn’t know how to dance. She spun him with an easy confidence, and never once did his stumbling disrupt her. “You used to dance with me all the time when you were a child…”

“I don’t remember.” Bilbo whispered.

Belladonna hummed. “I suppose you wouldn’t.” She said.

A tight frown touched Bilbo’s lips. As Belladonna continued to dance, the faint notes of a melody began to echo around the room. At first he hardly heard them, but with a start he abruptly recognised the tune as one he played as a child. He was struck by the memories of learning the tune, and although he couldn’t quite remember who had been the one to teach it to him he certainly remembered playing it for hours.

“You know,” Belladonna began, “If your friends stay here for too long, they’ll die.”

Bilbo went stiff with shock. He tried to pull his hands away from Belladonna’s but her grip was too strong. He could feel his heart racing frantically. “W-what…”

A piercing scream suddenly echoed through the manor. Bilbo felt chills race down his spine; he didn’t think he’d ever be able to mistake that voice. “Legolas…!” As hard as he could he pulled his hands from his Belladonna’s, and with one lingering, frightful look in her direction he bolted from the room as fast as he could. His heart had climbed into his throat, and he couldn’t get Belladonna’s words out of his head. He had to get back to the room, he had to-
Bilbo stumbled across a familiar hallway faster than he expected. His head was spinning and he didn’t know why, and as he lurched down the hallway the smell of something coppery and bitter overwhelmed him. He heaved heavily, and covered his mouth with his hand as he rounded a corner only to come across the hallway from which the room they were staying was located. The door to their room had been thrown wide open, and with a sinking feel in his stomach he saw that there was red smeared across the handle. His eyes travelled down as he slowed to a walk, and as he sharply inhaled a breath he realised Carc was slumped against the floor outside the room. His face was turned away from Bilbo, but Bilbo could see the steadily spreading stain of blood pooling around his head.

He felt sick to his stomach. Carc wasn’t moving. Bilbo couldn’t breathe properly anymore, and as carefully as he could he edged around Carc and tried to keep his eyes away as best as possible. The situation only got worse, however, when he took in the state of the room. It was in complete disarray – papers were strewn across the floor and furniture looked as though it had been toppled over. His eyes frantically searched the room, and his knees buckled out from beneath him at the sight he was greeted by.

Thranduil was slumped over the table. His long hair was messy and matted with blood, and his arms were limp. Across from him Legolas was in a similar position, and Bilbo couldn’t help but let out a frightened whimper. He staggered towards the table, and reached out with trembling hands to touch Legolas’s shoulders. “Legolas…” He whispered frantically. “H-hey, answer me… Legolas…”

Legolas didn’t even stir. Bilbo felt tears spring to his eyes, and in a frustrated rush he shook Legolas a little harder. Limply, Legolas’s head rolled to the side. His eyes were wide open, and there was a darkened bruise spreading across his throat. Bilbo recoiled at the sight of him, stumbling backwards, and couldn’t help but let out a small, horrified cry. What could have done something so horrible?

A hasty thought sprung into his mind – where was Thorin? Frantically, Bilbo scrambled to his feet, using the edge of the table to steady himself. He wildly searched the room with his eyes, and only when he saw a slumped figure against the futons did his heart really kick into overdrive.

“Thorin…” He croaked. He clutched his chest with trembling fingers as he lurched his way to the futons, trying not to let his watery eyes cloud his vision. He fell to his knees beside Thorin, and reached out with trembling hands to prop Thorin up in his arms. He was frightfully pale, and the longer Bilbo looked at him the cloudier his eyes became. “Thorin?” He whispered.

Predictably, Thorin didn’t respond. His eyes weren’t open like Legolas’s were, but somehow that was much more frightening. There was a bruise swelling at the corner of Thorin’s lips, and when Bilbo shifted his grip on him, a damp patch at the back of Thorin’s head caught his attention. He pulled his hand away from Thorin’s head and let out a choked whimper when he found his fingers stained with red.

There was no mistaking it – it was blood.

Bilbo let out a choking gasp as he jerked away from Belladonna’s hands. His world was spinning, and distantly he could still hear the sound of a piano ringing in his ears. He was completely unbalanced, and fell to the ground in a sprawling heap. His wrist made an awful cracking noise as it took the brunt of his weight, but the pain only throbbed a handful of times before it was easy pushed aside. “What have you done…?” He whispered.

Belladonna stood above him, her eyes sharp and obtrusive. She had a contemplative look on her face, and didn’t answer for a moment. “I’ve done nothing.” She finally said.
Bilbo’s eyes flashed up to her, but he quickly baulked at her appearance. Her hair had turned almost completely white, and her skin was far too pale. Bilbo recognised her instantly, and cowered in fear. She’d been the one strangling Nimrodel, hadn’t she? If she was capable of doing such a thing towards a spirit, then what would she do to those who were living? Again, the bloodied hallway flashed through his mind, and he swallowed heavily.

Cautiously, he backed away from her. Belladonna’s eyes followed him, and in a rush Bilbo scrambled to his feet. The manor seemed exceptionally quiet without any music and without any voices, but he couldn’t focus on that. He could feel her watching him as he fled from the room, and it was a weight he no longer wished to bare. He felt as though he’d pulled the lid off of something that had been sealed for far too long, and it was suffocating him.

He was overwhelmed with a distressing sense of déjà vu, and as the winding corridors cleared before him he found himself in a familiar area sooner than he expected. He felt his stomach lurch as images of blood flashed before his eyes, but he forced them away. He didn’t know how much of what he saw was the truth, if anything. He slowed to a dejected walk, and as he reached the door to the room they were staying in he suddenly started to wonder if he should return to his friends at all.

“You know, if your friends stay here for too long, they’ll die.” That was what Belladonna had said, hadn’t she? And then- and then he’d seen those awful things…

Who wasn’t to say that that would happen if they stayed here? Bilbo already knew that the spirits, hollow or not, were unafraid to cause harm. The bruises all over his body still ached. What would he do if one of his friends got lured away by one of the bad spirits here? What if they got hurt, what if they bruised and bled or something worse happened to them? He didn’t think he could endure that.

Hesitantly, he withdrew his hand. It was still trembling. He swallowed heavily, and closed his eyes. Just faintly, on the other side of the door, he could hear people talking. Legolas’s voice was the loudest, and just quietly under it he could hear Thranduil’s and Thorin’s lower tones. Just the sound of them sent relief unlike any other coursing through his veins, and absently he clenched his fists. He couldn’t put these people in danger anymore, it was burdening him too much. He couldn’t have anyone hurt because of him, not anymore. Hadn’t he been the one to blame for Frodo’s pain, even for his death? For Nimrodel’s pain here at the manor, too? For Maki?

It was his fault, and he knew it. He took a step back, eyebrows furrowed with concern, and took a moment to glance at the door. He couldn’t go in there, not when his interference would get someone badly hurt. He didn’t think Belladonna or whatever it was that was in this manor would hurt anyone if he wasn’t with them. Although it pained his heart to back away from the door, he did. His footsteps seemed surprisingly loud as he turned and left the door behind. Was this the right decision? It had to be.

With nowhere else to go, Bilbo went to the piano room. He made his way without thinking about it directly, and wasn’t surprised when he found the room just as cold and empty as he’d left it. He knew he was affected strangely by pianos, even more so this specific one, and although that loss of control frightened him he still sat down on the seat and lifted his fingers to touch the keys. They felt as they always did – smooth and worn, but cool and untarnished. He took a moment to distractedly brush away the leaves that had fallen in through the open window, and then he started to play.

He brought to life any melody that came into his head. He doesn’t know how long he played for, nor did he care to measure the time. It was easy to lose himself in the sounds the piano made, in the way pressing against the keys made him feel. It was like that even with something so wretched beautiful melodies could still be created, and by someone like him nevertheless. When no further melodies sprung forth from his mind, he started to play the song that had echoed around the ballroom when he
had danced with his mother. It was a jaunty tune, one that seemed obnoxious and sad and far too carefree. He didn’t like it, but he played it over and over, as though hearing it a hundred times would suddenly make it seem less upsetting.

It didn’t.

Eventually, Bilbo’s fingers stilled. He ached to play more, to bring forth more lullabies into fruition, but nothing came. Even with the thing he loved his memory failed him. Absently, he turned his head to glance out of the windows. At some point, the moon had risen to settle among its darkened blanket of stars. Bilbo had always enjoyed looking at the night sky, but that night it seemed nothing more and nothing less than distant and unkind. Instead his attention turned to his reflection in the windows, of which swiftly became very clear.

His hair had turned completely white.
Bilbo played the piano until his back went stiff and his fingers started to ache. The sound of the slow notes lulled him into a state of mindlessness, and without any thoughts weighing him down he felt like he could play for an eternity and never once falter. He didn’t think he would have ever stopped playing had sharp pain not started insistently pricking at all of his fingertips.

It was still dark outside when he lifted his head. The air that flowed in from the window on a stiff breeze was cold, more so than he had realised. He withdrew his aching arms from the piano and rested them against his lap as he watched the dark clouds in the sky out of the windows. They looked deceptively welcoming, and with a frustrated frown pulling at his lips he turned away from the piano and stood. He had to do something else, even for just a little while.

For a while, he aimlessly wandered the hallways of his house. Just like in his dreams the corridors made no sense and looked as though they’d been made with several different periods and styles in mind. He didn’t like how disconnected the house felt, and the more he walked the more he wondered just how many additions had been made on the very original structure. In fact, he wondered if any of that first building remained, or if it was so deeply buried in the walls of the current manor that it was completely inaccessible.

Somehow, he found himself in the archives again. Maki wasn’t there, but the archives felt a lot warmer than other places of the manor. He strolled through the aisles and wondered if there was anything in here he had to find. He didn’t feel particularly drawn to anywhere, and he couldn’t sense any spirits close by. With that thought in mind he allowed himself to do whatever came to mind. There were so many books in the archive that he would never be able to read them all, not even if he’d wanted to. Eventually he stumbled across something that seemed out of place – a book with a soft cover, wider than the others, with simple writing along the spine. It was worn around the edges and quite dirty, so much so that he couldn’t read what was written on the cover.

Intrigued, he took it to the closest armchair to investigate. The cover was thick and soft, and as he flipped it open he found that the book was actually a photo album. Neatly written across the first page were the names “Belladonna Took” and “Bungo Baggins”. He turned the page, and pressed against it were printed photographs. The first was clearly his parents when they were much younger. With each page he turned more and more appeared, some of Belladonna, some of Bungo and many of them together. It was so normal that Bilbo couldn’t help but feel surprised by it. Had his parents once been such happy people? They both smiled so warmly, like nothing dark had ever tainted their
hearts.

Towards the end of the photographs – but not the end of the book – Bilbo found a photograph that surprised him. Belladonna had tears in her eyes, and Bungo was holding her hands tightly. They both smiled so radiantly that for a moment he could hardly believe that the people he knew today could have ever looked so joyous. It hardly seemed possible, and yet there they were. When he looked at the photograph closer to take in all its details, he suddenly found out why they were so happy. Belladonna was holding something in her hands, something she was in the process of handing to Bungo. It was a small piece of cloth, light blue in colour and small enough to almost be forgotten. He could see letters embroidered into the tiny thing and although some were obscured he could tell it said “Papa’s Boy”.

A lump formed in his throat. If they had been so happy to conceive him, why were his parents like they were now? He couldn’t comprehend it. What had changed them so much that they became what they were? He had no doubt that whatever was causing them trouble was what haunted this place, was what had killed all those people. Had his parents been possessed? The more he thought about it, the less it made sense. He couldn’t work out where his lost memories fit into the whole mess, or where he himself fit. There was no doubt in his mind that he was Belladonna and Bungo’s child, but he doubted that the photos in the album would suddenly stop as they had if something bad hadn’t of happened. Were they possessed after Belladonna fell pregnant, or was it just a coincidence? They’d owned the house before Bilbo was conceived, but as he thought back to what he’d read with everyone else he realised that they might not have lived in the house, too. Moving into such an isolated place must take time, mustn’t it?

If they hadn’t been living in the house until Belladonna conceived, then some things could be explained – like the photo album, for instance. If they’d kept such a meticulous record of their lives together until Bilbo had been conceived, then it was easy to believe that whatever bad thing had happened had occurred after that. If someone living who happened to be pregnant got possessed by something, what affect would it have on the child? He wasn’t sure if he wanted to know.

Before his thoughts could spin any wilder, he shut the book and pushed it away. He felt the urge to play the piano again, but one look at his bruising fingertips told him that it wouldn’t be wise. It was harder to ignore the pain now. How long would he be able to play before his fingertips started to bleed?

Bilbo inhaled deeply, and stood. It wouldn’t do him any good to linger on the memories spread before him because they were not his own. He would be unable to understand them without hearing them firsthand from Belladonna or Bungo, and he doubted that that would ever be possible. Their minds had long since been twisted, and he had a feeling that their memories of happier times had faded into nothingness.

He left the photo album and the archive behind without much trouble. It felt too easy to forget things he’d never experienced, even though he wouldn’t have minded remembering them. His parents had been good people once upon a time, hadn’t they? Somehow, it was a reassuring thought. What would they have been like as parents if they had not come to live at this wretched house? Would they have been like Thranduil? It was an entertaining thought.

The next time he returned to the room where the paranormal research team was staying, he felt incredibly apprehensive. He didn’t want to answer their questions. If they knew what he did, then they would undoubtedly be hurt. He didn’t know if he could stomach having another dream of them dying, if calling it a dream was even correct. It seemed impossible that something so lifelike and so
traumatising could be anything less than real.

When he opened the door, it hardly made a sound. It felt heavy, but he knew it physically weighed no more than it normally did. He was somewhat relieved to find that everyone had already retired to the futons, but at the sound of his footsteps Thorin’s head suddenly lifted. Bilbo only hesitated for a moment before he made his way over to Thorin. The futons looked enticingly comfortable, and he briefly wondered when the last time he slept was. It felt like it was years ago, and he didn’t know if it was a mere matter of hours or if it was days.

Regardless, Thorin pulled him into a tight embrace the moment Bilbo lowered himself down onto the futon. Thorin’s arms were warm and firm around him, and his hands pressed against Bilbo’s back as though he could keep him there with nothing more than the strength he possessed in his body. Perhaps he could.

“Where did you go?” Thorin whispered. His voice was rough with sleep, and sent chills down Bilbo’s spine. “I was worried…”

Bilbo shut his eyes. He couldn’t tell Thorin about Nimrodel, or about Maki, so he didn’t say anything. Instead he lifted his hands to clutch at the back of Thorin’s shirt as though doing so could stop the shaking that plagued his fingers. A strange feeling of guilt overcame him, but he knew where it burst forth from. He’d broken the promise he’d made to Thorin, hadn’t he? He’d broken it, and he’d soon break it again as though making a promise to a person like Thorin meant nothing to him.

“Bilbo, something bad is happening to you.” Thorin murmured. “You’re not the same, even I can tell. Why won’t you let me help you?”

Bilbo’s fingers tightened in the material of Thorin’s shirt. He could feel tears gathering in his eyes, but he stubbornly refused to let them fall. He didn’t want Thorin to think he was weak, to think that he couldn’t handle this on his own. He had to.

“Please don’t try to do everyone on your own.” Thorin whispered. “You don’t have to anymore.”

He didn’t have a choice. Even if it hurt him, even if it took away his memories – as long as those he cared about were safe he didn’t care what happened to him. He had to deal with it all alone so that they didn’t get hurt. From everything that had already happened and all the strange dreams he’d had, he knew that that had to be true. Even if he craved Legolas’s warm friendship and the way Thranduil always looked out for him and Thorin’s comfort, he knew he would never involve them in something so dangerous. He must have been drawn back here for a reason, and even if that reason was the case he knew it couldn’t be a coincidence. There had to be a reason he left, and perhaps it was time for him to return even if he no longer wished to.

That didn’t many any of it any easier. To break his promise to Thorin over and over, to know that he was consciously choosing to do so; he didn’t think he’d ever deserve forgiveness for it. Still he selfishly wished that Thorin would hold him for longer, that Thorin would still wish to hold him in such a way. Was he a person who still deserved comfort like this? He doubted it, but he pursed his lips and held onto Thorin tightly anyway. He didn’t know how much longer Thorin would be there for him to rely on, but even if Thorin came to despise him, Bilbo wouldn’t leave him to die in a place like this. Somehow he had to think of a way to get Thorin and everyone else to leave, but for now he allowed himself that small moment of comfort. He needed it.

“Don’t go tonight, alright?” Thorin said.

Bilbo nodded. That was the least he could do. He wondered if Thorin could sense what he was
going to do, but he’d never really been able to understand Thorin, had he? He didn’t protest when Thorin insisted he lay down, and only closed his eyes as Thorin’s arm settled heavily over his waist. It was a reassuring weight, one he wished he had gotten longer to experience.

For a while, they both remained awake. Even though Bilbo felt as though he could sleep, he kept his eyes open. Eventually Thorin lost out, and his breathing evened. It was rhythmic to listen to. The weight of his arm became heavier, and he seemed to shift in his sleep, like he could sense Bilbo was there and he didn’t want him to leave. Just faintly, Bilbo could hear Thorin’s heart thumping away. He liked the sound of it.

Chapter End Notes

Ahh, I'm so exhausted today. This isn't edited properly, I apologise ^____T
Bilbo didn’t sleep easy that night. He guessed he only slept for an hour or so before he was restlessly waking every couple of minutes, plagued by dreams that gave him chills and a sick feeling in his stomach. Throughout the night Thorin didn’t awaken, and for that Bilbo was glad. He hated the thought that Thorin would lose sleep because of him, even more so if Thorin worried because Bilbo himself wasn’t able to slumber.

If nothing else, it gave Bilbo a chance to think things over. He knew he wouldn’t be able to avoid anyone’s questions by the time the sun rose, and giving them answers wasn’t something he wanted to do. The more they knew, the more dangerous being here would become for them. Bilbo thought back to that strange dream he’d had in the ballroom, and it made him feel sick. He couldn’t stand the thought of them getting hurt because of him.

Thorin seemed almost peaceful when he slept. The harsh look didn’t quite leave his face, but it certainly gentled, and it reminded Bilbo of how Thorin looked when he smiled. He wondered if Thorin had ever watched him sleep in the way Bilbo did, had ever thought that his sleeping face might look like the face he made when he smiled. He didn’t really smile often, did he? He wondered if he’d ever shown such an honest expression to Thorin, and he desperately hoped he had. If nothing else, he wished he could give Thorin something like that.

Mid-morning, when the darkness in the room was starting to turn blue with light, Thorin started to stir. Perhaps he sensed that Bilbo wasn’t asleep, but as his eyes started flutter open Bilbo realised it was time for him to go.

“You should leave.” He told Thorin quietly as he pushed himself upright. Thorin seemed too drowsy to quite comprehend what he was saying, and mindlessly clutched at Bilbo’s arm when he shifted away. “It’s not safe here, Thorin. You have to go.”

“Bilbo…” He mumbled.

Gently, Bilbo reached out to run his fingers through Thorin’s hair. At the gentle touch, Thorin’s eyes started to droop closed. “Go back to sleep.” He urged.

Thorin almost seemed to comply instantly, but his eyes opened again, and his fingers tightened around Bilbo’s. “But what about you?” He whispered.

Bilbo’s throat tightened, but he tried not to let it show. “Perhaps I was meant to stay here.” He said.
“If I stay, then you can go.”

“You’ll be sad.” Thorin said. His eyes met Bilbo and held the gaze. “I don’t want you to be alone.”

Bilbo forced a smile. He thought back to his first impressions of Thorin and how he’d never even considered the fact he would one day come to rely on him so much. “I’ll be... I won’t be alone.” He finally said.

Thorin pulled his hand closer. “I don’t want you to be alone without me.”

Tears started to pool in Bilbo’s eyes. “I’m sorry.” He whispered. He really was. He never wanted any of this to happen but it felt completely out of his control.

“Bilbo-” Thorin startled.

He only shook his head. “Go to sleep.” He repeated gently. After a moment Thorin’s eyes drifted shut, but there was a frown pulling at his lips. That frown was Bilbo’s fault, wasn’t it? It made a pain unlike any other blossom in his chest, and after giving Thorin a last lingering look, he stood. He couldn’t wait around here any longer, no matter how much he wished he could.

Thranduil let out an aggravated sound as he shuffled around piles and piles of paperwork. They had too many unanswered questions and with each trail they chased only more appeared. Carc had spent countless hours researching the house and its history and they still were unable to piece together everything that had happened here. When they’d finally decided to turn to investigating Bilbo, he’d disappeared into the depths of the manor like a ghost.

If Thranduil were being honest, he thought that Bilbo had changed since they’d entered this house. He had never strayed from them if he were scared; rather, he tended to do the opposite and remain noticeably close by. Thranduil wasn’t quite sure what made this case different, because even though it involved Bilbo’s family he hadn’t shown any signs of being particularly close with them. While Thranduil wanted him to have a connection with his parents, he couldn’t bear the thought of Bilbo being influenced by such frightening people, not when he needed someone who could nurture him and help him remember the things he’d forgotten.

Maybe it was because he was a parent, but Thranduil hated to think that Bilbo would be left on his own. When he thought about his own child being stuck in such a situation, a fierce sense of protectiveness reared its head. It didn’t help that Legolas seemed to become more and more uncomfortable in the house without Bilbo’s presence to steady him. He wondered how deeply Legolas had come to care for Bilbo, and hoped that Legolas wouldn’t be deeply hurt by anything that might happen while they stayed here.

It was only when they were begrudgingly going over the files they’d collected on Bilbo did something finally emerge. Thranduil had been reading them over – he still had Bilbo’s files from the case at his school even though he should had long since got rid of them. He was reading over Bilbo’s school records when something suddenly struck him. “Carc, do you still have the transcripts from the interviews we did at Bilbo’s school?”

Carc glanced up at him, and nodded. “I do.” He said evenly. “Do you need them?”

“Yes.” Thranduil said. Carc pulled up the records within a handful of moments and handed the laptop over to him. At first Thranduil saw nothing out of place. After a moment, however, he noticed something. “There,” He said, pointing at the screen, “Milo is one of Bilbo’s friends, isn’t he? He said
he’s known Bilbo for longer than a year. Bilbo’s other friend, Hamfast, said something similar.”

“And?” Thorin asked as he came over to the table with the morning’s readings from the cameras in hand.

“His school records state he was only at the school for four months.” Thranduil said, brandishing the corresponding paperwork. “There’s no way they could have known him for so long.”

“That can’t be possible.” Thorin frowned. “Bilbo has been at that school for much longer.”

Thranduil simply shook his head. How could they have missed such an important fact when on the case? It seemed improbable that even Thorin and Carc could miss such a big discrepancy, let alone himself. They never miss anything so obvious. “I think we should contact his friends.” Thranduil said suddenly. “I have their information here…”

Carc nodded, and took the papers. He went to the other side of the room to have some privacy while he called them, and in the meantime Thorin took a seat across from him. “You still have those files.” He remarked.

Thranduil glanced away. “Yes.” He agreed. “I do. Something always prevented me from throwing them away.”

Thorin frowned again, but he made no comment. Ever since Bilbo had disappeared he’d become very withdrawn, more so than usual. Thranduil wondered about the extent of their relationship, but thinking of it only made him sad. He’d known Thorin for a very long time and he’d never made connections with other people easily. He still often brushed off Legolas, and the only person he freely conversed with was Carc. Since meeting Bilbo, however, he’d become much more interested in other people. Thranduil wasn’t so blind that he couldn’t see the affection Thorin held for Bilbo, but he wasn’t sure how deep that affection ran.

After a few tense minutes, Carc came back over and took his seat. “They don’t remember him.” He said.

Thranduil stiffened. “What do you mean?” He demanded. “How can they not remember him?”

Carc shook his head. “I don’t know.” He said.

“How is that even possible?” Thranduil groused as he jerked a hand back through his hair. “They were close with Bilbo, were they not?”

“Could their memory have been altered?” Legolas asked quietly. “Like Bilbo’s has been?”

“It’s possible.” Thranduil said. “But it feels as though there’s something more to it. Memory isn’t such a fickle thing that it can be changed and removed so easily. Bilbo seems to be an exception to that, but his friends should have not been affected by it.”

Anxiously, Legolas pulled his coat tighter around his shoulders. It wasn’t particularly cold, but Thranduil knew he wasn’t feeling well. He’d been making Legolas tea all morning and had even surreptitiously checked his temperature, though he thought that perhaps he hadn’t been subtle enough. He didn’t want his child to get hurt, let alone by something Thranduil couldn’t protect him from. Just the thought of it set his nerves on edge.

“Their memory loss can’t be a coincidence.” Thorin said. “Not when Bilbo’s memory is so fragmented already.”
Thranduil nodded in agreement. “Have you found anything more on his parents?”

Thorin frowned, and spread out the sheets he’d carried over. “Nothing more than we already know.” He said. “But this house is completely suffocated in spirits. I expected nothing less, but our readings can’t find a base level to calculate increases and decreases from.”

“There’s too much interference from them, then.” Thranduil hummed. “Could the spirits here be the ones messing with Bilbo’s memories?”

“I don’t know.” Thorin answered with a shake of his head. “I… Whatever it is that is here clearly wants us to leave. I think… I think somehow it’s targeting Bilbo, and he figured that out. That’s why he won’t come back here.”

“Then we have to find him!” Legolas exclaimed, standing abruptly. “He can’t… He can’t handle this on his own!”

“We know, Legolas.” Thranduil consoled. “But if we can’t find him, there isn’t any way for us to protect him. I have no doubt he has a deeper knowledge of what’s going on here than we do-”

“Then why won’t he tell us?”

“Legolas, I think that Bilbo is trying to protect us.” Thranduil said gently. “He must believe something bad will happen if he doesn’t command the attention of anything bad in this manor.”

“But why doesn’t he trust us?” Legolas implored. “Why won’t he let us help him?”

Thranduil sighed. “I don’t think it’s anything like that. I have no doubt that Bilbo trusts us, and if he believed it was a problem we could safely solve then he would come to us for help. There has to be something more sinister here, something that has him frightened. You mustn’t blame him for anything he’s doing right now.”

Legolas slowly sat down. He had a very troubled look on his face. “I don’t- I don’t blame him for anything.” He whispered. “But I want him back. He doesn’t seem like himself anymore. He won’t even reply to my messages.”

Thranduil’s heart twisted. “It’ll be alright, Legolas.” He said quietly as he pulled his child into his arms. He didn’t know what words to say that could possible comfort Legolas, and for that he felt incredibly guilty.

“Bilbo was here last night.” Thorin said quietly.

Legolas’s head snapped up. “He didn’t stay?”

Thorin shook his head. “I thought I dreamed it.” He said. “But I don’t think that I did. His hair had turned completely white, just like a ghost…”

Chills ran down Thranduil’s spine. He felt Legolas go stiff beside him, and resisted the urge to coddle him again. “Did he say anything?” Thranduil asked.

Thorin looked away. “I thought it was a dream, but he said we should leave.” He murmured. “He really wanted us to go. I asked him to stay, but he just… Apologised.”

Something deeply uneasy settled in Thranduil’s stomach. He wanted to protect Bilbo just in the same way he wanted to protect Legolas, but he was completely unable to. Whatever was haunting this house had already sunk its claws into him, and Thranduil didn’t know if Bilbo could be pulled back
out at all.
At lunch time, it was decided that they had to search for Bilbo. Regardless of the fact that this was his home, he was still contracted under Oakenshield for the duration of the case, and as such Oakenshield was responsible for his wellbeing. If Thranduil were being completely honest, he thought that perhaps this case would be too much for them to handle. Unlike Eru’s case, they were unaware of what exactly was haunting the building, and the fact that it was impossible to find their way around didn't help the situation at all.

Thranduil, for what it was worth, was mostly concerned about Legolas’s actions, excluding Bilbo’s disappearance of course. Legolas had become very withdrawn over the course of the investigation, even more so within the last day or so. Thranduil knew that the malicious spirit here targeted young people, most likely because it thought their youthfulness would give it something it lacked. He was worried for Legolas’s help, and even with the numerous warding and protection charms they’d made he doubted Legolas was completely safe. Some deep, instinctual part of him was flaring up, and it frustrated him. He felt inadequate as a parent when he saw his child so bravely hiding his distress.

When it came time for them to leave the room they were staying in, Thranduil was admittedly nervous. He made sure to hover over Legolas, even when he received an irritated glance for his efforts. Somehow he found himself glancing over at Oakenshield every now and then, too. While Oakenshield’s unruffled exterior may deceive some, Thranduil knew him better. It was a begrudging admission, but it was still true nevertheless. He knew that Bilbo had affected them all in some way – most clearly Legolas, but on a deeper level he knew that Bilbo had changed Thorin the most. How would he be if Bilbo were to never return?

Just the thought of leaving Bilbo in this house pained Thranduil’s heart. Not only for Thorin’s sake, or even for Legolas’s; no, for his own. He had come to care for Bilbo as well, and ached at the thought of Bilbo ever being lonely or hurt.

Expectedly, the corridors of the Baggins Manor were twisted and confusing. Thranduil couldn’t quite comprehend how such a house was ever built, and yet it was so. Even with the blueprints they’d created and the hallways they’d become somewhat familiar with still seemed foreign and bewildering. Thranduil had never been in a house like this, and once this case was over he never wanted to be in another one again, even if it didn’t happen to be haunted. It was simply too dangerous.

“There’s a room in this house that is empty aside from an old piano.” Oakenshield murmured quietly. “Bilbo took me to it, once. It had a strange effect on him.”
“How so?”

A tight frown came to Oakenshield’s face. “He… When he played, it was like his presence of mind completely vanished. He spoke without thinking and told me things I don’t think he would have otherwise said. There has to be something special about that piano, but I can’t figure out what it is if he doesn’t tell me.”

“Could it be the instrument he learned to play on?” Thranduil asked.

“Perhaps.”

“If that’s so, then his connection to it would certainly be strong.” Thranduil said. “I’ve seen spirits that had lingered in or around items they treasured when they were living. Do you remember where the room is?”

“I might be able to.” Oakenshield said. “It was night when we went and the corridors were quite dark, but…”

Thranduil nodded. He knew how difficult it could be to navigate this house even in daylight, let alone when the sun went down and the moon emerged. Still, he held out his hand. “Lead the way.”

The corridors steadily became colder and colder the deeper they moved into the house. It set Thranduil on edge, and he became more uneasy the further they walked. He kept expecting something to spring out from around a corner or from the darkness that lingered in opened doors and strangely placed windows. The structural design of the house was so unfathomable that he had all but become used to its strangeness.

“I think that’s it.” Oakenshield eventually murmured. The hallway they turned into was exceptionally wide and branched off into a T-shape at the end. A pair of tall doors stood out starkly against the lighter colours of the basic interior decorations, and for some reason they felt incredibly intimidating. How could a child have ever pushed open such big doors on their own?

Out of nowhere, glowing orbs began to appear throughout the hallway. They startled Thranduil. At first there were only a handful but the longer they lingered in the hallway the more appeared. Soon enough they were getting so thick that the view to the doors was being obscured, and almost instantly he felt a glaring sense of danger. He had seen orbs before – it was a common enough occurrence in his line of work – but these ones felt different. He’d always known the orbs to have a subtle presence, one that was sometimes completely unnoticeable. They had never felt threatening, until now. He could sense them the instant they appeared, but not for any good reason. They felt… They felt hollow, but how was such a thing possible?

“What are these things?” Legolas whispered quietly. His face was looking paler than it had before, and as one of the orbs drifted closer to him he physically jerked away.

“Legolas, move out of the way.” Thranduil said as a sinking feeling began to weigh down heavily in his stomach. “Don’t touch the-”

Legolas let out a pained cry as one of the orbs brushed against his arm. He stumbled away from it so fast that for a moment Thranduil feared he would topple right over, and clutched his arm tightly.

“Legolas!” Thranduil went cold with fear as he lurched towards his child. Legolas didn’t complain when Thranduil hiked up his sleeve. Slowly spreading across Legolas’s skin was a deep bruise, one that looked incredibly painful. “How is this possible?”

“How so?”

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“How so?” Oakenshield snapped. He looked agitated, but became noticeably less so.
when they complied with his command and moved further back down the hallway. “That bruise looks like the one on Bilbo’s hand.”

“Didn’t he say he fell…?” Legolas whispered. His eyes widened after a second, and he grit his teeth. “Did he lie?”

Thranduil rubbed his back soothingly. “Legolas.” He whispered warningly. Legolas only jerked his head away, but deep down Thranduil didn’t blame him. Had Bilbo been injured under his care? The thought made him feel sick, and he anxiously shepherded Legolas further away from the drifting orbs. “I’ve never seen them injure someone like that.” He said. “How is that possible?”

“Those orbs feel different.” Oakenshield muttered. “Something about them has changed.”

A frown crossed Thranduil’s face. He thought back to the last few days, feeling something linger at the edges of his mind, and with a start he suddenly remembered what it was. “Bilbo asked me about how spirits gain strength.” He said swiftly. “That was when he suddenly ran off.”

“What did you say?” Oakenshield demanded. “What did he want to know?”

“He wanted to know about spirits consuming one another.” Thranduil explained. “To gain strength, it’s not unheard of that darker spirits cannibalise smaller or weaker ones and thus gain strength. Could that be what happened here?”

Oakenshield was nodding before Thranduil even finished his sentence. “It must be.” He said. “It seems logical. Those orbs must only be husks of spirits, that’s why they’re able to cause harm.”

Thranduil made a frustrated noise and tried to school his expression into something more neutral. It took a moment, but he thought he managed to do so eventually. “We should head back to our room.” He said. “Erling was right – it’s become the only safe place in this house. We shouldn’t linger in these hallways.”

Oakenshield glanced back at the doors, of which were only partially visible. “The piano…” He murmured. His eyes looked wistful and worried; it was a look Thranduil had never seen on his face. It seemed incredibly sad.

“There’s nothing we can do about it now.” He said as gently as he could. “We can’t get through those spirits, not if they’re causing such forceful bodily harm. It’s just not safe.”

It was only when they were at the end of the hallway when Thranduil was struck by the sudden urge to turn around. It send uneasy chills down his spine, and made his heart thump. There weren’t often cases that could make him nervous, but now he was exceptionally so. He almost didn’t want to turn around, but it was as though something had hooked its claws into him and was forcing him to do so.

Standing at the end of the hallway in a clearing mist of orbs was Bilbo. The sight of him, with his hair all white and his skin turned purple with bruises, snatched away Thranduil’s breath. He looked so tired and withdrawn, more so than Thranduil had ever seen him. His parental instincts were rearing up atrociously, and he wanted to do nothing more than soothe Bilbo’s wounds and see to it that he returned to normal. But that wasn’t possible, was it? Not if Bilbo was appearing as he was, now. In fact, Bilbo’s sudden reappearance wasn’t the only worrying part – no, Thranduil was immediately startled at the fact that Nimrodel was standing beside Bilbo, tightly holding onto his hand.

“Is that Nimrodel?” Legolas whispered in shock. “We- we purified him, didn’t we? He should have crossed over, right? That’s definitely him.”
Thranduil nodded. “Yes.” He murmured. “That shouldn’t be possible, he was certainly purified…”

“Bilbo…” Oakenshield murmured.

The orbs were drifting towards Bilbo as though drawn to him. Even from this distance Thranduil could see hesitance in Bilbo’s stance, could see the way he shifted away from them. He had no doubt in his mind that Bilbo had been hurt by them before, and it made something awful crawl up into his throat. Just how much of Bilbo’s pain had gone unnoticed by the people who were meant to care for him? How could they miss something that was right before them? It didn’t seem conceivable that they could be so blind, and yet…

Thranduil watched with a growing feeling of dread as Bilbo turned his head away. He looked upset, and Thranduil wanted to comfort him, but the orbs were still lingering between them. He kept a tight grip on Legolas’s arm because he knew Legolas must be feeling something just like he was. No matter how much he wanted to go to Bilbo, there was no possible way for them to do so, and he didn’t want Legolas risking his health to attempt something they simply couldn’t do.

After a tense moment, Bilbo turned away. Nimrodel followed easily, and just like that they both escaped into the piano room. Thranduil couldn’t see into the room through all the orbs, and as they started to disappear he realised that the door was already closed. He doubted it would open for them any time soon, and was filled when a crushed feeling suddenly overcame him.

If all they could do was watch Bilbo destroy himself in an attempt to protect them, then what kind of people were they? Could they do nothing to alleviate his pain, to reassure him and protect him in a situation where he couldn’t protect himself? Had they not been the ones to involve him in all this mayhem in the first place?

He shook his head and frowned. He had a feeling that this had been coming for a long time, no matter how much of it Bilbo happened to forget. He wished that he could protect Bilbo, but was he even capable of doing so in the first place? He just didn’t know.
Exposure

Chapter Summary

A reappearing ring and a confrontation.

Chapter Notes

Exposure - the state of having no protection from something harmful.

It was dark, but it always seemed dark now. Bilbo wondered if the sun had stopped rising, or if it had simply given up on trying to reach through the darkness that permeated the building. At some places it was so thick that Bilbo felt swallowed up by it, but it was such a subtle, gradual presence he never noticed until it was far too late.

Bilbo had learned that Nimrodel liked to listen to him play the piano. It wasn’t just Nimrodel’s lullaby that he liked hearing, but it was anything Bilbo played that he enjoyed. Perhaps it wasn’t so much the music but instead the distraction he liked. Bilbo didn’t blame him. He’d long since stopped playing because he liked the sounds the keys made; playing had become the only way he knew how to distract himself from everything else that lurked in the manner. He saw ghosts are every turn, some that had grown from being nothing more than an orb into something that was distinguishably human.

He didn’t like seeing it. Most of the people that had been killed here were from so long ago that records of them no longer existed, and to put faces and figures to that mass concept of people only worsened his spirits. The longer he stayed here, the worse he got. He didn’t know how much longer he could endure the darkness in this house, as each moment slowly drained him of more and more energy. For how much longer would he be able to do even the simplest of things, like playing the piano?

It seemed impossible that he would ever stop, and yet his bones ached and his fingertips had been played raw. If it were not for Nimrodel he doubted he could have kept his eyes open for this long. The tiredness he was feeling wasn’t anything he had experienced before – it wore down on his nerves continuously, with enough pressure for him to feel and be aware of.

But it wasn’t hurting Thorin, and it wasn’t hurting Legolas or Thranduil or Carc. As long as they stayed away, as long as they didn’t come searching for him or for anything else in this house, then they would be safe. If he’d learned nothing else, he’d at least learned that. The spirits in the house had even started forgoing Nimrodel and Maki in favour of following after Bilbo like lost dogs. He’s lost count of the amount of times he’d gotten trapped by the orbs. There were so many bruises and aches in his skin that they’d all blurred into one.

The next time he saw his parents, they were together. It seemed almost foreign to find them together after seeing Belladonna alone so often, but he worried less when Bungo wasn’t hidden. Bilbo still couldn’t completely understand his parents, and no matter how much he searched the archives he was never able to find out what had happened to them after they had come to this house. His father’s hair had turned white, just like Belladonna’s, and after his own had done the same, none had
returned to their normal colour. Sometimes he’d sit before a mirror and gently tangle his fingers through the wispy strands, but he could never look at his reflection for long. Not because there was something wrong with it, but rather because there would always be more than one face in the mirror – and only one was his.

He still hadn’t found his bedroom. The room with all the plants from his dream, as well as the dark room in which Nimrodel had first appeared, were still mysteriously hidden in the winding halls of the manor. Bilbo wasn’t fond of the idea of going to a place where Nimrodel had so forcefully pulled him away from, but his bedroom was another matter altogether. What if there was something there that could help him? A document, a photo, or even a hidden memory?

He thought about his bedroom a lot as he played the piano. The piano room was the only room in the entire building that seemed void of spirits other than those Bilbo led in. Maki, Nimrodel and even Frodo had willingly followed him in, but the spirits trapped at the manor and his parents had never stepped a single foot over the threshold. He wondered if there was some reason for it, but he reasoned that there must be. He had guessed by now that this was the place he spent most of his childhood so he knew he had a strong connection to it, but why had the room become such a voice for other spirits? Was it because they had been consumed? If that were the case, then his parents should have been able to enter to, and yet despite the amount of time Bilbo wasted at the seat of the piano they never once appeared.

When they did appear before him, however, he was always left with a bitter feeling. Belladonna was always whisking him away deeper into the house, and although her touch was cold Bilbo never shook her off. The questions he asked her were always brushed aside, but he reasoned that if her attention was focused on him then it simply couldn’t be focused on anyone else.

It was only when Bilbo realised that Thorin and the others had not yet taken the chance to leave did he start to worry. He feared for them greatly, and anytime he closed his eyes he was plagued by awful images of his friends injured and hurt. What if they came to hate him for what he did? As long… As long as they were safe, he would stomach it.

Strangely, as he finished a quiet lullaby on the piano, he was struck by thoughts of the golden ring that had washed up on Elrond’s shores. It had seemed like the darkest thing he’d ever come across, like nothing could ever carry as bad an aura as it somehow managed to. Now, however, it was the house and all its dangerous mysteries that had taken that title. He wondered what had happened to that ring, but he didn’t have to wonder long.

When Bilbo ventured out of the piano room, he was somewhat relieved to find that the hallway was empty. He had seen the others standing at the end of it before, but he was unsure if he had dreamed of that or not. All his memories, even those newly made, where all blending and twisting into one, incomprehensible thought that he couldn’t quite wrap his mind around no matter how hard he tried to.

He was walking down a hallway, one with many stairs, when he heard footsteps. When he reached the landing, he found that he wasn’t in another corridor, but rather he was in a room. It felt disconcerting to enter a room in such a way, without meaning or intention. With doors and windows there was a physical means by which one could tell they were changing locations, but this house wasn’t at all conventional, was it? At the other side of the room stood his parents.

He stopped at the sight of them, and was briefly relieved that neither Maki nor Nimrodel had followed him in. He felt utterly scrutinized under their gaze, and couldn’t help but stiffen.

“Hello, dear.” Belladonna greeted.
Bilbo shivered. Her tone was cold, but no more so than usual. “What is it?” He asked quietly.

“I was wondering if you’ve seen a ring of mine.” She said. “It’s a small thing, made of gold… It’s quite precious. Your father gave it to me.”

He shook his head. “I haven’t.” He said. His voice was nothing more than a whisper, even to his own ears. “I haven’t seen a ring.”

“Are you sure?” Belladonna prodded. “It’s quite unmissable, I’m sure. My name is inscribed on the inside of the band.”

Bilbo only shook his head again. His mouth couldn’t form words, so he pursed his lips tightly. He couldn’t meet Belladonna’s eyes; couldn’t meet Bungo’s, either, despite his more placid exterior. What was he meant to do in this situation?

Belladonna hummed quietly. Bilbo could feel the unsettling weight of her eyes on him, and it made his heart beat erratically. “Are you quite sure, Bilbo?”

His breath got caught in his throat. The room was steadily turning colder, enough that his skin started to prickle and his hair stood on end.

Suddenly, a small clanging sound reached his ears. It became the only sound in the room, and with each clang Bilbo felt his heart race even faster. He stiffly twisted his head, and there it was – the ring. It slowly toppled down each of the stairs he’d previously come down from before it slowly rolled across the floor. It clattered to a stop in the centre of the room, and the noise it made as it fell to its side was deafening. How could such a small thing make so much noise on its own? Even more puzzling was the fact that it was here in the manor when Bilbo clearly remembered throwing it far out into the ocean.

“Ah.” Belladonna said on a sigh as she tucked a strand of long, white hair behind her ear. “There it is.”

Bilbo took a cautious step back. “But how…?”

“Oh look dear, that is your ring.” Bungo remarked. He walked forwards and stooped to delicately pluck it from the floor. “I hadn’t known you’d lost it.”

“Yes, well.” Belladonna waved a hand. “It tends to disappear quite a bit on me.”

Curiously, Bungo turned it over in his hands. “I see.” He murmured. “What a tricky thing it is.”

Bilbo bit the inside of his mouth so hard he tasted blood. He’d never felt such a dangerous presence from anything before, not even from Gorlim. He had the distinct impression that one wrong step would get him seriously hurt, and it took all his effort not to turn on his heel and run. “Th-that ring…” He murmured shakily. “How long have you had it?”

“Oh, I hardly remember now.” Belladonna said. “Perhaps before you were born?”

Bilbo thought back to the picture he’d seen of his parents when they were younger, the one in which Belladonna had been holding a baby’s jumpsuit. He could see it vividly in his head, and he knew that neither Belladonna nor Bungo had been wearing a gold ring. If it was so precious to her, then she would have been wearing it, and yet… There was no way they could have owned the ring for so long, so had she simply forgotten? Or did she not know at all, because she was not Belladonna?

He felt his hands go clammy with sweat. “I should- I should go…” He stuttered.
“But why?” Belladonna asked. Her eyes were wide and piercing, and Bilbo suddenly knew for sure that this Belladonna wasn’t the one who had been in that photograph. “Won’t you stay with us, Bilbo?”

He shook his head, and clenched his trembling fingers. He took a step back, and after only a moment of hesitation he turned around to rush back up the stairs. He could hear Bungo and Belladonna move to follow him, and he couldn’t help but let out wheezing breaths as he tried to run faster. There were orbs lingering at the top of the staircase, and he flailed for a moment as he flung himself through them. He hardly felt their bruises anymore.

He couldn’t stay here, something bad was going to happen. His heart was going to burst from his chest, and he felt burning tears pool in his eyes. His chest heaved as he struggled to breath, and he blindly turned down hallways and through doors as if getting lost would keep Belladonna and Bungo off of his trail.

But it didn’t work. He could hear them behind him, as though they had to do nothing more than walk to keep up with him. He let out a petrified scream as something furiously cold wrapped around his ankle to pull his leg out from under him. The ground rushed up startlingly fast and he hit it hard, hard enough to have the breath knocked out of his lungs. When he jerked his head around he saw that there was a ghostly hand clutching his ankle, and that a shadowy figure had been the one to pull him down. He tried to kick the figure off but it only dragged him along the ground; its grip on his ankle was tight.

“Bilbo!”

His heart plummeted. At the other end of the hallway Thorin had appeared, looking breathless. His face twisted as he took in the sight before him, and Bilbo felt his own expression fall. “Don’t come here.” He snapped forcefully, but Thorin didn’t listen. Bilbo had never seen him look so frightened. “Thorin, don’t!”
Exaction

Chapter Summary

A means of force and a tough decision to make.

Chapter Notes

Exaction - the action of demanding and obtaining something from someone, especially a payment.

Bilbo cried out in pain as the grip on his ankle became brutally tight. He clawed at the floor but it did nothing to stop him from getting pulled along the tiles. His bruised fingertips sent shocks of pain up his arms; he couldn’t pull himself upright.

“Bilbo!” Thorin shouted as he rushed down the hallway. Orbs were starting to appear in the air and for a moment Bilbo feared Thorin would walk through them, but he didn’t. He grabbed Bilbo by the arms when he reached him and hauled him upright with enough strength to rip Bilbo’s ankle from the grip of the ghost. A loud crack emanated from Bilbo’s ankle, and his face twisted in pain.

“You have to go.” He whimpered, pushing against Thorin’s grip. “Thorin.”

“We have to go.” Thorin corrected. His arm dropped to Bilbo waist to hold him upright when his knees buckled. “I won’t leave you here, Bilbo.”

He gritted his teeth, and tightened his fingers around Thorin’s sleeves. When he glanced back over at Belladonna and Bungo, he found that they were standing frightfully still at the end of the hallway. Belladonna’s eyes were misted over with white, as were Bungo’s, and they were so intently focused on Thorin that Bilbo immediately felt sick. He met Belladonna’s eyes and the gradual pull of her lips told him that she knew just exactly how frightened he was.

On a whim, he turned to face her and pushed out his arm in front of Thorin. Distantly, he wondered what Thorin thought of them. Did he see Belladonna and Bungo, and think of Bilbo? It wasn’t so much of a stretch. He himself caught glimpses of his parents’ features in his own face every time he glanced in a mirror. He’d never thought about how he would look like in relation to his parents because he’d never remembered what they looked like, but to have their faces clear in his mind… It was more unsettling than he had expected it to be.

“Let’s go, Bilbo.” Thorin murmured. He tried to pull Bilbo away, but the motion caught Belladonna’s eyes, and she turned her gaze back to him. Bilbo felt a chill pass right through his chest, and he went stiff with tension. Why would she look at Thorin like that? He thought he knew – the people that had all died in this house had been young – but he didn’t want to believe that she would kill the people he cared about.

But she wasn’t normal anymore, and he knew that both she and Bungo would take any opportunity they got because they didn’t think like humans now. He inhaled deeply, and slowly unclenched his
jaw. “You have to go.” He whispered. “It’s not safe.”

“Bilbo-”

“No.” He interrupted, voice harsh. He couldn’t meet Thorin’s eyes. “Don’t argue with me, Thorin. You don’t know what they’ll do.”

“And that’s because you won’t tell me anything.” Thorin pressed. “How can I know how to help you when I don’t know what’s happening?”

Bilbo trembled. That was true, wasn’t it? He hadn’t told Thorin anything, not now – not ever. Did that mean he didn’t trust Thorin? No, no that couldn’t be true. He knew Thorin was intelligent and brave, and if anyone could figure out a way to stop the things that were happening at this manor then it would be him. Bilbo hadn’t tell him because he didn’t know what sort of price was attached to that knowledge, and it scared him. What if Thorin lost his memory, or if he was injured by something that lurked in this house? There were so many things that could have gone wrong, and if keeping Thorin in the dark about his parents and this house protected him, then that was what Bilbo would do. It was what he had done.

“Thorin, this isn’t like your other cases.” He said. “You have to listen to me – you can’t stay here.”

Thorin shook his head. “Bilbo, I can’t-”

“You have to.” Bilbo snapped. He pushed Thorin back with as much energy as he could muster, and all of his efforts seemed to get the message through.

“Come with me.” Thorin said. “We’ll all go.”

Bilbo shook his head. “I- I can’t Thorin, I’m- I’m sorry…”

“Don’t apologise.” Thorin said sharply. He gripped Bilbo’s hand tightly and pulled him along. “Let’s go, Bilbo.”

An orb drifted past his head, and Bilbo couldn’t help but physically flinch. He pulled his hands free from Thorin, and clenched his fingers to hide their trembling. The hallway had been steadily attracting the spirits, and with so many people – including Belladonna and Bungo – lingering in one place more were certainly bound to show up.

“Bilbo, won’t you introduce us?” Belladonna asked. She shared one last look with Bungo before she started to walk towards them.

Panicked, Bilbo turned back down the hallway only to be faced with a growing mass of orbs. Some had developed human forms, and just the sight of them made Bilbo’s heart race. How was Thorin meant to escape when those painful things haunted every corner of the mansion? He bit the inside of his mouth, and took a step back. He gripped Thorin by the arm, and ignored Thorin’s quiet, confused murmur of his name. He couldn't argue with Thorin anymore, it wasn't getting him anywhere. He knew where he stood regarding the situation, so why did he continue to pursue it?

“Bilbo.” Belladonna insisted. Her eyes had not left Thorin, and Bilbo felt his stomach drop. He tried to shield Thorin as best as he could, but it was futile. Even when he tried to pull Thorin away there was nowhere to go. Bilbo wouldn’t risk guiding him through the orbs, not when there were so many. He wouldn’t dare take Thorin any closer to Belladonna or Bungo, either, because he simply didn’t know what would happen if he did.

Frantically, he glanced around himself. There weren’t any doors close enough to safely reach – only
rows of windows with old, wooden shutters lined the walls lined up on the wall just behind Thorin. He didn’t know what was on the other side of them, but he had a feeling it wasn’t what he expected.

“Bilbo, we have to go-” Thorin tried again. He had a panicked edge to his voice, one that was just barely noticeable, and it shocked Bilbo. Perhaps Thorin understood the dangers of this house more than Bilbo had thought.

But he shook his head. “No.” He whispered. “You have to go.”

And with that, he pushed Thorin.

Thranduil held in his sharp breathes as he rounded a corner. He’d lost sight of Oakenshield after he had run down a winding hallway, and now they were all lost. Oakenshield hadn’t been the only one to hear Bilbo’s screams, so why hadn’t he just stuck by the rest of them like he would have any other time? Somehow, Thranduil thought he knew why. The echoing scream that had reached them as they walked down a hallway in search of camera recordings had chilled him to the bone. He never wanted to hear that noise again, and yet it revolved around his head on a steady loop he just couldn’t shake.

Eventually they came across a strangely designed room they had not yet seen. The ceiling was exceptionally high, likely extending to the next story up, and beds that were soft in appearance lined one wall. When Thranduil followed the wall up he saw that windows lined the upper portion all around the room. Wooden shutters kept them shut, but they looked loosely latched. As he watched one of them started to creak, and he stiffened defensively. Beside him, Legolas and Carc did the same.

As he watched, the shutters suddenly burst open in a spray of wooden debris. He flinched as the wooden shards clattered to the ground, but that seemed to pale in comparison as to what came through the window – or rather, who. Thorin fell through the air as if he weighed nothing, his arms crossed protectively over his face. Thranduil lurched forwards, but then something pale and glowing flashed beneath Thorin. For a moment Thranduil thought he saw a figure, but it was gone as soon as it appeared. Thorin hit the bed with nothing more than a gentle thump, panting harshly.

“Thorin!” Legolas cried as he ran forwards to help Thorin sit up. “What happened?”

“Bilbo… Bilbo pushed me.” Thorin said. His eyes were wide with shock, and he looked paler than Thranduil had ever seen him.

Legolas flinched at his words. “Bilbo did?” He whispered. “But- but he wouldn’t…”

Thranduil glanced up. From the angle he was standing at it was difficult to see through what remained of the broken window shutters, but Bilbo’s shaking figure was unmistakable. His arms were still held out, and he met Thranduil’s eyes. Bilbo’s eyes were losing their colour just like his hair, and his pupils were incredibly constricted. He looked petrified, and then his figure was suddenly blocked out by a tall figure with long white hair. Thranduil blinked once, tensing, but then Bilbo and the white-haired figure were gone.

He turned his attention to Thorin. Carc was helping him upright and subtlety checking him for injuries. “Are you alright?” He asked.

Silently, Thorin nodded his head.

“Why did Bilbo push you?” Thranduil asked. “Do you know?”
Thorin pursed his lips, and turned his head back up to the window. His eyes searched for Bilbo, but Bilbo was long gone. He didn’t answer Thranduil.

“We should leave.” Carc murmured. At the sharp look Thorin shot him, he hardened his expression. “I know you don’t want to hear it, but it doesn’t seem like there’s anything more we can do.”

“We can’t leave Bilbo here.” Legolas snarled. “How could you even suggest such a thing?”

“He doesn’t want our help.” Carc replied just as harshly. “Can’t you see? He’s not the same anymore, not if he’s willing to harm Thorin.”

“He didn’t harm me.” Thorin said defensively.

“He said it himself that he doesn’t know his way around this house.” Carc pointed out. “How could he have known what was behind that window?”

Thorin clenched his jaw, unable to answer. He glanced at Thranduil imploringly.

Thranduil only shook his head. “I don’t know what you want me to say.” He said. “But no one here is safe, least of all Bilbo. There are far too many vengeful spirits here, hollow or not. I don’t believe an exorcism is possible anymore.”

“Then what are we meant to do?” Legolas asked despairingly. “We have to get Bilbo to leave with us.”

“He won’t.” Thorin murmured. “I tried.”

Thranduil’s heart clenched. If Bilbo wouldn’t leave for Thorin, then he wouldn’t leave at all. That much was certain. What did Bilbo knew that they didn’t? Just how far did Belladonna and Bungo’s influence extend over him? Something clearly wasn’t right, and he desperately wished to know what it was. They had to do more research on Bilbo, to figure him out despite their hesitance, but was there time to do such a thing? It was clear that Carc wanted to leave and he was the most handy when it came to digging up secrets from the past. It could never be done without him.

He wondered if they should leave this manor, but his deepest instincts so harshly demanded that they find Bilbo that he wondered if he would be able to leave if the need arose. Bilbo didn’t deserve to be left in this place by himself, not if they could somehow help him.

“Then what should we do?” Legolas demanded. “We can’t… We can’t just leave him.”

Thranduil pulled his child into his arms. Legolas was trembling, and his face was stony. Thranduil had never seen him wear such an expression, and it frightened him. “Legolas, there might not be anything we can do.” He whispered. “We’ll keep trying for as long as possible, but there isn’t much time yet.”

“Why would Bilbo do this to us?”

A lump formed in Thranduil’s throat. “He’s not trying to hurt us.” He whispered. “But Bilbo thinks the payment for knowing the secrets of this house are too high for us to pay.”
Extricate

Chapter Summary

Frustration and a painful reality.

Chapter Notes

Extricate - free (someone or something) from a constraint or difficulty.

Better than anybody else, Bilbo thought he knew himself. That, however, was an assertion that was
becoming less and less clear the longer he stayed in his childhood home. Whenever he had lost a
memory, he’d never experienced any sort of sensation or absentness in his thoughts that would
indicate something was missing. Now however, he had started to notice when something
disappeared. It always brought him up short, and when he’d try and reach for the part of his mind that
had gone cold and blank it always made him recoil. He was constantly plagued by headaches, and
no matter how fervently he thought over his memories he could never recall what had been taken.

That was what was happening, wasn't it? He wasn't losing his memories, not like before; no, they
were being taken from him and there wasn't anything he could do about it.

Frodo hadn't appeared in quite some days, Bilbo eventually realised. He'd long since lost all concepts
of time and he hadn't come across windows that showed the outside world in a while, but he was
sure that the hours were passing one by one. When he thought about it harder, he realised that Maki
and Nimrodel hadn't appeared in quite some time, either. He was sure that he would have known if
something bad happened to them, so he tried not to think too negatively on it. There was a reason for
everything, and so there must be a reason for that, too.

In a house as endless as this, he found it difficult to avoid ghosts and spirits. He never lingered in one
place for long, fearing that his parents would find him. It exhausted him, and he wondered when the
last time he slept was, but that was one of the many things he could no longer recall. He hadn't come
across that bloodied hallway again, and for that he was relieved. He had a feeling that it led to a place
he didn't want to ever go, and he thought that perhaps one he'd been quite close to finding it - there
had been so many spirits filling a hallway that he'd turned back around straight away, but the sight of
that hallway had stayed with him for quite some time afterwards.

Still, despite his familiarity with the house from his dreams, he did not know it. His knowledge of its
hallways and its scattered rooms was mere in comparison to the knowledge that Belladonna and
Bungo presumably had, and so he knew that avoiding them completely was an unlikely possibility.
What was he to do if he could, anyway? All he wanted was for the paranormal research team to
safely leave, and if that happened - then what? What would he do, afterwards? He didn't believe that
any of the spirits trapped here, including Belladonna and Bungo, would be able to leave. Too much
death and horror was tied up in the house, and it prevented them from ever escaping.

Even if Thorin and the others left, would Bilbo be able to? If he could find his way out, it didn't seem
so impossible. Would it be wise for him to? When he thought about his memories and the way they
disappeared so easily and freely, he didn’t think so. Even if he could leave, would he be able to recover anything that he’d lost? It wasn’t worth living if he was destined to forget everything he wanted to remember.

If there were anything he wished to forget, he thought it might be his parents. He tried to find memories of them he could treasure, memories that were precious and kind, but none came. This house had taken whoever they had been and turned them into people that were frightening and cold and dangerous. He doubted that the people he saw were human any longer. Such thoughts troubled him, because he knew without any doubt that he was their child. If they were no longer human, then what was he? Realistically, he knew that his memory troubles and his appearance were abnormal. His hair had turned just as white as his parents’, and they were frightfully dangerous. If they truly were possessed, or if their spirits had been consumed by whatever lurked in this house, then what did that mean for him?

Nothing good, he knew. He looked in a mirror and wondered if he was human, what with such white hair. Had he been born from spirits, or was he human as a child? Terrifyingly, he started to wonder if he was in fact the person who had been named “Bilbo.” There were so many spirits in this house, and if he had been born here… It made sense, didn’t it, to think that perhaps he was a spirit too? Maybe that was why he would stay, even if those that he loved left.

Of course, things had never worked out quite so easily for Bilbo. He’d learned that the hard way, he thought. Nothing came easy. He had been walking down a hallway, one he didn’t recognise, when he was suddenly overcome by a terribly cold feeling. It rocked him right to the core, and he couldn’t help but let out a small, shocked gasp as he clutched at his chest. He glanced around, eyeing the hallway and its doorways suspiciously, but there was nothing there. Still he felt troubled, and unbidden his feet started to lead him back down the hallway. Something bad was going to happen, and he didn’t like it.

The room he came across was only faintly familiar. There was an oddly placed balcony running around its outer edges, and he cautiously walked its length, trying to figure out what exactly had drawn him here. The lighting was poor and it took his eyes an unexpectedly long time to adjust. He struggled to make sense of the room, but when he did it didn’t make him feel any less uneasy. There was something in the room, something bad – and he finally realised that it was Belladonna. She stood with her hair out and flowing in the centre of the room with her arms by her sides. Just the sight of her sent awful chills down his spine, but that wasn’t the worst part of it all.

No, the worst part was that he could hear voices; familiar ones. He tightened his fingers around the balcony railing as he felt his heart plummet. His eyes focused on the doors before Belladonna, and as he watched they were pushed open. Flashes of long, blonde hair glinted in the faint light, and Bilbo went to call out for his friends but no words came. His eyes flashed as they fixated on the paranormal research team, and he felt his fingers start to cramp. He wanted to move, to go to them, but his body had turned cold.

Thranduil threw his arm out in front of Legolas at the sight of Belladonna. Even from this distance Bilbo could see that he had gone tense. He seemed to murmur something to Legolas, but Legolas didn’t respond. He seemed different, but Bilbo couldn’t place exactly what had changed about him. Whatever it was, he hoped that it was reversible.

“Welcome.” Belladonna said. Her voice was thick with false kindliness, and she spread out her arms correspondingly. “Did you enjoy your time with my child?”

“What have you done to him?” Thorin demanded. His face was stony, his tone equally so.

“Why, I haven’t done a single thing.” Belladonna replied. Her eyes had turned chillingly cold, but
there was a hunger in them that Bilbo had never seen before. She took a step forwards, and it seemed that only Thranduil was wary enough to take a visible step back.

Bilbo clenched his teeth, and pried his hands away from the railing. He couldn’t let anything happen to his friends, not when he knew what Belladonna was capable of. His legs felt heavy when he forced them to move, but they move nevertheless. His footsteps were heavy, and noticeably echoed throughout the hall. Belladonna’s head turned around to face him, and Bilbo met her eyes. The hunger in them didn’t lessen at all when she met his gaze, but at least she was no longer staring at the people before her.

If a look could convey words, then Bilbo hoped his expression told her to stop what she was doing. He reached the bottom of the stairs that led down from the balcony and stood still. He refused to drop her gaze no matter how frightened it made him. Just faintly, Belladonna tilled her head to the side. She looked as though she was considering something important, and it made Bilbo incredibly nervous. What could she possibly be thinking?

When he started to inch along the wall towards Thorin and the others, her eyes followed him. Her hair and her clothes were moving ever so slightly as though there were a breeze in the room, and somehow it reminded him of the way his curtains often moved. He couldn’t quite picture them in his head anymore, but he still remembered them, just a little.

“Bilbo, we have to go.” Legolas said. He was holding Thranduil’s arm tightly, as though he were about to push past him, and briefly Bilbo cast him a glance. “Please.”

He only shook his head. Bilbo wasn’t sure what he was going to do, but he knew that he couldn’t leave with Legolas, no matter how much he wanted to. Something would prevent him from doing so. “You have to go.” He said instead. “Now.”

Legolas’s face dropped, and just the sight of him looking so upset made Bilbo’s heart ache.

“You don’t want your friends to stay, Bilbo?” Belladonna interjected.

Bilbo’s eyes jerked towards her. As subtly as he could, he came to stand in between his friends and his mother. He met her eyes again, and didn’t flinch at her heavy, imploring stare. He didn’t know what he could do to stop her, but whatever it was he would do it. “Stop this.” He said quietly. “Stop it.”

Something cold flashed through Belladonna’s eyes again, and her lips twisted up. For a moment she completely disappeared, but then she appeared right before Bilbo, close enough that he could feel the coldness emanating from her skin. “You’re my child,” She whispered, lifting a hand to touch his cheek, “But you shouldn’t stand in my way.”

He inhaled deeply, and felt his chest heave. “Am I really your child?” He whispered back. “Or am I someone else – are we both someone else?”

Belladonna’s smile turned cruel. “I guess you’ll never know.” She said. Her hand dropped from his face, and then suddenly dozens of spirits began to seep through the walls of the hall. Like liquid they dripped from the ceiling and from every crack visible. They made tormented sounds, ones that grated on Bilbo’s nerves and made him clap his hands over his ears in an attempt to block them out.

“I always get what I want, Bilbo.” Belladonna said over the noise. She stepped away from Bilbo, and turned towards Thorin, who visibly flinched. In the spur of the moment Bilbo pushed himself forwards, hard enough to reach Thorin and shove him away.
“Go already!” He shouted. He pushed Thorin again, harder, and felt his heart jump as Thorin stumbled. “Go!”

“Bilbo-!” Thorin protested, grabbing Bilbo by the wrists.

“Hurry.” Thranduil demanded as he grabbed a hold of Thorin’s shoulder. “Before we get trapped in here.”

“I’m not leaving you.” Thorin snarled. “You don’t need to be afraid, Bilbo!”

Bilbo’s heart jumped into his throat. He swallowed heavily, and for a moment he was completely overwhelmed by the feelings he felt. They burned bitterly, and left his mouth tasting sour. He couldn’t name it, and it frustrated him so much that his eyes started to turn watery. In a fit he shook off Thorin’s grip and jerked away. “You don’t get to tell me how to feel!” He shouted. How could Thorin not understand how petrified he felt? How could he not understand Bilbo at all?

“Bilbo…” Thorin whispered. He looked devastated, and moved limply when Thranduil tried to shake him.

“Get out.” Bilbo said. “Get out, all of you!”

It sounded so cruel, he could hear it in his own voice, but he didn’t care. He was too panicked, too flighty. Creaking sounds were starting to rapidly fill the air and for a moment he didn’t even notice them because the noise of the spirits was far too loud, but then dust started to rain down from the ceiling in sporadic clumps. He looked up and saw that the high ceiling was starting to bend and break, and he just knew it was Belladonna’s doing. As chunks of debris started to fall to the floor, Bilbo felt his blood run cold.

“Look out!” He screamed, panicked. He grabbed a fistful of Thorin and Thranduil’s shirts and pushed them with all of his might just as a support beam swung down towards the ground. He saw them topple to the ground, saw Legolas reach for his father and Carc jump in to catch Thorin before he could get injured. He saw them all, just one last time.

And then the beam hit him. He hardly felt it as he was thrown to the ground. His head cracked awfully against the marbled floors, and then he went still.
Red had never been a colour that Thranduil particularly admired. It was brash and forceful, and was associated with things like danger and anger and seduction. He didn’t like it, not when it was bold and bright and solid. It was a colour that was only suited to a certain type of person, and often used on others it did not compliment. Red wasn’t a colour that suited him, but he thought that perhaps it suited Bilbo.

But not like this.

Thranduil’s body went cold and stiff with shock as he watched red pool beneath Bilbo’s head. It crept through the cracks in the marbled floor and created tangles in Bilbo’s pale hair. Against such a white colour, it was glaringly stark.

“Bilbo.” Thorin said. Thranduil’s eyes jerked towards him, and he felt something lodge in his throat. Thorin’s face was shattered, his expression lost and blank. His pupils were constricted, and his eyes were frightfully wide. It almost looked like he’d stopped breathing, and his face was so pale. Thranduil had never seen him look like that, not even anything close. Thorin looked like his breath had been ripped right from his lungs.

“We have to go.” Carc murmured. He kept a tight grip on Thorin, and Thranduil knew that if he hadn’t Thorin would have fallen to the ground. “Thorin, we have to go.”

“Not without him…!” Thorin gasped. His eyes were slowly filling with tears but he didn’t seem to notice.

Carc’s expression turned hard. He hauled Thorin upright and struggled to keep Thorin from lurching towards Bilbo in his desperation. He didn’t say another word as he physically pulled Thorin backwards.

“The building is coming down.” Thranduil said as he allowed Legolas to help him up. Even to his own ears his voice sounded choked off and shaken. Legolas whimpered and held onto Thranduil’s arm tightly. His face was streaked with damp tracks, and Thranduil could feel that he was shaking. Legolas couldn’t look at Bilbo, couldn’t even meet Thranduil’s eyes when Thranduil shot him a concerned look.

With more strength that Thranduil expected, Carc heaved Thorin towards the door. Thorin’s head twisted around, his eyes fixated on Bilbo. He looked like he was trying to say something, to voice
even more heart-heavy, weak protests at the mere notion of leaving Bilbo behind. What other choice did they have? It made Thranduil ache to even think it, but he doubted there was anything they could do, not after a blow like that.

They escaped into the hallway. Thranduil pulled Legolas on as fast as he could because he knew that Legolas simply wouldn’t be able to function without the support. Although his thoughts and his emotions were all over the place, Thranduil knew that that much was true, and he could see it. He made sure to keep a tight grip on his child, to shield him from the debris that crumbled down from the splintering ceiling.

“Do you remember the way?” He shouted over the noise towards Carc, who gave him a quick glance before nodding. Thranduil swallowed heavily, and let him lead the way. Carc had his arm swung around Thorin’s waist, and Thorin slumped against him, boneless. His head was hung, but Thranduil could still see his wide eyes and his pale complexion.

The corridors were teeming with spirits, and although Thranduil couldn’t quite see half of them he could certainly sense them. Like noticeable weights pressing against his mind, they commanded his attention. There were far too many for him to sort through, and he didn’t want to have them anywhere near him. If he had time to throw up a warding spell he would have, but there was no way he could. Instead he tried to block out the loud white noise that they created, and focused intensely on putting one foot in front of the other. He had to trust that Carc remembered the way, or else they’d never escape.

Thranduil sucked in a pained breath as an orb shot through his arm. He could feel a bruise appearing on his skin, but he didn’t let it deter him. He kept his eyes on Carc’s back, and pushed Legolas onwards when he began to slow. The corridor was becoming thick with spirits, but the further they got away from Belladonna the easier it became to see. He had no doubt that the spirits were attracted to Belladonna, even if going towards her would lead to their demise.

When he cast a quick glance over his shoulder, he found that they weren’t being followed by her. He wondered if seeing Bilbo- if seeing Bilbo as he was had shocked her. In either case it had given them a small window of opportunity, and despite the building was coming down around them they would take that opportunity for all that it was worth. Even if the corridors were nothing less than a mystifying labyrinth, they had to escape.

Carc paused for a moment, and a deep furrow appeared in his brow. Thranduil watched him anxiously, and felt himself start to fidget as they came to a standstill. There were so many open doorways and hallways they could go through that it made Thranduil’s head spin. “Which way?” He demanded as he met Carc’s gaze.

For a moment Carc didn’t answer, but then he shook his head and jostled Thorin into a better position. “This way.” He said. Thranduil hesitated for a moment, before following. He’d lost all sense of direction in this house, and he wouldn’t be able to lead them out of it any safer than Carc would. Thranduil couldn’t remember the turns they’d taken to get where they were in the first place, let alone to find their way back.

Suddenly, the floor started to shake. Thranduil tensed and felt Legolas stiffen in fright. He quickly cast his eyes around the corridor, and felt his heart begin to race faster. Cracks were spreading across the walls like spider webs, and before his eyes chunks of the ceiling began to collapse. He ducked instinctively as a wooden beam pushed through the ceiling, and quickly pulled Legolas out of the wall as it began to fall. “Go!” He shouted. “We have to hurry!”

Carc pursed his lips, and didn’t say a word. He trudged down the hallway as fast as he could, and Thranduil wondered if he would be able to support Thorin for much longer. There wasn’t much of a
height different between Carc and Thorin despite their age different, and he knew it must be physically strenuous to carry Thorin so heavily through such an unstable house. Concerned, Thranduil moved faster, and tried to keep a closer distance between them all. He would help if the need arose.

“The floor is going to collapse any moment.” Carc said. “But I don’t know how close we are to the exit.”

“Where are the employees?” Thranduil asked. “Erling?”

Carc only shook his head. “I can’t even remember their names.”

Thranduil startled at that, and tried to recall the names of the people they’d interviewed. Just as Carc said, he couldn’t remember anyone other than Erling. It had seemed strange to him that the only employees at the house would be the elderly, even if younger employees were being killed. Did they even exist in the first place? He wasn’t so sure anymore, and it frustrated him more than he let on.

Out of nowhere, a sharp pain suddenly rocketed up his leg. Thranduil felt his face twist into a wince, and he couldn’t help but stumble a little. Legolas’s head jerked up towards him, eyes wide with fright, and he didn’t seem to believe the tense smile Thranduil sent him. Anxiously, Thranduil glanced down at his leg and he couldn’t help but cringe when he saw that a shard of wood had stabbed into the space above his ankle. The floor behind them was starting to crack, and its weakened wooden foundations were sending splinters of wood everywhere in their wake. He hadn’t even seen it coming.

“Thranduil.” Carc murmured.

He shook his head to brush away Carc’s unease. “Keep going.” He said forcefully. “And hurry.”

A frown twisted at Carc’s face, but he didn’t question Thranduil’s orders. “It’s just this way.” He said. “I think.”

“Watch out for the floor.” Thranduil said. Although Legolas was moving more on his own now that before, Thranduil still kept a tight grip on him. He could feel Legolas’s pulse fluttering wildly under the skin of his wrist, and it made him fretful. Legolas had never dealt with anxiety well, and Thranduil knew that this situation would be no different, but he just didn’t have time to focus on that.

At the end of the hallway they rushed down, Bungo abruptly appeared. His hair wasn’t pale and white, but his eyes were unfocused. It was as though he could see straight through them all, and it left Thranduil with a distinctly hollow feeling in the centre of his chest. Ahead of him Carc and Thorin stopped, and knowing the floor behind them was caving in only made Thranduil frightened. “Just go!” He said. They all still wore Legolas’s protective charms, and he apprehensively reached into his pocket for the vial of sacred water he kept on him at all times.

But they didn’t need it. The closer they got to Bungo, the more transparent he became. He wasn’t fading, but rather it was like he had become just the same as any other ghost. With a start Thranduil realised that this ghost was the spirit of Bilbo’s father, and not the ghost that had been tormenting them. When they neared the end of the hallway, it was easy to pass right through Bungo. Wisps of smoke-like air clung to them as they passed through him, and when Thranduil looked over his shoulder he saw that Bungo had closed his eyes before he completely disappeared.

There was a crestfallen expression on his face, and it made Thranduil think that perhaps Bilbo’s parents had been unwilling victims in all of this mess and not the perpetrators they had come to believe them to be.
Carc suddenly let out a pained groan as he staggered. Thorin visibly flinched, and his shoulders went
tense as Carc’s weight swayed into him. Thranduil lurched forwards, his eyes roaming Carc’s figure.
An orb had passed through his neck, and a dark bruise was spreading across the underside of his
chin and his throat. He pressed a hand to the wound like it would stop hurting, and with a steely
expression he continued on. He didn’t respond to Thorin’s traumatised stare; didn’t even stop to look
at him.

At the end of the hallway was a set of doors, and without hesitation Carc forced them open. A
corridor intersected the other side of the doorway, but just ahead of them were suddenly another pair
of doors that Thranduil instantly recognised. He felt his heart jump as they staggered towards the
exit, and in a rushed burst of exhaled breath the doors were thrown open and they tumbled out the
fresh night air.

Thranduil collapsed against the gravelled driveway as he swallowed thick gulps of air. He pressed a
hand to his ankle and wasn’t surprised when it came away sticky with blood. He looked to Legolas,
and was so instantly relieved to see him physically uninjured that he could have cried if he weren’t so
shell-shocked at the current situation.

Before them, the house started to collapse. The noise it made was deafening, and then suddenly the
roof caved in and plumes of smoke rose into the air. From the outside it was noticeable, but
Thranduil knew that the interior of the house was what had truly been ruined. As the smoke cleared
they were left staring at debris that covered what looked like to be the original house; a tiny thing in
comparison to the additions that had been made, located in the very centre of the land. It was dark
and frightening and made Thranduil feel sick to his stomach, and he just knew that that deeply
hidden house had been the place where everyone had been killed.

Legolas whimpered as he pressed his hands to his eyes. Thranduil drew him closer, and then Legolas
started to cry. His muffled whines tore at Thranduil’s heart more than anything else ever had, and he
himself went still with agony.

Hearing Thorin scream for Bilbo in anguish, however, was what made him cry. Thorin’s cries were
agonizing and deep, and although they were quiet and stifled Thranduil could hear them clearly. The
house had been destroyed, and with it so was Bilbo.
Thranduil woke to the sound of Legolas screaming. He emerged from restless sleep gasping and spluttering, images of a doe-eyed child and the colour red vividly burned into the backs of his eyes. He struggled to focus on the world around him, and only when he heard Legolas start to sob was he able to push himself upright and stumble from the uncomfortable hotel bed where he laid.

Legolas was trembling and trying to muffle his cries into his hands, and made no protest when Thranduil drew him into a tight embrace. It was still dark outside, but Thranduil knew that it must be nearing morning, but nightmares were not limited to the darkest part of the night. That was something Thranduil knew all too well, and although he desperately wished he could protect Legolas from the bad things that went on inside his head he simply couldn’t.

“Calm down, Legolas.” He murmured, stroking Legolas’s hair reassuringly. “You’re alright, you’re alright.”

Deep down, he knew that his words did not comfort Legolas. His child was wise enough to realise the difference between dreams and reality, and although he may be frightened and anxious, he knew that he would be alright. He always had been, hadn’t he? Even after everything he’d gone through, he had always come through on the other side. This instance, however, Thranduil knew that Legolas wasn’t fearing for himself. No, he had nightmares that had him waking up with screams for a completely different reason.

That was something Thranduil didn’t think he’d ever be able to help.

Although it had felt like weeks, the paranormal research team stayed at the Baggins Manor for no more than three days. There was no explanation for why the time had passed differently at that dark manor, and no way to accurately measure just how much such an unsettling phenomenon had affected those caught up in its web.

As they feared, the house was completely destroyed. Although Thorin’s initial tests had proven there was nothing wrong with its foundations or stability, the ground beneath the house itself had completely crumbled, as though an earthquake had shook it. It was utterly unnerving, and there was no scientific reason for it. That in part had been what allowed the foundations to completely collapse in on themselves, aside from Belladonna’s influence, though it didn’t explain why the very original
building had remained intact. While the debris made it impossible to get to, it was certainly visible, and was clearly undamaged.

Due to the fact that all of Thorin’s equipment had been destroyed or lost when the house collapsed, finding the information they had gathered again was difficult. However, without any interference from the house the process of regathering the information that had been lost was simple.

They uncovered a list of owners of the house, and with each uncovered owner that came through several more additions were added to the house. They were easy to keep track of, now, and more information that had previously been inaccessible started to surface. Eventually the number of deaths they could positively link to the house started to rise, along with it the names of young workers, house members and even visitors to the manor. They piled up until everyone gave up on printing their files and only added their name or description to an ever-growing list of victims.

The truth behind the spirit was never uncovered. Thranduil believed that it had been a vengeful spirit that had either found its way to the manor, or it was the spirit of someone who died there. He knew it must harbour a deep hatred or some specific brand of boiling anger, or else it would have never begun killing those that lived. It may have had a strong desire to live, and that could have what led it to consuming the spirits of those it killed, as well. As no one had exorcised it when it was weak or growing, the spirit had been allowed to mature, to strengthen and expand and twist into something that would never be recognisable again.

There was no chance that any of them could have exorcised it, not even if they all worked together as hard as they could. It was foolish to think that anything like that could have ever been tameable.

Among its victims were Belladonna Took and Bungo Baggins. Ownership of the manor had fallen into their hands shortly before they had their first child, and for all intents and purposes they had seemed like a normal and healthy family. There was nothing suspicious or noteworthy in their histories, and if not for their connection with the manor Thranduil thought that perhaps they would have grown into a family just the same as any other. He didn’t know if he would have ever met them had they not been killed at the manor, and for that he was anguished.

It seemed likely that the maleficent spirit at the house possessed Belladonna and Bungo’s bodies after they were killed. Thranduil didn’t know what had happened to their spirits, but he knew that he saw Bungo’s at the manor. He thought that perhaps at least Bungo was able to protect himself for just long enough to see his child one last time.

Their child was a boy, and was given the name Bilbo Baggins. He was born to bodies that had long since lost their original spirits, and although it was a completely foreign and unheard of concept, Thranduil had no problem believing it. There was nothing in his heart that spoke of doubt when he thought of Bilbo, and he believed that perhaps Bilbo had realised the truth of his birth before any of them had even considered that he might not be completely human himself. Even now Thranduil wished he had noticed, for all the signs had been there – Bilbo’s affiliation for the spirits of children, his fading hair, his fragmented memory. They were all signs that pointed to something, and he wished that he had noticed what that something was before they even stepped foot in the manor.

But they hadn’t, and Bilbo had suffered because of their negligence. Every spirit in that house had wounded him, and the longer he stayed in a place that had already ruined his mind so the longer he had suffered; staying there for the case had only furthered the damage. It was impossible to ever know if Bilbo was the original soul that resided in his body, and what the effects of his birth had been. Had Bilbo been a spirit all along, caught in a charade of life that could never be real and memorable? His childhood had been spent in a house that only bred death and misfortune, and Thranduil doubted Bilbo had ever had a reason to smile until he left the manor.
He desperately hoped that Bilbo had smiled at least once.

Thranduil placed a cup of tea in front of Legolas before taking a seat at the table. He had already given Thorin, Carc and even Bard fresh cups of tea, though they hadn’t asked for it. He had needed something to do with his hands, to occupy his mind and his body. If nothing else, the sound of the kettle boiling and the clumsy way he purposefully knocked the teaspoon against the walls of the teacups made the room feel less silent.

Legolas only looked at his tea, and made no move to take it. Dark circles had appeared under his eyes, and he hadn’t spoken a word in more than a day. He looked as though he would fall over at any moment, and yet he never did. Thranduil didn’t know what was haunting his dreams, but it was evidently nothing good. Without a word he pushed himself away from the table and left the room. Thranduil had no doubt that he was retiring to Bilbo’s room to sleep once again, so he didn’t stop him.

“Nothing was found at the building site.” Carc eventually murmured. He looked tireder than Thranduil had ever seen him, and no longer wore the smart suit jacket he usually donned.

A frown touched Thranduil’s face. He drummed his fingers against the table, and let himself sink deep in thought. He knew what Carc meant by that, even if Carc did not say it directly. He had a feeling that the debris of the house was far too much to sift through, and although he expected this outcome it still left him feeling incredibly upset. There was no chance for closure with this case, none at all.

“Did you contact the school?” Thranduil asked quietly.

Carc nodded. “His record is still there, but he only attended that school for a handful of months. No one can particularly remember him.”

Thorin flinched at that. He looked like he was watching the sky bend before it broke right above his head, and somehow Thranduil knew that that was exactly what Thorin felt like had happened. He had never thought Thorin could be affected by another person in the way Bilbo had affected him, and yet there he sat, swallowed in grief and anguish and sorrow.

The room fell silent as their tea began to turn cold. Thranduil didn’t know how much time passed as they sat at the table. Elrond was meant to arrive soon, and although he hadn’t called in he was certainly late. Thranduil couldn’t bring himself to care, not when his mind was so preoccupied with insignificant and fleeting thoughts. After spending days in the Baggins Manor, his concept of time had been completely rendered useless. He struggled to grasp the way minutes passed, and when night came he was always disgruntled and antsy. He knew the others felt the same; could see it in the tenseness of Carc’s shoulders and the way Thorin never quite sat up straight.

A scream, however, snapped him into wakefulness. How many times had Legolas woken up crying in pain and anger and frustration? Even when Thranduil rushed to his side the quivers that wracked through his child’s bones. Legolas was twisted in the bedsheets, his fingers clenched as tightly in the fabric as he could manage. His eyes were wide open.

“Legolas, what happened?” Thranduil asked as he gently pried the bedsheets from Legolas’s grip.

“He’s haunting me.” Legolas gasped. “He’s in my dreams, begging for help and- and dying over and over and-”
Thranduil shook his head, and cut Legolas off with a gentle touch to the back of his head. “It’s alright.” He murmured. “You don’t need to explain it to me.”

“I dream of that.” Thorin abruptly said. “I have those dreams, too.”

Legolas’s eyes flashed over to him. Those blue irises were watery and full of disbelief, and just as soon as he turned them on Thorin he turned them away. He looked as though he wanted to say something, but the agony on Thorin’s face silenced him. Instead Legolas exhaled heavily, and pushed himself upright.

Thorin suddenly startled, and glanced around. “Do you hear that?”

Thranduil frowned. “Hear what-?” His eyes widened as his words trailed off when a quiet sound reached his ears. Like a crescendo, the gentle melody built into something that echoed throughout his entire home. He stood from the edge of the bed, and listened carefully. He had one piano in his house, one that Bilbo had played only a small amount of times. He recognised that melody like it had been ingrained into his head.

“Bilbo.” Legolas whispered. He stumbled off of the bed and scrambled to his feet before pushing past Thranduil and the others. “That has to be Bilbo!”

“Legolas, wait.” Thranduil rushed after his child, his heart lodged into his throat. There was only one reason that melody would begin to play in his house, and he didn’t like the outcome it offered. He didn't want his child to suffer anymore.

The door to the music room was shut when Legolas rushed towards it. Thranduil was close behind him, and as Legolas threw the door open a tangible rush of cool air washed over him. it stopped him in his tracks, and for a moment he swore he saw nothing but white curtains fluttering in a breeze that didn't exist. As soon as the door was opened, the music stopped.

The piano room was empty.

With a whimper, Legolas fell to his knees. He pressed his hands to his face, and this time Thranduil didn't go to comfort him. He knew that nothing he could do would ease the pain in his child's heart. Behind him, he heard Thorin press a hand to his mouth to muffle a sob.

Out of nowhere, Elrond came rushing up the stairs. His expression was sharp, and without hesitation he pushed past everyone to walk straight into the piano room. For a moment he simply looked around, and when he didn't find what he was searching for a furrow appeared in his brows. "I sense someone here." He said, turning to look straight at Thorin. "Where is Bilbo?"

Thorin's expression crumpled. "You already know." He whispered.

Elrond shook his head, and just faintly, a handful of gentle notes chimed through the air. Thranduil thought he might have heard a bell amongst them, too, and clearly Elrond was shocked. A wide-eyed look had come to his face, like he couldn't believe what he was sensing. He appeared confused, and had gone still. He paused to think and was dreadfully silent as he allowed himself to take in everything that he could feel in the room. "I..." Elrond paused, looking lost for words, before he took several long strides towards Thorin. He carefully withdrew something small and fragile from his coat, and pressed it into Thorin's hands.

It was a doll.

Elrond looked Thorin straight into the eyes. His expression was frightfully serious. "He's alive."
Thank you for sticking with me for so long! This is undoubtedly the longest project I've ever worked on, and only the second full-length piece I've ever written, so I'm thankful for all the support I've received ^///w///^.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact me on my tumblr ^^.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!