Here, There Be Dragons
by bendingsignpost

Summary

The day before, Thorin was everything Bilbo had wanted in a boyfriend. The day after, he's anything but. Discovering your boyfriend torturing a man in the basement tends to have that effect. Bagginshield Mafia AU.

(Originally written and posted on the Hobbit Kink Meme.)

Notes

The original prompt:

"Bilbo Baggins begins dating Thorin "Oakenshield" Durin, he knew some things were off. Like how Thorin was a little evasive when it came to his job, but always had enough money to give Bilbo nice things. And how he always insisted that one of his "friends" should keep an eye on Bilbo at odd times. And how he referred to his nephews as his "heirs" and seemed
to expect a lot from them, even though they were barely college-aged.

It took Bilbo accidentally walking in on Thorin working someone over to finally connect all the dots. He's horrified at the realization, but is convinced that Thorin will murder him and his family if he tries to leave. So he plays the role of the mafia don's little toy and pretends like nothing's wrong, even though he's convinced that one wrong word will have him murdered.

Meanwhile Thorin's completely unaware of what Bilbo thinks and is delighted that he doesn't have to lie to his boyfriend anymore. Sure, sometimes Bilbo wakes him up at night with his vivid nightmares or gets pale whenever he brings up the family business, but Thorin figures he's still getting used to being the lover of a don.

tl;dr: Thorin is mob boss. Bilbo finds out and pretends to still be in love with Thorin because he's scared he'd be killed if he didn't. Thorin has no idea Bilbo's scared and thinks everything's hunky dory."

That said, PLEASE READ THE WARNINGS. SERIOUSLY, GO BACK AND READ THE TAGS. I KNOW THERE ARE MANY. READ THEM.
Chapter 1

The light in the hall flicks on. Bilbo doesn't close his eyes tighter, doesn't tense, doesn't stir. When the light from the hall turns off and the bedroom door gingerly creaks open, Bilbo keeps his breathing steady. Throughout the sounds of undressing, he prevents any response in his body. He'd try to sleep with his back turned to the door, but then he would never sleep at all.

The sheets lift. A warm body with incongruously cold feet eases into the bed in front of him. The mattress shifts beneath him as Thorin draws closer. A light brush of beard against his forehead signals the incoming kiss. It's soft and lingering, much like the fingertips on his shoulder. Bilbo can feel the decision being made, whether Thorin will wake him or not. It's after eleven on a weeknight, so Thorin oughtn't, but he might.

Ultimately, Thorin settles in beside him and quietly snuffles off to sleep. His low snores are a strange, once-loved lullaby, now irritating from frequent repetition. Still, at least they mean Thorin is asleep.

It takes Bilbo perhaps ten minutes for his heart to stop pounding, perhaps twenty more to feel like sleep is possible. All told, he drops off within the hour, and that's an impressive record when sleeping beside a murderer.

It started simply enough. Years of dusty maps and old books, and Bilbo's middle age had come creeping up on him faster than the PhD ever had. He'd settled into Rivendell University easily enough, taking the maps and the books, if leaving the dust behind in Hobbiton. He taught well once he managed to make his students look downward. Terribly short compared to all of his colleagues, he felt easily lost and overwhelmed for a time. This faded as he settled in, but the occasional strange thing still happened, such as an odd visitor outside his office door.

"If it isn't Bilbo Baggins!" exclaimed an old man from behind a large, grey beard.

"Yes, hello," he greeted in turn, hand still in the cubbyhole for his letters. "I'm sorry, have we met or did you just read my mailbox?"

"Both! Or I'm afraid I might not have recognised you. It has been a very long time, Bilbo, a very long time indeed."

"I... I suppose it has, yes," Bilbo replied, nodding. "Otherwise, I'm sure I'd remember your name better than I do."

"Your mother would be appalled. Gandalf is my name."

"Oh!" A connection of his grandfather’s, if he remembered correctly. Bilbo made his quick apologies. "And what, um. What brings you here?"

"I am looking for someone," Gandalf replied, "with working knowledge of ancient maps and runes."

"Well," Bilbo said. He nodded up to the plaque on the side of his door and stuck a thumb beneath one of his braces. "That would be me."
"So I see. What time might my friend bring his map around?"

"Is it safe to be moved?" Bilbo asked. "I've nothing scheduled tomorrow. If not Wednesday, we might try for Saturday."

"Tomorrow," Gandalf agreed. "As for the state of the map, I'm uncertain. It might be best for you to pay a house visit. It's not very far. Though perhaps it would be best if you could manage a translation from a picture."

"Would you happen to have a picture?"

Gandalf withdraws a folded piece of paper from his pocket and hands Bilbo a photograph printed on plain paper.

Bilbo hums and haws, recognising a fair deal. Enough to know one thing: "There might be secret runes. Trick of the ink, it's a common trick for that style. I won't know for sure until I see it in person."

"Then you must visit. I'll make the arrangements. And Bilbo?"

Bilbo hummed once more, too engrossed in the map to look up.

"Do be careful."

"Always am," Bilbo promised. Old maps were far too fragile to be otherwise.

With the arrangements made, he'd gone to house of Thorin Durin the following afternoon. Bit of an intimidating place, to be honest, with a metal gate built into the stone walls about the front garden. He had to buzz in, which was rather unexpected. "Bilbo Baggins," he announced. "Friend of Gandalf's, he said Mr Durin would be expecting me...?"

"Right," a gruff voice replied. "Come on in."

A buzzer sounded and Bilbo quickly pushed the gate open. The fellow who opened the door was bald and formidable. "He's in the back," said the bald man.

"Right." Bilbo adjusted his pack and entered.

"What's all that?" the bald man asked.

"Books, mostly."

The bald man lead him into the back, which apparently meant down multiple hallways and through a crowded kitchen.

"Dwalin, who's this?" called one of the youngest in the group, the only one without a beard.

"Gandalf's map expert."

"Ah. Uncle will be pleased."
Bilbo followed Dwalin into a backroom. Though the decor was dark, the walls were well-lit. Though the furniture is all aged, the quality could not be doubted. Before a table stood Thorin Durin, for this could only be Thorin Durin. Tall, though not so tall as Dwalin, he wore his hair long without it looking stringy or unkempt. It looked very good, actually, startlingly so. When Thorin turned, Bilbo saw traces of grey lightening the darkness of his hair. His beard was short in comparison and well trimmed.

"So you're Gandalf's translator," Thorin said.

Bilbo nodded nervously. "That would be me. And this would be the map?"

"It is. It was my father's." Thorin stepped aside for Bilbo to approach, then stood much too close to Bilbo's back. In shucking his backpack, Bilbo nearly hit him, and not by accident either.

"What have you made of it so far?" Thorin asked.

"What, since yesterday?"

A bored pallor settled across his features, as if delay were a form of illness. "How much time will you need?"

Bilbo explained the required sets for seeing hidden runes and the preliminary tests, but he did so somewhat absently. "So far, I know this part here reads as follows," he adds, then recites the runes aloud. He follows this with the translation.

"My father said the bird mentioned was a raven."

"It's a thrush," Bilbo replied with confidence. "It's a remarkably common mistake." He began to explain why before Thorin cut him off with a raised palm.

"That's enough," Thorin told him. "You know what you're doing, I'll give you that."

They discussed the further tests required to see the hidden runes, Bilbo explaining what equipment Rivendell University has at its disposal, Thorin largely nodding with his arms crossed and his blue eyes intent.

Even with some delays for the equipment, they had their results within the month. In a fascinating twist, the runes they uncovered were an entirely different dialect than the obvious runes. Bilbo delighted over the map, and Thorin insisted he call whenever a new development made itself known. Bilbo called to ask whether Thorin would allow Bilbo to write a paper on the map, this justifying the use of university resources. All was agreed, Bilbo was thrilled, and Thorin's faint, quiet smile never blossomed nor withered.

When at last the map had been exhausted--or when Bilbo was exhausted of the map and writing about it--Bilbo called Thorin for what was intended to be the final time. "I've already sent it off to several journals," he reported. "There's a copy in your email. I do hope it answers all your questions."

"Thank you," Thorin said. The line thrummed with his voice even in the resulting silence.
"What do you--" Thorin began the moment Bilbo attempted to say, "I should hear back--"

They both went silent. "Sorry, you first," Bilbo insisted.

"How much?" Thorin asked.

"...Sorry?"

"For... all of it."

"I'm... Thorin, I'm not an appraiser. Sorry, that's, as luck would have it--or not have it--that's the one thing I didn't sort out. Um."

"For your services," Thorin corrected.

Bilbo blinked. He looked at the mobile in his hand and then stuck it back against his ear. "Sorry?"

"How much do you want for your services?"

Bilbo stared at the wall of his office, but his appointment calendar offered no suggestions. "I just love maps," he said. "Your father's is lovely. Opportunities like that don't come around every day. And, and I'm publishing an article, or at least I should be. You know, publish or perish, so. I'm, I'm fine, really."

There was a long, confused silence. "I dislike owing favours," Thorin replied. "Is there anything besides maps and runes that interest you?"

"Riddles."

Thorin laughed softly. "I don't know any."

Bilbo bit his lip. "Um. Food?" He'd never actually received a fruit basket in his life, and it felt a strangely obligatory event.

"Anything in particular?"

"I'm not picky."

"Excellent. What are you doing tomorrow night?"

"Watching QI, why?"

"The night after that? Saturday."

"Um." Bilbo sat up straighter in his desk chair. His event calendar held nothing.

"Good. Where should I pick you up?"

Bilbo stammered out his address, too surprised not to.

"Expect me at seven. I'll see you then."
"I, yes. See you."

Thorin hung up.

Bilbo stared at his phone, waiting for it to clarify whether or not this was a cryptic thank-you or an exceptionally smooth pickup. His phone did no such thing.
Bilbo wakes early, twitching his way awake before his alarm. For one groggy, confused moment, he can't quite remember what there is to be worried about. There's something, certainly. He can't possibly be late for anything; that's not it.

He sighs and settles into the wall of heat against his back. Thorin's arm tightens about his waist. Tired, Bilbo nearly dozes, but something keeps nagging at him. Something dreamlike and surreal, nightmarish.

Bilbo's alarm goes off. He pulls free as Thorin groans. He turns off his alarm and thinks, *oh.*

A tug at the back of his t-shirt startles him. He nearly jumps off the bed entirely. He twists around instead.

Thorin lies with his eyes half-open, one arm outstretched and bare. His hand drops down and tugs at the waistband of Bilbo's pyjama bottoms. Two fingers hook beneath fabric, warm where his spine leads into his coccyx. "Come back," Thorin rumbles.

"Can't," Bilbo says. "School. Teaching." He waves his hands in the air, signifying these things.

Thorin tugs again, knuckles rubbing. Bilbo tries not to squirm. He crawls back quickly, on his hands and knees for only a moment. When Thorin leans up for a kiss, Bilbo scrunches his nose at Thorin's morning breath. Thorin chuckles and settles for his cheek instead. Warm and heavy, his hand settles over the side of Bilbo's neck, his thumb brushing over Bilbo's pulse point. Bilbo's heart begins to race immediately, but Thorin only smiles. "Stay in bed. I've barely seen you this week."

"If someone didn't come home in the middle of the night, that wouldn't be a problem," Bilbo replies. "Work's been--"

Bilbo kisses his nose just the way that always shuts him up. "I know." He doesn't want to hear it. "Go back to sleep."

Thorin's face softens, and Bilbo's pulse turns absolutely wild for far too many reasons. Bilbo climbs out of bed over him. He pulls his clothing rapidly out of the closet and dresser, bundling it into a neat pile. He's always dressed in the bathroom, and what a stroke of luck that's become of late.

"We ought to schedule something," Thorin murmurs.

"Hm?"

"We ought to schedule something."

"Right. How's April for you?"

Thorin arches an eyebrow at him.

"Really? No? Fine, if you insist: June, it is."
The slight curve to Thorin's mouth spurs him on. "Nope, sorry, can't do any sooner. March is booked through solid. Much too busy with things like showering." He opens the door, his other arm wrapped about his bundled clothing. "Try to free up April, won't you?"

Thorin chuckles. He rolls onto his side, one arm tucked beneath his cheek. "I love you."

"And I love breakfast. I'm sorry you had to find out this way."

Thorin laughs aloud.

"No, don't laugh, I'm perfectly serious. Breakfast always makes time for me. Incredibly punctual, that's breakfast. It's a very charming quality in a meal. In fact, I'm sorry, you don't want to know how I've been carrying on with lunch and dinner. I'm not gay, I'm polydietous. Which is a real word. I'm a linguist and that entitles me to making up words."

Thorin laughs on in that endearingly almost silent way he has. Bilbo fleetingly wonders if Thorin used to have a booming laugh like Kili's or a shouty one like Fili's. He wonders if Thorin's father had been worse on his heir than Thorin was with his own. And then he tells himself not to wonder, because wondering can do him no good.

"Go back to sleep," Bilbo tells him and shuts the door.

"Pick a day you want to have sex," Thorin calls after him.

"My birthday!" Bilbo shouts back and flees into the bathroom. He sets down his clothing and locks the door before undressing.

Preparing for dinner was an awkward affair. Date or not a date? No way of telling before he went, and he could hardly change clothing halfway through. Bilbo stared endlessly at his closet before erring on the side of overdressed. Still, he did teach in his waistcoats sometimes. He could claim this as a personal standard easily enough. He had plenty of time to change as Thorin arrived twenty minutes late.

"I lost my way," he explained at Bilbo's door. "The GPS didn't know this was a street."

"That's all right," Bilbo answered as if he hadn't been panicking.

Next, they were late for their reservations, but the table was still available. As it happened, a table with a long, white cloth and a candle floating in a tiny bowl of water. Unmistakably a date, then, and unmistakably between two men. Bilbo looked about nervously, but no one seemed to be staring. Rivendell was hardly Hobbiton, but old instincts remained strong. Though Thorin didn't seem to notice, it remained an exceptionally awkward moment for Bilbo.

The true awkwardness arrived when they attempted to break through the barrier of small talk. Bilbo couldn't sort out what it was that Thorin did, only that it was stressful and Thorin would prefer a distraction. He asked about the company that seemed to perpetually be at Thorin's house, to which
Thorin replied, "It's a large house."

Bilbo was about to give up and simply enjoy his very nice meal—the menu had listed no prices whatsoever in a vaguely terrifying fashion—when Thorin asked him about riddles. At that point, Bilbo nearly neglected his dinner. Nearly. Rather than grow bored and search for a new topic as so many did, Thorin listened with rapt interest, nodding where appropriate, asking questions when Bilbo paused for breath. Though rather more like an interrogation than a conversation, it was perhaps the most animated discussion Bilbo had held outside of the classroom in quite some time. Grinning and animated, he tried to reign himself in but found he couldn't. Perhaps the wine, perhaps the company, but he simply could not stop talking, not while it made Thorin's eyes crinkle at the corners.

After a fairly decadent pudding, Thorin paid the bill without letting Bilbo catch sight of the total. They exited the restaurant with their coats pulled tight against the late autumn chill. Their height difference was much more pronounced, standing. "Perhaps a walk first," Thorin suggested. "More time for the wine to settle."

It was an upscale neighbourhood, a slightly urban place of beautiful, incongruously old architecture. They walked past bookstores closed for the evening, past benches and trees pre-emptively covered in fairy lights for the season still to come. The gap between their shoulders waxed and waned but never vanished.

Eventually, they stood upon a noticeable border from urban to suburban. After a silent pause, they turned around in unison and continued back the way they'd come. Bilbo considered saying something before they climbed back into the car. He didn't. Thorin turned the radio on, an instinctual motion, and he absently sang along to it in a low, velvety rumble.

All too soon, Thorin pulled to a stop in front of Bilbo's modest little house. They looked at each other.

"I'll pay next time," Bilbo said.

Thorin's eyes gleamed in the dark. "Will you."

"Yes. Or we'll go dutch, whichever you prefer."

Thorin tilted his head slightly.

Bilbo tilted his head slightly in the other direction.

The kiss was soft, more of beard upon skin than lips upon lips. Bilbo pressed closer, and Thorin gripped him by the neck. Bilbo mewedled at that, a pathetic little sound he hoped the radio drowned out. No such luck. Thorin grinned against his mouth before slowly biting Bilbo's bottom lip. Not nipping, no, but a long, slow bite of pleasure-into-pain with soothing touches of tongue. Bilbo's knee bumped into the armrest between the front seats, nearly hitting the stick shift.

When Thorin released his mouth, Bilbo gasped, "Coffee?"

"We'll set something up," Thorin promised, a bewildering comment until Bilbo realized Thorin had heard actual coffee instead of come-into-my-house-and-also-bedroom coffee.

"Good," Bilbo said, and then they snogged a bit more. Bilbo entirely forgot how to open the car door
on his way out, but at least Thorin's laugh was a kind one.
The worst part has to be the lack of privacy. Outside of the hallway with their--Thorin's, Bilbo corrects, just Thorin's--room, the bathroom and the back sitting room with the map, the rest of the house always seems to be occupied. Bilbo's never asked why Thorin prefers sleeping on the ground floor, but the bedroom is clearly a master bedroom all the same. Only Fili and Kili actually live here full time, but Dwalin and Balin seem to as well. Rather, Balin seemed to. As for the rest of the main horde, they drop in and out.

It used to be they'd go quiet when Bilbo padded barefoot into the room unexpectedly, or that they'd roar with laughter moments before Bilbo entered with his shoes on, the sound of his soles more authoritative than his meagre height. He'd always brushed it off to a bit of homophobia, some group attempt to exclude him in the hope it would make him wander off.

He'd been wrong.

This is worse.

"Bilbo!" Fili greets, arms folded on the counter before the toaster. Kili echoes the greeting through a mouthful of porridge. Both sit on the high stools on the eating side of the bar-like counter.

"Morning," Bilbo replies. He puts the kettle on and opens the cupboard under the counter, the one where only his things go. Rather jarring, realising how few of his things aren't here or back in Hobbiton. Just a bit of a mistake there, just a bit too late to solve it.

"Did Uncle tell you about--" Kili begins. Fili audibly kicks him.

"He's still asleep," Bilbo says. And Bilbo doesn't want to know anything, not in the slightest. Fili seems to understand this, even if Kili doesn't.

"He's taking tonight off," says Nori from the corner. Dwalin sits beside him. Bilbo tries not to jump at the sight of them. "About time, too."

"Everything going well?" Bilbo asks tentatively.

Dwalin grunts.

Nori winks. "Some complications, nothing to be worried about."

"How's your brother?" Bilbo asks Dwalin.


"I'm glad to hear it," Bilbo says, and it's perhaps his first honest statement in the last fortnight. After that, he has to force himself to eat breakfast. In a room full of observers, no less. He finishes it all by the time his tea cools, and if he stops at the first orange, bowl of cornflakes, stack of toast and bit of cold ham, well, perhaps his metabolism is finally slowing down.

Nori and Dwalin begin to discuss something in an obvious code, and Bilbo does his best to ignore it. Finally, he puts his dishes in the sink and catches Kili's eye. "Don't you have a lecture to go to this morning?"

Kili rolls his eyes but goes to grab his bag when his brother shoves him. Before Kili can return,
Thorin emerges from the back hallway, now in considerably more pyjamas than he'd been an hour earlier. Bilbo peels another orange for something to do with his hands, and when Thorin bends down for a kiss, Bilbo warns "Toothpaste and citrus!" just in time. When Kili and his backpack make an appearance, Bilbo quickly kisses Thorin on the shoulder, ostensibly the only place he can reach without Thorin bending down. Then he scurries for his briefcase and coat.

Minutes later, they shut the car doors and Bilbo pulls out past the gate and onto the street. "This is nice," Kili announces apropos of nothing.

"I think it might rain later," Bilbo replies.

"No, this," Kili says, because Kili is a bit dense like that and will never let Bilbo mistake the topic of conversation for something safer. "Everyone was so worried when Uncle Thorin brought you home. And then it was, 'Oh no, no one talk in front of Bilbo!' This is so much better. Not that anyone thought you were going to go running to the police, of course. ...Well. Anyway. It's like you're really part of the family now."

"Thank you," Bilbo says and turns up the radio. "Did you catch the weather report?"

"Sorry, missed it."

"Drat. Never mind."

Bilbo drops Kili off before going to park the car. He sits in it for long minutes, his eyes closed. His mobile buzzes. Just the three times, so a text, not a call.

After a long moment, he checks it. Your birthday is in September.

Bilbo frowns. So it is. He hesitates before he hits send, trying to recall what they'd been talking about. His stomach drops and he hurriedly adds, Are you saying we're not having sex on my birthday?

The response is almost immediate. Before would be preferable. When aren't you busy next week?

Need to check my planner, hold on. He hits send, turns his mobile to silent, and takes a moment to breathe. Just for once, one moment for himself. Then he'll get out, go to his office, and text his sociopath boyfriend. And then he'll see about finding a way out of it. Something subtle, something he could sincerely complain about to Thorin. Is there anything that makes him throw up? No, don't be stupid. That needs to be on reserve for emergencies. Because there will be emergencies. Bilbo is part of the family now, and he is not getting out.

Dating Thorin Durin was a whirlwind experience if there ever was one. Coffee came first, an afternoon date at a university cafe. Thorin looked askance at the barista and Bilbo's unasked for second muffin until Bilbo explained that this was something of a daily ritual and the second muffin was for between his lectures.

"Are you always hungry?" Thorin asked.

"Nearly always."

Thorin looked thoughtful at that before accompanying Bilbo back to his office. He followed him
inside the small room with its piled books and warmly lit writing desk. He closed the door behind them and caught Bilbo's chin, already lifted, in one hand. Thorin tasted of coffee with cream, no, skim milk. By the time he pulled away, he tasted rather more of blueberry muffin.

Keeping a hand on the back of Bilbo's head, Thorin looked at the planner on Bilbo's wall. Without so much as a by-your-leave, Thorin picked up the dry erase marker, thumbed off the cap, and wrote in three T's. Bilbo laughed, more charmed than irritated. A few more kisses and Thorin departed for the afternoon. And if Bilbo took to grinning stupidly at his planner for the rest of the week, well, no one was the wiser.

A wine and cheese tasting followed, and Thorin only looked immensely bored half the time. The other half, he watched Bilbo enjoy himself. A night out at the pub came after, musicians and folk instruments gathered for the evening. Bilbo held Thorin's hand under the table and leaned close enough to hear the sympathetic hum in Thorin's throat. They bought each other different ales each round, trying this and swapping that. One of Thorin's friends drove them home that night, a chap named Nori with odd hair who'd been playing the flute. The chaperon prevented Bilbo from hauling Thorin into his house, so the next date was a homemade dinner.

The look on Thorin's face would have been well worth the fuss even had Bilbo disliked cooking. He loved it, as it happened, and he loved even more to watch anyone eat his cooking. As for Thorin's reaction to steak with garlic and rosemary, honey-glazed carrots and turnips, and mashed swede with crispy shallots, it was certainly worth watching. Two parts amazement, one part bewilderment, many parts hunger and one part something nearly but not quite soft.

They ate until they could eat no more. After, Bilbo carried the empty plates to the sink and began storing away this and that in the refrigerator. When Thorin made to stand, Bilbo chided him, and Thorin remained where he was at the table. The exhaustion of excessive digestion was visibly upon him. Bilbo left the washing up until morning, partially because he had better things to do, and mostly because he didn't want to use his little step stool where Thorin could see it.

"The sitting room is much more comfortable," Bilbo said. They went into the sitting room. They sat upon the sofa without turning on the telly or lighting a fire. Without any manner of distraction to disguise his intent, Bilbo watched Thorin's ongoing battle to remain active as well as awake. The kisses began amorous and ended lethargic. Bilbo chuckled quietly. "Hoist by my own petard."

Thorin shook his head sleepily, nose rubbing against Bilbo's. "If your intent was to have me sleep here tonight, you've certainly managed it."

"There's still pudding in the fridge if you recover."

Thorin groaned.

Bilbo giggled like the infatuated fool he was. "Perhaps not."

"Only if all you want me to do is sleep."

"Well." Bilbo swallowed. "That's what morning is for, isn't it?"

Thorin kissed him soundly, if sloppily. He pulled back with a tired sigh. "I need to make a phone call."

"Can't have your nephews thinking you've gone missing," Bilbo agreed.

Thorin didn't seem to find any humour in that. Instead, he twisted on the sofa to pull his mobile out of his trouser pocket. Bilbo settled against his side, eyes closed, body warm. Thorin's arm wrapped
uncertainly about his waist.

The call was fairly short. "I'll be in late tomorrow. No other changes of plan. If anything comes up, call Balin."

Bilbo heard a faint protest down the line, something much like "We can last five hours without you, Uncle, I promise."

"I should hope so," Thorin replied, a stern note entering his voice. "I'll see you in the morning." A pause. "Possibly early afternoon."

Unable to prevent it, Bilbo giggled as Thorin hung up. "Early afternoon?"

"If you've any plans of making breakfast, I'll be comatose until then."

"Drat, foiled. Are you sure you don't want dessert?"

In reply, Thorin groaned against the top of his head. They sat and dozed until nearly midnight, and then they went to bed.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Warnings for dubcon in the first half of this chapter.

He texts Thorin the once from his office, suggesting Tuesday and adding a notice--not a warning, just a notice--that he's setting his mobile on silent for the rest of the day. And it is a good day. A lovely day. The kind of day where most of his undergrad students have actually done the reading and the grad students don't look so terribly confused or frightened. It passes much too quickly.

Soon, there comes a knock at the door. Kili opens it without waiting for permission.

"I'm leaving at five," Bilbo announces, not looking up from his desk.

"It's half six."

Bilbo blinks at him, then at his watch. "What, again?" He turns his phone off silent and sees the two missing calls and four texts. His stomach churns, but at least this prevents him from feeling overly hungry. He gathers up his things, dithering rather than rushing. Rushing looks guilty, but dithering is absentminded. He asks Kili about his day as they walk out. Once in the car, he asks if there are any updates on Balin's condition. Kili has nothing new to report, which is hardly surprising. They drive home where Bombur has already made a large dinner for everyone, a chicken soup that is more chicken than soup.

Thorin is actually present at dinner, a rarity these past few weeks. He sits with Dwalin on his right and Bilbo on his left, a hand on Bilbo's leg beneath the tablecloth. An absent sort of hold, it nevertheless pins Bilbo to his chair. When Thorin speaks with Dwalin, he rubs his thumb over Bilbo's thigh, a motion perhaps meant to soothe. It does nothing of the sort.

Trying to ignore everything that's being said, Bilbo chews his soup. He composes riddles inside his head, which is always a slow business. Unfortunately, all he manages is *A family of blood not their own, never again shall the door be shown.* It turns into a morbid mantra despite his best efforts.

He has a second bowl of soup, but not a third. Thorin doesn't notice. When Bilbo tries to get up, Thorin tightens his grip in what is either an affectionate squeeze or a command for Bilbo to stay. Unable to tell which and erring on the side of both, Bilbo drops his hand atop of Thorin's and squeezes in turn.

Thorin threads their fingers together. Bilbo remains seated. Eventually, Dori comes around and gives him a spot of tea, which helps only somewhat. Bilbo would rather not sit and listen to even grossly abridged plans. He knows they're using some sort of shorthand, but rather than conceal layers of violence, the hinting worsens it, like shadows in a basement.

While he speaks, Thorin turns over Bilbo's hand and plays with his palm. The brush of his fingertips is light and tingling. The combination of fear, food, and arousal turns his stomach. He burps the once, covering his mouth and reclaiming his hand in the same instant.

"Sorry, excuse me," Bilbo apologises, then begins to clear the table. "No, Dori, please, let me help."
They bring the dishes to Bifur at the sink. Then they settle down in front of the evening news with Bofur. There's always something friendly about Bofur, so incredibly reassuring that Bilbo nearly lets himself be reassured, especially when Dori keeps making more tea.

"How's Ori?" Bilbo asks Dori quietly once Bofur gets up in need of the loo.

"Pulling together," Dori replies primly. "First time out is always the hardest." With that, the subject is closed. Bilbo sets down his tea and goes to the other loo, the one in Thorin's hall.

When he exits, Thorin's hall also contains a Thorin. Bilbo steps aside--soup and then tea; small wonder everyone needs to piss like a horse--but Thorin simply shakes his head and steps in close.

"We've had little time to talk, you and I," Thorin murmurs.

"You've been busy." Lest that sound like a complaint, he adds, "Understandably so."

Thorin slides a hand onto Bilbo's waist. "I've given you a great deal to adjust to."

Bilbo lets himself be backed against the wall. Thorin's arms bracket him there. "How am I doing so far?"

Thorin stoops down until their foreheads are in alignment. "Better than I'd dared to hope," he says, cryptic and sincere.

"Yes, well."

"Yes?"

"Well," Bilbo says to Thorin's nose, "I love you." Which isn't a lie. Bilbo is very fond of Thorin's nose. Very good length, incredible profile, prone to turning adorably red in the cold.

Thorin kisses him softly. Bilbo's head thunks against the wall all the same. Frowning faintly, Thorin cups his head in a gesture equal parts protectiveness and possessiveness. He kisses Bilbo's forehead. "I love you too."

Bilbo slips forward into a hug, because hugs are safest. His face is hidden against Thorin's chest. His crotch is just too low for Thorin to feel anything by accident or, as the case may be, the lack of anything. He can hold here, like this.

Until Thorin reaches down and takes him by the hand, that is. He pulls Bilbo inexorably toward the bedroom.

"Is it Tuesday already?" Bilbo asks.

"No."

"Don't tell me you're cancelling Tuesday. It's set in dry erase marker, you know, and that makes it permanent."

"I am not cancelling Tuesday." Thorin closes the bedroom door behind them. He locks it, an act that has prevented Kili from walking in on them more than once.

Even knowing the benign reason, even knowing that he can simply turn the handle and escape into the hall if not out of this house, even with this, Bilbo's mouth goes dry. "Well. Good."

It's hardly as if this is the first time, Bilbo reminds himself as Thorin takes him by the mouth and
walks him backward to the bed. The first time after, that had been terrifying, Thorin much too
determined to keep Bilbo at his side. It had taken long moments for Bilbo to realize they’d forgone
condoms. Little more than desperate, fumbling rutting, that particular bout of frottage had done them
both in.

Since then, Thorin's been busy. People to get even with, Balin to be recovered and hospitalised, and
Bilbo to scurry away into the remaining vestiges of normalcy his life still contains. How has it only
been a fortnight? It's already been forever.

Thorin eases him onto the bed. Off with his jacket, off with the waistcoat, down with the braces.
Then his buttons, then his shirt pushed down his arms, and Thorin exasperated to find Bilbo wearing
a vest under that. "What happened to the shirt I gave you?" Thorin asks. "The under armour."

"Hamper." Where Bilbo had deposited it without wearing it these past two weeks. "I can hardly
wear it every day." He tugs at Thorin's jacket as he says this, a successful attempt at a distraction.

Thorin undresses to his shirtsleeves and trousers before climbing onto the bed. "Come here."

"Impatient."

"Yes." His hands are warm weights on Bilbo's hips. "Lift."

Bilbo lifts and there go his trousers. Vest and pants remain, but they count for little. Thorin pushes
the vest up to better kiss Bilbo's chest, his beard tickling terribly on the way down to his stomach.
His other hand works Bilbo through his pants.

Writhing and giggling at the scratch of beard, Bilbo squeaks, "Stop it! Stop it, stop it, stop it!" For a
horrid instant, he wonders how loud he'd have to yell in a house this size, then wonders if anyone
would come if they heard him.

Thorin stops--this time--and rubs a soothing palm over Bilbo's belly. His other hand doesn't pause,
and Bilbo's hips begin to follow its rhythm. Crouched over Bilbo's legs, Thorin exhales against
tenting cloth until he's set Bilbo wriggling. Only then does he take pity and fish Bilbo out.

"Wait," Bilbo gasps, flinging one hand toward the bedside table.

"It's fine." With that, Thorin puts his mouth to skin, so wet and hot and immediate.

Bilbo makes a garbled noise, his hand detouring rapidly to the top of Thorin's head. Once is a
mistake. Twice is a commitment.

A small man in all regards, Bilbo fits all too neatly inside Thorin's mouth. The occasional scrape of
teeth sends him twitching, and Thorin makes a noise as if he's about to gag and enjoy it. His hair
forms a dark curtain about Bilbo's lap. Palms cup his arse, a grip from between his thighs, beneath
his thighs, parting his legs. Fingertips bite into flesh as Thorin shoulders his knees.

Bilbo gasps out a warning and immediately thinks he's jinxed himself. Thorin doesn't pull off.

"No, really," Bilbo squeaks. "Now is the time."

Thorin hums, Bilbo swears in an obscure Germanic dialect, and then Thorin begins to swallow.
Bilbo keeps swearing. Even once Thorin releases him and lets his legs fall back to the coverlet, Bilbo
keeps swearing. He swears even more when Thorin sets about licking him clean. He only stops
when Thorin kisses him quiet, an unpleasant taste about the whole business. He shivers as Thorin
tucks him back into his pants.
"Now you," Thorin whispers.

"No, now you," Bilbo counters as playfully as he can manage. He brushes the back of his hand against Thorin's crotch. This oughtn't take long.

Thorin settles down beside him, shucking his shirt and kicking his trousers and pants off. Bilbo touches him with surprisingly few qualms, but Thorin still looks at him expectantly. It takes Bilbo a few strokes before the belated realisation sets in.

"On your side then?" Bilbo prompts. He scoots down the bed as Thorin complies. He wraps one hand around the base of Thorin's cock and wraps the other arm about Thorin's thigh. In a horrendously well-practiced motion, Thorin shifts a pillow down beneath Bilbo's cheek so he doesn't have to strain. Then, Thorin's hand settles on the back of Bilbo's head and remains there.

Bilbo steadies his nerves as he steadies his hands. He reminds himself he was in love with this man not three weeks ago. More importantly, he reminds himself that he had best revive that particular sentiment as quickly as possible. Or at least convincingly fake it.

He begins slowly. A tentative lick, some play with the foreskin. Inexperience with a lack of latex can serve for his excuse, but only for so long. The bitter leak of precome nearly surprises him. Eventually, having played the tease much too long, Bilbo gives Thorin's hip a tap and relaxes as best he can as Thorin fucks his mouth. Grunting, gasping, absolutely sublime, Thorin grips his head firmly without pulling his hair.

Bilbo feels the beginning of the orgasm in the tension of Thorin's thighs, in the firmness in his mouth, but Thorin warns him even so.

"Now is the time," Thorin whispers. He holds Bilbo in place, holds him through the swallowing and the unfulfilled urge to cough. His grip doesn't relinquish Bilbo's hair until Bilbo cleans him with his tongue. Only then does Thorin remove the pillow from beneath Bilbo's cheek, tacit acknowledgement that the sex is now over. Or perhaps not. Thorin tugs at the neck of Bilbo's vest, still on.

Bilbo crawls up. He could see the kiss coming a mile away. The taste of come abates somewhat. There is that benefit to it.

"Did you like that?" Thorin asks.

Bilbo nods.

Thorin tucks Bilbo against his chest. Bilbo tucks his face against Thorin's armpit. Thorin pets his back. There is a long delay where they grow cold and the lights remain on.

"You do understand, don't you?" Thorin asks quietly. "Why I had to do what I did. Why I have to do what I do."

"They hurt Balin," Bilbo answers.

"You understand?"

"They hurt Balin," Bilbo repeats, because this has to be answer enough. This must be answer enough. "I'm glad you found him in time."

Thorin's hand drifts from Bilbo's back to his head. "As am I." The petting continues, now on Bilbo's hair. "Do you understand what this means for us?"
"Which us?" Bilbo asks after a pause. "Everybody-us, or everybody-in-this-bed-us?"

"Bed-us."

Bilbo tries to find a response. Bilbo tries not to shake.

Thorin eases back and looks at him. He looks Bilbo in the eyes.

All of Bilbo's trying comes to naught. He looks away and squeezes his eyes shut for further measure. The shaking doesn't start, but, worse, the crying starts instead. A slow, terrible leak over the bridge of his nose and down onto the pillow beneath his cheek.

"Bilbo," Thorin says, appalled, and it is a very good thing Bilbo thought of an excuse for crying in advance.

"Please don't die," he gasps. "I mean, should it prove optional, really, don't."

Thorin crushes him against his chest in an instant. If anything, the crying only grows worse. Because, now that it's been said, he sees it. That's the only way out. Someone is going to kill Thorin, and the others will hardly hold onto Bilbo then. Someone, sometime, eventually. Or maybe jail. Or not. There's honestly no telling.

"It's all right," Thorin whispers, coaxing him quiet. He presses a kiss to one wet eyelid, then the other, a gesture of sincerity, of conviction. "There is no fool alive brave enough to part me from you."

The first morning Bilbo woke next to Thorin, he drifted back to consciousness slowly, registering first that he was warm, second that something smelled good. Some snuffling set his face against chest hair. Distantly, he realized there was a hand on his back and it was moving in drifting circles beneath his pyjama shirt.

Bilbo tilted his head back and peered up. He pieced two and two together. "Oh, that's you."

With a sudden frown, Thorin stared down at him. "And who else were you expecting?"

"I meant the smell," Bilbo explained, but that did little to help. If anything, Thorin only grew more offended. Still too sleepy for a good laugh, Bilbo instead set his forehead against Thorin's shoulder and inhaled deeply. He settled down against Thorin as he did so, and Thorin's irritation abruptly evaporated.

His hand on Bilbo's back crept lower, following the line of his spine into the curve of his bum. "I suppose I'll consider it a compliment."

"If you think with the stomach, you look with the nose, my father always said."

"That seems a fairly pointless saying."

"You've not met my family." Nor would he, for that matter. Bilbo had left Hobbiton behind him for a reason. Well, somewhat behind. Still owning Bag-End did complicate matters. In any case, the two worlds would never collide. Determined to change the subject, Bilbo shifted and kissed him only to pull back. "How... Did you sneak out and brush your teeth?"
"I needed the toilet. It seemed prudent." He kissed Bilbo softly, beard prickling against Bilbo's chin.

"Wait." Bilbo pulled back again. "You mean you've been wandering about my house in your boxers and I've missed this?"

"Yes," said Thorin.

"That is absolutely terrible. I for one am very put out. How do you plan on salvaging the morning?"

"My boxers are now on your floor," Thorin informed him.

For one moment, Bilbo didn't move. Then he slid his hand down Thorin's side to where Thorin's hip was very much a hip and very much bare. Unsure of which side to explore first, Bilbo left his hand where it was. "Excellent job, well done."

The resultant snog was exceptional, if only because nothing could quite compare to the weight of a strong, naked body atop one's own. Absolutely intoxicating, to be dressed for bed and pressed against someone so clearly undressed for sex.

Deliberate and slow, Thorin coaxed off the pyjamas, working his way down Bilbo's body as he did. He pressed firm, tickling kisses across Bilbo's chest, his hands gentle and insistent in their hold Bilbo's rocking hips.

Bilbo pulled at his neck, though careful not to pull hair. "Oh, come off it. I'm small, not fragile. At least touch me. I won't break."

Thorin lifted his gaze from Bilbo's body to his face. His hair fell over his shoulders in a dark tumble like water on a moonless night. "And if I prefer to take my time?"

Bilbo's mouth dried up. With more daring than he actually felt, he reached down and began to take care of matters on his own.

Thorin's hand closed around his wrist.

His hand kept still, Bilbo used his hips instead. He grew more vocal than was strictly called for. He could have simply used his other hand, but this seemed far more entertaining.

Thorin looked at him as one typically looked at something small and adorable, which only half-applied to the situation. Slowly, his strength absurd, he pinned both of Bilbo's hands beside his head. Thorin shifted his knee between Bilbo's legs and pressed higher, higher, until Bilbo's thighs opened and Bilbo was very close to having something new to thrust against.

"Will you behave?" Thorin whispered.

Bilbo laughed outright.

Thorin's eyes widened. A strange change came over his face, as if Bilbo had done something remarkable. Which was absurd. What was sex if not misbehaving?

"Come here," Thorin instructed.

Bilbo looked at him oddly, but Thorin sat back in a kneel, releasing Bilbo's hands to do so. Curious, Bilbo sat up, propping himself upon his elbows. With Thorin straddling one of his legs, Thorin's knee remained against his crotch. As Bilbo sat up, his cock lowered against the top of Thorin's thigh. Still: "This is a very awkward position."
Thorin's eyes gleamed. In an instant, he reached around and seized Bilbo's opposite arm from around his back, effectively pinning both of Bilbo's arms behind him. "Isn't it, just." Searching for the answer to an unspoken question, his gaze never wavered from Bilbo's face.

In response, Bilbo stubbornly attempted to rut against his leg. Failure only prompted him to try harder. With his legs before him and one of the two pinned, he had little in the way of leverage. "Fine," he said in the face of Thorin's amusement. "I might need a bit of help."

One-handed and slow, Thorin set about taking him apart. His mouth dominated Bilbo's neck, his shoulders. His hand worked a steady rhythm. Bilbo dropped his forehead onto Thorin's shoulder, his arms slack, his hips twisting. Pleasure drew out into agony before twisting sharply into bliss. Bilbo might have made some sort of noise as he finished, but it seemed to catch inside his chest, filling him up there.

When Thorin released his arms, Bilbo felt abruptly cold. Lack of circulation? His grip hadn't been so tight, and it hadn't lasted for so long.

"What, um." He tried to blink his eyes back open. "What should I do for you? I suppose I could try to go that slowly, though I imagine my jaw would give out. Condoms in the bedside table, by the way. Should have mentioned that earlier, shouldn't I have? Well, there are."

"Your mouth," Thorin replied. "At any speed."

Bilbo grinned almost drunkenly before fumbling for the drawer. As he did, Thorin's mobile began to beep from somewhere on the floor. Thorin caught him once more and kissed the back of his neck.

"One moment."

Bilbo twisted around. His gaze dropped to Thorin's crotch automatically. Nothing amiss there. "It can't wait?"

Thorin kissed him once more, this time soundly. "One moment."

"...All right. Yes, of course. It's your own balls you're turning blue."

Thorin climbed out of bed and bent to fetch his phone, which was certainly a sight worth seeing. He flipped open his mobile and held it to his ear in one fluid motion. "Fili," A long pause. "No." A short pause. "That is an excuse, not a reason."

Waiting awkwardly, Bilbo fiddled with the duvet.

"Yes. Let Dori handle that."

Bilbo began to wonder whether he ought to put the condom back.

"Where's your brother?" A pause. "Speak with Bofur later. Yes, after. Good." A slightly longer pause. "No, that was worth calling over. I'll see you later." He hung up and tucked his mobile away.

"Everything all right?" Bilbo asked. The answer was clearly no, but manners dictated.

"Kili's had a panic over problems at school," Thorin answered. "It happens."

"Oh," Bilbo said. He still had the terrible feeling of having sat in on a scolding. At least it didn't last long.

Thorin climbed back into bed, large and strong and naked, scarred here and there in the old lines of
boyhood mishaps. "You were saying."

"I was saying what? I can't remember."

Thorin took him gently by the chin. "You can."

"What, about your balls turning blue?"

"Are you always so irreverent in bed?" The question lacked the sound of a complaint.

"Not telling," Bilbo answered, tearing open the condom packet. "You'll simply have to find out in due time."

Thorin kissed him as if intending to devour him whole. "I plan to."
Normalcy attempts to return. It fails utterly.

Though Balin returns from hospital, the danger is clearly not past. Or so says Thorin, and so echoes the remainder of his Company. Bilbo will not be returning to his Rivendell home for the foreseeable future.

The reactions to this vary. Dwalin's acceptance is clearly a matter of obedience. Fili is neutral, Kili pleased. Bofur nearly always seems pleased, so his positive reaction to Bilbo's continued presence in the house must be taken with grain of salt. Ditto for Bifur, if in a more mellow and cryptic fashion. Oin and Gloin have returned to Gloin's home for the sake of Gloin's family, and they've taken Bombur with them. Dori and Nori come in and out, Ori evidently tucked away somewhere until his nerves recover.

As for Balin, he resumes his place by Thorin's side during "family meetings," even if this means relocating the meetings to a room with a sofa. The first time Thorin begins to speak of matters plainly in front of Bilbo, Balin looks between the two of them sharply. Bilbo avoids Balin's gaze. Thorin meets it.

The moment passes. Soon after, Bilbo takes the first excuse he can make to leave the room and then doesn't return. He holes up in the map room and tries not to curl in on himself in the armchair too badly. When he hears footsteps in the hall, he quickly grabs his laptop off the ottoman and opens the file with this week's lecture notes. The first time is a false alarm, but he leaves the laptop open all the same. Long hours pass, two of them.

Eventually, there comes a tap at the door just as Bilbo goes to plug his laptop in. He tenses for a moment, then relaxes.

"All right?" Bofur asks.

Bilbo nods. Lying to Bofur is outrageously difficult, which he imagines is a very useful skill for a... whatever Bofur really is. He's clearly more than a seller of electronics, regardless of where that merchandise came from.

"We're sorting out how to make sure Azog's lot doesn't make off with anyone else," Bofur continues. "If you want any say in the buddy system, you'd best come back."

"I get a say?"

Bofur very nearly frowns. "Of course you get a say. Though not much of one for either of us, if we dawdle."

Bilbo follows him back into the sitting room and finds Thorin flanked on the sofa by Balin and Fili. He takes Bofur's former spot at Bofur's insistence, and Bofur stands behind the chair, arms folded on its back over Bilbo's head.

Though they had been quick to come, the plans are very nearly settled. Fili will be driving Bilbo and Kili to Rivendell in the mornings and picking them up in the evenings. Kili has been banished to the student centre during all non-class hours, and in the most public section of it. Bilbo is advised to avoid any unknown faces, and it only gets more condescending and controlling from there. Bilbo does not have a say in it.
Still, if there is one lesson Bilbo has learned from Fili and Kili, it is that Thorin is not to be argued with in front of the Company. Bilbo simply has to determine if Thorin is to be argued with in front of, say, Balin. Balin might be safe. Moreover, it might be safe for Balin. Bilbo might attempt to ask Bofur for backup, were Bofur not clearly some way down the pecking order.

Finally, they convene for the night. Though most stand, Balin and Thorin do not. When Bilbo shifts to stand, Bofur lightly touches his shoulder. Just a quick touch, there and gone before Bofur is gone as well. So quickly the change seems almost instantaneous, it's merely the three of them.

Then Balin nudges Thorin with the elbow of his good arm until Thorin shifts on the sofa. Balin looks to Bilbo and nods to the empty spot now beside him.

As steadily as he can, Bilbo approaches and sits. Positioned between the two of them, Bilbo isn't certain who to face until a light tug on the back of his jacket guides the way. He sits with Thorin at his back.

"I imagine with this lot, no one's thought to sit you down and give you the run of it," Balin presumes--and correctly at that. "What do you have of it so far?"

"Azog, bad. Very much so."

Balin may smile faintly, or this may simply be the shape of his mouth.

"He shot my grandfather in the throat," Thorin says. This is less confession, more agreement, but Bilbo twists around to look at him all the same. "He was dormant for a time, a long time. We'd thought him finished."

"Until he is, anyone near Thorin is in danger," Balin continues. "I'm sorry, lad."

Bilbo twists back to look at Balin. He nearly expects Thorin's arms about his waist, the way things used to be, but the touch doesn't come. "I need to keep my job," Bilbo says. It's an easier demand to make of Balin than of Thorin. He adds nothing else, no reasons, no pleading.

He feels Thorin move behind him and realises to his surprise that Thorin is nodding. He looks to be sure. Runology isn't typically considered a very pressing or pertinent field, and the support is unexpected.

"It's a balance of safety, of course," Balin says. "Everything always is."

Understanding all too well, Bilbo nods. Balin himself is evidence enough of what could go wrong.

"Now. About your level of involvement," Balin continues. "It would be safest for all involved for you to be kept on a need-to-know basis."

"I agree," Bilbo says, stomach churning at simply the thought of having to sit through these long discussions of threats and crime and violence. How terrifyingly real it becomes, words as if from a film set into gruesome reality. And the less Bilbo knows, the better his chances at freedom ought to be.

"You resented the lying," Thorin reminds him, voice soft in the way a house of brick seems soft when warm.

"There's a difference between being kept in the dark and closing the blinds," Bilbo reasons.

"It's for the best," Bilbo shifts uncomfortably before standing. "Good night."
Bilbo blinks up at him, expecting far more than simply that. Like so much in this house, it goes unsaid.

Slow about it, Balin meanders out of the room toward the stairs.

Almost furtive, his behaviour that of a teenager rather than a grown man, Thorin sneaks his arms about Bilbo's waist. "Sit on my lap," he murmurs.

"Where anyone could walk in?"

"In our bedroom, then."

Bilbo twists in his arms. He lifts his knee onto the sofa in order to better turn to face Thorin, a motion that simply happens to set his shin against Thorin's thigh and create additional distance between them. "I've never moved in with anyone. At all. Ever."

"These are hardly the conditions I'd planned to ask under."

"Thorin, if you planned this, I'd be terrified."

The honesty escapes him by mistake, but Thorin takes no offence. If anything, Thorin becomes more obviously worried. "You've been frightened enough these past weeks."

"So that's a no, then?"

Something of a smile lightens Thorin's eyes, but only as a match would a cave. It soon flickers and goes out. He takes Bilbo's head between his hands, between large, rough palms. Bilbo's body decides to relax, this particular stimulus simply too much, too lovely.

"You don't want to live here," Thorin states. He never does ask, does he?

"With twelve other people?" Bilbo shakes his head the slight amount still possible, but it turns into something of a nuzzle. "I'm a bit too solitary for that."

"Which currently makes you a target. Your house isn't secure."

Bilbo thinks of Balin's condition when he was recovered and shudders. Thorin pulls him close and Bilbo complies thoughtlessly to huddle against the wall of his chest.

Very nearly, Bilbo considers going back to Hobbiton. He couldn't for long, not with his position and research and students, but the tiny town offers surprising comfort in the light of this danger.

"What does Azog want with you?" Bilbo asks instead.

"I shot him through the forearm when my grandfather died," Thorin answers. "He now bears a prosthetic and a grudge."

Bilbo tries to think of another question, another sign of interest in this horror that is Thorin's life. "How long after your grandfather died?"

"Concurrently."

"Oh. How old were you?"

"Nearly sixteen."
Bilbo looks up at him sharply.

Thorin looks down, face impassive.

"That's... Why were you even there?" Ori isn't allowed to do more than drive, and he's eighteen.

"It was our home," Thorin replies.

Bilbo can't find anything to say.

"My brother was thirteen. He was shot through our sitting room window."

Bilbo gives up hope of finding anything to say.

Thorin eases him back against his chest. "You'll remain here until it's safe."

Bilbo nods and holds on tight. There's nothing else left he can do.

"What are your plans for the holiday?" Thorin asked.

"Busywork, mostly," Bilbo replied, switching the mobile to his other ear as he cooked. He gave a brief ramble regarding papers and projects over the winter break.

"On the actual holiday," Thorin prompted.

"Oh! Going home. You?"

"Staying here."

Bilbo stirred the contents of a saucepan for a quiet moment. "Nothing exciting planned?"

"No," Thorin replied. "You?"

"I'm going to Hobbiton."

"...Is that meant to be exciting?"

Bilbo laughed thinly. "No, that's meant to be a synonym for 'boring as dirt'."

"What's in Hobbiton?"

"Dirt. For entertainment: things growing in dirt."

"I can see why you left."

Bilbo's smile froze on his face.

"Bilbo?"

"Sorry, minor cooking emergency. Solved now. But yes, that does explain why I find dead languages fascinating. Anything by comparison."

"When are you leaving?"
"That eager to be rid of me?" Bilbo asked. "I'm wounded."

"Eager to catch you before you escape."

"Are you?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's all right, then." He cradles the mobile between ear and shoulder to work the pepper crank. "I'm going down on the twenty-second, and I'll be trapped visiting family until New Year's. There's a lot of them."

"How many?"

"Mother was the youngest of seven. Father the oldest of five. It only gets worse from there. Barely anyone ever moves away, so the entire horde is still there. We've given up on everyone getting presents for each other. After first cousins--not removed, just usual first cousins--any gift giving is in absolute secret."

"I take it that won't be a problem for you."

"There's just the one."

Thorin remained quiet in the way that meant he was listening, presenting Bilbo with a silence that could be filled or left empty, however he saw fit. He filled this one, speaking of his second cousin Drogo and his first cousin Primula and their son, Frodo. Both bookish and adventuresome, but somewhat off on his lonesome. Bilbo had a few further suspicions regarding his first-ish, second-ish cousin once removed, but he kept those to himself. Only time would tell on that front.

By the time he finished, dinner was ready for eating. When he turned the stove off, he shivered. Cold in this house, not at all like Bag-End. "Finished cooking now, so unless you want to listen to me chew..."

"I'll see you tomorrow."

"Mm, yes. Bring a toothbrush. Unless I should bring the toothbrush?"

"I will. Your house has the benefit of not containing my nephews."

Bilbo laughed. "Very fair. Good night."

"Good night." Thorin's low rumble warmed him, but not enough to lower the gooseflesh on his arms. They hung up, and Bilbo spent more of the night prodding at Thorin's present than doing his actual work.

He managed to complete it by the morning of the twenty-first, which was fortunate as Thorin was visiting that afternoon. And evening, and night, and well into the morning.

"I need to catch my train," Bilbo mumbled against Thorin's shoulder.

Thorin merely hummed and tightened his arms about Bilbo's back.

"I should at least put some clothes on."

"No."
"My family doesn't like me naked as much as you do."

Thorin kissed the side of his head. "Does anyone?"

Bilbo pretended to consider this. He pretended very hard, but Thorin didn't seek to prove his line of thought. Not that it was very likely he would—or even could—after having proved it thoroughly and recently this morning, but Bilbo could still hope.

Without Thorin making an active attempt to keep him there, Bilbo was able to climb out of bed at last. He'd been pulled back in quickly after breakfast, for even Thorin had learned to give way to the priorities of Bilbo's stomach. Bilbo trotted off for a quick shower before returning to dress. Thorin was sitting up when he returned but still unabashedly nude.

Bilbo shook his head at him. "How you don't freeze like that, I'll never know."

In reply, Thorin reached over the side of the bed for his overnight bag. Just as Bilbo tramped down the disappointment that Thorin was actually putting clothes on, Thorin instead withdrew a floppy parcel wrapped in red. Bilbo immediately tramped down the disappointment that Thorin was trying to give him some article of clothing. As well-dressed as Bilbo prided himself on being, his size was a complicating factor if there ever was one.

"Oh. Let me get yours." He tightened the rope of his bathrobe and fetched it from his study. It was a small, obvious shape, blatantly a CD in its case. Bilbo sat on the bed and they swapped.

"You first," Thorin insisted. Bilbo complied, taking care in advance to keep any trace of disappointment from his face. Surprisingly, there was no need for this. The first touch of the fabric contained within was blissful. It was a shimmering silver-pearl color, not simply soft to the touch but lush and full despite its thinness.

Curious, Bilbo unfastened his bathrobe and pulled the undershirt on. "Oh." His mouth fell open and refused to close. "Oh my." Luxuriant and warm, it was absolutely wondrous against his skin. Miraculously, it even fit.

The roots of a smile took hold of Thorin's mouth, though the blossom did not follow. It never did, except when the necessary care was taken.

Bilbo took pains to thank him, and properly too; though halfway through, the sentiment began to exist for its own sake. The warmth of Thorin's hands through that fabric was simply incredible.

"Your train," Thorin prompted eventually.

Bilbo let out an unfortunate squeak at that and scrambled to be more completely dressed. If his clothing was somewhat more sedate than the norm and far more formal than flamboyant, then it was clearly due to his hurry or perhaps the fact that he was travelling and didn't want to muss his nice clothes. Though Bilbo had the excuses ready, Thorin didn't ask, and that was all the better.

Such was Bilbo's rush and worry that he didn't notice Thorin getting dressed himself, let alone Thorin ripping the paper from the CD case. Inside, the disc had "Put me in a computer" written on it in black sharpie. Even with the effort that had gone into it, it was woefully inadequate compared to Thorin's gift to him. Thorin seemed more cautiously curious than disappointed, which only settled yet more dread into Bilbo's stomach. So much for a second breakfast before the train.

"Drive me to the station?" he asked, which Thorin had apparently been expecting to do anyway. Even so, Thorin still stood back and watched Bilbo tussle with his luggage, perhaps for the simple amusement of it. "What?" Bilbo demanded.
"Two suitcases and a duffle for ten days?"

"That is clothes." Bilbo pointed at the larger of the two suitcases. "The rest is presents."

A raised eyebrow. "What of the first cousin rule?"

Bilbo glowered at him. "Ten aunts and uncles. Ten, Thorin. All with children."

Thorin stared. "I see." At last, he picked up the suitcase and swung it into the boot, a feat that Bilbo had been struggling with only due to bulk, not from weight.

As Thorin drove them down to the station, Thorin cleared his throat. It was a very significant throat-clearing.

"I will never make you come home with me," Bilbo said immediately. "In fact, I insist you take shelter from the horde until the end of time."

"Are you sure?"

Bilbo nodded, more relieved than he could say. Every motion sinfully shifted the undershirt between his skin and his shirt. "Put it entirely from your mind." He placed his hand over Thorin's on the stick shift, but only for a moment. "Anyone new is poked and prodded beyond belief. It's all entirely unnecessary. Unless you'd care to explain to fifty or so people what you do for a living, twenty-five times each."

There was a lengthy pause in the car. "Thank you," Thorin said.

Bilbo simply smiled at him. Yes, this would work out quite nicely indeed.
Days drag on until Bilbo has been there for a month, and more of Bilbo's things find their way from his house and into Thorin's. His favourite clothing appears in Thorin's closet. Often blocked in, his car sits in the driveway with a cold engine. His toiletries spring up in the loo. His mail stacks up on his bedside table. Reference books and other materials claim desk space.

Bilbo moves very few of them himself, and that's the terrifying part.

"How did this get here?" he asks Thorin one morning as he dresses, as if it's no matter at all. "I don't remember packing it."

"Bifur and Dwalin brought over a few of your things."

"Oh," Bilbo says. "Did I leave my keys here?"

"No." Thorin doesn't elaborate.

Silence stretches between them. Bilbo buttons up his waistcoat.

"It proves your house isn't secure," Thorin says before Bilbo can leave the bedroom.

"I would like to not have this be a concern in my life. Do you have any sort of timetable for that?"

"No," Thorin says.

"No, there will always be some madman coming after you and me by extension, or no, you're not sure when?"

"It comes and goes." Thorin comes to him and sets his hands on Bilbo's shoulders. "You're handling it well."

Bilbo looks at the door instead of Thorin's eyes. "I would handle it better if I knew when I could stop."

"We have plans. You said you preferred not to know."

This is true. "Well. As long as there are plans."

Nearly dismissive: "Of course there are plans."

Bilbo nods, eyes still on the door.

Thorin's hand lifts from Bilbo's shoulder to take him by the chin. He doesn't move Bilbo's head, doesn't control him in any other way than the simple hold. Even so, Bilbo still finds himself looking up.

With that, Thorin presses a soft kiss to his mouth. "I will keep you safe."

*From yourself?* Bilbo doesn't ask. He has seen the hand on his face curled tight about Biter. He's seen the hand on his shoulder clenched in the hair of another man, yanking it back to bare the pulse pounding in a throat.

Bilbo trembles, his body betraying him.
"Do you not believe me?" Thorin whispers.

"I believe you," Bilbo answers in a voice too small to be his own.

"If anyone harmed you--"

"Then I would already be harmed."

Something helpless occurs in Thorin's face, in his hands and arms. Something helpless and quaking, and Bilbo can see the anger trying to rise. He can see it being pressed down and kept in check. It is actively controlled, a feat of self-restraint that may have a limit on how many times it can be duplicated.

"I'm not," Bilbo begins, "I'm not saying I doubt you. But. Revenge doesn't heal wounds."

"Not the physical ones," Thorin allows.

With the timing of a saint, Bilbo's stomach growls.

Thorin's gaze flicks down to Bilbo's belly before returning to his face. Thorin releases him. Then, as Bilbo reaches for the door handle, Thorin catches him by one shoulder. "I can't stand how frightened you are."

"Well," Bilbo says, "at least that's two of us."

Thorin doesn't return his weak smile. Instead, he looks miserable, and guilty, and very, very angry.

Bilbo slips under his arms to hug him. The tension in Thorin has been wound much too tightly, and nothing Bilbo does can make it dissipate. Eventually, his stomach lets out a second, much longer growl, and Thorin eases him back.

"I never thought I'd have to tell you to eat," Thorin says.

"You'll never have to twice in a row, at least." With that, he finally escapes from the bedroom. He has a bowl of cereal with bits of banana cut in, along with an orange. He'll regret it come mid-morning, but right now, he isn't hungry.

Come mid-morning, he doesn't regret it. Or come lunch. He takes his back-to-back lectures without the muffin in the middle. Come the end of the day, he feels hollow but still not hungry. He feels like a gourd with the flesh carved out, bit after bit scraped away inside but the outer shape preserved.

He tightens his belt and squares his shoulders. He keeps going. Some of his students notice that he looks more tired than usual, but it's only his first year here. No one can contradict his claim to Seasonal Affective Disorder. Some of his colleagues attempt to renew their efforts to befriend him, but he demurs. That he's too tired is an easy excuse and one that is readily believed.

A month and a half into living with Thorin--a month and a week knowing what Thorin is--Thorin acknowledges the weight loss. Perhaps Bilbo isn't meant to know that he does, because it happens at night. Bilbo is ostensibly sleeping, more truthfully sleeping fitfully, and Thorin slips into bed late into the night. Bilbo wakes, because he always wakes, but he doesn't move, because he never moves.

Thorin settles in beside him and lies quietly for long moments. Not asleep, but thinking. The lack of snoring gives him away. He shifts onto his side, facing Bilbo, and his hand sneaks beneath the sheets. His fingertips edge up beneath the hem of Bilbo's pyjama top, typically a sign that his hand is about to slip beneath the waistband of Bilbo's pyjama bottoms.
Instead, Thorin's hand moves higher. His palm covers Bilbo's stomach, neither pressing nor hovering. He moves his hand in a not quite rubbing motion, his palm never lifting from skin or sliding upon it.

Thorin exhales slowly. His tense touch tells Bilbo all there is to know.

Bilbo is aware his skin has the loose feel to it about his stomach, the effect of too much loss in too small a time, but he still feels oddly detached from it. This isn't quite real, isn't quite happening, except for the part where it is.

Slowly, clearly trying not to wake him, Thorin gathers Bilbo close and curls up behind him. Tucked into the fold of Thorin's chest and legs, Bilbo keeps his breathing steady and regular regardless of how his heart pounds. It only leaps faster when Thorin's hand rises up his chest to press against the trembling spot. His entire body tenses.

"Bilbo," Thorin whispers. He rocks Bilbo rather than shaking him.

Bilbo feigns bleary-eyed confusion. "Hm?"

"Were you having a nightmare?"

For once, there's no sense in lying. "Yes."

Thorin kisses the back of his neck. "It's all right. I'm here."

Desperately, terribly, Bilbo keeps himself from laughing.

By the time Bilbo's train arrived, he'd long since slipped into the loo and pulled off his new undershirt. As lovely as it felt, as toasty warm it made him, its presence was too palpable, too impossible to ignore against his skin. Guilty about it, he tucked it into his clothing suitcase.

Getting off the train was an absurd process with his luggage, but manage it, he did. Not for the first time, he thought he should have taken his car, but driving on the narrow roads of Hobbiton was absurd at the best of times and Bilbo was hardly in the mood for it today. Fortunately, he didn't have to be.

"Mr Bilbo!"

Bilbo tried to lift a hand and nearly dropped his bag. "Hamfast! How are you?"

"Very well, very well, Mr Bilbo," greeted Hamfast Gamgee. "Sam, get his bag, there's a good lad."

"You didn't both need to come out here," Bilbo said. "Oh, thank you, Sam."

"Not a problem, sir!" Sam replied, hefting the duffle and looking for a moment as if he were about to fall over. Though twelve, he was still short even for Hobbiton boys and had something of a pudgy look to him, though nothing compared to how Bilbo had been at the same age. Sam had simply grown into his frame before his frame had grown for him.

The three of them moved Bilbo's luggage into the back of the Gaffer's pickup truck. They piled into the cab, Sam wedged in between the adults, and the Gaffer gave Bilbo the relevant recent news, the births, deaths, and marriages. Sam piped in every so often, but only when the Gaffer began to trail
"Right to Bag-End?" the Gaffer asked. "Be good to have a Baggins back in it, if only for a little while."

"Yes," Bilbo said with a sigh. "Very good. You've the right of it, Hamfast."

It took a fair amount of scrubbing and hoovering and pulling sheets off furniture—if not in that order—but Bag-End was quickly put to rights. By evening, the house was very much liveable once more. Even more so when young Sam returned with the shopping. Bilbo proceeded to test out the kitchen and insisted the Gamgees remain for dinner, though this did result in a few more Gamgees at the table than had helped with the clean-up.

As the evening stretched on, its sense of reality stretched thin. How incredibly strange to think, standing in the kitchen or sitting at the table, that he had woken this morning in Rivendell in the arms of another man. And now, to be here, in Hobbiton, supping with the gardener and his family.

Before the Gamgees departed for the night, Bilbo was sure to give the Gaffer his present, a good stain-resistant jacket that nevertheless had a hint of jauntiness. Hamfast Gamgee pulled it on proudly before hollering to his children to come take a look at him. Warm and snug in his home beneath the Hill, Bilbo hugged his arms against his chest in the vain attempt to keep this feeling locked inside where it would not fade or escape.

It endured through the night in a freshly made bed. It endured through the morning and a fine breakfast. It endured all the way until noon, when his neighbours began at last to drop by and his relations began to show.

The week blurred past, the actual holiday lost to the march of time and the endless old chatter that each gathering brushed off and shook out to treat as new. Bilbo bored any who asked with details of his work, then enthralled many--mostly young--with descriptions of Rivendell. Many others--mostly older--turned up their noses at the thought of the city.

"I'm in a suburb," Bilbo tried to explain, but to no success. Beyond this, he answered all of the usual questions, and the answer to all was still no, and would forever be no. Calling himself single hurt this year more than most.

There were a few rays of light here and there, but none more so than Frodo Brandybuck. Bilbo had never in his life been the interesting family member, but Frodo's copy of this memo had apparently been lost very badly indeed. Bilbo told him tales of old, often with jokes that only made sense in other languages that needed painstaking explanations, but the boy ate them up. Ancient poetry and cryptic riddles: also favourites. He was a befuddling boy, but one Bilbo was thankful for. This year more than others, Frodo was accompanied by friends, and it was the friends and never Frodo who drew Frodo away from Bilbo's side. At times, Frodo would hesitate before following the other boys, but Bilbo never pressed him in either direction.

The day before New Year's Eve, Frodo appeared at Bilbo's front door without Merry in tow. "I brought you a gift," Frodo explained in lieu of hello.

"Come in, come in! Before all the cold comes in with you."

They went into the good sitting room, the one with the window over the garden, and Bilbo made them tea. They exchanged their small gifts, a book for Frodo and a trio of pocket handkerchiefs for Bilbo. Bilbo immediately folded one into a square and tucked it into his jacket's breast pocket. A faint smile at this, but little more.
For a time, they sat and had their tea.

"Uncle," Frodo said, mug clutched between his hands. "If I tell you something, will you not tell my parents? Or anyone?"

And here it was. Bilbo nodded. "Of course, my boy."

Frodo looked down at his tea. "You know Sam. Sam Gamgee."

"He helped the Gaffer and me put Bag-End back in working order this year. He's a good lad."

"He is," Frodo agreed, sounding wretched. "He's..." Frodo worked his mug between his hands, the handle hitting against one wrist and the other.

Bilbo waited.

Frodo took a very deep breath. "He likes Rosie. Rosie Cotton? Sam likes her."

"Ah."

Frodo looked up sharply. "What? What do you mean?"

"Is Rosie nice? Enough for Sam."

Miserable, Frodo nodded. He looked anywhere but at Bilbo. "I know we're not, we're not that close of friends, Sam and me. But I thought maybe we could be, but if he wants to go be with Rosie, there won't be time for that."

"Frodo?"

"Yes?"

Bilbo steeled himself. "If I tell you a secret, will you tell no one? It stops with us, just us."

"Of course," Frodo said, clearly not understanding.

"When your mother asked me yesterday whether I was seeing anyone, I lied. It's not the first time I've lied either. I am seeing someone."

Frodo's eyes became very round.

"You're not surprised, are you?" Bilbo asked.

Frodo made a small, huffing laugh. "I thought you were away with your books. Rivendell, the poetry, you've always wanted to... You were writing a book."

"I am away with my books, that much is true. All of that is true. But I haven't told you the whole truth."

Looking down, Frodo bit his lip. Finally, he asked, "What's his name?"

"His name is Thorin," Bilbo answered.

"I like Sam so much," Frodo confessed in a rush. "I don't know why, and I know I should try not to, but it's Sam, and why would anyone try to not like Sam?"

"Sam is perfectly likable. You should like Sam."
"What do I do? Do I leave Hobbiton? The Shire? Can I come with you to Rivendell?"

Bilbo held up a hand and the questions stopped like birds against a glass door, still visible through motionless and broken. "Who else knows, Frodo?"

"No one! I've told no one. I thought you might have friends in Rivendell who were... you know. But I didn't know you... you know."

"I know," Bilbo said with a small smile.

"What do I do? Do I hide it away? Do I never speak of it again?"

"Nothing of the sort. But you will wait. Always hide until you know you're safe, Frodo, my boy."

"How do I know that?" Frodo asked.

"Little things," Bilbo said, and he began to explain about word choice and glances, about colours and code words and signals. He talked about bringing the subject up from the side and then seeing how people reacted to someone else. He talked about his own mother keeping his secret and his father never knowing. He talked about a great number of matters until Frodo began to nod and ask questions, until Frodo looked more curious than frantic.

"If I want to tell Sam I like him, how should I go about it?" Frodo asked, and so Bilbo laid out the lines of first asking Sam to keep a secret, then confessing the preference and learning whether Sam had a preference in that direction as well. Confessing the actual attraction could come later. Mostly, Bilbo urged caution, caution, caution, and the absolute necessity that Frodo do his confessing in absolute privacy, so as to not be overheard, but also close enough to a public spot with a friend nearby in case something went awry. Which it shouldn't, not with Sam, but other people might not be so kind.

"I think I could tell Merry," Frodo supposed. "As long as he doesn't tell Pippin."

"Pippin?"

"Took."

"Ah. Not the best of secret keepers?"

Frodo shook his head. They discussed this a bit more, never venturing near the topic of Frodo's parents. When Bilbo was about to broach the subject, Frodo asked instead, "Will you tell me about Thorin?"

Bilbo did his best. A physical description first, his stature and hair, his voice and his manner of dress. His house and his map and his way of listening. Then behaviour. The way he didn't smile easily or often, but frequently seemed as if he might be about to. The way he would go quiet and expect Bilbo to keep talking, the way he was perfectly comfortable standing in silence without any awkward shifting about.

Frodo asked about being happy, and Bilbo said yes. Frodo asked about going out in public, and Bilbo said their first date had been obvious and at a restaurant. Frodo asked a great many things and, once aware of them, the questions increasingly centred on Fili and Kili.

"I don't think either is gay," Bilbo said, "but I think their friend Ori might be."

"Could I talk to him?" Frodo asked immediately.
"What happened to Sam?"

"Uncle, I said *talk*," Frodo repeated.

"Ah. Yes." That would be a valuable thing at Frodo's age. "We'll see."

"Thank you," Frodo said, then made a face at drinking cold tea.

Bilbo kept himself from laughing, but only just. The boy's happiness was infectious, bitter tea or not. Even so: "We'll keep discussing this while I'm gone. Over the phone, no emails, nothing your parents can overhear or catch."

Frodo nodded eagerly. Then: "If I come to visit you in Rivendell, can I meet Thorin?"

"We'll see," Bilbo replied. "But it does happen, you know. You leave Hobbiton and you meet wonderful people."

"And do you live happily until the end of your days?" Frodo teased.

Bilbo smiled somewhat wider and drank his cold tea without complaint. "We'll see."
In a rare stroke of luck—if this can be called luck—his mobile rings when he's in his office. Though it's on silent, he's sat it on his desk, and he sees the flicker of light. With his stomach plummeting, he checks the name of caller. Then, stomach plummeting for an entirely different reason, he picks up.

"Frodo?"

"Am I interrupting anything?"

"Not at all. What is it?"

Frodo hesitates.

Bilbo waits.

"I told Mum. Today. Earlier today."

"Just your mother?"

"Yes."

"Is she going to tell your father?"

"When he comes home," Frodo says in a rush.

Bilbo bites down a curse and checks his watch. "When is that?"

"About five or so. Maybe five-thirty. It's bad enough already without him: Mum says I'm not allowed to see Sam anymore. I think she'd take Merry away too if we weren't cousins."

"Can you put your mother on the phone?"

"Could you come here? Please? There's still time enough. I checked the train times. I don't want to be in the room alone with them."

The train would be slower than driving, but Bilbo can't risk attempting to get to his car. And it wouldn't be slower by much. "Hold on." He does a quick search on his laptop for rail times. "I'll have to change trains halfway, but I'll be at the station at five-twenty."

"Will you really?"

"I should be able to manage it. Family emergencies are frowned upon, but we are allowed to run off when one happens. I'll tell Dr Elrond, he'll understand." Thorin, on the other hand, would not. He shook to think it, but he thought it all the same.

Down the line, Frodo exhales harshly. "Thank you."

"It's going to be all right, lad. If not now, then later. I'll call you when I get on the train."

"She's going to tell Sam," Frodo says, forcing it in before their goodbyes. "Or she's going to tell the Gaffer, and he's going to tell Sam."

"I thought you already came out to Sam."
"I did! I did and he was lovely, but she's going to tell him the rest, Uncle!"

"Well, we'll simply have to stop her."

So agreed, they hang up, and Bilbo scurries to secure permission and cancel his lectures via email with promises to reschedule. He sticks a sign on his office door for Kili to find, a simple "Family Emergency: Gone to Hobbiton, Back Tomorrow." It takes a spot of jogging to the station, but he makes his train in time. He calls Frodo quickly while finding a seat. Only once the train pulls away from the station does reality begin to settle in.

Though it was just in his hand, he checks his mobile immediately. It's still on silent, and no new messages. No reason why there should be. Kili won't come to fetch him until after his train arrives in the Shire. Whatever happens, Bilbo will be able to reach Frodo before it comes.

He feels a touch queasy at that. More than a touch. He stares out the window, watching craggy hills with sparse trees turn gradually into meadows. It soothes him until he meets the gaze of his reflection. What a poor, tired fellow.

What a poor, tired fellow dressed like an absolutely pansy.

He looks down at himself in dismay, realizing all too late that he can't go back and make use of his emergency change of clothes at the office. He should have known he was forgetting something. He pulls off his cravat and sticks it into his pocket. He unbuttons the top button of his shirt.

There. Better.

Somewhat.

Maybe he can hide the waistcoat in his jacket. Yes, he'll do that.

Oh, this is going to end terribly.

He sits there and feels ill somewhat longer. With her son on her mind, Prim will see through him in an instant. She'll see Bilbo's preferences, think about the time he's spent with the boy, and that will be the end of it immediately. How can he help Frodo if he's being tossed out and denounced as a child molester? He can't, that's what, but the absolute panic behind Frodo's words was much too great.

(And, to be entirely honest, which he isn't, not at all, it's much too much of an excuse to go running off home. "He calls me uncle," he'll tell Thorin. "He was scared and he needed me. I didn't stop to think." He'll tell Thorin this in front of Fili and Kili, and at least Fili will eat it up. That is, if Bilbo gets to explain. If Thorin doesn't simply lose his temper entirely or send someone to lose his temper for him.)

He pulls his mind away from the inevitable argument with Thorin by putting it to the inevitable argument with Prim and Drogo. He wonders about calling the Gaffer himself and saying something.

In the midst of his wondering, the train comes to the last stop before his changeover. Just one more stop, then a stay on the platform, then four more stops after that. This is why it's so annoying when one of the boarding passengers sits down in the aisle seat next to Bilbo. The man is a giant, well over six feet, and he looms well over Bilbo even sitting down. He also has a very bad smell. The man's two friends sit down behind them. Bilbo looks determinedly out the window.

"Let me see the picture, Tom," whispers one of the men behind them. Ineffectual, a furtive edge lifts his volume.
"You've seen it enough already," whispers his friend. "Bill has the right of it."

Bilbo frowns. Are they looking at porn in public?

The man sitting beside him turns around. "Shush, Bert."

Finally, the train reaches his stop.

"Excuse me," Bilbo says, trying to stand. The man--Bill?--has legs like tree trunks, his knees wedged against the seat in front of him. Bilbo couldn't get around him or even over him if he tried. "This is my stop."

"Sorry," says Bill. He doesn't move.

"No, I need to get out."

"Right you are," He stands, enough that Bilbo can stand as well.

"Excuse me," says one of the men behind him, either Tom or Bert. He taps Bilbo on the shoulder. "Do you have a tissue?"

Bilbo turns to look up at him. "Um," he says, and then he feels a sharp pinch in his side, then a smarting pressure. Bilbo looks back to Bill and down in time to see the needle pull out. Everything tumbles. He tries to use his mouth, tries to say something, but he can't seem to breathe. They're in public. This can't possibly be happening.

Strong hands manage him back into his seat. "Not your stop after all, then." Everything tingles, until it doesn't. He begins to breathe again. He tries to shout and only a mumble comes out. His heart pounds wildly, then begins to slow in a way that has nothing to do with terror and everything to do with sedatives.

"You are sure that's him?" asks Bert, nothing more than a distant voice behind Bilbo's head. So very distant. "Let me see the picture." More sounds follow. "Ah, so it is. Check his credit cards to be sure."

Bilbo registers only that this is strange and wrong. He can feel his panic and fear as if through plastic wrap. He can see them, but he can't touch them. They float away slowly.

"Unless Baggins has a twin--which he doesn't, the boss had someone check--this is Baggins. And now we bring him in, nice and easy."

Please don't, Bilbo would have said if he could. Thorin is clearly overreacting, please don't do this. He could have sent Bofur. I would have gone back willingly with Bofur. Or anyone but you.

Instead, he simply, slowly slumps into a rising darkness.

He left home to return home, but after Bag-End, his place in Rivendell didn't quite fit the way it ought. As some measure of compensation, he changed clothing soon after he unpacked. White trousers, pink waistcoat, pastel shirt and tie to match; not an outfit he particularly favoured except for moments of extreme flamboyance. He wore the undershirt beneath it and tucked one of the
handkerchiefs from Frodo into the breast pocket of the waistcoat.

Once he felt that he was in his own skin, if not his own home, he rung Thorin up. With a fading smile, he left a message. A few hours of tinkering around the house passed as he put away his new gifts.

At last his mobile rang. He answered it in an instant. "Hello." His voice came out oddly breathless. No, not so oddly.

"Hello," Thorin answered.

"When can I see you? Because I need to kiss you very badly, but I intend to do it very well."

Thorin actually chuckled, a low rumble that belonged beneath Bilbo's lips. "Did you miss me, then?"

"If you stay over tonight, I'll let you tie me down."

Down the line, silence reigned.

"I'll even let you use your belt for it."

Barely, just barely, Thorin might have been breathing.

"Shall I leave the light on?" Bilbo asked.

"...one moment."

"All right."

He expected to hear sounds in the background as Thorin bribed Fili into keeping an eye on Kili. Instead, Thorin hung up.

Well then. Just a bit rude.

After no fewer than seven minutes, Thorin called him back. "How long does that offer stand?"

"Thorin, that offer doesn't stand. That offer lies flat on its back, tied to the headboard."

Thorin exhaled slowly but harshly. Bilbo imagined he might be adjusting himself in his trousers. Thorin asked, "Meaning, it will stay where it is?"

Bilbo's stomach sank. "Does it have to?"

"I have company over," Thorin replied.

"Oh."

"I wish I didn't."

Bilbo sighed with him. "I wish you didn't, too."

"They'll be here a few more days."

"Oh. Will you be able to slip away at all?"

"I wouldn't count on it," Thorin said. He let out a frustrated growl, or perhaps it escaped him. "Email me your schedule, and I'll find where we overlap."
"There's nothing this week I can't rearrange. Are we honestly scheduling sex?"

"If we must."

"Then we must," Bilbo agreed.

"I'll schedule dinner before it. Or during?"

"Thorin, that is offensive to the sanctity of dinner. You need to be more respectful of my beliefs."

Thorin laughed outright at that, such an unexpected and lovely sound.

"I mean it. If you really must, mix foreplay with dessert, but leave dinner out of it."

A warm silence answered him. One which could have meant any number of things, so Bilbo took the wise path and didn't respond directly to it. He wanted to, of course. If it meant what he thought it meant. Difficult to tell without seeing Thorin's face or feeling the balance of tension within his body. Soon, though. Perhaps.

"Dinner does sound lovely," Bilbo added. The two of them in public, unafraid. Yes. Thorin's size and musculature obviously helped.

"I'll tie you to the bed after."

Bilbo giggled. "As long as you let me digest first."

"Of course. The night after next ought to be fine."

"Good," Bilbo said, grinning somewhat stupidly, but only somewhat.

"I'll pick you up at seven."

"Why don't we ever take my car?"

"Because my legs don't fit inside it."

"Ah. Right, I'd forgotten. See you Thursday."

"Good night," Thorin bid him.

They hung up and Bilbo absently kissed the top of his mobile before pocketing it. He fretted about for the rest of the evening, though over what, he couldn't be certain.

The next two days passed slowly, terribly, and Bilbo told himself he was worried over Frodo. He told himself he was worried over the way things still were in Hobbiton. He told himself a great many things as he tried to interest himself in his research, but the only true distraction arrived that night at six-fifty with Thorin very pleased with himself and absolutely no GPS in sight.

They kissed in the doorway, framed in the light of Bilbo's foyer, and Bilbo's eyes flickered past Thorin's shoulder out of habit.

"What are you looking for?" Thorin asked.

"For someone to be immensely jealous, so I can wink at them and annoy them terribly."

"Someone in your driveway?"
Bilbo shook his head and leaned up on tiptoe. All discussion halted until they took shelter in the relative warmth of Thorin's car. A CD began to play, the eighth track already well underway. Bilbo recognized the song immediately. Unless someone else was giving Thorin ancient folk songs and half-forgotten chants, he knew exactly from where it had come.

Even so, Bilbo was confused. "That disc was only meant to work in a computer." Otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to include the translations and phonetic guides.

"I burned a copy for the car."

Unable to do anything else, Bilbo grinned out the window. They drove and listened, and Bilbo watched the suburbs condense into the city. Streetlights flashed by, the buildings grew into towers, and the sky was lost between them.

As Thorin pulled to a stop before a red light, Bilbo's good mood broke with sudden clarity. Desperately, hopelessly, Bilbo attempted to reclaim it, but it was already gone. Listening to some of his favourite music with a significant other who actually liked it, going out to a restaurant in the city where he worked at the university he'd always dreamed of, and yet, still, something wasn't there.

Two streets later, despite Bilbo's best efforts, Thorin noticed. He didn't say anything.

Bilbo looked harder out the window.

Thorin reached over and held his hand. Bilbo squeezed it, Thorin's strength preventing him from knowing when tight could become too tight.

"What happened?" Thorin asked.

"I want to go home," Bilbo explained. It hurt to say, but nearly as much as it hurt to know.

Thorin was silent for a long moment, all the way through the next light. Then he withdrew his hand from Bilbo's to better turn the car around.


"But do you want to go home?"

"You mean, back to the house? ...No. I don't suppose I do. Sorry."

Thorin said nothing more, merely turned the car around again at the soonest opportunity.

"Sorry."

"Stop apologizing."

Bilbo stopped apologizing.

Before long, Thorin parked the car. He turned off the engine, and the music cut off. In the light of the streetlamps slanting in through the windshield, Thorin was motionless and stone-like.

"Are we going in?" Bilbo asked, still not entirely certain where it was they were eating.

"The reservations aren't for ten more minutes."

"Oh."
The headlights of passing cars painted Thorin in flashes of dim yellow. "You're upset," Thorin stated in a tone which brooked no argument or debate. A strange way to begin a heart-to-heart, but an effective one.

"I'm homesick," Bilbo said, thinking of the meadows rolling away from the train window. Or the footpaths all up and down and around the hills. Or the gardens framing colourful doors.

Or Bag-End. To be honest, mostly Bag-End. For his house built into the Hill, the house his father had built for his mother. He'd wanted to love like that from a small age. He'd thought it expected, thought it simply what one did, as Bungo Baggins was an expert on doing exactly what one did.

In any case, he missed Bag-End. The smooth panels on the walls and the light of the sun in through the round windows come morning. The low height of the ceilings and doors and the accompanying if unspoken expectation that it would always be a Baggins living there.

There wasn't now, not quite. Regardless of what others thought, no one felt that disappointment more acutely than Bilbo. Except perhaps the Sackville-Bagginses, because Bilbo would very much be dead before he handed over the house to them.

"Are you often homesick?" Thorin asked.

"No," Bilbo answered quickly, too quickly. "At least, I hadn't thought so."

Thorin nods. Then, slowly, as if from the side, Thorin asked, "Do you have long-term plans for Rivendell?"

This time, Bilbo thought his answer through. "I think so. For some years, at least." He would have to sort out what to do with the house in the meanwhile. But not tonight. Not when he recognized that silence in Thorin, the helpless strain of affection when affection knew it could not be enough on its lonesome. Beneath the faint signs of irritation, the worry provoking them made itself plain. Bilbo knew these pieces well, and he recognized the patience binding them together.

He squared his shoulders and sat up tall, though twisted in his seat to better face Thorin. "I've enough to keep me here in the interim, you realize."

"I had hoped."

"Oh yes." Bilbo nodded. "Plenty of reasons to stay. My job, the lease, I love you; pick any one you wish."

"You love me?"

Bilbo smiled. "Yes, I thought you'd pick that one."

Slowly, as if afraid his hand would fall off or Bilbo shatter into pieces or the car engine spontaneously explode, Thorin reached for him. Heart pounding, sitting in a car with windows tinted but not tinted enough, Bilbo leaned toward him, against him.

Thorin kissed his forehead first, then his nose, then his lips. He said nothing. The tension within him was incredible.

"It's all right," Bilbo murmured. He adjusted a stray strand of Thorin's hair. "Let's have dinner."

Thorin made a strange, strained sound, a cross between frustration and amusement.
"It fits some mouths better than others," Bilbo assured him. "Don't hurt yourself." He reached for the car door.

"It frightens me to need you."

"Good," Bilbo said. "That's only fair. My hands won't stop shaking, and I can promise you that it's entirely your fault."

Thorin very nearly laughed.

"I love you," Bilbo said again. "I suppose I just like saying it. Come along, now. Dinner."

He opened the door and Thorin said to his back, as if he might be dying, "I love you."

Bilbo smiled at him over his shoulder. Then, glad to be in good company, he climbed out into the dark to hold another man's hand beneath the streetlamps.
Bumpy and strange, the darkness begins to blur. Aches make themselves known to his body. He tries to stretch and cannot. Distant panic flares, but his body doesn't care to move. It also seems to be inside some sort of box. No, a suitcase.

He closes his eyes to the dark and, listening to the sounds of the road, drops off once more into the black inside his head.

When he next comes to, he's in a chair and his eyes are already open. His head isn't lolling but instead held upright. How long he's been like this, he cannot say. He thinks there might have been stairs at some point. A niggling sensation in the back of his head warns him that this might not be the first time his mind has surfaced.

The one benefit to his hazy condition is that his captors don't seem to notice his present return to reality. Arguing about something, the three men sit about a small card table in the dimly lit basement.

"...don't want to kill him by accident, you dolt."

"All I'm saying is, if we avoid the head--"

"You just want to rough him up, Bert."

"Of course I do! That's the fun part."

"I keep telling you, we wait until the drug's run its course, and then we beat him. Think about it, Bert, is there any point to it if he doesn't react?"

Bert sighs. "Oh, I suppose not."

"We shouldn't have much longer to wait anyway," says Bill. "Tom, do you have the camera?"

"Charging the battery, should be ready soon."

"Good. Now, we want the bruising nice and good on the face. That's more dramatic."

Tom groans. "Bill, we know what we're doing."

"If we're going to go through the bother of abducting Oakenshield's little boyfriend, we're going to go through it correctly. Azog wants this done right, boys, and I'm not one to disagree."

As best as he can, Bilbo stares sightlessly at the concrete wall before him. Despite his terror, his body remains drained enough that remaining still is far from a problem. Motion is the problem.

He twists his arms slowly, and yes, that's his wrists tied. This is rough rope, the kind that makes him grateful to have his sleeves as barriers. Against skin, scratches and rope burn would be inevitable. He flexes his calves, and yes, that's his legs tied. His feet don't even reach the floor. Some rope about the middle as well, though that might be more to frighten him than anything else. The knots on his arms and legs are very secure, enough that Bilbo's not insignificant experience of being tied up doesn't help him. No, the rope around the middle must be extra, just to thoroughly make him anxious when he can't breathe deeply. The irony helps him keep his head: being tied down has never made him anything other than calm before.

Bilbo swallows and tries not to make a sound. Distantly, he wonders if it's after five o'clock yet. He
feels as if an age must have passed.

"What do you think about a burn?" Burt asks. "'Cos bruises take time to get really good, but burns are quick."

"Burns are nice," says Tom. "Bit permanent, though. Too conspicuous for the face. Though that won't much matter if Oakenshield doesn't budge for him."

"Maybe on the chest, then?"

"Oh, that would be fine."

"Excuse me!" Bilbo squeaks.

The trio looks over at him sharply.

"Right," says Bill. "Who has the gag?"

"Sorry," Bilbo says. "I'll only take a moment. I just want to be sure we're all on the same page so no one makes any mistakes."

The three look between themselves.

"How do you mean?" asks Burt.

"Well," Bilbo says, "for a start, am I being held for ransom? Or is this a 'keep you now, kill you later' sort of deal?"

"A bit ransom-like, yeah, but we might still kill you later," says Tom. "That's up to Oakenshield."

"So there are things Azog wants from Thorin," Bilbo reasons.

"You could say that."

"Meaning, the most important thing to do is to make Thorin comply with your demands. Which, you know, I'm rather good at."

Bill tilts his head to the side. The other two look at Bill. "Go on."

"Well," Bilbo says, "first off, Thorin does know you have me, doesn't he?"

"We were going to show him with the picture?" Tom says. "With your face all beaten-like."

Bilbo nods. "Shock value. Like you did with Balin. Um, right. So. He doesn't know yet?"

"Not yet."

"Well, that's going to be a problem right there. What time is it?"

Tom checks his watch. "Half eleven."

Somehow, Bilbo doesn't curse. "Oh dear," he says instead. "Thorin's going to be very upset."

"He thinks you've run off to a family emergency. Where's the harm in that?"

Bilbo scrunched his face up in the shape of an awkward confession. "We've been fighting. He might think I've run off. Absolutely paranoid, that one, but what can you do? If he's called and I haven't
called back, oh, goodness. If he thinks I've been kidnapped while running away from him, good luck getting anything out of him. He'd probably let you go right ahead without batting an eye."

"Right then," Bill says. "Tom, get the camera."

"Are you going to beat me now?" His voice doesn't rise too high, but it does rise.

"Well, yeah."

"That's a bit premature, isn't it?" Bilbo asks.

"We've been waiting hours," Tom whinges.

"But you haven't even offered to give me back to him unharmed."

"What would we do that for?" Bert asks. "Look, we all know we're going to beat you to a pulp."

"Well, yes, obviously, but it's a bit soon for that," Bilbo insists. "You only have an unharmed hostage once. If that's gone, it's gone."

"Yeah, but he's not getting you back unharmed."

"Oh, I never said he was. I'm only saying, if you tell him I'm unharmed and he doesn't do anything, he'll blame himself for whatever harm befalls me. And I quite agree: you lot would never have come near me if it weren't for him, so let's make him guilty as hell. But if you hurt me before you give him the chance to save me, he'll only be angry. He might be able to stop you in time to keep you from breaking me entirely, but the difference between 'beaten' and 'badly beaten' isn't remotely as pronounced as the difference from 'unbeaten' to 'beaten'."

The three look between themselves.

"Besides," Bilbo adds, "you can always beat me later. Nothing's stopping you. I'm certainly in no position to! But it seems a shame to give away a trump card before you even start playing."

"Trump card?" asks Bill.

Bilbo nods. "Thorin's very fond of how not-broken I am. Never broken so much as a bone, and not a single scar from surgery. He thinks it makes me look innocent. Personally, I think he has something of a fetish. He really wouldn't want to lose that."

"Huh," says Bert. Tom wrinkles his nose.

"Not to mention," Bilbo continues, "he really wants my family to like him. The mobster bit would have been a hard sell, but no one is going to be very happy with him if I'm beaten bloody on his account. And doesn't he know it!"

Between the three, debate ensues.

"All right," Bill says at last. "Threaten Oakenshield first, then beat the boyfriend after."

"You're not going to give an ultimatum?" Bilbo chimes in.

Further debate ensues. They decide to give the ultimatum. Thorin will have an hour.

"Can Thorin put together what you want within an hour?" Bilbo asks.
The three stare at him blankly. Yet more discussion lengthens the wait to three hours. "Not another word out of you," Bill warns as he leaves the basement to make his call.

"People don't usually cooperate so well," says Tom. "Usually, there's a lot more fussing and screaming."

"That must be terribly annoying," says Bilbo.

"Like you wouldn't believe!"

"You don't say."

"I do say."

"So you do," Bilbo says. "How annoying does that get, really?"

Tom explains in gruesome detail. Bert joins in soon after. Bilbo feels the colour leave his face, but he nods along all the same and makes tsking noises in the appropriate spots.

"What're you talking to him for?" Bill demands when he returns.

"I'm bored!"

"I'm bored too," Bert agrees.

"That's too bad. We're going to wait. And stop talking to him!"

Tom sighs. "Three hours to wait. We beat him at half three."

"I hate staying up so late," Bert complains. "Always feel so sluggish the day after."

This chatter continues for some time, Bilbo desperately thinking all the while. Eventually, his stomach bothers him. It growls audibly, but the three ignore him.

"Excuse me," Bilbo says when he is at last really, truly hungry. "Sorry, I know I shouldn't interrupt, but you ought to know I'm diabetic and I haven't had dinner." Though the first is a lie, the second is very true.

"So?"

"So I'll pass out and could go into a coma. Or have seizures. Sort of puts a damper on the 'unharmed' business."

"Oh," says Tom. He turns to Bert. "Have we got anything?"

Come half three, Bilbo is still slowly attempting to eat his crackers without the use of his hands. Though it is technically time to beat him, they agree the blood sugar issue must be taken care of first and--more importantly--it's so amusing to watch him try.

After that, Bilbo asks for the loo. The three are in favour of letting him piss himself, but Bilbo points out that it is them and not him who will have to clean it up. Grudgingly, Tom unties Bilbo from the chair and leads him to a small closet of a loo. It absolutely reeks.

"Go on then."

"I've a very shy bladder."
"Piss or I'll make you piss yourself."

Bilbo uses the toilet, his hands fortunately tied together in front. Even so, he uses it as slowly as possible.

Once finished, he's returned to the chair in the basement. Tom gets the camera ready and Bert lays out an unsettling number of tools. The small rectangle of a window near the ceiling begins to leak faint, pre-dawn light.

"Does it help if I'm more tense?" Bilbo asks. "I mean, with the bruising."

"I think so, yeah," says Tom.

In that case, Bilbo is about to be very helpful indeed.

"Now, keep your head still so I can aim," Tom adds. At the first pulled punch, Bilbo flinches and Tom laughs. "Don't worry, I can help with that." Tom sets one hand atop Bilbo's curls and grips tight. "Nice and easy now. Nobody wants knuckles meeting teeth. Just going to bloody up your face a little."

"You'll want to put on gloves first, then," Bilbo gasps out in a rush of inspiration.

"What for?"

"I'm HIV-positive."

Tom releases his hair immediately and, eyes wide, wipes his hands on his shirt.

"The medication controls it, but, well, still best to be careful about transmission."

"Tom, he's lying," Bill insists. "I think he was lying about the diabetes, too."

"I'm not risking AIDS!" Tom shudders.

"You don't have to hit him with your hand!"

"But it could splatter! No, we're doing this the safe way. Do we have any gloves?"

"Think there's some beneath the sink," says Bert. "I'll check." Bert goes to check.

"Just hit him already," Bill says.

"You hit him," Tom says.

Bill doesn't hit him.

An endless wait later, Bert returns. "I found the gloves!"

Tom puts on the gloves.

Bilbo squeezes his eyes tight and turns his face away.

With the sound of shattering glass, a blast of light blazes against Bilbo's closed eyelids. A roar erupts within the basement. Bilbo cries out soundlessly and flings himself to the side with all his might. The chair topples. He lands hard on his side, nearly striking his head on the cement floor, and there he lies, dazed and stunned, until gentle hands unbind him and guide him to sit.
Bilbo blinks and blinks against the afterimage of so much light, his ears ringing. Bilbo reaches for those hands, but he doesn't know them by touch. A single ring, but not one he knows. They're a man's hands, and old. Dazed and disoriented, Bilbo allows himself to be pulled to his feet, and together, he and the old man navigate out of the basement through what Bilbo hopes is a crowd of police officers.

Once outside, gasping the dawn air, Bilbo can make out vague shapes that become specific people. Or specific person, as it happens.

"Gandalf?"

"Hello again, Bilbo," Gandalf answers sadly. "I'm afraid I've done you a great disservice."

"And you've now done just the opposite," Bilbo gasps. "Excuse me, I need to sit down."

"Of course. Are you unharmed?"

"Nearly completely." His head hurts and his limbs ache from there the ropes were tight, but having seen what happened to Balin, Bilbo can only be thankful for his condition.

"Good." Gandalf brings him to the street all the same, where they sit until an ambulance appears. Then Bilbo sits on the back of the ambulance, between the open doors. Gandalf stays with him and seems to be someone of greater than usual importance.

"Do you know about Thorin, then?" Bilbo asks once he's been looked over. He'll have to go to the hospital for a little while, but it shouldn't take too long.

"Far more than you do, I'm afraid," Gandalf replies. "In hindsight, I ought to have warned you more thoroughly, but at the time, the thought never crossed my mind."

"Why did you involve me in the first place?"

"That is a long story, and one I will tell you when there is time for the telling. I promise you that."

"Thank you," Bilbo answers, beginning to droop where he sits. "I'd like breakfast and my phone back, please."

Gandalf chuckles. "You sound very much like your grandfather."

"The Old Took?" It's not a comparison Bilbo has ever heard before. Far from it, in fact.

"Yes. You've your father's face, but much of your mother's spirit. May it serve you well."

"I imagine we'll see," Bilbo allows. "But please, my phone."

"One moment," Gandalf promises. Squeezing Bilbo's shoulder with a gentle hand, he stands.

Wrapped in a blanket, Bilbo waits on the ambulance step in his shirtsleeves. The sun rises above the building where he was kept, and the light is warm.

"Stay over tonight," Thorin said the moment Bilbo answered his phone.

Bilbo laughed. "Hello to you too."
"You should stay over tonight," Thorin repeated.

"At your place?"

"Where else?"

"I'm currently in my office," Bilbo replied. "I could stay over here."

Thorin responded to that bit of playfulness as if Bilbo had proposed jumping off the library to his death. "Don't."

"Are you all right? You sound strained."

"I'm fine. Will you come?"

Bilbo bit his lip. "What am I walking into here?"

"What?"

"You're worried about something," Bilbo said. "Should I be worried too?"

For a terrible moment, Thorin was very quiet. Then he said, "I would like you to meet my friends."

The bottom of Bilbo's stomach dropped out. "Your friends."

"Yes."

"So... there's another gathering at your house."

"Yes."

"Any I've met before? While I was working on the map."

"You're familiar with Dwalin, I believe. His brother is also here. There are others, but Balin has known me my entire life."

Oh no. Oh, oh no. "...Are you asking me to meet your family?"

"I am asking you to meet my friends."

"Could I just pop in and out?" Bilbo compromised.

"I want you to stay over. I want to wake up with you in my own bed."

Bilbo swallowed. He pushed against his desk with one arm, swivelling his chair this way and that. "Do they already know? About us."

"Kili told them."

Bilbo attempted to keep his lunch down. He succeeded. "Thorin," he said slowly, "I love you."

"...I have never before heard 'no' said in such a way."

"I'm not... To my family, to anyone in Hobbiton, I'm not out. No one knows."

None besides Frodo, and to breathe word of that would be to give Frodo away as well. "So I can't... You must understand, this is a one-way sort of scenario. I won't be introducing you to anyone. I won't be bringing you home. I'm not ashamed of you, and I'm not ashamed of myself, but I do enjoy a life where my
relations don't hide their children away from me."

Again, Thorin was quiet. Then, as if resuming the recitation of a recipe, "Come to my house. Speak with my friends. Sleep in my bed. My family loves you, and my friends will follow."

Bilbo very nearly cried. Instead, he asked, "And if they don't?"

"I'll hit them."

Bilbo laughed a broken sound. He took a deep breath. "All right, then."

"Bombur's making dinner. Come as soon as you can if you don't want to be left hungry."

"All right," Bilbo agreed without asking who Bombur was. He had some time to wonder that after they'd hung up. He did a mental count and reasoned that with himself included, there would be at least seven people there.

When he arrived, there were already that many cars in Thorin's driveway behind the gate. Immediately glad to have changed clothing at home before coming, Bilbo climbed out of his car with no small sense of trepidation.

Having buzzed him in, Kili greeted him at the door. It was more than a bit like having a Labrador retriever, provided the dog shouted "Bilbo's here!" instead of simply barking.

Kili escorted him rapidly inside, grabbing his jacket and tossing it on a looming pile on an armchair in the sitting room. All the rooms were already crowded, and Bilbo quickly counted what had to be a dozen people. Some he'd seen, some had names he was meant to know. Bilbo was relieved to see Dori, presumably there from having driven over Kili's friend Ori. There was another small boy who seemed to belong to, was it, yes, Gloin.

Upon seeing Thorin, Bilbo's stomach twisted into knots, but Thorin simply looked up, smiled faintly, and called for another chair. Someone brought one--Bilbo didn't catch his name--and someone else--Bombur?--immediately set a heaping plate down in front of him. Potatoes and pot roast, both hidden beneath gravy, and a loud laugh went up around the table when Bilbo asked for a fork. Cries of "No!" and "Absolutely not!" abounded.

"Bofur," Thorin prompted.

The one who had fetched Bilbo a chair sighed. "If you absolutely must. I suppose you'd be wanting a knife with that too, wouldn't you?"

"Thank you," Bilbo said.

"I didn't say I'd get you one!"

More laughter about the table, but the fellow with the odd hat furnished Bilbo with his silverware within moments. Everyone was in various stages of eating, only just digging in or mopping up their plate or carrying it off to the sink. The conversation roamed just as fiercely, glancing off sport, fumbling against local news, and volleying into raucous stories about people Bilbo knew nothing about. Boisterous in their eating as well as their drinking, they weren't pretty to look at, but they made up for it in being intimidating to listen to. They were precisely the sort of company Bilbo never had anything to do with. Even so, their joy was catching, and Bilbo watched them with anxious fascination.

He would look to Thorin in the few quieter moments--not quiet, but quieter--and Thorin would be in
low conversation with the white-haired man beside him or would be watching the rest of them. He looked proud. He looked at Bilbo as if Bilbo fit there, sitting in that chair between Dori and Bofur with his feet off the floor.

"Bilbo!" exclaimed Kili right by Bilbo's ear. "Can you come look over my essay? It's history."

Bilbo blinked at him, but the rest of the table responded to the interruption with good cheer and largely expressed the sentiment that Kili needed all the help he could get.

He followed Kili upstairs, settled down with the boy's laptop, and discovered an appalling mess. Bilbo effectively had to give a lecture in story form simply to be certain Kili had any idea at all what he was writing about. By the time they sorted that out, Bilbo had an audience.

"Tell another one?" asked the smaller of the two boys.

"Yes, please," urged Ori.

This was how Bilbo found himself entertaining a trio of boys with befuddling Celtic mythology and gruesome Icelandic sagas. Eventually, there came a knock at the door and Gloin with it.

"Gimli, we're going home."

"But he's not at the end yet!"

Bilbo hurried the story along, but Fili also appeared before the end. Then off with Gloin and Gimli, and in with Fili. Ori continued to listen, rapt, and both he and Fili complained when Kili interrupted over needing to rewrite another paragraph.

Dori brought up tea in exchange for putting Ori to bed. Fili and Bilbo talked, then, their first real time talking between the two of them. Even with Kili occasionally chiming in, it still counted.

Eventually, it occurred to Bilbo that everyone was very quiet downstairs.

"Are they watching a movie?" Bilbo asked.

"Went out," Fili said with a shrug. "Beer run. This always happens. They'll be hopelessly lost by now."

"What always happens?" asked Kili.

"Company's gone out," said Fili. "For beer."

"Oh," said Kili. He turned to Bilbo. "They'll get lost coming home. It might take hours. You'd be amazed."

"Thorin does have an impressive record," Bilbo allowed. Hours seemed a bit much.

The two brothers stared at him for a moment before they burst into laughter. "He does!" Fili cried.

"Oh, does he!" Kili agreed, cackling. A running gag in the family, obviously.

They chatted for a while longer, but as the night stretched on from Friday into Saturday, Bilbo rose. "If they're all still out, I ought to head home."

"No!" Kili protested. "You can't!"
Bilbo frowned at him, bewildered.

Fili elbowed his brother, hard. "Don't be such a baby." He looked to Bilbo. "Though he might actually be right. I think your car is blocked in."

"What? It wasn't earlier!"

"They had to rearrange to get Gloin out," Fili explained with a shrug.

Bilbo frowned deeper and went downstairs to check out the sitting room window. Balin and Dwalin sat on the armchair and sofa, respectively, watching a late night talk show.

"I've been blocked in," Bilbo announced.

"Which car are you?" Balin asked.

Bilbo pointed.

"Ah. Can't help you there. We've the green one next to you."

"Ah," said Bilbo. He sat down and watched the show. When it ended, Balin stood, stretched, and announced he was turning in for the night. He went upstairs. Bilbo looked at Dwalin.

"Insomnia," grunted Dwalin. "You go to bed when you like. His room is the last on the right." He pointed to the back hall.

"...Right. Thank you." Recognizing the dismissal, Bilbo stood and wandered into the kitchen. Dori was on a laptop at the cleaned table, a cup of tea at his elbow. "Evening," Bilbo greeted.

"Evening." More typing.

"Do people often stay over?" Bilbo asked.

"We all go way back," Dori replied, which likely meant "yes".

"Well," Bilbo said. He bobbed up and down on the balls of his feet slowly. He tried to think of something else to say and failed. "Good night."

"Good night."

Bilbo went into the back hallway with a sense of sneaking about a place he didn't belong. Then, in the loo opposite Thorin's bedroom, Bilbo discovered a towel, a flannel and an unopened toothbrush all in a neat pile on the counter. He picked up the toothbrush, closed his eyes, and waited for the teary feeling to pass. He blinked it back and reminded himself that being relentlessly welcomed had to be somewhat tempered by Thorin's disappearance--and without a word! Even so, chastisement was slow in coming.

He brushed his teeth and readied for bed. He stared about Thorin's bedroom with curious eyes, skimming book titles upon their shelves and taking note of which had their spines cracked and edges worn. At last, too tired to do otherwise, he stripped down to his undershirt and pants, then climbed into bed. Soft sheets smelled of Thorin. Softer pillows did the same.

He slipped off to sleep only to wake at a shifting of the mattress and a lifting of the sheets.

"...Thorin?" He rolled over, directly into Thorin's arms and a consuming kiss. A muffled sound of surprise escaped him, a squeak rapidly deepening into a rumble.
"You see?" Thorin whispered into Bilbo's ear. He smelled of his shampoo, and his hair was damp. "You're safe here. I will let none harm you."

Sleepy and warm, Bilbo hummed against his throat. "Late," he chided.

"We have all morning," Thorin promised. "Better yet, stay again, and I'll keep you properly."

Bilbo mumbled his agreement for the sake of more kissing and hazy pawing. Slowly, gently, he slipped back down toward sleep regardless of his intentions. Thorin petted his hair.

"I can make this work," Thorin whispered. His lips pressed against Bilbo's closed eyelids, his forehead, his nose. His beard tickled. "I will keep you safe."

Bilbo held his hand loosely. "Sleep."

Thorin kissed him a final time and was silent. Wrapped in each other, they slept.
Chapter 9

Paperwork follows before he can sneak in his phone call. His scrapes and bruises are documented, a sample of his blood taken. He gives his statement this way and that, and one of the police officers lets out a quiet snicker as she writes down his many stalling tactics. She apologises, but it does make Bilbo feel better. Absurd situations cannot possibly be so dangerous.

By the time they're done, the sun has well and truly risen. Gandalf announces his intent to remain with Bilbo until arrangements can be made for his continued safety. The police respond to him with a cautious if deep respect, an attitude that makes Bilbo wonder what exactly it was Gandalf does for a living.

"I take it you would like to have breakfast now," Gandalf muses aloud.

"Yes, please!" They climb into Gandalf's car. Once buckled, Bilbo pulls out his phone.

"Before you do that," Gandalf begins.

"I'm calling my relatives," Bilbo replies. "They were expecting me at half five yesterday. All of Hobbiton likely thinks me dead by now."

Gandalf nods. "In that case."

Bilbo pauses, thumb hovering above the keys. "Has Thorin already been told? About my rescue."

"I believe so," Gandalf replies in the tone of a man withholding judgement.

"Oh good," Bilbo says. "I wasn't looking forward to that call. And I'm sorry if this is loud, but it's overdue." He dials and puts the phone to his ear.

"Hello?" answers Primula Brandybuck. Very curious, as he'd dialled Frodo's mobile.

Bilbo sits up somewhat taller, insofar as this is possible. "Good morning, Prim. It's Bilbo."

"Hello," Primula repeats cautiously.

"I understand Frodo was very upset yesterday."

Primula grows very quiet, which is saying something. "I don't know what you've heard..."

"I've heard why," Bilbo says. "He told me at Christmas."

"And you didn't tell us?" Primula demands immediately, her hesitation vanished.

"When you'd react like this? No. No I did not. Now, could you put Frodo on the phone? He hasn't left for school yet, has he?"

"If you're not going to talk some sense into him, no. I can't believe you're taking it so calmly."

"I'm not taking it calmly at all," Bilbo says. "I am taking it very angrily, and if you haven't told your son that you love him in the past day, you are a terrible parent and a horrible person."

"I'm not going to encourage this! Do you have any idea what sort of life he's setting himself up for?"
"Do you know what you're setting him up for?" Bilbo demands after a nasty laugh. "I don't think you do."

"When the family finds out about him--"

"I'm leaving him Bag-End."

There is, for just a moment, complete silence down the line. In this silence, Bilbo hears make Gandalf make an impressed sound.

"You're what?" Primula asks.

"I'm leaving him Bag-End," Bilbo repeats. "The moment I have a chance, I am updating my will. Now, the stipulation my father left is that the owner of Bag-End must have 'Baggins' in their name, but there's nothing to say it has to be his surname. It could be a middle name. He wouldn't have to decide until I died, at any rate, but the property will go to him. That is the life I am setting him up for. You may set him up for a life with a loving mother, which I understand you were doing perfectly well at until yesterday."

"If any of the neighbours find out--"

"Sod the neighbours."

"--they'll hurt him, and you know it."

"I do know it. I'll be taking measures against it shortly. Now, kindly remember that while you might be frightened, he is terrified, as it's his body and not yours which will be beaten if he doesn't have support."

Gandalf glances at him curiously.

"I can't encourage this," Primula says. "The things people are going to say about him, Bilbo. The things they'll do."

"I know," Bilbo says. "I'm taking care of however much I can. But, please, whatever Drogo says, do not try to talk him out of it, do not force him out of it, do not separate him from the few friends he has. He's alone enough already, Prim. He has enough to be afraid of without adding his parents to the list."

Primula is very quiet once more.

"I have a few more calls to make," Bilbo says. "Pass on my love to Frodo and send my apologies for not coming in person."

"Goodbye."

"Will you tell him?"

"Goodbye." She hangs up.

Bilbo looks at his mobile for a moment. He sighs.

"Primula Brandybuck?" asks Gandalf.

Bilbo nods.
"I take it Frodo is gay."

Bilbo nods. "Excuse me, I need to..."

"By all means."

Bilbo dials the Gaffer first.

"Mr Bilbo!" exclaims the Gaffer.

"Hamfast!" answers Bilbo.

"Rather early for a call. Still delighted to hear from you, no mistake. What can I do for you?"

"Well, there's an interesting fact I'd hope you might spread about," Bilbo says. "It's very important it spread today, as quickly as it can."

"Oh?"

"Yes." His stomach squeezes in on itself, the crackers long since digested. Car sickness threatens though Bilbo sits in the passenger seat. "I... Do you know the reason why Bag-End is empty?"

"Your university position, I always thought," says the Gaffer.

"Partially." He clears his throat. "Actually, the reason Bag-End is empty--and that is how I'd like you to phrase this--the reason Bag-End is empty is that I don't feel safe in Hobbiton. In fact, I know I'm not. I'm, well. I'm gay."

"To be honest, Mr Bilbo," says the Gaffer, "I always thought that too."

"Oh," says Bilbo.

"But if you want that told, I'll go and tell it. Should shame a few right into their places, I hope. Bag-End deserves a Baggins in it, safe and sound."

"Thank you, Hamfast." His voice turns small and childlike, the way he ought to have sounded while tied to a chair and threatened. Strange that he would sound like this now.

"Anything for you, Mr Bilbo, anything for you. Will that be all?"

"That is more than enough," Bilbo assures him, desperately trying not to cry. "Thank you."

"The children will be off to school soon. Should I tell them?"

"We've a lot of ground to cover." His voice barely shakes this time.

"Right, then. I'll be off. You take care, Mr Bilbo."

"You too, Hamfast." This time, Bilbo hangs up.

Gandalf reaches over, pulls the latch on the glove compartment and blindly pulls out a packet of tissues. Bilbo takes them gladly.

"You're a very busy man, Bilbo Baggins," says Gandalf. "Would you like me to explain the situation concerning the crime syndicate you've stumbled into, or do you have more cousin-rescuing to do?"

"A bit more cousin-rescuing," Bilbo replies.
"By all means."

There's only one left on his list of certain safe calls. As luck would have it, Merry Brandybuck picks up the phone on the first go. They have a quick talk where the usually playful boy turns serious indeed.

"Is this only to protect Frodo?" Merry asks.

"It's not a lie. But it is more for Frodo."

"All right then. For Frodo."

"Good lad."

By the time they hang up, Gandalf has already parked. The neighbourhood is bright and clean, the sort of place which makes quiet promises of safety it cannot keep. Bilbo puts his phone away and takes a moment to steady his nerves. Then he takes a longer moment, and a longer moment still.

"Would you like breakfast?" Gandalf asks gently.

"Yes," Bilbo says immediately. "I haven't eaten in over a month."

They exit the car and go inside the restaurant. At this time of morning, most present are commuters, people who look like they know they have someone else to be. There is a table in the back corner, all the way back, and this is the one Gandalf leads him to. Gandalf sits facing the rest of the room. Though Bilbo ought to be terrified to have his back turned, he's much too tired to bother with fear. When the waitress comes, Bilbo orders two full breakfasts with sausage as well as ham, a glass of orange juice, a glass of water, and a cup of coffee, and Gandalf has to call her back before he can place his own order.

"Thorin's Company is an old one," Gandalf begins once they're alone. "There are longstanding feuds and rivalries. Occasionally, one family unseats another. This causes all sorts of upheaval. When the family is weak, we can go in and make what arrests we can.

"I am currently working in conjunction with Thorin against the family that unseated his grandfather in Erebor. Though Thorin's current trade centres largely in electronics, 'Fire Drake' Smaug is decidedly more unsavoury. The people of Lake-town in particular live in terror.

"Where you come in is something of an accident. In order to repair certain singed bridges, a few personal effects belonging to his father were returned to Thorin. They were seized in old raids, you see. One piece taken for evidence turned out to be an entirely legal purchase. This has been returned, and I believe you're familiar with it."

"The map," Bilbo says.

Gandalf nods. "His father was a collector. Many were obtained by other means. This one, however, was safe to return as a token of goodwill."

"And you wanted to butter him up further so he'd go after this Smaug fellow," Bilbo continues flatly. "So you offered to have it translated for him."

"The map alone was a token of goodwill," Gandalf assures him. "You were not featured in any sort of bargain."

"I--"
Gandalf holds up a finger. Overburdened, the waitress returns. Bilbo thanks her soundly and speaks no more. By the time she returns with Gandalf's breakfast, half of Bilbo's first plate is empty. He eats and he eats, and it is as if food has never before featured taste or scent.

Is there anything more delicious than the crisp surface of golden toast gleaming with butter? Is any scent more delectable than that of a grilled sausage? Or any taste more sublime than scrambled eggs showered with pepper? And coffee, oh, coffee with cream and sugar, the way the white blooms through the black, the way the sugar turns cloudy brown before fading into unseen sweetness. Even water, the simplicity of drinking, of swallowing, of tilting his head back while the dryness of his throat at last recedes, what could be better?

Somewhere in the far distance, terror screams and shakes, shouting at a beating barely escaped, at a death avoided, at a home to which he can never again return but must for Frodo's sake, at everything that has happened these past months. But it is in the far distance and breakfast lies immediately before him. For a time, he pays the terror no heed.

Bilbo stops eating only once he begins to feel crapulent. He looks at the bathroom door, visible from where he sits, and nearly stands before the fear returns.

Gandalf follows his gaze. He stands and goes to the door. He opens it and looks in. He returns. "Single stall," he says. "I will watch the door."

"Thank you," Bilbo answers in a small voice. He goes and takes care of his business, acutely recalling the last time he'd relieved himself this morning, hands bound and Tom behind him. Though he returns to the table without mishap, the warm safety of breakfast has vanished.

Gandalf says nothing. He merely looks at Bilbo, weighing something unseen.

Bilbo sips his hot coffee, his mug refilled in his absence. He cools it with cream.

"Your phone rang in your absence," Gandalf tells him, glancing pointedly to the coat on the back of Bilbo's chair.

A wave of cold passes over Bilbo. By the look on Gandalf's face, all the colour must have drained of Bilbo's.

"Bilbo," Gandalf begins gently, leaning forward with his hands folded upon the table, "you should know that there is no better moment than this."

"What do you mean?" Bilbo whispers. His heart pounds through his chest.

"You were abducted last night due to your involvement with Thorin--"

"I did notice, I was there--"

"And," Gandalf continues over him, "it is only reasonable for you to seek safety."

That cuts him short. "I... I don't know."

Gandalf's face is gentle and old. There is a hint of familiarity about it, and Bilbo half-recalls, or thinks he recollects, or pretends to recollect, or perhaps remembers a story of a time when he was very small. He remembers holding his grandfather's hand and looking up at the pearl cufflinks shining orange in the light of fireworks. His grandfather Took on his birthday, because Old Took's birthdays meant fireworks, and his grandfather was talking to a man with a red ring that shone in the night. Bilbo remembers being small and watching their hands and wrists sparkle beneath the cheerful
booming above. Sitting with his hands folded, Gandalf still wears that ring.

"...What kind of safety?" Bilbo asks.

"A protection program of sorts. It would take you out of Rivendell and limit your contact with your family, but you would be safe from reprisals."

"What about my family?"

"They would be safer if you left than if you stayed," Gandalf replies.

The question hurts to ask. Bilbo forces it out all the same. "Even from Thorin?"

With no pity, with no anger, Gandalf asks, "Has he made threats?"

"I'm not sure. They all seem to take it for granted that I'm staying for good."

"Has Thorin physically harmed you in any way?"

Bilbo shakes his head. "He tries to keep me safe."

"How?"

Bilbo drinks a bit more of his coffee. "He makes sure I'm not alone," he answers slowly. "He has me stay at the house."

"Does that make you feel safe?" Gandalf asks.

Bilbo turns the mug between his hands. He warms the back of his fingers, curling them against the heat. Eventually, he shakes his head. "But then I left, and I wasn't safe at all."

"There are other protectors, Bilbo. Will he protect you from himself?"

No matter how Bilbo stares down into it, the coffee contains no answers, only cream and caffeine. "I don't know."

Gandalf allows the silence to fall. He slides the packet of tissues from his glove compartment across the table. Bilbo drinks his coffee, but it fails to warm him properly.

"Do you trust him?" Gandalf asks.

"He doesn't want to hurt me," Bilbo answers. "And I haven't, I haven't told him."

"Why not?"

Bilbo squeezes his eyes shut. "I know what point you're driving at. No, I don't trust him. Yes, I'm afraid of how he'll react."

"This is a difficult thing, Bilbo Baggins," Gandalf says, "but if you will trust an old man to make amends, I believe I can get you to safety."

"And what if you can't?" Bilbo demands in a whisper. "What if I'm stuck and he's furious?"

"Then that will be a thing yet more difficult," Gandalf allows. "But I do not believe you will find a better time than this to act." He lets this settle in. Silence returns once more to their table. For a short time, Bilbo makes use of the tissues and Gandalf pays more attention to his tea. At last, Bilbo
"Well," Bilbo says with false cheer and a smile, "at least I was already planning to update my will."

"Shoulders, starting to hurt," Bilbo panted.

Thorin hummed in acknowledgement but otherwise changed nothing. His clothed chest remained steady against Bilbo's bare back, Bilbo's folded and bound arms secure between them. Thorin's legs remained hooked over Bilbo's, preventing him from rocking up into the torturously slow hand upon him. Thorin's thumb continued its infinitesimal circling just below the head, his palm providing only the friction that squirming could produce.

The nuzzling at his ear hit a particularly sensitive spot. Bilbo squeaked. "Close...!"

Thorin eased back accordingly, one soothing hand spread over Bilbo's sternum. His other hand released Bilbo entirely. "Breathe."

Toes curled tight, Bilbo gasped his way back from the edge. His hands grasped at Thorin's shirt insofar as was possible.

A slow minute later, Thorin asked, "Are you at your limit?"

Bilbo shook his head.

Slowly, Thorin took him once more in hand. Again, Thorin resumed the tiny circling of the thumb that did nothing more than set Bilbo leaking and trembling. His hips tried to buck without him, but Thorin's hand on his chest held him tight. A whine built up in Bilbo's throat, but he was far past caring. Sweaty and aching, trussed and naked, Bilbo flexed his legs against the fabric of Thorin's trousers, anything for a bit more stimulation.

"Steady," Thorin urged.

"Trying."

Thorin kissed his ear. "Could you drive Kili to the university this week?"

"Wh... What?"

"Stay over every night," Thorin explained. "There's the excuse."

A prolonged squeak stretched into a keening sound.

Thorin kissed the curve of his neck, just the place that made his shoulders hunch and his skin tingle. "Stay the week," he rumbled.

Bilbo let out a garbled noise.

"I'm too busy to see you otherwise," Thorin continued, remarkably steady. He shifted his hips tighter against Bilbo's bum but otherwise maintained control. "Stay here, unless it passes."


Thorin set both hands upon Bilbo's stomach. "Breathe," he said, and they breathed. "You're
twitching."

Bilbo nodded, still half-frantic. The ache of his shoulders blurred through lines of pleasure. The pain of thwarted fulfilment became itself bliss.

"Is that the limit?"

Bilbo kept nodding.

"Look at me."

He turned his head, his eyes unseeing, and the scratch of beard heralded a deep kiss. At last, at last, Thorin moved his hands properly, the left hand with harsh, slippery strokes, the right rising to pinch a nipple hard enough to feel it once more.

Bilbo came with a muffled shout, his entire body tensing with the final effort. The violent rush trickled away like rainwater, leaving him gasping and drenched. Thorin kissed his damp brow and eased his limp body onto the bed. He untied Bilbo's arms and massaged them past tingling and through pain. Utterly uncoordinated, Bilbo grasped in vain at his hands.

"We ought to do this before a mirror," Thorin murmured, pulling him close.

Bilbo burrowed against his shirt weakly. He felt vaguely guilty for sweating so against the fabric, but there was already a damp spot from where Thorin had held him for so long. "Oh no we oughtn't. If you want to see me, you can look down."

"You ought to see yourself," Thorin replied in utter seriousness, and Bilbo giggled.

"Mm, yes. Red-faced and blotchy-chested, I'm sure that won't haunt me in the slightest."

Thorin touched Bilbo's face in precisely the way that no one should be allowed to touch another's face. No verbal confession of love was so tender, so sincere. No elaborate gift ever made Bilbo feel so awkward. Surely it was enough to possess a beautiful man without being thought one in return.

"It's a matter of seeing," Thorin replied.

Rather than fight his way through a wall of affection, Bilbo reached down low and said, "I'm in the mood to choke a bit."

Heat blazed in Thorin's eyes. "Are you."

Bilbo nodded. He'd calm himself in a moment, slip back down to the warmth inside his mind.

They arranged themselves at varying speeds, Thorin increasingly hasty and Bilbo still limp. They laid on their sides, Bilbo down low. Thorin tucked a pillow beneath Bilbo's cheek after opening his trousers and rolling on a condom. Evidently as teased as Bilbo himself had been, Thorin took relatively little time, as benefited a choking mood.

After, Thorin wiped involuntary tears from the corners of Bilbo's eyes with his thumbs. His palms cupped Bilbo's cheeks, and Bilbo nearly fell asleep then and there, worn out and well-used.

"Stay this week," Thorin whispered against his mouth.

"That's a while."

"Even so."
Bilbo snuggled close, cold without a sheet over him. They'd have to change the sheets, by which he meant Thorin would.

"Bilbo."

"Mm?"

"Stay."

"Mhm."

"Is that a yes?"

"'es."

Thorin kissed his forehead before wrapping him in a bathrobe and nudging him to stand idly and tiredly by as Thorin took care of the sheets. Bilbo drank his glass of water. After, Thorin stripped at last and they climbed back into a warm bed with cool sheets.

Contentment reigned until morning, through morning, through the afternoon and into evening. Only then, after driving Kili home with a stop for his overnight bag on the way back, did Bilbo notice the shift in the air. Though many of Thorin's friends were about, it was a smaller horde than usual, and a quieter one at that.

"Is everything all right?" Bilbo asked Thorin quietly after dinner.

"Are you staying the week?" The question was nearly wary, and important beyond measure.

Bilbo wondered abruptly if Balin wasn't here because Balin disapproved. He wondered if he ought to ask but ultimately remained silent. He nodded instead.

"Then everything is all right," Thorin promised.
"You will not be returning to Thorin's house," Gandalf reminds him as they climb back into the car. "Once within, even the surest resolve may bend."

"I understand." Bilbo takes three tries to fasten his seat belt, his hands shaking. Exhaustion fills his bones and chills his flesh. His head falls heavily against the seat back. He shifts slightly, the lumbar support too high.

"You are leaving because," Gandalf prompts.

"Because of the danger," Bilbo says. "Because I have family of my own to look out for, and this protection programme is better suited to protect them than hiding behind Thorin is."

They practice questions and responses until they reach the motorway, and then the motion of the car begins to lull Bilbo past any sort of coherency. A jarring period of time later, he startles awake at the buzzing of his phone.

"We are en route to your house in Rivendell," Gandalf assures him. "From there, we will speak with the head of Rivendell University about your relocation. After you sleep, of course."

Bilbo nods, a bobbing of the head. "Where could I go?"

"There are a number of options. I've a contact at Carrock Institute you'd be safe with."

"Bit more biology than linguistics, but that would do." He pulls out his mobile and sees the two dozen or so missed calls. Half are from Thorin or the Company. The remainder all have Hobbiton area codes.

"I'm going to check my voicemail," Bilbo says. When Gandalf says nothing to the contrary, Bilbo enters his password and listens. The messages from Hobbiton have a single topic and reactions range from sceptical to scandalized and hateful. All messages from the Company boil down to "Are you all right? Tell us where you are and we'll come get you."

The message from Thorin is much harsher, more succinct, and much more difficult to listen to. "Call me back if you're able." A long pause, then: "We're working to find you."

Bilbo's stomach churns and churns, and perhaps he should have forgone the second breakfast.

"He's coming to find me," he tells Gandalf. "The longer I wait to respond, the worse it will be when we do speak."

"You will not face him alone," Gandalf promises. "He cannot send me away, and he cannot force you to send me away."

"...Should I text him?"

Gandalf says nothing for a long moment. The radio plays on. "What do you intend to say?"

"Um. 'Am fine but ears ringing. Will fade. Battery nearly dead.'"
"Do you usually text as if sending a telegram?"

"Er, no. But that would be the basics."

They hammer out the precise contents of the text. Bilbo reads it aloud twice before finally sending it. Periodically his phone buzzes with an incoming call with a Hobbiton area code. At last he sends

Ears still ringing from rescue but am fine. My phone is dying, so please don't worry at lack of contact. I'm safe with a family friend.

Nearly immediately, Thorin texts back: Where are you?

Only a moment after that: What friend?

Bilbo reads the messages aloud. "Don't answer?"

"Tell him the police said you're not allowed to say."

"Are you the police?" Bilbo asks.

Gandalf doesn't look at him, his eyes on the motorway. There is a distinct answer in the lack of response.

"Right then," says Bilbo. He types this out, then adds but I am fine. Barely bruised, no lasting damage whatsoever, but desperately need to sleep. Half awake now. After, he puts his phone on silent and pockets it.

Trees and fields pass by in the window.

"If he comes to my house," Bilbo begins.

"I will be there," Gandalf says. "You may be surprised to know the resources I have standing by."

Bilbo thinks of the bang of light this morning as Tom's gloved fist pulled back. "Not so surprised, I think. But how prepared are you? To pull me out of this?"

"By the time you finish your nap, considerably so."

"But currently?"

"Not particularly," Gandalf allows.

More fields pass. Fewer trees now.

"Do you think he would kill me?" Bilbo asks. "Or anyone in my family?"

Gandalf glances to him, if only for a moment. "I think his anger is a terrible thing. An appeal to his better nature may be lost upon him. Once he loses his temper, it certainly will be."

"That's not very reassuring."

"Perhaps not. But this will be simpler to handle once you've slept, if only just, and we will do what we can for your family after you are removed from the situation."

"I like sleep," Bilbo says. He closes his eyes and drifts off. He only wakes when the car stops and blinks to see the once familiar sight of his suburban house. He can't quite remember how long Thorin has kept him away.
He still has his keys. Or, rather, his keys have been returned to him. He opens the door and they head inside, locking everything behind them. Gandalf makes a phone call and, despite being a very old man, has a remarkably soothing presence that whispers of safety. Or perhaps this is an effect of knowing he has a direct line to a very responsive police unit.

"They came in before," Bilbo warns Gandalf while nevertheless staggering off to bed. "So... please be careful."

"I will be," promises Gandalf. He sits at the kitchen table and, without doing anything at all, has the air of a man cleaning his gun.

"Good," says Bilbo. "I'm glad. Good night."

"Good afternoon, you mean."

Bilbo laughs something like a laugh without meaning to. He goes into his bedroom, kicks off his shoes and collapses down onto the bed, onto disused sheets. He's unconscious in a moment, and when the pounding startles him awake, he thinks for a moment that it's merely a nightmare.

Then the landline begins to ring. The answering machine picks up, then cuts off. The pounding at the door resumes.

Weary down to the bone, Bilbo sits up as Gandalf knocks at his bedroom door and enters.

"Thorin's at the door," Bilbo surmises.

"He is. What would you like to do about him?"

Bilbo looks down at his hands. He tries to think, but the only sound in his head is a clear lack of noise. No static, no ringing. Nothing at all.

"I'll have to talk to him eventually," he says, and he climbs out of bed.

"Everything all right?" Bilbo asked as Kili searched increasingly frantically through his backpack.

"Fine," Kili said immediately. "I'm sure it's in here somewhere."

Bilbo waited, absently drumming his fingers on the library table.

"Um..."

"Did you leave it at home?" Bilbo asked.

"No!" Kili said sharply. Everyone nearby immediately shushed him. "I mean, no," Kili continued at a much lower volume. "I'm sure I packed it."

Bilbo gestured for him to pass the bag over. Kili complied. Bilbo looked through the bag somewhat more systematically. "No, definitely not here. Fortunately, I can tutor you anywhere."

The reassurance did nothing for Kili. If anything, it did the opposite. "Could we do something else?"

"Sorry?"
"Could we... go get coffee?" Kili asked.

"How about we go get the books and use the coffee machine located downstairs from them?" Bilbo offered pointedly.

"But I want one of those coffees with the caramel in it."

"Which would be fine, except that this is study time and your study materials are at home." Bilbo stood. "Come along."

Kili stayed planted at the table.

Bilbo set his hands on his hips and waited.

"Can we please get coffee first?" Kili pleaded.

Bilbo sighed. "Fine." They headed out, climbing into Bilbo's car and stopping along the way. Kili protested when Bilbo ordered the coffees to takeaway, but as Bilbo was paying, these protests came to naught.

When they arrived at the house, Kili nearly burst out of the car. "I'll run in and grab it."

Bilbo rolled his eyes and turns the engine off. "Kili, we're already here. I'm not wasting the petrol driving us back."

Kili made a plaintive expression. "But the distractions..."

Bilbo waited for a better excuse. None was forthcoming. "Take your caramel thing," he prompted instead and thrust the cardboard-wrapped cup at him.

Kili took his caramel thing, and they went inside, passing Thorin and Dwalin's cars. With the number of people in and out of the house, the presence of the cars never guaranteed the presence of the car owner, and this time was no exception.

"Can we work in my room, then?" Kili asked, already heading up the stairs. "If it's the kitchen, I'll only start snacking."

That was a fair point if Bilbo had ever heard one. He started up the stairs after him only to pause. "Did you hear something?"

"Sorry, what?" Kili asked.

"Never mind." An odd creak to the stairs, perhaps.

They set up shop on the floor of Kili's room, books and outlines going this way and that. Bilbo began to see why Kili had pressed so hard for the library: the boy's concentration was shot.

"Kili, close the book for second."

Blinking owlishly, Kili did so.

"You can talk to me, you know," Bilbo said. "Uni can be stressful."

Kili chewed on his lip.

"Have you been sleeping well?" Bilbo asked.
Hesitating about it, Kili shook his head. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Kili shook his head emphatically.

"All right, then. I won't press," Bilbo assured him. "But you should know that if I can help, I will, all right?" It happened again, the sound. "...Did you hear that?"

"It's the boiler," Kili said. "It echoes up the vents a little."

"The boiler?"

"It's a normal basement sound, at any rate." Kili shrugged a bit. "You get used to it."

"All right. Now, are you able to concentrate or would a bit of a power nap help?" When Kili looked at his books with dread, Bilbo sighed and answered for him, "Power nap, it is. You have a rest. I'm going to have a snack."

"Bilbo," Kili said, and then sat there with his mouth open and his eyes full of panic.

Bilbo's stomach clenched. Only half-risen to begin with, he sat back down. Rather than take the direct route, he approached purposefully from the wrong angle. "Have you been having nightmares, then? I remember the end of my first year at uni, and I can say I don't blame you at all." He neglected to mention the nightmares were directly connected to the toe he had out of the closet and whether someone might chop it off. "Or is it Balin?"

Kili blanched.

"He's... sick, isn't he?" Bilbo asked, getting to the heart of the matter. "Dwalin took him to hospital."

"Yeah," said Kili.

"Has he taken a turn for the worse?"

"We're all really worried," Kili said.

They sat in silence for a bit, only interrupted the once by that sort of banging, echoing sound through the vent.

"You look exhausted," Bilbo told him. "A bit of a lie-down won't hurt you. I think I'll go downstairs and have a kip on the sofa myself."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, it's a lovely sofa. Might sleep the night through there, if no one wakes me."

Kili nodded. They stacked the books and folders up before Bilbo exited, first to the loo, then to the sitting room. He settled down on the sofa, his feet toward the staircase and his shoes on the floor. A few minutes later, he heard the creaking of steps and could feel Kili watching him. The boy's anxiety was palpable. Not wanting to press when Kili was so obviously on the verge of confiding, Bilbo feigned sleep.

After perhaps a minute of this, Kili let out a sigh of relief and then tromped back up the stairs.

Bilbo blinked at the ceiling. He sat up, not at all sure of what to make of this. What on earth could
have happened? It was fear, yes, but as an educator, Bilbo knew that exact variation of it well: fear of discovery. This was far more than a lie about doing the reading.

The banging occurred again, now with an odd, secondary sound. He couldn't hear it up in Kili's room, but down here...

Kili hadn't so much as sipped his caramel thing, and after all that fuss to go and get it. It shouldn't have mattered, but it did.

As quietly as he could, which was very quietly indeed, Bilbo stood. He padded into the kitchen and around the way opposite from Thorin's hall. Gently, slowly, he turned the doorknob of the basement door. There was a lock built into the knob, an unused but nevertheless strange feature on a basement door. He opened it and looked down to where the lights should have been off. A faint glow caught his eye, little more than a line of shadow falling into the patch of light from the door.

Bilbo stared down for what felt like much too long a moment. Then, one foot followed by the other, he climbed down the stairs into the shadow. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled higher with each step.

He ought to go back upstairs. Clearly, Kili's mood was catching. He really ought to go back upstairs. Shaking himself past his fear, he went toward the bit of light, a hanging light bulb outside a small, concrete room built into the corner. Was the boiler in there? There was a large metal cabinet against the wall, likely containing relevant tools. Had there been plans to convert this outer space into a rec area?

Bilbo looked around, wondering this and wondering who had left the light on. He spied the boiler. He went over to it just to be certain. Yes, this was the boiler. The absolutely silent boiler, at the moment. He stood next to it, straining to hear a sound and cursing himself for not turning on the rest of the lights when he had a chance. Terrible, the way basements could amplify fear.

Listening and listening, he heard the sound again. Then, lower, following this, he heard the sound of speech. Or, rather, the sound of speech the way it sounded on a television in another room. Because people didn't really speak like that, so low and threatening.

He watched the door to the small room as he might that of a tiger's cage. Instinct told him to go upstairs, grab Kili, get in the car and drive. His heart told him he was being silly.

As he debated, the door opened. Bilbo shifted his weight without a thought and so stood behind the boiler. They could all have a laugh about this later, he assured himself. Bilbo being spooked and searching for a noise, yes, they would laugh about that. How he wished he could believe it. For, truly, he might have believed it.

Except for that sound.

No longer the sound of hard impact, this was the sound that followed. Not an echo, but a whimper. And then, over it, solid footsteps and a proud voice, confident of its threats.

"We no longer have Beater, but I'm sure you've heard tell of his cousin." The metal doors of the cabinet opened. An object was taken. "You can tell us now, or you will speak to Biter."

Bilbo peeked out from behind the boiler just in time to see Thorin snap a large battery pack into what looked very much like an electric cattle prod. Having grown up in a farming community, even on the posh side of one, Bilbo knew what that was, and knew even at this distance it had been modified. The twin teeth at the tip would bite deeply.
Thorin returned to the doorway and entered without a backward glance. And why should he look back when there was a man bound to a chair before him? The most broken man Bilbo had ever seen outside of a film or a newspaper or a hospital. In Thorin's hand, Biter came to life, thrumming a harsh warning. With a casual reach, Thorin gripped the man by the hair and wrenched his head back. "Look at it."

As Bilbo stood transfixed, eyes as round as his open mouth, Dwalin closed the door behind Thorin. Unlike Thorin, he did look out into the basement. Unlike Thorin, he saw.

Their eyes met.

They stared at one another.

"Dwalin, close the door," Thorin ordered.

Dwalin's answer was a single word and yet a complete report. "Boss," he said.

Biter's thrum cut off.

Bilbo bolted. Behind the boiler, across the basement floor. He fled up the stairs, slipped the once, and nearly wrenched his shoulder from its socket catching himself on the railing.

"Bilbo!" Thorin shouted after him, more anger than surprise, and Bilbo skidded through the turn in the kitchen on his dirty socks. Then, an absolute bellow, in absolute rage: "Kili!"

Kili came thundering down the stairs in an instant. Bilbo's shaking hands fumbled at the lock of the front door, but Kili slammed his body against the door just as Bilbo tried to yank it open.

Bilbo gaped at the boy, at the pain and fear on Kili's face, and, yes, this was the secret guilt.

"I told you to keep him away!" Thorin shouted at Kili, and when Bilbo moved, he moved without thinking.

He put his back to the boy and he folded his arms across his chest in a gesture that was pure Took. He lifted his chin in a manner that was pure Baggins and said in a shaking voice that was all Bilbo, "I think someone has some explaining to do."

Chapter End Notes

Art of Thorin and Biter by caffeinetooth. He's a bit bloodier here than he is in the fic, but I think we can agree he's much more dramatic that way.
Chapter 11

As Gandalf goes to open the door, Bilbo batters down his nervous urge to put the electric kettle on. The last thing the situation needs added to the mix is scalding water. At a loss for anything else to do, Bilbo stands behind the counter in his kitchenette and tries to smooth down his hopelessly rumpled shirt. Too late to change now. Besides, most of his clothing has been removed from this house. When he adjusts his trousers, he recalls his silenced mobile and immediately changes it to the loudest setting. He already has some forty-odd missed calls since the last time he'd checked--that was Hobbiton for you--and the probability of a timely interruption is high.

The pounding finally stops with the sound of the door opening. Then, a word full of bewildered anger: "You?"

"Me," Gandalf confirms. "And how are you?"

"I'm wondering what you are doing here," Thorin answers.

"Looking after an old friend. Or, rather, the son of an old friend, and the grandson of an even older one."

If this takes Thorin aback, it doesn't do so enough to make him pause. "Where is he?"

"Kitchen!" Bilbo shouts. He promptly changes his mind about putting the kettle on, as having a heavy weight in his hand now seems a good decision.

Thorin tries to storm in, but the foyer is narrow and Gandalf can take up a surprising amount of space when he wishes. So slowed, Thorin enters with the force of a gale instead of a hurricane.

"Tea?" Bilbo asks.

"You could have been killed!" Thorin bellows. "What were you thinking? Why didn't you listen? They could have torn you apart, don't you understand that?"

"Yes," Bilbo says in a small voice. He goes so far as to lower his gaze with a submissive bow of the head. Gandalf will likely hold Thorin back should he decide to charge, but Bilbo would rather not risk it. "I was there. I noticed."

The tone works wonders, or perhaps, as rumbled and exhausted as he is, Bilbo is truly so pitiful a creature. In either case, the blaze of Thorin's rage dampens from an uncontrollable bonfire to a roaring fireplace.

"You must never do that again." Thorin strides forward, his eyes serious.

"I must never visit my family?" Bilbo translates incredulously. He glances to Gandalf as he speaks, to the comforting pillar nearby. "I must never board a train ever again because there are people after me because of you? Do you realize how absurd that sounds?"

"You misunderstand." Thorin too glances to Gandalf, clearly wishing him gone, but Gandalf doesn't budge.

"Then please explain," Bilbo says. He clicks the kettle on for emphasis before crossing his arms. Too late, he sees the not-shake of Gandalf's head, the look in his eyes that clearly tells Bilbo to stop leaving Thorin these openings.
"There was no reason for you to run off on your own," Thorin tells him. "What were you even running off for?"

"Something important."

"More than your life?"

"Apparently," says Bilbo. "I mean, yes." It is this moment that proves to him that he may be becoming somewhat suicidal. Remarkable, the things one can realize while the kettle boils and one's mobster boyfriend menaces and one's family friend stands warily by.

"Thorin, have you come here to berate Bilbo or to perform some useful purpose?" Gandalf asks. "If the former, let the poor chap go back to bed."

"I'm taking him home," Thorin says with such authority that Bilbo has to actively stop himself from fetching his coat. He covers by opening the cabinet and pulling out mugs instead. Thorin's gaze snaps back to him. "What are you doing?"

"I'm making tea."

"There will be time for that later." Then, the anticipated command: "Get your coat."

"I'm finished with Hobbiton for a while, but thank you," Bilbo answers. He's not usually much for herbal, but moments like these are what camomile was invented for. In go the teabags, but before in can go the water, Thorin catches his elbow. Bilbo stops himself from pulling free, frightened of the fight that might provoke. "My hands aren't shaking so badly as that."

"I'm taking you home," Thorin repeats. He doesn't let go.

"No," Bilbo says slowly, as if he honestly doesn't understand what Thorin means. "I really ought not to go back to Hobbiton for a while. I was waylaid and had to change my plans considerably, but I did what I needed to."

"I mean the house," Thorin says, patience stretched so thin it might as well have been a window.

"Thorin, I've had two months at your house," Bilbo says. As carefully as he can, he eases his elbow out of Thorin's grip and pours the water into the mugs. "It was only meant to be until things went back to normal or another option cropped up, and here it cropped." He sets down the kettle. "There you are." He tries to hand Thorin his least favourite of the mugs, but Thorin refuses to accept it. "Oh dear."

"What are you playing at?" Thorin demands of Gandalf. "You dangle him beneath my nose only to snatch him away? I've had enough of your interference!"

"My dear fellow, you are speaking as if Bilbo has no agency of his own," Gandalf chastises. "I am absolutely certain that he does. Moreover, I know because he has exercised it."

Thorin rounds on Bilbo, but Gandalf bustles forward to accept his tea and holds it with his elbows spread out very wide. As if in coordination, Bilbo's mobile begins to ring, the tone loud and obnoxious.

"Excuse me," Bilbo squeaks.

"That can wait," Thorin says in a tone that brooks no questioning. Thorin's tones never brook questioning, and yet this one somehow manages to brook even less.
"Let me at least check." He checks and the number is unknown.

This must show on his face. "It can wait," Thorin repeats. He doesn't pluck the still-ringing phone from Bilbo's hand, but the motions of his hands imply he might. "Now tell me what Gandalf means."

Bilbo silences his phone, then picks up his tea. He wonders vaguely if he could make it all the way to the car if he threw the tea into Thorin's face and ran for it, only to remember that he took his keys out of his trouser pockets before lying down earlier.

"Thorin," Bilbo begins, "I've lost well over a stone in the last two months. It's almost closer to two stone at this point. I'm scared, all the time. And I know you're doing your best. I know that."

"We dealt with Azog last night," Thorin says.

Bilbo looks sharply at Gandalf, Gandalf who is looking sharply at Thorin. Bilbo looks back at Thorin. "You what?"

"It's finished," Thorin says. "You said you didn't want the details, so I spared you them. Any other night, and we would have come for you ourselves. Do you believe me?"

"Yes. Yes, I believe you." His answer is automatic, his mind numb.

"Then why are you looking at me like that?"

The ringing seems to be in Bilbo's ears before he realises it's the landline. Which is strange, because nearly no one knows his landline number, let alone uses it.

"Leave it," Thorin orders.

Gandalf shifts his weight slightly, yet significantly. "He can answer the phone in his own home."

"The danger has passed," Thorin tells Gandalf. "You are no longer needed here."

"Largely passed," Gandalf corrects. "And only for the moment."

On the kitchen counter, Bilbo's answering machine picks up. Thorin speaks over the pre-recorded message. "All the more reason for him to come home."

"I don't remember actually moving in," Bilbo points out. "I mostly remember being terrified and told that if I left--"

The answering machine beeps. "Uncle Bilbo, it's me, are you there? I don't have much time, I'm borrowing the line at school--"

Bilbo grabs up the phone without thinking. Hissing slightly from tea-inflicted burns, he sets the receiver to his ear and immediately says, "Yes, I'm here, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Frodo answers, his voice echoing strangely between the phone at one ear and the answering machine beyond. With that, the poor boy begins to cry.

Bilbo sets his hand over the phone and whispers to Thorin, "I need to take this." Without waiting for an answer, he says to Frodo, "It's all right. It's going to be all right." He says this as if he himself believes it. An utter lie, of course, but he uses his tone to gentle Thorin as much as he does to reassure Frodo. It might help. It might not. At this point, he'll try anything.
Blocking every doorway while only standing in one, Thorin dominated the foyer. Bilbo stood a better chance of staring down a mountain and, indeed, a mountain would have been more comforting to look at. Here was Thorin, angry and with a touch of nerves to him, but Thorin nonetheless. Very much his normal self, which boded exceptionally poorly. Any usual self that could go from torturing a man and return to a state of socially acceptable pique in half a minute was not a very good usual self.

"Sitting room," Thorin told him. "Kili, tell Dwalin everything is in hand. We'll discuss the rest later."

Kili nodded, a quiet bob of the head, and scrambled off to do as told. So abandoned, Bilbo froze. Though the door was unlocked, he'd never make it out.

"Bilbo," Thorin prompted. He seemed to understand that Bilbo would fly to pieces entirely if touched, but this did not mean he kept his distance. Entirely to the contrary, Thorin reached out with one arm to Bilbo's right and so herded Bilbo to the left. Thorin's eyes never left his, and he had the expression of a man negotiating a hostage crisis.

Bilbo edged into the sitting room one step at a time. He was herded past his shoes to sit down on the far corner of the couch, a spot blocked in by the coffee table to the front and a floor lamp to the side. His arms couldn't seem to uncross. As the sofa cushion attempted to swallow him or at least force him to lean back into the furniture's cushy embrace, Bilbo felt incongruously like a sulking teenager.

"What were you doing down there?" Thorin asked. His anger was painted with flaking patience.

"I heard a noise," Bilbo answered in a small voice. "Thought it was the boiler and went to make sure the house wasn't going to explode."

"You had no business going down there. Do you even know anything about boilers?"

"What I am trying to sort out," Bilbo said very slowly, "is how I was checking for home safety, you were torturing a man, and yet I'm the one apparently in trouble."

Perhaps it was Bilbo's obvious fear or perhaps the logic made an impression on Thorin. In either case--presumably the first case--Thorin clearly attempted to relax. "I was going to tell you eventually."

"If that's what you meant by working in electronics, that was in very poor taste."

"It wasn't."

Beneath his crossed arms, inside his ears, he felt his pulse pounding. He chewed on his lip in the hope that Thorin would keep talking so Bilbo wouldn't have to. And then eventually Thorin would stop talking and then eventually there would be a chance for escape and then, well, that was what the police were for. He would swear he hadn't known a thing until today. He would promise that he'd assumed his boyfriend's love of tying people down and having them at his mercy was a facet of his sexuality rather than an aspect of his character.

Thorin put his hand on Bilbo's shoulder, and Bilbo nearly jumped out of his skin. Even so, Thorin didn't retract the touch. "I understand how this looks."

"Are you about to tell me Dwalin isn't actually torturing a man in the basement?"

"Interrogating."
Bilbo took a very deep breath and did not let it out in a scream. He imagined that was something to be proud of.

"They took Balin," Thorin continued.

"'They?' The police? Oh, God, was that a police officer downstairs?

"We're not the only family in the area. Azog wants to infringe on our territory, and he thinks he can use Balin as leverage. It's important we find him quickly. Even if Dwalin learns nothing, it serves to even the tally."

"You mean... they've already hurt him?"

Thorin looked at Bilbo as he would at a child, as he would if Bilbo had asked whether Balin had been taken to the moon. Shifting his weight on the sofa, Thorin retrieved his wallet from his back pocket. He opened it and pulled out what looked like a folded photograph. In a rare moment of hesitation, Thorin looked to Bilbo and studied his face. "Would it be enough to tell you yes?"

"Why do you have a photograph?"

"Because this is how Azog announces the taking of a captive."

"Is he already...?"

Thorin nodded.

Stomach churning its contents, mind roiling his thoughts, Bilbo held out his hand. Thorin passed him the photograph. Though it could only be a few days old at the most, it was creased and worn about the edges. Bilbo unfolded it.

He looked at it.

He very nearly vomited. Instead, he cleared his throat and swallowed.

Thorin eased the photograph from his hand. Rapidly numbing, Bilbo let him. Thorin folded the photograph and set it on the coffee table with his wallet. Then, Thorin turned toward him. His arms were strong and thick, his chest still warm and wall-like. Bilbo was gathered there, pressed there. Thorin didn't so much as smell any different. There ought to have been something, some whiff of blood or the tang of electricity, but there was simply Thorin and the mingling scents, comforting and toe-curling, of his shampoo and body wash.

His mind utterly giving up, his body turned limp. Thorin's hair was soft against the side of his face, the beard a scratch without a tickle at the top of his head.

"He will be recovered," Thorin promised in a tone that ought to be reserved for children.

Bilbo very nearly asked how. No, he didn't want to know. "Soon?" he asked instead.

"That is the hope."

"And you can't... um." A stupid thought, he tried and failed to take back what he'd already said of it.

"Go to the police?" Thorin finished for him. "There would be very little point in it, and more harm than good."

"Do... um."
"They know who we are. We have an arrangement of civility."

Bilbo heard the sound of terror inside his head. It sounded much like a kettle boiling in another room, in a flat which shared a wall with his living space. It was something hot and shrieking, but something very much removed from himself.

"So they won't... do anything for you, but they won't do anything against you," Bilbo pieced together. It was the simplest of jigsaw puzzles, and yet when assembled in the fog at night with numb hands, it was a very difficult feat.

"I'm uncertain how they would respond to the abduction of someone who wasn't involved," Thorin replied, as if this were somehow relevant. "Even then, your lack of involvement would be difficult to prove."

The kettle stopped screaming. The fog lifted. Bilbo blinked against Thorin's chest and into sudden clarity. He sat up straight and he looked at Thorin and he said, "What."

Thorin returned his gaze calmly. Thorin returned his gaze as if he had absolutely no qualms about hauling Bilbo unknowingly into a life of crime and violence.

Then the kettle began to shriek again, and this time it wasn't in the imaginary adjoining flat, it was in his kitchen. "Abduction," Bilbo repeated. "Um. Well. What are my odds of ending up chained in a basement?"

"As long as you remain here, negligible," Thorin promised.

"'Come spend the week' means 'come not die'?"

Thorin nodded.

"Just for, well." Bilbo cleared his throat. "Just for, you know, a good understanding of the situation, what are my odds, er, anywhere else?"

For a moment, Thorin merely looked at him. It wasn't his angry look or even his sad look. It was the same look from that night after the winter holiday, the same look from that ride in the car. It spoke of a man in love who was only too aware of his own limits to protect and provide.

"I would prefer you stayed here," Thorin said quietly.

Somehow, Bilbo kept breathing. "How many people want to kill me now?"

"Should any try, their numbers will be reduced immediately."

"Look, am I--at the university--"

"You're far safer in public, and Kili will be about. He knows when to get us, regardless of his other failings."

"My students, Thorin. Are they in danger from being near me?" Bilbo asked. "If, if one of them wanted to hammer out their dissertation over coffee, or, or, oh, God, if the Dean invited me over for dinner, what would I...?"

Thorin didn't answer immediately. He didn't look to be about to answer either, so Bilbo stood up and the world tilted and Bilbo promptly sat back down. The screaming kettle effect was drastically reduced by another sort of rushing sound and everything was shining and bursting with fizzling
colours, except for the bits around the shrinking edges where the dark was frittering in.

Bilbo tried to stand up again and this was followed by a sharp pain to his head. Thorin must have hit him, except Thorin hadn’t hit him because Bilbo had fallen to the floor in two bits, and the pain hadn’t set in until the part in between the two bits, the part where his head struck the coffee table on his way down. So Thorin probably hadn’t hit him after all, and what would that be like empty-handed? Would it still be like being struck by lightning?

He stared blankly upward, wondering this, and Thorin looked remarkably absurd when worried and with no one to yell at. Bilbo giggled then, and he giggled a lot, because here was a mob boss who tortured with a steady hand, a criminal whose idea of comfort was the promise to kill, a fellow who had just been downgraded from Absolutely Wonderful to Oh Dear No, and Thorin was terrified because of Bilbo. *Bilbo Baggins* had made Thorin afraid, and that was the most hilarious thing Bilbo had ever heard of, so he giggled and giggled as Thorin’s mouth made shapes and sounds.

It was a bit of a blur after that. Thorin on his phone. Thorin pushing the coffee table away and touching Bilbo's head. Thorin telling him to open his eyes and Bilbo not wanting to, partially because he was embarrassed but mostly because no one expected a concussed man on the floor to cope with life's problems.

After a fair while of Thorin fussing in a very authoritative and even tone and Thorin talking to Oin on the phone and Thorin making Bilbo sit up so he could shine a light in his eyes and check for concussion, Bilbo was tentatively deemed concussion-free, and there went that excuse.

Thorin said something else, but Bilbo missed it in his panic. He did not miss being picked up from the floor as if he weighed nothing, as if he were nothing. Bilbo's arms fastened about Thorin's neck, an involuntary motion, and Thorin navigated all the way to his bedroom without knocking Bilbo against any door frames or furniture. Bilbo was deposited on the edge of the bed. Thorin went away for a little while. Just as Bilbo was trying to sort out whether he really was safer here than elsewhere, Thorin returned with tea.

Bilbo took it, and Thorin sat beside him to rub his back.

"You're very frightened," Thorin noted.

Bilbo tried not to shake under his hand.

"Let it out now," Thorin ordered. "While we've time."

The question looms in his head, and he rephrases it, and rephrases it, and eventually, it turns into something he might be able to risk asking. "How often do people get killed, like this?"

"My people? Barely ever." He squeezed Bilbo's shoulder. "We'll have Balin back soon."

Bilbo asked the question in a slightly less rephrased form: "Will you have to kill people?"

"There are consequences to hurting my family. And Dwalin is very protective of his older brother." Which meant yes.

"How often does it get to this point?"

"This was a lapse," Thorin promised. Patience flaked away to reveal glimpses of irritation, a self-directed force waiting for an excuse to turn outward.

"So not very often at all, you mean," Bilbo said, trying to prove that he wasn't doubting Thorin,
anything but. He was simply trying to find a way to ask "how many people have you killed?" without actually asking the question.

"I would call it rare," Thorin told him, unappeased.

"Good," Bilbo said, and he said it as sincerely as he'd ever said something he didn't mean. Rare wasn't good. Rare still wasn't close to it. And what did rare even mean? Once a decade? Or a year? "That's reassuring, thank you."

Thorin rubbed his back a bit more while Bilbo drank his tea, hands cupped about the mug. Bilbo swung his legs a little in the way that showed exactly how short he was, and when Bilbo next risked a glimpse of Thorin's face, the irritation had faded from endearment.

"Oin will be over later. He'll check your head then."

"I'm fine."

"You were insensible. He'll check your head."

Bilbo nodded rather than explaining that he had just become an expert on both head trauma and panic attacks and, as such, was very certain of which had made him insensible.

Thorin kept on rubbing his back. Finally, he asked, "Do you want a moment alone?"

"I feel very tired," Bilbo said, which meant yes.

"Don't fall asleep. I'll send Kili in to check on you."

"Thank you."

Thorin stood. Thorin turned and stood before him, and his expression was terrible to look upon. It was recognisable, it was inescapable, and Bilbo's heart and stomach ripped each other to shreds at the sight.

"I love you," Thorin told him softly.

And, because Thorin's mood was quicksilver, because there was Biter in the basement, because there was a man tied to a chair and bleeding onto concrete, because that man might be Bilbo should Bilbo run from this house, because of so many horrible things, Bilbo nodded. He nodded and flinched and touched the forming lump on his head.

His concern immediate, Thorin bent down and cupped the back of Bilbo's head in one large hand. Bilbo took his opening. He leaned forward. He mashed his face against Thorin's neck. He wrapped his arms about Thorin's shoulders. He held on tight, held on to the lifeline that Thorin had abruptly become. Then, his heart beating like a rabbit's, he risked it. "I love you, too."

Thorin rubbed his back. Bilbo's body still accepted the motion as a touch of comfort, and that gave weight to his lie. He hadn't been sure until he'd said it. He hadn't even thought of it until Thorin had said it. What a thing to be there and gone, and to not even notice it leaving.

"We're going to be all right," Thorin said. He spoke with finality rather than hope, certainty rather than doubt.

Bilbo said, "I think I might be concussed after all."

Thorin pulled back and looked at him the way one only looked at people one would never intend to
beat. Bilbo's heart pounded slightly less.

"You're very pale," Thorin noted. He touched Bilbo's forehead. "Somewhat clammy."

"You've a very vicious coffee table."

Thorin didn't smile, but neither did he frown. "Pay it no mind," he instructed, much too serious in the wake of Bilbo's jest. "I'm going to protect you."

Unable to see any way out but through, Bilbo smiled and tried to look relieved.
Thankfully, the crying does stop. It's the outburst of a child who doesn't know where to run, and Bilbo knows the sound only from the similar noises he'd made himself.

"All there, Frodo?" he asks.

"I don't know what's happening," Frodo says, his voice still clear on the answering machine as well as from the phone. "The whole town's in an uproar. Everyone knows and it's going around so fast, I don't... Is that what happened yesterday? You said five-twenty and we waited and I tried to get Dad to wait, but... Where were you?"

"I had an unfortunate run-in," Bilbo answers, more contrite than he's ever been for anything. Not his fault, no, not his fault in the slightest, and with Primula holding onto Frodo's cell phone there'd been no way of reaching the boy this morning, but all the same. "That's been cleared up now, and I am terribly sorry for the delay." He doesn't look at Thorin as he says this.

"Are you all right?" Frodo asks immediately. "Is that how everyone knows?"

"I'm fine. I'm absolutely fine. And knows about...? You or me."

"About you."

"Oh, good. Everyone knows because I told the Gaffer and Merry to tell everyone." He doesn't mind looking at Thorin as he says this. He needs to be thought brave, and he's decided to begin there. Thorin certainly realizes what this means. Even so, his expression is still largely one of anger and confusion.

"And they're all saying terrible things!" Frodo's earlier distress returns in spades. "Why would you do that?"

"So your parents can tell the wolves from the dogs, if you catch my meaning," Bilbo explains. "And, I hope, so they'll understand the full consequences of throwing you to them and decide not to. Mind you, I doubt we'll be able to speak again in Hobbiton for quite some time, following this."

The resulting silence on the line makes all three in the room lean in closer. The answering machine lets out a beep.

"Frodo?" Bilbo asks. The answering machine no longer echoes him. "Still there?"

"You didn't have to," Frodo says, sounding very small. Sounding, in fact, like the child he is, and far too responsible for his own good.

"It's a long-term plan," Bilbo explains. "Now everyone knows I don't live in Bag-End because of how they'd react. Yes? That's step one. Step two, I update my will. Step three, I eventually die and the Sackville-Bagginses shake their fists at my coffin because you're getting the house, Frodo, my boy." Unable to do otherwise, he starts laughing as he says this last part.

"...You're not serious."

"You won't have to do anything with it. But by then, the town ought to have calmed down towards me, just a touch, and they ought to think twice before chasing you off for the same reason. At any rate, they'd have a pack of irate Gamgees on their hands if they tried."
"You can't leave me a house! Lobeila and Otho are going to be so angry."

"I know."

Frodo lets out a small giggle. "Uncle Bilbo, that's terrible."

"Isn't it just. All right now?"

"...I think so. Yes."

"Excellent," Bilbo says. "Now, don't you have some schooling to get back to?"

Frodo sighs.

"We'll talk more later. I promise. Just remember, if anything goes wrong, you go to the Gaffer, understand? I should be able to arrange calls through him. And if anyone asks if you knew about me, you say 'yes' or 'no', whichever suits you best, but you don't feed any more information to the fire."

"Yes, Uncle Bilbo."

"Good lad." There is, for just a moment, a soft pause. There's one last instant before they say goodbye and hang up and Bilbo returns to the world of Thorin Durin. It's not a bad feeling, that of being an adult and a pillar of safety. He's spent far too long without this feeling and now he wraps it about himself like a cloak.

Finally, he swallows and says, "Bye-bye, Brandybuck."

"Bye-bye, Baggins," Frodo answers.

They hang up. Bilbo sighs and refills his half-empty mug with more hot water from the kettle.

"That was what you risked your life for," Thorin half-asks.

"It was," Bilbo says. He sets his back against the corner and leans there, both hands wrapped about his mug. "And destroyed a fair portion of my life for, but there we are."

"Destroyed?"

"I told you, I won't be going back to Hobbiton for a while. Probably not even for the holidays. I imagine continually making sure there are no children in the room with me would dampen the festive cheer. Someone has probably thought to email the university and warn them about me by now, or will later tonight, but I imagine all my students will have a laugh to know I've so much as seen the back of a closet door."

"It was bravely done," Gandalf tells him.

"Would you leave us be?" Thorin demands of the old man. "Just for one moment." Impatience turns polite phrasing rude. He glares at Bilbo, clearly wondering why Bilbo hasn't taken his side.

"Thorin, I've just had the most terrifying day of my life, and if you're only going to disparage me for it--"

"I've done no such thing," Thorin interrupts.

"Gandalf said it was bravely done."
"And so it was," Thorin says, "but I am somewhat more concerned with the fact that Azog's henchmen attempted to destroy you last night and somehow failed, and no one has yet told me how or why!" His voice rises into a shout that he hurls first at Bilbo, then at Gandalf: "Could you at least turn your back!"

"I will not," Gandalf says just as Bilbo asks, bewildered, "Why on earth would he do that?"

"Because you nearly died and you hate public displays!" Thorin snaps.

Stunned, Bilbo sets down his mug before he drops it.

Taking this for permission, Thorin seizes him in a paradoxically gentle rough embrace. If the rocks of an avalanche came to a still about Bilbo, leaving a perfectly Bilbo-sized gap beneath their crushing weight, the effect would be much the same. At once trapped and cradled, Bilbo has enough time for one shaking breath before the side of Thorin's jaw presses against his temple.

"How are you unharmed?" His tone, full of marvelling, is one clearly reserved for miracles.

His face against the solid wall of Thorin's chest, his head flooded with familiar scents, Bilbo begins to sob. He clutches at Thorin's shirt as that distant wave of terror, suspended so high above him, finally crashes down and makes itself felt. He cries and he shakes and he gasps for air, and Thorin holds him through it all, the restraint of his arms the only force that keeps Bilbo from falling apart entirely.

"Bilbo was very clever," Gandalf begins once Bilbo's sobbing decreases in volume. "From my understanding of his account, he negotiated his way through in the guise of being helpful."

"'Helpful'?"

"I told them I had HIV," Bilbo says, his voice small and shaking. "So they had to leave and find gloves. Things like that. Just stalling. It wasn't anything clever, it was just... stalling."

Thorin curses admiringly and presses a firm kiss to his forehead. "You're a marvel," he says, and Bilbo begins to cry on him all over again.

It isn't fair, Thorin being like this. Thorin being this, and Thorin being that, and both being inseparable in him. He was a protector, careful toward his own and vicious to all others. Should Bilbo go through with this, should he do as Gandalf says, that care will vanish and only the rage will remain. Hiccupping against the damp cloth over Thorin's shoulder, secured by warm, wide arms, he can't tell whether leaving this comfort or remaining in it is the more absurd option.

"I can't do that again," he gasps. "I couldn't, I can't, that can never happen again."

"It won't," Thorin promises.

"Indeed it won't," Gandalf agrees. "Arrangements are currently being made."

Thorin shifts against him, shifts Bilbo against his chest as if to shield him from Gandalf. "Arrangements have been made," Thorin states. "Yours won't be necessary."

"As you've said, he nearly died last night."

"If he had stayed where was he told--"

"If he hadn't boarded a train that he has, by my understanding, boarded countless times before
"without mishap?"

"Under better circumstances, perhaps," Thorin counters.

"I need a tissue," Bilbo interrupts.

With tension mounting in his arms, Thorin releases him. Bilbo scurries away and takes his time while the two spar in the kitchen. When he returns, the battle remains stalemated.

"I can't do that again," Bilbo announces. Thorin and Gandalf both turn to him in an instant. Bilbo remains in the doorway to the hall, tissue in hand, face unwashed. "If I had to do that again, I would probably die, and I would prefer not to do that."

The way Thorin looks at him is much too kind. Bilbo's nightmare is reflected far too easily in his eyes. "You won't have to."

"And how will you prevent this?" Gandalf asks. "Hm? Have you any plan that doesn't involve locking Bilbo away from his life?"

Thorin turns to him or, rather, turns on him. "Do not question me."

"I want to know that too," Bilbo mumbles.

Thorin's hair whips with the turn of his head. "What?"

"I want to know that too," Bilbo repeats, barely any louder.

"You have your university. You have your research. You seem to have rescued your cousin by phone far better than you could have in person. If you'd done it remotely in the first place, you never would have been in danger."

Gandalf scoffs. "Not direct danger, perhaps, but still in danger. Tell me, Thorin, do you see any way for Bilbo to remain with you and not be at risk?"

"You blame me for his abduction! If he had stayed where told--"

"Bilbo is not a dog to be tied to a fence!"

"No, he is a small, defenceless man and an easy target!"

"He's also standing right here," Bilbo says. "He also notices that Thorin didn't answer Gandalf's question."

Thorin looks at him sharply. "What question?"

Bilbo forces himself to take a moment. He phrases the question as best as he can. "Will I ever not be in danger with you?"

"I'll keep you safe."

"Meaning that there is danger." Bilbo stuffs his tissue into his trouser pocket and forbids himself from any more crying. He's far too tired for that, as well as much too dehydrated. "Thank you for answering."

"This was a particularly bad time." Thorin draws nearer and Bilbo exits the doorway to go after his tea, a move that puts him closer to Gandalf. "It won't be like this normally. It's over. You'll see."
Come home."

Bilbo clasps his mug in both hands, creating a barrier of bone and skin lukewarm tea. "If it's safe, why shouldn't I stay at my own house? That was the first sleep I'd had in my own bed in two months."

Thorin stares at him as if Bilbo has missed the point entirely. "Do you believe everyone isn't worried about you? That Kili would have forgiven himself if anything had happened? Anything permanent."

"Oh." Bilbo tries not to look to Gandalf and fails. If he returns to the house, there will be a reason to stay, or his car will be blocked in, or Thorin will drive him there and he'll have no way to leave. He'd simply go back and everything would return to normal. Decisions would be taken away; his appetite would again recede; and perhaps someday, when he woke in Thorin's bed, afraid and confused at finding himself afraid, he would never recall the proper reason and instead trust Thorin's words over his own mind.

Thorin sees his distress. This is no surprise. Bilbo's distress is impossible to miss.

"And what of the limits you would set upon him?" Thorin demands of Gandalf. "You seek to shame me for keeping him safe, and yet you forbid him from the company of those who love him!"

Gandalf's disparaging expression turns almost kindly in the face of Thorin's rage. "Thorin, are you listening to yourself?"

"I can't go," Bilbo says before Thorin explodes. "It's a stipulation of Gandalf's offer. No direct contact with the Company, though since Gandalf let you in, I don't think you count." A lie and a quick one. For an instant, Bilbo is back in the basement, tied to a chair. "I need time to think about it, and going with you would be deciding. I'm not ready to do that yet."

"You've had a very frightening two days," Thorin's patience audibly strains. "This is a very vulnerable time and he knows it. Don't let him pressure you away," he cautions, entirely unaware of the irony. Though his voice is comprised of suspicion and anger, his face holds nothing but concern for Bilbo's well-being. It's a look like a warm blanket, something to wrap oneself up in before sighing in relief. Here, it merely clenches Bilbo's stomach. Though it's possible no one else has ever loved him so well, it is certain no one else has ever loved him so terribly.

"I'm not rushing into anything," Bilbo says slowly. "I'm safe, in my own house, with an old family friend who personally pulled me out of a basement where I was about to be mutilated. I'm going to calm down for a bit."

"While he remains here and urges you to leave me. No." He nearly reaches for Bilbo but stops when Gandalf clears his throat. "Get your coat."

"No." Bilbo's voice shakes, his hands tremble against his mug, his eyes look anywhere but at Thorin, but he says it.

"Get your coat."

Bilbo shakes his head. "I'm not going to live like that anymore."

"I told you. The danger is passed."

"I don't mean Azog." He swallows and stands up as tall as he can, and he speaks to the centre of Thorin's chest. "I'm tired of nightmares. I'm tired of looking over my shoulder all the time. And I'm, oh, just look." He puts his tea down and unfastens his belt to show the sheer amount of slack in his
trousers. He pulls the waist out from his hip as far as it will go. The gap could easily accommodate a few tins of soup, possibly as many as four. "These were snug two months ago! I'm sick to death of it, Thorin. Quite literally to death, given enough time."

"You haven't had time to adjust," Thorin tells him.

"The answer to 'I'm terrified' isn't 'be more terrified,' I'm very certain of that."

"You've had a very trying two days. When you remember what normal feels like, you'll calm down."

Gandalf nearly manages a word in edgewise before Bilbo boils over.

"Calm down? Calm down! I haven't been calm in two months! And I am not going to be calm in two months more!" The shaking worsens, becomes vibration down into his clenched fists and hunched shoulders. "I can't do this. I simply can't. I have tried and I have put up with it and I don't like not eating, I really dislike it, but I'm outside my body staring in half the time and I don't like that feeling in the slightest. It's not a good feeling. It's enough to be worried sick about you lot and stand there wondering who will return. The rest of it, all of it, it's too much."

For a moment, for just a moment, Thorin stands very still. With his eyes drilling into Bilbo's head, Thorin watches Bilbo shake and pant and avoid his gaze.

Then he turns to Gandalf and demands, "What have you been saying to him?"

Gandalf's eyebrows rise. "Saying? Oh, no. I have been asking. Perhaps Bilbo has come to conclusions you dislike, but I can assure you he dislikes them just as much."

Thorin looks at Bilbo. His expression is a facade of neutrality. His voice is dead. "Are you leaving me, then?"

"I'm sorry," Bilbo mumbles, his brief flare of courage exhausted. Quivering rather than beating, his heart barely dares make a sound and risk interrupting the silence.

"No," Thorin says, as if this is his to decide. "I'm taking you home. You'll sleep on it. We'll discuss this in the morning, provided you've calmed down."

Bilbo shakes his head. Impossibly quick, Thorin seizes him by the arm and drags him away from Gandalf. Bilbo yelps, stumbling, shoulder wrenched.

"Don't you dare, Thorin Oakenshield!" Gandalf booms, the shock of his voice shaking the room. "Is this how you treat a 'small, defenceless man'? An 'easy target,' you called him, but an easy target, he will not be. Release him."

Eyes locked with Gandalf's, Thorin doesn't move save to tighten his already crushing grip on Bilbo's arm. His hand easily encompasses Bilbo's forearm and would certainly break his wrist if it slid lower.

"Thorin," Bilbo squeaks, tears falling despite his best efforts. "Thorin, please, stop."

"I will stop when he is gone!"

"Thorin, you're hurting me...!"

Thorin looks to him sharply, his eyes first upon Bilbo's tear-stained face before falling to his own white-knuckled hand, to the bunched sleeve beneath, to Bilbo's purpling hand. Thorin stares for a hard, unchanging second before releasing him entirely.
Gasping, flexing his fingers, Bilbo cradles his arm to his chest. Thorin reaches for him anew, now a motion meant to comfort, and Bilbo staggers backward until his back hits the counter. He cries, not with fear but with viciousness. Let Thorin look. Let him see and understand and stop telling Bilbo he doesn't know his own mind.

For whatever virtues he may possess, Thorin is a man with more temper than conscience, and as Bilbo's pain is made apparent, Thorin's mounting rage is made likewise.

"Are you going to tell me I provoked you?" Gandalf asks in a low tone. "Will you tell him you would never hurt him while he is still in pain?"

"Be quiet!" Thorin shouts, his eyes never leaving Bilbo's arm. "Be quiet."

Gandalf grants him that quiet, a brittle silence that can only break beneath its own weight.

"That was the first time," Thorin half-says, half-asks. He lifts his gaze to Bilbo's face. "The only time. Was that the only time?"

Bilbo tries to look anywhere else, at anything else, but Thorin's eyes arrest him. Thorin's terror compels him. "I don't know," he confesses in a small voice.

"You've..." Thorin runs a hand over his face. "In the bedroom. Have I...?"

Very hard, Bilbo tries to keep from crying. A miracle, he does.

"Have I forced you?" Thorin asks, voice breaking.

Even now, Bilbo holds the tears back. Huddled against the counter, curled about his aching arm, he answers with terrible honesty: "I don't know."

They sat in the kitchen, waiting for the rest of the Company to return. Or to call. They sat and they waited for word.

"Tea?" Dori offered the room at large, all two of them.

"Black, thanks," said Bofur.

"No, thank you," said Bilbo.

"Are you sure?" Dori asked.

Bilbo nodded.

Dori bustled about for a few minutes. Bilbo continued his recently developed game of Don't Look at Anyone.

"I'm on the sales side, you know," Bofur said out of nowhere. "Distribution."

"What?" Bilbo asked.

"I sell things," Bofur said. "Mostly electronics. A lot of gaming equipment. It's not as exciting as you'd think."
Bilbo stared at him while trying not to stare at him.

"Dori's a lawyer. And a very good one!"

"Thank you!" Dori called back from his spot by the stove.

"By which I mean, it's not all like this," Bofur continues. "The waiting's always the worst bit."

"Is it?" Bilbo asked.

"Oh yes," said Bofur. Unflappably cheerful, he went on to tell Bilbo vague bits of this and that, nothing concrete and nothing too frightening. Dori returned with a mug for everyone, asked for or not, and Bilbo cupped his hands about the warmth even if he didn't drink. Slowly, Bilbo regained his ability to breathe.

Bofur's mobile rang and he answered with no obvious signs of stress. "Bofur here."

Dori and Bilbo leaned in slightly but couldn't make out anything.

Bofur grinned. "Glad to hear it. See you soon."

Dori cheered the moment Bofur hung up. Bilbo simply felt his strings cut from exhaustion.

"Balin's in hospital," Bofur reported. "He'll be a bit distinctive for a while, but he might even be handsome again someday. He's definitely not dead. No one else is seriously hurt."

"How many coming home?" Dori asked, rising from the table.

"Didn't say."

"Well, the lads will be hungry, no mistake. Three in the morning's a bit soon for breakfast, but I don't much care."

"Bit of egg and sausage wouldn't go amiss," Bofur agreed.

"Bilbo?" Dori asked.

"No, thank you."

Dori shrugged. "Suit yourself."

An indeterminable time later, the Company returned, some exhausted, some exuberant. "Uncle and Dwalin are staying at the hospital," Kili reported eagerly. "Dori, your cousins went home."

"Ori's a bit shaken up, but he did well," Fili added.

Food and mirth and vindictive good cheer filled the kitchen with the sounds of chewing and cries of "Serves the bastards right!" Sooner rather than later, Bilbo reached his limit. He went over and tapped Kili on the back of the head. "School in five hours."

Kili groaned, the others laughed, and with that, Bilbo went off to bed. He slept fitfully if indeed he slept at all. When the bedroom door opened, it wasn't so much that he woke as that he was startled more fully into consciousness. "Thorin?"

"He's safe," Thorin said. He shucked his clothing into a hasty pile on the floor.
Much too tired to be afraid, Bilbo propped himself up on his elbows. With his entire life having
turned dreamlike at best and nightmarish at worst, he simply sat and watched. Thorin moved with an
unreasonable amount of vigour at this time of morning, especially for a man who hadn't slept.

"Get undressed," Thorin commanded.

Of their own accord, Bilbo's hands moved to the buttons of his pyjama top. Only once they reached
the final button did Bilbo realize what he was doing. He looked at the clock. "My alarm goes off in
twenty minutes." Less than.

"Will it take so long?" His was a hard kiss, heedless of Bilbo's stale breath. His hand wrapped about
Bilbo's neck in a secure if gentle hold. His other hand tugged Bilbo's pyjama top away. Bilbo
shivered in the morning chill, shivered at the touch. Like a rising tide, waves of submission broke
over his agitated mind and heart. Small at first, ineffectual at first, the wave rose up, stronger and
stronger, the instincts of his body. The more Thorin kissed him, the longer Thorin held him, the
deeper Bilbo sank. Wound so tightly, his body began to relax, to remember the safety in surrender,
the comfort of strong hands about his wrists.

Thorin pressed him down to the bed, stripped off his bottoms, and then was on him in truth. Harder
kisses now, shadowed in the dark curtain of Thorin's hair. Thorin supported himself on his elbows,
his hands closed about Bilbo's wrists, his knees shoving in between Bilbo's.

"Oh!" Bilbo gasped.

Fitting them together, Thorin grunted. Hard and hot and heavy, Thorin began to move. Arms
restrained, unable to hold on in any other way, Bilbo wrapped his legs about Thorin's waist lest he
fly apart.

A vague thought surfaced at the increasingly slippery feel. Bilbo cursed. Never stopping, Thorin
silenced him with a kiss. He tightened his grip on Bilbo's wrists and Bilbo very nearly subsided.
Then Thorin began to thrust against him in earnest and the thought spiked all the way through the
calm mist of submission and into panic.

"Condoms!" he squeaked.

"What for?" Another kiss, even deeper than the last, and by the time it ended, Bilbo was in no state
to talk.

With more surprise than satisfaction, he came first. He bucked and thrashed and a jolt of pleasure
thundered through him as Thorin pinned him down. Thorin rutted against him in slickness soon to
turn sticky, and then he too came. He sprawled atop of Bilbo after, barrier and blanket both. When
he released Bilbo's arms, it felt wrong to be unbound. It didn't feel safe.

Unsure of what else to do, Bilbo held onto him tightly. It didn't work. In fact, it did just the opposite. He
nudged the nearly sleeping Thorin and, as if supplicating, said, "I need to shower." There was a
mix of bodily fluids between their bellies, and it unnerved him more than he could say. He was
tested, Thorin was tested, and yet. And yet.

Thorin mumbled something against Bilbo's cheek. Otherwise, he didn't move.

"Thorin," Bilbo prompted quietly.

Thorin didn't reply, but neither did he snore. Bilbo stayed there until his alarm sounded and then, as
Thorin groaned, Bilbo slipped out from beneath him, grabbed up his bathrobe, and scurried out to the
hall and bathroom beyond. He didn't stop scurrying until he was in the shower. Hot water nearly
scalded. It was perfect. He stood in the spray and wiped his body clean before scrubbing it cleaner. Gradually, he began to breathe. It took some time.

Logically, rationally, he knew he wasn't going to catch something and die. If his involvement with Thorin killed him, it would be in a vastly different way.

With that small comfort, Bilbo stepped out of the shower and towelled himself off. Then he stood in the steam and his bathrobe, waiting for the bravery to fetch his clothes, waiting for the courage to face his life to come.
Chapter 13

"You don't know," Thorin echoes.

"I mean," Bilbo says, but he doesn't know what he means. "I'm uncertain."

For an uncomfortable time, Thorin says nothing. Then, in a voice of both shame and bewilderment: "You've never said anything before."

"That was part of the problem." As he speaks, Bilbo unbuttons his cuff. He keeps his eyes upon his sleeve, then upon the reddened skin. He tries to ignore how his hands shake but knows Thorin won't. "Not all of the problem, obviously, but a part. Still, I'm saying something now.

"The bad has outweighed the good. The good was very good, but there's very much more of the bad. Now, we could go through an ordeal of attempting to change, but I think we both know it would be me changing and I can't see that being at all for the better. In any case, even were anything else all right, I'd die of fright with your work, and you're obviously in it for life. We were clearly never destined for the long term.

"This is a fine time to cut our losses, when you think about it. I'll go off to an undisclosed location, you'll go home, and we'll both tell everyone it was for my own good and then speak no more of it. I know Kili's very attached to me, but we don't need to upset him any more than he already is. Tell him I'm safe, that it wasn't his fault, and there it all ends."

Thorin stares at him long and hard. As the silence stretches, Gandalf's presence becomes more palpable, more solid and imposing.

"You'd have me feign a noble sacrifice, is that it?" Thorin asks.

"It's far better than the alternative," Bilbo says, his voice still remarkably steady and clear. "Or you might shout a bit more and try to drag me off again, but I wouldn't advise it."

"Particularly as it would prove your point," Gandalf adds.

"I wasn't," Thorin begins.

"Then what were you doing?" Bilbo asks.

Thorin looks at Gandalf as if contemplating further shouting. A hunted air settles upon him, that of a man who has run out of targets unto which he may deflect incoming damage. In a motion remarkably similar to that of his youngest nephew, Thorin looks down at his feet.

"I think we should go with my idea for once," Bilbo says, "but if you like, you can finish your tea before you go." He glances up to Gandalf who wears a look of amused exasperation, but Gandalf doesn't so much as shake his head.

Thorin looks toward the foyer. Thorin looks at the mug on the counter, at Bilbo's arm, at Bilbo.

"Do you still love me?" Thorin asks. Though the words themselves are manipulative, the tone is only questioning, still so bewildered.

"Thorin," Gandalf chides.

"Yes," Bilbo says, surprised to say it and even more surprised to mean it. "But I just suppose that
means I'd stand still when you lost your temper. And you will, don't promise you won't."

Thorin stands very still and very alone. Thoughts race about behind his distant eyes. With an abrupt motion that nearly brings Gandalf to intervene, Thorin strides to the counter. He picks up Bilbo's least favourite mug, pours the tepid contents down the sink, and says as if to himself, "I've finished my tea." He sets the mug in the sink.

Bilbo begins to cry without warning. He screws his eyes shut and hunches his shoulders and clenches his fists. Most importantly of all, he flattens out his tongue to bite it in place with all of his teeth at once. He will say nothing. He can say nothing. No more, lest he beg Thorin to stay.

A cautious hand touches his shoulder, and Bilbo begins to cry in earnest. For the second time today, he sobs against Thorin's chest. For the second time, he holds on as if he might die doing otherwise.

"I have betrayed myself," Thorin whispers, "and you. I swear to you, you will have no more to fear from me."

Tenderly made and gently given, it is intended as a sweet promise, but Bilbo hears it for the hope it is.

He eases back. He retrieves his tissue from his pocket and wipes his eyes and blows his nose, in that order. He returns the tissue to his pocket, even though it's soggy, simply so he has something to do with his hands.

"I know," Bilbo says and he looks Thorin in the eyes to say it. "Goodbye."

If Thorin expected any other response, he doesn't show it. He simply nods and turns on his heel. His footsteps resound through the foyer before the door opens and does not slam shut. It closes civilly, quietly, either shamed or shaming, and Bilbo cannot for the life of him tell which.

"It is done," Gandalf says.

"Yes," Bilbo says. He puts his mug into the sink as well and begins to clean the pair of them by hand. "And good riddance." He nods and keeps nodding until the mugs are washed and rinsed and painstakingly dried and put back in the cupboard. But he only discovers after that he'd forgotten Gandalf's mug and he very nearly decides to bother with that, except for the fact that he doesn't.

Throughout, Gandalf simply watches, patient.

"I don't know what to do now," Bilbo says. "Which isn't quite right. I know that I'm going to expect him to return at any minute and I'm going to expect that for quite some time whether I like it or not. But, besides that, I don't know what to do."

Gandalf considers this. "Are you hungry or thirsty?"

Bilbo shakes his head.

"Would you care to go back to sleep?"

"I want to get back on a normal schedule."

Gandalf nods. "Would you like to focus on your research?"

The unseen shoe drops and Bilbo swears.

"Bilbo?"
"He has all my things," Bilbo says. He could go without the clothing, if he had to, but the laptop... "The laptop has everything on it."

"Then consider it a trouble for tomorrow," Gandalf says, "and tomorrow at the soonest."

Bilbo tries and fails.

"You were going to focus on Frodo," Gandalf reminds him.

"Oh," Bilbo says. "Oh yes." He sits down at the small table in the kitchenette in the seat where he can just see the edge of the front door. He tries not to look at it and fails at this as well. During this period of not-looking, he begins to update Gandalf on the general goings on of the Shire since the Old Took died.

He buries himself in the familiar gossip and bits of sarcastic sniping. Gandalf joins him, elaborating upon old stories Bilbo knows only vaguely. Given time, the conversation turns to the leaving of Bag-End to Frodo and Hobbiton's absurd seven witness rule. They count out likely willing witnesses and Bilbo seriously debates inviting the Sackville-Bagginses. From there, they discuss what Bilbo ought to leave them in his will in lieu of the house. All of Gandalf's suggestions are completely horrible in the best way possible, but Bilbo trumps the majority of them with his own ideas. Feeling wicked and delighted, he laughs before he remembers himself, and then he simply feels wicked.

"Do you think I was too harsh?" Bilbo asks.

"To the Sackville-Bagginses? Dear me, no."

Bilbo shakes his head. "That's not who I mean."

Gandalf's face makes a shape very kindly and very sad. "You were more even-handed than he deserved, whatever you may think of him."

"I don't know what I think of him."

"Exactly my point: you were more even-handed than he deserved, regardless."

Bilbo looks at the table in his effort to keep from looking at the front door. "Do you think he'll come back?"

"He may. It would not be wise, but many of his actions are not in the least wise."

"And what if he does?" Bilbo asks in a small voice.

"Then I will send him away."

A piece of Bilbo very nearly begs Gandalf not to. With great difficulty, he manages to hold his peace.

Gandalf looks at him with kindness and understanding in equal measure, and Bilbo feels ashamed. "Just to be safe, perhaps I ought to hold on to your phone. Until any impulses pass. I'll return it when you ask."

Bilbo slides his mobile across the kitchen table. "A built-in delay might be best," he agrees.

"This will be a trying time," Gandalf tells him, "but we will see it through."

It is a very trying time. The first night lasts an eternity, even before he goes to bed. He lies awake, his
own bed now unfamiliar. It smells only of his detergent and whatever traces of smell it picked up from his clothing during his midday nap. He sleeps with a sudden plunge and comes back up just as quickly, convinced that something must be happening. He sits up and looks for Thorin and nearly panics at the lack of him. If he can't see Thorin, Thorin could be anywhere. If he can't see Thorin, where is he? He hugs his knees and chews his lip and eventually he falls back asleep entirely by accident, his light still on.

Morning is better, but not by much. He's ravenous and his refrigerator is empty, leaving them with the contents of the cupboards and freezer. It makes for a very strange breakfast, but he makes up for it in volume while Gandalf makes arrangements over the phone. They'll leave in the early afternoon. Bilbo asks what will happen to the lease and his car, and they sort yet more details while Bilbo continues cleaning out the cupboards in the best way he knows.

Because he's braced for it, he hears the knock on the door with a terrible sense of acceptance rather than any actual fear. Gandalf bids him to stay where he is and Bilbo holds on to the counter and tells himself that whatever Thorin says or shouts, there will be no return to him.

Very much to Bilbo's surprise, none of the voices from the foyer are Thorin's at all.

"Bilbo?" Gandalf calls. "You might want to come say goodbye."

Cautious, Bilbo pops his head around the door frame.

Standing outside the front door with a large suitcase with Bilbo's briefcase on top, Bofur and Kili wave.

After a short pause, Bilbo waves back. He ventures into the foyer and goes so far as to open the glass door. With Gandalf at his back and a formidable suitcase before him, abduction is unlikely but a possibility Bilbo can't ignore.

"Hello," Bilbo says.

"I'm so sorry," Kili says. "I should have--I dunno what I should have."

"It's all right," Bilbo says. "Except for the bit where you ought to be at school."

Kili manages a somewhat watery smile, but he doesn't embarrass himself.

"Thought I'd pick him up while I was running this down," Bofur says, tapping the suitcase with the side of his foot. "Mind you, I was supposed to drop it off without saying anything, but the boy wanted his goodbye. After what happened to Balin, he had to see you for himself."

"I'm fine," Bilbo promises. "I really am, Kili. And I'm going to go off and keep being fine, so I'm afraid you'll have to find someone else to edit your essays from now on."

Kili nods, his mouth stuck in a shape that makes talking unwise.

"Oh!" Bofur says. "Nearly forgot." He pulls a small bunch of coloured cloth from his coat pocket. "Found these on top of the dresser during the last go-around. Wasn't sure where to put them."

Bilbo accepts the handkerchiefs, the small gift from Frodo in a time so very long ago. "Thank you."

As he reaches, his sleeve rides up a little. Bofur's eyes flick down. Kili's, thankfully, do not. Bofur's expression doesn't change in the slightest, entirely unsurprised.
"You're very welcome," Bofur says. "If you must go, you must. I wish you all the luck in the world." He smiles faintly, as if he knows how much Bilbo needs it. Perhaps he does.

Beside him, Kili simply nods and looks at his shoes. The sight nearly breaks Bilbo's heart.

"Thank you," Bilbo repeats. He puts the handkerchiefs into his pocket and takes the suitcase by the handle. With some awkward lifting, they get it over the threshold and into the hall, the briefcase still safely on top. He shuts the glass door after, ostensibly to keep out the chill. "Goodbye, Bofur. Goodbye, Kili."

"Goodbye," Bofur says. He squeezes Kili's shoulder.

"Do you have to go?" Kili asks.

"Yes he does, lad," Bofur answers on Bilbo's behalf. "Now say goodbye before you make it hurt worse."

"Goodbye," Kili says. He lifts his hand in a little wave.

Bilbo does the same.

Bofur pulls on Kili's shoulder. Gandalf shuts the door. He shuts it and then he locks it, and Bilbo breathes easier. It's a dangerous business, opening one's front door.

His days loom, empty. As the landscape drags on outside the car window, he thinks fleetingly of the wall calendar in what was once his office. Has it only been two days? Perhaps it has.

"Are we there yet?" Bilbo asks.

A vague smile pulls at the edge of Gandalf's mouth. He says nothing.

Bilbo waits a moment before asking, "How about now?"

"Yes we are. Feel free to jump out." That said, Gandalf promptly accelerates.

Bilbo laughs, and Gandalf laughs with him. The car eases back down to a proper speed.

"This friend of yours," Bilbo says.

"Contact," Gandalf corrects. "But he is a staunch ally."

"Against what?" Bilbo asks.

Gandalf smiles faintly but does not say.

"Against, against people like Thorin and Azog and Fire Drake, you mean."

"It would be safer for you to refer to him as Oakenshield in Beorn's presence, but yes," Gandalf replies. "Beorn has largely retired, but it is an early retirement."

"So what did he do before training animals at Carrock Institute?"

"Something impressive," Gandalf says, and no more than that.
"Like what you do?" Bilbo asks.

"In a way, though I would call us neighbours rather than flatmates."

Bilbo nods a bit. "Is it more government work or police work? Or military?"

Gandalf lets silence be his answer. Not a spurning, shunning silence, but a firm one into which words will not be put--although, the silence adds, the radio could be turned up if this were so wished. Bilbo turns the radio up. Then he asks, "Are we there yet?"

"Bilbo Baggins, we will arrive exactly when we arrive and not a minute later."

"That's a better answer than you've had to most of my questions," Bilbo points out.

Gandalf pauses, then hums. He turns the car down an even obscurer lane, the tires crunching soil. "A fair point, if irritatingly made." A moment longer, and he adds, "You've made quite the leap of faith. It isn't lost on me. Again, I promise you: you are quite welcome to go home whenever you wish, to whichever home you wish, and I will keep you apprised as to the relative safety of doing so. Though Beorn may consent to serve as your protector, he is by no means your keeper."

"Is he enough to intimidate Thorin?" Bilbo asks.

"I daresay he is."

"Then why will I be safe with him?"

"Because," Gandalf says, "unless I have vastly misjudged you, you have never meant another soul harm in all your life."

Brought momentarily up short, Bilbo does manage to ask, "And that will help me how?"

They pass through another copse and a large lodge comes in sight, a barn behind it. From the barn on poles fly a pair of flags. The first has seven stripes progressing from black to grey to pink to shades of deepening brown and sports a distinctive paw print in the corner. The second has five symmetrical stripes, blue to pink to white and back.

Bilbo laughs with the shock of recognition.

"Yes, we are there yet," Gandalf says.

"So, really," Bilbo says, ignoring him, "what you meant was Beorn is a bear with a terrible soft spot for small, defenceless queers in trouble."

"I mean we are here, and not late in the slightest," Gandalf replies. He parks the car beside the barn and climbs out. Bilbo hesitates slightly before following, but he does follow.

Gandalf knocks on the front door before backtracking to gently tap on the barn door.

"Who's that?" shouts a voice rough and deep.

"Gandalf!" answers Gandalf. "And friend."

"You said you'd be here an hour ago!"

"I said no such thing!" Gandalf pulls the great door open on its tracks. The scents of horses and hay
waft out.

Inside with a large push broom is Beorn, provided Beorn is a giant with a beard and voice to match. "That him?" he booms from the chest.

"Bilbo Baggins," says Bilbo. "Pleased to meet you."

Beorn looks him over with less interest than several of the horses exhibit. "And why is it you need a place to stay?"

Gandalf says, "Beorn--"

"I want to hear it from him."

Bilbo stands up straight and tall and begins with "I was on a train to see my nephew" and ends with "he said he wouldn't come after me, but I don't know how long he'll mean it." His mouth goes dry several times through, but Beorn finishes his sweeping around the middle and even laughs when Bilbo demonstrates the goons' terror to spill his blood when they thought he had HIV. Beorn laughs at most of Bilbo's tactics that night, come to think of it. It's a booming, pleased laugh, the sort Father Christmas might have if he lived in a cave in the mountains.

"That's a fine story," Beorn says. "Fine then. If you must stay, stay. To warn you, I keep bees, dogs, and horses, and I'm vegan."

Such is the state of Bilbo's appetite that a vegan kitchen isn't off-putting in the slightest; he would rather long for bacon and not have it than have it before him but sicken at the sight. Bilbo agrees to those terms quite readily, and they go into the house. A small herd of dogs runs out of nowhere in the attempt to follow into the house, but Beorn whistles sharply at them and they all stop and sit outside instead. Beorn washes up, and Bilbo and Gandalf stand in the main room twiddling their thumbs. After, they have dinner of a lentil soup and warm, hearty bread with honey from the comb. Bilbo decides he could die happy there and then.

So begins the strange, formless period of Bilbo's abrupt sabbatical. Gandalf remains for a few days as Bilbo settles in and follows Beorn about as he introduces Bilbo to the horses and dogs. The bees, Bilbo is to leave alone. When he sees Bilbo at a loss for what to do, Beorn shows him how to brush the horses, and Bilbo sets to it until his hands go a bit numb and his mind runs smooth.

On the third day, Gandalf makes his goodbyes and Bilbo hugs him fiercely. "You said you wanted Thorin's Company to take on the fellow terrorizing Lake-town," Bilbo says. "Have I ruined that for you?"

"You have ruined nothing. Even had you, one of my senior colleagues was never terribly in favour of that plan anyway."

"Your boss?"

"My senior colleague, Bilbo."

Bilbo nods with the utmost sarcasm, and Gandalf smiles.

"You'll be all right," Gandalf says. Remarkably, Bilbo even believes him.

"I still can't believe you convinced Elrond to let me go on sabbatical."

"It is very good to have friends," Gandalf replies. "Good luck with your book."
They hug again and Gandalf drives away down the muddy road. Standing in the front garden of a near stranger, surrounded by highly trained dogs and with only his suitcase, a rental car, and his research to his name, it occurs to Bilbo that he might want to worry. And so he does.

He worries that Thorin will find where he's gone and try to follow.

He worries the Brandybucks will be cruel to their son.

He worries some Hobbiton idiot will try to vandalize Bag-End and the poor Gaffer will turn vigilante and hurt himself.

Then he looks at the house--the lodge, really--and the barn and the great pen where Beorn has let the horses out for a run. He looks at the dogs and, basking in this attention, the lot of them immediately begin wagging their tails. None of them will approach unless Bilbo shows them his upturned palm.

Tentative about it, he offers his palm and the pack rushes in only to fall over its plethora of paws when he holds his hands up in a stopping motion. He offers his palm again and the dogs trot forward the remaining distance. Some butt their heads against Bilbo's legs or even his chest or--alarmingly, in the case of the wolfhound--Bilbo's head. But none of them jump on him.

A sharp whistle and the pack rushes off to Beorn in the field, barking merrily as they go. Tugging his coat closed, Bilbo returns to sit on the porch and simply watches.

He shapes his time because he must. His book takes up as much time as he can possibly make it, but when the fear grows too great, he announces to Beorn that he's going for a drive. Beorn's answer is to tell Bilbo where the nearest petrol station is. Bilbo drives off to the small town that Carrock Institute is vaguely associated with, finds a restaurant that offers BLTs, and then wanders about through a bookstore until certain he no longer smells of bacon. He returns before dark, letting himself in with his own key, and Beorn doesn't so much as look up, which suits Bilbo perfectly.

At first, he and Beorn have the vaguely anxious social awkwardness of two queers with nothing in common beyond their own queerness (though perhaps it must be said that most of the anxiety and awkwardness belongs to Bilbo). Soon, the garden needs planting and work and minor bouts of weeding, and that takes care of that. They both share a remarkable knowledge and love of flowers, Beorn's being more practical, Bilbo's more on the traditions and symbolism behind each bloom.

In the hours where his mind cannot be occupied, Bilbo writes himself notes. He makes sure to write a new one every day. They say things like:

*I went for a drive.*

*I'm hungry again.*

*My bed is mine.*

*I lost my temper today: so far, no repercussions.*

*I've made a friend in town.*

*I didn't have to hide my phone from myself today.*

*Masturbating again!*
Learned to make broccoli soup.

Baking is going well.

Don't want to learn to ride. Think Beorn is relieved.

I like feeding the horses.

No nightmares all week!

The list goes on. It stretches and stretches, but there are things Bilbo never writes. He doesn't write Woke up missing him or Worried I'll only ever have vanilla sex for the rest of my life. He makes no mention of the warm piece of under armour he keeps in the bottom of his suitcase. He certainly doesn't write Nearly called him and told him to come get me. There are some feelings that writing down would make too real. The months pass by, Bilbo's book lengthens, and the fears remain.

One day he writes down Confided in Beorn and then makes himself do so. He tells a rambling sort of tale of that strange time he spent trapped in a mobster's house and stopped eating. Beorn listens as if he isn't listening. When Bilbo finishes and sits there squirming inside, Beorn reaches over and pokes him in the stomach.

"Little bunny's getting fat again," Beorn says.

"I am not a little bunny."

"Fine. You're a chubby one," Beorn says, and Bilbo laughs despite himself.

Time passes. Bilbo edits. Gandalf calls with the promised updates. Each time, Bilbo finds himself relieved to have a reason to stay where he is. Gandalf assures him that Bilbo's escape didn't weaken Thorin's resolve to return to Erebor, but he will say nothing more. More gardening ensues. Beorn bids a stoic goodbye to nearly half the dogs in one swoop after instructing the new owners on how the dogs would best guide them. The wolfhound stays, and slowly Bilbo becomes accustomed to being shorter than a dog. The summer passes. The book is nearly finished. For Bilbo's birthday, Beorn drives them into town where Bilbo's few acquaintances-turned-friends have gathered at a restaurant that even serves steak. After, Bilbo calls Frodo and they wish each other a happy birthday.

All the while, he waits and he frets and tells himself there is nothing to be waiting for or fretting over, even though he knows better.

It arrives one day in October. The moment. Bilbo observes the signs as he enters the lodge with a bag of shopping one hand and two more bags of shopping carried in the jaws of the wolfhound and the mottled mutt. It's a neat trick that Beorn usually smiles at, but today Beorn is on the phone and doesn't so much as glance at his animals.

Bilbo puts the shopping on the counter. The wolfhound puts the shopping on the counter. The mutt puts the shopping on the floor, which the wolfhound then puts on the counter as well.

"He's back," Beorn says.

Bilbo pauses from putting the shopping in the fridge.

Beorn holds the phone out to him.

Bilbo sets it to his ear. "Gandalf?"
"Hello, Bilbo."

"You sound tired. Are you all right?"

"It's been a tiring time," Gandalf says. "I'm afraid I have very mixed news."

"Oh," Bilbo says. "Do you mean I can go home, but something terrible has happened?"

"...Yes."

"Is he dead?"

Gandalf pauses. "Thorin, you mean."

Bilbo's stomach drops. "Who else is dead?"

"Would you prefer to hear it bluntly?"

Bilbo nods, then remembers to say, "Yes."

"A policeman in Lake-town managed to shoot Smaug fatally. There was a scramble for power in the resulting vacuum. Thorin's efforts failed."

"Blunter, please."

"Thorin has perhaps a day to live."

Bilbo nods. He asks, "And who is dead already?"

For a moment, Gandalf is silent. "The brothers," he says.

"Not Dwalin and Balin, you mean."

"No," Gandalf says.

"How did they die?"

"Defending their uncle, though I am under the impression that at least Kili was under strict orders to stay with the car."

"I see," Bilbo says.

A long silence stretches down the line, interrupted only by the sounds of Beorn putting the shopping away. The wolfhound rests her head on Bilbo's shoulder. Bilbo scratches her ears absently.

"The Company is largely dissolved," Gandalf adds. "They have left Rivendell, and there is no longer anyone to use you in leverage against."

"You mean, in a day or two. There won't be in a day or two."

"Yes," Gandalf says. "I suppose I do mean that."

Bilbo turns around and hugs the wolfhound. She whines softly. Beorn puts the empty shopping bags away.

"I suppose I am asking how much closure you would like," Gandalf says.
"How long do I have to decide?"

"In current traffic, it's a three hour drive or so."

Bilbo tries to think past the terrible silence in his own mind. "Has he asked for me?"

"Bilbo, what would you prefer to do? You can wait with Beorn and go home in a day or two. There is absolutely no reason for you to go to Lake-town."

"I would prefer to know whether he's asked for me," Bilbo says.

"He has," Gandalf says.

Bilbo nods. He finds a bit of paper and a sharpened pencil. "What's the address?" His hand shakes as he writes it down, but when he enters it into the GPS ten minutes later, his hand is perfectly steady.
A tall figure in a long, grey duster, Gandalf meets him in the car park. He wears a silver scarf beneath his beard, the cloth nearly indistinguishable from his hair.

It's very strange, Bilbo thinks to himself, the things one focuses on. He turns off the engine and climbs out.

"There is not much time left," Gandalf warns him.

"Then we ought to walk quickly."

Gandalf leads him inside the hospital. They take the lift to the second floor and set off down a long, white hall. They find Bofur sitting in the hall, painstakingly attempting to fill out paperwork on a clipboard with his right arm in a sling. Someone seems to have taken his hat. "Oh, no," he's in the midst of saying to a nurse. "I wouldn't want to be a bother. I think my left hand is legible enough."

Gandalf clears his throat and Bofur twists in his seat. His eyes darken on Gandalf before he catches sight of Bilbo. Bofur makes a strange sort of face, but no face is meant to be bewildered and relieved and anxious and grief-stricken all at once.

"Bilbo," Bofur says.

"Hello, Bofur," says Bilbo.

Bofur stares at him for a moment longer and then says to the nurse, "He's family. Would you show him where Thorin is, please?"

The nurse looks at Bilbo sceptically but simply says, "Mr Durin is this way."

Gandalf remains with Bofur, and Bilbo nearly stops when he realizes this. "Is he very badly hurt?" Bilbo asks the nurse.

"He's very weak. I'm afraid he doesn't have long."

Bilbo lets out a shaking breath and nods. They enter. The room is a single, full of beeps and humming, and the figure beneath the sheet is much too small to be Thorin. The face is pale and drawn. The hands are devoid of Thorin's solid rings. The hair has been gathered back and lies in an unwashed clump over one shoulder. The chest rises and falls, and there is a terrible noise as this occurs. The eyelids lie closed and do not move.

Beside the bed is a chair. Bilbo sits in it. He stands, pulls the chair closer, and sits again. He looks to the nurse and says, "It's all right. You can leave me with him." He is distantly surprised to mean it.

The nurse shuts the door. The sounds of the hall recede.

Bilbo sits and waits. The machines beep. The body that is soon to be a corpse continues to breathe.

Once his heart stops pounding, Bilbo reaches for the hand closest to him. There is an IV in it, and Bilbo is very careful not to disturb tape or needle. He tries to remember if Thorin's hands have ever felt cold before.
He sits and he holds on and he thinks. Mostly, he thinks the world very strange. With a fierce longing, he misses his home, his armchair, his books. He misses Frodo and the Gaffer. He misses Rivendell and his students. He misses the dogs and the scent of hay.

And, keeping in mind that he misses all of these things, he lets himself miss a few things more. He misses Thorin quietly singing in the car, so soft and low as if he were trying not to be heard. He misses the way Thorin would always order the dessert Bilbo second-most wanted and then, not finishing it, nudge it across the table. He misses Thorin's scent on his sheets. He aches for the warmth of Thorin's hand in his beneath the glow of streetlamps.

The beeping begins to beep faster, and Bilbo looks to the machine in alarm. It tells him nothing. The light squeeze of fingers in his own tells him everything.

Bilbo looks into eyes hazy with pain and medication. "Hello," he says.

Thorin blinks at him slowly, or perhaps his eyes fall shut and he must open them anew. He mumbles a faint question, words which might include "long gone."

"I must have been closer than you thought," Bilbo answers, if this is indeed an answer.

Again, Thorin's eyes close. His mouth pulls into a tight line. Be it pain or shame, something clearly hurts him.

As if trying to warm it, Bilbo holds Thorin's hand in both of his.

"Why did you return?" Thorin whispers with thin breath.

"If anything happened to Frodo, I don't know how I could bear it. Certainly not alone. To lose two of him..." Bilbo shakes his head.

"Are you here to help me bear it?"

"Yes. And because, now that it's safe to see you, I want to."

Thorin's mouth twists. His eyes nearly open, then remain shut. "There is that blessing." His thumb twitches between Bilbo's hands in a feeble attempt at affection. "I am glad to know I will never again cause you pain."

"Thorin, you're dying."

"Exactly my meaning."

Bilbo makes a broken sound. "Exactly why you're wrong." He lowers his head and kisses Thorin's scraped knuckles.

As if about to die there and then, Thorin makes a terrible noise.

"Please don't cry," Bilbo begs. "I am the crier of the two of us, and it would be horrid of you to take that away. Though I suppose you're not crying. It's simply raining on your face indoors."

Thorin squeezes his hand. What a curious feeling, the touch of a strong man rendered weak. A trace of softness nearly touches Thorin's mouth. Affection, perhaps, or simply the exhaustion of dying. "I would take back so much," he whispers, voice failing.

"But not all, I hope. We had a lovely start, you and I."
As if struggling against great weights, Thorin opens his eyes. They take a moment to find Bilbo. Not all, he mouths.

Bilbo holds Thorin's gaze until the simple act of looking wearies Thorin past his limits. Bilbo holds Thorin's hand until Thorin's chest neither rises nor falls. Bilbo holds still as the hospital staff rushes in, and after, he holds his tears until he can lock himself into a toilet stall. He cries until his eyes itch and burn, until his throat can barely hold together the broken shards of his voice, and then he washes his face in the sink. His head hurts terribly, but it is a welcome distraction from his heart.

The funeral is a crowded affair. Not because of the number of mourners, but because three caskets take a considerable amount of space. Though only one needs to be, all three are closed.

Bilbo spends much of the wait before the service looking at the flowers. Some are fitting. Some are not. He asks Balin for permission before he sets about moving the arrangements to be more appropriately positioned. The daisies ought to be near Kili. The chrysanthemums and lilies are fine near Fili. The roses on Thorin's casket are much too dark a red, and Bilbo hesitates before leaving them where they lie.

During the service, he sits between Bofur and Gandalf. He listens to Balin speak of Thorin's childhood, of the sister and brother gone before him. He listens to Dwalin's gruff, choking story about Fili and Kili when they were still small. He looks away politely when Ori stands up to speak of his friends only to turn to Nori and start crying.

Much too soon, they go to the graveyard, following too many hearses. An October wind bites at their noses and pulls at their coats. A few more words are said. After, they climb back into their cars. Although he was invited, Bilbo doesn't go to the lunch. Instead, he and Gandalf drive long way back to Beorn's house, Bilbo keeping Gandalf's car carefully in sight.

By the time they stop in front of the barn, Bilbo is famished. He doesn't quite want to eat. He wonders if this ought to be alarming before dismissing the thought. He hadn't been able to eat after his father's funeral either.

Bilbo lets himself into the house and into the kitchen and into the fridge. Gandalf sits at the table, and Bilbo cooks for him. He tastes while he cooks, because this is a good habit to have. When finished, he sits and eats as well, because that is good manners.

Hours later, Beorn returns with tromping footsteps. He takes one look at Bilbo and says, "You ought to stay a few days."

"I think I need to," Bilbo agrees. He no longer has the house in Rivendell, and he isn't at all brave enough to return to Hobbiton at the moment.

Bilbo stays, and Gandalf stays with him. They make phone calls and arrangements. Bilbo learns he will be able to return to teaching next term. The months until January stretch before him. He very nearly asks Beorn if he might stay. Instead, he forces himself to look into potential leases for the coming year and promises himself many a Sunday roast.

Once Thorin and the brothers have been buried for a full week, Bilbo packs his things. He makes a few more calls. The Gaffer promises Bag-End will be ready for him.

"Are you certain?" Gandalf asks the same way he might check the temperature of an oven. He
doesn't seek to redirect Bilbo, merely to determine whether his course is true.

"I think I would like someone to be angry with." Bilbo smiles tightly. "I'm sure I'll find a number in Hobbiton."

"If you're decided," says Beorn. Simply that and no more, and it takes until the following day and a loaded car for Bilbo to realize there was an unspoken half to that sentence. Two cars set off down the lane, one containing suitcases and one containing a very large dog. Each time they stop, the wolfhound comes out for a piss while Beorn calls his two assistants from Carrock in the conviction that they are taking care of the horses improperly.

"You didn't have to come," Bilbo tries to tell him once and only once. Beorn says nothing, merely looks at him, but Bilbo doesn't question his presence again.

Come mid-afternoon, they arrive in Hobbiton. Bilbo leads the way with Gandalf in the passenger seat, the rented car crawling slowly down narrow lanes and reminding Bilbo exactly why he never drives in Hobbiton.

Such is his hometown that by the time he reaches the Hill, all of his neighbours have been alerted. They gather in their front gardens in a feat of synchronized mail-fetching. Hamfast Gamgee himself stands in wait by Bag-End's gate. Bilbo parks awkwardly. Beorn inches to a stop behind.

Bilbo climbs out and hurries to the boot lest the Gaffer tries to take his luggage for him. He doesn't hurry quickly enough and so hurries to open the gate and unlock the door instead. All the way, he says "You really don't have to" while the Gaffer says "I don't mind, Mr Bilbo, not at all."

In goes the suitcase, in goes his briefcase, and then Bilbo stands by his front door and looks down to where his friends wait. The November air is cold and puts a ruddy glow into everyone's cheeks.

"It really does have a grass roof," Beorn muses.

"It does," Bilbo says proudly. "Will you be staying the night? You'll have to stoop and I doubt there's a bed that would fit you, but we can sort something out."

"Tempting, but no," says Beorn.

"I will be, if that is an open offer," Gandalf says.

"It is," Bilbo says, "but if Beorn is leaving tonight, how will you leave?"

"Who do you think will be returning the rental car?" Gandalf asks.

"Ah. Right. Thank you, Gandalf."

"Gandalf?" asks Hamfast Gamgee. "Is that Gandalf? Well, I'll be!"

As the Gaffer and Gandalf catch up, Beorn lets the dog out of the car. She sniffs the air and turns in a circle before sitting patiently in the middle of the lane. Beorn gestures Bilbo down to them.

"You're back to Rivendell in January?" Beorn asks.

"That's the plan."
Beorn nods. "She wouldn't like Rivendell, but I doubt you'd need her there. I'll be back in two months for her."

Bilbo stares at him. "You're not serious."

In reply, Beorn turns to stare at the nearest stout, judgmental man dithering by a mailbox. The wolfhound stands up, alert. The man in question immediately closes his mailbox and begins to walk back to his house. Beorn says quietly, "She won't bite anyone, if that's what you're worried about. She'll get between you and anything nasty, though. I can promise you that." Then, more loudly: "I've her feed and bowl in the boot. She'll stay out of any room you tell her to. She likes to sit on front steps and she'll want to follow you on any walks."

"That would be lovely," Bilbo says. "But, really, you don't have to."

Beorn simply says, "I was small once, too. Even then, most of the muscle didn't come until later."

Touched beyond words, Bilbo says quietly, "When you come back for her, I hope you can meet my nephew. He needs to know there are people like you in the world."

"What, pansexuals or transsexuals?" Entirely unabashed, Beorn doesn't so much as lower his voice. In the very heart of Hobbiton, he stands tall and proud, more so than Bilbo could ever dream of being.

Bilbo laughs. "Amazing, I meant, but he could stand to learn about the rest of it, too. And thank you. For her and for everything else."

"You're welcome," Beorn says. "Now how about some dinner before I go?"

"I've nothing in the house, but I think I'm brave enough tonight to go elsewhere."

They carry the dog food inside before setting off on foot down to the Green Dragon. They acquire a small crowd of Gamgees on the way, the youngest few of which remain outside the pub to play fetch with the wolfhound.

Sandwiched in between Gandalf and Mrs Gamgee, it nearly occurs to Bilbo to be nervous. The pub regulars turn to stare. Bits of whispering erupt here and there, stopping whenever Bilbo catches a questioning eye. The barkeep keeps looking between Bilbo and Beorn. To be fair, the last may be because little Bilbo is devouring everything set before him, whereas giant Beorn is prodding away at a salad. Bilbo still isn't confident about this benign option.

Much too soon, dinner is finished and Beorn must leave if he's to return home at any sort of reasonable time. The lot of them troop back to Beorn's car, Bilbo, Gandalf and Gamgees all, the Gamgee children asking Beorn everything and anything about training great big dogs. When Beorn drives away, everyone stands in a long line and waves in a proper Hobbiton send-off. They part ways after, insofar as close neighbours can part ways when they return home for the night.

Dog in tow, Bilbo and Gandalf climb up the Hill to the old bench and sit with matching sighs. The wolfhound lies down on Bilbo's feet, her back a steadying warmth against his shins.

"Your grandfather and I used to sit like this. Of course, we smoked in those days."

"He always did smell of pipe tobacco," Bilbo remembers.

They sit a bit longer. Bilbo waits with the odd sense that Gandalf has something more to say, something more to share. Eventually, Bilbo asks, "What is it?"
"Mixed news, I'm afraid."

"It always is, isn't it? All right, then: tell me."

"In exchange for rolling over on many of their associates, the trio who ab ducted you have had their sentences lightened."

Bilbo startles. The wolfhound looks up. "They won't be coming after me, will they?"

"Nothing of the sort," Gandalf promises without hesitation. "No, those three will be imprisoned for a very, very long time, if now in greater comfort that they would have otherwise expected. I am sorry to say that the settlement was somewhat reduced as well."

"The what?" Bilbo asks. "You mean, I'm getting money?"

"Compensation for your trials," Gandalf replies, "but yes."

"Well," Bilbo says, rather pleased, "that's not something I'd considered." He smiles up at Gandalf and gives the dog's side a pat. She drops her head back onto her paws.

Gandalf smiles back, but only faintly.

"There's something else, isn't there?" Bilbo asks.

Gandalf nods. "Thorin's left you something. You are by no means obligated to take it. I imagine it could be donated somewhere appropriate."

"Oh, no, it's not money, is it?" Illegally gained, no less. "I couldn't possibly accept any of that."

"Not money," Gandalf says. "A map. I'm sure you remember it."

"Oh. Oh, I..." He can't seem to breathe. "Oh."

Quiet at his side, Gandalf waits for him to recover.

"Where is it?" Bilbo asks.

"Still at the house in Rivendell, I believe. Dori will be dispersing any items touched on in Thorin's will in the coming weeks, but only if you accept it."

"Is it only the map?"

"I believe so, yes."

"Then yes," Bilbo says without hesitation.

"It won't be too painful a reminder?"

Bilbo shakes his head. "I've plenty to be angry about, but there's nothing left to be frightened of."

Gandalf lets out a soft sound, nearly a laugh if laughs were made of marvelling rather than amusement. "You really are a remarkable fellow, Bilbo Baggins."

"Thank you," Bilbo says. "I think."

Gandalf's laugh is made of amusement this time. Soon, the air grows too cold and they turn in. Gandalf promptly smacks his head on the chandelier in the foyer and it is Bilbo's turn to laugh. They
go to bed, Bilbo in the master bedroom, Gandalf in the second-best guestroom as that one has the longest bed.

In the morning, there is breakfast and then there are goodbyes. Gandalf adjusts the front seat of the rental car significantly before driving away. Bilbo waves his hand, the dog her tail. Once Gandalf is out of sight, Bilbo heads inside with a nervous determination to keep himself largely to himself.

Though Frodo calls, Bilbo makes the boy promise not to come around in person for the foreseeable future, not under any circumstances and certainly not alone. The poor, kind-hearted lad he is, Frodo asks after Thorin. Bilbo tells him with a steady voice that Thorin died of cardiac arrest. Frodo goes very quiet at that, so Bilbo tells him all about Beorn in the hopes the boy will acquire a better role model. Thorin is quite out of the question, and Bilbo has shattered his own reputation himself. Being thought queer in Hobbiton is one thing, but being known as queer is quite another.

The map arrives by post by the end of the week. Its case is more beautiful than Bilbo remembers, but that pales in comparison to the map itself. Bilbo looks at it fondly, wistfully, and he hangs it on the wall with great care. On a whim, he looks up the date of the article he'd written on it, and it's been nearly a year to the day.

"Fancy that," Bilbo murmurs. He sits with his books and his map amid the remaining dust of his long-disused home, and he thinks of what had been. He thinks of being frightened, he thinks of being terribly frightened, and then he thinks of taking a walk.

He rises from his chair and dresses again, brighter, cheerier, as flamboyant as he pleases. As it happens, he pleases very much. He proudly looks himself over in the mirror. He even combs his hair. Then, with walking stick in hand and hound at his side, he ventures out his door.

Chapter End Notes

I know there's a big trend towards wishful or happy endings for the Bagginshield tag, but as far as I can see it, this is the happy ending. Damage has been done, a closet has been thrown open for the sake of keeping another safely shut, and death has come, but, yes, this is still the happy ending.

I wouldn't feel right posting the last chapter of this fic without adding the following:

Thorin's tactics and behaviors that feed into the abuse include but aren't limited to: making long-term plans without Bilbo's input or consent, controlling Bilbo's movement (blocking the car in, assigning him a driver), controlling Bilbo's clothing, threats or implied threats of harm (presenting himself as the only source of safety), blaming others for things that are his own fault, ignoring or rationalizing away Bilbo's input (they don't need condoms, Bilbo's just tired), lying, withholding information, and a great deal more.

The consent issues in the bedroom focus on fluid exchange rather than bondage. Thorin's abusive tendencies didn't arise in this because of his sexuality, but because he has been conditioned to living a position that requires control, doing what's best for the people he considers his, not listening to "no" and not needing to hear "yes" before proceeding.

If any of this sounds horribly familiar to you, please stay safe and know that it is not your fault if you cannot. Here is a link to the International Directory of Domestic
Violence Agencies. To navigate, just click on the increasingly specific maps. You are not alone, and it is not your fault.

Thank you for reading.

Works inspired by this one

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