How the West Was Won and Where It Got Us

by stickman

Summary

Bilbo is a harried 1st year British literature Ph.D. (early 20th century fiction) who happens to have an interest in spatial narrative structures, a lack of time-management skills, and a tiny apartment with a lot of books and very little furniture. He’s stressed, always, and doesn’t quite know where he belongs. He tells himself that really, this is, in fact, what he wants to be doing. But sometimes, as much as he loves books, he gets an urge to do something with his hands.

Thorin is a disgruntled M.Arch. 1 in his last year who can’t be arsed to shave and frightens his students, and, frankly, his profs, but his work is top-notch so no one can really say much. They can, however, bully him into running a hands-on design workshop on Saturday mornings, which is complete crap, because he’s used to drinking his Friday nights into oblivion so showing up at Milstein at 7:45 the next morning and trying to teach in a room of wall-to-wall windows as the sun rises is not at the top of his list. Besides, no one ever shows up.
Except one morning, someone does.

[graduate school AU]

Notes

Apparently, when I (a harried British Literature Ph.D. candidate) am stressed, I feel the need to write academic AUs. So I stayed up the better part of the night, trying to figure out how to deal with and re-interpret canon characters and events, and then started writing.

This starts out with a (just barely) established relationship and then skips around in time, going back to just before their first meeting and then working up to their current status, and then progressing from there. I hope the timelines are clear - please let me know if they aren't. Thanks for reading. If you'd be so kind, I'd love to hear what you think.

A note about the tags: There are some things listed that I do not think directly occur in this story, but that may seem very close calls to others. In the interest of letting you go into this informed, in case certain things are situations you'd rather avoid, I've decided to put tags for anything that might be interpreted as occurring. Feel free to talk to me if you'd like more info, or if this doesn't make sense.

Translations into Russian, French, and Vietnamese available.
Chapter 1

It’s nearly April, which means there’s just over a month left before the end of term, which means that Bilbo Baggins has, for all intents and purposes, entirely given up on being well-rested. It’s a sacrifice in the most literal sense of the word. Rest is, after good food, quite possibly his favourite thing. After that would be books, and sweaters. Not that he keeps a list or anything. At least, not on paper. Considering that upstate New York doesn’t actually see spring until May, it is, currently, still sweater weather, which is perhaps the only redeeming thing about the weather in this town. It’s Sunday and Bilbo fully intends to not leave his apartment, so the sweater of the day is an old one, burgundy, a cardigan worn thin at the ribbed cuffs and missing half its buttons. Every time he sits down to fix it, he manages to convince himself that the hole in the left sleeve is perfect for his thumb, and that buttons are over-rated, and he has a stereotype to uphold, one that allows for—requires—his perpetually unruly hair and his tortoise-framed glasses.

He should be reading, something French about theories of the spectator, but this week has been longer than it had any right to be, so he makes a cup of tea instead, and waters his plants, and contemplates a nap. He’s nearly asleep at his desk when his phone goes off. It’s Thorin, of course, texting instead of calling even though Bilbo’s told him at least seven times that his texting grammar is atrocious. It’s gotten to the point where Bilbo is convinced Thorin does it only to annoy him. This time, though, it’s relatively innocuous.

“Dinner 7,” Thorin has asked. Well, strictly speaking, he hasn’t asked, he’s stated, because there’s the grammar thing again, with the lack of a question mark or even a courteous comma.

Bilbo should stay in, should do his reading, but the idea of having Sunday dinner with Thorin Oakenshield of all people is still such a new one, still slightly alarming, and Bilbo’s long-neglected, ill-advised New Year’s Resolution was to be more reckless (his official wording was “adventurous” but it’s been pointed out to him that the sentiment is the same), so he makes himself text back, “Yes, all right. Where?”

It’s half an hour before Thorin replies again and Bilbo has a book in his lap that he isn’t really reading, just staring at the words on the page and thinking that there’s something intriguing about the use of white space, which could possibly be a paper topic. Instead of examining spatial structures in texts, he could examine spatial structure of text. It is, perhaps, one of the more obviously nerdy thoughts he’s had lately. “Bring dessert” is Thorin’s reply, which means dinner at Thorin’s. Bilbo sighs. It’s not that he dislikes being at Thorin’s. The place is comfortable, if a bit cluttered. He has a mudroom and a couch and a sprawling kitchen table, and there are trees in the backyard and the kind of natural light Bilbo’s apartment only gets for a few hours each afternoon, when he’s usually in class. It’s just that Thorin lives just outside of North Campus, up by the lake, more than half an hour’s walk. Bilbo’s bicycle is leaning against his stove, waiting patiently to see some use, but a week after he moved here he had to admit that his legs, and his lungs, were not up to the challenge of riding up the hill.

“Fine,” he texts back. He hasn’t even set the phone down when Thorin replies again.

“Don’t sigh, know you are. Will fetch you.”

Fetch. The man’s been spending too much time with his dog. But Bilbo smiles, because it’s an unusually attentive gesture from Thorin, who is typically about as obtuse as a rock where other people’s moods are concerned.

Thorin drives a rusted Volvo station wagon and hates it. It’s the car that everyone has, or
close enough to it. It only has a cassette deck, and the heater’s broken, and it gets stuck at least once a winter and has to be pushed back up the hill to Thorin’s place. He says he wants a motorbike, something sleek and fast and, as Bilbo has repeatedly pointed out, utterly useless eight months of the year.

There’s also the fact that Bilbo is terrified of motorbikes, and would in no way, shape, or form ever allow himself to be coerced onto one. Not even by Thorin, who can be disarmingly charming when he wants to be.

Bilbo still has a few hours before he can expect Thorin, and he hasn’t entirely lost control of his life—positive reinforcement, he’s been told, works wonders, even when one is doing it to oneself—so he tucks his feet underneath him and picks his book back up. Fifty pages, he tells himself, and then he’ll bake something. As incentives go, it’s a good one. By the time Thorin arrives, not bothering to get out of the car and walk down the hazardous steps to Bilbo’s front door because his car makes such a racket that it’s instantly recognisable, Bilbo has conquered Rancière and made banana muffins with cream cheese frosting, which he knows Thorin will mock mercilessly before eating half the batch.

“You smell like fruit,” Thorin says to Bilbo as he reaches across to open the passenger door—the handle outside sticks.

“Yes, well, hello to you too, and you did ask for dessert.” Bilbo fits neatly in Thorin’s car, with its narrow seats and lack of leg-room. He isn’t small, just compact. Thorin, on the other hand, has his seat back as far as it can go and still looks hunched over the steering wheel, window open and one arm hanging out despite the forty-degree weather, tangled hair brushing the car roof. The B-52’s are relentlessly cheerful out of the Volvo’s tinny speakers, which is weird even for Thorin, who has possibly the most eclectic musical taste of anyone Bilbo’s ever met. Thorin just huffs and says that Bilbo needs to get out more, and really, that’s a fair point. So that argument never gets very far.

“I was expecting chocolate. Get out.”

Bilbo buckles his seat-belt and looks calmly at Thorin, who is a master at keeping a straight face. Though, it must be said, Thorin’s idea of a “straight face” always defaults to something just the angry side of neutral. They hold each other’s gaze for a minute and then Thorin shakes his head and starts to drive. Out of the corner of his eyes, Bilbo can make out the barest hint of a smirk.

“You don’t even like chocolate,” Bilbo says as Thorin executes a tight turn-around on Bilbo’s narrow, slanted street and coaxes the Volvo back up the hill. “I was being considerate. Which is more than I can say for some people.”

“Some people being the ones who drive to your apartment to fetch you, so you don’t have to walk.”

“Yes, those people. Precisely.”

“Completely inconsiderate.”

Bilbo is still new to this. If it was a scene in a novel he was writing on, he’d say that the characters were bantering. But Thorin’s not a bantering type, and Bilbo knows full well that he lost most of his own social graces exactly eight months and seventeen days ago. So they can’t be bantering, which still leaves a couple of options, none of which Bilbo wants to dwell on. He finds himself wishing sometimes that he had some sort of a map for all this, to help him work out what he was meant to be doing. The closest thing he has is the English department’s course catalogue and time-to-degree chart, tacked to the wall beside his desk. Somehow, though, he’s made it through the
better part of his first year as a literature Ph.D. candidate. No one is more surprised than he. Thorin, in a way that makes Bilbo’s chest feel a little tight if he lets himself think about it too long, has the nerve to act as though he’s not surprised at all.

With a cold west wind blowing his hair out of his eyes and the pipe-smoke smell of the Volvo’s upholstery in his nose, Bilbo almost believes it.

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It’s August when Bilbo moves in, the day sticky-hot in a way he was promised it wouldn’t be. His uncle—who isn’t technically his uncle but more of a family friend, though “friend” isn’t quite the right word to use either, for someone who used to turn up unannounced and unshaven at Bilbo’s parents’ doorstep, stay for long enough to do his laundry and drink all their red wine, and then whisk himself off again—has made the drive with him. “Uncle” is more a term of convenience, and not one Bilbo would ever say to the man’s face. He’s some kind of archaeologist, though Bilbo’s never really understood exactly what it is he does. He gets written up in history journals and museum studies reports, and it’s generally acknowledged that the man is eccentric but brilliant so everyone more or less lets him do what he wants. His not-uncle was the one who suggested Bilbo apply here. Thought the upstate air would do him good. Bilbo doesn’t agree—misses his green, rolling hills some 300 miles to the south, misses the family home with its front door painted green and its warmly lit library and three distinct pantries, the home he can no longer afford to keep—but the program is a good one, both academically and financially, and Gandalf’s advice came at a time when Bilbo wasn’t really capable of making his own decisions, so it was as good an option as any and a great deal better than most.

“Well then, Bilbo,” Gandalf says, clambering with some difficulty out of their borrowed van and straightening up to his full, intimidating height. “I told you I would get you here, and so I have. I’m afraid, however, that I will not be staying very long. Something has . . . come up.”

How something could have come up in the last five and a half hours on the road, when neither of them has a cell-phone, is a mystery to Bilbo. But he’s no longer surprised by Gandalf’s haphazard comings and goings so he nods and accepts the help, carrying boxes and suitcases down the uneven steps from street-level to his apartment. The house is a towering Victorian, more specifically in the Queen Anne style; Bilbo knows this because he has read up on the local architecture, thinking that if he had to move so far north, at least he would be in an area with interesting houses. The shutters are crooked and the paint’s peeling a little, and the porch creaks when they step up to the front door. The landlord is some former colleague of Gandalf’s whom Bilbo has never met, but the keys are waiting for them in the mailbox, a gesture at once unsafe and encouraging.

Bilbo has rented the entire top floor, which sounded extravagant until he takes a step inside and realises that by “top floor” the landlord meant “attic.” He’s up in the eaves, sloped ceilings and all, and when Gandalf smacks his head on a rafter Bilbo smother a laugh and thinks, for the first time, that it’s a good thing he’s not very tall. There’s a sky-light, though it’s in desperate need of washing, and a pair of awning windows looking out at the street and the cemetery across the road. It doesn’t feel cramped so much as comfortable. Bilbo likes it instantly, though he doesn’t say so. He trudges back down the stairs, fights with his desk chair and smacks himself in the shin as he drags it out of the van. He doesn’t have much furniture to speak of, just the chair and an old drafting table that belonged to his father, easy enough to take apart and pack into the van. A narrow futon mattress,
His parents had been well-off. Nothing to advertise, no family estate or overseas investments or anything like that. Just a sprawling single-story home, built in stages as money came in from his father’s work. Built, for the most part, by his father himself. Bilbo’s father was a carpenter, his mother a clothing designer. Between the two of them, and some very important clients, the name of Baggins became quite well respected. Now that home, with its kerosene lamps and its velvet settees and its built-in bookshelves belongs to someone else, sold off to pay hospital bills and funeral fees, and Bilbo can never go back again. He doesn’t even want to. It’s not the same place it once was.

Gandalf helped him move out, well before Bilbo was ready to leave but long after he had started getting calls from collection agencies. His not-uncle had turned up out of the blue with a borrowed van and a cask—an actual, oaken cask—of ale, barely a week after the funeral. He’d missed the actual funeral, which made Bilbo uncharacteristically angry. Made him want to slam the door in Gandalf’s face, leave him out there on the porch with his ale and his painfully, frustratingly kind smile. But Bilbo knew that, for all the man’s unreliability, Gandalf had honestly cared about his mother. So he let the old man in, let Gandalf pilfer the library and raid the pantry and drink most of the ale himself, and if Bilbo fell properly asleep, for the first time in weeks, to the sound of his snores, he wasn’t going to tell anyone.

It takes Bilbo longer to unpack than it really should. He keeps getting distracted, by the play of sunlight across the smooth wooden floorboards or the voices of his downstairs neighbours filtering up. He holds a box of photographs in his hands for a full ten minutes before tucking it back into his trunk and firmly shutting the lid. What he needs to do, now that his clothing is put away—pants and shirts in the narrow closet, sweaters in a dresser left by the previous tenant—and his books stacked neatly beside his futon, his ancient Micron laptop on his re-assembled desk, is find his way to a grocery store, pick up some food and cleaning supplies. Walk up to campus and figure out where he’s meant to be tomorrow. In other words, be an adult.

He’s twenty-three years old. Technically, legally, that’s exactly what he is. In this new town where he knows precisely no one, he might—he thinks—be able to keep up the ruse. No one has to know who he, where he comes from. No one has any reason to doubt him.

Which would be perfect, if only he could stop doubting himself.

It takes several wrong turns and two different buses but Bilbo finds his way to a grocery store...
that is larger than any he’s seen in his entire life. He’s starving and wants to buy just about everything in sight, but he’s made a list and keeps to it, mindful that the only money in his bank account right now is on loan from Gandalf until the University gives him his stipend next month. The place is filled with people and Bilbo keeps having to side-step in the aisles, knocking things off shelves as distracted shoppers brush by. But the girl at the checkout lane smiles at him and he allowed himself a croissant, which he eats, crumb by crumb, while waiting for the bus to take him back to his street. So, all things considered, the first outing is a success. Six hours of floor-scrubbing and shower-bleaching and oven-cleaning later, Bilbo feels more accomplished than he has in weeks. Exhausted, and filthy, and still starving. But accomplished. That has to count for something.

Doesn’t it?

It’s nearly three in the morning before he manages to fall asleep, fidgeting in clean cotton sheets stretched over his thin futon, listening to the crickets loud outside the window.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

It doesn’t really hit him until two months or so into the fall term that his life—his entire life—now consists of books. Sure, there are papers, and there is terminology, but both of those are really just books, give or take a few parts. The first time he makes a remark about the amount of reading he has, a sixth-year student laughs at him and tells him it’s the least he’ll ever have. Bilbo stops talking about it after that, but it doesn’t go away.

The good thing about not having a cell-phone or internet in his apartment is that there are hardly any distractions, not to mention no monthly charges to his bank account. Theoretically, it should mean he can get a lot of work done when he’s there. Mostly, though, it’s just isolating. He starts cooking and baking increasingly elaborate things partially out of sentimentalism—it’s his mother’s handwriting in the cookbooks—but also because it gives him something to do with his hands. Something that isn’t turning pages or writing notes. He doesn’t have a kitchen table yet, hasn’t had time to track down a secondhand furniture store and find one, let alone figure out how to get said table back to his apartment by himself. So he eats at his desk, or cross-legged on the floor, because he doesn’t have any kitchen chairs either. He has an old metal milk crate that’s currently serving as a wine rack, and a sink from the 1950s, and a refrigerator that chirps and hums through the night, and that is the extent of his kitchen. The appliances are tucked awkwardly under the eaves, hulking away from the joint of ceiling to floor and leaving tunnels of empty space that he doesn’t know how to fill.

Bilbo thinks that he should get more exercise, to combat the amount of pie he’s been eating, so he starts taking walks, mainly through the cemetery, or along the gorges, trying to see if the town lives up to its claim, taking in the scenery. That is, until the reports of harassment start circulating, first one and then two, three, five through his student e-mail account. After that, he avoids those routes and their neighbouring fraternity houses. He looks for other places to walk. There are at least four fitness centers on campus, each requiring an expensive membership, so each out of the question. “Exercise” wasn’t really what he had in mind by “something to do with his hands,” anyway.

There is always gardening, which is something of a point of pride around town, if the local farmers’ market every weekend is anything to go by. It’s down at the old steamboat landing, a sprawl of pavilion roofs. The steamboats are long gone but there are a few resident ducks and there’s something comforting about the sights of parents holding small grubby children by the hand, carrying re-usable grocery bags, carrying on conversations about varieties of kale. Bilbo makes himself go every Saturday morning, just after nine, when the place is mostly empty. It’s good to get out of the apartment. It’s downhill, too, over the highway and along the railroad tracks, which means he can ride his bicycle. He doesn’t have a lock for it, but it’s a rusting fixed-gear that he doesn’t expect anyone to steal anytime soon. So he cycles down to the market and he walks, hands in his pockets, doesn’t make eye-contact with the vendors but appraises their vegetables and thinks about all the things he could cook with them. If he’s feeling particularly sorry for himself, he might buy a few carrots, shockingly purple or fat and red-orange, or an apple cider donut. It’s a place that’s both comforting and off-putting, somehow, and ultimately Bilbo comes away feeling that gardening, even if it’s only trimming the overgrown rosebush out front of the house that snags on his sweater every time he goes to take out the trash, is not something he can face just yet.

When he talks to Gandalf about it—his not-uncle calls him one day, entirely out of the blue, ringing up the department offices on a Thursday afternoon and knowing in that uncanny way of his
that Bilbo will be walking past, on his way to the library after getting out of his morning class, and charming the administrative assistant into pulling Bilbo inside—Gandalf says that it’s all perfectly normal. Routine. Bilbo shifts uncomfortably against a secretary’s desk and listens to the rasp of the old man’s voice with a mounting pressure behind his eyes.

“Look,” he finally says, “what are you even doing? Why did you call? Where are you?”

“Oh, my boy, just checking in. The usual, you know. I’ve been here and there. Working on a piece for the Bodelian right now, actually, a fascinating thing, you should see the size of—”

“I’m busy.” Bilbo rubs his temples. The secretary is looking at him out of the corner of her eye and he knows that this is not normal. This is not something that normal graduate students do. “I’m busy right now, that is,” he amends, taking care to keep his voice even. “I have work to do. I’m—I’m standing in the middle of the departmental offices, Gandalf, you can’t just . . . never mind, that isn’t the point. Do you have anything actually helpful, or shall I just carry on?”

“By all means, carry on. But Bilbo—”

“Yes?”

“If you are asking for my advice, there is one thing I would tell you.”

“And?” Bilbo prompts, after a moment. “What is that?”

“This Saturday, at Milstein Hall. There is, I think, something that you will not want to miss.”

“Sorry, what?” Bilbo asks, but Gandalf has already hung up. He stares at the phone uselessly for a moment and then hands it back to the secretary with a mumbled word of thanks. Gets out of the office and doesn’t even bother with the library, just goes straight to his apartment, feeling as though everyone’s eyes are on him the entire walk back.

Pressed against the twice-locked door of his attic, Bilbo lets out a long, shaky breath. In the privacy of the eaves, it is easy to convince himself that he’s being ridiculous. He sets his satchel down and puts the kettle on, pacing before the awning windows as the water heats.

It’s been two months and he was starting to think—to really, honestly think—that he was fine. He was handling things. He wakes up every morning before ten, he does his reading, he goes to his classes, he eats his sandwiches in secret at his carrel in the library. He doesn’t speak often in class, but his papers are turned in on time and he replies to discussion posts on his British Modernism seminar’s website, and his professors know his name. He doesn’t have any friends, but he has books, an entire shelf devoted to tea, and at least eighteen sweaters. He’s fine.

He’s fine. The kettle whistles and he makes his tea, drinks it while scanning a chapter of Forster. When the sun sets and his apartment cools, he puts on a second pair of socks and wraps himself in a blanket rather than turning up the thermostat. He tries to get Gandalf’s sudden phone-call out of his mind.

The library is open until two in the morning. Bilbo knows this. The name of the building Gandalf mentioned hangs in his thoughts: Milstein. Saturday. He could walk back up to campus. Could go online, look it up, find out what’s happening there on Saturday morning. Figure out what on earth his not-uncle is talking about.

Or he could make some toast and brush his teeth and go to sleep, tucked back against the sloped wall, listening to the soft hoot of a train whistle sounding out over the hills.
It’s December and there are only two weeks of classes left until winter break. Bilbo hasn’t slept in four days. His hair is sticking up everywhere and his glasses are dirty and he’s at least one hundred and seventy-three pages behind in his reading. He skips his first-year colloquium and feels incredibly guilty about it, but the thought of sitting in that room for two hours listening to some professor he’s never met speak about their research when he has his own papers to write is enough to convince him that he’s managing his time, not being a delinquent. A disappointment.

The week slips away from him, Monday night bleeding through Tuesday morning with a lackluster sunrise and five cups of tea. By the time Thursday comes, Bilbo is half-convinced that it must be Friday. That the week must be over. Time warps into something he can’t follow, a blurred succession of walks to and from campus, of identically overwhelming classes, of day after day without him speaking a single word.

So it’s a bit of a surprise when Thursday night finds him lacing up his boots and wandering up the hill to campus after a half-hearted dinner with Ford Madox Ford and theories of national representation. It’s not the routine. It’s so far out of the routine that Bilbo doesn’t even know what to think. His feet take him up University Ave to Milstein, cantilevered out over the road, studio windows dimly lit. The poured concrete of the lobby floor is smooth underfoot. The building hums with that particular kind of after-dark industrial buzz, generators and fans on low power cycles for the night.

Bilbo doesn’t have a plan. He walks up to the studio and, finding the door open, goes inside. He thinks he’ll just walk over and look out the windows and then head back to his attic when he sees someone standing there, leaning over a drafting table. And then he knocks over an easel trying to back out of the room and that person turns and it’s Thorin, his hair half pulled back, his sleeves rolled up, a pencil hanging out of his mouth.

“Sorry,” Bilbo says, the sight of the architecture grad snapping him back to reality. “Sorry, I was just . . . taking a walk.” It sounds ridiculous even to his own ears. He rights the easel and turns to leave.

“Hey, wait,” Thorin says. “Bilbo . . . you all right?”

“Fine,” Bilbo says, too quickly. “Yes, yes, completely fine. Sorry to bother you. I didn’t think anyone would be here.”

“Fortunately, no one is. I hate working in here when it’s busy.”

“I’ll leave you to it, then.”

“No, I didn’t mean you. Just, you know, other people. Look, come in, don’t stand awkwardly in the doorway. I can hardly see you.”

Bilbo takes a cautious step into the studio. Thorin beckons with one hand, half his attention still on his drafting table. “What are you working on?” Bilbo asks.

“Thesis. As usual. I thought I’d get some elevations done tonight but . . . well, it’s been a long week.”
“It really, really has.” Bilbo pushes himself up onto the stool across the aisle from Thorin’s. His hands are restless in his lap, tugging at a loose thread on the cuff of his jacket. He unwinds the scarf from his throat, suddenly warm. His glasses are still a little fogged from coming in out of the cold.

“Your work piling up?” Thorin asks, speaking out of one side of his mouth in that way he does when he’s distracted and chewing the end of his pencil. His hands are spread flat against the desk, smoothing out a sheet of paper.

“Yes.”

“It going all right?”

“No . . . not really. No. If I’m honest.” Bilbo lets out a little laugh, involuntarily. He twists his scarf in his hands. “I thought . . .”

Minutes pass, the clock on the wall ticking them off solemnly.

“You thought?” Thorin says. “Damn it, this angle is off. Go on. Don’t mind me.”

“I thought I had things under control,” Bilbo says, speaking more to the floor than to Thorin. “I was actually looking forward to writing my papers, if you can believe that. But I have three of them, all due within a week of each other, and I’m still reading and researching and I only have a thesis for one of them, and it’s a stretch, really, because it’s more about Borges than Brunanburh and I’m not sure what my professor will think, and I was considering adding Tennyson but the thought of reading his criticism on top of everything is so daunting that I don’t think I will, but that still leaves me with forty pages to write and I thought I’d be fine, I’d just work harder and take it day by day but I can’t sleep anymore, Thorin, and I have no idea what I’m doing, why am I doing this, when I could—”

“Hey.” Thorin’s voice, loud and deep, makes Bilbo lift his head and take in a breath of air, ragged and too-quick. “Hey. Bilbo. Calm down.”

“Sorry. Sorry, I was—I don’t know what I was doing. Babbling at you. I really should go.” Bilbo takes a step off his stool and his knees shake.

“Bilbo, hey, stop. Stop.” Thorin sets down his pencil and brushes eraser dust from his hands. “Don’t apologise. It’s a sign of weakness.”

“Everyone apologises, Thorin.”

“Well then everyone is—Oh, that’s not the point. The point is . . . are you really all right? Because you don’t sound all right.”

“I’ve been more all right,” is what Bilbo finally says. It’s as honest an answer as he can give, here and now. He’s been less all right, too, but Thorin doesn’t need to know that. Thorin already knows far more than he needs to, as far as Bilbo is concerned.

“Yeah?” Thorin slides off his stool and comes to stand before Bilbo. He has graphite smudged across one cheek. The fans overhead whirr softly. The stars outside are unusually bright, clear in the cold winter air. Bilbo takes a breath that gets stuck in his throat and stifles the urge to cough.

Thorin looks him over, head to toe, slowly. He turns away for a moment and then is pressing something into Bilbo’s hands, his face unreadable. Bilbo looks down at the mp3 player, just stares at
it, until Thorin huffs and untangles the headphones, brushes aside unruly hair and presses them firmly into Bilbo’s ears. He cues up a playlist and puts his hands on Bilbo’s shoulders, steers him back against the wall and pushes him down to sit there in the corner. Then Thorin goes back over to his drafting table and gets back to work. Bilbo watches him, the way his hair falls in his face, the muscles of his forearms shifting as he spreads out a fresh sheet of tracing paper. The music is loud in his ears, blocking out all other sounds with a steady drumbeat and long, quiet synth chords. Thorin sweeps a braid out of his face and sharpens his pencil. Bilbo leans his head back against the wall and closes his eyes. He re-learns how to breathe.

_I was bruised and battered, I couldn’t tell what I felt._

_I was unrecognisable to myself._

_Saw my reflection in a window and didn’t know my own face._

_Oh brother, are you gonna leave me wasting away in the streets of Philadelphia?_

The singer’s voice is deep and rough and sounding so close Bilbo can almost smell him, warm and leathery and damp. Thorin has turned the volume up so high that Bilbo can hear every breath taken, every vowel flattened, every word slurred. The nonsense syllables of the chorus build and swell; Bilbo’s chest rises and falls, his hands loose at his sides.

When Bilbo is stressed, he turns to folk music, something with picked guitar and layered harmonies, something light and airy and sad. Something with sweet, sad voices. Apparently, Thorin doesn’t think the same way. His music is low and soft and it works its way into your bones, calms you down by smothering you in sound. Slows down your heartbeat by pressing on your chest. Overpowers you, forces you into a different rhythm than the one you in which had been living.

_Ain’t no angel gonna greet me here._

_There’s just you and I, my friend._

_And my clothes don’t fit me no more._

_I walked a thousand miles just to slip this skin._

The next song is more of the same, heavy background synths supporting lazy vocals, a saxophone sliding in with a mute and a melody line that unclenches something in Bilbo’s chest. He bows his head, rests his elbows on his knees, eyes still closed. The man half-singing, half-speaking in his ears is impossibly calm. Everything moves in slow motion.

Bilbo doesn’t know how much time passes before he opens his eyes to find Thorin crouched in front of him, his head cocked to one side. Bilbo reaches up and takes the headphones off, feeling unaccountably tired. Thorin’s eyes are dark and his smile a little wistful.

“The boss?”

“Are you going to tell me, seriously, that you don’t know Bruce Springsteen?”

Bilbo shakes his head. “No. Should I?”

“It’s nearly one o’clock,” Thorin finally says, instead of explaining, instead of giving a proper answer. “You should go home. Get some rest.”

“What about you?” Bilbo asks. His tongue is thick in his mouth, his lips dry. “Aren’t you leaving?”

“I still have work to do.”

“I’ll stay, then.”

Thorin looks at him longer than is really comfortable. Bilbo can just make out the muffled strains of music still coming through the headphones in his lap. Thorin makes a noise that might almost be a laugh. He stands and reaches a hand down to Bilbo, tugs him to his feet. “Come on,” he says, “You’ll fall asleep here if you stay. I’ll walk with you.” When Bilbo looks at him in askance, Thorin rubs the back of his neck. “I need to clear my mind,” he says, and that’s that. They lock up the design studio and head out into the night. Campus is empty. Only one car in the parking lot, no students on the sidewalk. The lights are on in some of the fraternity houses as they pass, thick curtains drawn over the windows. Neither of them speaks. They walk side by side and Thorin looks down at Bilbo every so often as if he is trying to figure something out.

When they get to the top of the stairway leading down to Bilbo’s house, Thorin stuffs his hands into his pockets and clears his throat. “Sleep,” he says. “It’ll help.”

“Thank you,” is all that Bilbo can really say. He realises he’s still holding onto Thorin’s mp3 player and headphones and moves to give it back, but Thorin shakes his head.

“Keep it.”

“Really? No, I couldn’t possibly—”

“Not forever,” Thorin says quickly. “I just mean, keep it for now. You might . . . need it. Again. Or something. Anyway, I’ll, uh, see you later.”

“Goodnight,” Bilbo calls after him, belatedly, but Thorin is already walking away, heading back up the street, hands still in his pockets, head tucked into his chest. Bilbo watches him turn the corner and then picks his way down the uneven steps. The mp3 player is warm in his hand.

When Bilbo dreams that night, Thorin’s voice and Bruce Springsteen’s blend into one.

Chapter End Notes

Is this time-skip business working? Let me know.

Having a bit of a rough night so I abandoned my own schoolwork in order to write
Bilbo fighting with his. I'm trying to balance Bilbo alone in his early days as a grad student with Bilbo and Thorin on the road to knowing each other, because there's only so much introverted commentary I can write before needing a bit of dialogue. I hope it's working.

These two still have a long way to go . . .
Chapter 3

Bilbo wakes up that Saturday after Gandalf’s unexpected phone-call determined to spend the entire day in his attic. He has a reasonable idea what it is Gandalf would rather he do. Milstein Hall is part of the School of Art, Architecture, and Planning. The event calendar on their website lists today as the first in a series of hands-on design workshops, two hour sessions every Saturday, now until further notice. Apparently it’s a kind of extended thesis requirement for some of the graduates, giving them practice lecturing and critiquing. In order to give them something to critique, the architecture department opened up the program to the general public. How Gandalf found out about this, Bilbo has no idea. But he’s not really surprised—the old man seems to know everything about everyone, always. No matter where he is or what else he’s involved in.

Bilbo could go. Technically. He knows this. It’s free of cost, all materials provided. He’s awake anyway—can’t sleep—and it’s only two hours out of his day, which leaves plenty of time to get his reading done. It’s a gorgeous late October morning, the rare upstate kind that’s forgotten it’s meant to be channeling winter already, so the sky is deep, bright blue. Not a bad day to walk up to campus. Bilbo’s passed by the studio before. He has seen its wall-to-wall windows and has thought to himself, each time, that it must be a nice place to work.

To work with his hands.

This is what he wanted. Isn’t it?

Bilbo paces his apartment, mug of tea in hand, gesturing vaguely. He draws the line at talking to himself. He has a houseplant—he could talk to that.

Or he could just crawl back into bed, Gandalf’s advice be damned. Except that his not-uncle’s advice is uncannily good, even when he doesn’t want to hear it. Perhaps especially then.

He’s made his mind up before he really admits it to himself. It’s only two hours. One class. He doesn’t have to commit to anything. If it comes down to it, he supposes that he doesn’t even need to stay for the full session. If there are too many people, or if he feels out of place, or—

Carrying on a silent argument with oneself nearly qualifies as talking to oneself. Bilbo gets dressed and pours his now-cold tea down the drain. Changes his sweater. Stares at himself in the bathroom mirror and debates putting in his contact lenses. Changes his sweater again and keeps the glasses. Puts on his gloves and his scarf, because it’s already quarter after seven, and he needs to start walking and stop worrying about his appearance and first-impressions. It’s not as if he’s going to make friends.

Hands-on workshop. Something to distract himself. That’s all he wants.

The building is quiet when he gets there and he stands outside for a minute to catch his breath and loosen the scarf from his throat. He knows his hair is probably a mess, bangs stuck to his forehead with sweat, and he scrubs a hand through it even though it’s a lost cause. The concrete steps are smooth and quiet underfoot as he makes his way up to the studio, passing student projects in various states of completion. For some indiscernible reason, the hall is filled with birds. Geese, mainly, of the Canadian variety, with a pigeon or two thrown in for . . . variety, Bilbo supposes.
He’s so distracted by the geese—halfway up the walls, leaning on the windows, hanging from the ceiling—that he walks straight into the studio. No pausing outside the doorway to compose himself or survey the room. Straight in, to a wide open room, clear and light with the morning sun. There isn’t anyone there. Idly, Bilbo wonders if it’s been cancelled.

He goes over to one of the windows that faces down towards the lake, wondering if the view is as good as he imagined. He’s staring out at blazing trees and the tops of houses when a noise comes from behind. A ragged groan on the other side of the room, behind one of the large tables.

“Don’t tell me someone actually came,” a voice says, deep and not-quite-smooth. Bilbo watches, pressed back against the window, as a man unfolds himself from the floor and pushes upright, palms flat against the table, neck stretching first to one side and then the other, slowly. He can’t quite look away. “Or are you just lost?” the man asks.

“Sorry?”

“What are you doing here?”

“I thought—that is, I’d heard there was some kind of . . . workshop. Or something.”

“There is.”

“Oh. Right. And, er, is that here?”

“It is.”

“Right. Thank you.” Bilbo clears his throat and looks to the door. Surely other students will arrive soon, or the instructor. The man crosses the room to lean against the desk next to Bilbo and looks at him. He smells faintly of alcohol. His hair is long and tangled, a dark mess tied in a knot at the back of his head, and his shirt is wrinkled, but his eyes are bright and his hands are steady as he crosses his arms over his chest.

“Are you really going to do this?” he asks.

“I’m not sure I know what you mean,” Bilbo says.

“The workshop. You’re actually interested?”

“Yes?”

The man lets out a short laugh. His face doesn’t look amused, and Bilbo bites his lip, glancing once again at the door. “You can stop looking over there,” the man says. “No one ever comes to these things. Waste of fucking time.”

“You’re here,” Bilbo ventures.

“You see my problem, then.”

“Sorry, no.”

“Thorin,” the man says, offering Bilbo a hand with some show of reluctance. Bilbo takes it, his fingers narrow and cold in Thorin’s grip. “M.Arch.1, final year. Here because I have to be. And you’re here, God knows why, so I suppose that makes you my student. At least my profs will be pleased. They can tick their little boxes. Come on. Let’s get this over with.”

Thorin walks back to the table at the front of the room and starts sorting through papers.
Bilbo gives the door one last look before turning his back and taking a seat at one of the drafting tables. He folds his hands in his lap. He waits. Thorin is still rifling through papers, his back to Bilbo.

“So,” Bilbo ventures, “what exactly do you teach? Here, I mean.”

“Depends.”

“I see.” Bilbo takes off his glasses and cleans them on the sleeve of his sweater. “Depends on what?”

“Why are you here?” Thorin asks, his voice suddenly close.

“What?” Bilbo looks up quickly and shoves his glasses back on. Thorin is standing right in front of him. “Just . . . looking for something to do.”

“On a Saturday morning? Nothing better to do? What are you, a first-year?”

“Yes? But, er, in the doctoral program. Not . . . not undergrad.”

“Small mercies. What department?”

“English. Literature.”

“Hmm. Should’ve guessed.”

“Sorry?”

Thorin waves a hand at Bilbo. “You look the part.”

“Thank you?”

“Sure, take it as a compliment.” Thorin drags a hand through his hair and looks annoyed, whether with its tangles or the situation Bilbo can’t tell. “You interested in defecting, then? Becoming an architect?”

“No, not really. I just . . . like space.”

“Hmm.”

“I mean,” Bilbo says, flustered now, and wishing Thorin would stop staring at him, or standing so close. “I like how space functions in novels. How characters’ actions are determined by the spaces they inhabit. How, say, the late 19th century Modernist interior would affect someone’s mental state, their interiority, that kind of thing. Or how certain characters are attuned to their surroundings, geographically, and how the author presents that, whether there are maps in the text, or how their surroundings are described. Or. You know.”

“Space.”

“Yes.”

Thorin continues to stare at Bilbo. The clock ticks several minutes by. No one else walks into the studio. After Bilbo drops his gaze to his lap and shifts his feet on the rungs of the high stool, Thorin heaves a sigh. “All right, space cadet. You ever done anything with a scale rule?”

Thorin spends the better part of an hour explaining the various tools and instruments Bilbo can expect to use in the workshop—if, that is, he sticks around. It’s fairly straightforward and Thorin
sounds bored out of his mind, and when he starts going into the different kinds of paper Bilbo has to stop him.

“Can’t we just . . . make something?”

“You want to make something?”

“I mean, is it really necessary for me to learn this?”

“My profs think so. That, and you’re taking enough notes to make me think it is.”

“Oh, no, that’s not—I just need something to do with my hands,” Bilbo confesses. “That’s really why I’m here.”

“Restless, huh?”

“A bit, yes.”

“You won’t get very far making a scale model without doing your drawings first.” Thorin rubs his face, scratching at what looks like a week’s worth of unshaved chin. “Guess we can do some kind of mock-up. Just to demonstrate. It’ll look terrible.”

“I don’t mind.”

“It’ll only be paper. I’m not wasting good supplies on this.”

“That’s fine.”

“All right, get over here. I don’t trust you with a blade. Probably bleed all over the table.”

“I wouldn’t,” Bilbo says, but he slides down from his stool and joins Thorin at the table anyway as the architecture grad starts cutting and folding paper. Thorin points things out here and there, asks Bilbo to hand him things, curses at the tape sticking to his fingers. Bilbo fights a completely unfounded urge to smile.

“There,” Thorin says, after a while, and sets the model down in front of Bilbo.

Bilbo blinks at it. “It’s just a square.”

“Basically.”

“Is it . . . meant to be like that?”

“It’s Olin,” Thorin says, which means, yes. It is meant to be a square. The library is a Cold War relic, all narrow windows and sub-sub-basements that doubled as bomb shelters back in the day.

Bilbo lets go of his smile and when Thorin claps a hand on his shoulder he’s so startled he thinks he’ll fall over.

“Was wondering if you could do that,” Thorin says. “We’re out of time. I’ve got actual work to do.”

“Of course,” Bilbo says, and tries another smile. “I’ll let you get back to it.” Thorin shoves the crude paper model at him.

“Take it. It’s not just a square, you know. And if you wanted to come back next week, we
could—I have to be here anyway, so you might as well show up.”

“I will,” Bilbo says, and thinks that he’s probably telling the truth. “Er, thanks. For the workshop. Sorry to take up your time.”

“I’d just have been sleeping if you hadn’t come.”

“Well, you should probably . . . sleep anyway. You, uh, look like you could use it.”

“Hah. Sure. I could use a lot of things.” Thorin rubs glue off of one thumb and stares at some point over Bilbo’s right shoulder. “Get out of here,” he says. “Don’t spend all weekend with your books. You look pale.”

“I’m always pale,” Bilbo says, and feels his cheeks flush without knowing why. “Nevermind. Just—have a nice weekend.”

“We’ll see,” Thorin says, which isn’t really the conversationally expected response, so Bilbo just nods and turns to leave. “Wait, hang on,” Thorin calls after him. “You never actually told me your name. Unless you just want to be space cadet . . .”

“It’s Bilbo,” he says, already at the door, not turning around.

“So that’s a no to space cadet?”

Bilbo leaves before he can answer, mostly because he doesn’t know what he would say, and that doesn’t tend to end well. Thorin’s laughter follows him as he goes, through the hall, down the stairs, out of the building. When Bilbo walks down the hill back to his apartment, he doesn’t turn around. Doesn’t want to know if Thorin is watching him go, from those wide studio windows.

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Sometimes it’s one in the morning and Bilbo finds himself sitting at his desk, cross-legged in a high-backed office chair he salvaged from the department’s recent remodeling efforts, wrapped in a sweater that’s always been somewhat itchy, feet cold despite two pairs of socks and the fact that it’s now well into April and officially spring, his books and papers spread out before him, the light of his computer screen a cold glow, and for no reason at all, he’ll feel like crying.

It doesn’t make sense.

He’ll get up and make a cup of tea, or put a record on, something dusty-sounding, with lots of harmonica. He’ll check to make sure he’s closed the curtains on the awning windows so no one can see in. He’ll press the palms of his hands against his eyes and push, push, but he’s not sure what he’s trying to push out, or what he’s trying to keep in. Everything. Nothing. He can’t even answer his own questions. Questions of what he’s doing here, of why he can’t focus. He’ll stand in the shower, so hot that it burns, until he feels guilty about wasting water.

He’ll sit back at his desk, cold, tense, until he’s so tired he can fall into bed and know he won’t remember his dreams. Know he’ll wake in the morning feeling awful, with a bad taste in his mouth and none of his reading done.

He’s fine.
He’s just a little worn out.

He had dinner with Thorin last weekend and it had been good. More than good. He was expecting company, one or two of Thorin’s strange and—frankly—intimidating group of friends, but there was no one. Just Thorin and himself, with Thorin’s dog nosing up against Bilbo’s leg and banana muffins heartily mocked and summarily eaten, the stereo playing yet another band Thorin was determined Bilbo should know. The biggest surprise was that Thorin actually cooked. Really, properly cooked. He was living in a garage-turned-apartment on the back of a History professor’s property, and said professor had a grill. Apparently grilling steak was one of the few culinary skills Thorin would admit to having, though Bilbo suspected there were more.

They stood on the back deck—and since when did garages have back decks, Bilbo wondered—while Thorin grilled, talking through the smoke and watching Erebor run around the yard. “You keep staring and I’ll start to think you’re only here for that dog,” Thorin said.

“I’ll keep staring, then,” Bilbo replied, looking pointedly out at the flat-coated retriever.

“I’ll eat your steak.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“I would.”

Bilbo sighed and gave Thorin a long-suffering look which lasted all of three seconds before he ducked his head, quickly embarrassed. Bantering, again. Where did it come from? How did people manage it?

“If you do, I’ll keep the muffins for myself.”

“All of them? Bilbo, you’ll get fat.”

“I will not.”

“Hide it under all those sweaters.”

“Shut up, you,” Bilbo told Thorin, who was shaking with barely-concealed laughter. He made a move as if to hit Thorin on the shoulder but pulled the motion and turned instead, stepping off the deck and into the yard. “Here, Ere,” he called, and the dog came bounding up, his head nearly level with Bilbo’s hips, seventy-five pounds of enthusiasm. “Good dog.”

“No steak for him, either,” Thorin called off the deck. Bilbo pretended not to hear. “Swear it’s like you’ve teamed up against me.” Thorin muttered as he finished cooking their dinner and Ere tackled Bilbo into the grass and made him sneeze, and the spring sun hung low in the sky, washing everything in golden light. They ate inside, across from each other at Thorin’s Formica table, and if Bilbo sat a little stiffly on the threadbare couch after dinner when the sun had set and Ere was a sleepy hump on the cushion next to him and Thorin was offering him a beer, then the situation itself had nothing to do with it.

It was just him.

“What’s wrong with you?” Thorin asked.

So perhaps it wasn't just him, or at the very least, it was enough of him that other people could see it too. “Nothing,” Bilbo said. “I’m fine.”
Thorin knocked the beer bottle against Bilbo’s knee. Bilbo took it automatically and then stared at it, cold in his hands, without drinking. “More fine or less fine?” Thorin asked.

“More,” Bilbo said, which couldn’t be called lying, because Thorin never specified a basis for comparison.

“More than last term?”

“Of course. You—you should know that.”

“I’d hoped.” Thorin took a drink, contemplated the scene on his couch briefly, and then slipped a knee under Ere, scooping a too-large dog easily into his lap so he could sit down. “I would like to think that . . .” Thorin rubbed his dog’s ears, looking anywhere but at Bilbo. “I would like to think that we’re friends,” he said, voice gruffer than usual.

“Aren’t we?” Bilbo asked. “We are, aren’t we?”

“Then why do you never tell me what’s bothering you? It’s always me, pulling . . . I’m not good at this. Talking. Getting other people to talk. God knows I’m terrible at picking up hints. But I can listen to you, if you would just start the conversation, so . . . work with me here.”

“Thorin, it’s not—it isn’t as though I don’t appreciate what you’re trying to do.”

“Keyword: trying.”

“I don’t know what to tell you.”

“I’m worried about you,” Thorin said, the words coming out in a rush, as if he didn’t mean to speak them. “I mean—”

“Did you ask me to dinner just to psychoanalyse me?” Bilbo asked. He took a gulp of beer and grimaced at the taste. Stout. Of course Thorin would drink stout.

“No, just for your dessert,” Thorin retorted. “And stop making that face, that’s good beer.”

“You can keep it for yourself, then. Some company for your Friday nights.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just that I wish you would stop showing up hungover every Saturday, as if it isn’t anything, as if it’s just normal and there’s you and there’s me and every time I see you, practically, you’re—” Bilbo broke off to wave his hands around. Ere made a noise of protest at the couch shifting.

“We’re not having this conversation,” Thorin said, his voice even and pitched low. “I’m trying to help you.”

“Maybe you’re the one who needs help.”

“I’m not the one who—damn it, would you stop this?”

“What?”

“This, all this, always turning the conversation onto other people. I told you, I don’t know how to do this. I asked you to dinner tonight so I could just listen to you.”

“Conversation is a two-way street, Thorin. And that’s just if we’re being trite. If you really
wanted to hear—"

“I do."

“If you really wanted to hear,” Bilbo repeated, dislodging himself from Ere’s sprawled limbs and standing up, “you’d have figured it out already. I’ve told you. I’ve been telling you, all along. You just haven’t been listening.” He stuffed his hands in his pockets and squared his shoulders. “Forget it. I’ll see myself out.”

Chapter End Notes

Timeline clarification (I'm trying to avoid giving outright dates, because I don't think that really fits the tone of the story, but it might become necessary):

Chapter 1 is half April, half the previous August. Chapter 2 is half late October (post-August, pre-April), half mid December (post-October). Chapter 3 is half late October (same week), half April (same week as Chapter 1, except as a memory).

Now that I write it out that way, it is kind of confusing . . . I'm making this up as I go, and writing scenes as they come, so the progression isn't exactly smooth. I'll think about it this week and figure out if the formatting needs to change or something. Thanks for reading.
October ends on a Wednesday and Bilbo is in the typical mid-week crisis that affects every grad student. He doesn’t have classes on Wednesdays and should be doing his laundry or washing his floor or something productive but instead has been sitting in bed since he awoke at seven, huddled in his blankets, emerging only for a fresh cup of tea. He tells himself that he’s reading but honestly he’s staring at the walls. *Jacob’s Room* sits neglected in his lap and he’s thinking of a time when he was just a kid, when his parents packed him into the car and drove an hour east to the bay. They had a picnic lunch. He fell asleep on the blanket and woke up with sand in his hair.

It’s one of the better memories he’s had as of late.

He manages to get out of bed around four in the afternoon, by which time it’s nearly dark. He makes himself toast, more out of a sense of obligation, trying to remember the taste of apricot jam. Two-hundred and fifty-four pages of reading left for the week, and then it will be the weekend. It will be Saturday, and it will be November, and though Bilbo said he would come back, he’s not sure he will. He could just tell Gandalf he went, but then, lying to the old man has never worked out before. Gandalf always, somehow, knows. Always has. Bilbo paces his floor—still unwashed—Friday night, alone in his attic, and frets about the next morning.

The “alone in his attic” bit is starting to worry him. At least there is no wallpaper, yellow or otherwise, and he’s not a woman. Still, the whole situation is verging uncomfortably into the territory of literary trope.

Bilbo goes back to the studio on Saturday. It’s snowing lightly as he makes the trek from his apartment up to Milstein, the oaks still hanging on to crippled leaves, the streets wet and grey. He’s wearing a knit hat that will make his hair into an absolute wreck when he takes it off, and an oversized Fair Isle sweater that used to be—embarrassingly, but it’s not as if anyone can tell—his mother’s. It’s armour emotionally as much as it is protection against the cold, and he feels about twelve years old again for even thinking it, but there it is.

Thorin isn’t asleep this time but bent over a drafting table, all broad shoulders in worn flannel, his back to the door. Bilbo wonders if he should cough or something, announce his presence, but Thorin turns around before he can decide. So he takes off his hat instead and says, “I hope it’s all right. That I came back, I mean.”

Thorin is laughing too hard to answer. Actually laughing, full-bodied, his head tilted back, one hand on his knee. Bilbo frowns at him until he settles down enough to ask, “What happened to you?”

“. . . What do you mean?”

“You look like hell.”

“If you’re referring to the state of my hair,” Bilbo says, patting uselessly at it with a hand and earning another laugh from Thorin, “you hardly have a place to talk. Do you even know what a comb is?”

“I do.”
“And when was the last time you used one?” Bilbo gives up on his hair as a lost cause and takes off his coat instead.

“This morning.”

“I doubt that. And I didn’t come to talk personal appearance with you, anyway.”

“Good,” Thorin says, though he still looks far too smug. “Let’s talk groundplans. Get over here.”

Bilbo hangs his coat off the back of a chair and goes to Thorin’s side. The drafting table is covered with a sheet of tracing paper overlaid on a template of a building that is, roughly, a square. Standing so close, Bilbo can see that the knuckles of Thorin’s right hand are split and there is a bruise on his chin, dark under his beard. His boots are unlaced and for some reason that bothers Bilbo almost more than the other things do. Before he can speak, though, Thorin is handing him a triangle and a scale-rule and saying, “Since you like Olin so much, we’ll start there.”

“I don’t like Olin,” Bilbo protests, “and I certainly don’t like it enough to draw seven floors of it, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“Only the first floor.” Thorin slides off his stool and gestures to it. “Sit. Makes no sense for me to just teach you this abstractly. You might as well do it.”

“I’m not going to be a library designer.”

“Neither am I. It’s an exercise. Stop complaining.”

“What do you want to design?” Bilbo asks, hoisting himself up onto the stool.

“Scale-rule practice first. Tell me these dimensions.” Thorin runs his finger along several of the lines on the groundplan. “And I’m more interested in restoration.”

“All right, what do you want to restore, then?”

“Castles. Churches. Old stone houses. I like the geometry of them. You’re doing it wrong.”

“Am I?”

“Eighth-inch scale. Check your key.”

Sure enough, the key on the bottom right of the drawing confirms it. 1/8” = 1’0”. Bilbo flips the scale-rule and re-measures. “Not very many castles around here,” he says, drawing a neat tick-mark on the paper at twenty-five feet.

“No.”

“So you want to work in Europe?”

“No. This wall next.”

“If not Europe, then where?”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t work in Europe.”

“You did, though—or, no, just that you don’t want to. So you would work there?”
“If someone hired me, I would work.”

“So—”

“Now that you have the walls, you need windows. And doors.” Thorin tugs a piece of paper off the neighbouring desk, instructions on how to properly indicate windows and doors in groundplans. Penciled in block capitals below are notes about Olin Library and its entrances and exits.

“Did you write this up?” Bilbo asks. “Is that why you were in Olin the other day?”

“You saw me?”

“Well, I—that is . . . I thought I did.”

“Sure you weren’t hallucinating?” Thorin asks, and it sounds as if he’s joking but Bilbo flinches all the same.

“I’m not the one who’s hung-over,” he mutters, pulling the paper out of Thorin’s hand. He bites his tongue and starts marking out the front doors, already certain that this is going to be incredibly tedious. Marking the windows, when Olin has practically an entire wall of them on the first floor.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing.”

“Thought we agreed not to talk personal appearance. Or should I start in on your sweater?”

“There is nothing wrong with my sweater.”

“You could fit another person in there.”

“At least it’s clean,” Bilbo says. He can feel the back of his neck itching and it’s not from the sweater, whose wool has always been soft. He doesn’t dare to look up from the tracing paper. There is a tight, long silence. Then Thorin, his voice rough, says, “Fuck off” and walks away, jostling the table as he goes and making Bilbo’s line crooked.

They don’t talk after that.

Bilbo painstakingly marks out each window, each door, cross-hatching the solid sections. It takes the better part of an hour because he is a perfectionist and the pencil keep smudging and his hands are shaking even though he glares at them in an attempt to get them to stop. He can hear Thorin moving around, is certain that the man is going to shout at him any second, but can’t bring himself to look up and find out. This was a mistake, coming here. Thinking he could do something with his hands, with other people, and do it without feeling as though he’s going to be ill from a combination of anxiety and, startlingly, anger that turns his stomach.

Bilbo pushes the stool back from the desk, knocking his pencil and scale-rule to the floor. He’s halfway into his coat when the music starts. It’s so far from what he was expecting that it stops him in his tracks.

It’s just a drumbeat, low and then a scattering of high, light hits, and a slow three-note bass pattern. Something that sounds like a muted xylophone mixes with a cello and everything weaves
together. Bilbo doesn’t turn around to look but he can hear that Thorin has stopped moving. Is, presumably, sitting somewhere, or leaning against the wall. Listening. Waiting.

Waiting to see what Bilbo does? Or just waiting?

*Now I’m waking at the crack of dawn*

to send a little money home

*from here to the moon.*

*It’s rising like a discothèque,*

*and now my bags are down and packed*

*for traveling.*

The man’s voice is liquid-smooth, clear over the instrumental texture. There’s a lot going on in the song but somehow it’s soothing, not agitating. Bilbo drops his shoulders, shrugs out of the coat sleeves, still staring at the back wall and the door. He can see a speaker in the far corner, paired with one in the front of the room. He gets the sense that this is, probably, something Thorin does often. Comes up here and plays music loudly. Disrupts the other students. Perhaps that’s why the studio is empty when he comes—Thorin has already annoyed everyone else away.

Bilbo waits out the song, trying to follow each instrument as they blend in and out, trying to slow his own breathing. Already he feels less like throwing up, which is something of a small miracle in itself, but he still cannot turn around. When the song slows and fades out, instrument by instrument, Bilbo leaves.

Thorin doesn’t say a word.

Sunday passes quietly, Bilbo in his attic, shuffling around with a blanket over his shoulders and fingerless gloves on his hands, the air colder than early November has any right to make it. Yesterday’s snow didn’t last but the world outside is damp and Bilbo doesn’t want to face it. Come Monday, he has to, with his first-year colloquium to attend. The class is about as interesting as expected, something on early modern poetry that Bilbo tries to follow. He ends up marking lines on his notebook instead, stopping himself when he realises he’s drawn a window in groundplan view. The student next to him is playing solitaire on her phone and Bilbo watches over his shoulder, discreetly, for the remainder of the lecture. She’s not very good.

On Thursday Bilbo makes himself go back to Olin. He hasn’t been avoiding it, not deliberately. Just accidentally. There’s no sign of Thorin, or anyone who might be Thorin, and he climbs the stairs slowly up to the seventh floor and sits—hides—in his carrel. He reads for a bit but *Women in Love* is tedious and he’s not in the mood. Lawrence has never been his favourite. The seventh floor is quiet, the lights dim in the stacks. It’s pleasant enough to stare out the window for a while, looking at the campus outside and not the window itself. When the snow starts up again and the sky darkens, Bilbo packs his books into his schoolbag and thinks about going back to his apartment. He won’t get any work done tonight, he knows, but he might as well try.

Before he leaves, reluctantly, he checks his e-mail. There might be word from a professor, a new assignment or a cancelled class. There isn’t. There is, though, an e-mail from an address he
doesn’t recognise, the initials T.O. and a string of numbers. He panics and signs out of his account. Takes several deep breaths. Then, very deliberately, logs in again and opens the message.

Bilbo—

Wondering if you’re going to come back on Saturday. I’ll do my best not to mock your sweater. Or your hair. Your groundplan was good. Precise. It’s not done yet. Shame to leave it unfinished.

I looked you up, by the way. In the student directory. Not hard, with a first name like yours. Figured it was fair use of my “instructor” status, to check in on you.

What if I play more music for you? Will you come back then?

—T.

It’s awkward and stilted and doesn’t say half of what it should. Bilbo definitely doesn’t print it out and hang it on the wall next to his desk. Doesn’t glance at it from time to time, as if to remind himself that it’s (not) real. Doesn’t wake up early Saturday morning and lace up his boots and walk up the hill, where Thorin won’t be waiting.

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It’s been almost a week since what Bilbo is privately referring to as “the disastrous dinner of April the seventh.” If he was the sort to keep a journal, that date would either have pages upon pages written about it or be struck out entirely—he can’t quite decide. Since he doesn’t keep a journal, it’s a moot point. He made it halfway down Thorin’s long driveway that night before Thorin was calling after him, offering to drive him home, telling him to wait. Bilbo didn’t wait. Not because he wanted to leave, but because he thought, foolishly, that if he just kept walking, Thorin, with his longer legs and his heavy boots and his rusted car, would come after him.

Thorin didn’t.

Of course he didn’t.

They’ve spent the week avoiding each other, which isn’t very hard, as their classes don’t overlap and they use different libraries and Bilbo’s something of a hermit even in the best of times. He has a cell-phone now, has had one since Christmastime, and Thorin’s is one of the few numbers in it—Thorin drove him to the store to purchase it, and intimidated the technician trying to sell Bilbo a higher-priced model—but the architecture grad doesn’t call. Bilbo is a little grateful and a little annoyed, but mostly just disappointed. He throws himself into his work. He writes a lousy paper on Defoe’s mapping of early eighteenth-century London’s narrow alleyways qua escape routes for thieves in *Moll Flanders* for a course he has come to resent, a course that has left him firmly determined to stop trying to venture out of his field. He prepares and delivers, badly, a presentation on time and narrative and the paradox of the “as-yet untold” story in Ricouer. He gets rejected from a collaborative conference on the nineteenth century and refuses to admit that he’s upset over it. It would have meant presenting a paper in front of some indeterminate number of people, anyway, so perhaps it’s for the best. He goes for a walk and flinches when he sees a man with a dog but no, it’s not Thorin, not Erebor, and if he goes back to his attic and draws the curtains and knocks his head
against the wall, no one has to know.

It’s been that sort of week and yet, here he is, Friday night, over at Thorin’s and at a loss for words. He didn’t mean for it to happen, but then, that’s usually how these things work. On Thursday Thorin came up to Bilbo’s carrel in Olin, tucked away on the seventh floor, a scowl on his face that he was quick to blame on the building—“Fucking depressing aesthetic,” he said, as if the Fine Arts Library was any great improvement—and hovered over Bilbo and asked surprisingly astute questions about his research until Bilbo gave him a look that very clearly said, “I’m so busy I can’t even think straight, so if you have a purpose for bothering me, please state it and be done.” And Thorin invited him to dinner again, and said he’d pick Bilbo up at seven, and left before he got a proper reply.

Bilbo dropped his head onto his desk and spent the rest of the evening entirely unable to focus on work, awake all hours of the morning and hating himself for it, and Friday came even though he wished it away.

So Bilbo sits on Thorin’s couch, sleepy and full in a way he hasn’t been since last week, waiting for things to go wrong. And things don’t go wrong. They’ve spent the week pretending and equally, separately, absorbed. The dinner was good—pasta with some kind of mushroom sauce, and Thorin didn’t even ask Bilbo to bring anything, and he cooked vegetables, not just meat with some vegetables but only vegetables, and that should be the first hint that something is wrong—and now Ere is asleep on his bed in the corner and the two of them are on the couch with the television glowing and rain trickling down the windows. It’s so domestic it hurts.

Bilbo has to break it.

“What are we even doing?” he asks.

“What?”

“You, me. Here.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I don’t know,” Bilbo says, and gives a small laugh. “And that’s precisely the point.”

Thorin shifts on the couch, dragging his arm slowly out from behind his head to drop both his hands in his lap. He turns and looks at Bilbo. Bilbo notices, somewhere in the back of his mind, that there are lines under Thorin’s eyes. He smells of Old Spice and the early spring rain. His shirt is wrinkled and a little too tight.

“Thought you didn’t want to talk about it,” he says.

“I don’t.”

“What’s the problem, then?”

“God, Thorin, we can’t just carry on not talking about it. Do you even realise how ridiculous that sounds? What are we supposed to do, just keep on pretending for, what, another month and a half, and then you’ll graduate and you’ll leave and I’ll just be—no, that doesn’t work. Not for me.”

“Talk, then.”

“I can’t.”
“You mean won’t.”

“No, I mean—every time I try to say what I want to say, I can’t find the words.”

“Thought that was your job. English, and all.”

“Shut up, that’s not it.” Bilbo looks down at his feet, hoping that if he continues to say nothing, Thorin will step in. Take the lead.

“I wanted to talk to you a week ago. You ran out of here, didn’t say a word, and then next thing I know it’s as if nothing happened. You agreed to dinner. Now you say we can’t do this, whatever this is, anymore. I’m trying to understand, here, Bilbo, I am. Give me some credit. But I’m not a fucking mind-reader.”

“No one’s asking you to be,” Bilbo says, with perhaps a little more bite than the situation warrants, when they’re both so pleasantly full from their dinners. There is a hole in his right sock. He can see it, glaringly obvious, when he wriggles his toes. He’s had dinner but no dessert and no after-dinner drinks with his not-friend and they’ve made it through one-and-a-half Star Wars films and he’s had a hole in his sock the entire time. It is, he thinks, the sort of thing he should have noticed.

“Would be a damn sight easier if I was.”

“I don’t know what to call you,” Bilbo says finally, tearing his eyes away from his sock.

“What?” Thorin asks, after a moment of tense staring. “I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t.”

“No, hey, come on. You can’t just duck out of conversations every time I can’t follow. Use your words. What do you mean?”

“It’s what I was saying. What are we doing here? What are we?”


“You’re not a failure.”

“Hardly a professional.”

“No, look, that’s not it. I don’t mean life or—or academics, or what-have-you. I mean us.”

“Us.”

“I mean,” Bilbo says, and his face feels very hot, “you know. Us. As in, you, me, together.” He glances up at Thorin from the side, biting his lip, ready to flinch away. It takes a moment for Thorin to process what Bilbo’s just said. When he does, he blinks several times, steadily, and the corners of his mouth turn down.

“You don’t know what to call,” he says. “Besides my name.”

“Right.” Bilbo swallows, unable to look away. “I mean, I know your name.”

“I’d hope so.”

“It’s just that . . . it’s been a while. And I haven’t . . . I know I’m not exactly . . . oh, hell.”
“I’m not your boyfriend, if that’s what you’re hinting at.”

“No. No. I mean, yes, in a way, that’s what I—but . . . no.”

“It’s a stupid word.” Thorin looks at Bilbo, his eyes hard. He huffs out a breath and stands abruptly, walking over to the refrigerator. He opens it, stares inside for a long minute, and then comes back to the couch empty-handed, which is something. “I don’t know what I am. Or what you are.” He’s standing there, hands tense at his sides like he doesn’t know what to do with them.

Bilbo thinks that he may have stopped breathing. His heart is beating so strongly it hurts. He wonders how quickly he can make it to the door, retrace his steps from last week. The walk home will be long and wet but at this point it’s starting to look enticing.

“I do know what we are, though,” Thorin says, dragging the words out, as if it’s a challenge to even speak them. Bilbo has to mentally re-wind, bring himself back in through the door, out of the rain and onto the couch to make sure he’s heard correctly.

“What’s that?” he asks, completely and utterly confused.

“We are going to make this work.”

It is, possibly, one of the strangest things Thorin has ever said to him. And Thorin has been known to say some very strange things. Bilbo tilts his head, as though if he could only get the right angle, the right perspective on this situation, it would make sense. He tilts so far he nearly falls over and then Thorin’s hands are steadying and warm on his shoulders, and everything is even more confused.

“I—I can’t believe I just said that.” Thorin gives a low, hesitant noise, somewhere deep in his throat. “Fuck. I feel ridiculous.” He doesn’t lift his hands.

“You sound ridiculous,” Bilbo points out.

“Thank you for that.”

And then they’re both laughing, and Bilbo brings his hands up to rest on Thorin’s wrists. “You do realise what this means,” he says, suddenly serious.

“No. What?”

“We’ll have to talk. I mean, actually talk. About things.”

“Oh, God,” Thorin says. “I take it back.”

“You do?” The thought is terrifying. Bilbo’s certain he’s gripping too tight, but Thorin’s wrists are solid; unlike his own, they don’t feel as though they would break under pressure. He has to keep holding on.


Bilbo smiles, because even if he very much he doubts the rest of it, that much, at least, he knows to be true.
Thank you to everyone who's read so far, and everyone who's taken the time to comment--I'm so pleased that you're staying with this story.

The guys have their share of awkwardness in this chapter, but I hope it's starting to become clear how they get to know each other, and where they will eventually end up, in relation to one another. There was going to be more to the first part of the chapter (the November half) but I'm frustrated with it a bit right now and the wording wasn't coming, so I thought it best to just post this and write that scene another time. The second part of the chapter picks up from last chapter's semi-cliffhanger, in what I hope is a satisfactory way.

Slowly, things are coming together. The next chapters will see the gaps between November and April filled in, as well as April continuing on. If anyone has specific questions about anything, please ask in comments, or on tumblr if you'd prefer (stickmansaga).
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

By the time mid-December rolls around, Bilbo has been to the design workshop eight times. No one else ever comes; it’s always him and Thorin. Him and Thorin and the stale smell of alcohol, him and Thorin and music playing as the sun rises. They still haven’t quite figured out how to talk to each other. Bilbo thinks it is, perhaps, better that way.

Thorin has taught him about groundplans and elevations, about foam-core models and the many uses of balsa wood. They’ve tossed around theories and Bilbo’s learned how to spot an Eames chair, a house in Le Corbusier’s style, while Thorin sketches Norman arches and grumbles about limestone. Today he has his hair tied back; one of the braids that trail from his temples has escaped and swings down along his face as he slides his T-square across the drafting table. Bilbo looks up from his book on modernist architecture—Thorin dug it up from one of the studio’s reference shelves and thrust it at Bilbo, right at his chest, winding him, because of course Thorin, restorer of castles, disapproves of modernist architecture—and he watches, feeling intrusive, unable to look away. It’s cold in the studio, cold enough that Bilbo is glad for his wool socks and boots, yet Thorin is in shirtsleeves.

Technically, the university is closed for winter break. For most students this is a Saturday for sleeping in, packing up, going back to their parents for the holidays. In one week and three days, it will be Christmas. Bilbo was looking at his calendar the other day, thinking about how he would be able to get a ride back home, when the thought hit him. This is his home now. There isn’t anywhere else. Someone else will have Christmas in his parents’ house. Will wind their garlands through the hand-carved banister, will stand their tree under the highest point of the roof in the reading room, will hang their stockings on the wide slate mantel and greet carolers at the green door.

He hasn’t heard from Gandalf since October. Doesn’t know where the old man is or what he’s up to, which library archives he’s terrorising now with his obscure requests. He could be in another country, halfway around the world, or he could turn up on the doorstep tomorrow. Bilbo has a couple of cousins, somewhere. He has names and addresses, but Christmas is a time for families, and family is more than just names on an ancestral tree. It wouldn’t feel right to spend the holiday with them. Which leaves him here, with his attic and his books and the persistent, damp snow. At least, he thinks to himself, if he bakes a pie, he can eat the entire thing.

Thorin has Billy Bragg on the stereo because Bilbo had vetoed The Rolling Stones in the early morning hour. They compromised, with a classic rock guitarist but an album that’s an odd one with dry, slow-picked guitar and vocal harmonies, more lazy drums than driving beats. “He’s playing with Wilco and Natalie Merchant,” Thorin said, as if that was supposed to mean something to Bilbo. “Using Woody Guthrie’s lyrics,” he added, and that did mean something to Bilbo, something more than a name he had heard before. With the sun up and the music loud, Thorin’s booted foot tapping against the leg of his drafting table, Bilbo can look out the studio windows at the glistening streets and pretend that he is where he wants to be.

I’d like to rest my heavy head tonight

on a bed of California stars.
I’d like to lay my weary bones tonight
on a bed of California stars.

I’d love to feel your hand touching mine,
and tell me why I must keep working on,
yes, I give my life to lay my head tonight
on a bed of California stars.

“It’s Saturday,” Thorin says, after the next few songs.

“Yes?”

“Why are you still here?”

“Is it . . . not all right?”

“You’re not going away for the break?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Hmm.” Thorin flips a page in his reference book and hums a few bars of music. “Neither am I,” he says.

“I can leave, if I’m bothering you.”

“No. You’re not. Have to educate you, anyway.”

“Oh, you’re teaching me right now?” Bilbo asks, in a complete lapse from all tact. He contemplates putting his hand over his mouth before he says any more, but Thorin just turns and gives him an exasperated look over his shoulder, one braid trailing.

“The music, space cadet. Not the research. I figured you had enough practice with that. Could handle it on your own.”

“Not a space cadet,” Bilbo mumbles, and tucks his chin into his chest to break the gaze, thinking that will be the end of it.

“What’s your favourite Guthrie song?” Thorin asks then, turning back to his own project. “Don’t tell me you don’t have one.”

Bilbo thinks about it for a minute, idly running a finger along the spine of his book. Not talking is seeming easier and easier. Burying himself in the dusty pages—ironic, since it’s a relatively new book on modern architecture. “Thorin,” he says slowly, “Guthrie has hundreds and hundreds of songs.”

“One of your top ten, then.”

That’s a thing Thorin tends to do, Bilbo’s started to notice: ask questions as statements. As though he’s positive he’ll get an answer. It still takes Bilbo a minute, or maybe more, to find one. “I’ve always liked ‘Pastures of Plenty,’” he says. “I know it’s not obscure, and you were testing me.
... I could name you others. Just to prove it. But that one, probably, is one of my favourites."

“It wasn’t a test.”

“Oh.”

“Of course it wasn’t,” Thorin says, and just that one line is enough to make Bilbo shrink back, hunch his shoulders, look down at his book. “But that’s a good song,” Thorin adds, his voice a bit rough. “I know what it’s like to want a—that is, it’s a good song.”

“Thanks for your approval,” Bilbo says, which earns him another exasperated look, though this one has something like fondness in it.


“I’m really not.”

“Keep it up. All right. I’m starting to figure you out, I think. If you like Guthrie, you’ll like Johnny Cash. Tell me you know him. I’ll lose all faith if you don’t.”

“Faith in what, me or your guessing abilities? And yes, I do like Johnny Cash. My father”—and his voice doesn’t hitch, but only barely—“liked him. Used to play his music as he worked.”

“Good. Faith in my abilities. Same question: favourite song.”

“You first,” Bilbo says. “It’s only fair.”

“‘Sunday Morning Coming Down,’ ” Thorin answers, quick, like he doesn’t even have to think about it.

“I should have guessed.”

“Well, tell me yours.”

“I think I would say, ‘I Hung My Head,’ if I had to choose.”

“Hmph.”

“Hmph? What does hmph mean?”

“It means I should have guessed. Just as you said. Should have guessed you’d pick a song like that.”

“What’s wrong with it? ‘Sunday Morning’ is about being drunk and unwashed and lonely. I should think that has more to criticise than ‘I Hung My Head.’ ”

“‘I beg their forgiveness, I wish I was dead?’ ” Thorin quotes. “It’s all about shame. Apologies. Ergo, weakness.”

“It’s not about that at all.”

“No?”

“It’s about . . . not knowing what to do.”

“Weakness.”
“Oh, and a song that says, ‘The beer I had for breakfast wasn’t bad so I had one more for dessert’ is advocating strength, is that it?”

“Shut up.”

“Is that your motto, then?”

“I said, shut up!” Thorin crosses the room in three quick strides and fists his hands in Bilbo’s sweater, his breath hot and close. Bilbo tries to back away but can’t. His hands are useless at his side. He closes his eyes so he doesn’t have to see the look on Thorin’s face. “Don’t talk about things you don’t understand,” Thorin is saying, which is just stupid, because isn’t that what they’re here to do, in the workshop, in graduate school in general? To talk about what they don’t understand, and, one hopes, figure it out by talking about it? That’s the whole premise of a seminar, after all.

Bilbo wants to come up with a retort, wants to be properly angry, thinks it might do him good. But Thorin is taller and has a good twenty pounds on him and Bilbo is afraid. He doesn’t open his eyes.

“It’s none of your business. Do you hear me?” Thorin shakes Bilbo, his elbows sharp in Bilbo’s gut, hunched over the smaller man. “None.”

Billy Bragg plays on, unperturbed.

_I don't know what I'll do,_
_I don't know what I'll do,_
_Eisler’s on the come and go and_
_I don't know what I'll do._

Thorin relaxes his grip, slowly. Bilbo feels himself set back down on his stool. When loud footsteps move away from him he judges it safe to look. Thorin is standing at the windows looking down towards the lake, his shoulders heaving, his feet planted wide, one hand splayed up against the glass. The guitar is slow and surreal in the background. Bilbo’s legs are shaking too much to leave so he sits there, trying to figure out how everything went wrong so quickly when all they were doing was educating themselves.

The workshop hours pass and still Bilbo does not move and still Thorin stares out at the lake. They are, each of them, it seems, pretending that none of this has happened. Snow falls thick and wet, dirtying the windows. The music has turned jaunty and it isn’t helping. Once in a while a car passes below but for the most part they are alone.

“I’m going to Toronto on Monday,” Thorin says after what feels like hours. Bilbo doesn’t know how he’s expected to respond, so he says nothing. “Architecture conference,” Thorin adds, speaking to the window. “The whole week.”

“That’s . . . good?” Bilbo ventures. He flexes a foot, testing. If he needs to, he thinks he could run away now. He eyes the door, making certain that his path is clear.

“It is,” Thorin breathes, fogging up the glass. “Good for my career. There will be some people there to talk to.”

“Are you, um, presenting?”
“I’m part of a seminar.” Thorin finally pushes away from the window and turns to Bilbo. He keeps his distance, and his hands are in his pockets. He looks, Bilbo thinks, suddenly much younger.

“Well, then. Have a good, er, trip. I suppose.”

“I need you to watch my dog.”

There is silence then, as one song ends and another doesn’t begin.

“What?”

“I can’t take him with me. And he likes you.”

“He knocked me into the lake, Thorin. I don’t think that qualifies as liking.”

“For Erebor, it does.”

Bilbo wants to ask if the dog’s behavioural code applies to Thorin as well, if shaking him bodily connotes liking, but he doesn’t. Instead, he is practical. He is on the defensive and he knows it when he says, “I’m sure you can find someone else.”

“No. There isn’t anyone else.”

“What about that professor you rent from?”

“Gone on sabbatical.”

“What about your friends?”

“I don’t exactly have . . . friends,” Thorin says. “At least, they wouldn’t call themselves that. It’s more of an obligation thing. Duty. Look, damn it, Bilbo, that’s not important. Will you just watch the dog?”

“If they’re obligated to you, wouldn’t they watch him?”

“Half of them aren’t even on this side of the country. You won’t watch him. Fine. I’ll figure something else out.”

“You mean you won’t go to the conference,” Bilbo says, because he’s nothing if not perceptive. Doesn’t always know what to say—in fact, rarely knows what to say—but can see that there is something that should be said, which has to count for something.

Thorin doesn’t deny it. He’s packing up his desk and scowling. The album’s run out and the speakers are humming with faint static.

“Thorin, you can’t just not go.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It’s your career.”

“And Erebor is my dog.”

“The two are equal?”

“Of course not. Erebor’s much more important.”
“. . . Did you just make a joke?”

“If I have to qualify, then it wasn’t a good one.” He sighs and tugs his hair free from its tie. It spills over his shoulders, massively tangled. It should look, Bilbo thinks, quite stupid. How it manages not to is an impressive mystery. “It’s only a week.”

“Your dog could eat me.”

“He won’t.”

“But he could, which is the more worrying thing here.”

“You would be doing me a great favour,” Thorin says, very slowly. He looks Bilbo in the eye and at least has the decency to be a bit shamefaced.

Bilbo opens his mouth to say, “No,” except, “Yes,” comes out instead. “Yes, all right. I’ll watch your dog.”

“Good,” Thorin says. Bilbo’s starting to believe that “good” means “thank you” in Thorin’s vocabulary, or something close to it. “I’ll bring him over to your place tomorrow night.”

“Wait, no, no, that’s not—Thorin, that won’t work. I live in an attic.”

“It’s just the one week, Erebor will be fine. Take him to the park or something.”

“He’d go crazy. And even if he didn’t, I’m not allowed pets.”

“Sneak him in.”

“Your dog is bigger than I am. There is no way I could sneak him in.”

“We’ll do it at night, with a blanket—”

“Yes, and then what happens when you leave and I take him to the park? Which would be the cemetery, by the way, and I don’t know that he would really enjoy it.”

“He would. Erebor appreciates history.”

“Thorin, no.”

“Then we’re back to where we started. Me, not going.”

“I swear, you are the most—we’re not back to where we started. Not necessarily,” Bilbo says, even though the rational part of his brain is telling him that really, he’s been perfectly helpful, and he should just stop talking now.

“How so?”

“If you’re going to Toronto, I could . . . watch Erebor at your place. I mean, it would be easier, right?”

“You’d stay in my apartment.”

“Yes?”

“For a week, with my dog.”
“It was just an idea. No need to get all upset about it.”

“It’s just—I’m not really—no. No, it will work. It will. Monday, then. I’ll drive you up, sometime in the afternoon.”

“All right.”

“Good.” Thorin looks Bilbo over, head to toe. He’s done it before but it doesn’t get any less unnerving by being repeated. Then he’s gone, his bag hauled over his shoulder and his portfolio in his hand, leaving Bilbo to turn off the sound system and the lights, lock the door. As if he’s the one responsible for this space.

Walking home, his hat pulled low and his shoulders hunched against the snow, Bilbo thinks that they are, apparently, trusting each other now. It’s more than he had hoped for. If all it took was agreeing to spend a week with Thorin’s dog, he would have done it sooner.

What he doesn’t think about is the fact that it’s a week with Thorin’s dog, in Thorin’s apartment, alone. If he did think about that, he’d intimidate himself right out of going.

Monday, late afternoon, Bilbo fidgets with the strap on his satchel in the parking lot next to Milstein. His duffel is at his feet, probably over-packed. It isn’t as if he’s going to be going anywhere or seeing anyone for the next week. He doesn’t need to have five sweaters with him. Thorin rumbles up to the curb in his rusted Volvo before Bilbo can turn around, though, and then Thorin is tossing his duffel in the trunk and they are very close, inside the warmth of the car. The windows are a little fogged and it smells as if Thorin’s been smoking again.

“Look, I should tell you—” Thorin breaks off, drumming his fingers against the steering wheel as they idle at a red light. Bilbo doesn’t recognise the band playing on the car’s stereo, can’t tell if the music is gritty or if the speakers are just junk. It’s only the fourth time he’s been in the car. Once more, he thinks, and he’ll have it figured out. He doesn’t prompt Thorin to continue. They drive on, through the intersection and up along the lake.

“I went grocery shopping,” Thorin says, which is almost definitely not what he was going to say earlier. “Since you don’t have a car, you know, and I’ll be gone. There’s plenty of food.”

“Thank you.” Bilbo is surprised. He shouldn’t be, not really. Thorin’s been considerate before, in his own way. Still, he was half expecting to live off of toast for a week. Provided that Thorin had any bread in his refrigerator, and not just an elaborate collection of beer. He didn’t have bread last time Bilbo was over.

Thorin nods, and soon enough they’re pulling into his steep driveway. Bilbo hears Erebor’s deep bark as they pull up, distracted enough that he lets Thorin guide him into the garage apartment with a hand on his back. The hand drops once they’re inside. That has more to do with the fact that the dog has tackled Thorin, paws on his shoulders, and knocked him back against the wall, than any reluctance on Bilbo’s part. That alone is odd enough that it takes him a second to process, once again, that this is the dog he’s agreed to watch for a week.

“Down, dog.” Thorin says, but he’s laughing in a way he rarely does on campus, rubbing Erebor’s head and grinning at Bilbo. It only lasts a second, but it’s there. Then Thorin is clearing his throat and pushing Erebor down. “I’d say, come on in, I’ll give you the tour, but then, there’s not much to see.”
There isn’t. There’s a narrow mudroom in the front of the garage, on one side the wide double doors. A couple of pairs of boots and some jackets on pegs—after a glance to Thorin, Bilbo adds his own to the pile—a snow shovel and a trash bin. Through the other side is the apartment itself. It’s all one room, like Bilbo’s, but feels larger. Higher ceilings and proper windows. The right side is a kitchen, a table right out of the 1950s, a farmhouse-style sink, a refrigerator. The back wall is split by a door to the deck and the yard beyond. The left side of the garage has a bookshelf built in along the whole length of the wall, a window cut into its center. There’s an old television in the corner and a short, curved couch. A scarred wooden table with a light clamped to it, a high-backed chair, sheaves of papers and a couple of tubes of blueprints. A ladder to the side of the couch leads up to the sleeping loft.

Bilbo looks around, hands in his pockets, as Erebor’s tail thwacks him from behind. The poured concrete floor is cold beneath his socks. He can feel Thorin watching him and his shoulders tense. It takes a moment to school his expression into something like a smile, as if this is easy for him. He has his glasses on, his eyes too tired, and he pushes them up to rub the bridge of his nose.

“I should get on the road,” Thorin says. That’s good. It means they won’t continue to stand here uncomfortably.

“Right,” Bilbo says, expecting Thorin to turn and walk out. Instead, the man brings a hand to the back of his neck and clears his throat, then crosses his arms over his chest. Regards Bilbo as if he’s done something wrong. Bilbo shrinks back a bit and nearly trips over the dog.

Thorin clears his throat again and uncrosses his arms. He looks down at his dog, then back to Bilbo. “I’ll be back on Sunday. You might as well—it’s not as if I’m going to be here, so—no one will be using it. You know.” He waves a hand in the direction of the sleeping loft and doesn’t look Bilbo in the eye.

“What on earth are you talking about?” Bilbo finally asks, when the silence wears on and his shoulders are tense enough to hurt.

“My bed. The bed. You should, uh, just sleep there.”

“What?”

“I don’t exactly have a guest room, Bilbo. The sheets are clean, if that’s what you’re worried about. I washed them.”

“Then they’ll be clean for you when you get back. No, Thorin, I’m not taking your bed.”

“You’re not sleeping on the floor for a week. Take the bed.”

“You have a couch.”

“The couch is too short.”

“I’m short,” Bilbo says, which earns him a look from Thorin, a specific kind of look he’s been getting lately and doesn’t know how to process. He breaks it off, very deliberately, and flops on the couch, puts his feet up and clasps his hands behind his head, stretching his shoulders. Casual. As if he does this all the time. As if his heart isn’t pounding. “See? I fit.”

“Just take the bed, damn it. It’s not a big deal.”

“Thank you, but no. This is fine.” Bilbo raises his eyebrows at Thorin in a challenge. He doesn’t expect it to work.
Thorin mutters something about “stubborn half-pints” and stomps out the door. He doesn’t close it behind him and Bilbo can hear him rummaging in his car. A cold draft works its way in around Bilbo’s ankles where the cuffs of his pants are rolled and his socks don’t quite reach. A moment later something hits him in the face with a soft thud. An old Army-issue sleeping bag. “It gets cold down here,” Thorin says, as if he hasn’t just thrown something at Bilbo’s head. “At least take this.”

“Did you wash this too?”

“. . . No.”

“I’m only joking. Really. Thank you.” The sleeping bag is soft and smells of Thorin’s car. Olive green and weather-stained. A comfortable lump in his arms.

“Right. Yes. I have to get on the road,” Thorin says, but doesn’t move.

“Long drive.”

“Four hours. Less if I speed.”

“Don’t speed. Go, Thorin. We’re good. Aren’t we, Ere?”

The dog barks helpfully and Thorin sighs. “Call me. If you need anything. If anything happens. I mean, I’ll be in conference so . . . you’ll have to leave a message, but I’ll check every day.”

“Your apartment has a phoneline?” Bilbo asks, and looks around. He hadn’t noticed one.

“What? No. No one has landlines anymore. What year do you think it is?”

“Thorin, I don’t have a cell-phone. How do you expect me to be calling you?”

“What?”

“Never really needed one,” Bilbo says with a shrug. “It doesn’t matter. I won’t need to call.”

“Yes, it does matter.”

“Are you doubting my ability to care for your overly large dog?”

“Ere’s not overly large, he’s . . . If you think I’m leaving you here with my dog for a week with no way of getting ahold of you, you’re out of your mind.”

“There’s always e-mail.”

“Not good enough.”

“I don’t think you have a choice, honestly. At this point, you’re committed to the conference. And you can’t take him with you.”

“He’s well-behaved,” Thorin says, as if that’s a reasonable answer, as if Ere can simply roam about Toronto while Thorin sits on panels and goes to fancy cocktail parties. The thought of Thorin in a neatly pressed suit, sipping champagne and scowling, crosses Bilbo’s mind and he has to hold back a laugh. He doesn’t know where it came from.

“Thorin. I promise I will look after your dog. You really should get on the road.”
“Get in the car.”

“Sorry? What do you mean? I’m not coming with you.”

“We’re getting you a phone. Let’s go.”

“You’re being ridiculous. I don’t need a phone.”

“I need you to have a phone,” Thorin says, and that’s the end of the argument. Bilbo finds himself bundled into the Volvo and they’re headed down the hill, through town and out to the highway. Thorin is efficient, bordering on rude, but within the hour Bilbo has a cell-phone he doesn’t quite know how to use and feels, somehow, less apprehensive than he really should, considering. It’s dark by the time they get back to Thorin’s apartment and he doesn’t get out of the car, just tosses the keys to Bilbo and waves him off.


Whether Thorin means that of Bilbo himself or the dog, Bilbo can’t say. He watches Thorin go, the Volvo sliding a bit as it heads downhill and out of sight. Inside, the heat is clattering, and Erebor is waiting, his head cocked to one side as if he knows something, or at least suspects. Bilbo pets him absently and rummages in his bag for another sweater, another pair of socks.

One week. Thorin will be back on Sunday, and then Bilbo will return to his attic. Wait out the rest of winter break there, with his books and his tea, his houseplant. Alone again, but that’s not unusual. This is his life now. And after Sunday comes Monday, Christmas Eve.

It should be something to look forward to. Bilbo’s always been fond of Christmas. For reasons he wants to avoid acknowledging even to himself, though, he doesn’t feel his usual excitement. Not this year.

It’s foolish and fundamentally a bad idea, but as Bilbo curls up on the couch in the sleeping bag—it’s still early, and he hasn’t eaten, but he’s suddenly exhausted—he finds himself wondering if Thorin’s conference will run long. If there might be bad weather, or heavy traffic on the route back from Toronto. Perhaps it will take him just one day longer to come home.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took a bit longer than expected. I'm fast approaching the end of the semester, so the academic workload is increasing, the hours of sleep are decreasing, &c. Business as usual.

This chapter's a bit different in format, in that it covers just one stretch of time. That wasn't the plan but apparently I had a lot to say. Not sure where next chapter will pick up yet, so you'll just have to wait and see. I'm working on groundplans of Thorin's and Bilbo's apartments, just for fun. If I'm satisfied with them, I'll post them on my tumblr and link it here for any who are curious.

Thanks again to all who have read & commented thus far. Reading your words is often the highlight of my day.
The fields around his home have always been green. Green and gently rolling, as far as the eye can see. Dotted with cows and fences and silos, with mill ponds and white oaks, they spread out before your eyes, unending. In summertime’s golden light, humidity slinks in and covers the land in a comfortable haze while the magnolia trees burst into stars of the palest pink. Windows are left open wide, curtains swaying. There are drinks on front porches, long nights of star-gazing with the smell of honeysuckle and forsythia in the air.

There are funerals on Sunday mornings, with the grass still damp from last night’s rain.

Bilbo’s suit jacket is too big. It hangs off his shoulders, the sleeves half-covering his hands, as he stands in front of a hole in the earth that he is expected to put his mother into and then simply walk away.

It is one of those things, he thinks, that shouldn’t ever be possible.

After the service is over he wanders the cemetery. Two men are still shoveling dirt but neither of them say anything. Bilbo blinks and forces his eyes to focus, reading lines of names and dates, all the people he does not know, will never know. Someday, perhaps even tomorrow—for people are dying every day—someone else will do the same. They will read his mother’s headstone without ever knowing the sound of her voice or the scent of her hair or how steady her hands were when she poured tea.

Bilbo has read enough Dickens to know all about orphans. Here under the July sun he is twenty-two years old and he knows better. These are not the gritty streets of rainy London; this is not Pip’s fateful graveyard; no one is going to come and turn him into a thief; no rich benefactor has their eye set on crafting him into the perfect match for their daughter. It’s just him. Left, now, with nothing.

Never in his life has he wanted to be as thoroughly drunk as he does at this moment. What would surely be a morning spent throwing up would be worth the few hours of pure, blank space. But he is a Baggins, the only one left. An entire lineage’s worth of propriety is entirely on his shoulders. Firm foundations, his father always said. Firm foundations make for a solid home. Bilbo finds his way back to what is still, for now, his parents’ house—he’s never quite sure how—and does not empty the hand-carved liquor cabinet. If he’s being honest with himself, whisky has never been his drink of choice. He cleans the mantel and gives the flowers from various well-wishers fresh water. He makes himself a cup of tea. It burns his tongue.

When it grows dark enough that he can close the curtains without the neighbours’ suspicion, he puts his head down on the table and closes his eyes.

Bilbo wakes to a crick in his neck and warm breath on his hand. Erebor’s damp nose nudges under his hand where it’s fallen off the couch. “Morning already?” Bilbo asks. His voice comes out rougher than expected. He hasn’t dreamed about the funeral in a long time. Erebor drops his chin onto Bilbo’s thigh and eyes him pensively.
“Right,” Bilbo says. “Right. Breakfast.” He extracts himself from the sleeping bag with some difficulty and shivers at the loss of warmth. Thorin’s floor is cold underfoot, though Erebor doesn’t seem to mind. Bilbo rummages in his bag for his slippers and pads over to the kitchen. Thorin’s fridge is surprisingly full and for a minute all Bilbo can do is stare. He had been expecting Thorin to have at least 4 kinds of beer in his fridge, and some really old hummus, and very little else. Erebor paws at his dish and Bilbo tips dry food into it absently, spilling some before he realises it. With the dog crunching happily in the background, Bilbo makes himself some toast. Slathers it with butter and jam and sits in Thorin’s kitchen, one finger idly tracing the flecks of mica in the tabletop design. In the light of day, the apartment looks different. More real. The place is clean but has piles of stuff everywhere—tracing paper rolls piled on the side table, jointed industrial work-lights clamped to most surfaces, a scrap heap in the corner of off-cuts of wood and ripped cloth and who knows what else. It’s comforting, somehow, to see a place so obviously lived-in.

Bilbo’s contemplating more toast, or possibly an egg, when Erebor walks over to the door and looks back at him pointedly. A well-behaved dog, Thorin had said. Bilbo sighs and brushes crumbs from his fingers. Snow fell sometime in the night, just a dusting. Bilbo trades his slippers out, folding the legs of his pajama pants into snow boots, and looks over his own jacket briefly before taking one at random instead off the pegs in the mudroom. It’s cold. Surely Thorin won’t begrudge him borrowing the heavier—and longer—coat. It’s some kind of waxed cotton, weighty on his shoulders, flannel-lined and padded and nothing Bilbo would ever pick out for himself. He feels like a five-year-old, or a lumberjack. A five-year-old lumberjack. The hem comes nearly to his knees.

Erebor paws at the door. They step outside into a morning of bright, crisp light. There is ice on the bare branches of the maple trees, frost biting the air. Erebor snaps at the steam he huffs and runs over to a tree at the edge of the yard. Bilbo stuffs his hands into the coat’s pockets and hunches his shoulders up. His fingers touch something hard and smooth and he draws out his hand to see an old-fashioned pipe in his grasp. It explains the smell in Thorin’s car, the smell that sometimes lingers on his clothing when he passes by in the studio or stands particularly close. It’s a smell far preferable to the other one that often accompanies Thorin. Curious, and having the unexpected freedom of no one watching, Bilbo investigates the coat’s other pockets. A key-ring, some loose change, an elastic hair-tie, a single glove. Half a granola bar in its wrapper, hard as a rock. A couple of crumpled receipts, most of them for the liquor store. A felt-tipped pen, two acorns, a bit of twine.

“Half boy-scout, half trouble,” Bilbo says. He would feel guilty, if he didn’t think Thorin would do the same to his pockets, given the chance. “Come on, you,” he calls to the dog. “It’s cold out here. Aren’t you finished?” Erebor comes bounding back to him, big paws crunching frozen grass. The dog barks once, loudly, and looks up at Bilbo as if pleased. “Inside,” Bilbo says. “Go.”

Jacket back on its peg, boots lined up neatly next to the door—Bilbo’s aware that he’s compartmentalising, and the oddly specific organisation of Thorin’s fridge isn’t helping him not too. He decides to make pancakes, if only for the possible mess the flour offers. Erebor watches some sparrows hop around the lawn while Bilbo wipes down the counter and makes a neat stack of pancakes, golden-brown and inviting. Then the dog comes over and snatches the top one off the plate. Bilbo lets out a laugh and supposes he shouldn’t be surprised. His fork is halfway to his mouth when a beeping noise interrupts. It takes him a moment to place the sound—his new phone, still somewhere in the vicinity of the couch.

“Thorin doesn’t trust me with you, apparently,” Bilbo tells Erebor. The dog wags his tail, and Bilbo shakes his head. “I didn’t think he would actually call.”

As it turns out, Thorin hasn’t called. He’s texted: “Made it to Toronto. Bored already.”

Bilbo fumbles with the buttons, trying to remember what Thorin showed him. His first few
attempts get him garbled letters and symbols. Eventually he manages to reply, “Your dog is eating my breakfast.” It seems only fair to let Thorin know. Bilbo waits for an answer, but none comes. Pancakes beckon. He sits back at the table to a shorter stack—Erebor’s taken another one while he was distracted by the phone—and makes a concerted effort to enjoy his second breakfast. Feeling some mixture of rebelliousness and decadence, he leaves the dishes in the sink for later and instead settles down on the couch with a book on William Morris and British Socialism. He curls into the sleeping bag for warmth and ends up horizontal with his eyes closed and the book open across his chest, still on the introduction.

When he wakes, to the sound of his phone again, it’s dark outside and there is a heavy weight on his feet. Erebor, asleep, tail twitching lightly. Bilbo reaches down and rubs the dog’s ears, smiling before he realises it. Thorin has replied, belatedly: “Good.” Erebor must eat pancakes on frequent occasion. Bilbo leans down, tucks his head to his chest. Stretches. There’s a chill in the air and it’s very quiet. More quiet than Bilbo’s own attic, which has road traffic and downstairs neighbours. Out here on the edge of the woods, behind the house of a professor away on sabbatical, Thorin’s place is practically an island unto itself. For a reason he can’t quite explain, being in Thorin’s space and having such silence seems wrong. Bilbo tugs his feet free and switches on the light next to the couch. The lower section of Thorin’s bookshelf, near the television, is packed with records, most of them unfamiliar. Choosing it more because he recognises the name and less because it suits his mood, Bilbo slips Dylan’s *Blood on the Tracks* from its sleeve and sets it gently on the turntable. Erebor wakes as the music starts and shakes himself off. He looks up at Bilbo, who is eyeing the bookshelf, with dark eyes.

“Trying to chase me off?” Bilbo asks. The dog whoofs softly but doesn’t move. “Or encourage me, eh? Which is it?” Bilbo scratches Ere’s muzzle and the dog’s tail thumps his legs. “What if I promise to put everything back?”

Bilbo feels foolish talking to Thorin’s dog, but then, it isn’t as though anyone is around to hear. And Thorin never has to know. Bilbo picks up his phone to check for messages, wondering if Thorin has replied, but there’s nothing. Reasoning that a bit more snooping couldn’t possibly hurt anything, he runs his fingers across the shelves. Above the records are stacks of DVDs, again titles Bilbo doesn’t know. There are, of course, hundreds of books. Heavy architectural reference volumes. A whole shelf of design magazines from the 1970s. Entirely at random, Bilbo tugs a slim leather-bound book off the shelf and is startled to see that it’s actually a photo album. He’s also startled by the hole in the underarm of his shirt, showing pale skin when he reaches up. He hadn’t realised that it had worn so thin.

The album had been embossed on its cover but someone’s scratched out whatever was tooled into the leather, leaving only a long gouge. Bilbo settles back into the couch, sleeping bag across his legs, and opens the cover. The first few pages are curiously blank, though Bilbo can see light spots where photographs once sat and the slightly yellowed edges of the rest of the paper, exposed to the air and sunlight. The first photograph is of a woman Bilbo doesn’t recognise, holding a bundle that can only be a baby. Thorin? Or someone else? Several shots of an interior, possibly Thorin’s childhood home. A toddler, all dark curls, gnawing on a wooden spoon. Bilbo suspects it’s Thorin and lets out a laugh. It’s a far cry from the man he now knows. The photographs are mostly landscapes or snapshots of things that don’t mean anything to Bilbo, with a few shots of Thorin in various ages interspersed. There’s one of him as a teenager, barely bearded. He’s holding a hammer, but the background is too dark to make out any other details. There’s a photograph of a black puppy held in hands that Bilbo knows, just from the fingers and the hard lines of the wrist, are Thorin’s.

That realisation troubles him and Bilbo flips the page, onto a blurry shot of Thorin in black robes holding a diploma but not looking very happy. More scenery, a couple of churches. The puppy, who must be Erebor, growing bigger with each photograph. Then there’s one of a woman
with two small, adorable children and Thorin looking more pleased than Bilbo’s ever seen him. Thorin has never talked about a wife and kids, and he’d have been quite young to father children who look to be about eight and five in a photo taken—Bilbo checks the date—just a year ago, but maybe Thorin is just a private person. Maybe he trusts someone enough to leave them with his dog and his apartment but not tell them about his family.

There are plenty of other photographs to study. Some of Thorin with the kids, one blonde and the other brunette, both with wide smiles. In one shot they have toy trucks, in the next wooden swords. They are atop Thorin’s shoulders, one on each side, small hands fist in his hair. The blonde one has a ponytail. Their mother looks on fondly and Bilbo wonders about that theory he has heard, that you come to resemble your spouse, because she looks quite a bit like Thorin. A few pages later there is a photograph of Thorin atop a mountain with someone who looks like his father. Bilbo can’t help but be curious about Thorin’s family, whom he hardly ever mentions. About why he’s out here in upstate New York all alone when the scenery in the photos looks like the West somewhere, Utah or Montana or Wyoming, all mountains and clear skies. He thinks he’s almost figured it out, almost reached a breakthrough, when Ere knocks against his knees from behind, wanting to go for a walk.

Apparently, the dog doesn’t care that it’s past eleven at night. Bilbo realises, as he looks for a flashlight, that he’s never bothered to put on proper pants. Still in pajamas, borrowing Thorin’s coat again, he lets Erebor out and closes the door firmly behind them. The garage windows are squares of soft light against the icy darkness of the night sky. Erebor doesn’t have a leash but he seems to recognise that Bilbo doesn’t want to be left behind, or perhaps Thorin’s just trained him so well that he heels at the slightest urging. They head down the long driveway, footsteps and breathing the only sounds in the night air. When they’re far enough away that Bilbo can barely see the garage, Erebor stops and cocks his head, listening.

“He’s out there, somewhere,” Bilbo says. The dog is looking north. As they head back to the house, Bilbo drops a hand to Erebor’s neck and leaves it there, enjoying the warmth, the company. His phone is beeping when they get back to the garage and he trips over his boots trying to answer it in time.

“Just finished for the day. Last panelist was an idiot.” The text message from Thorin is clear on the phone’s screen but Bilbo doesn’t know what to say in response, so he leaves it unanswered. Are they making casual conversation? Is Thorin simply complaining to him because he can? Is one meant to reply to vague complaints over text message? No one’s taught him how these sorts of exchanges are meant to go. Bilbo knows, fundamentally, that he’s more than a bit technologically backwards. His parents favoured letter writing and face-to-face visits, and he went to college close enough to home for it not to matter that he didn’t have a cell-phone. He could always find a phone on campus for a brief call home, and there had never been anyone to call but home.

Bilbo is wiping Erebor’s wet paw-prints off the floor when the phone beeps again. “Bookshelf, back of apt., 2nd row. Watch something if you’re still awake.” The idea that Thorin is bored in his hotel room in Toronto, thinking of his dog-sitter and his DVDs, is one Bilbo doesn’t know how to process. “Thank you,” he texts back, because he feels that he should say something, even if it also makes him feel like an idiot.

“Figured you’d be awake,” Thorin replies, almost immediately. “How’re things?”

“Everything is fine,” Bilbo writes. He crouches down in front of the shelf, runs his fingers along the spines of the DVDs. Erebor comes over and touches his nose to one, and really, Bilbo has very little preference, so he pulls it out and spends a few minutes figuring out how to make Thorin’s television cooperate. He could watch it on his laptop, but the lure of a bigger screen just the right
distance from the couch is too much to resist. He’s about fifteen minutes into the film before Thorin texts again.

“You watching?”

“Yes,” Bilbo writes back, distracted.

“What?”

“The Magnificent Seven.”

“Classic,” is Thorin’s reply, and Bilbo smiles. Of course, considering that they’re all Thorin’s DVDs, the man probably likes all of them, so his approval of this one isn’t anything special. All the same, it sends a warmth through Bilbo that has very little to do with the sleeping bag.

“Your dog picked it,” he confesses.

“He’s got good taste.”

They’re silent for a while after that, as the titular seven start to get together. They’re riding into the Mexican village when Bilbo texts again. He’s finding himself thinking that this movie would be better if Thorin were on the couch too, or at least roaming the kitchen, so he pretends. “Was the whole day boring?” he asks.

“Yes,” Thorin replies. Onscreen, Chico is yelling at the villagers. “Stop texting during the movie. You’ll miss something.”

Bilbo moves his gaze from the phone in his hand back to the television, and dutifully doesn’t reply. He falls asleep just after two in the morning during the last moments of the shootout with an arm slung over Erebor and dreams about gunslingers and how in the end, no one really wins.

He wakes to Erebor’s nose on his chest and tears in his eyes. He doesn’t know where he is. It’s dim and cold. The dog’s weight is crushing his ribs so much that he can barely breathe. With a strangled noise Bilbo shoves Erebor off and sits up straight, panting. The dog whines and looks up at him from the floor. “Sorry,” Bilbo says. He reaches down with a shaky hand and Erebor licks him before padding off towards his water bowl. Bilbo runs his fingers through his hair and digs his phone out of the couch cushions to check the time. It’s nearly three in the afternoon. Still disoriented, Bilbo wipes his face on his sleeve and lets out a long, slow breath. He is on Thorin’s couch, in Thorin’s apartment, with Thorin’s dog. It’s Wednesday, the nineteenth of December.

Bilbo makes himself a pot of coffee and a plate of toast. He feeds Erebor and straightens up the couch, folding the sleeping bag neatly as if to encourage himself to not simply go back to sleep. He ends up at the desk, books spread out before him, trying to work on his paper. He’s written four pages when his phone goes off. It’s Thorin, of course: “Send me a photo of my dog so I know he’s alive.”

Bilbo turns in the chair and whistles for Erebor. The dog comes over and lays his head in Bilbo’s lap. Bilbo finds the camera button on the phone and takes a picture of the dog’s head, his left hand resting atop it, and his oldest jeans beneath it all. He sends it to Thorin and feels like an idiot, particularly when there is no reply. Erebor barks, just once, and walks over to the door. With a sigh Bilbo wraps himself up and they brave the afternoon snow.

The week passes in much the same way.
All of my apologies for not updating sooner. It's around seven thirty in the morning now and I've been up all night, for not the first night in several weeks. I'm at the tail end of the semester and things have gotten predictably hectic. This chapter is shorter than I meant but I was feeling bad for neglecting the story, so I thought I'd post at least this much for now. Thanks for your patience. I hope you're still enjoying the story. Next chapter, more of Thorin's past will be explained. Also, Christmas (which is going to be a bit odd to write, considering that it's May, but we'll see how it goes).
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s quiet in the studio, Van Morrison grainy in the background with the volume turned low, freezing rain hissing against the windows on the north side. Thorin is drafting, tiny pencil marks on his elevations as he details the interior of some ridiculous building in the style of the fourteenth century, all short huffs of frustrated breath and low, distracted humming. Bilbo is seated on the floor, leaning back against one of the long tables at the front of the room, legs stretched out in front of him. He has a slim book in his lap, Aragon’s *Une Vague de Rêves*. He’s meant to be translating, or at least reading, but mostly he’s just relaxing. Watching Thorin’s foot tap steadily on the rung of his stool. Watching the lights on North Campus slowly go out as the hour gets later. He’s hungry, and he’s exhausted, but this is good. This is calm. He doesn’t want to leave.

There are moments like this, when it’s just the two of them, and it’s some stupid hour of the night, so late it’s technically morning, and they’re not talking or even looking at each other but they’re in the same place, in the same time—there are moments when Bilbo aches, desperately, to find the words to say what he wants to say. He knows, though, that even if he could figure it out, Thorin would rather not hear it. Would brush it off, or turn up the volume on his stereo, or, worst of all, tell Bilbo to leave. Maybe even get angry. And he can’t lose this, this mutual ignoring of the rest of the world. It’s cowardly and it’s probably several kinds of unhealthy, but it’s the only thing keeping him on his feet.

It’s the tail end of January. Spring term. Bilbo’s meant to be figuring things out, meeting new faculty, thinking about getting his advising committee together. He’s supposed to be debating in reading groups and drinking his way through Monday night trivia at one of the bars just off campus. It isn’t that the work is too much, though he’s taking more courses this semester, trying to fit in as much as he can before something happens—because something always happens—and he can’t continue in the program. It’s a foolish fear when they’ve guaranteed him funding for five years, but he can’t stop himself thinking it. So now he’s not sleeping, but he’s reading Lacan for the first time and he’s learning French. He tells himself it’s a good thing. A step in the right direction for his career. He looks at Thorin, who practically lives in the studio, and tells himself to work harder. To keep up.

But Thorin does, actually, go home at some point. It’s usually around four in the morning, but he gets into his Volvo and he drives up to his garage and has, presumably, a life outside of school. Has a dog that he takes to the park. Has drinking partners who aren’t Bilbo, because they’ve realised by now that never ends well. Thorin talks about his “companions” once in a while. Bilbo supposes they’re like friends, but different somehow. He doesn’t ask, for fear of being mocked. He doesn’t think he could stand it if Thorin were to mock him, not so soon after spending Christmas in his company. When he realises that, it suddenly makes sense that neither of them knows what to say to the other. They haven’t yet worked out how to be sincere.

Sure, there was that brief moment, Wednesday afternoon, the day after Christmas. Thorin had been more than a little drunk and Bilbo had finished most of a bottle of wine on his own, and they were just slumped on Thorin’s couch—Thorin’s feet on the battered coffee table, Bilbo leaning against the armrest, their shoulders almost touching—and saying things that didn’t make very much sense. There had been sincerity there. But when Bilbo woke up with a headache and Thorin watching him, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, his eyes bloodshot in the darkened room, the sincerity turned into something entirely different. Thorin had backed away, quickly, saying
words Bilbo couldn’t catch. He’d thrown a blanket in Bilbo’s face and climbed the ladder to his sleeping loft, and in the morning they were both hung-over. It took two rounds of pancakes to get them talking again and even then it was only about the weather.

Bilbo could talk about the weather now, but what’s the point? It’s typical January, lousy and cold, and they both know it. It suits them, somehow, the bleak skies, the chill that never gets out of your bones. It’s a time of year when everything is only half-alive, if even that.

The studio, for all its wide open spaces and endless windows, always manages to feel cut off from the rest of the world. At least, it does when they’re there. Bilbo walks past at other times of day, taking the long route up to Goldwin-Smith or wandering up towards Beebe Lake, and the space is filled with activity. Students at every desk, worklights on, professors in and out. The shop below seems to run all hours of the day, too. Thorin told him, back in October, that Saturday mornings were always dead times. That doesn’t explain the emptiness all other hours, though the dark cloud that’s been hanging around Thorin lately might. Bilbo’s beginning to wonder if he hasn’t actually threatened someone—professors, campus security, whoever—to get the studio all to himself.

There’s probably something wrong with Bilbo, because that thought doesn’t make him nearly as unnerved as it should. Even after the whirlwind that was winter break, especially after it, being around Thorin is easy in a way that makes no sense. Absolutely no sense. Out of all the people Bilbo spends his time with, it’s completely baffling, on many levels, that it’s Thorin who manages to make him drop his guard. He knows, logically, that he should be running in the other direction, or at least keeping things on a strictly professional level—though, speaking logically, he really should’ve dropped the workshop class a long time ago, if that was to be the case—but here he is. Here they are. Still trying to make things work.

Sometime just after two in the morning, Thorin shoves his chair back and reaches his arms up, clasps his hands and twists them behind his head. “You’re still here,” he says, tipping his head first to one side and then the other.

“Still here,” Bilbo agrees, turning a page and trying to decide how to translate les requins de la folie. Folie . . . Madness, or insanity? Does it make a difference?

“Getting any work done?”

“Er, not so much.” Bilbo marks his place in the text with a finger and looks up. Thorin is bent over in the corner where they keep a small refrigerator. When he straightens up, it’s with two beers in his hand and an eyebrow raised. Asking—except Thorin almost never asks. Offering, perhaps. A second try.

“I’m done for the night,” Thorin says. “Don’t feel like driving home just yet. I close my eyes and all I see are fucking cornices. If you want . . .”

Bilbo bites his lip and thinks for a minute. On the one hand, it’s drinking with Thorin, which he knows is a Bad Plan, capital letters and all. On the other, it’s another hour or so of company, and there’s always the chance that this time, it won’t all turn sour. Apparently, somewhere along the line, gradschool has turned Bilbo into an optimist, which is actually one of the most surprising things about the whole situation. “Why not,” he says, finally. He’s halfway to standing when Thorin drops onto the ground next to him instead.

“You should come by the garage,” Thorin says. “Erebor misses you.”

“I’m sure.” Bilbo takes a sip of his beer and tilts his head, surprised. It’s not Thorin’s usual stout. It actually isn’t half bad.
“Damn dog got attached while you were . . . anyway, we still have to finish your education in Indiana Jones.”

Bilbo groans. “Can we not? It reminds me a bit too much of someone in my life.”

“I am not Indy. I don’t do hats.”

“No you.” Bilbo has to laugh a bit at that, and takes another drink. This isn’t a conversation he had been planning on having. “My . . . sort of uncle. In a way.”

“Didn’t know you had an uncle,” Thorin says, because they may have—once or twice, during other Bad Plans—tried to talk about their families.

“I don’t. He’s not related. He was a friend of my mother’s. Or, kind of an uncle to her. The details are a bit vague.”

“And he’s like Indiana Jones how, exactly?”

“The hats,” Bilbo says. Thorin smiles a bit and rolls his shoulder again, stiff from hours of leaning over the drafting table. They’re both still tense. Testing their footing around each other.

“You wear hats,” Thorin points out.

“Wool hats. Not cowboy hats. There’s a difference.”

“Huge difference.”

“Practicality, Thorin. My hats wouldn’t fall off, if I ever had to roll under a door.”

Thorin hides a smile in the mouth of his beer bottle and knocks his head back against the wall. His hair is down and seated so close, Bilbo can spot the small braids trailing from his temples. That’s another thing Bilbo wants to ask about but can’t. Given where they are, and what sorts of fashions students and townspeople alike sport, it shouldn’t seem so out of place, but this is Thorin. The man lives in dirty jeans and flannel shirts, battered Carhartts and Henleys and leather boots. The beard makes sense but the fact that his hair is down past his shoulders, let alone braided, is just odd.

“I’d like to see you try,” Thorin says, and Bilbo has to blink himself back to attention.

“Try what?”

“To roll under a door.”

“Not going to happen.”

“You are small. It might be easier.”

“It would not be easier.”

“It’s an impractical design, though. The doors should really close upwards. Harder to leap through the top. Or close faster, at least. Or all at once, when there’s a whole line of them.”

“Remind me to not let you design any temples of death.”

“Doom, Bilbo. Temple of Doom.”

“Temples of any kind.”
With a sound too derisive to be properly called laughter, Thorin says, “You might have it your way, after all,” and takes a long drink.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve been applying for jobs for months. Nothing.”

“Well, I mean, it’s still early, right? There’s still . . . time. Before your graduation.”

“That’s not the point.”

“I’m sure someone will hire you.”

“I can’t just sit around and wait. I have—there are things I need to do, important things, and without money, it’s hopeless.”

“What about your stipend?”

“Gone.”

“You spent it all?” Bilbo asks, not quite believing it. He hasn’t even used half of his yet. “Don’t they give you very much?”

“They do.”

“Then, what?”

“I told you. There are things I need to do and they require money. So, it’s gone.”

“What sorts of things?” Bilbo asks. “And if you say alcohol, I swear—”

“What, you’ll hit me?” Thorin asks, his voice tight. “Go ahead and try it. I don’t think it will end well. But until you work up the nerve, why don’t you tell me why you don’t want to talk about your pseudo-uncle?”

“Can we . . . not do this?”

“What, you’re the only one allowed to ask questions?”

“Please, Thorin.”

They’re quiet for a few minutes after that. Drinking, listening to the rasp of the music. Not looking at each other. It’s a bit like meditation, Bilbo thinks. Staring at a point just in front of you. Staring so hard you stop really seeing anything. He counts his breaths and thinks about self-induced trance states, about l’ivresse des religions et des stupéfiant physiques, about what the world was like in 1924 and why the first surrealists wanted, so desperately, to leave it. He drinks the rest of his beer in one go and thinks it isn’t nearly enough.

“You already know that I have family out west,” Thorin says.

“Yes.”

“The money goes to them. It’s not that they can’t—they know how to handle themselves. But they don’t have anywhere to go. To be.” Thorin leans forward, his elbows on his knees, still staring off at the distance. “Our home was taken from us.”
“Taken,” Bilbo repeats, because he’s just latching onto words now, trying to move past the sound of Thorin’s voice and figure out what he’s really saying.

“My grandfather was a good man,” Thorin is saying, as if that’s what matters. As if that has anything to do with anything. “As was my father. They just . . . didn’t know when to stop.”

Bilbo realises, probably far too late, that what Thorin is trying to do is apologise. “You don’t have to do that,” he says, and then winces, because his words are only half the conversation in his head. “Tell me your life story,” he clarifies. “It’s not my business.”

“We’ll trade,” Thorin says. “Mine for yours.”

“Let’s not.”

“It wasn’t an offer. I’m not going to let you poke around my house, ask me questions you shouldn’t know to ask, and not demand anything in return.”

“That isn’t fair.”

“Life isn’t fair. I learned that very early on.”

So Thorin tells Bilbo, in halting words, about his family. About the people from the photographs, and the place in that old map. “We had a mine,” he says. Silver, mainly, and enough to make a whole town prosper. At least, back in its day. Something about litigations and national panic, coupled with a lack of railroad access, meant that the boomtown crashed, hard. Thorin’s family came out of it all holding the title to the lands. They tried farming there for a while but the winters were harsh and, Thorin said, farming never really took with his family. It was his grandfather who decided to re-open the mine. Everyone in the next town over said it was folly—folie, Bilbo thinks, a word that seems to be following him—said that all the rich ore had been near the surface and was long gone. So Thror dug deeper.

“You should’ve seen it,” Thorin says, laughing in a way that makes Bilbo’s chest hurt. Bitter. Hollow. Echoing, like a mine. “I was just a kid but I still remember. It was . . . there we were, middle of nowhere, up on this mountain, tunnels everywhere. Searching. Every day, down in the mine. All of us. Five years old with a pick-axe in hand, lowered on a rope into the crevasses that were too narrow for anyone else.” Thorin takes a long drink, his knuckles white where they’re clenched around the neck of the bottle. “There was lead, too, but my grandfather wasn’t interested in that.”

“So he found silver, then?”

“He found it. Deep within the mountain.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“Wasn’t that . . . good?”

“At first, it was.”

Thorin talks about days of plenty in a way that makes the expression more than just a cliché. The mountain was business and sanctuary in one, a compound where relatives from all over came to gather. At first it was just a few homes but over the years it grew, surpassed even the city it had been years ago. Surpassed its neighbouring cities, too, and became the envy of the region. “Envy,” Thorin says. “It should have been goddamn pride. It was . . . majestic, Bilbo. It was glory. Like nothing
you’ve ever seen.”

“We’re still at the ‘good’ part,” Bilbo says, because tact has left him. His eyes are hurting and he can’t quite figure out why, so he closes them.

“It was poison, too. It seemed endless—just keep mining, deeper and deeper. Everything else . . . wasn’t important anymore. You think something like that can last?” Thorin says. “Of course it couldn’t. It was like an addiction, like some kind of disease. And there was all that wealth, from one mountain no one thought was worth anything. They weren’t just going to let us keep it.”

“Who wasn’t?”

“Everyone.”

The way Thorin talks about it, it sounds like a war. Later, much later, Bilbo will realise that it wasn’t that way at all—calling it a war implies that either side could win, when Thorin’s family never stood a chance. In some obscure combination of government legislation and what Thorin calls an “invasion from the North” but refuses to explain, all of them were driven out.

“We lost everything,” Thorin says. With his eyes closed, all Bilbo can hear is steadiness in Thorin’s voice, and it surprises him. “The silver, the land—they torched the entire city. It wasn’t just a mine, you have to understand. It was . . . My grandfather went mad. Some years later, my father probably did, too.” There’s a brief scuffle, the sound of the fridge opening and shutting. Thorin sinks back to his place next to Bilbo and opens up another beer. “Hell, you already think I’m there.”

“No, I don’t, I—”

“Getting there, at least,” Thorin says, and Bilbo doesn’t argue, because along with his New Year’s Resolution to be more adventurous, he’s trying to be honest with himself these days. Although it’s possible that this time, lying would be better.

“So you’ve . . . never been home since?”

“Once or twice. But I can't stay. Not yet. I’m not ready.”

“For?”

“To take it back.”

Bilbo doesn’t ask how, can’t even begin to think of what Thorin’s trying to do. He knows about family, though, and what it means to want to return when you cannot. So he lets Thorin have his second drink in silence while he stares at the laces on his boots and tries to see anything but rolling hills. It’s stupidly symbolic, he thinks, the colours of their homes, his green and Thorin’s red, his fields to Thorin’s mountain. Now they’re here: grey, rivers.

“We had a name for the mountain, you know,” Thorin says, after a long pause. “We called it Erebor.”

Bilbo has to smile at that.

“Enough. Your turn now.” Thorin reaches out an arm to shove against Bilbo’s shoulder. His aim is off—either he’s still stiff, or Bilbo flinches. Either way, his hand ends up somewhere between Bilbo’s collarbone and neck instead. Bilbo looks over, still smiling. Thorin frowns.

“You’re warm,” he says.
“It’s warm in here.”

“No, you’re never warm.” Thorin reaches out again, brushing Bilbo’s hair back from his forehead and pressing the back of his hand against flushed skin. “You always have at least five sweaters. It’s some kind of . . . anomaly. Your own geographic climate field. You’re running a fever.”

“I’m fine. It’s probably the alcohol.”

“Bilbo. You had one drink.”

“Lightweight. You did say I was.”

“You’re not even wearing two sweaters right now. You shouldn’t be this warm.”

“It’s nothing, really.”

“You’re just doing this to get out of holding up your end of the deal. Telling me about your family.”

“Guilty,” Bilbo says, but he closes his eyes again. His forehead burns where Thorin touched it.

“Yeah, well, it’s not going to work. But right now, you get a pass.” Thorin stands and tugs Bilbo to his feet.

“Thorin, what are you doing?”

“You’re sick. I’m taking you home. No arguing.”

“I’ll just sleep here.”

“Even I don’t sleep here,” Thorin says. When Bilbo still doesn’t move, Thorin guides him to a chair and pushes him down into it. Bilbo sits while Thorin packs up their things, shuts down the studio. He doesn’t know why he doesn’t just stand up and walk home. It seems too much of an effort, but it’s not, or it shouldn’t be. “Come on.” Thorin lifts him to his feet again, and when Bilbo wavers, Thorin tucks an arm around his back and steadies him. They’re sitting at the stoplight when Bilbo focuses enough to realise that when Thorin said “home,” he meant his, not Bilbo’s. He leans against the cool glass of the window and watches the scenery blur past. He hasn’t been to Thorin’s place since Thorin all but threw him out the door two weeks ago.

Chapter End Notes

Another chapter on the shorter side, but I thought you might appreciate an update, even a short one, rather than waiting what might be another week. I know I said this one would include Christmas but I wanted to do a bit of a time-skip first, so Christmas comes after, and is still currently being written. I also figured you all might welcome Thorin back for a bit of a change from Bilbo's introspection. I know I welcome Thorin back, because it means I get to write dialogue.

I'm actually exhausted right now, and still have schoolwork to finish up, but once I'm in the clear for the summer, I hope to be able to keep up more frequent updates. Thanks for
staying with the story so far, and for such wonderful feedback. I appreciate you all immensely.
When Thorin comes back from Toronto, Bilbo’s asleep. His excuse is that while it is Sunday, it’s just after midnight, and he wasn’t expecting such a quick return. His other excuse is that he thinks he’s dreaming. He’s passed out on the couch, facedown in his pillow, when he hears the creak of one of the heavy garage doors. Erebor doesn’t bark the way he would if there was an intruder. Too tired, even in his dream, to lift his head, Bilbo rolls to the side and sees someone who can’t be Thorin, because Thorin is still at the conference, hundreds of miles away. Whoever it is dumps a bag next to the table, ruffles Erebor’s ears, and pauses only briefly at the edge of the couch before climbing the ladder up to the loft. Bilbo puts his face back into the pillow and thinks he should have more eventful dreams.

When he wakes up, of course, he realises it wasn’t a dream. Thorin is at the kitchen table in sweatpants and a t-shirt and the garage smells of coffee and bacon. Bilbo pushes himself upright and wipes a hand at his mouth. He’s been, embarrassingly, drooling in his sleep. He hopes Thorin hasn’t noticed.

“Morning,” Thorin calls over.

“You’re . . . back.”

“Left after the last panel yesterday. There was meant to be a storm today, and I thought I’d beat it down here. It was basically pointless anyway, and I thought Erebor might be driving you mad, so . . .”

“I wasn’t expecting you until later.”

“Yeah, I heard. You don’t function well before coffee, do you? I made you some.”

“Thank you,” Bilbo manages, and makes his way across the cold floor to the kitchen.

“Your hair is ridiculous.” Thorin slides a mug of coffee across the table.

“Sorry,” Bilbo says, well aware of his potential for spectacular bed-head, of the rumpled state of his slept-in sweater, the hole in its elbow. He picks his glasses up off the desk and puts them on to see Thorin smirking.

“Like a bird’s nest.”

“Oh, very original.” Bilbo sips his coffee and raises his eyebrows. Thorin’s remembered that unlike himself, Bilbo doesn’t take his coffee black, and doesn’t care if that makes him unmanly.

“I’ve spent the past week being harangued about building codes. I’m out of practice with originality.” Thorin goes over to the toaster and drops some bread in, and pulls the jam out of the fridge. The fact that he’s guessed what Bilbo eats for breakfast is puzzling, again, until Bilbo realises he’s probably just looked at his stock of food and figured out what’s in short supply. Erebor comes up and noses Bilbo before going to Thorin and lying down at his feet.

“I’ll pack my things and be out of your way after breakfast,” Bilbo says.
“No, just stay,” Thorin says, like it’s the most reasonable thing in the world.

“You want me to stay?”

“The weather report was right, it’s brutal out there. I don’t feel like driving you home.”

“I guess . . . I could stay another day.” Or two, Bilbo thinks, but doesn’t want to press.

“Good.”

They don’t talk much over breakfast. Thorin’s reading a magazine, and Bilbo’s still half-asleep. But later, Bilbo makes some offhanded remark about the lack of festivity, and Thorin shoves his feet into a pair of boots and heads out of the garage, a saw over his shoulder. He comes back in ten minutes later, cheeks red and nose running, with an armful of evergreen branches, snow dusting his shoulders.

“Happy?” he asks, stomping his boots and tossing a branch at Bilbo. “It’s festive.”

“Very,” Bilbo agrees. He bites back a smile and accepts the rest of the branches Thorin shoves in his general direction, casting a glance about the garage for suitable places to hang them. “You don’t have a mantelpiece,” he says.

“What do you need a mantelpiece for?”

“Hanging stockings. Draping greenery.”

“You wear stockings?” Thorin asks.

“Hush, you.” Bilbo brushes snow from one of the branches and lays it across the windowsill. “Christmas stockings. You know, for presents.”

Thorin doesn’t reply, so Bilbo rewinds his words, plays them back. Presents. Who’s to say there will even be any? Bilbo doesn’t bring it up again. When Thorin asks him for some branches Bilbo hands them over, and Thorin ties two together and tacks them over the stove.

“Fire hazard,” Bilbo says.

“Christmas fire,” Thorin retorts. He ties another branch to the ladder and dumps the rest in a heap on the desk. “Anything you wanted to do today?”

“I have a paper I’m meant to be working on. Other than that, no.”

“It’s the day before Christmas Eve. You’re not working.”

“Well if you’re going to suggest something ridiculous like ice skating, I’ll save you the trouble.”

“Not ice skating. Ice hockey, maybe. The end of the lake might be frozen over.”

“Still a no.”

“We’re at least going out to walk the dog,” Thorin says. “He looks like he’s getting fat. Didn’t you exercise him?”

“I did,” Bilbo protests. “He’s not fat. He’s a good dog, right, Erebor?” The dog’s ears perk up and he pads over to Bilbo, tail thumping against Bilbo’s legs. “I can’t really go out in public,
anyway. I was expecting to go back to my place today so . . . I don’t have any clean laundry.”

“Who cares?”

“I care, Thorin. I’m not traipsing about in the snow in my pajamas.”

“There’s a laundry room in Balin’s place, I can let you in.”

“Your landlord’s house? Is that all right?”

“Yeah, he doesn’t mind. We’ll go over after breakfast. I have some things to wash, anyway. Until then, I can just loan you something.”

“You’re a giant.”

“You’re short. It’s winter, no one will care if your clothing’s bulky, and we’re not likely to run into anyone else anyway. I’ll go see what’s clean. Relatively speaking.” Thorin’s hauling himself up into the sleeping loft before Bilbo can protest, and when a pair of sweatpants, a woolen pullover, a t-shirt, and a thick pair of socks hit him in the face, he just smiles. They smell like Thorin, Old Spice and dog and the citrus soap from the studio that Thorin steals by the bottle and brings back to his garage. “Get dressed,” Thorin calls down the ladder. “Dog walking in five.”

Thorin’s hauling himself up into the sleeping loft before Bilbo can protest, and when a pair of sweatpants, a woolen pullover, a t-shirt, and a thick pair of socks hit him in the face, he just smiles. They smell like Thorin, Old Spice and dog and the citrus soap from the studio that Thorin steals by the bottle and brings back to his garage. “Get dressed,” Thorin calls down the ladder. “Dog walking in five.”

Bilbo gulps down his coffee and hurries to dress, sniffing his underwear and frowning. He might be borrowing a t-shirt but underwear are another thing entirely, so he pulls the sweatpants up and cinches the drawstring as tight as it can go. They still hang low and he has to roll the bottoms. He feels like a kid again. Thorin slides down the ladder and looks him over, lasting a full three seconds before bursting into laughter.

They’re just out walking around the property, and then Erebor bounds down the driveway and they have to take off after him, Bilbo’s borrowed coat flapping after him, his glasses cold on the bridge of his face. They end up doing a circuit of the lake, under the hemlocks, and it’s peaceful until Thorin bends down and scoops up a snowball. He nails Bilbo square in the back and has another in his hands before Bilbo can even react.

So they have Christmas decorations, and a Christmas snowball fight, and then they get back to the garage, shedding clothing and dripping snow. Thorin’s looking around his kitchen for some Christmas hot chocolate makings, and Bilbo notices that the pantry’s stocked enough for Christmas cookie baking. Thorin makes the drinks—actual melted chocolate whisked into a saucepan of milk, not just the powder, and a liberal amount of “festive” peppermint schnapps in a dusty bottle from Thorin’s landlord’s wine cellar—and leaves him to it, sipping cocoa and playing with Erebor’s ears on the couch, Schubert scratchy on the record player. Apparently Die Winterreise is Thorin’s idea of Christmas music; while it’s not cheery, precisely, it sort of fits. The gas oven warms the entire garage.

Evening falls and Thorin doesn’t offer to drive Bilbo back to his place, and Bilbo doesn’t ask. They pick up their laundry, all of it mixed together, and dump it onto the couch to sort it. An old movie on the television, a plate stacked high with cookies, the two of them folding shirts side-by-side—it’s all disturbingly normal. Or rather, abnormal, because how did they end up here? It’s easier not to question it, and yet it’s like an itch in the back of Bilbo’s mind, and he waits for it to fall apart.

So Christmas Eve dawns and it’s quiet, just the two of them and the dog and snow falling outside. When Bilbo tries to remember the day afterwards, it’s a blank. A pleasant, calm blank, and he is content. They can’t have done much besides sit around but there is something so comforting about that—when it shouldn’t be, not at all—and if Bilbo thinks about it too hard, his chest gets tight,
so he mostly doesn’t. Eight o’clock comes around and instead of feeling nostalgic for the candlelight services of his hometown—the high white ceilings of the church and how it never snowed—now Bilbo is cross-legged on the couch, stomach full from too many cookies. Thorin is sketching at the desk, papers strewn everywhere. It feels like a place he ought to be. A moment he’d like to preserve.

“Any other . . . Oakenshield family traditions?” Bilbo asks. “For the holidays, I mean.”

The answer is a terse negative, and Thorin’s pencil doesn’t even pause.

“I just thought, you know . . . it’s Christmas Eve and I’ve been with you all day and you haven’t even phoned home.”

“Neither have you,” Thorin says.

“There isn’t really anyone to phone.”

“Right.”

“Right, as in . . . you as well?”

Thorin cracks his knuckles and doesn’t answer right away. When he does, he speaks as if from very far away. “I have—there are people I could call. But whatever I could say to them, they already know.”

“It could still be nice. For them to hear from you, that is.”

“If you’re so set on it, call them yourself. I hate phones.”

Bilbo twists on the couch and looks over at Thorin. The backlog of text messages in his phone says otherwise. Schubert—the same record as yesterday—is particularly agitated, jaunty, the baritone’s words sibilant and forceful, the piano switching modes with every phrase. Then that song ends and the next begins, and Thorin’s eyeing his ruler, his shoulders tight. Bilbo wants to ask but he doesn’t, because it’s nearly Christmas and he feels a fight coming on.

The record runs out. Bilbo’s in his sleeping bag but not lying down, cozy next to Erebor. Thorin comes over and nudges the dog aside, drops down onto the couch with a cookie in his mouth and a closed expression on his face. Bilbo’s used to him being cagey but this is a whole new level. Perhaps it’s that, or perhaps it’s the fact that neither of them seems to be able to say what they mean—whatever the reason, Thorin doesn’t climb the ladder back up to his loft. When Bilbo wakes up, it’s Christmas, and his head is next to Thorin’s hip, one of Thorin’s arms over his shoulders. For a minute, maybe two, he doesn’t move. It’s not a very comfortable position and he’s too warm, between the sleeping bag, the dog on his lap, and Thorin’s body heat, but he doesn’t move. Just blinks, one cheek pressed into the couch and his glasses askew on his nose. Erebor, with an uncanny ability to know exactly when the people around him are faking sleep, drops a heavy paw on his ear and leans over to lick Thorin’s arm.

“Get off, Ere,” Thorin mutters, but he lifts his hand to pet the dog. Or, he tries to, but his arm’s still pinned between Bilbo and the couch. Erebor barks, sounding immensely pleased with his situation, and licks Thorin again before jumping off the couch and going to lap noisily at his water dish. Bilbo sits up as soon as the dog is gone and looks straight ahead, trying to flatten his hair. “Give it up,” Thorin says from beside him. “Losing battle. No fighting on Christmas, and all that. I’m starving—let’s eat.”

Bilbo sighs, though he can’t help but smile, and fights his way out of the tangle of his sleeping bag and a leg that’s tingling from being bent all night long. Thorin’s eating a cookie by the
time Bilbo makes it into the kitchen, saying something about “breakfast cookies” as if that’s a legitimate thing, but he’s also making coffee so Bilbo doesn’t argue. After two cups and some cookies of his own, Bilbo pauses. He should say something. He should at least wish Thorin a merry Christmas, but even more, he should thank him. He should give him a present, really, but it’s too late for that now. “Thanks for the coffee,” he says instead, and knows that if his mother was here, she would cringe at his lack of manners.

Nothing much happens on Christmas, and later Bilbo will think that perhaps he should start believing again in the magic of the season, because that’s a small miracle in and of itself. Thorin roasts a surprisingly delicious turkey and Bilbo cooks some potatoes and the branches over the stove catch fire, just as expected. The day after is quiet, too, just the two of them sitting around, overstuffed, avoiding the inevitable return to work. Then Wednesday comes and Bilbo can’t hide the fact that he feels he’s overstayed his welcome, but Thorin is a secret-agent-level people reader when he wants to be so he also knows that Bilbo doesn’t want to leave, and the topic just doesn’t come up. They eat leftovers for dinner and Thorin goes over to liberate a couple of bottles of red wine from his landlord’s wine cellar, laughing when Bilbo suggests they should just drive to the liquor store. “He really won’t mind,” Thorin says. “He’s practically family.”

And that’s what starts the conversation again, the one Bilbo had been so determined to drop in favour of holiday cheer. “You do have a family, though,” he says, bent nearly double in his chair, his chin atop Erebor’s head. “I can’t believe you didn’t talk to them on Christmas.”

“My family is complicated,” Thorin says, and pours more wine.

“If you’re going to quote Tolstoy at me—”

“Now you’re confusing me with you. The quoting business. I don’t do that.”

“Thorin,” Bilbo says, and has to take a deep breath before he continues. Erebor whines beneath him but Bilbo slides his arms around the dog’s neck and doesn’t let go. “I found your photo album.”

“Found?”

“Well . . . I was curious. I know I shouldn’t have, but I was looking for a book and then once I picked it up I couldn’t just put it back.”

“You should have.”

“I know, I know, but . . . were you never going to tell me that you’re married?”

“What?”

“And with children, even?”

“What?” Thorin asks again, and sets the bottle down heavily. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“The woman and children in the photographs,” Bilbo says, his eyes on the kitchen floor, following the grain of the wood. “Your family.”

“They’re not—you had no right to snoop around! I asked you to watch my dog, not investigate my life. It’s none of your goddamn business.”

“Why don’t you talk about them?”
“Family isn’t something I talk about.”

“You’ll regret that one day,” Bilbo says, because he can’t leave well enough alone, and also because it’s true. “Trust me.”

“I don’t need you telling me how to take care of my family.”

“Why aren’t they here with you?”

“They have their own lives.”

“But—”

“We’re not talking about this anymore.”

“Thorin, if we’re going to be friends, I can’t . . . I need to know more about you other than your favourite beer and what size shirts you wear and how to look after your dog.”

Thorin is quiet for a minute. He empties his glass—not a proper wine glass, something that looks like a beaker from a chemistry lab—and kicks a foot at the table leg absently. “I’m not married,” he finally says.

“Divorced, then?”

“No. Fuck, no. Look, those photographs, the kids are my nephews. The woman’s my sister. And you now know more about me than any of my cohort, so you can shut up.”

Bilbo could shut up. Or he could just keep talking. Thorin hasn’t shoved him against a wall yet, which is a good sign, so he may as well go for it, right? “That doesn’t sound very complicated.”

“You have no idea,” Thorin says, and huffs a laugh. “God, I need a smoke.”

“I got pipe tobacco in the mail once,” Bilbo says, which was not at all what he meant to say. He frowns and looks at his own glass, which is empty, and at the bottle beside it—nearly empty. “Didn’t know what to do with it.”

“Only one thing to do with it.” Thorin leans his chair back, pulls a pipe from the pocket of a shirt that’s hanging on a peg on the wall. He packs it, spins it in his fingers, but doesn’t light it.

“Thorin, if we’re going to be friends, I can’t . . . I need to know more about you other than your favourite beer and what size shirts you wear and how to look after your dog.”

“I got pipe tobacco in the mail once,” Bilbo says, which was not at all what he meant to say. He frowns and looks at his own glass, which is empty, and at the bottle beside it—nearly empty. “Didn’t know what to do with it.”

“My parents are dead,” Bilbo blurts out, when he had meant to say, “I don’t smoke.”

Thorin just looks at him, his gaze steady despite all the wine, and Bilbo shrinks under the scrutiny. Erebor pulls away and goes over to jump up on the couch. The conversation all but dies after that, because what is there to say? By some unspoken agreement they join the dog and finish off the wine. In the morning Bilbo is more hung-over than he has been in his entire life and can’t even string a sentence together.

But while the hang-over persists, his words soon return, and because he is who he is, he tries to talk about family again. It’s a phenomenally bad idea, even after heaps of pancakes and the last of the Christmas cookies, and if Bilbo’s head had hurt a bit less, he might’ve realised it. At first it seems fine. They talk about family, the abstract concept, for a bit. Then, after at least four inquiries, Thorin caves and tells him the kids’ names—Fíli, age 9, and Kíli, age 6, and Thorin’s ridiculously proud of both of them, Bilbo can hear it in his voice—and says how they live on a ranch, a couple of horses and cows, fields of barley. His sister’s name is Dís. Bilbo asks about the kids’ father and gets a stony glare, and then he asks about Thorin’s father and gets a plate thrown at his head.
There’s no apology. Just a “We’re done here,” and Thorin folding his arms across his chest, leaning back against the sink, chin raised as if in a challenge, daring Bilbo to say anything. Erebor comes over to sniff at the broken porcelain and Thorin shouts at his dog, whose head lowers, ears flat to the sides. Bilbo gathers his things and walks to the door, his hands shaking. He pauses there for a moment, gives Thorin a chance, but gets only silence. He doesn’t want to leave, even after all this—he doesn’t want to leave. But he’s frightened, and he’s not an idiot, so he bends to lace his boots and he walks out, still wearing Thorin’s sweater as he trudges through the snow.

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Bilbo doesn’t know whether to laugh or panic. It’s all very West Side Story: a parking lot standoff, the street-lamp flickering. Half of him wonders if the other man is hiding a switchblade up the sleeve of his leather jacket. The other half of him wouldn’t be surprised if that was true.

It all started with a map.

He goes by the name of Azog, and Bilbo hasn’t bothered questioning it. Frankly, the man’s more than a little intimidating, even in the confines of his office. A fourth-year grad student in the history department with a fine arts degree, he specialises in Anglo-Saxon antiquities, specifically in artistic reconstruction of historical maps. Tall and pale with white-blonde hair, Azog cuts a striking figure. When they first met, back in early March, Bilbo had started a conversation without even looking up, leaning over a map in a glass case and noticing only the presence of someone beside him. It was only later, when the slick reply came and the debate started, that he began to be afraid.

Despite all that, they worked surprisingly well together, deciphering old texts and leafing through the library archives. Bilbo found that if he just focused enough on the maps, he could ignore the chill that ran up his spine every time Azog leaned over him or whispered something in his ear, sliding a book across the reading room table in the hush of the room. The man has, objectively speaking, quite nice hands, the fingers long and dexterous. There’s a scar on his face, cutting through one eyebrow and down onto his cheek, and when he smiles it curls up towards his hairline. He’s someone who could be—would be—fascinating, if he wasn’t so terrifying. Bilbo spends many of their hours together convincing himself that Azog couldn’t possibly have been a murderer in his past life, telling himself that he reads too many crime novels, that it’s all a cultivated air of mystery and not an actual Russian mafia heritage. He’s not entirely successful but the archives are alluring enough and with Azog’s knowledge, the uncanny way he tracks down exactly the right documents, Bilbo’s too interested to back down.

Except now they’re here, an unusually warm night, mid-April, trading threats in the moonlight. Or rather, Azog is threatening; Bilbo is listening, and feeling increasingly like this was all a very bad idea. Wishing he knew how to re-wind time.

“You will be there tomorrow, and you will find a way to get that map to me after closing, or I can promise you that you will not like what comes next.” Azog’s leaning casually against the low wall outside of Milstein. When he came out of the shadows and waved a casual hand at Bilbo as he left the studio, Bilbo hadn’t given it a second thought. It’s nearing one in the morning and he’s had a drink in the studio with Thorin, so he’s probably not as together as he should be. All he meant to do was walk home.

“I won’t do that,” he says, the words thick in his throat. He doesn’t know if he’s sweating or if the air is just humid, on the brink of rain.
“No, I think you will.” Azog reaches out a hand, pale wrist flashing quick, and then he’s fisting Bilbo’s sweater and tugging him close. “I need that map.”

“I have to go now,” Bilbo says, and tries to take a step back. Azog doesn’t let go.

“I’ve been more than lenient with you so far. Little first-year, all alone in a new town, doesn’t know what he wants to research. I’ve . . . taken you in.”

“That’s really not—”

“There’s a system in place here. And you don’t simply walk out. Tomorrow. The map. My hands.”

“Please, I’m not going to—”

“Hey!” The shout, low and angry as it is, is a welcome relief. Azog’s eyes narrow but his grip loosens, and Bilbo sinks back. He doesn’t know who it is, until the next words come, and then the voice makes it clear. “What’s going on?”


“You get the hell away from him.”

“We’re only talking. Move along.” Azog pulls a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, lights one slowly, as if he has all the time in the world. Bilbo shivers and takes a step towards Thorin, but just one. Azog’s eyes pin him in place.

“Fuck you,” Thorin says. He moves between Bilbo and Azog, his whole posture tense. “Bilbo, get in the car.”

“We’re not done talking here, Bilbo and I,” Azog says, and blows a line of smoke at Thorin. “And this has nothing to do with you. Unless . . .” He looks from Thorin to Bilbo, back to Thorin again, and then laughs, his head tilted back, perfectly coiffed hair shining under the street-lamp. He laughs and laughs and finally says, “You’ve got to be joking. Really, Thorin? This kid? Are you that desperate?”

“You get in the goddamn car.”

Bilbo flinches at Thorin’s tone and backs his way across the parking lot until he hits the Volvo and stumbles. It’s unlocked, because it’s always unlocked, so battered and so recognisably his that Thorin doesn’t fear anyone stealing it. After a bit of fumbling with the door handle, Bilbo falls into the passenger seat. The windows are damp from spring rain and he watches Thorin face down Azog and feels sick to his stomach. Thorin turns and his look is clear, even across the parking lot—Bilbo shuts the car door. He can’t hear their words after that, but the body language says it all. Azog too carefully nonchalant, the butt of his cigarette glowing. Like he knows a secret. Thorin with his fists clenched, leaning forward, ever so slightly in Azog’s space, not taller but broader and clearly fuming. They stand there for what seems like an age, and then before Bilbo knows it the Volvo’s driver side door is jerked open and Thorin sits down hard, pulls the door shut after him so fiercely that the entire car rattles. There are minutes, so many minutes, of tense breathing. Bilbo looks up, out the windshield, and Azog is gone.

“Are you . . . all right?” he ventures, when it becomes clear that Thorin isn’t planning on starting the car anytime soon.
“Am I—are you seriously asking me that? Am I all right? What the hell were you doing, talking to that bastard? What the fuck is wrong with you? Are you all right? Did he hurt you?”

“No, no, Thorin, he’s . . . I’m fine.”

“You never speak to him again. Do you understand me? Don’t ever speak to him. If he so much as looks at you, I swear—”

“I don’t need you mauling people on my account.”

“Not everything is about you,” Thorin snaps, and slams a hand against the dashboard. “Goddamn it. You don’t—you don’t have any idea who he is, do you? What you’re risking by even being on his radar?”

“Thorin, we were only talking. He’s smart, we’ve done some work together in the past—”

“When?”

“What?”

“When did you work together?”

“Um . . . we met back in March, so, it’s been a little over a month now? More or less. He’s working on something for this conference in Munich so I’ve been—”

“You’ve been ‘working’ with him for a month? And you didn’t think, even once, that it might be a good idea to say something to me about that? I can’t believe you!”

“Why would I tell you about my research partners? You won’t tell me about your ‘companions,’ not really, and we haven’t exactly been on the best of terms lately, in case you didn’t notice. Look, it was just work, Thorin. Like anything else. There’s no need to—”

“It’s never just anything with Azog, you don’t understand—you have to tell me these things, Bilbo!”

“Why? Why should I tell you? You’re not my father, and we’ve already established that you’re not my boyfriend, and to be honest you’re acting like an arse right now, so why on earth would I tell you anything? It’s always violence with you. Like you’re some kind of . . . Neanderthal. I don’t know why I bother.” Bilbo shrinks down into his seat and knocks his forehead against the window.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Thorin says, his words slow and deliberate and somehow more painful than the shouting because of that. He starts the car, pulls out of the parking lot slowly, looking around, checking things out. With no sign of Azog, Thorin eases the rickety car out onto the road and heads for his apartment. They don’t speak on the drive, not even when Bilbo notices how Thorin’s knuckles are white on the steering wheel, how his left leg is restless against the car door. He can’t get the smell of Azog’s cigarette out of his nose.

“Out,” Thorin says, when he pulls up to the garage, and Bilbo gets out. Follows Thorin in through the wide front doors and drops into a chair at the kitchen table. Thorin rummages in the fridge and Bilbo is expecting alcohol but it’s a glass of water thrust into his hands, and then Thorin is sitting across from him, not quite looking at him, his jaw tight. “I don’t know . . . how to talk about this.”

“With words. It isn’t that difficult.”
Thorin exhales sharply and for a second Bilbo thinks he’s going to overturn the table or something. But Thorin just closes his eyes, and his shoulders heave once, and his hand taps steadily on the table. “It is difficult,” he says. “More than you know. I’m trying, as best as I can, to tell you why. So if you could stop arguing for five minutes, I’d appreciate it.”

“Well, you do owe me an explanation.”

“I owe you an apology,” Thorin says, and they are words Bilbo has never heard him speak before. They are words he didn’t even know Thorin knew.

“What did he say to you, after you sent me to the car?” Bilbo asks, because he’s still shaken up, still argumentative, not ready to just take the apology and accept it for the novelty it is.

“You don’t need to know.”

“I’m asking you to tell me.”

“Bilbo, you have to understand that Azog and I . . . have a history. A really fucking terrible history. Whatever he said, it’s not important. What matters now is that you keep away from him, as best you can, and if he ever tries to threaten you again, you come to me.”

“So you can maul him.”

“I would like nothing more,” Thorin says, and he isn’t joking the way Bilbo had hoped.

“I don’t need you to . . . defend my honour, or whatever else you think you might be doing. He hasn’t done anything to me. What you saw was just . . . I don’t know, a bad moment.”

“I’m telling you, this isn’t about you. Until today, I didn’t even know you knew him. You shouldn’t know him, not at all. He’s not the type to—There are things about Azog that you don’t know. That I don’t ever want you to know.”

“What things?”

“Damn it, I just said, things I don’t want you to know! So I’m not going to tell you. Just drop it.”

“I think I deserve to know,” Bilbo says, and wipes at the condensation on his glass instead of looking Thorin in the eyes.

“Maybe,” Thorin says. “Maybe you do. But I am asking you to let this go. He hasn’t . . . hurt you yet. You can still walk away. I am asking you to do that, Bilbo.”

And because it is Thorin, and he is—for one of the first times, ever—asking, Bilbo lets it go. They move from the table to the couch without really talking about it, in their usual positions: Bilbo on the left with the pillows and the ragged afghan, Thorin on the right with his feet up, Erebor beneath the coffee table. They’re all drained, too worn-out to even think about moving further. Beyond that, neither of them, though they’d never admit it, particularly wants to be alone.

“Thorin?” Bilbo says, just before they fall asleep.

“Mmm?”

“I didn’t say it earlier. I was . . . frightened, and then I was just angry. But thank you.”

“Hmm for what?” Thorin shifts, his head back against the couch, body slumped over towards
“For saving me, back there.”

“Go to sleep.” Thorin shoves a hand against Bilbo’s shoulder, clumsy with exhaustion.

As fights and apologies go, it’s nowhere near good, but it’s the best they’ve managed so far.

Chapter End Notes

Longer chapter, because I'm on summer break (well, mostly) for a little bit and had some more time, and also because I thought, "You know what this story needs? A villain." So, here you go. This chapter's back to a time-skip thing again, with the first part of it being Christmas & the days after, and the second part taking place not long after their "disastrous dinner of April the seventh." Hope that was clear.

Not sure what's going to happen next, but I hope to not keep you waiting for too long. Thanks for reading, and massive thank-yous to everyone who's left comments and/or kudos. I really appreciate all of you.

UPDATE:

I made a calendar for a basic outline of story events so far and posted it to my tumblr (http://stickmansaga.tumblr.com/post/51133378535/mock-up-calendar-to-try-to-clarify-some-dates-for) so if you are seeking clarification, check it out, and I hope it helps. Feel free to ask me about the timeline, but please also know that I am making it up as I go and some things might be a little off, since I'm writing this quickly and without any outside editor/beta. Thanks, guys.
Thorin maneuvers Bilbo through his garage door easily. His hand is cool on the back of Bilbo’s neck and the contact is a grounding force, keeping Bilbo upright long enough to get to the couch. Thorin, it turns out, is unusually good at taking care of people. You would never guess it. He bats away Bilbo’s fumbling hands and makes short work of unlacing Bilbo’s boots. Removes his wool socks, tucks his legs up on the couch. “I’ll be right back,” Thorin tells him, and brushes his fingers against Bilbo’s hair as he walks past.

Bilbo, if anyone bothered to ask, would still say that he was fine, but he can’t deny that he’s tired all of a sudden, so tired his limbs feel heavy. It’s too much effort even to raise his head and see what Thorin’s doing. He hears running water, and then Thorin is back with a damp washcloth in hand. “Here,” Thorin says, and folds it neatly in half, presses it to Bilbo’s forehead. “Just . . . close your eyes, or something.”

“Hmm,” Bilbo says, and water drips down from his temple, runs down his neck.

“Have you eaten today?”

“I had breakfast.”

“Lunch? Dinner?”

“An apple.” It had been a lousy one, mealy on his tongue, which is always the trouble with winter fruit. “Beer, with you.”

“Damn it, Bilbo, why don’t you actually spend some of your stipend for once? Buy yourself some decent food. I know you like to eat.”

“Don’t like to eat alone,” Bilbo mumbles, and Thorin sighs.

“I’ll get you some aspirin or something. Don’t go anywhere.”

Bilbo has to smile a little, because the thought of him going anywhere is ridiculous. There’s a crick in his neck so he scrunches down until his head falls off the armrest and onto the cushion. When Thorin returns, he slips a hand under Bilbo’s head and lifts him back up, and Bilbo protests. “Medicine,” Thorin says. “Then you can lie back down.” So Bilbo puts the pills in his mouth and fumbles with the water, spilling a little down the front of his shirt.

“Sorry,” he says, letting Thorin take the glass back and lying down again. “I didn’t mean to . . . get your couch wet.”

“I think most of it ended up on your shirt,” Thorin says. He turns to put the glass on the coffee table and then his fingers are undoing the buttons of Bilbo’s shirt.

“What’re you doing?”

“I want to get your temperature down, not freeze you to death. It is still January, you know. Even if you’re burning up. Wet shirt’s not going to help here.”
“Oh.”

Bilbo lets Thorin work his arms free of the wet shirt and shivers. He reaches up to push the washcloth off his forehead and Thorin stops him. “Leave it,” he says.

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologising.”

Bilbo’s own memories of that night are understandably fuzzy, but he thinks Thorin may have spoon-fed him ice chips at some point, which is beyond embarrassing. He’s also about sixty-percent certain that his head ended up in Thorin’s lap at some point, and when he wakes up it isn’t to the coffee table in front of him and his feet pressed up against the armrest. He’s in Thorin’s bed, snow falling wetly on the skylight above the loft, everything mid-morning bright. It takes him a few minutes to recall that it must be Wednesday and he’s definitely slept through class.

“Thorin?” he calls, testing his voice. Low, scratchy—sounding nothing like himself. There’s some rustling from down below and Thorin’s head appears at the top of the ladder.

“Hey, space cadet,” Thorin says, and Bilbo frowns because he thought they’d left that nickname behind. “How’re you feeling?”

“Miserable.”

“You look far more with-it than last night, though.” Thorin climbs up onto the loft platform, sits down at the foot of the bed.

Bilbo pulls the sheets up to his chin, suddenly aware that he’s still shirtless, and frowns. “What did I say? Last night, that is.”

“Oh, plenty. Think you can make it down the ladder for some breakfast? I don’t want you to fall and concuss yourself on top of it all.”

“I know how to climb a ladder, thank you,” Bilbo says, trying for dignity and missing it by about a mile. It only gets worse when he fights his way out of tangled sheets—Thorin’s tangled sheets—and sees that he’s not in his jeans anymore, either.

“Here,” Thorin says, and throws a sweater at him. It’s the same one Bilbo walked out in last time, washed and folded and carefully left on Thorin’s drafting table in the studio last week. Bilbo slips it on wordlessly, smooths it out. The shoulders hang and the bottom hem goes well past his hips but it’s just as soft as he remembers. “I’d offer coffee but I doubt you’re up to it so . . . apple juice? And you’re eating something. No arguments.”

Bilbo takes a minute to collect himself before following Thorin down the ladder. He doesn’t know where his pants are, or his socks. His toes curl on the cold rungs. His mouth tastes like week-old bread and something worse, something beneath that. Thorin slides a glass of juice across the kitchen table to him and then a plate of toast.

“Eat.”

“Thorin, really, what did I say last night? I . . . can’t really remember.”

“Drink your juice.”

“I’m sorry if I—”
“Bilbo, stop. You just answered a few questions, that’s all.”

At that, Bilbo feels his cheeks flush. Not fever again but embarrassment, because they had been talking about “life stories” before his whole Victorian-lady swooning episode back in the studio, and whatever questions Thorin asked can’t have been ones he would have wanted to answer. He rather suspects, in his feverish state, that he answered them all anyway, and then some.

Thorin spends the rest of the afternoon alternating between ribbing Bilbo mercilessly and hovering over him with bottles of water, aspirin, toast with honey until Bilbo has to actually push him away. Even though there’s still time to get back to campus before his French class, Thorin insists that Bilbo’s staying put. When the fever breaks and Bilbo can’t stop shivering Thorin bundles him into the quilt from his bed and they sit on the couch and—true to Thorin’s word—finish off Bilbo’s education Indiana Jones with The Last Crusade. It’s sort of awful and sort of fantastic, and it does wonders for taking Bilbo’s mind off things, but when the credits roll it’s all still there: shame, and apprehension. He’s never been blackout drunk, has no precedent for this sort of thing, and he can’t honestly say what worries him more, the fact that he can’t remember or what he might’ve said to Thorin.

“I need to know,” he finally says, after Thorin explains that technically there’s another Indiana Jones film but it’s not something they’re ever going to speak of, let alone watch. “I need to know what I said to you last night.”

“You told me about your parents.”

“. . . What, exactly, did I say?”

“I am sorry, you know. I told you then, but I should tell you again—I had guessed as much, a while back, but I didn’t know for certain.”

“That wasn’t fair of you,” Bilbo says. He’s not as angry as he thinks he should be and chalks it up to fever, to the softness of Thorin’s quilt around his shoulders. “Asking me questions like that when you knew I wasn’t really all together.”

“It was a fair trade, though. My story for yours.”

“You had a chance to edit yours.”

“All right, then. Tell me your version, now.”

“What good will that do? You already have your answers.”

“I want to compare.”

“No, thanks.”

“Or I can tell it to you, and you can tell me where you think I’ve got it wrong.”

“I said no!”

For as long as they’ve been arguing—nearly three months, now—it is the first time Bilbo has ever raised his voice.

The conversation’s all but over after that. Bilbo falls asleep, sometime later in the evening, and when he wakes up to use the bathroom the garage is cold and dark and Thorin is, presumably, upstairs on his bed, sans quilt. Bilbo should feel guilty at that, but as he washes his hands and looks
at himself in the mirror over the sink, he feels a little smug. It serves Thorin right, he thinks, and
finishes off the bottle of apple juice. Goes back to the couch, and back to sleep.

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They’re in Thorin’s car driving north, the windows rolled all the way down. It’s the first week of
May and uncharacteristically gorgeous outside, all blue skies, the weeping cherries in full bloom.
Thorin is wearing these absurd cheap plastic sunglasses with neon blue frames that someone left
behind in the studio. He has a bare arm hanging out the window while the fingers of his other hand
drum on the steering wheel. Bruce Springsteen is loud, almost painfully so, on the Volvo’s lousy
speakers, singing “Jungleland” as if his heart depends on it. Bilbo thinks he’s starting to understand
now, why Thorin likes Springsteen so much. It’s something to do with the way he sings about home
—like it’s a place he can’t wait to leave, but also a place he’d give anything to keep. Or to save. A
place he loves for what it is but hates for what it does.

Outside the street’s on fire in a real death waltz
between what’s flesh and what’s fantasy,
and the poets down here don’t write nothing at all,
they just stand back and let it all be.

It’s imperative, somehow, that Bilbo understand. He knows this. Can feel it in his bones.

“This is good,” Thorin says, apropos of nothing, shouting a little to be heard over the music
and the noise of the highway. He turns to grin at Bilbo, mouth wide, eyes decidedly not on the road.

“Look where you’re going,” Bilbo says, and ruins the mood, but he can’t help it if he panics
slightly on highways. He can see the speedometer—Thorin’s doing nearly eighty.

“Relax, Bilbo.” Thorin reaches over and shoves his shoulder, ruffles his hair. Bilbo bites his
lip and closes his eyes so he doesn’t see the road whizzing past.

Springsteen’s just crooning now, over rumbling piano riffs, as the song ends. Bilbo opens his
eyes in time to see Thorin nodding his head in time with the music, entirely caught up in the moment.
They’re driving out of town to nowhere in particular. It’s Friday, the last day of classes for the spring
term, and though they both have piles of work left undone—papers and a translation project for
Bilbo, the finishing touches on a scale model and four more pages of elevations plus the oral
examination for his thesis defense for Thorin—they decided, mostly by unspoken agreement, that
while the rest of the university blows off classes to drink on campus at some kind of outdoor concert
that everyone except the grads seems to know about, they would take the Volvo and Thorin’s box of
cassettes and a case of beer and get as far away as one afternoon would let them.

The lake stretches out to their right, a slick line glistening in the sun. “Few hours, we could
be in Canada,” Thorin says. “Want to?”
“We can’t,” Bilbo says, because someone has to be responsible, to point out that they have liquor in the car and no passports, that the bottle cradled between Thorin’s thighs does not contain water.

“Ever been?”

“Once,” Bilbo says. “When I was very young.”

They end up just outside of some town with a Roman name—a geographic anomaly, Bilbo thinks, that there should be so many, clustered together, so far from Rome—on the back slopes of a winery, overlooking the lake. Thorin gives Bilbo a boost up and then they’re on the Volvo’s roof, the case of beer between them as Bilbo shifts awkwardly and Thorin lies back, one leg hanging over the roof-racks, like he’s done this a thousand times. Bilbo takes a drink and he lies back too, the feel of warm metal strange beneath his back.

“Bilbo,” Thorin says, hours later, when they’re sleepy with sun and both more than a little not-sober. His voice sounds further away than Bilbo’s shoulder. “As good as this is, I didn’t drag you out here just to look at some grapes.”

“We’re not looking at grapes,” Bilbo wants to say, because when he’s feeling contrary he gets logical, but he keeps his mouth shut because deeper than any desire to argue is panic, sheer and sudden.

“We have to talk.”

It’s funny, in a way, Bilbo thinks, because those are words he’s been expecting for ages now, except always from his own lips. Thorin isn’t the type to talk. He’ll glare, or throw something, or stand painfully stoic until the other person caves. He’ll cook dinner rather than apologise. Drink rather than socialise. Anything having even remotely to do with emotions is best broached with a ten-foot pole, or not at all. So why this, now?

“You know I’m leaving. Less than two weeks. And there’s no way—you have to understand that I won’t be coming back.”

There are a couple of terns out over the lake, dipping low in flashes of black and white. It hurts to follow their movements, so Bilbo closes his eyes.

“I’m not asking you to come with me,” Thorin is saying, and Bilbo thinks he must have missed something because that doesn’t understand.

“What?” he asks, tongue thick in his mouth.

“I know you have . . . things. Things to do here. A life, and all that.” Thorin clears his throat, so close that Bilbo feels the rumble. “And what I am trying—what I am going to do is not exactly a brilliant plan. I’ve been told”—he laughs a little, bitterly—“that there are some who would not deem it wise.”

“Speaking in quotations,” Bilbo says, because those words can’t be Thorin’s own.

“Yes.”

Bilbo takes a minute to wonder at that, but there is so much that he has not been told and this is just one more thing added to the list. “I knew this wasn’t forever. I think, probably, that I’ve always known. You’re not the kind of person who does ‘forever’ very well, are you?”
“Because I know that nothing is forever.”

“There you go.”

“Everyone knows that.”

“No,” Bilbo says, and sits up. It’s a struggle, but he makes it, one hand braced on the roofrack so he doesn’t slip off. “I don’t. I don’t know that.”

“You just don’t want to believe it. But you do know it.” Thorin’s voice is gentle. Bilbo almost wishes he would yell.

“I’ve already lost . . . so much. And I know, I know you have, too, but I just can’t . . . I can’t believe that. Some things have to be forever.”

“Why?” Thorin asks. He knocks his foot against Bilbo’s crossed legs once, twice. “I have seen what comes from thinking that nothing can ever change. It isn’t pretty. To let yourself think that, to get caught up—”

“Can’t it be, though? Can’t things just . . . go on?”

“You’re asking the wrong person if you’re looking for me to say yes. It was my home, Bilbo, it was my family. My father, his father, everyone thought we were invincible. Perfection isn’t real, though, and getting too close to it only spells disaster. It ruins every damn thing it touches.”

They’re quiet after that, thinking, or not thinking. If Bilbo was a little bit braver, he’d call Thorin a hypocrite, because what else is he trying to do but resurrect the past? Bring back that “perfection” he remembers from his childhood? Even now, even with all he’s said to Bilbo about madness and how it runs in the family, about how he hates and blames that insatiable desire that poisoned his ancestors, here he is, planning to go down the same path. He hasn’t said it yet, not exactly, but Bilbo has spent an awful lot of time this past year watching Thorin and he can tell, just from the set of Thorin’s jaw, that the man is lying. Doesn’t believe his own words, and as soon as Thorin leaves his side Bilbo knows the façade will fall away.

It’s like architecture, and so it’s no surprise—Thorin builds up walls. It’s all he knows how to do. A soon-to-be-certified professional at it, in fact.

“You don’t have a home,” Bilbo says, finally, and it’s not an accusation, just him thinking aloud, but Thorin bristles anyway.

“I do,” he says. “Erebor will always be my home.”

“No,” Bilbo says, “or rather, that’s not what I meant. It’s that your home was taken from you. Whereas mine . . .”

“You could go back anytime you wanted.”

“I can’t, though. Not really. It wouldn’t be the same. And I can’t even—you at least can get properly angry about the whole thing. Your fortress, overrun. What did you expect, though, honestly, making so much out of so little? Your family had to have known. It’s like raising a beacon on a hill. It’s asking to be noticed.”

“We did nothing to deserve what was done to us!”

“Didn’t you, though? It’s greed, Thorin, even if you don’t want to say it, and I’m sorry for
your loss, truly I am, but I can’t pretend to understand it. Not really.”

“Maybe I should take a torch to your apartment, then,” Thorin snarls. “So you can ‘understand’ how I feel.”

“It wouldn’t make a difference. That place isn’t my home. There’s nothing you can do to make me feel what you are feeling.”

“Don’t test me.”

Bilbo knows he’s being stupid, provoking Thorin, but he has a point here, if only he could get the words out in the right order. Ignoring the way his hands are shaking and how cold he suddenly feels, he pushes forward. “My home wasn’t taken, Thorin. It’s simply . . . gone. I always thought it would be mine someday, you know? It was a constant.” Bilbo presses a hand to his eyes, tries to squeeze out the image of a green front door. “And now it’s gone. Which I suppose is only appropriate, considering what the true constants in our world are. Death, and taxes. That’s what they say, right? Between the two of them, they’ve cost me . . . everything.” He huffs a laugh, deliberate and painfully false, and rolls on his side to look at Thorin.

Thorin’s eyes are a little red, and there’s a tinge of sunburn across his nose and cheeks. The beer is long gone by now but he’s holding an empty bottle, spinning it slowly in his hands. He won’t meet Bilbo’s eyes.

“So now what?” Thorin asks. “When I leave, what will you do?”

“I don’t know. Keep on . . . keeping on, I suppose.”

“You have a life here,” Thorin says, again, and Bilbo shakes his head.

“I have work to do here, but it’s not a life. It’s never felt more than temporary.”

“That’s how gradschool is supposed to feel.”

“That isn’t what I want.”

“What do you want?”

For you to stay, Bilbo thinks, but he can’t ask that. Thorin will leave, because he has to. There are people, more people than just Bilbo, counting on him, and they’ve been doing it for a lot longer than a year. They matter more. Of course they matter more.

“Bilbo?”

Only things I can’t have, Bilbo thinks. That’s what I want. Time, re-wound. My parents, alive. My house, mine. You, with me. “Nothing,” he says. “I don’t want anything.” Because there’s hardly anything left to lose, he reaches over and puts a hand on Thorin’s arm, warm and solid. “Just these last two weeks.”

“You have them. Of course you have them.” There’s an edge of apology in Thorin’s voice and it really isn’t what Bilbo wants to hear.

“Well, then,” Bilbo says, and forces a smile. “Come on, let’s not be maudlin. Or did you drive me all the way out here just to look at the water?”

Thorin looks as if he’s going to say something, and his other hand comes up to rest on top of
Bilbo’s, but all he does is stare. Then, with a deep inhale, he pushes himself up and slides off the roof, stripping his shirt as he walks towards the water, tossing a “You coming?” back over his bare shoulder. Bilbo’s eyes trace down the slope of his back before he snaps out of it and looks down at the Volvo instead.

“Jerk,” Bilbo calls out, because Thorin’s left him on the roof and though it isn’t that high, it’s high enough. By the time Bilbo clammers down—ungracefully, over the windshield—Thorin’s in the water, nevermind the fact that it’s still freezing cold. Knowing that this is, probably, the last chance Bilbo will ever get to do this, he forces stubborn fingers through the buttons on his shirt, the zipper on his jeans, and thinks of saunas.

“Just going to stand there?” Thorin taunts as he treads water, trying to hide the chatter in his teeth. “Admiring the view?”

“What view?” Bilbo mutters, and thinks, Oh hell, as he kicks off his jeans and socks and sticks a toe in the water.

“Jump. It’s deep enough.”

“What, and you’ll catch me?”

“Sure.”

“I don’t think so,” Bilbo says, and Thorin raises an eyebrow. He takes a few strokes back to the shallows and waits. “Thorin, I’m taking my time. I have to adjust.”

“No,” Thorin says. “That’s not how it works.” And he surges up out of the water and onto shore, slipping an icy wet arm under Bilbo’s knees and another behind his neck, and Bilbo flails but it’s useless because Thorin is bigger, stronger, faster—naked, Bilbo’s brain supplies—and in seconds they’re both in the lake. Bilbo sputters and splashes towards the shore but Thorin gets an arm around his waist and drags him back, ducks him under.

“Let me go, you brute,” Bilbo gasps out when they surface, but he’s laughing. It’s painfully cold and Thorin’s grinning like a madman. Bilbo would pull away, if he could, and if Thorin wasn’t the warmest thing around. “You’re terrible.”

“This was your idea.”

“It was a bad idea. Very bad.”

“I’m going to remind you of that next time you say you’re always right.” Thorin’s chest is broad and solid against Bilbo’s back, his voice deep in Bilbo’s ear.

“Hypothermia,” Bilbo stammers, because he can’t think straight and it’s not just the cold.

“You’ll be fine,” Thorin says, but he relents and hauls Bilbo in to shore, dumps him there on the rocky bank before pushing himself up out of the water. Bilbo shivers and tells himself to avert his eyes as Thorin wrings the water out of his hair and walks back towards the Volvo, picking up discarded clothing on the way. Instead of getting into the car, though, Thorin pulls a blanket from the trunk, spreads it on the roof, and sprawls back out up there. Bilbo gives himself a minute or two, dripping in his wet underwear, before following.

“Are you seriously doing this right now?” he asks.

“What does it look like?”
“You’re going to get us arrested,” Bilbo says, but he puts a foot on top of a tire and shoves himself up on top of the car anyway. The wind’s died down and the warmth of the car seeps through the blanket. “Indecent exposure.”

“No one’s looking,” Thorin says. “Unless you are.”

“I’m not!”

“Shame.”

“Idiot.” Bilbo can’t tell, because he is emphatically not looking, but he’s almost positive that Thorin is smirking. He feels the press of a damp knee against his own. An invitation to a truce. This is how they solve problems—they talk in circles, at cross-purposes with one another, and then change the subject, so that they’re left with no real answers, only roles they can fall back on. Thorin is the instigator; Bilbo is used to always being the one who retreats. More and more, these days, he’s wondering if there isn’t another way. Because nothing is forever, Thorin says, and when he says it, it doesn’t sound like such a bad thing.

Chapter End Notes

First of all, major apologies for the huge delay between chapter 8 and this update. I was in an absolute funk and could not seem to break out of it, and writing was just not coming.

But anyway, I think I’ve moved past it now, so I thank you all for your patience, and hope you're still enjoying the story.

Also, I'm a little behind in replying to your comments, but I promise I will get there, and I really do appreciate the feedback. I'm considering breaking out of my vagueness and actually starting each chapter with a more concrete date/time, because it sounds like that would help some people, so feel free to weigh in on whether you'd like that or not. I'd go back and edit past chapter headings, just to clear things up. Contrary to what it may seem, my goal here is not to confuse you all.
In November, late November, when they hardly know each other, Bilbo and Thorin still end up spending Thanksgiving together. Like most things, it is Gandalf’s fault, but Bilbo does not know this until later, until post-dinner and two bottles of wine, a mutual food coma on the floor of Bilbo’s attic. Thorin simply shows up at his door at five o’clock on Thursday evening, an armful of food and half a scowl. No one has ever rung Bilbo’s doorbell before and it takes him a few seconds to figure out what’s going on. When he goes downstairs to the house’s main door and wrenches it open to see Thorin there, he nearly shuts it again, right in the man’s face, but he does still have some vestige of his mother’s manners and so he stands in the entrance instead and chews his lip. “Won’t you come in,” he says, finally, but doesn’t step back. Thorin brushes past him as he enters, wiping snowy boots on the mat.

“Going to invite me up?” Thorin asks. “Or do you typically have dinner in the doorway?”

“O-of course,” Bilbo says. “Er, this way.”

They make their way up to the second floor, and then up the steep set of stairs to the attic door. Bilbo fretting, Thorin thumping along. When they are standing awkwardly in the center of Bilbo’s apartment, he asks, “Did you say dinner?”

“It’s Thanksgiving.”

“I know . . .”

“I brought meat. You look like you could use some. Real food.”

Bilbo doesn’t have a proper dining table, or chairs, so they end up cross-legged on the floor, plates balanced on their laps. Thorin is militaristically efficient, setting out the food on Bilbo’s counter, pouring the wine into whatever glassware is on hand, and Bilbo—whether out of sheer surprise or persistent loneliness—lets himself be managed in the same way. They sit beneath the skylight, snow-covered and dim, and Bilbo wonders if it would be appropriate or just ridiculous to light a candle. Ridiculous, probably.

There’s a tension to the dinner that, while not precisely uncomfortable, nevertheless makes itself felt. Bilbo doesn’t know what to say, to this man he’s known for a scant few weeks, who has made himself comfortable on the floor—and how did he know Bilbo’s address, anyway—with a turkey dinner. Then there’s the fact that it’s Thanksgiving, a family holiday, or meant to be, and neither one of them is saying anything about that. Bilbo’s barely worked up the nerve to ask Thorin what he’s doing here when the doorbell rings again.

“You’ll want to get that,” Thorin says, when Bilbo makes a startled move.

“What’s going on?”

The doorbell rings again. Thorin raises an eyebrow and takes a gigantic forkful of turkey. He chews deliberately. Bilbo wavers, and at a third ring he huffs and stands to go open the door. Brushing snow off their shoulders are two men he’s never seen before. One of them is, if possible, even more intimidating than Thorin. He’s tall and bulky, bearded, hair sticking straight up, tattoos covering arms that are otherwise bare, despite the weather. The other is shorter, rounder, white-
haired. He’s smiling at Bilbo while his companion frowns, and that bit of encouragement is enough for Bilbo to take a step back and let them inside.

“Good afternoon,” the old man says. “Balin, at your service. Is he upstairs, then?”

“Course he is.” The tattooed man brushes past Bilbo and heads up the stairs.

“Do you mean . . . Thorin?” Bilbo asks. “Are you, um, a friend of his, Mr. Balin?”

“You might say that.” Balin shuts the door behind him and gestures for Bilbo to lead the way. In the attic, Thorin and the other man are embracing and pounding each other manfully on the back. “My brother, Dwalin,” Balin tells Bilbo as they enter his apartment. “And you must be Mr. Baggins.”

“Oh, no, you can just call me Bilbo. And please, sit down, though . . . wait, I’ll get you a chair.” It’s easier to fall back on formalities, and Bilbo drags his desk chair over for the old man, who is fixing himself a plate as if he’s in his own kitchen, raiding Bilbo’s few cabinets for spices, looking through his fridge.

“There should be others here,” Thorin says. “But none of them could make it.”

“More food for us, then,” says Dwalin, piling stuffing onto his plate. “Any beer?”

“Just, um, just wine,” Bilbo says, and feels bad about it for a second or two until he remembers that this is his apartment, and this is an entirely unexpected party. He can’t be held responsible for not having beer on hand.

“Ah, well.” Dwalin pours himself a mason jar of wine and sits down next to Thorin. “We’ll get some later.”

“Later?” Bilbo blurts out, and ducks his head when they all turn to look at him. “Sorry, but . . . what exactly are you all doing here? I don’t mind the occasional guest, truly, but I do like to know them before they arrive, and I wasn’t planning for—”

“Dwalin, at your service,” Dwalin says, between mouthfuls. “Didn’t you get the message?”

“What message?”

“Told us to come, said there’d be food. But hey, where’s Gandalf? Late again, that old coot.”

“Now, brother, be kind,” Balin says.

“You know my uncle?”

“He’s your uncle?”

“Well, not strictly speaking, no. Is he coming? I thought he was out of the country, he hasn’t called in months. Are you certain he told you to come here? How do you know him, anyway?” The words come out in a rush and Bilbo has to bite his lip to stop speaking.

“Balin is a history professor,” Thorin says, and puts a hand on Bilbo’s shoulder. His palm is warm, a firm weight, just for a few seconds before he withdraws it. “And my landlord.”

“Nothing so official,” Balin says. “I’m an old friend, that’s all. And Gandalf and I have often crossed paths. Similar interests, and that style of thing.”
“So he’s the one behind all this?” Bilbo asks.

“He’s always behind it,” Balin says. “Whatever it may be. Him being your uncle, I’d have thought you’d have figured that out by now.” He smiles as he says it so the words don’t sting, but still Bilbo lowers his eyes.

“Any dessert?” Dwalin asks, looking around the apartment.

“There are some cookies in that jar,” Bilbo says, pointing, hardly done speaking before Dwalin is there with his fist stuffed through the jar’s opening, fighting to get the cookies out. “Please be careful with that,” Bilbo stammers. “It was my mother’s.”

“It’s too small.”

“Sit down, you oaf,” Thorin says, and Dwalin frowns but comes back to sit beneath the skylight. Thorin takes the jar and tips out a cookie. “Here.”

It’s more hectic than any dinner Bilbo’s ever attended, and he’s been to quite a few, back home. They’re all passing plates around, eating with their fingers, picking at the remains of the turkey. There’s a lot of talk that Bilbo doesn’t understand, about some sort of “quest” that apparently occupies a large part of Thorin’s mind. Dwalin’s sense of humour is violently physical, though fortunately directed primarily at Thorin, who takes the punches with a grin and for the following months anytime Thorin shows up to the studio with a black eye or a split lip, Bilbo will know where it came from. Balin quietly depletes Bilbo’s meagre supply of wine, nodding along with the conversation, and casting Bilbo firm, curious glances.

“—going with you?” Dwalin is asking, when Bilbo tunes back into the conversation. Everyone is looking at him.

“Sorry, I was just . . .” Bilbo says, trying to rewind the events in his mind.

“Told you he was a space case,” Thorin mutters to Dwalin, not quite managing to keep the fondness from his voice. “Nevermind, though.”

“Have I missed something?” Bilbo asks, looking around the room.

“Loads,” Dwalin says. “But I guess now’s not the time, hey, Thorin?”

“I have, haven’t I?” Bilbo asks.

“Leave it,” Thorin says, and that’s that. He’s difficult to argue with at any time, and now is no exception. Balin produces a pie from somewhere and all serious conversation is lost to clinking forks and bickering over whose slice is larger. Bilbo ends up asleep on the floor, leaning back against the counter, half-full glass of wine between his knees. When he wakes, everyone is gone.

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When you’re contemplating how best to break your own arm, and how long a leave of absence that might possibly grant, you know there’s something wrong.

Bilbo realises this one night, late February. The whole city is buried in snow, wet and dark.
He’s up in his attic, looking out the awning windows as cars slush by on the hill. It would be quiet, if not for the headphones in his ears. Thorin’s mp3 player, still somehow in his possession. Bilbo’s phone went off earlier in the evening, startling him as he cooked dinner. Even though he had one now, it was still rare for him to use it, and almost no one had the number. Thorin did, though, and this was a text, out of the blue: Cue up R.E.M., New Adventures in Hi-Fi.

Any particular reason? Bilbo texted back.

Bet you’re sulking, Thorin replied.

And he isn’t sulking, not really, but he isn’t exactly cheerful. In the days since they had spent Christmas and New Year’s together, Thorin has been developing an uncanny ability to read Bilbo’s moods, even from afar. Even when they haven’t seen each other in a while, despite living in the same city.

I didn’t wear glasses ‘cause I thought it might rain.

Now I can’t see anything.

I made a mistake, chalked it up to design.

I cracked through time, space, godless and dry.

I point my nose to the northern star

and watch the decline from a hazy distance.

The album’s first song is something called “How the West Was Won and Where It Got Us.” Bilbo thinks this is an unnecessarily long title, but Thorin’s inordinately fond of this group, so he’ll let it slide. The piano’s repetitive and quiet, with some kind of high-pitched synth whine in the background, and the vocalist’s more talking than singing. It’s not something Bilbo would choose to listen to, and Thorin will later tell him that it’s not even his favourite R.E.M. song, but there’s something about it that catches in his mind. Perhaps it’s in the refrain: “The story is a sad one told many times, the story of my life in trying times.” Perhaps it’s the way the bridge is kind of out-of-tune and all over the place, and it’s all too familiar.

Bilbo thinks Thorin probably likes the title, too. His whole end-goal is some mad quest to reclaim his home, out West. To win it back, as if they’re back in medieval times and people actually go on quests, with magic swords and familial destiny. Where will it get him, once it’s done? They haven’t talked about that. Haven’t so much as mentioned Erebor, except when referring to the dog, since that conversation just a few weeks ago. Bilbo doesn’t know how to bring it up, and Thorin won’t talk about it unless he gets a story out of Bilbo in return, so they’re at an impasse.

An impasse. The word brings to mind a host of things: a wall, a crevasse, a crack in the land. Something that cannot be gotten over. “Chalked it up to design,” Michael Stipe sings, and Bilbo thinks about the scale model he’s started building up in Milstein. He hasn’t told Thorin yet, though the man’s probably guessed, but it’s his parents’ house, or part of it. The curved walls are a challenge —posterboard and foam-core, scored in a running pattern along the back, bent and shaped around wooden dowels. Thorin told him he should start with a paper model, no colour, Elmer’s glue and drafting tape. But Bilbo’s impatient. Has this unaccountable feeling that time is running out.
Not all that unaccountable, really. It’s February, and in three months it will be May, and Thorin will graduate.

So they raided the woodshop on the bottom floor, and the supply cabinets in the print shop, and whatever other rooms they could get in to. The drafting table in the corner that Bilbo uses is stockpiled with spray adhesive, scraps of cloth, balsa strips, needles and thread. Anything a model-builder could want. Bilbo has the house’s proper blueprints in a trunk at the foot of his bed up in his attic, but he’s taken the time to make his own. To use them would feel too much like cheating, and he’s figuring out that there aren’t any shortcuts in this life that lead to good ends. On Saturday morning he started building the tiny vaulted ceilings for each room, painting wood-grain in fine lines, tying black thread into mock-rigging so the whole assembly can be lifted off and the house viewed from the top. Spread open, like a puzzle or a maze.

Building this model has been like re-fashioning a memory. The elevations for each wall took ages—silent stares and under-the-table drinking during daylight hours, long nights spent with Thorin “educating” him in music. They are nearly perfect in their detail, or as perfect as they can be in 1/8th inch scale. Each bookshelf has rows of books, miniscule spidery writing on their spines. The maps and paintings have been reproduced in miniature, down to the gold paint gilding their frames. If Bilbo was small enough, he could sink down into a velvet-covered armchair, pull the chain on a lamp with a thin paper shade, and curl up with a shred of newspaper. He could run his fingers along the sweep of the walls, trace his toes on the tile in the kitchen.

There is one room that does not look as it should: his parents’ bedroom. The space where it should be stands empty, just bare walls, a door that only opens from the inside. Bilbo has built it this way on purpose. He does not want to remember it as a sick-bay, as a gathering place for misery. When his mother died, he pulled the door closed, laid his forehead against it, and tried to wipe the interior from his mind.

There are a lot of things in his mind he’d like to wipe out, if he is honest with himself. Starting with the look Thorin probably has on his face right now. Bilbo’s just texted him about the whole broken arm/medical leave theory. Apparently gradschool has been teaching him how to develop poor impulse control. The album is on its last track, piano loud through the headphones in Bilbo’s ears. “Your eyes are burning holes through me,” the song starts out, and Bilbo cringes. Again, too familiar.

His phone rings and he drops it. Fumbling to answer, he sees that it’s Thorin. Bilbo tugs the headphones free and hears Thorin already talking.

“. . . need to have a conversation about physical safety,” he’s saying. “Or possibly mental instability. For God’s sake, Bilbo, that’s a hell of a conversation starter. Hey, are you even listening to me?”

“Technically,” Bilbo says, “we were already midconversation.”

“You know that’s not the point.”

They’re quiet for a bit, tense breathing over the phonelines.

“I’m coming over,” Thorin says, suddenly. “Stay right there. Don’t move. Don’t go down the stairs.”

“Thorin, wait, no—” Bilbo starts, but Thorin’s already hung up. Is probably throwing on his waxed cotton jacket, or maybe that buffalo check wool coat, smelling of pipe tobacco as he laces up his boots and starts up his car. Bilbo doesn’t know what to do, so he sits down on the edge of his bed.
and waits. Soon enough, the Volvo clatters up his street, and then his doorbell is ringing.

“Hello,” Bilbo says, pulling the front door open. Thorin looks him over, more critically than anyone has looked at him in years.

“Still in one piece,” Thorin says. He drops a hand onto Bilbo’s head, calloused fingers tangling in sandy-blond hair. As Thorin brushes past and heads upstairs, Bilbo realises that he’s got a military surplus duffle over one shoulder, a sleeping bag in his hand, and a friendly black shadow.

“You brought your dog?”

“Thought you might like to see him.”

“Well, yes, but . . . my landlord doesn’t allow dogs, you know that. Hello, Ere.” Bilbo leans down and pats Erebor absently, still watching Thorin climb the stairs and turn the corner. He sighs. “I guess we can always hope no one will notice, right, boy? Come on.” Erebor follows good-naturedly, his paws quiet on the wooden steps. Thorin has to give the dog a boost up into the attic and then there they are, the three of them, standing together under the eaves.

“I’ll put on a pot of tea,” Bilbo says, and turns to light the stove. Thorin catches him by the arm, pauses, and then twists his grip, pulling the arm behind Bilbo’s back. The movement wrenches Bilbo’s shoulder and sends a spike of pain through his arm, and he kicks out, on his tiptoes, trying to relieve the pressure. “What’re you doing? That hurts!”

“Hmm,” Thorin says. “Does it hurt as much as getting hit by a car?”

“What?”

“Or maybe falling down a staircase? Would that do it, you think? Break that arm?”

“Thorin, you’re hurting me.” Bilbo’s prying at Thorin’s grip with his free hand but the man is immobile. An impasse in human form.

“You mean this isn’t what you wanted? And here I thought I was helping you out.”

They struggle for a moment, maybe two, and then Thorin huffs and lets go, shakes Bilbo loose. “You’re an idiot,” he says, and slings his bag to the ground. Erebor whines, comes over to lick Bilbo’s dangling hand. His entire arm is throbbing dully. “An absolute idiot.”

“I wasn’t seriously planning—”

“Then don’t fucking say it!” Thorin’s hands are tangled in his own hair now, and he yanks them free to scratch Erebor behind the ears instead. “When you say things like that, it makes me— I don’t know what to do.”

Bilbo sinks to the ground. Sits cross-legged right in the middle of his floor and stares up at the skylight. Erebor leaves Thorin’s side and comes over to drop his head in Bilbo’s lap, heavy, eyes big and dark. Bilbo wraps his arms around the dog, wincing at the twinge in his left shoulder.

“I don’t know what to do either,” Bilbo says.

“Next time . . .”

“Yes?”

“Next time, just . . . call me. When you start thinking about things like that. Deal?”
“It’s not as though I go around thinking—”

“Do we have a deal?”

Bilbo drops his gaze from the skylight to Thorin’s face. Beneath the messy hair and beard in need of trimming, there is the usual red tint around his eyes, but a darkness beneath them. “Deal,” Bilbo says, nodding his head.

“Good.” Thorin returns the nod. He shakes out his sleeping bag on the floor next to Bilbo and stretches out on his back, fingers interlaced beneath his head. “I’m holding you to that.”

This is how the three of them spend the night: Thorin’s sleeping bag and Bilbo’s quilt on the floor, Erebor curled between them, snow falling heavily on the skylight above.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your patience, everyone. I really do appreciate it. Summer is an atypical time for me and my schedule’s gotten all turned around, so finding time to write has been tough. The Thanksgiving scene was meant to be longer but it wasn’t working for me, so I started writing miserable Bilbo instead, which was much more suited to my mood. It's a shorter chapter as a consequence, but I felt bad about leaving you all in suspense for much longer than I meant to. Thanks again for being so kind to me & this story--you're all wonderful.
Chapter 11

The second time Bilbo sees Thorin, the weather’s turned cold. It’s a Friday, near the end of October, not quite a week since Bilbo first set foot in the studio up in Milstein. He’s walking back from a small organic market downtown, tea and pasta and a loaf of bread tucked into his satchel, scarf hanging loose around his neck as he climbs back up the hill towards his apartment. The skies are clear, bright blue, so bright it nearly hurts to look up beyond the flaming tree tops, red-gold with the turning season.

This was always his father’s favourite time of the year.

The colours turn later, some 300 miles to the south, but they do turn. Bilbo remembers stacking the woodpile with green still on the oaks, acorns crunching underfoot. He used to lie out on the deck behind the house and breathe deep, taking in the crispness of the air, filling himself with the feeling of change. He remembers banking fires and testing the chimney in the old cast-iron stove in the study with the windows open, his mother in the kitchen, apple bread in the oven. Fall is the scent of dust and wood-shavings, the start of winter’s carpentry project, the bite of saw-teeth and the grind of an awl. One winter, when Bilbo was ten or maybe eleven, he helped his father plane the wood for new desk in the library. They built it slowly, a little each day, an after-dinner project. When it was done his mother took a rag and a bottle of tung oil, wiped it into the grooves, her hair falling in smooth golden waves over her shoulders.

This is what Bilbo is thinking about when a car rolls up beside him, engine loud, and it is Thorin in the driver’s seat, Thorin’s arm hanging out of the window. There’s a wooden boat strapped to the roof-racks and a black dog in the backseat. Thorin idles the Volvo and looks Bilbo over for a minute. “Get in,” he says, reaching over and opening the passenger door. Bilbo just stares at him, the strap of his satchel digging into his shoulder. Whatever song is loud on the stereo has some kind of high, metallic percussion and it’s all he can hear. Then the car behind Thorin pulls out, swerves around them, and startles Bilbo back into himself. He stumbles around the hood of the station wagon and gets inside. Thorin has to reach across him to pull the door shut; Bilbo’s hands are in his lap, uncertain.

This is probably a bad idea.

Not because he’s particularly worried—you have to care enough, to be worried—but because he doesn’t know what to expect.

Instead of turning and heading up the hill, Thorin continues on out of town. They pass the high school, cross over the creek.

Love, I get so lost sometimes.

Days pass, and this emptiness fills my heart.

When I want to run away, I drive off in my car,

but whichever way I go, I come back to the place you are.
“Where are you going?” Bilbo asks when they roll to a halt at a stop sign.

“We,” Thorin says, “are going to the lake.”

“Oh,” Bilbo says, because what else is there to say? It’s a phenomenally gorgeous day. He can let this man—still a stranger, nothing more than a name and a temper—drive him to the lake, or he can walk back to his apartment, a mile and a half, and shut himself up in his attic.

It is, though he doesn’t realise it, a turning point. Thorin puts on the blinker, swings out to the left, and Bilbo’s life changes.

It isn’t far to the lake. They pass under the highway, cross a railroad track, and pull into a small park along the shore. Thorin backs into a parking space and gets out of the car, opens the backdoor. The dog comes bounding out and does a lap of the parking lot before coming around to look up at Bilbo, who’s still sitting in the passenger seat. Under the dog’s curious gaze, Bilbo unbuckles his seatbelt and climbs out, holding his satchel.

“Leave that,” Thorin says. “Come give me a hand.” He’s undoing the tie-down straps holding the boat to the roof-racks, and holds them out in a tangle for Bilbo to take.

“Isn’t it a bit cold for swimming?” Bilbo asks, finding his voice as he sorts through the straps.

“Not planning on swimming.” The dog’s tail is wagging and he presses himself up against Thorin’s legs. “If you stay there,” Thorin tells him, hoisting the boat onto his broad shoulders, “I’m going to step on you. Go on, Erebor. Get.”

“Your dog’s name is Erebor?”

“What of it?”

“Nothing,” Bilbo says, quickly. “I like it.”

“Didn’t ask your opinion.” Boat overhead, Thorin turns and heads for the water’s edge. Erebor follows at his heels. Bilbo ties the straps into a neat bundle and leaves them on the car’s backseat, next to his abandoned satchel. Apparently, he too is meant to follow.

The water looks cold, dark and spreading out far into the distance. Thorin sets the boat down carefully on the rocky shore and dips a hand in. He is in jeans and a flannel shirt, heavy boots, sunglasses. Bilbo tucks his hands into the pockets of his jacket and approaches with caution.

“This is her maiden voyage,” Thorin says, running a hand along the boat’s gunwales. “Is it yours, too?”

“I’ll just watch,” Bilbo says. There’s a glint in Thorin’s eye that makes him uncomfortable.

“Boring. Come on, get in.” Thorin has the boat in the water now, holding it steady as the water laps against its sides. “She’s water-tight.”

“I’m not exactly a boat person.” Erebor is at the back of Bilbo’s knees, nudging him forward. In the end, it is the boat itself—herself?—which convinces him. The sides bow and curve so gracefully, shiny with varnish, sanded smooth. The boat rocks as Bilbo clambers in, thinking of his father’s hands on a plane, shaping, shaping. He wonders if Thorin’s hands have done the same. He blinks and Erebor is beside him, and then Thorin is pushing off, oars dipping into the water with
barely a sound.

There’s no one else around. Thorin takes them out around the docks of the sailing school, pulling from the stern. Bilbo looks back over his shoulder and a lapful of large dog and watches him row, his back solid, arms rolling in fluid motion. They put some distance between themselves and the shore and a breeze picks up, tipping the water into white-caps. Erebor steps over Bilbo to stand in the bow, nose to the wind, chin up.

Later, Bilbo can never remember what they talked about. They were in the boat for an hour, maybe more, and in his mind he can picture it all so clearly—wood, water, man, dog, the vivid reds and blues, trees and sky and water—but it’s like a movie with the sound turned off. Images crisp, audio mysteriously absent.

He suspects they didn’t say much, because neither of them knew yet who the other was. Either that, or this is just a dream he has invented, to fill in the gaps. To explain why he is so inexplicably at ease around Thorin.

When they get back to shore, Erebor knocks Bilbo into the lake and it is cold but not as cold as he expected. He treads water for a minute, stunned, while Thorin laughs and wrestles his dog.

“All right?” Thorin asks him, crouched on a rock, extending a hand. Bilbo takes it and finds himself hauled out of the water, hoisted up as if he weighed nothing. “Damn dog. He gets excited, days like this.”

“F-fine,” Bilbo says, once his feet are back on solid ground. “A little cold, though.”

There’s a blanket in the car and Thorin throws it over Bilbo, then lifts the boat back up and ties it to the roof-racks. Erebor looks shame-faced, but only a bit. Thorin starts the car and switches on the heater, turning all vents towards Bilbo. He does not apologise, and Bilbo does not thank him. They just do things, each of them, sort of separately. Bilbo leans in close to the dashboard, fingers spread out to catch the half-hearted stream of warm air. He breathes in deep, lakewater in his nose mixing with the smoke-dust smell of Thorin’s car, and coughs.

“That was good,” Thorin says, as he pulls to a stop near the cemetery—Bilbo’s common sense has returned to him, and he doesn’t want to give out his actual address. It’s probably foolish, given that he’s just been alone in a boat with this man. Anything could’ve happened. “A good voyage.”

“I haven’t done anything like that in a long time,” Bilbo says, handing the wet blanket back.

“We’ll do it again,” Thorin says, and drives away, Erebor’s head hanging out the back window.

They never do.

That probably should have been a hint.

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In March, after Bilbo has met Azog but before he’s told Thorin about it—and long before Thorin finally tells him why Azog is to be avoided, at all costs—they’re in the studio, working through a
rainy afternoon, and Bilbo asks, “Do you remember our deal?”

Thorin’s quiet for a minute, focusing on his t-square and the compass in his hand. “I do,” he says, but he doesn’t turn to look at Bilbo. Somehow, not having to worry about eye-contact actually makes this easier, what Bilbo’s about to say, and he wonders if Thorin guessed as much and that’s why he’s doing it, or if he’s just being rude. Because it has to be said that Thorin is, often, quite rude.

“Can I, er, take you up on it?”

“Go ahead.”

“I’ve been thinking . . .”

“. . . About?” Thorin prompts.

“What I’m doing. Here.”

“Reading Badiou. Eating a bagel.”

“What I’m doing . . . existentially.”

“Oh, God,” Thorin groans, but it’s not a dismissal. Bilbo presses on.

“Or maybe, how I’m doing what I’m doing. I feel like I’m on auto-pilot. I wake up, I go to class, I eat lunch, I go home. Read, or nap. My days all feel the same.” Bilbo toys with the staple on his handout—it is Badiou, Thorin was right, but he isn’t really reading it. “It’s as though all of this might as well not be happening.”

“What would make it more real for you?”

“I don’t know.”

“If you’re going to suggest something idiotic again, like bodily harm—”

“No. No, I don’t want . . . I just feel pointless. Anyone else could be doing what I’m doing.”

“Sure,” Thorin says. “But they’re not. You are.”

“Don’t you ever feel that way, though?”

“My problem is more the opposite.” Thorin spins his compass in one hand. “No one else is doing what I’m doing. Explains why I can’t find a job.”

“Maybe I should change my course of study.”

“To what?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been doing some research into Anglo-Saxon history. Battle poetry, and archaeology . . . maybe I’d be more suited to that.” He doesn’t tell Thorin that Azog is charming, in a frightening way, and is luring Bilbo farther and farther afield.

“So change.”

“But I don’t think it would help. Not really, I mean.”

“So don’t change.”
“Thorin, it’s not that simple.”

“All you can do,” Thorin says, finally turning to look at him, “is keep going, or give up. Those are basically your only options.”

“Are you telling me to give up?”

“If you want to.”

“But I can’t. I need the funding. And even if I’m . . . dissatisfied with what I’m doing, I don’t know what else I’d rather do.”

“Then you keep going. Look, if you’re on auto-pilot for a while, then you’re on auto-pilot. You get things done. Maybe they’re shitty. Maybe you don’t care. But you’re doing something. Which is a hell of a lot more than can be said for most of my classmates. You see any of them here? No. They think they can coast by, on parental money, on family legacy. They’re here killing time.”

“Isn’t that what I’m doing?” Bilbo asks.

“You’re waiting,” Thorin says. “There’s a difference. Someday, you’ll get your act together.”

“Will I, though?”

“Now you just sound pathetic.”

“That really isn’t what I want to hear from you.”

“I’m not good at emotional counseling. Deal with it.”

“I don’t want to deal with it,” Bilbo says, and there is the real problem. He crumples Badiou and stands, crosses the studio to the stereo. There’s a song that’s been on his mind these days, and it’s almost certainly the wrong song to play now—it’s too heavy, the wrong ending to a conversation they were so close to having—but he plays it anyway.

The thing about this song is that it suits them too well. “They measure the room,” it says, and, “they know the score,” and what do Bilbo and Thorin have if not that? The boundaries are clear. “Come on, come on,” and, “We were only just beginning,” and they keep going ‘round, coming back to where they started.

We have the answer to all your fears.

It’s short, it’s simple, it’s crystal clear.

It’s roundabout and it’s somewhere here,

lost amongst our winnings.

The thing about this song is that there’s so much potential and it just fails. There’s a resignation that’s more profound than anything Bilbo can put into words. There is no train here, not in this life, for him to catch. All he has is this room, this score. He has to make it work, but how? The bass is slow, methodical, the beat inescapable. The chorus nearly makes him cry. He is not going to go find some creative way to injure himself, doesn’t want to do anyone harm—what he wants is to
not have to do anything. Not to be the one in charge of his own life. Not to have to decide what it is he doesn’t want to do.

“Lift up your voice,” the song tells him, but what is there to say?

When the song ends, the quiet that falls over the studio is so thick Bilbo can hardly breathe. It takes him all his strength to put one foot in front of the other and walk away. They leave the studio, both of them, separate, disheartened. They don’t speak for three days.

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It’s quiet, when it finally happens. A Saturday night that could be any Saturday but it’s not. It’s the twenty-seventh of April. The two of them are on Thorin’s couch, Erebor curled up underneath the desk. Bilbo doesn’t really know what he would have expected—feels like he shouldn’t have expected anything—but he thought there would be more of a soundtrack. At least some old Western playing in the background. But the television’s off, and the only noise is the hum of the refrigerator and their own breathing, loud, open-mouthed. Everything registers as if in a dream: the well-worn softness of Thorin’s flannel shirt, exactly how broad his shoulders are beneath Bilbo’s hands, the way the couch is definitely too cramped for this. It’s all there, noticeable, but not really important. Think about any one detail too long and it starts to slip away.

He’s still wearing his socks, and that should be ridiculous, but it isn’t. They’re woolen, burgundy, just a little tight around his ankles. They’re leftover from his childhood and he has become attached.

Thorin’s fingers are rough and warm against his jaw, tracing lines down his throat. Feeling out the architecture of his body—support beams, pivot points.

“I won’t break,” Bilbo says, and Thorin answers, his voice hoarse, “You might.”

It’s true. He might. They don’t know, either of them, what they’re doing. Not really. Not with each other. Six months, more or less, and all they’ve done is learn how to orbit. Going in circles around each other, a push and pull that never leads anywhere.

Well. They’re somewhere, now. Bilbo shifts his hips and one of Thorin’s knees falls between his own. They’re somewhere Bilbo has never been before. He suspects Thorin has, sometime, with someone, but he doesn’t want to ask. It just seems like the sort of thing that might’ve happened, maybe after a long night of drinking, maybe more than once. There’s a confidence about Thorin that Bilbo is trying very hard to match and he knows he’s falling short.

Bilbo isn’t wearing his glasses. Thorin’s face and hands are in focus, close. Around his waist, things start to waver. Anything below that is a blur, muted colours, fuzzed edges. When their foreheads press together he blinks and closes his eyes.

It’s taken a lot to get them here. He doesn’t want to look back and have it all be gone. Or, worse, look back and watch it go.

Thorin’s hands are lower now, pushing up his sweater, at the waistband of his jeans. Tight—he’s been eating too much dessert lately. It is Thorin’s fault.

But isn’t it his own fault, too? If he’s being honest with himself, isn’t he also responsible for
this? Can he really say that Thorin has changed him, has brought him this far?

   Isn’t it more that they’re changing each other?

   Bilbo doesn’t want to be thinking about that now. He opens his eyes again, thinking about how very blue Thorin’s are, such a pale blue. “Hey,” he says.

   “Mmmwhat?” Thorin’s breath is hot against his stomach. His legs are heavy atop Bilbo’s own, pressing them into the couch cushions.

   “. . . Nothing,” Bilbo says. Thorin draws back, takes his hands away.

   “We don’t have to—” he starts to say, but Bilbo shakes his head.

   “This is fine.”

   Thorin frowns at that. Like “good,” “fine” has become a loaded word for the two of them. It doesn’t mean what you think it means.

   “I like this,” Bilbo clarifies, but can’t look Thorin in the eyes as he says it. Blushing, he turns his head, studies the fibers of the cushion instead. “Just . . . I don’t . . .”

   “I know,” Thorin says, and leans back in.

   So they still can’t put their thoughts into words. Does that matter, if now they are finishing each other’s sentences?

   Maybe, Bilbo thinks, it should.

   Or maybe he thinks too much.

Chapter End Notes

I don't have a definite number of chapters yet, but as you can probably tell, things are drawing to a close. Or rather, Thorin & Bilbo are getting closer, as is the date of Thorin's departure. What next? Your guess is probably as good as mine, haha. We'll see.

I just wanted to thank you all for reading and for leaving such fantastic, engaging feedback. I love reading your thoughts/responses, and can't even express how much my mood improves whenever I go to read comments. I'm going to go stop listening to Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds now, because Bilbo's thoughts about that song are my own, and I don't have time to sit around, staring at walls.

Hope you're all doing well!
They do finally finish their conversation on families that same January, one night—it seems they always talk at night—maybe a week after Bilbo’s recovered, both from his fever and his anger at Thorin’s pressing for details. Looking back at it, the anger was probably unfair. After all, he never gave Thorin the chance to say no to him. He just poked around the man’s house, without permission.

He can’t help it. It is a weakness he has always had, since he was small and used to go visiting relatives—until recent years, he’s always had an awful lot of relatives. Left to his own devices, he’d open their drawers and cabinets, wander from room to room, toast in hand, fingers sticky with jam, munching and . . . well, snooping is probably the right word for it. He became accustomed to snooping. It’s nearly irresistible, to be in someone’s house and amongst their belongings, and if they’re not around to watch you do it (though even when said relatives were just in the next room, Bilbo had always been good at staying unnoticed, had always been the smallest of his cousins) the urge to snoop is overwhelming. Besides, Bilbo thinks, Thorin can’t have minded that much, or surely he would have trained Erebor to bite anyone who so much as cracked the spine of a book. It seems the sort of thing Thorin would do. But Erebor, for all his watchful stares, hardly so much as barked when Bilbo snooped.

When his mother died, and their bedroom was finally empty, that was the first time he did not want to go around opening drawers, pulling things off of shelves. And yet he had to, for the lawyers and for the last few relatives and for the auction houses. It had to become almost automatic. Reach out a hand, grab, place in box. Tape up box. Move on. If he stopped to think about what he was packaging up to be sold in some antiques mall, he would have more than just dust in his eyes.

Why are people so ashamed of crying, anyway? At twenty-three, Bilbo still cries at least once every two weeks. Sometimes more. Never loudly, and never in front of people, but it’s a physical reaction to emotion, just as valid any other. He’s tried punching walls before and all it got him was bloodied knuckles. Crying is far easier.

Thorin probably never cries. Thorin probably punches walls and doesn’t even bleed.

When they talk about families again, then, it is beyond surprising that things go as well as they do. A conversational failure by other people’s standards it may be, but for them, it is success. Perhaps both of them are just tired, too tired to argue, to do anything more than speak in low voices, some re-run of Lonesome Dove on the television and a bottle of whisky not-quite-forgotten beneath the couch. Bilbo has his feet tucked beneath him and a hand hanging down to rest atop Erebor’s sleeping head. The dog is warm, warmer than he in his two sweaters and Thorin’s quilt, tossed down from the loft earlier in the evening. Thorin has his socks off, his head tilted back against the couch, his shoulders sunk into the cushions, legs on the coffee table. They are as far away from each other as it is possible to be on such a small couch, which is to say, not very far.

“Your father sounds like a good man,” Thorin says, speaking more to the open ceiling than to Bilbo’s face. Hanging on twine and binder-clips from the exposed beams is a series of sketches for his latest hypothetical restoration project, some abandoned church in a town no one has ever heard of. Not on any map. That is Thorin’s life’s work, though. Doing things far away, in forgotten places. Bilbo wants to ask what the point is, but he can’t answer that question for himself and knows he has no right.
“He was. A good man. He was always . . . patient. Kind. He, um”—Bilbo pauses, licks his lips—“he taught me a great deal.”

“I think,” Thorin says, “my father could have learned from him. If their paths had ever crossed.”

And they both know that would never have happened, but still, the sentiment is there. That has to count for something, right?

Bilbo is warm and sleepy. He feels nearly at ease—a feeling that has, only very recently, stopped terrifying him every time he catches himself in the midst of it. It doesn’t make sense now, talking about his dead parents, that he should be at ease. Normally, he would have quietly fled the room and quietly been sick in the toilet, by this point in the conversation. Normally, no one would notice. Here, though, now, Thorin is looking at him, straight at him, piercing blue bright against the dimness of the garage.

“What I miss most isn’t anything in particular,” Bilbo says, blinking, because he’s beginning to suspect he’s under some sort of spell. “You know, people ask you . . . but what do they know? Afterwards . . . I hated everyone.”

“Bilbo, I don’t think you’re capable of hate.”

“I am,” Bilbo assures him, and tries to force his mouth to cooperate into a smile, to belie the words he speaks. “Someday, you may even see it firsthand.”

“Don’t say that.”

“You think too much of me.”

“And you think too little. Have some fucking confidence.”

Bilbo laughs a little, helplessly. The sort of laughter—and he recognises this—that people do when they have lost control of things. If only it were that easy. “At the funeral,” he says, slowing his breath, “I had to give a eulogy, right, and of course when my father passed away I was still in high school, I was seventeen, and my mother . . . she stood there next to me. Held my hand. It was—God, embarrassing, in a way, probably, but also the only thing I wanted at that moment. I mean, the only thing that was conceivable to have. Obviously, if it had been po—” Bilbo breaks off, clears his throat. He runs his fingers over Erebor’s brow. “But then last summer I had to do the same for my mother. And I . . . I couldn’t even get the words out.”

Thorin shifts on the couch, sets a hand on Bilbo’s leg. Because he hasn’t bothered to sit up, his hand lands somewhere halfway up Bilbo’s thigh. In a way, the awkwardness of it is more reassuring than the gesture itself. Thorin’s fingers tense, briefly, and then relax. He doesn’t move his hand.

“But there wasn’t anyone else around to say them, so I had to. Man up, right?” Bilbo wipes at his eyes with a sleeve—apparently, this week is a three-timer. “You’re always telling me . . . And I know, I know that it’s just . . . how life goes. You get older, your parents die. It happens to everyone. And it’s not as though it was any surprise. She’d—she’d been sick for a long time. And people said it was better that— Perhaps I’m just being selfish. But I don’t think . . . Hell, Thorin, I don’t think I’ll ever be over it.”

Thorin doesn’t say anything at first. His fingers tighten a little on Bilbo’s leg again. “Having time to ‘prepare’ doesn’t help. People say it does, but it really, really doesn’t.”
On the old television’s screen, Gus is fighting the Comanchero gang. Night falls, and then there’s silence across the scene. Bilbo fidgets, plays with the cuff of his sweater. Tries not to look at Thorin’s hand, at his leg, at both of them, together.

“You don’t have to be over it,” Thorin says. He fishes the bottle of whisky out from under the couch with his other hand and takes a swig. “Whoever tells you that is an asshole. Losing a parent—both parents—it’s not something you just stop thinking about.”

“Last time I asked you about your father you threw a plate at my head,” Bilbo says, and he reaches out for the whisky without turning to look. Thorin passes it to him and he drinks, a larger sip than he meant. It burns his tongue and throat, smooth and strong. “What do you have on hand this time?”

“I . . . Nothing. Shut up.”

“So I can ask you about him, then?”

“No.”

“You told me he went mad,” Bilbo says, and holds the whisky out of reach when Thorin puts a hand out for the bottle. Deflecting, deflecting. He cannot talk about his own parents any more. Not tonight. If he can crack Thorin’s story, though—he feels, in some way, that it would help. “Told me that you were going mad, too. Should I be expecting you to . . . go the way of your father?”

“No,” Thorin says, his voice a growl. “Fuck. That won’t happen. I refuse to let that happen.”

“If I give you the whisky back, will you tell me about him?”

“No.” But Thorin takes the whisky from Bilbo anyway. He swirls it in its bottle, staring at the amber liquid. “I won’t be able to make you understand.”

“Try.”

“I said no!”

“Thorin, you owe it to me to try.” Bilbo wants to tell himself it’s not the tears in his eyes that convince Thorin to break his silence, but it probably is.

Pathetic.

“I could make it sound heroic,” Thorin says, still tilting the whisky bottle in his hand. “Tell you he died in combat. That’s what I used to tell myself. He was combative as hell, all right, but he never— Damn it, Bilbo, I don’t even know how he died. Just know he’s dead.”

Thorin’s father was called Thrain, the son of Thrór, and Bilbo almost makes a joke about how both their families favour first-names of the same letter. Thorin doesn’t talk much about his grandfather, just says that he took the loss of their home hard, far harder than anyone else, and died not long after. Died somewhere far away, and when Bilbo asks how they’re certain Thorin says, “They sent us the body,” but won’t say who “they” were. Or perhaps, given the way his eyes narrow and his face gets hard, “they” still are. Out there, somewhere, tormenting Thorin by their very existence. Bilbo’s read his share of stories and it’s all very darkly poetic, the exiled man dying in disgrace. Exiled king, usually. But of course, this is real life, Thorin’s life, and there are no kings.

Thorin tells Bilbo that his family went south after losing Erebor, south where it was either farmland or desert, with nothing in between. Miles and miles of dry grass plains and black, worthless
rock. He tells Bilbo about their days living as traveling salesmen, moving from town to town, working odd jobs. Homeless, essentially. Thorin never finished his schooling. Had a mother, a younger sister, and a kid brother to look after. Learned to weld when he was fifteen, worked in automotive repair shops, hung around construction sites and got paid under the table for installing grain elevators and rigging windmills.

His father—Thorin’s voice only cracks once—before he died, had become an alcoholic, consumed with rage over the injustice of losing their home. Obsessed with gaining it back. Again he’s making it sound like a battle, and Bilbo can’t understand, because from what he knows it just sounds like the land went bust and they had to move on. Who is there even to fight?

“Before,” Bilbo says, aiming for tact but probably falling short, “you said something about an invasion.”

“Yes.”

“Was it, um, government? Bureaucracy, that sort of thing?”

“No.”

Thorin’s fingers are white around the neck of the bottle. Bilbo clears his throat and tries again. “I don’t understand,” he says, “why you couldn’t just go back and try again.”

“It’s the desert,” Thorin says, as if that’s an answer.

“You were . . . fighting the desert?”

“No. Yes. In a way.” Thorin sighs and drags a hand across his face. His beard needs a trim and there’s graphite smudged across one cheek. He looks exhausted. “This really isn’t something I talk about.”

“Thorin, I’ve been here for six months now and out of everyone I’ve met—fellow cohort mates, professors, everyone—you’re the only one . . . the only person I can ever actually talk to. But I feel like you don’t trust me. You demand, you argue, and fine, perhaps you don’t like speaking about your family, but I know almost nothing about you!”

“You know enough.”

“No, I don’t.”

“This isn’t a quantifiable thing. Knowing somebody. You don’t get to decide when it’s enough.”

“If I don’t, who does?”

“No one.”

“So we just talk around each other for the rest of the year, and then you faff off to some stupid old castle, and I never hear from you again? No. No, Thorin, I can’t— Please don’t make me do this again.”

“What?” Thorin asks. “And what the hell do you mean, ‘faff off’? I don’t ‘faff.’ I don’t even know what that is.”

“Don’t make me lose someone again,” Bilbo says, interrupting. “Not just when I thought that
we were getting somewhere, you and I. Finally.”

“We are,” Thorin says, and turns suddenly to look at Bilbo, his eyes still just as blue. “We have gotten somewhere.” He frowns. “Haven’t we?”

“Then please, talk to me. I . . . want to feel that this goes both ways.”

“What does?”


“I don’t have friends.”

“I’ve noticed,” Bilbo says, dryly. He pulls a throw pillow around from behind him, holds it against his chest. “In all seriousness, though, I can’t help . . . I can’t stop wanting to know more about you.”

“You’re too damn curious.”

“I’m just trying to understand you.”

“Not some puzzle to be solved.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. It’s . . . been a long time since I’ve felt that I understood anyone. You could be my first.” Bilbo lifts his head and smiles, hesitantly. Thorin looks him in the eye for a long while, lips pressed into a tight line, and then flushes and knocks his head back against the couch again. Closes his eyes.

“You’re hopeless,” he says, but some of the tension leaves his shoulders. “Absolutely fucking hopeless.”

The mountain, Erebor, is a lone peak, surrounded by desert. When Thorin’s family delved into the mountain to re-start the mine, they found a spring. In the desert, water is wealth. With a river flowing out, down the canyon and into the lake some miles away, Erebor turned green. High limber pines, quaking aspen, sage underfoot everywhere. Standing tall above the grass plains and red-rock canyons, Erebor thrived.

The lakewater was no good, contaminated by minerals from the soil, a beautiful blue-green to look at but impossible to drink. Still, people had settled along its edges, trying to eke a living out of the marshland while above them Erebor’s river flowed, and its streams of silver grew, and now Bilbo starts to see where the envy might’ve come in.

“You can’t imagine,” Thorin says, “what it’s like out there. Such broad, open spaces . . . nothing, for miles around. Windmills. Cattle. But no industry, and farming requires irrigation and that’s expensive. Most people can’t afford it. And then there we were, with everything you could have wanted. It’s not like we didn’t share—we tried to reach out. Had great markets and fairs, held feasts. But it wasn’t enough, I guess. They never accepted us there, on the mountain, succeeding where too many others had failed. I think it seemed like we were . . . lording it over them. Ivory tower mentality, and all that, except when people talk about that here it’s all academia and accessibility and out west it means you’re a target. Giant fucking bulls-eye, right where everyone can see.”

Thorin’s hands are in his hair now, twisted, and his feet are planted on the floor. Erebor whines and shifts to lay across them. Thorin doesn’t even blink. “I can’t just go back. There’s nothing now to go back to. I told you they torched the land.”
“Yes, but . . . surely you could have rebuilt? Even if the neighbours didn’t like you—”

“You’ve never seen a brush fire, have you?” Thorin asks, and shakes his head. “You’re such an—You’re so naive. They didn’t come knocking on the doors, give us all fair warning. They didn’t just drive us out and then burn our houses one by one in neat little rows. They set fire to the mountain, Bilbo—all of it. Eight thousand feet of flame.”

“Oh, God,” Bilbo chokes out, but words are pointless. He hesitates, reaches out, and then withdraws his hand, fingers flexing uselessly in his lap. He’s never been good at offering comfort. For all that Thorin is standoffish he’s also inexplicably good at the physical, at hands on shoulders or tops of heads at precisely the right moment, and Bilbo can’t compete. So he just listens.

“We were still down in the mines,” Thorin is saying. “A lot of us . . . didn’t make it out. I was near the surface. One of the first ones to realise what was happening. Not that it did me any good. I tried to sound the alarm, get everyone out, but— I was just a kid, Bilbo. I was fucking fourteen years old and they burned my home and my family with it. And I couldn’t a goddamn thing to stop them.”

“You keep saying ’they,’ ” Bilbo says, his voice tight, asking questions because he does not know how to offer comfort and because he really is too damn curious. One of these days, it is going to wreck him. He knows this. “Who did this to you?”

“Does it matter?” Thorin asks. “There was an inquiry, years later. Never found anything. Fire caused by lightning strike, the official reports said. I thought . . . I thought I saw someone, just before the flames caught, but afterwards I couldn’t be sure. Wanted to blame it on anyone, just to have someone to get revenge on, but there was nothing we could do. All the ash and the—the bodies . . . it all poisoned the spring. Whatever didn’t burn died. The mines caved in. We lost all our tools, too, so even if anyone’d had the strength to try to open up the mountain again it would’ve been hopeless. The land’s ruined now. We’re ruined.”

“But . . . did no one come to help? All of you there, they must have known how many people lived on the mountain . . . surely someone would have come?”

“They came,” Thorin says, and the bitterness in his voice is so clear it makes Bilbo’s stomach twist. “They came to watch it burn, and when we called to them from the flames they turned away.”

“Who would do that? Why?”

“I told you, Bilbo. Envy.”

“That’s not a reason! Not to let people die!”

“You have more honour than their entire breed.”

“Sorry, breed?” Bilbo asks. “What do you mean?”

“My father had a certain . . . subset of enemies, among the lake-dwellers. They resented us for breaking the natural order of things, or some such bullshit. I mean they didn’t like us mining,” Thorin clarifies, when Bilbo looks at him with raised eyebrows. “Eco-journalists, only interested in documenting crises. They don’t care about people. Only about the trees. I hate all of them.”

“Is there even such a thing?”

“I hate a hell of a lot more than you do.”
“I don’t doubt that. I was doubting the . . . eco-journalists.”

“I don’t want to talk about them,” Thorin says, and because he says “want” rather than commands, Bilbo doesn’t press the matter. Instead, he asks,

“So when you say you want to reclaim Erebor—”

“I’m starting from nothing. Less than nothing. We don’t even have the deeds to the land anymore. No one was very concerned with paperwork when there were kids on fire.”

Bilbo feels like now might be the time, after all, to go throw up.

“I have to take it back,” Thorin says. “I owe them that much.”

“Owe who?”

“My family. Everyone. They’re counting on me.”

“Surely you can’t do it alone.”

“You’re the last person I need doubting me.”

“No, I don’t, I just meant . . . isn’t there anyone who can help?”

Thorin shakes his head. Sighs, deflates, presses his hands to the back of his neck. “There are some who would. If I asked them.”

“Ask.”

“I can’t.”

“Then, I’ll ask for you.”

“You? Yeah, right.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“We’re out of whisky.”

“Thorin,” Bilbo says. Pleading? Warning? He doesn’t even know.

“Bilbo,” Thorin answers, matching his inflection, mocking.

Bilbo, as usual, caves first. “Look,” he says, reaching for the remote. “It’s late. Let’s just finish the show, and get some sleep.”

Sleep comes before the end of Lonesome Dove, and neither of them make it upstairs to the bed—Thorin’s bed, though Bilbo had won ownership for the night via rock-paper-scissors—and when morning breaks, late, cold and grey and foggy over both of them, a new kind of understanding has settled in.

Like the morning sun your eyes will follow me.
As you watch me wander, curse the powers that be.
‘Cause all I want is here and now,
but it’s already been and gone.
Our intentions always last that bit too long.

They eat breakfast without speaking, each fearing that the other will break the moment first.

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Thorin’s advisors aren’t happy. Bilbo walks in on them mid-morning, late April—the twenty-ninth of April, to be precise, and Bilbo almost didn’t come to the studio at all—and while they’re not quite yelling at him, because yelling at any student is frowned upon and yelling at Thorin is probably tantamount to suicide given the man’s temper, they’re certainly annoyed. They’re taller than him, Bilbo observes, but Thorin seems bigger, leaning against his drafting table with crossed arms and a scowl. He has a black eye, again.

Bilbo is a natural lurker and it seems a shame to waste an opportunity, so he hangs back in the doorway and holds his breath.

“You’re not taking this seriously,” a thin man, bearded, wearing argyle, says.

“We’re on your side here,” another says, this one a woman with a sharp bob, a maroon dress. “We want you to get hired.”

“I have standards,” Thorin says, typically argumentative.

“Well, lower them,” the man says. “Look, your work is outstanding, no one’s denying, but you can’t expect to make a living doing this sort of thing. There simply aren’t any positions for... medieval castle restoration.”

“I don’t care,” Thorin says. “I have other things on my mind.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed,” the man says.

“Your weekend tutorials,” the woman says, “does anyone ever come?”

“Yes,” Thorin says.

“Besides you?”

“Yes.”

“So you’ve had practice teaching the practical skills,” she says, and makes a note in her composition book. “We do sometimes hire on students as lecturers—”

“No,” Thorin says. “I’m not staying here.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers, so on, so forth,” the man says. “You have to compromise.”

“There are some things that are too important to compromise.”

“Is it this argumentative nature of yours that gets you into so many fights?” the woman asks.
“I don’t get into fights.”

“Oh, so then you run into doors?”

“No.”

The man raises a hand to the woman’s elbow, gentle but his meaning is clear: Let it go. For now, at least, it seems that they are going to. “Compromise,” the man repeats, as they head for the door. Bilbo just manages to slip behind a coat-rack and there he waits for them to pass. After a minute or two—after enough time for Thorin’s fists to unclench—he walks in.

“Not done yet?” Thorin asks, but then lifts his head and says, “Oh. You.”

“Hello.”

It’s as if they hardly know each other again. As if everything has been undone, or rather, re-done, except with different details. Bilbo supposes that’s what happens. At least, it seems to happen to characters in literature, and given that he doesn’t have any other basis for comparison and definitely doesn’t have anyone to ask, that’s his current operating theory.

Bilbo slides up onto a stool at the table across the aisle from Thorin’s and pulls out a sheaf of papers—notes for an essay he is meant to be writing, photocopies of passages of Benjamin on storytelling and memory. These are all things he used to know. The past-him, before Saturday re-wired his mind.

Thinking about that is making him blush so he says instead, “Bad morning?”

“You heard?”

“Kind of hard not to. They came . . . very close to shouting.” Bilbo folds a few pages back. “You restrained yourself admirably, though. Good on you.”

“Shut it,” Thorin says, but he’s smiling a little and he’s started re-arranging the paints on the table, so that’s progress.

“I don’t have class until two-thirty so I thought I might read here for a bit. If that’s all right.”

Thorin makes a noncommittal noise and wipes paint on his pants, three streaks of grey against the tan-brown of his Carhartts. They match the streaks of grey in Thorin’s hair, premature, just at the temples. Bilbo hadn’t noticed it until Saturday. Hadn’t been close enough to notice.

It proves fantastically difficult to get any work done. Thorin is cleaning and—shockingly—whistling. Bilbo doesn’t recognise the tune but then, why would he? Thorin is always the one bringing new music into play. His sleeves are rolled and Bilbo can see bruises on the tanned skin as Thorin washes out brushes and stacks reference magazines. Bruises that weren’t there two days ago. Getting into fights. Running into doors. Whatever it is that Thorin is doing, it’s leaving marks.

“So . . . no job offers yet?” Bilbo asks.

“Rejected soundly, four times in a row. Got the letters this morning.”

“Sorry.”

“I didn’t want those jobs.”

“But you need a job, Thorin. Somewhere.”
“I have a duty.”

“Duty doesn’t pay for dinner,” Bilbo says, and then clamps his mouth shut. Those aren’t his words—they have always belonged to his father. But his father is gone, and apparently something of the old Baggins conservative mien has found its way into Bilbo’s own mind. It is slightly horrifying, actually, to be so practical and yet at the same time spend so many of his weekends curled in bed, reading novels.

Well. Apart from last weekend. Which he is emphatically not thinking about.

“I don’t care. Like I told my advisors, I really don’t care. I don’t want to argue about this with you.”

“No, I don’t— I don’t want to argue either, Thorin.”

“Good.” They go back to their own silences, Thorin organising stacks of scrap foam-core and Bilbo idly marking pages. The stereo is unusually quiet, so quiet Bilbo can’t make out the tune.

“You will tell me, though, right?” Bilbo asks, after a while.

“Tell you what?”

“When you’re leaving. You’ll . . . say goodbye. Won’t you?”

‘Course I will,” Thorin says, and Bilbo has never yet known him to lie, not really, but there’s something about the way he says this now that cannot be believed.

“Promise?” Bilbo asks.

“I’ll tell you,” Thorin says. Not really an answer. But then, Bilbo wasn’t really expecting one. He will have to be vigilant, he realises, if he is to keep this thing—whatever it is that they have going—alive. He will have to haul himself out of the gradschool daze and pay attention.

At least it will give him something to wake up for in the mornings.

“Come for dinner tonight,” Thorin says, suddenly right in front of Bilbo. His hands are on the drafting table, their fingertips stained with paint, a piece of twine looped around one wrist. He smells like damp dog and stale beer and Bilbo is starting to put together last night’s probable chain of events. He can picture Thorin pacing the garage, Erebor pawing at the door, the two of them walking into town in the rain. So maybe Bilbo wasn’t the only one having doubts, afterwards.

Does the black eye figure into that story, somewhere?

Are the doubts enough to tear this all down, all these walls they’ve built and—more recently—all these doorways?

“What?” Bilbo says, after it’s been a minute and Thorin hasn’t moved, after he remembers that there was a question in there, somewhere, even if it wasn’t phrased like one.

“Dinner. Come. I’ll pick you up. Just— Will you?”

“Of course, but—”

“Great,” Thorin says, and Bilbo thinks, That’s the first time I’ve heard him say that. His ears are warm the rest of the day and if he cannot say exactly why, at least no one asks him to explain. There are some perks, it seems, to not having friends.
They have dinner that night, and then every night that week. Somehow, despite all the opportunities, neither one of them manages to bring up the fact that in another week, maybe two, three at the absolute most, Thorin will be leaving.

Every day, Bilbo waits for a goodbye.

Chapter End Notes

First off, all the apologies it is possible for me to make for the long wait between chapters. I can't say more than the fact that life, as it does sometimes, got in the way, and school has managed to be unbelievably stressful in the few short weeks of this new semester. But I have missed this story, and I have missed all of you, and if you've stuck around and waited for me to get my act together, I can't thank you enough.

I'm late in answering messages. I don't have it in me right now--social interactions are producing a lot of anxiety as of late--but I promise I'll get back to all of you. Thanks for all your feedback and lovely comments.

Lastly, I can't make any promises about when the next chapter will be out, but I can say 1) we are drawing close to the end and 2) I will do my best to not make you wait overly long.

Thanks again, all of you. Be well!
They’ve had fights before but not like this one.

The thing about it is, it’s completely unfounded. Or at least, that’s what Bilbo will keep telling himself, afterwards, still seething as he huffs down the stairs of Rand Hall. Thorin’s just being rude again, as usual, rude and overbearing and insensitive. If Bilbo used such language with any kind of freedom, he’d be tempted to call Thorin a dick.

Somewhere, two or three floors above him, Thorin has probably broken a window by now. Bilbo’s never seen him so physically angry—not even when he faced down Azog in the parking lot just two days ago. If he stopped to let himself think about it he’d probably be too terrified to move, and then Thorin might catch up with him, so Bilbo forces himself to keep breathing and concentrates on how firm the concrete steps are beneath his feet, how heavy the building’s doors are to push open. Solid things. Tangible. As far away from his usual state of near-perpetual reflection as possible.

Out on the Arts Quad the air hasn’t yet lost its winter chill. It’s early evening, with rain just beginning to streak in from over the lake, and the lights across campus are blurred. It’s also entirely possible that he’s crying. Either way, Bilbo tugs his glasses off and rubs the lenses with the sleeve of his sweater. Useless, because wool is always useless for cleaning glasses, and why isn’t he carrying a handkerchief? He always carries a handkerchief.

It’s only then that he notices his hands are shaking.

He doesn’t have it in him to walk all the way home just yet—his knees, too, seem to have lost their steadiness—so he detours over to the chapel. For some reason, being there reminds him of being home. He puts it down to the woodworking, to the roundness of windows, and doesn’t question it any further. It’s empty and dark inside, so Bilbo tucks himself into one of the pews on the east annex. Hidden in that muffled quiet that comes in sacred spaces, pressed up into a corner between brick and soft-worn wood with the painted ceilings high overhead, Bilbo closes his eyes. His left shoulder hurts from where Thorin threw him against the elevator doors. By morning, it will be bruised a dark purple.

Thorin had taken him by surprise. Came up from behind and picked him up bodily without a word, dragged him out of the library and into the hall. The single librarian at the circulation desk looked shocked but said nothing, which is most people’s default response when confronted by Thorin in one of his moods. Bilbo, not being most people, protested.

“What on earth are you doing?” he demanded, twisting around in Thorin’s grip and trying to regain his footing. That was where the elevator came in. The doors rattled when his back hit them and then Thorin leaned in close, slammed a hand on either side of Bilbo’s head.

“‘What on earth are you doing?’” he demanded, twisting around in Thorin’s grip and trying to regain his footing. That was where the elevator came in. The doors rattled when his back hit them and then Thorin leaned in close, slammed a hand on either side of Bilbo’s head.

“No, what are you doing?”

Bilbo frowned, and pushed against Thorin’s broad chest, uselessly. “I was studying, until someone came along and attacked me.”

“That wasn’t what it looked like to me.”

“What? Thorin, you’re doing it right now. What do you mean? And that hurt, by the way.
“I told you, and you promised— How could you do this?”

“I really have no idea what you’re talking about,” Bilbo said, getting angry himself now. “I was mid-sentence in there and now I’ve completely lost my place. And you’re causing a scene! Get off me.”

“No.”

“You’re acting like a child.”

“You’re the child! Fucking around with things you don’t understand!”

“I was just studying!”

“If that’s what you want to call it.”

“What would you call it? And get off me, I can’t breathe with you this close.”

Thorin didn’t move. His hair was tangled around his face, long and loose, and the smell of pipe tobacco was overpowering. Bilbo coughed. Thorin’s eyes were dark, narrow. He exhaled, slowly, down Bilbo’s neck.

“I said get off!” Bilbo shoved again, harder this time. It would be, he thought, just his luck if the doors opened and he fell backwards into the elevator. And it was strange, because he had never had a fear of small places, had always been inordinately fond of climbing into wardrobes and the like, but right now his heart was racing and he thought he might collapse if he didn’t get some space.

“You’ve betrayed me,” Thorin said, and sounded so ridiculously old-fashioned that it broke the moment and Bilbo actually let out a startled laugh. Thorin wasn’t amused. He glared at Bilbo full-on, a look with real heat behind it, and then—finally—took a step back. Bilbo choked on his own laughter. “After everything I told you, you still—”

“Anyone else,” Bilbo interrupted, his voice unsteady but his resolve strong, getting stronger by the second, “anyone else would just have a normal conversation. About this. Whatever ‘this’ is. Not go around tossing their only friends into elevators.” Stupid, he told himself, you are being very stupid, but he couldn’t stop.

“Oh, so now you’re pretending nothing’s happened?”

“Nothing has happened.”

“I don’t believe you,” Thorin said, his hands clenching and unclenching into fists like he wanted to hurt someone, hurt Bilbo, who was the only someone nearby. “This is absolutely— You have no fucking clue what you’re doing and you’re standing here and lying about it to my face.”

“I don’t lie.”

“I saw you!”

“Well, congratulations on not being blind,” Bilbo snapped. “No, look, you know what? We’re done here. Done. I have a French exam to study for. I don’t have time for this—this nonsense. I can’t, I won’t, I refuse.” And, in what was possibly one of the bravest things he’d ever done, he
walked away. Went back into the library to collect his things—even paused to apologise to the librarian—and then, without so much as a backward glance, passed Thorin and headed down the stairs, all the while expecting to be hauled back by the neck of his sweater. Thrown around some more. But Thorin didn’t move. Did nothing except loom and glare, and Bilbo could feel it without even looking at the man, and then he let out a low angry noise, incoherent, and then Bilbo was out of the building.

What Bilbo doesn’t know, hiding in the darkness of Sage, knees brushing the hymnals and head against dry, cool stone, is that Thorin had come looking for him and had found him, studying yes but not alone. Bilbo doesn’t know—and would never guess but probably should, given the specific level of Thorin’s anger—that Azog had been standing just behind him, pale fingers hovering over his shoulders, looking for all the world equal parts a predator and a close conversation partner, each just as damning as the other in Thorin’s eyes.

Yesterday, Bilbo was meant to have delivered a map from the university archives into Azog’s hands. He didn’t. Of course he didn’t, not after Thorin’s plea—he purged his e-mail account of all their conversations and steered clear from dark alleyways and generally felt like a paranoid idiot but there had been fear, real fear, behind the anger in Thorin’s eyes. So Bilbo was true to his word, and if he can be faulted at all it’s for being too naïve. Azog was not so easily dissuaded.

When Bilbo didn’t show up for their rendezvous yesterday, the would-be map thief must have been furious. Being Azog, he would be furious in a quiet, cold way, and then quickly turn to thoughts of revenge. If the rushing in Bilbo’s ears would stop, if he could calm down enough not to feel like Thorin was going to come knock the chapel’s doors off their hinges, Bilbo would put two and two together and make four: their fight, though avoidable with the help of communication—but when hasn’t communication been an issue for the them?—wasn’t unfounded at all.

Because Thorin is always like that: strong foundations. And the carpenter’s son in Bilbo, the same one who appreciates the detail work of the chapel ceilings, should recognise that. Should admire that. But too often it comes out as stubbornness, as implacability, and there was a time when Bilbo would have had the patience to deal with that, to coax out whatever was lurking underneath it all. Since he has had to grow up and get used to people leaving him, though, patience is a virtue he cannot afford. If you wait for anyone long enough, they will—eventually—leave. So you can’t stick around to find out. You have to be the one to leave first.

For a while—six months, more or less—Thorin has made Bilbo forget that. But tonight, now, he is remembering so hard it hurts.

What do you do, when you find yourself someplace you’ve just started to feel you belong, with someone you think will be different, and then it turns out that you’re wrong? Entirely wrong? What do you even do next? Bilbo doesn’t have answers. He’s cold and damp; he suspects he’s going to catch cold, or worse. So he buttons up his sweater and shoulders his bag and walks home, breath caught in his throat. Only when he’s climbed up to his attic and locked the door does he properly exhale, long and slow, and collapse back against the wall.

“You’re late.” The voice comes out of the darkness, somewhere over by the stove. Bilbo’s breath hitches. He is panicked, absolutely. He is cold all over and shaking, even worse than before. None of this can be real. “I even put the kettle on. Long cold now, of course. And when I say late, I mean two days late, Baggins. We had a deal.”

Azog steps out into the room, straightening up under the peaked roof. Light from the street outside filters in and catches on his white-blond hair. He crosses the room in three strides easily, long legs in tight black denim, and Bilbo can smell the leather of his jacket, the cigarette slowly
smouldering between his fingers. It probably says something about him that his first proper reaction is to worry about how he’s going to get the smell of cigarette smoke out of his apartment; meanwhile, Azog’s free hand has found its way to Bilbo’s elbow, is hauling him upward.

“No one walks away from me. Or didn’t your boyfriend tell you?”

“Wha— He’s not— What?”

“Oh, he really didn’t? Hmm. Oakenshield, keeping secrets. Who’s surprised? Lying bastard doesn’t have a truthful bone in him. Unless you were . . . Well. I suspect it’s the other way round.” Azog smiles, unevenly, the scar through his cheek twisting his lips. He leans in close, presses Bilbo bodily up against the wall and breathes down his neck. “I don’t really need that visual, though, thank you. What I do need is my map.”

“I’m not stealing anything for you,” Bilbo manages, turning his face away. His arms won’t cooperate for some reason. Azog’s fingers work their way up from elbow to neck and he smiles when Bilbo winces. “How did you even— Get out of my apartment. I don’t want you here.”

“I don’t give a damn what you want.”

“I’m not a thief!”

“I think you’ll change your mind. Once you realise . . . the alternatives.” Azog takes a drag of his cigarette and breathes a line of smoke into Bilbo’s eyes. Then, while Bilbo is blind and coughing, Azog twists an arm behind his back, flips him over entirely so his face is up against the wall. Bilbo’s lost his footing and his shoulder is burning. The ringing in his ears has returned. Azog’s fingers are cold and hard around his wrist. “The alternatives being, none,” Azog says, and brings the glowing end of his cigarette down on Bilbo’s left palm. It is the sort of thing that should be done swiftly, with vengeance; he does it slow as you please, still smiling.

Bilbo shouts and twists, tries to jerk his arm away. Azog’s hips are against his from behind, pinning him to the wall. Out of the corner of his eye he can just make out the man’s profile, bent over his burning hand. “Please—” Bilbo gasps, but then stops himself, because what’s the point in pleading at a time like this? His evening is repeating itself, only worse this time. Much worse. He didn’t cry in front of Thorin but he is crying again now, which is no help at all. But he is powerless in every sense of the word and his skin burns and his shoulder aches and all he wants to do is bury himself in blankets and never emerge. He wants to be anywhere but here.

“My father would have cut off your hand,” Azog is saying, when Bilbo shakes himself back into the present moment enough to listen. “But, changing times being what they are, I thought I’d be a bit more gentle. Besides, you’d make a poor thief with only one hand.” He runs his fingers up Bilbo’s spine and Bilbo shudders, biting back a moan. Azog puts the cigarette back between his lips, as if it hadn’t just been searing a hole in someone’s skin. “I’ll give you a day,” he says. “Generous, don’t you think? And then you’re going to do exactly as I tell you.”

Azog presses his jaw to the top of Bilbo’s head, runs his nose down along Bilbo’s neck, breath hot and damp. Bilbo squeezes his eyes shut. Every useful function of his brain has shut off. It’s as though he’s watching it all from across the room. Across the room, where his blankets are—a safe space. He aches to be there.

“And you’re not going to say a word to Oakenshield,” Azog whispers into Bilbo’s ear. He flicks ash casually onto Bilbo’s wrist, his sleeve, his wooden floor. Contamination: that’s what Azog is. Like a stain, or a disease. A spot—out, out. “One day. No need to worry about finding me. I’ll be watching you.”
Just as suddenly as he appeared Azog is gone, out the door and down the rickety stairs of the house. Released from his grip Bilbo crumples to the floor. He folds in on himself, trembling, cradling his left arm to his chest. There is ash beneath his cheek.

He has had bad days before but they have never left him feeling like this.

A minute passes, maybe more. Maybe an entire succession of minutes, because what is time, really? There are too many thoughts in his head to count. Everything and nothing is happening at once. He should stand up, re-lock his doors—for all the good that’ll do—run his hand under cold water. He should figure out what happens next. Clumsily, he digs his phone out of his satchel. He should call someone. Gandalf. Campus safety. The police.

After four rings there’s an answer, short, weary: “What?”

“Hello,” Bilbo means to say, but it comes out as “Help” and then “Oh, hell,” because he’s dialed Thorin. The only one he ever calls, and very close to the last person he wants to see right now. He has just enough presence of mind to hang up before dropping the phone.

Thorin calls back immediately and Bilbo stares at his phone, the screen lit, vibrating on the floor. He doesn’t answer, can’t answer. Thorin doesn’t leave a message, just calls back, and then again, and the fourth time Bilbo makes himself pick up, if only to lie.

“Where are you?” Thorin asks, before Bilbo can even speak. “I’m on my way, just tell me where?”

“I’m home, but—”

“I’ll be there in five minutes. Three. Are you— What happened?”

“Nothing,” Bilbo says. Lie better, he tells himself, and tries to sit up. “Just a misunderstanding. You don’t need to come. I didn’t mean to call you. I was trying to . . . Just nevermind.”

“Bilbo I said, ‘What?’ and you said, ‘Help.’ What the hell’s going on?”

“Really, it’s nothing.”

“Is this about earlier?”

“No.”

Thorin is quiet a moment. Bilbo sniffs, tries to wipe his nose on his shoulder because his good hand is holding the phone. “What do you need me to do?” Thorin asks, his voice gruff. “I know we . . . things went wrong earlier but if you need something now I—”

“I don’t,” Bilbo says. What he needs is not something Thorin can give, not something he himself can even put a name to. “I just . . .” His voice fails him.

“Fuck this, I’m coming over. Stay on the phone.”

“No, please don’t. I don’t want—”

“Already in the car,” Thorin says. Bilbo feels his eyes burning and blinks fiercely. The seared skin of his left palm is taut and shiny and when he tries to push himself to his feet while still holding the phone he nearly blackes out. Or maybe he does black out, because it’s definitely not three minutes
later that Thorin’s footsteps are pounding up the stairs.

Bilbo’s door bangs open and he hears Thorin call his name, close and too-loud, and then Thorin’s hands are on his shoulders, turning him over, and it is the same thing again, a third time now. It is too much. Bilbo jerks himself back, his breath coming fast. Instead of pushing forward like he expected, though, he watches as Thorin backs off, hands raised.

Thorin drops to a crouch on the floor next to Bilbo, a foot or two away. “You hung up the phone,” he says after a moment.

“I told you not to come.” It still seems important, somehow, that Bilbo cling to his original story. That way, perhaps, he might get out of all of this with a shred of dignity. He can be stubborn, too. “You don’t have to—”

“I’m sorry,” Thorin stammers, interrupting. “This evening . . . I don’t know what came over me.”

“You threw me into the elevator.”

“I—I did.” He at least has the decency to look ashamed of it. His mouth twists, like there’s a bad smell on the air. Bilbo holds his breath. Thorin’s eyebrows draw together and he tilts his head, leans in closer. “Something happened. Something more than me. To you, I mean.”

Bilbo says nothing.

“You don’t smoke,” Thorin says, slowly, because there really is a bad smell on the air, and then his face goes still. He stares at Bilbo’s wall, unblinking, for a good minute, and then lets out a low-voiced “Shit.”

“Thorin,” Bilbo starts, trying to head it off.

“Shit, Bilbo, where is he? What did he do? I’m going to fucking kill him, I swear, just—What did he do to you?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Bilbo asks. “You saw him earlier, didn’t you? That’s what you were mad about?”

“Of course! What the fuck did you think I was mad about? He was right there! And you—”

“Thorin, I didn’t know! And you didn’t tell me! And then he— Why didn’t you warn me?”

“What?” Thorin says, and then, “Oh. Oh, fuck.” He’s quiet, clearly thinking, but all of Bilbo’s spare energy has gone into trying not to think about pain and also trying to breathe evenly, so he has nothing left to use on translating Thorin’s silences. “He was here. Before you called me.”

“Yes,” Bilbo says. There doesn’t seem to be a point in lying now.

“Then he can’t have gotten far.” Thorin stands, reaches into his back waistband and pulls out a switchblade. He tosses it to Bilbo, who doesn’t catch it. “Take this. Stay here. Put a chair against your door. I’ll call you when I’m done. Do not pick up the phone unless it’s me.”

“No, wait, what are you doing?”

“I told you, I’m going to kill him. This is the last time, the last time he hurts anyone I care about. He already got to the rest of my family. He will not get to you.”
“Thorin—”

“I will come back for you,” Thorin says, already halfway out the door.

“I don’t want you to go!” Bilbo yells, surprising himself. Where did that come from?

Thorin stops and tenses, then turns and looks Bilbo over. Really looks him over, not just the redness around his eyes and his mussed hair, not just the way his left shoulder is hanging low, but the paleness of his face and the whiteness of the knuckles of his right hand as he grips his left wrist. “Show me your hand,” Thorin orders, stepping back inside, and Bilbo, knowing that this can only end badly but hoping it won’t get any worse, does.

Thorin hisses in a breath through clenched teeth. His fingers are light on the back of Bilbo’s hand, warm and dry. He tries to say several things at once and fails, settling for picking Bilbo up and hauling him over to the sink.

The cold water is better relief than Bilbo could have dreamt of. He leans forward, rests his elbows on the smooth porcelain, closes his eyes. Thorin’s holding his wrist, loosely, keeping it under the faucet. The anger seems to have gone out of him. Bilbo knows better than to think that it really has, but it is secondary now, buried beneath the more immediate emotions that are playing out, illegible, across Thorin’s face.

“If I step away, are you going to fall over?” Thorin asks.

“Probably not?” Bilbo ventures. Thorin takes a step, hesitant, and then another. When it looks like Bilbo will remain upright, Thorin walks over to the tiny bathroom. Bilbo can hear him rummaging around.

“For fuck’s sake, don’t you even have a first-aid kit?”

“I don’t know,” Bilbo says. The water feels so good he wants to climb into the sink. Judging by how much he is shivering, though, that is probably not a good idea. He has enough of a sense of self preservation left to recognise that, at least. Thorin bangs around in the bathroom a bit more before coming back, grumbling.

“I have to run down to my car. I will be right back. Do not move. Do not fall over. Do not pass Go.”

“Mmmm,” Bilbo says, eyes still closed. Thorin’s hand presses briefly to the back of his neck and then is gone. He comes back breathing like he’s taken the stairs at a run.

It takes some convincing to get Bilbo away from the sink, but Thorin has the first-aid kit of an Eagle Scout and there is anything anyone could want, including antibacterial wash and burn gel and prescription-strength painkillers for someone with a name Bilbo does not recognise. So, not exactly an honest Scout, but a well-prepared one. Thorin sits Bilbo down on the floor, facing him, and with hands far steadier than Bilbo’s own he cleans the dark-edged hole in Bilbo’s palm, winds a careful bandage around it. He opens up Bilbo’s freezer and, not finding any ice packs, takes out a bag of frozen broccoli and sets Bilbo’s hand atop it, wraps it all in a towel.

“I’m still going to kill him,” Thorin says as he sits back down, next to Bilbo this time.

“No,” Bilbo says. Gravity has increased somehow, or he’s lopsided; he leans over and comes up against Thorin’s shoulder. The sharp bite of Old Spice clears the sour cling of cigarette smoke from his nose.
“Bilbo, you don’t know what he’s done!” Thorin protests, but he shifts so that Bilbo is more firmly against his chest. Solid. Tangible.

“I know what he did to me, and I’m telling you I don’t want you to kill him.” If Thorin were to ask him why, Bilbo couldn’t say, but this is Thorin, and Thorin is so rarely concerned with the whys and hows, only the whens and whats. There was something said back there, something about family, but Bilbo can’t quite get the words back to ask Thorin what he meant.

“Then,” Thorin says, floundering—it is an unusual look on him, and Bilbo would savour it if he weren’t so suddenly exhausted—“at least let me call the police. This is assault. Battery. Did he— He didn’t—” Thorin cannot get the words out, but the glance he casts over Bilbo’s body again completes the question well enough.

“No. And I don’t want— Let’s just . . . not. Today.”

“What?”

“I want a do-over on today. Didn’t happen. No.”

“He can’t get away with this!”

“I have a plan,” Bilbo says, and it is mostly a lie, mostly just to get Thorin to sit still, but there is a thought, in the back of his mind, that may be the start of something. “Right now, though, I just feel . . . deflated. Sort of . . . washed up. Washed out? One of those.”

Thorin sighs. He brings his hands up to his temples, runs his fingers through his hair while swearing under his breath. “Fine,” he says, suddenly, startling Bilbo back to full wakefulness. “But you and I are going to talk about this.”

“That’ll be the day,” Bilbo mutters, speaking into Thorin’s chest.

“Look, you—” Thorin starts. He bites his lip and drops his hands. “I know, okay? I know I’m awful at this. It’s been a damn sight since I had anyone around to point it out but I know the looks you are giving me.”

“What looks?”

“The you’re-awful-at-this looks. Yes, that one. Fuck, you even do it well sideways. My sister used to give them exactly the same way. If she were here now . . . You don’t even want to know. She’d have a hell of a lot to say.”

“Good.”

“Hey, I’m not the only one awful at things here. You don’t get to talk.”

“Hmm. Thought you wanted to talk,” Bilbo reminds him. His mind has already turned to thoughts of pajamas.

“I do. And we are going to. But Bilbo, you have a problem.”

“Just one?”

“I’m really not in the mood, and I don’t think you are, either.”

“Sorry.”
“No, don’t— What I mean is you need to learn to stand up for yourself!”

“I do.”

“Verbally. Half-heartedly. With a lot of questions.”

“So?”

Thorin makes a noise of aggravation and shifts position again. Before Bilbo can say anything, Thorin has twisted around and gripped Bilbo’s upper arms, is forcing him down to the floor. He gets one knee on either side of Bilbo’s hips and waits, glaring.

“What are you doing?” Bilbo asks. He actually cannot process things anymore. There’s scientific reasoning behind that, isn’t there, about the point when your mind is simply overloaded? There must be.

“Proving a point,” Thorin says. He waits, and glares, and Bilbo waits, and the broccoli is cold beneath his fingers.

“Can your point wait until morning?” Bilbo asks.

“This is the point. You’re not resisting. I’m overpowering you and you haven’t even told me to stop. Damn it, Bilbo, don’t you know anything?”

“Lots of things.”

“Useless things. You don’t know anything practical. I’m amazed you’ve made it this far.”

“Hmm.” To form proper words has become difficult. Bilbo wants to protest, but more than that, he wants to sleep. This has always been a coping mechanism of his, ever since he was little; any ordinary night will see him awake until three or four o’clock, anxious, worrying over something, but give him a bad day and he can fall asleep anywhere, straight away. This is probably one of those “useless” things Thorin was talking about. This is probably impractical, and unwise, and a whole host of other things, but it is how he is. He cannot change that.

Thorin gets Bilbo over to his bed and helps him take off his shoes, removes his jacket and sweater. Thorin pulls the quilt up and Bilbo’s half-asleep already so he can’t really tell, but thinks he hears a sort of apology again. If he does, it is a record for the two of them. If he doesn’t, it’s just as he expected.

When he falls asleep he dreams about being a space cadet, burnt by a rocket, wakes thinking he’s falling to Earth and thrashes upright to see Thorin’s head resting on the edge of his bed, his body slumped over in one of the kitchen chairs, looking profoundly uncomfortable. But still there.

I don’t want you to go, Bilbo had said, and Thorin listened.

That has to count for something, right?

Bilbo can’t fall back asleep that night.

Chapter End Notes
Couple of things:

First, you might notice the tags have updated (explicit language rather than mild language, violence rather than minor violence) because that's probably more accurate, particularly given this chapter. Also, I debated for a while over the "domestic violence" tag but I do think that you have to question Thorin's actions (here, and in other chapters) and what category they really fall under, and in case that is something people would prefer to have a heads-up about or avoid entirely, I wanted to make sure everyone had that option. Feel free to discuss this with me, or suggest other tags if there's something you think is missing.

Second, I was stuck on what to write for this chapter, and then a couple of people over on tumblr suggested some angst, and then the lovely ewebean was streaming Hobbit art and I requested T & B fighting, and as a result completely abandoned my required reading that night to write this chapter instead. Check out her amazing art: http://ewebean.tumblr.com/post/63449701001/stick-wanted-some-thorin-and-bilbo-fighting

I also tried my hand at drawing the guys: http://stickmansaga.tumblr.com/post/63047897130/couldnt-sleep-last-night-so-i-tried-to-get-some

Third, this was meant to have a split time-line but 1) I ran out of steam around 5 in the morning and 2) it got kind of long already. So this takes place 2 days after the whole Azog-in-the-parking-lot confrontation, and ups the ante kind of considerably, in terms of drama/violence/angst. Is it too much? Probably. But I enjoyed writing the confrontation scenes.

What next? Who knows . . . I should really come up with some kind of outline, because we ARE nearing the end, and there are several things yet to be addressed. This semester is really rough, but know that I am still working on this, and will have the next chapter to you all as soon as possible. Thanks for reading, for your support, for your comments - you're all wonderful.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bilbo’s never been a physical person. Most days, he doesn’t even like to be looked at, let alone touched. Thorin being who he is—having grown up in a family where gruff pats and manful shoulder-punches were affection’s base currency, where he was expected from birth to someday be the one in charge of an empire and “hands-on” is more than just an expression—doesn’t understand that. So he pushes Bilbo around and throws him onto couches like it’s nothing, like it’s second nature. Or he’ll come up from behind and drop a hand on Bilbo’s head while leaning over his shoulder to look at something, and Bilbo still can’t stop himself from tensing, every time. Just for a second, he is always afraid.

If Bilbo could find the words to tell him about it, Thorin would probably stop. But Bilbo can’t decide which is worse: enduring that brief moment of fear, or not being touched at all.

He can’t say that he “wakes up” the next morning, because he’s been awake for hours, watching the light play across the walls as the sun rises, the palm of his hand a dull, hot ache. Thorin is snoring lightly, still slumped over in his chair. He doesn’t stir when Bilbo slides off the end of the bed and picks last night’s discarded sweater off the floor. It’s cold in the attic, and Bilbo warms his hands gently over the stove as he boils water for tea. Thorin isn’t a tea person, but he’s getting a cup anyway. Flexing his fingers experimentally, Bilbo winces as the skin pulls tight. There’s a matching tightness in his chest, behind his eyes—he would like very much to go back to bed, under the quilts, and not have to face anyone. Well, Thorin could stay. He’s not other people, not really. Bilbo doesn’t like when people watch him sleep but Thorin’s already seen him, passed out and drooling in a sleeping bag on his couch, feverish and incoherent in his bed, curled up in the corners of the studio. Thorin doesn’t count.

The water’s done, though the kettle doesn’t whistle; it’s his father’s, broken ever since he can remember. Bilbo makes tea, drinks it slowly, wills Thorin to wake up. The man doesn’t stir, so Bilbo watches him, the width of his back rising and falling with slow breaths, the dark hair half-fallen out of its tie. When the tea is gone Bilbo’s grown cold again, and Thorin is immobile as stone. It doesn’t seem fair to face the day alone. What day is it, even? Bilbo can’t remember. He crawls into his bed from the foot, careful not to disturb Thorin, and smothers himself in blankets till he can hardly breathe. The weight of them makes him feel safe.

Later, Thorin will wake up just enough to notice the awful ache in his neck, and the lump taking up just half the bed beside him. When they both next wake, it will be side by side.

“I want to handle this on my own,” Bilbo says. They’ve been sitting in relative quiet for a good hour or two, watching the fog slowly lift as morning wears on. Bilbo’s taken a shower and put on his oldest threadbare corduroys, has a sweater wrapped around his shoulders. Thorin tried to get him to eat something but he couldn’t stomach more than toast. Bilbo tried to get Thorin to shower, too—to wash off the lingering smell of fear and smoke and anger—but Thorin won’t stop looking at the door every five seconds, as if he is expecting Azog to return. Part of Bilbo, some vindictiveness he thought he had long since left behind, wants that to happen. It’s wrong, but he thinks he might feel better if he could just watch Thorin hurt Azog.

“You’re not shutting me out of this.”
“It’s not your fight.”

“It is my fight! You’re my— It is my fight, Bilbo.”

“I just need some time to think about it.”

“He didn’t give you any time. I have to act now. The longer I wait, the more time he will have had to plan.”

“It doesn’t matter. I need to figure this out alone.” Bilbo rubs at a bare patch on the left knee of his pants.

“No!” Thorin says, “You can’t handle this.”

“Because I’m useless.”

“What?”

“That’s what you said to me, last night.”

“I didn’t.”

“Thorin, you did. Please don’t lie to me.”

“No, I meant—” Thorin makes a short noise of exasperation and runs a hand through his hair. “I didn’t mean that. You’re not useless.”

“Just weak.”

“Look, Bilbo, this isn’t something you can just ignore and hope will go away. Azog doesn’t give up. I know his ways, and I am telling you, you have to let me go after him.”

“Funny way of asking permission you have there,” Bilbo says, “I ‘have to’ let you. Is this what we’ve become?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You don’t ask, ever. You always just do, do, do. Stop—stop taking care of me all the time. I’m not a child.”

“Bilbo—”

“I will handle this. By myself. Thank you for the bandages. Now please go.” Bilbo turns his back to Thorin. His head aches and his eyes are burning. He’s worried he might start crying, and that is the last thing this situation needs. Thorin doesn’t move for a minute, and Bilbo can feel the man glaring a hole in his back.

“At least come and stay with me.”

“No, thank you.” He is falling back on politeness, ingrained, a Baggins to the core. His mother, he thinks, would have been proud.

Wouldn’t she?

“What needs to happen to you to make you understand that this isn’t some kind of game?” Thorin is right behind him, Bilbo can feel it, breath hot on the back of his neck. “Next time he won’t
just burn your hand, he’ll cut it off.”

“Yes, he did say something like that.”

Thorin is grinding his teeth so loudly Bilbo can hear it. He is halfway to relenting when Thorin slams a hand into the wall and says, “Fine. See if I care.” He storms out, not even bothering to collect his things. Bilbo watches him go from the awning windows and then slides slowly to the ground.

“You do care,” he says. “I know you do. I just can’t...” He hugs his knees in close, drops his head onto his forearms. He doesn’t know what he is saying, or why he is even still talking. It feels as though he’s reached a cross-roads: if he doesn’t stand on his own now, he never will. And Thorin is leaving in a month, though he refuses to talk about that, and Bilbo is trying to plan for a future that doesn’t include him. They’re proving, more and more often these days, that they’re not good for each other.

Thorin texts him that night. “You’re being an idiot.” Bilbo doesn’t reply, because he’s certainly not going to admit that, even if it is probably true. Another text follows a while later, but Bilbo deletes it before even opening it.

And then, all of a sudden, Bilbo doesn’t sleep anymore. Not properly, anyway. Nevermind his past habits, the ease with which he retreated into sleep at the first hint of a bad day. In the last three days he’s slept maybe 10 hours total, and none of it restful. It’s some kind of delayed reaction to this whole thing, he thinks, and lousy timing for it. April is one of the busiest academic months. He’s meant to be planning for a humanities colloquium, figuring out term paper topics, not jumping at every passing shadow.

He’ll wake up damp with sweat, disoriented, no idea what day it is. It’s not even that he’s having nightmares—if he is, he doesn’t remember them. But he’ll be at his desk, working, contemplating bed around midnight or one o’clock in the morning, and the next thing he knows it’ll be five o’clock and then sleep seems pointless, when it’s already the next day and he has classes and lectures and stacks of reading. So he’ll make a pot of coffee and shower as the sun rises, and he’ll force himself out of the apartment to face the day.

It’s one of those things that people always say will get easier with time. How much time, Bilbo wonders? How long is he meant to wait? They said that after his father’s death, and again after his mothers, and he’s still fucking waiting, thank you. It is more time than he feels he has to spare. Sometimes he thinks about taking advantage of his university health insurance, seeking out some campus counselor. But the first step to a consultation is a phone conversation, and he can never make himself so much as dial the numbers, let alone complete the call. It seems paradoxically cruel to have such a barrier as the first step in the system—he’s anxious, that’s the proper word for it, but in order to speak with anyone about resolving that he would need to do precisely one of the things that makes him anxious.

He has hardly touched his phone since calling Thorin by mistake. Hasn’t even turned it on in two days. On some level, Bilbo knows that’s eminently stupid. It’s meant to be a tool for his own safety, a digital lifeline. All he sees when he looks at it, though, is a mistake, and what that led to. How they woke up side by side in the same bed. How they couldn’t talk to each other the next day. How they argued, later, and Thorin told him he didn’t understand anything.

Well, maybe he doesn’t. What’s so wrong about that? At what point in your life are you meant to understand things?
Sometimes it frightens Bilbo, how easily they can argue, and how often.

Whenever Bilbo goes out now, he worries that he’s being followed. The other evening, he thought some exercise and fresh air might help take his mind off things, tire him out enough to get some rest. So he laced up his boots and went walking across campus—well-lit, plenty of students about. He couldn’t stop looking over his shoulder, though, and it always seemed so damned clichéd, when he would read about it in books, but it’s real: his breath kept coming faster and he couldn’t keep his steps from quickening. He ducked into the library, open 24 hours a day, and took refuge in a throng of first-years, cramming for prelims. No one came in after him. No pale hair, no black leather, no cigarette smoke. But the possibility alone was more than enough. He was on edge the entire way back to his apartment. In the soft glow of the street-lamps he saw shadows moving towards him with long fingers; the headlights of every car that passed by had Azog’s sharp eyes behind them. It’s illogical, absolutely ridiculous, because the man has easier ways to get what he wants than wasting his time stalking Bilbo, but knowing that and really believing it are two completely different things. He’s going back to an empty apartment again—Thorin had asked him to stay at the garage again after their argument, speaking through clenched teeth, but Bilbo said no, worried that they were too close to a breaking point, trying so hard to prevent something he desperately wanted not to see as inevitable, no matter how much it was starting to feel that way. So Thorin made him take Erebor instead for a few days, and they were a good few days, sneaking the dog out for early morning walks, having a gigantic black lump at the foot of his bed each night, but now there’s no one. Bilbo’s changed the locks, not that changing the locks will do any good. It’s a useless security measure. He doesn’t feel secure.

He feels like an idiot. As though it’s somehow his fault. And even if he knows that he did absolutely nothing to cause it all, that he was just doing what he thought was right at the time, that still doesn’t change the way he can’t look himself in the eyes in the mirror. He feels like he’s drowning, or adrift, anything but on stable ground. He thinks that if he had a car, there’s no way in hell he’d still be in this city. He’d be out of the state, possibly even the country. He’d have driven into a tree in his haste to get away.

As it is, he hops a bus to the nearest liquor store, comes back with two bottles of port tucked into his satchel. It is a compromise. He spent five minutes staring at shelves of vodka, tequila, things with a higher proof, but even as messed up as he is—he is just now beginning to admit it, but only to himself—that’s a bit farther than he’s willing to go, to sit alone drinking straight vodka in his attic. It is not something Baggineses do. The port is strong enough, fruity stuff, thick and sweet in his mouth. It sort of gives him a headache. He drinks it anyway, and wonders if this is how Thorin feels, all the time, and if this accounts for the perpetual grumpiness. He drinks it at night in hopes of sleeping, and though it makes him lethargic it doesn’t knock him out, so he drinks it again in the morning, and when he comes home from classes. It doesn’t stop the anxiety; it just makes him too slow to care. He suspects he’s failing French, and keeps falling asleep in his Tuesday afternoon theory seminar. None of his professors have said anything yet. More to the point, Thorin hasn’t said anything yet. Bilbo is waiting for him to notice, to push, to recognise his own symptoms in the face of another. It is as if he needs another confrontation, a second one to derail the first that will not let him go. He needs to create problems for himself so that he can fix them, and feel as though he’s got control over something. It is not a pattern of behaviour he has indulged in before, not even in his lowest moments, but he has read about it often enough, those tragic antiheroes of his whom he so used to admire.

There is nothing admirable about this. Nothing at all.

He is afraid to stay on campus late to study. Doesn’t even like hanging around the studio anymore. The wall-to-wall windows that first seemed so inviting only made him think now that he is visible, so terribly visible, to anyone passing by. If Azog really is some kind of Russian mob scion, as Bilbo had once feared, he probably has spies everywhere. They are probably watching him, right
now, half-drunk on port and falling asleep over modal verb conjugations, cross-legged on his apartment floor.

The week is a complete disaster. He wants badly to just leave it all behind, but he has nowhere to go.

He’ll be in the middle of something—reading an article, scanning the stacks in the library, it doesn’t matter what—and then he will freeze up. He can go hours not thinking about it, but it always comes back, and when it does it knocks aside anything in its path. He replays the scene in his mind, and the pain in his hand reminds him daily that it happened, that it is still happening.

He didn’t steal the map, of course. He laid out his options. Campus security. City police. Neither of them was particularly appealing. Bilbo has never gotten into serious trouble, but lives with an honest person’s irrational fear that the law will convict him anyway. When he is already blaming himself, charges from someone else would be too much to handle. Besides, Thorin hates the campus security—they have thrown him out of the studio, or tried to, too many times—and the city police don’t like to get involved in academic affairs. For at its heart, this is still academic; it is about a map, rare and valuable and obscure, and professional greed. It is about status, and fame.

Bilbo has never wanted to make a name for himself. He just wants to live quietly, with his books, perhaps a garden of his own, if there’s money enough left to buy a house with any kind of a lawn. That does not mean, though, that he is entirely without connections. On Wednesday evening, five days later, he takes a deep breath and picks up his phone, hoping that the call will go straight through to the answering service. It rings three times, four, and then halfway through the fifth, Gandalf picks up.

“Bilbo, my lad, you’ll never guess—”

“I need your help,” Bilbo cuts in, before his not-uncle can go off on one of his stories. “Are you alone? That is, can you talk?”

“One minute,” Gandalf says, his voice instantly changed. Deeper now, gruffer. A no-nonsense sort of voice. This is always who he has been: playing a bit of the fool, a bit of the absent-minded professor, until there is a crisis. Gandalf is practically built for crisis. There is some shuffling in the background, the creak of a door, and then Gandalf says, “You have my complete and undivided attention.”

“I’m in some trouble,” Bilbo says. He dialed before he properly thought through this conversation, but he winces and forge ahead anyway. “I may have made an enemy. That is, I definitely made an enemy. He’s, um, very . . . well, terrifying.”

“What happened?”

“He wanted me to help him steal a map. From the rare manuscript collections. And I was never going to, but I . . . might have neglected to be clear about that.”

“He thought the two of you had made a deal, and you failed to deliver,” Gandalf says.

“Er, yes, something like that. And apparently he’s been following me, and now Thorin is talking about murder left and right, and—”

“Thorin knows him?”

“Thorin hates him. Won’t tell me why. Well, I mean, something about his family, and now the fact that he— He, um. Hmm.” Bilbo scratches his nose, takes a deep breath. He shakes his head,
trying to knock the words out. “Hmm.”

“Tell me, Bilbo,” Gandalf says, somewhere between coaxing and demanding. Bilbo sighs.

“I came back to the apartment. The other night, that is, I came back, and he was waiting. For me. Inside. We, er, talked. He threatened me. And burned me. With a cigarette. I didn’t realise—people still do that? It’s so— Well. Then he left.”

Gandalf says something then that sounds very much like a swear, but not in any language Bilbo can recognise. “What did you do?”

“Panicked, mostly,” Bilbo admits. “I called Thorin.”

“Who hates this man.”

“Right. But he . . . patched me up. Before threatening murder. Or after, possibly. Things were a little . . . confused.”

“I think you’d better tell me this man’s name, and anything else you might be holding back. Don’t worry about protecting Thorin; I know more of his secrets than he would care to admit.”

“Really?” Bilbo asks. “How—”

“The name, Bilbo!”

“It’s Azog,” Bilbo says. “I don’t know if it’s a surname or—”

Gandalf cuts in, quick, saying, “Azog is not a name at all.”

“Er, sorry. What?”

“It is a title. Bilbo, where are, right now? Are you safe?”

“I’m in the apartment.”

“I don’t suppose you have a gun.”

“What? Gandalf, what on earth are you talking about? You know I don’t.”

“You need protecting, Bilbo Baggins, and you cannot do it on your own, and I will not trust Thorin Oakenshield not to go off half-cocked and without a plan, not on something like this. I have been trying for some years now to take down Azog. You may have just given me an opening. This map, what do you know about it?”

“Not much,” Bilbo says. “I can send you the notes I have, but wait a minute, hang on—”

“Send the notes. I will handle Azog. Can I trust you to do as I say?”

“What are you going to do?”

“Bilbo, will you do as I say?”

“Yes, but—”

“Stay with Thorin for the next couple of days. It won’t be safe for you on your own, and I need you to keep him out of this. I shall call you when it’s all over.”
“Gandalf, would you please just tell me what—”

“Send the notes. Goodbye.”

Bilbo stares at the phone in his hand. He supposes that he should have expected this. Gandalf is only ever talkative when he wants to be. Fretting about it all the while, Bilbo signs into his personal e-mail account, takes a minute to run his notes through an encryption program, and sends the files to Gandalf. The encryption is something Gandalf insists upon for electronic communication. Bilbo tells himself it’s because archaeology is a competitive and time-sensitive field, and tries not to acknowledge the growing suspicion—even stronger now, after that phone call—that there is far more to his not-uncle than meets the eye. Whatever else can be said about the man, he always keeps his word, even if it’s not in the way you were expecting.

It is different, somehow, letting Gandalf take over things, than allowing Thorin to go off on a one-man revenge mission. Bilbo actively avoids thinking about why that is. He pours himself a glass of port instead, drinks it sitting on the kitchen floor. He will stay here, he tells himself, not go to Thorin’s; stay, and prove that he can handle things. That he is not useless, or at least, not as useless as he appears. There is a spider spinning slowly in the corner, climbing up the side of the refrigerator. His mother wouldn’t be proud; she’d be appalled. The place is a mess.

He is a mess.

He doesn’t see Thorin again until Saturday, the twenty-seventh of April.

Chapter End Notes

Even though this is a shorter chapter, and leaves a lot unanswered, I have been feeling awfully guilty for not updating in ages, so I thought to give you at least this much would be better than nothing. It’s the usual story: I’ve been writing term papers and grading student work and have no time. Also, this chapter was particularly challenging to write, because of 1) logistics with Gandalf’s, which I sort of avoided anyway, and 2) some emotions I haven’t revisited in a while, which were hard to get down on paper. Thanks for your patience. I think of this story often, and really appreciate you all sticking with it even during long bouts of radio silence. I should have the last of my term papers done by Tuesday night, and then apart from family stuff over the holidays, I plan to write. There are questions, questions that need answering, as they say, and I mean to give you some answers. Others, you’ll have to figure out for yourselves. If you're curious, the tag for this on tumblr is "htw fic" and I occasionally post about writing it, updates, relevant music, art, etc. If you've anything related to this story you'd like me to see, please tag it with that so I can check it out.

In case you'd like a general sense of some things to come in this story, here is a brief list. SPOILER ALERT for any who would rather not know. If there's something you're curious about that you don't see on here, feel free to drop me a line. I may already be thinking about it, or it may not be on my mind yet. Either way, I'm always curious to hear what you all think.

[SPOILERS] Things to come include: more about Thorin's family, the end of Azog's story, B & T going on a (pseudo-)date with coffee and actual other people around, the inevitable trip westward and the accompanying question of whether Bilbo will stay or
Vague, I know. I don't want to give too much away. I'll reply to private messages on tumblr if you want more details. Thanks, as always, for reading!
He needs to return to his roots. When he was younger, and working on a project with his father, the man would always tell him, “Bilbo, my boy, if ever you don’t know where you stand, just retrace your steps.” It worked when he was five and got lost in the park. It worked when he was eleven and misplaced his favourite book of stories. It worked that night in February when he was twenty-two and getting hit on for the first time in his life—he’d honestly thought the man was just offering him a couch to sleep on for the night, a shorter walk home in the dark. Once he realised, he’d turned and walked right out of the bar, and back the long twelve blocks to his university apartment, kept on walking until he was in his bed with the quilts over his head. It worked, too, when his parents had died. That is, it had mostly worked. Bag End had been waiting for him, however briefly, to come back and walk its halls once again.

Ever since then, though, Bilbo hasn’t been able to figure out exactly how far back he needs to retrace his steps. He feels as if he’s been going backwards forever, only nothing he passes looks familiar, and he hasn’t reached his roots yet. How long are you meant to rewind your life before you can figure out where you made a wrong turn?

His roots are not here, in this upstate city, amongst all these people he does not know. Now, even more than ever, he does not feel that he belongs.

Thorin’s gone. Has been gone a day, two, possibly more. Bilbo can’t be sure. He didn’t say goodbye—“He promised,” Bilbo keeps telling himself, “He promised,” until his throat is dry—and the note he left behind isn’t dated. Bilbo found it yesterday morning, when he finally checked his mail. No one ever sends him anything by post. Most days he doesn’t even spare the mailbox a passing glance as he enters his house. Why Thorin should choose to leave a note there, of all places, is entirely inexplicable.

Well. No, it isn’t.

He didn’t want to say goodbye. He wanted a head-start on leaving. He is a complete and total arsehole.

Bilbo’s tempted to go with the last one, currently. If he gives himself over to anger, maybe he can get his heart to stop breaking.

He’d been leaving Thorin increasingly incoherent—pathetic, his mind supplies—text messages and voicemails. “Where are you?” “Call me.” “Have you really gone?” “Thorin?” “Hello?” “Thorin, for God’s sake, will you just— Will you just pick up the phone? Please, I really need to hear your voice right now. I just need to hear you. I don’t understand. How— Why didn’t you tell me you were going? You said you would say goodbye!” “I know you pretend to be a terrible person but honestly, Thorin, what are you doing? Why won’t you answer? Why won’t you just fucking talk to me, God, I hate you for leaving, do you know that? Hate. I told you that someday you’d know it. You promised me, not just about saying goodbye. You promised me no one would ever leave me again and you’ve—you’ve just—”

All right, so anger isn’t really working. Bilbo has never been able to get properly angry. Can’t muster up the requisite fire inside. Thorin always did it spectacularly, terrifyingly well, and Bilbo figured one person out of two was quite enough.
He needs to stop thinking of them as a pair. They’re not. That’s been made very clear. Maybe they could have been, once. Or maybe they never were.

Bilbo is starting to wonder if he hasn’t made this whole thing up. He was lonely, desperately so, and he needed company of the sort that would step in and take over and take up space. Enter Thorin Oakenshield, always somehow too large for any room you put him in. Competent and brash and frighteningly good-looking when the scowl dropped from his face. Self-sufficient and intimidatingly adept at getting his own way. Bitter and uncompromising, barely held together by alcohol and unflinching determination and self-loathing. Let’s be honest: They never had anything in common, really, apart from how much they each couldn’t stand themselves.

They rarely went anywhere in public. They never spoke to other people when they were together. If not for the fact that Gandalf and Azog—Gandalf, who is more than a little insane, it must be said, and Azog, who has simply disappeared, and any inquiries made to Gandalf are met with a troubling, if satisfied, smile—both knew the man, Bilbo would be entertaining some serious doubts. Even as it is, he is doubting.

I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed
And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

[. . .]

I fancied you’d return the way you said,
But I grow old and I forget your name.

(I think I made you up inside my head.)

It has been years since he read any Plath, but the poem comes to him now, first the refrain, unbidden, and then the verses. In a moment of weakness, Bilbo caves and calls Gandalf. Even if it’s crazy, he just needs to hear.

“Did you know that the liriodendron—” Gandalf starts off, as soon as he picks up, but Bilbo cuts in.

“Was any of it real?” he blurts out, and brings a hand to his mouth, clenches it into a fist.

“Oh, Bilbo,” Gandalf says, slowly. They have had this conversation already. Four times since yesterday, in fact. “My dear boy.”

“How could he just— I don’t understand. I know, I know you keep telling me, but . . .”

“You’re not insane,” Gandalf says, as if that’s what they should be worrying about now, not the fact that Thorin is gone, gone, completely and shatteringly absent. He left Bilbo the keys to his garage, and one brief note, the handwriting in architect’s capitals, angular and impersonal. The paper—still clutched in Bilbo’s hand; he has hardly let it go—doesn’t smell like him anymore.

“You knew him, Gandalf. You told me you knew his secrets. Please just tell me, what’s going on?”

“I think it is safe to say that you now know precisely as much as I do about Thorin Oakenshield, and possibly a good deal more.”
“That can’t be true. I feel like I don’t know anything.” Bilbo sinks to the floor, right in the middle of his apartment. His toes are cold. He hasn’t showered since the night before last and the hem of his sweater is unraveling a little more each day. “Have you heard anything? At all?”

“Bilbo, it has been exactly nine hours and fourteen minutes since you last asked me that, and the answer is the same now as it was then: No.”

Bilbo bites down on a knuckle and forces himself to breathe in through his nose. “All right,” he says, nodding to himself. “All right.” Chin up, he tells himself. Stop it, just stop—stop falling to pieces.

“My project wraps in two days, you know,” Gandalf says. “I could come up for a visit.”

“There’s nothing you can do,” Bilbo says. Then, feeling bad about his tone, adds, “Thanks, anyway.”

“Have heart,” Gandalf is saying, but Bilbo hangs up. He doesn’t even have the energy to throw his phone across the apartment.

He needs to return to his roots.

It is Sunday, the twelfth of May. He saw Thorin last on Monday, the sixth. It was raining, soft and warm, and the sky was pale grey. Bilbo loaded his bicycle—fixed, now—onto the rack of the local bus and rode up the hill, then cycled the last two miles or so to Thorin’s garage. Erebor ran down the lane to greet him, and Bilbo can still see the look on Thorin’s face as he stood on the back deck and watched them come closer. Inside, Thorin threw him a towel, and Bilbo peeled off his wet socks, and they spent a comfortable afternoon sprawled around the garage, Bilbo baking bread, Thorin tinkering with a model, Erebor nudging each of them in turn. Bilbo wanted to stay the night but didn’t know how to ask, and Thorin didn’t offer. He looked distracted as he loaded Bilbo’s bicycle into the trunk of his station wagon.

They swam in the lake the Friday before, and Bilbo froze on the roof of the Volvo, his hands almost aching to reach out. Thorin had such confidence that it was breath-taking. Bilbo closed his eyes against the sun. When they got dressed afterwards, Bilbo felt Thorin’s eyes on him, felt the colour rushing to his cheeks. They finished the case of beer back at the garage and were stretched sideways across Thorin’s bed, Bilbo fighting with the NYT crossword and Thorin frowning over a book on stone quarries in Wales, and then Thorin reached out, brought a hand to Bilbo’s neck, right where jaw meets ear, and pulled him close. Bilbo never did finish the crossword, too caught up in the blank spaces of Thorin’s body instead, dips and hollows of muscles and joints, his hair smelling of the lake. Thorin’s beard was rough against his chin, the calluses on Thorin’s hands hard against his hips.

The last week of April, they saw each other every day. Dinner on the twenty-ninth, after Thorin’s confrontation with his advisors, and Bilbo drank to keep pace with Thorin and ended up asleep in his bed. He woke to Thorin next to him, on his side, head propped up on one hand, just watching. Thorin’s eyes were always startling, especially so close, and the line of his lips was thin. Bilbo blinked away sleep and a creeping headache while Thorin rolled over and said nothing. They never had a proper conversation about what happened on Saturday. Bilbo tried, once or twice over the next few days, to bring it up, but got too embarrassed. Thorin isn’t the type to talk about it, anyway. He just . . . does it. A physical thing, easy like all others. Saturday: their hips together, the friction of their jeans, the rumble of Thorin’s voice against Bilbo’s throat. “I don’t,” Bilbo had said, and then Thorin, “I know.”

Bilbo shakes his head. This is not what he wants to be remembering. It is too close, so close it
makes his stomach twist. He thinks back further, skipping over a weekend spent barricaded in his attic apartment, numb with terror, Thorin’s switchblade on his table. Holding his breath while waiting for a phone call, an e-mail, some kind of “all clear” from Gandalf, ignoring Thorin pounding on his house’s door. He didn’t give Thorin new keys when he changed the locks. It slipped his mind, or maybe, subconsciously, he already knew. He skips even faster over the smell of cigarettes and charred flesh, over yelling and elevator doors and rain-dark parking lots. Over a disastrous dinner that had started out so well. Over whispered conversations in the rare manuscripts archives, over stilted conversations in the design studio. He never did finish Badiou. And earlier still, in February when Thorin twisted his arm and made him feel, for the first time since his mother’s death, that he was really alive. Pain is perhaps the strongest grounding force we can know. Bilbo remembers this, and bites his lip.

This isn’t working. He doesn’t want to be seeing Thorin, shoulders large and looming, six days worth of unshaved chin and six feet plus worth of muscle, hair tangled into a knot, knuckles split and dusted with pencil lead. Smelling of pine and pipe tobacco and beer, of wet dog and wood glue. Bilbo misses Erebor, too—far more than he thought he would. The fact that the man named his dog after his lost home should probably have been a clue from the start: Thorin will never love anything as much as revenge. This mad quest he’s embarked on to reclaim his homeland, as if he were straight out of a medieval epic, was never going to be quietly set aside.

Back to his roots. It’s Sunday, and still early. Bilbo gets up off the floor, puts one foot in front of the other until he’s in his shower. If he is really going back, he shouldn’t be at home on a Sunday morning. He should be in church. There’s a little chapel on the lake—the other side of the lake from the garage, thankfully. The congregation is small. He’s only been once before. It didn’t feel right, going on his own. Church had always been something to do with parents: growing up, Bilbo sang in the choir, was a sacristan, carried the sacred flame into the sanctuary and lit all the candles before the service. About the time his voice broke, from boy soprano down to tenor, he started to wonder about the words he was hearing, and whether or not he really believed any of them. But now, he thinks, it might help, or at least he is desperate enough to give it a try. So he gets cleaned up, puts on a clean button-down and flattens his hair with one hand while eating a piece of toast with the other. Looking at himself in the mirror is still too hard. His fingers fumble with the laces of his boots. The bicycle ride up to the chapel gives him time to clear his head, cool air on his face and the scent of last night’s rain, the trees glistening with new leaves.

Upstate spring is a rare, fleeting thing. The weather’s too quick to slip back into winter, dreary and wind-blown, clouds scudding across the skies. But there are a few days, just a few, when the sun breaks through and the skies turn glassy and bright, and you can taste new earth with every breath. Bilbo is panting hard by the time he reaches the road that circles the lake and he stands up on the pedals, leans forward, coasts around a bend. In someone’s garden, snowdrops have begun to bloom.

When he gets to the chapel, though, he can’t actually bring himself to step inside. He leans his bicycle up against a post and stares at the trees, listening to a muffled hymn from inside the sanctuary. It is the first music he has heard since Thorin left. It’s fitting, Bilbo thinks, closing his eyes, that Thorin’s note should have closed with lyrics, and that they should have been Springsteen: “When I die I want no part of Heaven; I would not do Heaven’s work well. I pray the Devil comes and takes me to stand at the fiery furnaces of Hell.” Bilbo doesn’t know the song. Doesn’t want to, if he’s being honest. He never did give Thorin back his mp3 player, and the song’s surely on there, somewhere, but to hear that deep, rough voice now would break his heart, no matter what the tune was. If Thorin has gone off to die, Bilbo would rather not know.

That’s a lie. Of course he would want to know. But he doesn’t think he could handle it, either the knowing or the fact itself.
Call it cowardice, call it weakness—the name of the thing doesn’t change the fact that it is all he knows. Thorin was right, he is useless. In real life, when it really counts, he can’t do anything. He’s spent the last day and a half breathless with fear, and why? Because he’s been left alone? Well, we are all alone, in the end. That’s not it. Because it is Thorin who has left him? Closer, but still not quite. He always knew Thorin was leaving. Because Thorin didn’t say goodbye? But then, what is the note, if not a last farewell? No, what is really at the heart of all this, probably, is that Thorin left alone.

But Bilbo doesn’t even know if he would have gone, had Thorin asked. So really, what’s the point? He is being an idiot. “A fucking idiot,” Thorin would have said, and given him that look, sideways, smile just on the crooked side, just enough to be called a smirk.

This is hopeless.

Bilbo gets back on his bicycle and coasts down the hill, flying through the intersection, past Millstein without a second glance, past the undergrad housing. He makes a hard left, leaning into the turn, and passes his apartment by, face into the wind, mouth set in a thin line. He cycles all the way down to the railroad tracks, over them and to the river’s edge. Then there is nowhere further for him to go, so he drops his bicycle in the grass and sits on the low stone wall at the water’s edge. The current swirls gently, carrying city runoff down to the lake. That’s me, Bilbo thinks; I am the runoff, and Thorin was the current, only now he’s gone and I’ve gone stagnant.

As analogies go, it’s a fairly juvenile one. His poetry professors would cringe. Bilbo watches the water for a good hour, until the damp has seeped into his pants and his fingers are cold but no longer shaking. “Find another current,” he tells himself, aloud. There isn’t anyone around to hear. “Right, then.” He stands, dusts his pants off, and begins the long ride back up the hill.

He throws himself into his work. Sleeps for fourteen hours straight and turns out an eighteen-page paper in two days. Reads an entire novel in one sitting, before lunch. Vacuums his floors, cleans the kitchen and the bathroom, makes the trek down to the laundromat and breathes in the scent of detergent on clean sheets. Gandalf calls him three times, and Bilbo ignores each call, and deletes the voice-mails before listening to them. Thorin does not call at all. Bilbo thinks about erasing his contact details, but cannot quite bring himself to do it. He bakes a cake instead, and opens the awning windows to let in the cool spring breeze. He works and works and resolutely ignores everything else. This is how Bagginses have always coped. When his father fell ill, Bilbo and his mother repainted the kitchen. When he died, they replanted the entire garden, and all the neighbours dropped by to tell them how beautiful it looked, and how sorry they were, and Bilbo and his mother stood behind fence-posts with smiles stuck to their faces. Bilbo still has a scar on his arm, just below the wrist, from a particularly wily rose branch.

He runs a thumb over it, lying on his stomach on the bare clean floor. “I can do this. It’s just life. That’s all. Things happen, and then you go on.”

If he dreams about Erebor that night, the real Erebor, a shining silver mountain, he tries not to remember it in the morning.

Instead, he thinks about breakfast. When Thorin found out that Bilbo had never had a proper bagel, it was a Tuesday in November and hissing down rain. They were in the studio, talking about something entirely unrelated, when Thorin’s stomach grumbled loud enough to be heard from a table away. Bilbo bit back laughter and tried not to look, but it was a short-lived effort. “I would kill someone for a bagel right now,” Thorin said, up to his elbows in balsa wood and muslin.
“Bagels,” Bilbo said. “Not really my thing.”

Thorin gaped at him for a full minute, possibly more. Then he placed a miniature support beam onto his bridge, very carefully, and came to lean over Bilbo’s table. “How are they not your thing?” he asked. “What is wrong with you?”

“I’ve just never thought they were that good,” Bilbo said. “That’s a perfectly legitimate opinion.”

“No,” Thorin said, and that was that. Bilbo found himself being dragged off campus and into Collegetown, his cheeks reddening with cold, Thorin’s grip warm and tight on his shoulder. The bagel shop was packed with students but Thorin strong-armed his way through to get a table, told Bilbo in no uncertain terms to stay put, and returned with at least a dozen bagels. “Tuesdays,” Thorin said. “A dozen for six dollars.”

“I can’t eat that many.”

“Who said they were all for you?” Thorin pushed a bagel—just one—into Bilbo’s hand and stuffed another into his own mouth. Rain dripped off his upturned coat collar and onto the table. One of his feet was tapping evenly on the leg of his stool. Bilbo shook water from his hair and took a bite: warm and chewy, just a little bit sour. “Proper bagels,” Thorin was saying, “are only found in New York.”

“Since when did you become a gourmet?” Bilbo asked.

“I’ve lived here for long enough to learn,” Thorin retorted. “I can play the part, when I have to.”

“Hmm. Yes, I suppose you can.” Bilbo took another bite, savouring the taste. The texture was perfect, just the right balance between tough and airy. The shop’s grainy speakers were playing Chicago with the volume turned low. A troupe of law students with posh accents crowded the table next to theirs, pantsuits and briefcases, tearing apart their classmates behind their backs. Thorin glared at them until they noticed, and then they left. It should have been painfully awkward, and it was, but it was also comfortable, somehow. Sitting knee-to-knee under the narrow table on rickety stools, eating bagels, with someone who was still practically a stranger, Bilbo found himself not just resigned to his situation but actually enjoying it.

“What’s the verdict?” Thorin asked. “Still not your thing?”

Bilbo chewed and swallowed. He looked up and met Thorin’s eyes, properly. “You’ve converted me,” he said.

“Good,” Thorin replied, and broke into a rare smile, one that reached the corners of his eyes. He ran a hand through damp hair and leaned forward. “Today’s a success, then.”

“Yes, good. Now give me another.”

“I thought you couldn’t eat that many.”

“Yes, well, you thought wrong.”

It had been easy enough to snipe back and forth across the table, swapping bagel flavours and watching the rain. Thorin bought Bilbo a cup of coffee before their walk back, and took him the long way around, across the footbridge and into one of the gorges. They cut across the engineering quad, dodging umbrellas and puddles as they went. The coffee burnt Bilbo’s tongue, but it warmed
his hands, and Thorin’s good mood lasted the whole day.

What happens to people, to make them change? Bilbo knows now that even then, even that rainy Tuesday, Thorin must have been alight with cross-country desires, kindling a long-awaited vengeance inside the sturdy frame of his chest. If he could go back and tell himself then what he knows now, Bilbo thinks he would have spoken a warning: Stay away. Everyone else seemed to hear it loud and clear. Why was he never suspicious, not even a little bit, that Thorin had no friends? When he thought about that abrupt and confusing Thanksgiving, or about the curiously empty studio, why did it never strike him as anything other than simply odd? He has said it before: gradschool turned him into an optimist. He doesn’t know when that happened—can’t pin down the exact date—but it happened early on, and it is only just leaving him now.

That leaves the alternatives: a pessimist, or a realist. Pessimism has never been Bilbo’s thing, and unlike bagels, he doesn’t think he’ll be converted so easily. Besides, it’s a funny word. Realism is solid, structured; it has a history. It is something he should be able to hang on to when everything else fails: facts. With the morning sun warming his back, Bilbo sits at his desk and makes a list.

Fact: Thorin is gone.

Fact: He didn’t take you with him.

Fact: He is (probably) never coming back.

Fact: You need to get over that, or you’re going to fall apart.

Fact: Or, you could just go after him.

Chapter End Notes

In the spirit of Christmas, or something, here's an update sooner than I expected. Thanks for such enthusiastic, fantastic support throughout this whole endeavour, even when I haven't been able to give this fic as much attention as any of us would like. I appreciate all of you who read, leave kudos, comment, talk to me on tumblr ("htw fic" is the tag, stick-around-town is the blog), etc. I couldn't be doing this without you, so, thanks.

What will happen next? Your guess is as good as mine, honestly. Feel free to make conjectures in comments below. Also, I'll update the annotations/refs after the holidays, when I have a bit of free time. The Springsteen song here is "Youngstown" (there's a vid in the tag/on my blog) and the poem is "Mad Girl's Love Song," written 1951 when Plath was a student at Smith College.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

(Because this is quite a jump, time-wise from where we just were, a word of clarification: this chapter takes place before chapter 2, on the 2nd of December. It's just after Thanksgiving, and just before Thorin introduces Bilbo to The Boss and gives him his mp3 player.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The snow started last night, and ever since he woke up Bilbo’s been mostly content to sit on his bed, wrapped in a quilt, watching the windows frost over. It’s a Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent, and this is the first December that Bilbo has ever had proper snow, four inches deep already on the window-ledges, over the sidewalks outside, swinging the tree branches down low. Ford Madox Ford lies open on Bilbo’s lap, a pencil behind his ear for marking pages, but his mind isn’t on nationalism, or the English countryside—it’s on the upstate New York countryside. The damp weight of the snow over his attic has muffled all sound, cutting him off entirely from the outside world. Washed out in the pale light, blurred a little around the edges, everything in Bilbo’s apartment seems stuck in time. The larger city may as well not exist.

He’s reluctant to move and spoil the illusion but he’s been awake since five and now it’s seven-thirty and he’s so hungry his stomach aches. The end-of-term pressures of the past week kept him from going to the grocery store—half an hour on the bus each way, plus at least an hour to shop, equals time he did not have to spare. He could make some toast with week-old bread, scrape out the last of the raspberry jam, and drink tea without milk. Or he could walk into town in four inches of snow. Normally, it wouldn’t even be a debate, but Bilbo’s feeling restless, and the snowflakes are so large, so inviting.

Still, he hesitates. The weekend bus route doesn’t make it up his hill, so he’d have to walk even if he wanted to ride out to the store. Walk, and then sit on an overheated bus, and then deal with the inevitable Sunday rush at the store. Or just walk to a café, get coffee and a pastry, enough to settle his stomach and tide him over until Monday. The thing is, Bilbo actually hates eating alone. When he’s in his apartment, it’s a given—he lives on his own, and he eats alone. But eating out, in public, alone, is basically his least favourite thing to do.

He blames it on his parents, if you can call it blame. Meal times in the Baggins family were always sit-down affairs, everyone at the table. Books closed, noses wiped, no excuses. His mother would cook and his father would wash up afterwards, and if you didn’t clean your plate, you didn’t get dessert. When Bilbo got old enough, he’d help out with the cooking, or the dishes, or just generally be underfoot, lifting lids off of pots and burning his fingers sneaking bites before they were done. Food meant socialising, and socialising meant food, and the two were never meant to be separate. That idea seems to have found a way to follow him out to gradschool, for it was just a few days ago that Thorin and his strange companions invaded Bilbo’s attic for their rendition of Thanksgiving dinner. Though he never said anything—his manners have fallen into an appalling state these days—the company, if unexpected, was more than welcome. With that memory so fresh in his mind, the prospect of going out to eat alone now is less appealing than ever.

Thinking of Thorin, Bilbo drags his laptop up from the foot of his bed and opens his
university e-mail account. He hasn’t seen the man since that dinner, too caught up in his own research in the stacks of Olin to make it up to the studio, but they’ve written each other a few times. Once or twice. Well, once. Thorin wrote once, checking up on Bilbo the morning after Thanksgiving. Bilbo didn’t write back. Didn’t know what to say. He got embarrassed about it afterwards, and filed the e-mail away and told himself to stop thinking about it. Now he pulls it up again, eyeing TO274 in the address line.

His fingers resting on the keys, he bites his lip and stares at the screen. Thorin’s e-mail was brief:

Bilbo,

Checking to make sure you’re not still passed out on your floor. Lightweight, that’s what you are. See you in the studio soon? Will be here all week—final projects due. Classmates are a fucking mess. No one will mind another one.

Another what, Bilbo had wondered. Then it clicked: another mess, meaning him. Thorin thought he was a lightweight, and a mess. So he didn’t reply, and he told himself it was stupid to continue going to a Saturday morning workshop taught by a man who clearly hated just about everyone, who was rude and overly forward, and who had no right to be mocking anyone’s alcohol intake. But it’s barely been a week and here he is, and he can hear that deep voice in his head, laughing at him.

“What are you doing?” Bilbo asks himself. “Inviting Thorin Oakenshield to breakfast. God, when did you become such an absolute idiot?”

Probably around the same time he started talking to himself, and panicking over finishing reading assignments—784 pages this week, not counting his Old English translations—and generally feeling like he was caught in a very fast current and about two seconds from going under. That was probably the time.

“I’m not cut out for this,” Bilbo says, and he’s not sure if he means this, gradschool, or communication, or adult life in general. But he’s also not cut out for eating alone, and no one in their right mind can really protest a warm muffin on a snowy day, can they? He clicks to reply and tries several times to figure out what to say, deleting his words almost as soon as he types them. “Dear Thorin” looks silly for reasons he doesn’t want to think about. Just “Thorin” seems too blunt, and too much an echo of the first e-mail. Fed up with himself, Bilbo lets out a frustrated sigh and writes:

I’ve run out of anything remotely satisfying to eat, and if I have to read one more page of Christopher Tietjens waxing poetic about hedgerows I’m likely to throw this book across the room, which would be a great affront to books in general. Headed down to the Cayuga St. coffee shop, except I kind of hate eating alone, so was wondering if you might be hungry, too.

P.S. Not still passed out on my floor.

It’s far too informal, too familiar, but damn it, he’s hungry and he’s anxious and Thorin doesn’t really seem like the type to care all that much about propriety. Bilbo sends it before he can change his mind again, and then forces himself up out of his pile of blankets and towards the shower. Looking himself in the eyes in the mirror as he shaves, he squares his shoulders and says, “You are a Baggins, of Bag End, and you can handle one stupid breakfast.” Then he cuts his chin, and spoils the effect.

He’s clean, dressed, and has more or less dried his hair, and it’s pushing eight o’clock. Still
no answering e-mail from Thorin. What was he expecting, that the man would be sitting around by his computer this early on a Sunday? Just because it is Bilbo’s life doesn’t mean it is anyone else’s. Of course Thorin has better things to be doing. Things such as sleeping, most likely. Bilbo packs his Old English homework into his satchel—he has to do the first 90 lines of “The Dream of the Rood” by tomorrow afternoon—and pulls a scarf and hat down from the pegs next to his door. Gloves are in the pocket of his old woolen coat, and his boots are waiting next to the heater. He checks his e-mail one last time before he leaves, and feels even more foolish for having sent an invite that’s gone unanswerend than if he was actually setting out to meet Thorin Oakenshield at a café for Sunday breakfast, as if that was a normal thing to do.

So he’ll eat alone. So what? It’s not the end of the world. It’s just disappointing, to a degree that takes Bilbo by surprise. For all that he had no expectations, it’s uncomfortably hard to school his face into something suitably bland for the outside world and go off to breakfast on his own. He tells himself it’s the time of year, it’s the past week that seemed to be a month. It’s the fact that he’s not used to not having company, even if he’s had years to get used to not having friends.

It’s brighter outside than he would’ve guessed, from the dim light in his attic. The clouds are dark and close, but with the ground covered and reflecting every bit of available light through ice-shrouded trees, he can almost imagine there’s sunlight. The walk into town isn’t bad, largely because it’s entirely downhill. There are a couple of kids sledding through the cemetery. One of them smacks into a tombstone just as Bilbo passes by and he stops, worried, but they’re all laughing and the kid gets up to make another run, so he just shakes his head and continues on. At least someone is enjoying the place. Irreverent, and decidedly unsafe, but better for it to be lively kids than . . .

Bilbo takes a deep breath and looks up instead of finishing his thought. Two crows in the trees above him are calling out, protesting the snow. Normally Bilbo would join them, but it’s invigorating, somehow, walking down the hill with his hands stuffed in his pockets, snow crunching underfoot. He can feel his nose and cheeks burning from the cold, but at least it’s not too windy. It never snowed much in his hometown. January was the coldest month; December hovered around 40°F, and sometimes it rained a bit but mostly it was just a prolonged slide into spring. Even though he’s seen it before, on television and in photographs, the snow fascinates him. It’s harder than it should be to walk past the kids. Some part of Bilbo really, honestly wants to throw his books aside and go sledding.

“Idiot,” he says to himself again, tucking his chin into his scarf. “Be an adult.”

It shouldn’t be so hard.

The creek that cuts through the downtown area isn’t quite frozen over. Ice has crept along its banks, though, and the usual geese are long gone. Bilbo crosses over the canal bridge before the water widens and flows out towards the lake. There are three other people inside the coffee shop—it’s only opened half an hour ago—and all of them look up when Bilbo opens the door and lets in a cold draft. He’s quick to close the door and turn away, but then realises he recognises the face at the little table in the righthand corner.

“Hello, Bilbo. Would— Would you like to join me?”

“Hello, Ori,” Bilbo says, unwinding his scarf. “I’m just going to get a coffee first.”

“Right. Oh, here, wait, let me.” Ori stands, knocking into the table, and moves to pick up his scattered notes and make space. Bilbo smiles as he goes to order his drink, and tells himself that this chance meeting cancels out Thorin not replying to his e-mail. It really, really doesn’t, but perhaps if he repeats it often enough as he stands in line, it will start to.
Ori’s a history grad, first-year. They share a table in the humanities reading room sometimes. At first, their schedules simply happened to align—the reading room is almost always full, so you end up sharing a table with someone even if you prefer to work alone. Ori, in at least as many sweaters as Bilbo, with stacks of books and a slight, permanent frown while he reads, seemed the best (most unassuming) option for a table-partner, in Bilbo’s mind. After a while, they actually started to greet each other, and exchanged e-mail addresses. Sometimes Ori will bring Bilbo tea when he comes in, nine in the morning, just after the library café’s opened, knowing that Bilbo’s been up on the fifth floor for an hour already. Sometimes Bilbo will think about asking Ori if he wants to get lunch, but he hasn’t quite managed that yet. They nod, smile, and exchange a few words, and then they get back to work. That is how their relationship goes. Not friends, exactly, but slightly more than colleagues.

They haven’t actually had anything like what Bilbo would call a “real conversation” together. He knows that, over the years, he’s become sort of terrible at making friends. And Ori, for his part, seems painfully shy. Perhaps even more so than Bilbo. He can recognise his own shortcomings in another, but where Bilbo, upon provocation of his curiosity, or actual provocation, will take the initiative, and has even been known to stand up for himself—well, all right, he has been known to call people rude names, and stamp his foot on occasion, but it’s something—Ori just gets this pinched look about his face and hunches his shoulders when confronted with new people. Once some finance grad tried to sit at their table, and apart from the fact that her bright yellow textbook proclaiming “Business Finance” immediately marked her as an intruder to the humanities room, she looked quite nice. Next to her, across the table from Bilbo, Ori inched his chair away, ever so slightly. They happened to leave the room at the same time that day and as they were waiting for the elevator Bilbo asked, “What was that? Back there?”

“I just got nervous,” Ori had said, and that was the end of that conversation.

Bilbo blows on his hands to warm them as he waits for his order: large cappuccino, and two sticks of raspberry-white chocolate biscotti. It’s entirely too much money, but he’s feeling a little bit sorry for himself as well as anxious, and if that can be alleviated by sweets, it’s worth the cost.

“What are you working on?” Bilbo asks Ori as he slides into the open chair.

“My advisor got me a facsimile of the Peniarth 16 manuscript,” Ori says.

“Oh yes? And, what’s that?” Bilbo is used to Ori’s brief answers out of context, but it would be nice to actually understand, for once. He’s interested in Ori’s research, what bits of it he’s glimpsed across the table. There are always maps.

“A collection of the Welsh Triads. The earliest one we have. Look,” Ori says, shifting his papers around. He hands Bilbo a sheet, cramped with tiny print.

“I can’t read this.”

“Oh. Right, of course. It’s, um, a list. Lists of three things, quasi-history really, and it’s been researched for ages already, but this was the start of rhetorical devices in Welsh literature, and this kind of mythological blend with actual, traceable history—because, you know, you can actually go to Caerleon and see things? Not like, ‘the three bulls of battle,’ those are all dead, obviously . . .” Ori trails off, staring at the facsimile. Bilbo takes a sip of his coffee.

“I’m in your area today, then,” he says, and pulls his Anglo-Saxon Reader out of his satchel.

“Oh, what are you translating?”

Ori laughs a little, then looks around quickly, as if to see whether or not anyone noticed. “I like that one,” he tells Bilbo, quietly.

“Well, cheers,” Bilbo says, lifting his mug. Ori nods, already tugging his pages back and scanning over them, and they get to work. A few more people drift in and out, and Bilbo shrugs his coat on again to block the draft at his back. He’s eating his biscotti slowly—it’s his meal for the day, apart from the stale toast waiting back in his attic. He’s at line seventeen B when someone stomps in behind him and shakes snow off into his hair. Bilbo turns, ready to glare, tell them off, whoever they are. But then it’s Thorin looming over him, not exactly scowling, but close, so close that Bilbo chokes on what he was about to say.

“Er—”

“Bilbo,” Thorin says. He closes the door.

“I didn’t think you were coming,” Bilbo says, twisting around in his chair. The words are out before he can think them through and be a bit less honest. “I mean,” he amends, “you didn’t have to come.”

“Yeah.” Thorin nods. His hair is mostly falling out of a loose braid over one shoulder and his boots aren’t tied. He’s wearing sunglasses—Bilbo can’t tell if Thorin’s looking at him or not. “Here now, though.”

Thorin starts to take off his jacket and then notices Ori, who hasn’t bothered to look up from his Triads. He looks up now, though, and goes stiff for a second. “What are you doing here?” Thorin asks. Turning back to Bilbo, he adds, “Did you invite him, too?”

“No, we just ran into each other.”

Thorin and Ori hold each other’s gaze for an uncomfortable minute. Ori looks away first, ducking his head down and sweeping his papers together.

“I was just leaving,” he stammers, shoving everything into his bag.

“No, you can—” Bilbo starts to say.

“Goodbye,” Thorin interrupts, standing aside so Ori can slip out from behind the small table. Ori steps out the door without even looking back. Bilbo twists around again and this time does manage to glare at Thorin, a proper, firm glare.

“What was that for?” he asks. “You didn’t have to scare him off.”

“Kid’s not scared of me,” Thorin scoffs.

“Thorin, he bent his papers in his rush to leave. Ori never even folds things neatly, let alone bends them. I’d say he was scared.”

“Realised he had better things to do, then,” Thorin says, and takes over Ori’s seat.

“Excuse you,” Bilbo says, and presses his lips together, frowning. Really? Better things?

Thorin holds his smirk for a second, and then seems to realise what he just said, and how it could be taken. At least, he drops the smirk and runs a hand through his hair. Takes off his
sunglasses to reveal bloodshot eyes. “Not that you’re not, you know,” he says, waving his hand vaguely, “good enough. To do.”

“Really on a roll this morning,” Bilbo says, and where is this snark coming from all of a sudden? He’s in a mood he hasn’t been in for years. It’s a strange feeling, to be sarcastic again. It leaves an odd taste in his mouth, something to be savoured. He chalks it up to it being a Sunday, to his having been up all night. To the unexpected company.

Thorin groans and slides his sunglasses back on, slouching down in his seat. His boots knock against Bilbo’s under the table. “Shut up,” he sighs. “I’m here, aren’t I? Your e-mail woke me up.”

“What?”

“Smartphone, Bilbo. Get with this century. E-mail notifications. Very loud beeps.” Thorin crosses his arms over his chest and leans his head back with a thud against the window. “Not for everyone. Just for some people.” The Italian grad student at the next table is staring at them now, and Bilbo blushes.

“Thorin, are you . . . are you drunk? Still?” he asks in a whisper, leaning forward.

“Mmmm.”

“Fantastic,” Bilbo mutters. “Oh, that’s swell.”

“Can I have your coffee?”

“No, you may not. Get your own.”

“Too much effort,” Thorin says. Bilbo suspects he’s closed his eyes, but can’t tell—the sunglasses are too dark.

Bilbo sighs and settles in to translate ten more lines of “The Dream of the Rood.” Thorin’s mouth is open slightly; it’s very distracting. “Are you really not going to get a coffee?” Bilbo asks, after line forty A. Thorin grunts. Bilbo considers going back to his work, but Thorin really does look sort of awful, and Bilbo woke him up this morning. The least he could do, he thinks, is buy the man a coffee. So he marks his place and goes up to the counter. Coffee is expensive here--$3.75 for your most basic cup—but the company, even if said company is half-asleep and still mostly drunk across the table, is worth it.

Thorin wakes up enough to make a noise that might be a thank-you but probably isn’t. He drinks half the cup before speaking proper words. “I worry about you,” he says. Bilbo is so startled he drops his pen.

“What?”

“You said you ran out of food. And you’re such a space case, and this fucking weather . . . Thought I’d better come make sure you were still alive.”

“Thorin, I e-mailed you. Did you think it was from beyond the grave?”

“Ha,” Thorin says. He picks up Bilbo’s plate—empty now, except for a few crumbs—and gives it a sharp look. “Whatever was on here doesn’t count as proper food.”

“Well, the grocery store is far away so . . . It’s fine,” Bilbo shrugs, and his coat slips from his shoulders. Someone else walks into the coffee shop and bumps into Bilbo’s chair as he walks past.
Bilbo bends down to pick up his coat and inch his chair farther in.

“Get up,” Thorin says, as he stands from his own seat. “Switch with me.”

“What? No, it’s fine.”

“Come on, move.” Thorin grips Bilbo around the upper arm and hauls him out of his seat, pushes him towards the other side of the table. “I don’t like watching you flinch every time someone walks in.”

“Um, thanks,” Bilbo says. “I guess.” He settles in at the other side of the table, and the glass of the window behind his head is cold but the draft is less. Thorin takes up too much space on the other side of the table, but he finishes his coffee and despite the thoroughly grumpy look on his face, he doesn’t seem particularly unhappy about where he is. “I really do need to finish this,” he says, apologising and gesturing at his text.

“Do you have a spare pen and paper?”

“Yes, just let me . . .” Bilbo rummages around in his satchel and comes up with a notebook and a ballpoint pen. “Here.”

“Go on,” Thorin says, gesturing at Bilbo’s poetry. “Finish.”

“You should have some water,” Bilbo prods. “And food.”

“Coming from you, that doesn’t carry a whole lot of weight.” Thorin pulls the notebook over and starts sketching. Bilbo frowns and goes to get them each a glass of water, brushing Thorin’s hand off his arm where it grabs him as he walks past.

“Drink,” he says.

“Aye, aye,” Thorin says, and downs the glass in one go. He’s still slurring his words a little, and he’s dropped the sunglasses back down from his forehead to cover his eyes. Bilbo sighs, but it’s easy to get pulled back into the text, because he’s right at the moment of crucifixion: Rōd wæs ic āræred; āhōf ic rīcne Cyning, heofona Hlāford; hyldan mē ne dorste. Þurhdrifan hī mē mid deorcan næglum; on mē syndon þā dolg gesīene, opene inwidhlemmas; ne dorst ic hira ænigum sceððan. By the time Bilbo next looks up, Thorin’s drawn the coffee shop interior in perspective. There is even an outline of Bilbo; an outline which he is carefully filling in, the pen looking small in his hands, his elbow hanging off the edge of the table.

“Let’s get out of here,” Thorin says, tearing his sketch out of the notebook and crumpling it into his pocket. And because Bilbo’s finished his ninety lines and it’s become noisy inside, now that it’s nearly ten o’clock, he gives in. They wrap up and head outside to walk along the canal, making tracks in the snow. Bilbo’s kind of fascinated with the way the ice is flowing and says as much to Thorin, who mutters something about the canal not being “real water,” whatever that means. They circle back around the block and come upon Thorin’s car.

“Wait, you drove here?” Bilbo asks, just realising now.

“Didn’t feel like walking.”

“That’s not really the issue.”

“There is no issue.”
“Thorin, you were drunk!”

“I was fine.”

“You told me—you admitted it. You were not fine.”

“Didn’t crash.”

“Oh, that is so not the point it’s not even funny. What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking that you e-mailed me out of the blue and asked me to meet you here, and that I had better show up.”

“You couldn’t have, I don’t know, taken the bus or something?”

“No.”

“I can’t believe you,” Bilbo says, shaking his head. Thorin looks completely unrepentant. Is, in fact, opening the car door for Bilbo. “No. I am not getting in this car with you while you’re drunk.”

“I want to go look at the lake. Real water.”

“Not happening.”

“You don’t have to come, then,” Thorin says, and moves around to the driver’s side. Bilbo has a brief, tense argument with himself, there on the snowy sidewalk. Thorin starts the car, the engine turning over a couple of times before it catches.

“Oh, hell,” Bilbo bites out, and wrenches the door open. “You’re not going alone.”

First they double back to Thorin’s garage to pick up Erebor—“The dog appreciates real water,” Thorin says, and Bilbo doesn’t reply because he’s too busy gripping the edges of his seat and praying that the nap and coffee and water and argument have sobered Thorin up enough for this to be okay, even if he really doubts it—and then they go out to the lake.

The park where they launched the boat back in October is empty. Bilbo had sort of thought that they’d just sit in the car and look at things, but this is Thorin. He’s outside with Erebor almost as soon as the engine is off, hands stuffed in his pockets because he’s not wearing gloves. Bilbo shakes his head again, this time at himself, and resigns himself to an hour or so of being bitterly cold. The wind’s picked up and it’s blowing off the water. The lake isn’t frozen through, but there’s ice around the edges and along the docks.

Visibility’s gotten poorer, too, so Thorin and Erebor are just dark shapes down on the rocks. Bilbo spends a minute or two feeling very anxious about the whole situation, but then bends down and packs a neat snowball into his mitten. It’s another minute before he works up the courage to throw it at the back of Thorin’s head, or at least, where he thinks the back of Thorin’s head is. He’s always had good aim. The snowball explodes on its mark and Thorin swears into the wind, turning around. Bilbo’s rewarded with a split-second look of shock and then a slow, crooked grin. Thorin bends and scoops up retaliation, fires it off in one swift movement. It catches Bilbo square in the chest and the force of it knocks the air out of him. Erebor is barking, running interference between the two of them, catching snow in his mouth. He doesn’t seem to mind the cold. Bilbo minds, but he’s also growing inordinately fond of the wicked look Thorin has in his eyes, and the way his cheeks are reddening against the white of the snow and the dark of his hair.
Then Thorin tackles Bilbo into a snowdrift and he minds a whole lot more. Thorin pushes off of him and looks slightly shame-faced, rubbing the back of his neck. “I didn’t mean—“ he starts to say, the words stiff. Bilbo can’t tell which is more painful: the fact that he’s apparently let himself have fun, or that he’s trying to apologise for it now. There’s only one thing to be done about it, which is to toss a handful of snow in Thorin’s face.

They’re sopping wet and cloud up the windows on the drive back, the heater going full-blast but blowing mostly cold air. Bilbo is shivering so hard his bones hurt. With the volume turned up, scratchy over the noise of the heater, a song Bilbo distantly recognises plays out.

You got a fast car,
I want a ticket to anywhere.

Maybe we can make a deal,
maybe together we can get somewhere.

Any place is better,
start from zero, got nothing to lose,
maybe we’ll make something,
and me, myself, I got nothing to prove.

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It’s freezing and dark in his attic, except for the candle burning at his desk where he’d abandoned his reading hours ago. He’s sitting on his bed in nothing but underwear and a t-shirt and a wool hat and he feels so sick to his stomach he thinks he might cry. Snow is coming down again but wetter this time, shifting the sky outside from black to a gritty grey, and everything is miserable. He is miserable. He is in his underwear with his head in his hands and his chest clenched too tight.

He doesn’t know what happened. Or rather, how it happened. Why. Wherefore. All those question words that always gave him so much trouble when it came time to learn them in foreign languages are turning over in his head now and he wishes they would just shut up. Tugging his hat further over his ears, Bilbo lets out a low groan. There’s an empty bottle of wine knocking about somewhere on the floor, and another half-gone by the kitchen sink. He is miserable and drunk alone in his apartment in his underwear and his hat is itching, and barely two hours ago Thorin Oakenshield leaned across from the driver’s seat of his battered Volvo and put a hand on Bilbo’s jaw and kissed him.

This is how it happened.

They got back to Thorin’s garage, still snow-covered, Erebor dripping over the backseat. Bilbo had said that Thorin could just drop him home, but Thorin pointed out that his apartment was warmer than Bilbo’s drafty attic, and that he had fresh bread, and it wasn’t really an offer Bilbo could refuse. They shed soaking coats in the mud room and toed off boots stiff with cold. Thorin threw a
couple of logs into the woodstove and started a fire, steered Bilbo in front of it to shiver and drip on the floor while he climbed up to the loft in search of dry clothing.

It’s a hopeless cause, trying to fit Bilbo into Thorin’s clothes: everything hangs off of him hugely, the pants are too long in the leg and too wide in the waist, the shirts are like tunics that hang off of his shoulders. He ends up taking a pair of thermal long-johns and changing awkwardly in the bathroom, rubbing his damp hair with a borrowed towel. He drapes his wet things over the shower door. Thorin gives him a sweater, too, a black pull-over, one of those with reinforced patches on the shoulder meant for shooting. Thorin is the first person with such a sweater whom Bilbo actually expects uses it for practical reasons, rather than fashion purposes, but he doesn’t ask. Thorin doesn’t bother leaving the warmth of the fireplace to change, stripping out of his wet clothes and toweling off. Bilbo excuses himself to the kitchen and fumbles around for a few moments before putting the kettle on for tea, but not before getting a glimpse of a pale torso and well-defined abdominals.

Thorin comes up behind him, reaches over his head to take the mugs down from the cabinet Bilbo had been struggling to reach. He smells a little of sweat and a little of Old Spice, and his hand is cold where it brushes against Bilbo’s when he sets the mugs down on the counter. Erebor comes and starts to shake himself off right next to them until Thorin pushes him away with a toe, laughing.

“Always underfoot,” he says, turning easily to Bilbo as though they haven’t just acted like five year-olds and probably given themselves pneumonia. Bilbo appreciates the dog. Somehow, this would be a lot harder if it were just the two of them. For all that he doesn’t speak, and spends a lot of his time sleeping in various corners, Erebor is a good buffer. Reaching down, Bilbo gives him a pat, and gets a warm tongue on his hand in return.

“Thanks for the clothes,” Bilbo says, falling back on manners, even if the subject matter is a little awkward. Thorin just nods and draws out a box of tea from a drawer next to Bilbo’s right hip, reaching across his body to do so. Bilbo tenses, holds his breath. Thorin carries on as if oblivious, but Bilbo thinks he can see the beginnings of a smirk on the man’s face, just in the corners of his lips.

“Tea,” Thorin says, sounding nearly triumphant. “Knew I had some somewhere.”

“You are an abomination,” Bilbo says, abandoning manners for audacity. Perhaps that will work better. “Only one kind of tea?”

“I promised a fire. I made no claims about tea.”

They take their mugs and go back to the fire, warming their fingers and toes. Bilbo sits down right next to the hearth. He wants to curl into the warmth and never leave. The feeling frightens him as soon as it forms, because what right does he have to be here, to assume such things? It doesn’t quite frighten him enough to leave, though, not even when Thorin sinks down next to him, and he hasn’t even bothered to button up the flannel shirt he’s put on. Bilbo clears his throat and takes a sip of tea, but doesn’t manage to look away entirely.

They end up watching an old Steve McQueen movie, and Thorin would be appalled that Bilbo forgets the title, forgets the whole plot, even. He’s too distracted. Thorin’s rolled his sleeves up, and it’s not like Bilbo’s never seen that before, and it shouldn’t be nearly so fascinating. It’s profoundly unfair. They’re still on the floor in front of the fire so the television’s at a bit of an awkward angle, but Erebor’s taken up residence on the couch and Bilbo doesn’t want to move even an inch from the heat source. Thorin seems too warm, judging by his flushed cheeks—that, unlike the rolled up sleeves, is a new look—but he doesn’t move, either.

It’s dark outside by the time the film ends, and no matter how much either of them doesn’t want it, tomorrow is Monday and morning will come quickly. “I’ll drive you home,” Thorin says.
Bilbo washes up the mugs while Thorin finds a plastic bag for his still-damp clothing. The drive is quick, quicker than Bilbo would like. He kind of wants to suggest that they follow the song from earlier, though Thorin’s car isn’t fast by any stretch of the imagination. The urge to just keep driving is fantastically strong. It’s not as if there’s anything waiting for him, back in his attic.

Thorin pulls up to the curb in front of Bilbo’s house and they sit there for a minute, watching their breath fog up the car windows. “Well,” Bilbo says, as he unbuckles his seat belt. “Er, thanks.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” Thorin says.

“I mean, it was just . . . nice.” Neither of them really look at the other. Bilbo fiddles with the door handle. “That’s all.”

“I had a terrible weekend,” Thorin says suddenly, the rough baritone loud in the confines of the car.

“Oh,” says Bilbo, because it is Sunday, and it is still the weekend. So, there’s that.

“Until today,” Thorin clarifies, and he turns, one hand on the gear shift, the other hovering. If it was anybody else but Thorin Oakenshield, Bilbo would have said they were uncertain.


Thorin’s other hand—the one that is decidedly not uncertain—has found its way to Bilbo’s jaw, long fingers brushing along his cheek. Bilbo goes still. Thorin shifts in his seat and then their lips are together, Bilbo’s head knocking back against the cushion, Thorin’s nose brushing his. Bilbo hasn’t kissed anybody in years, and it was never like this, off-kilter, his teeth digging into his lips from the pressure, Thorin’s beard scraping along his chin. It used to be girls—well, one girl, and then another whom he was nearly certain was only doing it on a dare—and they were smooth and gentle, and he always suspected they were laughing at him a little. He doesn’t think he is very good at this. Thorin doesn’t seem to care, just pushes closer, his fingers firm against Bilbo’s neck, skating down towards the collarbone. Bilbo moves back, just a little, but it is enough for Thorin to pause mid-movement and pull away. He regards Bilbo for a second with an inscrutable expression. Bilbo blinks and tries to swallow; the motion sticks in his throat.

When Thorin leans back into his own seat it is as if an ocean has opened up between them. Thorin licks his lips, just once, and puts his hands back on the wheel. Their knuckles are white. Thorin shifts in his seat and then their lips are together, Bilbo’s head knocking back against the cushion, Thorin’s nose brushing his. Bilbo hasn’t kissed anybody in years, and it was never like this, off-kilter, his teeth digging into his lips from the pressure, Thorin’s beard scraping along his chin. It used to be girls—well, one girl, and then another whom he was nearly certain was only doing it on a dare—and they were smooth and gentle, and he always suspected they were laughing at him a little. He doesn’t think he is very good at this. Thorin doesn’t seem to care, just pushes closer, his fingers firm against Bilbo’s neck, skating down towards the collarbone. Bilbo moves back, just a little, but it is enough for Thorin to pause mid-movement and pull away. He regards Bilbo for a second with an inscrutable expression. Bilbo blinks and tries to swallow; the motion sticks in his throat.

When Thorin leans back into his own seat it is as if an ocean has opened up between them. Thorin licks his lips, just once, and puts his hands back on the wheel. Their knuckles are white. Bilbo opens his mouth to speak but too many words clamour to get out at once and he ends up saying nothing, which is probably a mistake but he doesn’t know any other way. Thorin takes a deep breath; Bilbo watches his chest swell and fill with air, then fall again, and ten years have passed and they are old, they have grown apart. Bilbo opens the door. Snow blows inside the car.

“I should . . . go,” Bilbo chokes out, but that is actually, surprisingly, the last thing he wants to do. Thorin doesn’t argue with him though, and that is most shocking of all, enough to force Bilbo out of the car. He closes the door with some difficulty and stands there on the curb while Thorin pulls away, swings a u-turn in the middle of the street, and drives off. Bilbo walks down the crumbling concrete steps to his house, and then climbs up into his attic, hating himself more than he has in a long while. For about twenty minutes, he tries to figure out what Thorin might be thinking, but he begins to suspect that Thorin’s default state involves a good deal of self-hatred, so it becomes a bit of a useless exercise.

And now he is here, because halfway along deciding that he should take a shower, when he’d gotten his pants and socks off but not his shirt, he opened a bottle of wine and also decided he’d rather not face his problems. The problems being, Thorin Oakenshield, and kissing, and what the hell
is he supposed to do now, come Saturday morning? He has nearly a week to figure that out but it
doesn’t make things any better.

He can’t handle this.

He can’t handle anything.

Groaning again, Bilbo rolls over and promptly falls out of bed. His hand comes down on the
wine bottle and cracks straight through it. “Fantastic,” he mutters. “Just brilliant.” That’s what he gets
for buying cheap wine, in cheap glass. He kicks the shards of glass under the bed and weaves his
way to the shower, getting in fully clothed. Well, partially clothed. Turns the water up as high as it
can go and lets the steam fill the room. The shower is crammed sideways into a corner and his
elbows always knock the door open. He has yet to manage a shower without getting the bathroom
floor wet, and this time is no exception. His hand is bleeding a little but when he prods it
experimentally he can’t feel any glass, so he just holds it under the spray and leans forward until his
head hits the wall. “Bilbo Baggins, you are a mess.”

When he gets out of the shower, half an hour later, he wraps his hand in a paper towel, puts
on his oldest sweater—a little too small across the shoulders, the sleeves ending well short of his
wrists—and a clean pair of underwear but forgoes pants to sit at his desk, huddled in his quilt. He
eats an entire bag of potato crisps while staring at the wall and he keeps meaning to get up and put on
some music but it seems like too much effort. He listens to the hum of the refrigerator instead, and
one of his downstairs neighbours on the phone. The cars passing by outside. The clicking of his
useless radiators. Eventually, he crawls back into bed.

At two in the morning he is throwing up in his toilet.

The next four days slip past him without his notice, except a realisation that he is not handling
this, and that it is not simply going to go away. So Thursday night, on a whim, or in a panic, or both,
he heads up to Milstein with a half-formed thought in his mind: he’s going to confront Thorin. Ask
him what the hell he thought he was doing, and what the hell they’re supposed to do now? He nearly
wants to ask if they can do it again, but that’s so far down his list of questions it hardly bears thinking
about, and anyway, it’s not as if he could ever actually say it out loud.

It doesn’t go according to plan at all, so the list doesn’t matter. Bilbo rambles on about his
feelings, of all things, and Thorin is a wall, but that wall—Bilbo has discovered—is cracking. It
cracks just a little bit further that night. Thorin introduces him to Springsteen and walks him home.
They never talk about it. None of this should work, and Bilbo spends most of his spare time waiting
for it to fall apart, but for whatever reason he and Thorin continue to find themselves in the same
place, and it isn’t horrible, even if they spend a lot of time arguing and not quite looking each other in
the eye. It isn’t horrible—it’s also sort of the only thing Bilbo’s got going for him at the moment, so
he keeps on doing it. None of it makes any sense, of course, and Bilbo puts a firm stop to asking
himself what his parents would think, and then an even firmer stop to thinking about his parents at
all. There is something about Thorin, though, that he can’t get out of his head, and really, it’s
exhausting to keep trying. It’s easier to just give in.

Chapter End Notes

I feel as though I'm just constantly apologising to you all for how long these updates
have been taking but . . . here I am again. Sorry. This one is a lengthier chapter, if that's
any consolation. It got a little out of hand. Mostly because I have had kind of a fair amount of wine tonight, and it is about 20 degrees below zero (Fahrenheit) and was too cold to go to bed, which makes no sense. But anyway. Long-awaited Chapter 16.

Back in early days, Kallios had rec'd Ori as a possible friend for Bilbo, and now he finally makes an appearance. He won't have a major role to play in the story; I just kind of wanted to explore dialogue with someone else. Considering that his was the hardest scene to write and hung up the progress in this chapter, though, I don't know that he'll return. Sorry to Ori fans. I just find him hard to write, because I haven't spent time with his voice in my head like I have Thorin & Bilbo.

What else to say . . . I don't condone drunk driving in any way, shape, or form, obviously. And alcohol is not, in fact, a viable solution to your problems. Eat proper meals. All that good stuff. Thorin & Bilbo are not role models here.

I hope both the length & the content here make up for my long absence, and again, I'll do my best to make the next gap shorter, and thank you all so, so much for your support thus far. You've been fantastic, and I feel incredibly grateful. Oh, also, when I was stuck on writing I made visual refs for the guys' clothing: [ http://stick-around-town.tumblr.com/post/74261529670/thorin-oakenshield-modern-au-architecture-grad ] and [ http://stick-around-town.tumblr.com/post/74264913862/bilbo-baggins-modern-au-literature-grad-23 ], if you're curious. More thrillingly, the incredibly kind Annie made this mindblowingly gorgeous graphic for the fic: [ http://bilboo.tumblr.com/post/73633369035/how-the-west-was-won-and-where-it-got ] so check that out, in case you haven't seen it. The fic tag is #htw fic and sometimes I ramble about it, sometimes in a proper post but sometimes just in tags.

Also, a model of Thorin's apartment: [ http://stick-around-town.tumblr.com/post/74316326092/x-this-is-a-model-ive-been-playing-with-for ]
Morning breaks but only barely, the skies grey, awash with rain, and it is Tuesday and Thorin is still gone. Bilbo doesn’t typically believe in miracles, so he’s not surprised by this. In fact, he’s starting to feel resigned. Outside his attic windows he can see the first new green of spring on the trees. He wonders if it is green already, out west, or if the snows still cover the mountains. But then, the west has been red in his mind for so long it’s hard to think of it ever being green. His own home is green; Thorin’s is red, mountainous. That was how it had seemed. For all that Thorin told him of Erebor’s history, Bilbo still knows so little about it. He wouldn’t even know where to place it on a map, though he can at least venture a guess, now.

Back in January, after Thorin finally talked to him about the fire, Bilbo tried to look into it further, digging through online newspaper archives, finding geological surveys from the Bureau of Land Management. Everything was frustratingly unspecific. His best lead—and he actually thought of it in such terms, as if he was some kind of investigator bent on uncovering the truth, and that thought is painful enough to almost make him laugh now—was an anonymous article, barely one full column, in what looks like an independent paper called The Arrow. But it doesn’t seem to be a reputable source at all; besides the anonymous by-line, the rest of the columns read like muck-raking, all unnamed “insiders” reporting on political slander and strangely poetic instigations to revolt. None of those have author names, either. As far as Bilbo can tell from the archives, the paper only ran for nine months before being bought out by a larger company, at which point its entire tone changed. So it’s not a real lead at all, even, just three paragraphs about a burning mountain and some wild speculation as to the cause of the fire. The author doesn’t mention the mine, or the people living there, or even call it Erebor. Doesn’t name the mountain at all, or locate it beyond a vague designation: “in the north-western region of the U-W-C National Forest.” Armed with a life-long education in maps and gradschool-honed Googling skills, Bilbo got a little bit farther. But still, beyond a speculation that Thorin is somewhere in the mountains of north-eastern Utah, he has nothing. And when you consider that the National Forest is 2,169,596 acres, he has less than nothing. There is no way he could ever find Thorin, even if he did go after him.

That is part of the problem, too: Bilbo can’t make up his mind. He made another list, last night, of pros and cons. Tried to balance things out as if this were an equation and not, for the third time in the last six years, his life falling apart. All it taught him was that he is just as bad at math as he has always been, and that he is growing even worse, if that’s possible, at losing people. Maybe he should just not befriend anyone anymore. But that’s planning for the future, and not dealing with the present, where the reality is that the “pros” of not going after Thorin are blank because he couldn’t put words to his thoughts, and the “cons” list is half a page long. Looking at it written out like that, the equation has a clear answer: Don’t go.

But it’s not that simple.

What he can’t forget, no matter how hard he tries, is not the fact that he has feelings for Thorin—and what a ridiculous way to think of it, but what else is he supposed to call it, the fact that Thorin Oakenshield, some seven years his senior, the most bitter man he has ever met and probably an alcoholic and definitely a little bit crazy because it runs in his blood, that Thorin Oakenshield kissed him, puts hands to his hips and his shoulders and rearranged their lives (their bodies) around each other, made it feel so damn easy it was actually frightening—it’s not that. It’s the fact that Thorin was his friend. At a time when Bilbo had no one else, and when Thorin himself should have
been too wrapped up in hatred of any and all possible kinds to have space for anything else inside of him, that man became the only person in Bilbo’s life who tangibly cared about him on a regular basis. Even if his particular brand of caring meant shouting, or throwing things. Even if Thorin broke one of Bilbo’s fingers once, when he shoved him into a doorframe, and Bilbo never said a word about it to him or anyone else but can see, right now, that it’s still crooked. Will always be crooked. Even if they each went about everything in entirely the wrong ways, Thorin was his friend, and Bilbo likes to think that he’s not deluding himself if he says that he was Thorin’s friend, too.

Because Thorin might have had companions, some rough and tumble gang ready to follow him at a moment’s notice if he would only ask, but they weren’t the ones sleeping on his couch and looking after his dog, wearing his clothing, cooking him dinner, buying him coffee on mornings when he was too drunk to count his own change. They weren’t the ones who sat and listened and swallowed half the whisky so Thorin wouldn’t drink it all himself when he needed to talk about his family. They weren’t the ones who guilted Thorin into going home on Saturday nights after hours of studio work instead of heading downtown to find the worst bar on the block and start a fistfight; Bilbo knows about those bars, those fights, because he has seen the aftermath on Thorin’s hands and face, has read every move in the stiffness of Thorin’s motions as he gets up from his sprawl on the studio floor, sees it all but never asks. It worries him, so much that it gives him a headache, the ways in which Thorin will throw himself into things: work, revenge, violence. All with so little regard for the after-effects. For himself, his own safety. If his life were Norse & Anglo-Saxon literature, Bilbo thinks Thorin would be the berserker, he would be Cúchulainn mid-warp spasm, he would be Sir Gawain starting a war over the deaths of his brothers and bringing the entire perfect kingdom to its knees. Here and now, though, all Bilbo is left with is the simple fact that Thorin, his friend, has gone away, and wherever he is and whatever he’s doing, there’s about a 95% chance he hasn’t thought it through.

“Damn it, Thorin,” Bilbo says aloud, fully aware that he’s talking to an attic empty of life except his plants. He turns to the jade plant sitting on his kitchen sink and repeats himself: “Damn it.” It’s early enough in the morning that no one else in the house seems to be awake, no traffic passes by outside. Classes are over and exams are mostly over, so a good deal of the undergrads have gone home, but Bilbo still has papers to write. Papers that determine his entire term’s grades, which in turn allow him to keep getting funding, to come back again for another year. One paper for a course on theatre and theory, another for a course on psychology and literature, and he has a French exam in three hours. There are so many other things he needs to be doing besides trying to figure out how to solve all of Thorin Oakenshield’s thousand-and-one problems.

Bilbo’s called Gandalf again, twice since they last spoke, but can only get through to the museum’s voice-mail system. He supposes his not-uncle got tired of repeating himself. When he phones the museum’s main office and asks, he’s told Gandalf’s project finished and he’s, quote, “gone on leave,” with no indication of how long or to where. So it seems it’s time, finally, for Bilbo Baggins to step up and make a decision entirely on his own. This is, he thinks, what they mean when they say, “Be an adult.” Make the choices you don’t want to make because they are, objectively, the best ones.

“Right,” he tells his plant, nodding. “Right. Yes.” The air in his attic is stuffy so he opens a window to let the damp breeze in. “First things first,” he says. Does the breakfast dishes and makes his bed, puts on a pair of pants and a sweater. And then, as much as he doesn’t want to, he sits at his desk and forces himself to review French verb paradigms and vocabulary lists for a full hour. It’s a half-hearted attempt, and as he’s making the walk up campus to the exam he knows he’s woefully under-prepared. All he can remember is folie and vacillement and how ronger means “to burn” but also “to fret, to wear upon,” and thinks that if that’s true he is burning up in a very different way than Thorin. The exam itself is two hours of quiet pencil scratches and a gathering headache, just behind his eyes. As he turns in his paper, he thinks he hasn’t failed, and that’s about as much as he dares to
hope for, considering the absolutely abysmal effort he’s been putting forth lately.

When Bilbo walks out of the building, it’s still raining, and the wind’s picked up. Great sheets of water are gusting across the Arts Quad and the cherry trees, loaded with early blossoms, bend and sway, dripping petals onto the sidewalk. Bilbo tugs his hood up and wishes he had proper rainboots. In the pocket of his jacket, the black one that’s always been a little too big for him, Thorin’s note is folded in on itself, weighted down by two keys. Bilbo has memorised its every word by now. Could reproduce nearly exactly those stark capital letters, so much more controlled than his own handwriting. They are part of the problem, too: they don’t feel real. They are too deliberate in their neatness. They seem, to Bilbo, like just another artifice. Feeling like a badly written extra in a Cold War spy novel, he searched for any kind of code, looking with a magnifying glass and holding the paper up to the light, trying out skip codes and substitutions, all for naught. Because this is life, not literature, and Bilbo really needs to get his head out of his books for once and just think.

The keys are cold against his fingers. He’s not ready to head back to his empty attic. Lately, it feels too big for him. To be honest, he hasn’t felt quite right there since the night Azog broke in. It has been long enough for his hand to scar over, but not for his mind. If he’d been able to make himself talk to someone about that, they probably would have just kept telling him, “Give it time.” But there is this feeling, one that’s been building for a while, that time is running out. Bilbo thinks he should have gone into Newtonian Physics—maybe then he’d get it through his head that there’s no such thing as time “running out,” that time is linear and universal, the same everywhere and for everyone. But in literature, there is Bergson and durée, individual conceptions of time speeding up and slowing down, always just out of reach. There is Woolf and there are “moments of being,” brief glimpses of reality, of a lifting of the veil. In his last year of undergrad, Bilbo took a literature course that mirrored his life in many ways: the failed Bildungsroman, novels of children who couldn’t grow up, whose circumstances had so conspired against them as to make their futures untenable. “The soul’s life has seasons of its own,” he remembers, “periods not found in any calendar, times that years and months will not scan, but which are as deftly and sharply cut off from one another as the smoothly-arranged years which the earth’s motion yields us. To stranger eyes these divisions are not evident; but each, looking back at the little track his consciousness illuminates, sees it cut into distinct portions, whose boundaries are the termination of mental states.”

So he has come now to a boundary, to a termination. He has cried over the phone to Gandalf, has made an absolute idiot of himself about nearly seven months’ duration—a portion, deft and sharp. He has spent quite enough time bemoaning his state. He should have remembered how that chapter continued earlier. The lines come to him now, as he walks northeast across campus, head tucked low against the driving rain: “The road to honour is paved with thorns; but on the path to truth, at every step you set your foot down on your own heart.”

Bilbo makes for the botanical gardens. He’s avoided them up till now, has become really, awfully skilled at avoiding things that remind him of his past, but perhaps as he tries to confront his future, he can make a stand there, too. It’s a four mile loop around the arboretum and it’s not as if he plans to walk the whole thing, but then Bilbo finds himself standing there amongst the oak trees on the top of the rise and his shoes are soaking wet, there is mud running down the side of the trail, and he tips back his hood and turns his face to the sky. It seems to make sense, after that, to just keep walking. He follows the beech trees around to the maples and can hear Fall Creek rushing past, through the woods. There’s a staircase that cuts down the slope and Bilbo wants to see the creek overflowing its banks so he steps off the trail and cuts north through the woods, his feet slipping on the wide wooden steps, stray branches catching him across the face as he descends. He brings his hand up to wipe water from his eyes and it comes away streaked with blood, a faint, runny red on his pale skin. There is no one else in sight and all he can hear is water. The stairs lead him down to a road again and Bilbo crosses the tarmac at a jog, wary of cars, but he needn’t have bothered. He is on the northernmost outskirts of campus, nothing but trees and a few scattered greenhouses, but once
he starts to run he finds he cannot stop, pushing on through the woods until he breaks out at the foot of a suspension bridge and a swell of water rushing brown and white, gasping for air. There is water in his eyes, in his mouth, running down the neck of his shirt underneath the jacket and dripping out his sleeves. Bent over, hands on his knees, Bilbo tries to slow his breathing as he watches the creek surge past.

The suspension bridge is awash with dirty water and Bilbo holds on to the guide-wires as he crosses, rouge waves washing over his shoes and catching him around the ankles. He is probably going to get pneumonia, he thinks, if he doesn’t drown first, but he is committed. Or, should be committed—one or the other. What does it matter? It rains and rains, and the city below must be flooded by now. On the other side of the bridge, the land slopes upwards, away from the gorge, and Bilbo slogs through mud and downed branches, led onwards by a sense of direction that is rarely wrong. He comes out of the woods and onto a broad lawn. Thorin’s garage and his landlord’s house are just visible through the rain, some fifty paces away. For a moment, no more than the blink of an eye, Bilbo looks up to see Thorin leaning against the front door, Erebor at his side, and something in his chest clenches and doesn’t let go until he’s stepping up to the garage. One of the keys in his pocket is for the apartment’s side door; the other unlocks the front door to the main house.

Neither of them is what he wants at the moment, but they’re all he has. The rain is loud as it beats against the metal roof of the garage and Bilbo stands inside, dripping onto the door mat. He takes off his shoes and socks, rolls up the cuffs of his pants. The garage is dark, cool, the smell of woodsmoke almost but not quite gone from the air. The plant on the table just inside the kitchen has started to wilt and for a second Bilbo nearly laughs, because it is so like Thorin, to forget about the details. Then he thinks that perhaps Thorin didn’t bother because he knew Bilbo would come. He has, after all, entrusted this place and everything in it—not to mention the neighbouring house—to Bilbo’s care.

“Why are you doing this to yourself?” Bilbo mutters, switching on the kitchen lights. The wooden floor is cold under his bare, damp feet. He puts the plant in the sink and waters it, staring out the window at the rain. He is beginning to suspect that he’s turning into a masochist. Why else would he have come here, when he knew he wouldn’t find anything? He turns off the tap and looks down at the plant in his hands, withered but still hanging on. He kind of wants to throw it across the room. Leaving the note and keys on the kitchen table, Bilbo goes to light the woodstove. It smokes and sputters, the logs from the back porch slightly damp. He burns his fingers on a twist of newspaper, waiting for the updraft. After the fire catches, Bilbo strips out of his wet, muddy clothing, leaving it in a heap in the kitchen sink while he showers. Thorin has left behind more than a plant: there is soap and shampoo still in the shower, a clean towel folded in the cabinet beneath the sink. A red plaid flannel shirt that’s been forgotten, hanging off the back of the reading chair in the main room, which Bilbo slips on and buttons up. It is long enough to be a night-shirt, and that combined with the woodstove makes him feel vaguely pioneer-land, as if he has stumbled into a game of Oregon Trail while no one was paying attention. The shirt is rumpled and smells of tobacco. Bilbo tugs the afghan off the back of the couch and curls up beneath it, his feet tucked under him, head resting on his hands as he stares at the flames flickering in the iron grate.

After a while, Bilbo gets up and turns on the stereo. The rain has slowed and the silence it’s left behind is unbearable. He flips through Thorin’s records until one catches his eye, because if he’s aiming at some kind of totality with all these literary references, he may as well go all the way towards turning his life into a work of fiction, in which everything, inexplicably, matches up. The album’s called The Lost One, and isn’t that apt? Leaving it to play, Bilbo returns to the couch. The first few tracks slip by him—when a song starts by saying, “You’ve had enough, you know it makes me so sad,” and moves into a refrain of “Don’t leave me, don’t leave me,” Bilbo has to tune it out before he starts to cry again—but then he worms into the cushions further, breathes in through his
nose and out through his mouth until the music changes, and tries to pay attention.

And if it makes you blue, I hope I did not dwell.

And if this gets to you, I hope it finds you well.

There’s not much else. Out here, it’s been raining.

Those days are here, and my heart is waiting.

It’s quite a change, this last verse, from the first couple of refrains on the track. No longer “Those days are gone, and my heart is breaking.” So perhaps there is hope after all, then, for the two of them. Bilbo’s not proud of how he broke down the other day, calling Gandalf and choking up over the phone. It ashamed him to remember it. If he is trying to lift the veil, though, he has to remember it. And then he has to move on. That was the whole point in coming here: confronting one’s fears. What he fears is this emptiness. The garage without Thorin doesn’t feel like home. His own attic doesn’t feel like home. So really, what’s holding him here?

BILBO—

I DIDN’T ASK YOU TO COME WITH ME. AND I CAN’T PROMISE TO LOOK AFTER YOU ANYMORE. THIS IS SOMETHING I HAVE TO DO. I’VE LEFT YOU THE GARAGE, AND BALIN’S PLACE. YOU’RE PROBABLY ANGRY WITH ME. GUESS I’LL HAVE TO LIVE WITH THAT. I DON’T KNOW WHAT’S GOING TO HAPPEN, BUT EITHER WAY, I DON’T THINK I’LL BE COMING BACK. I HAVE TO GO HOME.

YOU KNOW I’M NOT GOOD WITH WORDS. SO I’LL LEAVE IT FOR THE BOSS: “WHEN I DIE I WANT NO PART OF HEAVEN; I WOULD NOT DO HEAVEN’S WORK WELL. I PRAY THE DEVIL COMES AND TAKES ME TO STAND AT THE FIERY FURNACES OF HELL.”

Bilbo doesn’t remember falling asleep but he must have done so, because when he wakes the music’s stopped and the rain’s stopped, and there is Gandalf, standing in the kitchen, making tea.

“What?” Bilbo says, blearily, rubbing his face. His hair is standing on end, he can feel it, and he’s wearing nothing but a shirt that’s two sizes too large.

“Bilbo!” Gandalf exclaims as he turns around. “My dear boy. How are you?”

“What?” Bilbo repeats.

“I went by your apartment but you weren’t in. So I thought I might find you here, and I was right. Would you like some tea?”

“What are you doing here, Gandalf?” Bilbo manages, finally, sitting up and keeping the afghan carefully draped across his body from waist down. “Really, what the hell are you doing here?”

“I was worried about you, of course.” Gandalf pours tea into two of Thorin’s mugs, adding sugar to one. “No milk, I’m afraid, but no matter: tea is tea.” He hands the mug with sugar to Bilbo and then sits in the reading chair. “How are you?”

Bilbo sips his tea and stares at Gandalf with narrowed eyes. “You haven’t answered my question.”
“Of course I did.”

“Gandalf.”

“Bilbo,” the old man counters, and spends a leisurely minute drinking his tea. “You sounded awful over the telephone. I know I haven’t been the most . . . present guardian, shall we say, but your mother did ask me to look after you, so when my project wrapped and I found myself with some free time on my hands, I thought I’d come and do just that.”

“How did you know where to find me?”

“Balin is an old friend. He sent word that he was headed back west. Knowing what I did of his family history, of your friend Thorin’s family history, and of your own state of mind, I simply came to a logical conclusion.”

“I fail to see how any of this is logical,” Bilbo says, but that’s not really true, because it makes perfect sense that Balin and Gandalf should be old friends, and that neither of them should have seen fit to share that information with Bilbo. He wonders, for a moment or two, if there is something about him that makes people feel they need to keep secrets. He thinks he would actually be a very good secret keeper, if anyone ever gave him the chance. After all, he has kept his own secrets well enough, up to this point.

Then Gandalf says, “I advised Thorin to go back to Erebor,” and brings Bilbo back to their present conversation with a jerk.

“You what?”

“It seemed an appropriate time.”

“Well, it wasn’t!”

“For whom?”

“I’m sorry?”

“For you, or for him? Thorin did tell you, I believe, quite a while ago, that he would be leaving in early May.”

“Well, yes, but—”

“You didn’t want to believe it, so you put off thinking about it, and you convinced yourself it wasn’t going to happen.”

“That’s not true.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not,” Bilbo says flatly, and hitches the afghan up farther. “I knew he was leaving. I just thought . . . He promised me he’d say goodbye.”

“He left you a note,” Gandalf says, smiling, as if nothing’s wrong. “And keys to his home.”

“This isn’t his home.”

“You don’t make mistakes,” he says.

Gandalf breaks out into a laugh, tipping his head back. “Everyone makes mistakes, Bilbo. Myself included. But yes, in this instance, I will admit: you’ve caught me.”

“How much have you known, all this time? More to the point, how have you known?”

“Would you believe me if I said it was simply intuition?”

“No.”

“Then you are not as hopeless as you’ve been thinking of yourself. I hear things, Bilbo, that’s all. Here and there.” Gandalf waves his hand vaguely. “You know.”

“I thought you were an archaeologist.”

“I am.”

“Among other things?” Bilbo presses. Gandalf only smiles. “Speaking of which, are you ever going to tell me what you did to Azog?”

“No,” Gandalf says, and quickly loses the smile. “You don’t need to know about that.”

“I think I have a right to know. Thorin was cagey about it for long enough, and then I put a lot of effort into trying to stop him from killing the man. A lot of effort. If you’ve gone and done it anyway, you could at least tell me.”

“Azog is not dead.”

“And?”

“And you don’t have to worry about him coming back into your life. I can assure you of that, at least. He is being held somewhere very secure.”

“Held for what?” Bilbo asks.

“Aren’t there other questions you’d rather be asking me?” Gandalf replies, with that infuriating all-knowing look in his eyes, as he drinks his tea.

Bilbo falters. There is, of course, a massive question: “What am I supposed to do?” he asks, but Gandalf shakes his head.

“Not that question. That’s not something I can answer for you.”

“But—”

“And besides,” Gandalf adds, “I think you rather know already, don’t you?”

“But I don’t!”

“Oh no? Am I mistaken again? Bilbo, you wouldn’t have come here unless you’d already made up your mind, one way or the other. You could have forgotten everything that’s happened. Made a clean break, and continued on.”

“I couldn’t,” Bilbo says. “I tried, but . . . I just couldn’t.”
“So?”

“So . . . I made an idiot of myself instead.”

“Bilbo,” Gandalf says, and the consolation in his voice is so heavy it’s nearly crushing. Bilbo brushes it aside.

“No, no, I did. I remembered something today that I’d forgotten, and I can see now that I shouldn’t have been so surprised by all this. Really, when you think about it, it was horribly obvious.”

“Heartbreak is never obvious, Bilbo.”

“Heartbreak? What? It’s not— Gandalf, don’t be ridiculous, it’s not—”

“If you’re still trying to deny it, even as you speak to me now, in Thorin’s apartment, wearing his shirt, formerly asleep on his couch, then you’re doing the Baggins name a disservice. Your family have never been liars, Bilbo.”

“But Bagginses don’t do this sort of thing!”

“When I met your mother,” Gandalf begins, and Bilbo can’t help but groan because the last thing he needs right now is a family history lesson, but Gandalf continues, undeterred. “When I met your mother, she wasn’t a Baggins. She was a Took.”

“Yes, that is how maiden names work.”

“No need to be cheeky. All I am trying to say is that just because you have always acted in one way does not mean you need to continue. Or hasn’t this year taught you anything?”

“Hmm,” Bilbo says. He finishes his tea and drums his fingers on the sides of the mug. Heartbreak. Well, that’s one word for it. It’s not a new experience for Bilbo, but this time around, it feels different. When it was his parents, he didn’t have a choice. Right now, all he has are choices. They are, perhaps, some of the most important choices he will make in his life, and that realisation alone is so frightening it cripples him for a minute. Then he thinks about the lines Thorin left him with, how he wasn’t talking simply of going home but of going home to die, and his mind’s made up.

“How many questions do I have left?” he asks, because Gandalf has played this game before.

The old man smiles. “Just one. Make it count.”

“All right.” Bilbo nods, more to reassure himself than for any other reason. He looks up and meets Gandalf’s eyes. “Where am I going?”

Gandalf smiles, the corners of his eyes crinkling as he reaches into his pocket and draws out an envelope. “Excellent question. Plane tickets, from Syracuse to Minneapolis, and then on to Salt Lake City.”

“So I was right, then? He is in Utah?” Bilbo asks, taking the tickets.

“Yes,” Gandalf says, and looks almost surprised. “I didn’t think you knew.”

“Well, I did,” Bilbo says, and allows himself a moment of pride. Then he remembers he’s not wearing any pants, and the feeling is kind of ruined. “These are dated for tomorrow morning,” he
“Yes. So I think we’d best get you back to your apartment. You’re not exactly dressed for travelling, as a Baggins or a Took. Though there was this one time, when your great-uncle, or was it great-great uncle—”

“Now’s really not the time,” Bilbo cuts in.

“No, perhaps not,” Gandalf agrees.

It turns out that Gandalf drove up here, in a battered Aston Martin DB5 that looks as if it shouldn’t be able to handle the hills but is a frighteningly smooth ride across the river and down to Bilbo’s house, Gandalf shifting easily through the gears and driving with one hand as the other illustrates whatever story he’s telling. Bilbo is only half-listening, his mind racing with thoughts of airplanes and travel and *Thorin*. He will be seeing Thorin tomorrow, or possibly the day after, given how far north Erebor still is from the airport.

“Gandalf?” he asks, realising belatedly that he’s interrupted his not-uncle mid-sentence.

“How am I actually getting to Erebor?”

“You’ve used up your questions,” Gandalf reminds him, and doesn’t say a word more. Bilbo pesters him for answers while they pack, to no avail. The last thing Gandalf says to him, after an hour’s drive north to the Syracuse airport, is: “Good luck.” And then, just as Bilbo’s stepping inside the doors to the departures gates, Gandalf tags on, “You’ll need it.”

Chapter End Notes

So . . . This is what at least some of you wanted, I think. I knew already (since quite a while back) that Bilbo was going to go after Thorin. And I have most of the future events planned, in my mind.

I know we've left canon plot rather far behind; thanks for coming on this journey with me. I hope I won't let you down. Your support thus far has been thoroughly amazing.

I continue to ramble about this story/verse at http://stick-around-town.tumblr.com/tagged/htw-fic. Often I'll post the relevant music, or visual refs. This chapter comes accompanied with an early glimpse of this world's Erebor, in the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache Nat'l Forest. Also, the accompanying Ao3 entry for notes & references is up-to-date now.
Sometimes Bilbo wonders why he ever thought it would be a good idea to move up north. It’s early March but still feels like February, dreary and wet and frustratingly cold. Most of the snow’s melted into mud; campus is a mess and the streets in town are dirty, salt-stained and cracked with pot-holes from a long winter. The only bright point—the one thing that Bilbo’s holding onto in hopes of an actual spring—is the fact that the birds have begun to sing outside his window again. Just a little, here and there, and even then it’s only sparrows and starlings, mixed in with the harsh interruptions of a crow or two. It’s nothing like the symphony he used to have back home, bluebirds and finches and buntings, calling out across the garden. The trees are perpetually damp and bare here, and the grass is trampled and brown, and Bilbo hates everything.

“I am so done with this,” he mutters to himself, dodging rainwater dripping from the gutters as he tugs open the door to the basement of Sibley Hall. He wipes the muck off his boots on the mat inside the café door and tromps into The Green Dragon. It’s early enough on a Wednesday that the place is mostly empty and his usual table—a two-seater, tucked into a corner by a mural of geometric stars and offering a good view of the various ways in and out of the café—is empty. There’s a café in his own English & Humanities building, but he prefers this one. It’s more spacious, for one thing, and less busy. The floor is brick, uneven and faded, and the tables and folding chairs are all a little wonky, stone and plastic and red metal. There’s some kind of long-lived art installation on the ceiling, filtering through the industrial lighting, and a changing array of student art and advertising posters on display. Students and professors are always in and out, working at their laptops, sleeping on the long bench against the side wall. It’s a comfortable spot. It’s relaxed.

The Green Dragon is also, it must be said, a likely place to casually run into Thorin, as it’s run by the Art, Architecture & Planning department, and adjacent to the studio. Not that Bilbo is planning on running into Thorin, of course. He just came to get some work done. He’s been reading this novel called *Remainder* in conjunction with his course on psychoanalytic theory, trying to come up with a paper topic. Lately he’s come to the realisation that a lot of his life has been measured in losing things, so he’s particularly interested in what endures, in what remains. When he was a kid he had an idea that he could deal with things by telling stories, because the stories would outlast him. As if there was some kind of immortality, some kind of salvation, through words. He doesn’t think that anymore. Prefers to read stories rather than tell them. Scoffs at the word “redemption” on the back covers of novels: “A tale of sacrifice and redemption.” Yeah, right.

Bilbo should probably have thought twice before enrolling in a course whose primary topic is something called the “death drive,” but then again, it is inescapably true: we’re all going to die someday.

He gets himself a latte and a piece of crumb cake. He’s about halfway through the novel and things are getting very strange—the protagonist has become obsessed with repetition, with finding patterns in everything and recreating events with a degree of detail so exact and so literal it produces frightening results—when something wet nuzzles his hand, and he looks down to see Erebor there, tail thumping against the brick floor. “Hello, Ere,” Bilbo says, and sets his novel down so he can rub the dog’s ears. “What are you doing here?”

“He got bored in studio.”

Bilbo looks up, startled, because he was expecting Thorin—and trying to play it cool—but
it’s Dwalin standing there, towering over him. “Oh,” Bilbo says. “Er, hello.” He scratches Erebor under the chin and the dog presses closer, licking his wrist, his forearms. “Yes, yes, all right, you.” Bilbo pushes Erebor back. “Enough.” He looks at the dog sternly, or attempts to. Erebor cocks his head, lets out a subdued whoof of air, and curls up underneath Bilbo’s table.


“What? Oh, I . . . I’m fine.”

“You need coffee,” Dwalin declares, and marches off. A few other students have set up camp in the café since Bilbo last glanced up from the novel, and he notices them staring now. Well, of course they’re staring. Dwalin’s tall enough to stand out anyway, and he’s only wearing a t-shirt despite the cold rain. Then there are the tattoos, over his hands and around half of his very bald head, stark lines of black ink. Bilbo’s been curious about them since Thanksgiving but has yet to work up the courage to ask. There are more pressing mysteries in his life anyway. Dwalin comes back over, two cups of coffee in his massive hands, and drops into the chair opposite Bilbo before pushing one of the cups across the table to him.

“Th-thank you,” Bilbo says.

“So,” Dwalin says, and manages to inject a worrying amount of intent into that one syllable. He’s sideways in the chair, one arm hanging over the back of it, his knees too high to fit under the low table. “What are you up to these days?”

“Just the usual.”

“Hmm.”

Bilbo fiddles with the lid of his coffee cup. Dwalin keeps on staring. “What are you up to?” Bilbo counters.

“The usual,” Dwalin smirks. He stretches his arms over his head and rocks back in the chair.

“I still have no idea what you actually do.”

“Really? I would’ve thought Thorin’d told you by now. What with the two of you being so . . . close.”

“We’re—” Bilbo starts to say, but then shakes his head, because he really doesn’t know how to finish that sentence. “He didn’t tell me. Just that you’d known each other since you were kids.” He takes a sip of coffee before adding, tentatively, “In Erebor.”

Underneath Bilbo’s chair the dog stirs at mention of his name. He’s tall enough that he can comfortably rest his chin on the table and so he does, dark eyes flicking from Dwalin to Bilbo and back again.

“He’s like a brother to me,” Dwalin says, and leans forward. The chair scrapes along the floor. “So you’ll understand that I’m a little curious as to what’s going on between the two of you.”

Bilbo tells himself that if he can just not look away first, he’ll be fine. But he breaks under the weight of Dwalin’s stare, faced with the harshness of those black lines and runic letters stern across his forehead. Dwalin looks disturbingly at ease playing the interrogator. “I just want to be his friend,” Bilbo blurs out. Dwalin’s frown deepens. “I mean,” Bilbo stammers, “I worry about him.”

“He’s very good at that,” Dwalin concedes. “Making other people worry about him. Does it
to me all the time.” And it seems that Bilbo’s said something right, because Dwalin raises his cup of coffee in a toast before knocking back the rest of it. “Well,” he says, and pushes his chair back to stand up. Bilbo winces at the harsh noise of metal grating over brick. “I have to get back to work. Not all of us can enjoy a student’s schedule. I’ll leave Ere with you. Thorin’ll come by for him later, probably.”

“Probably?”

“Eh, the dog likes you, it’s fine.”

“Dogs aren’t allowed in here,” Bilbo points out. “I don’t know how we haven’t been told off already.”

“They like him,” Dwalin says, jerking a finger back over his shoulder towards the cash register. Sure enough, the art students behind the counter grin. “He’s well-behaved.”

“Even so . . .”

“Live a little,” Dwalin tells him. “Get your nose out of those books.”

“They’re sort of my job at the moment,” Bilbo says.

Dwalin laughs, his shoulders shaking with it. “See you around,” he says, and claps one heavy hand on Bilbo’s shoulder. “I mean it,” he adds, when Bilbo gives him a skeptical look. “I’ll be watching you.”

“You will?” Bilbo asks, pulling away, but Dwalin just gives him a careless wave and disappears off into the basement. “What do you think, Ere?” Bilbo asks the dog, who has put his front paws onto Bilbo’s lap. “Was that a threat? He really didn’t need to say anything. He could have just sat there and . . . menaced.” Bilbo picks up Erebor’s ears and frowns at the dog, who pushes up to nose at Bilbo’s neck. “Oh, get down, you great big lug,” Bilbo says, shaking his head and rubbing at the dampness. Erebor slides off, pacing a circuit around the table. It’s a tight fit between the table and the wall, so Bilbo tilts and shifts the table a bit. Erebor seems content enough to roam, sniffing casually at the cluster of art students at the long wooden table across from Bilbo before coming back to tuck himself under Dwalin’s abandoned chair.

He’s half focused on his reading and half on NPR’s All Songs Considered program, playing at low volume over the Dragon’s speakers, and so doesn’t notice when Thorin does actually walk in, smears of white plaster across the front of his jeans and his hair tied up on top of his head. “Large coffee,” Bilbo hears him order, and looks up at the sound of that deep voice, rough-edged from lack of sleep.

Bilbo catches Thorin’s eye and smiles, lifts one hand in a hesitant wave. Erebor’s ears perked up the moment Thorin walked in, but the dog, curiously, stays by Bilbo. Thorin raises an eyebrow at the dog but almost returns Bilbo’s smile and comes to join them, coffee in hand. “See you’re keeping my dog company,” he remarks.

“More the other way around, really,” Bilbo says.

“He’s good for that,” Thorin says, getting an arm around Erebor’s waist and pulling the dog towards him, wrestling. “Right, Ere?”

“Dwalin brought him.”

“Yeah. He wouldn’t leave me alone in studio so I sent him down here,” Thorin says. Erebor
has one of Thorin’s wrists in his mouth, tugging playfully, wrestling right back. “Dwalin, I mean. Not the dog.”

“What does he actually do?” Bilbo asks.

“Apart from intimidate freshmen into leaving studio? Very useful. But odd jobs, mostly. He’s working on the construction crew upstairs right now,” Thorin says. Sibley Hall is undergoing renovations, Bilbo knows, because he’s seen enough men in coveralls and hardhats buying coffee in the Dragon. He just hadn’t expected Dwalin to be one of them. “Sometimes he helps out at one of the local farms, or the refinery up the lake. He’s good with his hands.”

“He certainly seems, um, capable,” Bilbo says. He goes to take a sip of his coffee to cover the awkwardness, but his cup is already empty. So he sets it down, playing with the cardboard sleeve instead.

Thorin is laughing at him, a little bit. Not out loud, and not particularly obviously, but Bilbo picks up on it all the same. He frowns across the table at Thorin. The smug look doesn’t leave Thorin’s eyes. Thorin’s trimmed his beard though, and the shirt he’s wearing looks marginally clean, so on the whole Bilbo doesn’t mind. He supposes he can handle being mocked if it makes Thorin happy. “What were you working on?” Bilbo asks, gesturing to the chalky plaster drying on Thorin’s hands and jeans.

“Mixing up some cement,” Thorin says. “Among other things. It’s kind of a strange project. I was going to show you it, actually. We might as well go now. I’m due for a break.” Thorin stands and Erebor goes to his heels, so there’s really nothing for Bilbo to do except pack up his things and follow. “Have to pick up a few things from studio first,” Thorin says, and leads Bilbo and Erebor back upstairs. No one in the hall seems surprised to see either of them trailing after Thorin, who picks up a duffel bag and couple of 5-gallon buckets from the supply closet. “Take this,” he tells Bilbo, holding out the bag so he can shift the buckets, one per hand.

“I can take one of those,” Bilbo offers.

“They’re heavier than they look,” Thorin says. “Wouldn’t want to knock you over.”

“Oh, very funny.” Bilbo shoulders the bag and looks down at Erebor. “He’s hilarious,” he tells the dog. Erebor doesn’t reply.

“Come on, Bilbo. Keep up.” Thorin’s halfway out the door already, carrying the buckets with ease as he heads back downstairs and out to the parking lot.

It’s still wet outside, a kind of weather pattern particular to this city—grey skies, cold, but you’re never sure if it’s raining, or snowing, or just generally damp. The morning’s fog has lifted though, and Thorin slings the buckets into the Volvo’s trunk, next to a stack of lumber and canvas sacking. Bilbo lets Erebor into the backseat, and they set off through North Campus. Underclassmen are out and about, crossing the bridge, looking thoroughly miserable about the weather. Thorin seems distracted, the fingers of his right hand clenched around the gear shift. Bilbo wants to ask where they’re going, but when Thorin’s in a mood like this it’s tricky. He’s learning not to ask too many questions.

They’re only driving for five minutes or so when Thorin turns off the main road and pulls into an elementary school parking lot, of all places. There aren’t any kids outside. Thorin parks and cuts the engine, pauses a minute before getting out of the car. He opens the door for Erebor and goes back up to lean against the hood, looking out into the fog. Bilbo unbuckles and slides out of the car to join him.
“I wanted to show you,” Thorin says. He points to something across the lawn, a structure Bilbo can barely make out. “Been working on this for three weeks now.”

“I can’t see anything,” Bilbo finally admits, giving up on straining his eyes. He takes off his glasses and tugs his jacket up to wipe them on a dry part of his shirt. “This stupid rain . . .”

“Here, come on,” Thorin says, and he’s got Bilbo by the arm before Bilbo even has a chance to put his glasses back on, dragging him across the lawn. Erebor bounds off ahead, undisturbed by rain or mud.

They come to a stop in front of a staircase. “It’s . . . a castle?” Bilbo ventures. A doorway arches up before him, walls and turrets and slits for windows.

“It’s a playground,” Thorin says.

“Well, yes, but a castle playground.”

“If you like.” Thorin is smiling. He’s let go of Bilbo’s arm, shoved his own hands into his pockets, standing in a way that Bilbo recognises as the posture he adopts when he’s proud of something but doesn’t want to let on.

“I do like,” Bilbo says, and smiles back. “You’ve been building a castle playground for the last three weeks and you’re only telling me now? We could have been playing knights of the round table for ages already, Thorin.”

“It’s a commission,” Thorin explains. “The school put in a call to my department, looking for someone to revamp the place so kids would have something a bit more exciting. I submitted a proposal. Didn’t think they’d go for it, but then, this whole city’s crazy, so. Here it is. Not very Camelot. Just thought I might as well test out some designs I’ve been messing around with.”

“It’s great,” Bilbo says, one hand on the balustrade. “Can I . . . go inside?”

“Yeah, if you want.” Thorin follows Bilbo up the curved staircase. “I wanted to make a moat,” he says. “The school didn’t go for that.”

“Even crazy cities have their limits,” Bilbo concedes.

“What good is a castle without a moat?”

“It’s a good castle, Thorin. They’re kids. They’re not going to care. I would’ve loved this as a child.”

“It doesn’t suit you.”

“Sorry?”

“I mean— I didn’t design it with you in mind. Just for some kids.”

It’s not real stone, of course—that would’ve taken too long, cost too much. Thorin walks Bilbo through the layout, three basic rooms and a couple of offshoot walkways, leading out to guard towers. The ceilings are a bit low, child-sized, and Thorin has to duck under the doorways. Bilbo doesn’t. Bilbo fits just fine. “It’s concrete,” Thorin is telling him, “but poured into wooden molds; that’s where you get the ridges and grooves. And then you treat it afterwards, a chisel and hammer, a wash of paint, try to fake out some textures. It takes a while, but it’s cheap. Comparatively. And it’ll last through whatever these kids throw at it.”
“It’s fantastic.” Bilbo runs his hand along the wall, feeling the roughness, the grooves and lines. The floors are wood planking—“From a barn that collapsed a few miles up the lake,” Thorin tells him—and it feels far too grand to be sitting on an elementary school lawn. Far too incongruous.

They climb up one of the guard towers—it’s unfinished, scaffolding and wooden molds empty at the top—and stand there in the rain. Walking the battlements, or very near to it. Erebor is circling the castle below. “Really fantastic. Did you do all this yourself?” Bilbo asks.

Thorin’s smile fades a little, and he rubs the back of his neck. Turns away. “No,” he says. “I mean, mostly. You see the landscaping, down there?”

Bilbo hadn’t paid much attention to it when walking up to the castle, but sure enough, there are trees flanking the staircase, still just saplings, and shrubbery ringing the guard towers, with a trellis and some young ivy beginning to climb. “Really making this a proper place,” Bilbo says. The lawn rises up a gentle slope to meet the staircase and spreads around to a garden in the back.

“The commission was a two-part deal. Design and construction, and landscape architecture.”

Before meeting Thorin and spending so much time in studio, Bilbo hadn’t even known there was such a thing as a landscape architect. Back home, everyone tended their own gardens, planted their own trees, and if things were messy and overgrown that was just part of the aesthetic. Manicured lawns were harsh; a sprawling wildflower patch was much more welcoming. But there are people here getting degrees in what Bilbo had previously thought of, a bit derisively, as advanced gardening. Seeing the results of it now, how the landscaping works to blend Thorin’s artificial castle so seamlessly into a bare school lawn, he’s forced to revise his opinion.

“Well, whoever they are,” he says, “they’ve done a wonderful job.”

Thorin scowls. “He’s all right,” he says.

“Why am I not surprised you don’t work well with others?”

Thorin shoves at Bilbo’s shoulder, but not hard enough to make him stumble—they are on top of an unfinished tower, after all, even if it is only eight feet high. “You’re one to talk,” he says. “I never see you talking to anyone in Olin.”

“You see me in Olin?” Bilbo asks, taken aback. “When?”

“Elrond knows his stuff,” Thorin says, turning aside and dodging Bilbo’s question. He leads Bilbo back down into the castle’s main hall, out of the rain. “He ticks me off. The guy is really— If you met him, you’d see what I mean. But if I had to work with someone out of that group, I think . . . I can see why he got the contract, anyway.”

“I’m sure the school’s pleased.”

“They can’t pay much, but it covers materials, and a little extra. It’s more of a charity thing. Work experience for us—which is a laugh, because we work all the fucking time in studio—and gets the school’s name out into the community in a good way, plus the local kids get something slightly more entertaining than your standard jungle gym.”

“Which isn’t even a jungle,” Bilbo points out. “In any way, shape, or form.”

Thorin’s smile returns. “It’s because Elrond has a daughter,” he says after a quiet minute or so of standing in the rain. “She’s not a student here, they’re too posh for that. Goes to that hippy-leftover alternative community school where they don’t believe in grades and everyone’s a vegan or
some such bullshit.”

“How awful,” Bilbo jokes, mostly. He could never be vegan. He enjoys desserts far too much to accept substitutions.

“Elrond’s a dick,” Thorin says. “Walks around with his head held high”—You do that too, Bilbo wants to point out, but he holds his tongue—“He’s old money, you know, and everyone can tell. His clothes, the way he speaks. Your lot would love him, it’s like looking at someone out of Shakespeare. But he’s good at what he does, and he’s got a cute kid. Smart. A little bit of a brat. Six or seven, I think, and talks back to him already.”

“Which you approve of, naturally.”

“Of course,” Thorin says. “She planted those flower beds under the front windows.” There’s a softness in Thorin’s face as he speaks, a look Bilbo sees far too rarely. He thinks back to the photo album he found over Christmas, to the two boys growing older page by page, all the way across the country, and Thorin out here alone without his family.

“I’m glad you took this job,” he says.

“I needed the money,” Thorin says, bluntly. As if that’s all it was. Bilbo doesn’t know if it’s just because they know each other better, or if Thorin’s actually changed, that it’s now so easy to tell when the man is lying. They’re standing in the front doorway, looking out. Erebor’s come up the steps and is dripping in the entryway. Thorin takes a deep breath and then pushes off against the wall he’d been leaning on. “Anyway. I just wanted to show you. It’s not done, obviously, but I can’t work with concrete in this weather. And then I thought we could go for a drive but honestly, I’m fucking exhausted. I’ve been in studio since last night. Mid-term projects are due on Friday.”

Bilbo wonders where this new self-preservation instinct has come from, to keep Thorin from driving. Wonders if it has anything to do with their talk a week or so ago, with Thorin’s insistence that Bilbo phone him next time. “When you say things like that, it makes me— I don’t know what to do,” he’d said, and Bilbo can still feel the ache in his arm now. He doesn’t know what to do either.

Thorin’s standing by the driver’s side door, stretching. “Get over here,” he says, tilting his neck, beckoning. Bilbo goes. “You know how to drive, right?”

“No,” Bilbo says.

“No time like the present to learn. Get in.”

“Thorin, that is really not a good idea.”

“Oh, come on. I’m bored, God, Bilbo, I am so fucking bored with mid-term projects. I will go insane if I go back there. Let’s just drive around for a bit.”

“I don’t know how.”

“I’ll talk you through it.”

“You’re exhausted.”

“I can still talk,” Thorin says, and continues to prove it. He opens the door for Bilbo. Erebor climbs in while Bilbo tries to make up his mind. “Go on, there’s no one around.”

Bilbo wavers. His own self-preservation instinct hasn’t quite kicked in yet. He’s starting to
doubt, hanging around with Thorin, if it ever will. Maybe it is a compromise—what Thorin gives up, he takes in, all that reckless energy siphoned off, building up with every minute they spend together.

Bilbo sits in the driver’s seat and is immediately struck by how far he is from the wheel, by how much longer Thorin’s legs are than his, how much more space the man takes up. Thorin gets into the passenger seat, his knees knocking against the dashboard until he reaches down between his feet and pulls the bar to slide the seat back. Bilbo does the same, tugging forward. Thorin slides out of his frame of vision.

“Keys,” Thorin says. They’re still in the ignition. Bilbo starts the car and wills his hands not to tremble. “Don’t worry about it. Driving is easy. Being on the road is one of the easiest things in the world,” Thorin says. Bilbo looks over and sees that his eyes are closed, his head leaning against the window. “Right foot on the brake, put it into reverse,” Thorin tells him, his voice a low counterpoint against the soft rain drumming on the windshield. Bilbo does as he’s told, pulling the gearshift back to R.

Theoretically, he knows how to drive. This is just practical application of theoretical skills. And basically, fundamentally, that’s all life ever is. Bilbo backs out of the parking space and Thorin coaches him on down the road, winding through the back hills of the Heights, his eyes closed the whole time. He only opens them once, to reach out and hit the stereo. Music floods the car, all synthesizers and tight drums, high and light. Bilbo finds himself smiling again without really knowing why. Just beside him, if he takes his eyes off the road for a second, as long as he dares, he can see Thorin smiling too, ear to ear. It might be the first time he’s ever seen that. It’s kind of wonderful. Bilbo wants to just hang on to that image. Keep it forever.

Home is where I want to be, pick me up and turn me round.

I feel numb, born with a weak heart; I guess I must be having fun.

The less we say about it the better; we make it up as we go along.

Feet on the ground, head in the sky, it’s okay, I know nothing’s wrong, nothing . . .

Chapter End Notes

So this was stupidly hard to write and I don't know why. I still feel like the dialogue isn't quite right but every time I change it I like it less so . . . here you go? I'm sorry. It's not up to par. I just felt like I'd kept you all waiting and I wanted to give you something, and I don't have time to work on it more these next few days because I have some family visiting and also there is that looming thing called The Hobbit Big Bang which I am possibly doing, or trying to do, or something. Aaaah.

The Green Dragon café is a real place on campus. I did not invent it. There is also a dining hall-type place called Oakenshields on campus. The guys will not be going there, as that would be hard to explain away, but the fact that it exists makes me happy so I thought I'd share. March weather here is ridiculous and I am so done. Bilbo is basically me.
Elrond & Arwen really don't have much more to do with this story. I was just thinking about the playground commission (I know it's an impractical playground, hush) while I was lying in bed one night, reading Dwell magazine (their current issue's on outdoor living and landscape architecture) and I figured most of the Company & also Thranduil/Mirkwood elves would be out west around Erebor, but here in the northeast is kind of the "on the road" portion of canon, so why not add Rivendell? I don't know. This is a weird chapter. I haven't been sleeping enough so you all get less filtered thoughts. I'm sorry if it's weird. I mostly just wanted to write Thorin being a secret softie about kids. I bet he'd buy Arwen ice cream and make her a slingshot and teach her all kinds of ways to annoy her dad. And the song on the stereo at the end is possibly my all-time favourite song ever. "This Must Be the Place (Naive Melody)" by Talking Heads. I cannot even tell you how much I love that song. I would just ramble at you for pages. I promise it will cure whatever funk you might be in, if you just turn the volume up loud enough.

Next time: airplanes, airports, and Utah. It was going to happen this time, but 1) I like making you wait, apparently, and 2) I ran out of time. Have to go cook dinner for the family now. Thanks for being such fantastic readers--you guys are honestly the best audience, I couldn't even have anticipated this--and I hope you're all well!
It isn’t until the second leg of the journey that it really hits him. This isn’t something he’s ever done before, and he can’t even say—not clearly, at any rate—why he’s doing it. He’s crowded into a window seat, somewhere over the plains, watching the sun play out through the clouds. It’s the first time he’s ever flown and it is, frankly, a little bit terrifying. Even so, apart from forgetting to pack a handkerchief and still having no answer from Gandalf, who stonewalled him all the way to the airport, as to what’s going to happen once he lands out west, it’s not quite as bad as he thought it would be.

Bilbo thinks he’s starting to understand why Thorin said to him, that rainy day back in March, that being on the road was one of the easiest things in the world. A year ago—a few months ago, even—he wouldn’t have agreed. But there is an ease to travelling. You can blank out your mind. Extraneous thoughts slip by and the space ahead, that wide open space, even more brilliant in flight than on the ground, just continues on. Spreads out into the corners of the world, pushes past them and out into infinity. This must have been how it felt to Columbus, Bilbo thinks; sailing off the edge of the earth, or trying to, only continuing on forever. It’s equal parts monotony and revelation, passing by the same scenery but in a new place: plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose. The clouds out his window now are not the same ones he left back at his apartment before dawn that morning, and yet they might as well be. It’s comforting, somehow, to think about that.

The fact that he’s now more comfortable out of his home than in it, and just how strange that is, isn’t lost on him. If his little attic apartment can even be called home, that is. Maybe it can’t. Over the course of this past year, he has probably spent more time, collectively, either on campus or in Thorin’s garage. “You’ve changed, Bilbo Baggins,” he mutters, glancing to the side to make sure the elderly lady sitting to his left is still asleep. It feels important, if foolish, to say the words aloud. But it takes a long time to cross the country; he hasn’t slept much in the last 30 hours. Later on, he will use this as an excuse.

Though upstate spring had just barely set in, out west summer is in full swing, heat rising off the tarmac as soon as the plane touches down. Bilbo watches the mountains on the approach, catches a glimpse of the great lake, gleaming. It may as well be another world—the moon, perhaps, dry and cracked. Salty. With his feet on foreign soil, and a stiff back, Bilbo shoulders his duffel bag and follows the crowd out of the airport in a daze, blinking back sunlight. He finds a place to stand, off to the side, and strips off his cardigan. Rolls up the sleeves of his shirt, unbuttons it at the neck. He’s tired and hungry, disoriented by how bright it is and how many people there are, never mind the fact that he’s been living in a city for the past year. His city is damp and quiet, students in a caffeinated haze and townspeople open and casual, leftovers from another time. You always read about the west as being the last great frontier, the one place left to get away from city life: that’s not accounting for airports. The mountains are miles upon miles away, hazy in the distance. If Bilbo squints across the airfields he can just make out snow-capped tips, but there is too much in the way, civilisation packed into the desert basin, everything on top of everything else and everything somehow hostile. Bilbo’s about to phone Gandalf, never mind the fact that he has no more questions left, because he is at a complete loss. Nothing looks familiar. Gritty sidewalks and dirty benches and people, absolutely everywhere. People. One of them slightly taller than the rest, and significantly less clean-shaven.

“Thorin,” Bilbo says, and it comes out more like a gasp. “Thorin,” he tries again. There in the line of cars, leaning against his battered Volvo with sunburnt arms crossed over his chest and
frowning from behind dark sunglasses—it’s undeniably Thorin. Still real. Not yet fallen off the earth, and far too tan to be a ghost. “What are you doing here?”

“What do you think?”

“I— I wasn’t expecting you.” Wasn’t expecting to ever see you again. Was nearly crazy because of it. Those are just some of the things Bilbo doesn’t say.

“Yeah, I know.” Thorin looks him over. Bilbo fiddles with the strap of his duffel. “Come on, get in,” Thorin says, turning away and jerking the car door open. “We’re holding up traffic.”

Bilbo lingers, for a moment, amidst the cacophony of car horns and shouting voices and just stares. Gandalf is to blame here, almost certainly, but Bilbo can’t find it in himself to be angry. It’s partly that he’s exhausted, and partly that he’s relieved—relieved he’s not stuck in the middle of the airport on his own, yes, but more than that, just honestly relieved to see Thorin again. For someone who vanished so suddenly and completely, and was so utterly unreachable for days, he is startlingly, wonderfully solid, sprawled behind the wheel of the Volvo as if nothing ever happened. Three days, four, possibly five: that is all it has been since Thorin left, and yet it feels it’s been an age.

Thorin’s shoved the passenger door open for him so Bilbo stumbles over and climbs in, reaches back to push his duffel into the backseat as Thorin fights his way through airport traffic and out onto the highway. Thorin’s face in profile is just as strong as Bilbo remembered, though there’s a flush of sun across his cheekbones and the back of his neck now, fading to tan. Bilbo doesn’t tan—he freckles, and then he burns. He realises that he forgot to pack sunscreen, too. There’s a hole in the collar of Thorin’s t-shirt and he looks as though he hasn’t slept in about a week. Bilbo’s own exhaustion flared at the sight of Thorin, but it’s left him keyed up and anxious, too many questions. He kind of wants to reach across and put his hand on Thorin’s, clenched around the gearshift.

They leave the city behind in no time, driving north up the shore of the lake. Same scenery, new place, Bilbo thinks, and doesn’t work up the nerve to reach out but does dare to ask, “Why didn’t you say goodbye?” When he’s met with silence and a noticeably tightened jaw, he reminds Thorin, his voice tight, “You promised.”

“I left you a note.”

“A note in my mailbox. That doesn’t count, Thorin. I don’t even know when you actually left.”

“Friday,” Thorin says. Today’s Wednesday. Time has definitely slowed down.


Thorin takes a minute. Bilbo can feel the car’s vibrations; they’re surely breaking the speed limit, but he doesn’t say anything. Waits. They pull ahead of the line of traffic, road signs blurring past. Maybe the speed limit is higher out west. Thorin would like that, Bilbo thinks. Or maybe the signs are trying to tell him something—Get out now, while you can?—and Thorin doesn’t want him to able to read their messages.

“Because you were the only one who could’ve changed my mind,” Thorin says at last. “And I had to come back.”

It isn’t an apology, not even close, and Bilbo still feels he deserves one. He is still holding far too much hurt inside him, and even if he doesn’t want to place blame, it’s there sitting next to him in
the car. But it’s hot and clear, the road open before them, mountains and red-brown desert flat all around, dry brush and burnt grass and wide, sparkling lake; more than anything else right now Bilbo wants to just close his eyes and breathe in deep, sand and dry wind layered over smoke and sweat. The Volvo’s air conditioning has never worked. It didn’t matter back upstate, but now they roll the windows down and Bilbo pushes his hair out of his face, holds it there with one hand against his forehead and the wind loud in his ears. The stereo is on, though he can hardly hear it. Thorin is resolutely not looking at him. Bilbo supposes he should actually be grateful that Thorin’s eyes are on the road. The speedometer inches up to eighty, passes it.

“Where’s Erebor?” Bilbo asks, shifting in his seat to put a little more distance between the two of them—not that there’s really anywhere to go in the narrow confines of the car.

“About two hours north,” Thorin says, and frowns. He chews his bottom lip for a second and then adds, “I would’ve thought you’d figured that out by now. You and your maps.”

“I meant the dog,” Bilbo says.

“... Oh.”

“Me and my maps’ got quite close, thank you.”

“I didn’t mean that you— Shut up. I’m not fighting with you about this.”

“I didn’t exactly find it, just... the general area. You do have a lot of mountains out here,” Bilbo says, glancing out the window. Not shutting up. “And a lot of wildfires.”

“Only one that matters,” Thorin says, and Bilbo wishes away the bitterness in his voice. Thorin rubs the bridge of his nose under his sunglasses. “Anyway. The dog’s at my sister’s. It’s too hot for him to be in the car for so long.”

“Is that where we’re going, then? Your sister’s place?”

“Yeah.”

Bilbo nods, whether in agreement or reassurance he’s not sure. Thorin’s sister. He’s seen her in photographs. The idea of her intimidates him. One Thorin is quite enough—another version, female, both in the same room... He almost doesn’t want to think about it. What on earth is he supposed to say to her? Is he meant to apologise, or to thank her, for whatever part she played in making Thorin the man he is? It would be easier, he thinks, if he didn’t feel he was being made to choose sides. He briefly considers faking sleep for the rest of the drive and just resting his head against the doorframe, breathing and listening and—yes, all right—being a coward.

“I thought—” Thorin starts, and Bilbo sits up straighter, looks away from the flat red rock outside and back to Thorin at his left, one hand loose on the steering wheel. Everything about him is outwardly careless, even more obvious now when he’s stripped of his upstate layers and bared to the western sun. It makes Bilbo’s throat go a little dry; it fills him with worry. “I thought about asking you to come,” Thorin says, the words slow to come and deep. Bilbo leans in closer to hear better over the rush of the wind. “Even though I told you I wouldn’t, that day at the lake, and after. But I didn’t think you’d say yes.”

“Thorin—”

“I didn’t want you to say yes,” Thorin amends. “This isn’t your fight.”

It’s not a fight, Bilbo wants to say; it’s a homecoming. But Thorin is already distracted—has
to be, to admit something like that—and Bilbo is almost afraid that they would crash, no matter how at ease Thorin looks behind the wheel. Because this is Thorin, and he is scarily good at keeping a straight face when he wants to, Bilbo has figured that out by now. Has seen it enough that he can even tell, usually, when it's a ruse. It’s definitely a ruse now, no questions. As Bilbo doesn’t particularly want to die in the desert, he doesn’t argue. Just says, “I know you had to come back.”

He can feel Thorin’s eyes on him now, rather than on the road. Can feel Thorin waiting for him to say more. Is he meant to apologise? Well, he’s done apologising, and besides, it’s not his turn. He reaches over and turns up the stereo instead, so loud that the speakers crack.

What do you know? This house is falling apart.
What can I say? This house is falling apart.
We got no money but we got heart;
we’re gonna rattle this ghost town.
This house is falling apart.

They drive on, past rock formations and bare, twisted trees, low scrubs of juniper and sage. There’s no one else on the road now. Thorin lets out a frustrated huff of air and turns to look ahead of them again, still accelerating. There are probably a hundred ways this scenario could have played out but didn’t: romantic airport re-encounters, running into open arms. Bilbo got a half-junked car and a stoic face, a rough-edged voice that hasn’t even called him by name yet, and there are too many things wrong with that to even think about but then, that’s always been their pattern. Why should it be any different now? Bitterness and forgiveness war in his mind, the haze of heat across the road making it hard to think. Thorin’s right hand is still clenched around the gearshift, waiting in that no-man’s-land between them.

It’s a two hour drive north to the edge of the national forest where Dís has her farm, spread out across the flat plains at the base of the Wasatch range. Bilbo takes the easy way out and stares out the window, drowns out his thoughts with the strange mix of pop and electronica coming out of the Volvo’s speakers. His skin is windblown and starting to burn by the time they pull off the highway, his cheeks tight, his eyes gritty and dry. It’s better than the alternative, he thinks, rubbing his glasses clean on his sleeve; he could be crying. He doesn’t think he could stand it if he started crying now. Thorin hasn’t so much as looked at him for the last half an hour.

The station wagon rattles up a dirt track, the undercarriage scraping along clumps of high, dry grass. Golden fields spread out before them, flat and sparse, and Bilbo wonders how anyone could make a living farming this hard land. He’s sweating through his shirt and thirsty, so thirsty, the water bottle Thorin thrust at him an hour ago obstinately unopened in his lap. They pass a couple of scattered outbuildings: whitewashed barns and a squat silo, a crooked wind pump with its metal frame rusting. Thorin slows to let a cluster of pale chickens pick their way across the dirt track and disappear into the brush. A hawk is circling overhead, lazy on the air currents, but Thorin doesn’t seem concerned. He swings the car around in front of a low farmhouse, more whitewashed wooden slat siding and a roof that slopes down low in the back, and cuts the ignition. Runs his hands along the steering wheel and leans back in his seat.

Bilbo doesn’t know what to say. The silence that swallows them up is making him feel a little sick. He pushes his door open and tumbles out onto dusty ground, leaning against the car and taking deep, slow breaths.

“Look,” Thorin says, getting out of the car, “Bilbo—”
The house’s front door bangs open and Bilbo jumps back, loses his balance and ends up in the dirt. Two young boys barrel down the porch steps and run at Thorin. Brushing himself off, Bilbo looks up to see their mother in the doorway, wearing an airy blue dress, her hair up in a knot on her head. He is suddenly as embarrassed as he has ever been, in his whole life. Thorin, on the other side of the car, has wrangled one boy under each arm and is laughing. He catches Bilbo’s eye for a moment and chokes, the sound dying out halfway from his throat. “Settle down, you little idiots;” he says, suddenly gruff, maneuvering them to the ground.

“Don’t call my children idiots,” Dís calls from the doorway, almost lazily. Looking from one to the other, Bilbo guesses that this is a conversation they’ve had plenty of times. “And come in out of the sun. Trust you to drive up here in the heat of the day.”

“I didn’t plan to,” Thorin says.

“Idiot,” Dís tosses over her shoulder, turning back into the house.

“You saw me this morning,” Thorin tells the boys, ignoring their mother. “So knock it off. Make yourselves useful and carry something.”

“You were gone for hours,” Kíli says.

“Yes, five of them. Here, take this,” Thorin says, handing the boy his rucksack. “Fíli . . . help our guest with his bags.”

“I can manage,” Bilbo stammers, finally breaking out of his daze. “I can manage.” But Fíli has his hands on the strap of Bilbo’s duffel and isn’t letting go; it’s easier to let the boy take it and drag it up the porch and into the house.

“She's right, you know,” Thorin says, slamming his door shut. “This is the worst time of day to be outside. You actually look a bit sick. Are you—”

“Your guest?”

“What?”

“Is that what I am now? A guest?” Bilbo swallows, tries to get some moisture in his mouth. He wishes he hadn’t been so stubborn about the water bottle. “You can’t honestly expect me to go inside that house with you without having a conversation.”

“And what exactly do you want to talk about?” Thorin asks, spreading his hands. “And can we at least do it in the shade?”

“My God, are you really that dense?”

“What, is everyone calling me an idiot today? Did I miss that memo?”

“Thorin, you left without a word—no, the note doesn’t count—and I phoned you, I don’t know how many times, and you never answered. Never called me back. You just dropped out of my life after everything and yet I was expected to just carry on, to go to classes and read for exams and I can’t— I don’t understand why.”

“I told you.”

“No, no, you do not get to use this family revenge quest as an excuse, not for everything. For leaving, yes, all right. You said you had to come back here; I understand. But Thorin, for all I knew
you could have been dead.”

“. . . What?”

“I couldn’t reach you.”

“I didn’t want any distractions. I couldn’t afford distractions.”

“Oh, distraction, guest, what the hell am I meant to be, for you?” Bilbo yells across the car.

“Bilbo—”

“Because I’m tired, so very fucking tired, of not knowing where I stand. Even when we were just friends, I never really knew. Or were we friends, even, at all? And then one night we’re . . . and the next day, and weeks after, you barely even look at me!”

“I’m always looking at you,” Thorin mumbles. “You just don’t see it.”

“Then it doesn’t count!”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Thorin kicks back against the side of the car and crosses his arms. Bilbo stomps around the hood to stand in front of him, a good deal shorter but making up for it with anger.

“You could have been dead, and I would not be all right with that, do you understand?” He is about two steps away from actually poking Thorin in the chest. It’s a little ridiculous, but he can’t stop. “I would not be all right. You want to come out here and play Indiana Jones, looking for relics, digging up the past, fine, and you can keep your private vendettas and your family secrets and play everything as close to the chest as you like but you— You don’t get to leave me like that, not knowing what happened, not being able to talk to you, to hear your voice ever again. I won’t do it, Thorin. I can’t. Really, actually can’t.”

“Since when do you get to decide? Who asked you?”

“Who asked you to come into my life and just . . . Thorin, you—you broke my heart.” Putting it into words like that feels stupid, not least because he’s still insisting that it’s not true, but the words come anyway, and he can’t take them back. And then, following immediately after, a sudden, horrible realisation: “Did you know?”

“Bilbo—”

“Did you know?” Bilbo repeats. He’s straining his neck to look Thorin in the eye and they are standing far too close but this is important and he’s not backing down.

Thorin holds his gaze for a long minute and then, at last, sighs, the tension bleeding out of his shoulders. He uncrosses his arms and moves as if to put them around Bilbo, stops short and shoves his hands into his pockets instead. Turns to the side and studies the wind pump, creaking forlornly across the field. “Yeah,” he says. Breathes in, out. “Yeah. I knew.”

Bilbo wants to step away, hurt and upset and definitely feeling sick now. He lets himself, just for a moment, lean into Thorin. Pressed full-length up against that solid warmth, he closes his eyes. One of Thorin’s hands comes up to rest on his back, a light touch that Bilbo shrugs off in a minute, pulling back and wiping a sleeve across his face.

“Please, just come inside,” Thorin says, his voice flat and tired, as tired as Bilbo feels.
Bilbo nods, not trusting his throat to loosen enough to let the words out, words he is longing to say. Words that have betrayed him. Words he doesn’t even recognise as belonging to him. He shoulders his satchel and follows Thorin into the house.

Dís is standing in the entryway, the boys looking slightly guilty at her side, and Bilbo is certain they witnessed the whole thing from the windows. The house is pleasantly cool, dim and clean: a couple of wooden chairs and a sagging wicker sofa in the front room, a coffee table with a vase of bright yellow flowers, lace curtains bordering the windows, turning from white to cream with age. Thorin’s garage was a mix of rigid order—the bookshelves, his workbench—and comfortable piles, things always in their place but still visible, and Bilbo had guessed that balanced neatness would run in the family. He doesn’t think there’s even a bit of dust in this house, and with two boys running around, that’s quite the feat. Two boys and a dog, he amends, as Erebor comes trotting into the entryway, sniffing Thorin absently before pressing up against Bilbo’s legs.

“Hello, you,” Bilbo chokes out, and kneels down, wraps his arms around the dog and presses his face into soft black fur. Erebor stands patiently, bearing Bilbo’s breakdown until it passes and he can straighten up and look Dís in the eye, hold out his hand and offer a proper greeting, the same way Bagginses have for hundreds of years. “Bilbo Baggins,” he says, “at your service. Sorry to impose on you like this.”

“Oh, stop. It’s no imposition. And we’re not exactly formal in this house,” Dís says, as she shakes his hand. “You’ll figure that out quickly. But you could teach some of those manners to my idiot brother.”

“Shut up,” Thorin says, and disappears off into the house, Bilbo’s duffel over one shoulder and his rucksack over the other.

“Ignore him. I do. One moment of formality, then: Dís Oakenshield,” she says, and ushers the boys forward, “and this is Fíli, and Kíli. Say hello to Mister Baggins, boys.”

“Hi, Mister Boggins,” Kíli says.

“Baggins,” Fíli corrects him, and then turns to Bilbo. “Hi.”

“Hello, boys,” Bilbo says, and tries not to grimace as he fakes a smile. He wants a drink of water, and someplace to sit down, in that order. “You can just call me Bilbo. Otherwise I’ll feel very old.” Kíli laughs. Bilbo suspects a swift prod from his mother keeps him from saying anything else.

“Let’s go into the kitchen,” Dís says. She’s nearly as tall as Thorin, Bilbo notices, as she shows him the way before her down the hall, poised and graceful, barefoot. “Make sure Thorin didn’t give you sunstroke. Honestly, you’d think he never lived here.”

“Has it been long since he’s been home?” Bilbo asks, gratefully accepting a glass of water and a seat at the kitchen table. He presses the glass to his forehead and slumps over in his seat.

“This’ll work better,” Dís says, and hands him a kitchen towel, wet and cool from the faucet. “Put that on the back of your neck.” Bilbo does, and nearly tears up all over again. He takes a quick drink of water to hide it. “Thorin comes back for Christmas,” Dís says. “Well, usually. Seems something kept him out east this past year.”

“Hmm.”

“It’s no use being cagey. I know almost everything there is to know about my brother, and what I don’t know, I’ll soon find out. By extension, that includes you, too. Apparently.”
Bilbo wonders if he should be worried. He thinks he probably should. Fíli and Kíli come into the kitchen at that moment and sidle up to the table, clearly curious, and save him from thinking about it any further.

“We have cows,” Kíli says. “Do you want to see? Do you like cows?”

“I do,” Bilbo says, because this, at least, is something he can talk about: farming. “I grew up very near a dairy farm, so I have seen a lot of cows in my life.”

“Ours aren’t for milk,” Kíli says.

“Oh no?”

“No. Do you still want to see? Even if you’ve seen them before?” Kíli climbs into a chair and leans across the table to study Bilbo. He and his brother are equally tanned, wearing faded blue jeans and t-shirts and no shoes. Kíli’s hair is longer than it was in the photograph Bilbo saw and he has grass-stained knees; Fíli looks a bit more like Thorin, growing into his nose. It’s a resemblance that shouldn’t be startling but still sort of is.

“Er, sure,” Bilbo says. “Did you want to do that now?”

“Not now,” Dís says firmly. “After dinner, when it cools off, you two can take Bilbo up to the pastures. Now, why don’t you go bother your uncle? Ask him when he became so insensitive, while you’re at it.”

“What’s that mean?” Kíli asks, and slides down from his chair.

“It means he’s saying things without thinking, right, Mom?” Fíli asks.

“Yes.”

“Oh,” Kíli says. “I do that sometimes; Fí says so.”

“It’s not the same for you,” Dís says. “You get a pass because you’re young.”

“Oh! Thanks, Mom,” Kíli says, and leaves the kitchen at a run, presumably headed for Thorin’s room, Fíli following after.

“Fíli,” Dís calls after her older son. He turns in the hall and sticks his head back into the kitchen, blond, tousled. “Be nice to your brother. Tell him what words mean before you call him names.”

“Yes, Mom,” Fíli says dutifully, and he too vanishes into the house.

“Now then,” Dís says, and smiles at Bilbo. “Us civilised ones can talk.”

“You frighten me,” Bilbo says—and then immediately drops his head to the table, embarrassed. “I said that aloud. I am very tired, I’m sorry, really—”

“Bilbo, please. We’re going to be good friends, you and I. Don’t worry about a thing.”

“Worry is my default mode. Your brother can tell you that.”

“My brother, as has already been established, is more than a little bit of an idiot about some very important things.”
“. . . You heard us outside.”

“I saw. It was enough. You’re very expressive with that face of yours, you know.”

Bilbo groans and doesn’t lift his head from the table. “He’s—he’s just— How on earth have you put up with him for so long? I’ve only known him since September and look where that’s gotten me . . .”

“He’s my brother,” Dís says simply. “And apart from my sons, he’s all I have. So I don’t have too many options. You, on the other hand—”

“I didn’t have a choice.”

“You always have a choice, Bilbo. You either keep going, or you give up.”

And he remembers those same words in another, similar voice, hears them like an echo: Thorin’s voice, over Badiou and bagels and a resignation so deep it chills him even now. But this time it’s different. This time Dís stands and refills his water glass, rolls an orange across the table to him, and waits with a patience in her eyes that Thorin’s, the same dark clear blue, rarely ever show.

“I chose to keep going,” Bilbo says, speaking more to his orange than to Thorin’s sister. “I chose to stick around, never mind the consequences. Hah. Well, I’m minding them now.”

“You’ll be all right,” Dís tells him. “In the end.”

“Whenever that is.”

“Might be tomorrow.”

Bilbo can’t honestly say if that would be a good thing or a bad one and so he says nothing. Eats his orange, the sharp bite of citrus waking him from the daze he’s been under these past few hours. Wipes the juice from his chin with the damp kitchen towel and looks over to Dís, standing at the sink. So much is the same: the long dark hair, the strong profile, broad-shouldered and firm, but where Thorin is solid like a wall, Dís is leaner, not quite feminine in a traditional sense but striking in a way that didn’t translate into photographs.

“I’ve given you Kíli’s room,” she says. “He’s more than excited to be bunking with his brother, so don’t let that discourage you. Unless, of course, you and Thorin want to share.” She doesn’t say it like a question but the inflection is almost there, and Bilbo finds himself shaking his head. Not emphatically, nothing dramatic, just a slow, weary refusal.

“That would be a disaster, I think,” he says quietly. “I don’t have the first clue as to what to say to him right now. Actually, I don’t know if I ever did.”

“He’s taking you up to Erebor tomorrow,” Dís tells him. “Alone. Just so you know, in case you need to spend some time thinking up witty comebacks.”

“Won’t you come?”

“I’m not the one obsessed with the past, Bilbo. That family gene must have skipped me. We do all right with this life, my sons and I.” She doesn’t say anything about the boys’ father, and Bilbo doesn’t ask. “We have our home here, the barley and our cows and as much open space as anyone could want. Anyone, that is, except Thorin.”

That’s always the way it is: Thorin is the exception to each and every one of Bilbo’s rules. So
far, it’s proven to be a fairly stupid decision on his part, letting someone break everything apart like that. Dí is optimistic, but no matter what she says, Bilbo is certain she doesn’t know the whole story. He lets himself be led up to a small bedroom at the back of the house and is glad to be left alone. Kíli’s bookshelf holds tidy rows of comic books and school notebooks, a couple of army men and a plastic dinosaur, a glass jar of marbles with their coloured pips shining in the sun. The top wardrobe drawer’s been left ajar and cleared out; Bilbo’s duffel is sitting on the foot of the bed. He drops it to the floor, opens the window as wide as it can go but closes the curtains to keep out the sun, and stretches out on his back on the bed, a little short even for his frame. And he doesn’t mean to, but he falls asleep.

When he wakes it’s like coming out of a dream only to find you’re still dreaming, the room unfamiliar, the skies outside darkening, two pairs of eyes watching him from the foot of the bed. “We came to see if you wanted dinner,” Kíli says, as if there’s nothing unusual about watching a strange man sleep in your bed. “Do you?”

Bilbo rubs his face blearily and sits up on the bed. He hadn’t even bothered to change his shirt before lying down and it’s stuck to his back, impossibly wrinkled. The headache-haze has lifted though, and the breeze coming in through the open window is cool. “Dinner,” he says, “right.”

“Dinner, and then cows,” Kíli nods, solemn.

“Where’s Thorin?” Bilbo asks.

“Downstairs,” Fíli says. “In the kitchen. He wanted to come in and talk to you earlier but Mom made him go walk the fences instead.” At Bilbo’s blank look, Fíli explains, “To check on the cows, look for coyotes, that sort of thing. We just repaired the southern pasture fence last month. Lost two calves.”

“I’m sorry,” Bilbo says. Fíli shrugs.

“It happens,” he says. “You get used to it.” He looks at Bilbo, surprisingly critical for a nine year old. “Are you going to stay with us?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you going to stay, if Uncle stays?”

“I don’t know, Fíli.”

“Because he said he might stay.”

“I’m sure he will,” Bilbo says.

“But I don’t think he’s very happy,” Fíli says.

Bilbo laughs a little, even if it’s forced, as he reaches down to unlace his shoes. “No, I don’t think he is either.”

“Are you?” Kíli asks, crouching down to look up at Bilbo.

“Kíli, that’s not the sort of question you just ask people,” Fíli says, tugging his younger brother up by the sleeve. “Sorry,” he tells Bilbo. “We’ll see you in the kitchen. Okay?”
“Sure,” Bilbo says, but he’s not laughing anymore. Is he happy? Well, no. But that’s not really the issue: he’s grown sort of accustomed to being, if not unhappy, then at least not precisely happy. What matters here isn’t present happiness but future. Can he be happy? And how? Thorin is downstairs, unhappy, and still, apparently, hell-bent on revenge, however he hopes to achieve it. Bilbo is upstairs, unhappy, and still, apparently, terrible at making up his mind. Whatever impulses drove him to come out here, whatever certainty—it’s all vanished and left him dry. Fitting, for the dry country he’s landed in. Except it’s such unfamiliar territory, and so much is at stake. Bilbo stands up and goes over to the window, leans out. The juniper trees are swaying gently in the wind, carrying a sharp spice smell. The moon is high and pale against the dusk sky, birds settling in for the night and calling out sounds strange to Bilbo’s eastern ears.

“Bilbo?” Dís is calling up the stairs.

“Yes,” Bilbo says, “Yes, coming, sorry.” He pulls a clean t-shirt out of his duffel bag and peels off his button-down to change, makes an attempt at flattening his hair. “You have a choice,” he reminds himself, out loud because he needs to hear it, and heads downstairs.

They’re all sitting around the kitchen table, the Oakenshield family, proud and strong and stubborn, and for a moment Bilbo is simply frozen in the doorway before the four of them, breathless. For years to come he will see them like this, so clearly in his memory, like the sharpest photograph you could ever imagine: the dark wisps of Dís’s hair, escaped from her bun; Thorin caught between a smile and a scowl; Fíli and Kíli round-faced and bright. All looking at him, as if expecting something. Bilbo is positive he won’t be able to deliver, whatever it is, and all he can do is stand there, paralysed. Then Dís nudges a chair towards him with her foot, and the illusion is broken. “Sorry,” he says again, his breath coming quickly for no good reason. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Dís tells him. “You had a long day.”

Thorin clears his throat but one glance from his sister cuts off any words he might have been about to say. Fíli looks around the table and Bilbo flinches again under the scrutiny, expecting another inquisition, but the boy surprises him with a bright smile and then passes him the bread basket. “Thanks,” Bilbo says, and winces when he hands it off to Thorin at his right. Yeah, Thorin said; Yeah, I knew. The words are burned into Bilbo’s mind, as painfully obvious as the flush of sun on his face but harder, so much harder to fix.

“I gather you’re the one I should thank for making sure this guy eats a decent meal every once in a while,” Dís says to Bilbo, gesturing at Thorin with one hand while dishing out chili with the other. Neat and efficient, the person Thorin might have been if he was a bit more put-together, or possibly just a woman. Bilbo is reminded in some small ways of his own mother—the deftness of hands, the quick tongue.

“He can actually cook,” Bilbo replies, though he’s unsure why he’s defending Thorin.

“Oh, I know. I’ll make him cook tomorrow. But he doesn’t do it reliably.”

“I am right here, you know,” Thorin says.

Dís continues, as if he hasn’t spoken, “And though some alcohol may have its origin in barley, it is not the same thing.”

“I know how to harvest barley,” Kíli announces, his mouth half-full of chili, before Thorin can protest again.

“Oh, and who showed you that?” Fíli retorts.
“Uncle!” Kíli says.


Kíli swallows, takes a drink of water, and then sticks out his tongue. Bilbo, watching it all, is desperately grateful that he doesn’t have to carry on a conversation. The boys chatter on, interrogating Thorin about some project he left unfinished last time he was with them—“And that was years and years ago,” Kíli whines, even if it was only one—and Dís joins in with cutting remarks, sending the occasional conspiratorial wink to Bilbo, who doesn’t feel he deserves it. The chili is good and thick, beans and lentils and, fittingly, barley grains, with a lasting smoky heat. Rib-sticking food, his mother would have called this. Bilbo looks down into his bowl and remembers what Gandalf told him before he left, about his mother being a Took before she was a Baggins, and he makes his choice. He’s come this far, and he’s going to see it through, wherever it may lead. He’ll keep going, until there’s nowhere left to go, even if he ends up running himself into the ground. At the rate they’re going, he and Thorin, that’s looking increasingly likely.

Thorin doesn’t talk to him during dinner but the silence is buffered by the boys playing intermediaries, asking Bilbo about the books he reads and pleading for stories about their uncle. “I’m sure you know all the good ones,” Bilbo says, and dodges by talking about the farmlands of his childhood instead. After they’re done, Thorin is the first to rise. He starts cleaning up the kitchen, his back to the table, and Bilbo sinks a little as he lets himself be dragged outside by the boys, pausing only long enough to borrow a pair of muck boots. The night is clear and starlit, the air just this side of cold. Fíli and Kíli are wearing identical jackets, smaller twins to one of Thorin’s own that Bilbo recognises with a pang. They take his hands and lead him sure-footed up the dirt track and out towards the hulking shadow of a barn, Erebor keeping pace easily at their side, trotting off every now and then to sniff things. Fíli ducks inside the barn and comes back with a .22 rifle slung easily across his chest. The gun is nearly taller than he is.

“Coyotes,” he says when he notices Bilbo staring. “We already put the chickens in for the night, and they don’t usually bother with the cows, but . . .” He shrugs. “Even though the little ones are a couple of months old now, they’re still prey.”

Bilbo refrains, but only just barely, from telling Fíli how adult he seems. He suspects the boy would take it as an insult. After all, he’s had to grow up fast, no doubt, just like his mother and uncle before him. They walk on, climbing up the hill and leaving scrubland and dry grass behind for a thickening copse of aspen trees. The dog darts ahead and then comes circling back, unconcerned. No coyotes, Bilbo figures. “There’s a lake,” Kíli says, tugging at Bilbo’s hand. “But you can’t swim in it. It’s for the cows.”

“I see,” Bilbo says. That, at least, explains the sudden verdure all around them, the softness of the grass beneath their feet now. Fíli swings open a gate and they cross into the lower pasture, latching the gate securely behind them. They are upon the cows before Bilbo realises it; he walks smack into one and stumbles back. The cow goes on chewing placidly, moonlight reflecting off wide liquid eyes. “Hello, cow,” Bilbo says, and pats it hesitantly. Kíli laughs.

“What’s not to like?” Bilbo answers. The cow is huge and quiet, bristly to the touch as he runs his hand across the ridge of its back the wrong way, from rear to front. It huffs out a breath through its nose and ambles away to join the heard. Bilbo can just make out their outlines, distinct from the pine trees beyond.

“I like it here,” Fíli says, suddenly very serious. “And I don’t want to leave.”
“Yeah,” Kíli says, nodding. “I don’t want to leave either.”

“Are you leaving?” Bilbo asks, wondering if they’ve been enlisted on this mad quest to reclaim the mountain as well.

“No,” Kíli says. “I won’t go. I’ll stay here and take care of the farm.” He has a hand on Erebor’s collar and the dog is standing stolidly by

“We’re not leaving,” Fíli says. “But I’ve seen Uncle look this way before, and every time it happens he talks about leaving. Going to the mountain. We grew up on stories of that mountain.”

“I’ve heard some of them,” Bilbo says, gently, when it doesn’t look like Fíli is going to continue.

“They’re just stories, though,” the older boy says. “It’s not going to be like that ever again. No one tells us the whole truth, but I know enough to say that I don’t want to go there. I’ve heard Mom talking, when she thinks we’re asleep. You have to tell him to stop.”

“Tell who to stop what?” Bilbo asks, even though he’s sure he already knows.

“Tell Uncle to stop making Mom sad,” Kíli says. Bilbo is almost grateful he can’t see the boy’s face; the sound of his voice, high and cracking, is bad enough.

“He doesn’t understand,” Fíli says. He puts his hands on his brother’s shoulders from behind, draws Kíli close. “He doesn’t understand that we’re happy here. I think it’s been too long since he was happy, so . . .”

“Oh, boys,” Bilbo says, and even though he doesn’t know them, even though it’s only been a few hours since they met and he’s far from a tactile person, he reaches out and puts a hand to the top of each of their heads. “I’m glad you’re happy,” he says. Kíli grabs onto his leg. “But I’m afraid I don’t know what to say to Thorin, to fix things. And to be honest, he has a lot to say to me first.”

They stay out a little longer, listening to the cows shift their hooves and breathe slow, sleepy breaths. An owl hoots somewhere out in the mountains. The lights of the house, down below, are warm and steady, the only man-made sight for miles around. As they walk back down the road, Bilbo wonders whether it would have been kinder just to pretend, to have made up some answer that would reassure the boys. But if they’re anything like their uncle, and he suspects that they are, they’re never going to want to do things the easy way.

Thorin is standing on the porch waiting for them to return. Bilbo spots him from beside the barn and his breath catches: a tall silhouette leaning against a porch post, the red glow of a cigarette between his fingers. The dog runs up to him and Thorin pats him fondly. Fíli notices Bilbo staring and pauses for a moment after locking up the barn. “When you go out to the mountain tomorrow,” he says, “you’ll figure it out.” And he nods, self-assured, in a way that crushes Bilbo a little bit to see. The boys go inside, Kíli struggling to hold back a yawn, and the dog follows, shepherding. Bilbo can hear Dís talking to her sons as they get ready for bed, her voice drifting out of the open windows. Thorin unfolds himself from the wooden post and steps into the shaft of light spilling out from the entryway.

“Nice night,” he says. Bilbo just stares. “You’re really not . . . making this easy, you know,” Thorin sighs, and scuffs at the dirt with the toe of his right boot.

“I know,” Bilbo says. “But neither are you.”

Thorin takes a drag of his cigarette and turns to blow smoke downwind. “This isn’t my
“Home,” he says. “I’m not trying to be difficult, it just—”

“Comes naturally?”

“Happens,” Thorin corrects. “I’m not good with words. I want to show you. I need to show you. Erebor. Will you come? I need you to see, so you’ll understand.”

“I don’t think I’ll understand, Thorin.” Bilbo turns and looks out at the darkened fields, the hum of crickets loud in the air, the moon casting a pale sheen over the land. Hills, in the distance, and beyond them mountains, and somewhere in there, the mountain: Erebor. “But yes, I’ll come.”

Thorin bends, lifts one leg and puts out his cigarette on the bottom of his boot, tucking the end into his pocket. He straightens up and tilts his head back to study the sky. “Good,” he says. “That’s good,” and Bilbo hears, unspoken, just beneath those words, “Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

Along with the usual apology for the long wait, I wanted to say a couple of things.

First, that this is probably the last update you’ll see until I finish my fic for The Hobbit Big Bang at the end of May. I’m working with 2 fantastic artists and I want to make sure I hold up my end of the bargain, so I need to dedicate all my writing energies to that now. It’s another modern AU, but very different from this one, and sort of a haunted house story but less ghosts/scare and more unsettling atmosphere and uncertainty about one’s surroundings. Anyway, that is a thing that will be coming here in about a month, and I really hope you’ll all enjoy it. It will not be nearly as long as this story (how did this get so long?).

Second, this chapter is quite a bit longer, and I’m sorry for not following the pattern, but I wanted to leave you at a satisfactory spot, and I felt like this was it. Maybe it’s not. You might also have noticed that there’s a total expected chapter count now (22). Yes, we are very close to the end. I have been saying that for a while, I know, and then I got really into writing the scenes out west so . . . The timeline will most likely be straight from here on out, and any deviations would be shorter flashbacks/memories, because I think the pace needs to match the kind of urgent tension the guys are feeling here.

Third, I’ll update the notes sometime soon, but if you’re desperately curious about the song, it’s "Anna Sun" by WALK THE MOON (which started out as this fic’s unofficial theme song, so it’s about time it makes an appearance), and I’ve actually made an 8tracks playlist for the roadtrip from the airport in this chapter: http://8tracks.com/around-town/out-west if you want to listen. Thorin would probably say he’s not responsible for this mix CD, but he’d be lying. (I will admit that I shamelessly stole most of this music from a good friend of mine, lewizardnerd on tumblr, over the years.)

Fourth (and last, I promise), there are some photosets coming up in my tumblr queue with some Utah scenery and me messing about with outfit compilations, so if you’re curious, keep an eye on stick-around-town.tumblr.com/tagged/htw-fic in the next couple of days.

Enough notes. I can’t thank all of you enough for bearing with me and for being so encouraging and so lovely all the time. You are the greatest set of readers I could hope
for. Special thanks to those of you who have featured this fic on fic rec lists; I'm really honoured. Hope you're all well! Happy Easter, if you celebrate, and happy Sunday regardless.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Morning dawns early on the farm, with a pale light bleeding into the night sky, a tinge of red over the hills as the last stars fade into blue. The breeze through the curtains in Kíli’s room is still cool. Bilbo rolls over and pulls the quilt in close. Downstairs, Dís is humming in the kitchen, and he can hear the boys playing in the yard. Early to bed, and early to rise, just like his father always said. There was a time when that was Bilbo’s motto, too, but that was years and years ago. He stretches out and his feet hit the edge of Kíli’s bed, the wooden frame creaking. It’s stupid, but he spends a long time lying there with his eyes closed, listening for any hint of Thorin’s voice. After a while he gets out of bed and tries to answer the question of precisely how embarrassing it would be to go downstairs in his pajamas. He needs a shower before he dresses, and he’d like coffee before he showers, and after a day of travel his stomach is reminding him that last night’s dinner was delicious, but far too long ago.

“What’s the worst that can happen?” Bilbo asks his reflection in the antique mirror hanging over Kíli’s dresser, and goes downstairs.

It turns out he needn’t have worried, as the boys come in from the yard as soon as they spot him through the kitchen window and kick off muck boots, still in pajamas themselves. Kíli’s have dinosaurs, Fíli’s stripes. Dís is the only one properly dressed, flipping pancakes at the stove. “Coffee’s on the counter,” she tells Bilbo. “Help yourself.”

“Thanks,” Bilbo says, and tries to tone down his morning grumpiness. Manners in the face of company, and all that. “Morning, boys.”

“Morning, Bilbo!” Kíli says. “Guess what?”

Bilbo is not nearly awake enough for guessing games, but says anyway, “What?”

“We saw a coyote this morning!”

“Nowhere near the cows,” Fíli is quick to clarify. “Out in a far field.”

“I saw it first,” Kíli says, and gives Bilbo a proud smile.

“That’s . . . nice,” Bilbo tries. Is it? What sort of reply are they looking for? Over his shoulder, Dís is laughing.

“I think we need to let Bilbo wake up a little,” she tells her sons. “Get washed up and come have your breakfast.”

“Yes, Mom.” Kíli needs a stool to reach the kitchen sink. When he stands on it, he is almost taller than Fíli.

“Sleep all right?” Dís asks Bilbo.

“Oh, yes. Er, surprisingly.”

“No midnight trysts?”

“What?” Bilbo gulps, and hopes he doesn’t look guilty. There is, after all, nothing to look
guilty about.

“Relax, I’m only joking. Thorin’s in a better mood though, this morning, so whatever you did say to him last night must’ve helped.”

“He’s awake?”

“Mmm. Awake, and standing right behind you.”

Bilbo spins around and nearly drops his coffee. Dís bursts out laughing again. There’s no one there, of course. “That was not nice,” Bilbo tells her. “Not at all.”

“You should’ve seen your face,” Dís says, a hand on her stomach as she shakes with laughter. “How did you survive around my brother this long, being so gullible?”

There isn’t really an answer to that, not one that Bilbo wants to put into words. He puts on his sternest face and takes a seat at the table, positioning himself so that he has a good view of the kitchen doorway. The coffee scalds his tongue; it’s bitterer than he’s used to. Stronger, too. After a brief, uncomfortable silence, Dís sets a plate of pancakes in front of him. “Sorry,” she says. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Were you being in-insensitive, Mom?” Kíli asks.

“Insensitive,” Fíli corrects, and takes the chair to Bilbo’s left.

“Yeah, that,” says Kíli.

“Hmm. I suppose I was.” Dís hits a loose fist against Bilbo’s shoulder, gives an apologetic smile, and then goes back to the stove. “Who wants eggs?”

“They’re from our chickens,” Kíli tells Bilbo, climbing into the chair at his right. “Fí and me collect them!”

“I’m, er, sure you do a great job,” Bilbo says. He needs more coffee to deal with this. He needs an entire rainforest’s worth of coffee to deal with what will come later. Where is Thorin, anyway? Weren’t they meant to get any early start?

“They do,” Dís says. “This farm wouldn’t be much without them.” She turns to look at Bilbo, those deep-blue eyes so serious. She is trying to tell him something, Bilbo knows, something without words. If only he knew what it was. For all that she looks so much like her brother, she is a great deal harder to read.

“Wouldn’t be much without you either.” Thorin comes in through the doorway, right in front of Bilbo but just as startling as if he had been behind. He has a towel over one shoulder and damp hair, jeans and a grey Utah State University t-shirt. Ere brushes past his legs and goes to sit under the table, his head on Kíli’s lap. The boy grins, obviously delighted.

“Well, yes, credit where it’s due,” Dís says. “Finished the stables?”

“Yeah.” Thorin fills a glass of water, stands at the sink and downs the entire thing at once, wipes his mouth on the back of his hand.

“Uncle had to muck out the stables,” Fíli tells Bilbo, his whisper a bit too loud. “As punishment.”
“It wasn’t punishment!” Thorin protests.

“No, it was,” Dís tells him, nodding. “That was part one.”

Bilbo wants to know what part two is, but he’s afraid to ask. Thorin finally meets his eyes, leaning there against the sink. Bilbo is still hesitant about their truce. Is it a truce? By agreeing to go to Erebor, has he conceded? He doesn’t really want to think about what was at stake, to be won or lost.

“Hey,” Thorin says to him, and drops into the open seat at his right. “You all right?” Bilbo nods. “Sorry for . . . yesterday.” After Thorin apologises, he looks to Dís, expectant; she shakes her head at him, and he scowls. Bilbo wonders if that was part two, apologising, and if so he shouldn’t hold his breath. Thorin is terrible at apologies.

“Are you really going to the mountain, Uncle?” Kíli asks.

“We are,” Thorin says.

“Why?”

“You know why, Kí,” Fíli sighs. “We talked about it.”

“But—”

“How many eggs this morning?” Thorin cuts in.

“Nine,” Fíli answers. “Two more than yesterday.” He elbows his brother, who clamps his mouth shut but pouts into his pancakes.

“That won’t last,” Dís says, “not with the heat that’s coming in next week.”

Life on a farm out west, Bilbo learns, is not at all the same as it was back east. While his parents’ neighbours worried about possums and raccoons, or flooded fields with the spring rains, here there are coyotes, there is drought, there are animals panting with heat exhaustion. Barley, a drought resistant crop, is one of the few things that grows well, sown in spring after the snows melt and harvested just before high summer. In the winter nothing grows, and they herd the cattle together and hope that the hay lasts. It is desert and not-desert, red rock fading into golden grain, fading still up the mountain to aspen and ponderosa pine and then back into rock, grey and bare at the mountain peaks.

Dís sends them off with sandwiches and gallons of water, a bag of oranges and a warning look directed at her brother, who hunches his shoulders forward and throws their packs into a rusted pickup truck. “Don’t let him bully you,” Dís tells Bilbo.

“Easier said than done,” Bilbo says, and lets out a little, dry laugh. His feet are hot already in his sneakers. He wants to go back to bed.

“Hey, Bilbo.” Dís steps around to stand in front of him, blocking the doorway. “No matter what he says, my brother wants you around. Just . . . try to keep that in mind today.”

“I will.”

“I want you around, too, you know. So you’d better come back here in one piece.”

“Thanks,” Bilbo says, and goes out to the truck, climbs up into the passenger side.
“Thorin!” she shouts out the front door. “Bring him back, you hear me?”

“What am I going to do, drop him off a mountain?” Thorin shouts back, standing on the truck’s running board. “We’ll be back tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Bilbo asks, and stops fighting with the seatbelt. “We’re spending the night out there?”

“Yeah.” Thorin drops into the cab and starts the truck with a lurch, and then they’re off towards the mountains before Bilbo can even think about getting out. The morning haze has burnt off quickly and now the skies are so blue it hurts to look at them, scraped over with ragged clouds. More colours, in this dusty western land. Every minute it surprises Bilbo more and more.

They climb through the aspens, side by side and sticky on the cracked vinyl seats of Dís’s pickup truck, windows not rolled down so much as broken, sagging in their frames. The truck stalls on a hairpin turn and Thorin kicks at the clutch as they roll down the mountainside. There’s a cluster of cows off to the right, black and brown hides, dark shapes in the trees. Bilbo can practically taste them in the air, dusty and warm. Winding through the trees, they crisscross rocky streams. Cold water splashes up against the door, against Bilbo’s bare arm hanging out the window. At the top of the hill Thorin pulls off onto a grassy path and they erupt out into a field of wildflowers, gently sloping down into the valley. Off to their right, the sun rising behind its dark bulk, is a mountain that can only be Erebor. Thorin cuts the engine and as the truck settles and cools, a heavy quiet falls over the clearing. Bilbo glances across the bench seat at Thorin, who hasn’t yet let go of the steering wheel. They’re both sweating and it’s not yet nine o’clock.

“The trailhead’s on the other side of the field,” Thorin says. “It’s about eight miles to the top.”

“How high are we?” Bilbo asks.

“Around three thousand feet.”

It is the highest Bilbo has ever been, and he is about to go higher. Well, he reasons, you said you would keep going until there’s nowhere left to go.

Thorin shoulders a bulky frame pack, tosses a smaller one to Bilbo. “I didn’t mean to spring it on you,” he says. “That we’re spending the night up here. I . . . didn’t want you to worry about it.”

“So you figured you just wouldn’t tell me.”

“If you don’t know, you don’t worry.”

“Oh, that is so untrue.” Bilbo buckles the strap of his pack across his hips and shades his eyes, squinting up at Thorin, who takes a step towards him and drops a sun-bleached baseball cap on his head.

“Wear that,” he says. “Don’t want you getting sunstroke again.”

So they have eight miles and five thousand feet to go, all the way up to the crest of the mountain. Thorin doesn’t bother locking the truck. Who would steal it, out here in the middle of nowhere, piece of junk that it is? He tucks the keys under the seat and they set off. “There used to be a passable road,” he tells Bilbo. “But after the fire, when the mines collapsed, the rest of the mountainside just fell away. No one’s bothered to clear it out. Probably never will.”

They’re not nearly to the tree line yet but there are no trees here, on this mountainside. The
trail starts out in patchy grass and uneven humps of snakeweed, narrows into a path overgrown with weeds and tumbled branches that snag on Bilbo’s shirt. They come up over a low rise and it is like stepping into another world, bare and burnt, grey with ash, the ground trampled underfoot. Thorin leads the way, walking slowly but with a deliberate set to his shoulders, and Bilbo wishes he could see his face. The elevation gain is relentless; soon enough he is too worried about catching his breath to think about anything more than his next step. And then he trips over a downed tree and catches himself against a charcoal-dead trunk. When he brings his hand away it is black and gritty. Bilbo wipes his palm on his jeans, leaves a dark smudge across his thigh. Thorin is far ahead of him, long legs carrying him up the steep rise. They scrabble up a run of loose rock, kicking up clouds of dust and ash, timber rolling underfoot.

After about an hour they come to the first sign of Erebor. Breathing hard, doubled over with his elbows on his knees, Bilbo stops in front of a broken mine car track. The rails are rusted, the wooden spars charred and falling away. The track dead-ends into a collapsed mine shaft. Thorin is leaning against the toppled posts that used to mark its entrance, his back to the rockslide. As Bilbo approaches he takes off his sunglasses, rakes a hand through his hair. “I spent so many years on this road,” he says. “So many years down this mine. And now look at it.”

All that’s left of the site are a few burnt beams, the load-bearing struts of walls, blistered fragments of glass mixed with ash and rock underfoot. With the toe of his sneaker, Bilbo overturns a slat of wood, painted letters all but illegible on its other side. Rusted rebar pierces the ground here and there, marking the lines of long-gone foundations. Thorin leads the way through the wreckage and on up the mountainside. As they climb they pass more and more remnants of Erebor’s history: collapsed buildings with caved-in corrugated roofs, rusted machinery, cart wheels with broken spokes, and everywhere a lingering smell of smoke. It’s been more than ten years and the winds are strong, here on the exposed slope, but the smell remains.

“Has no one come to help clean it up?” Bilbo asks, though he knows he’s taking a risk even bringing it up.

“This is cleaned up,” Thorin says, and scuffs his boot against a buckled sheet of metal siding. “Come on. We’re not even halfway there yet.”

They climb for hours more, burning under the hot sun, hiking across an already-burned land. Thorin makes them stop and drink every thirty minutes, and the water is warm as it spills down Bilbo’s shirt. He can feel his legs aching already and he is carrying the smaller pack. Thorin, who isn’t even wearing a hat and has rolled his sleeves up, has a dark line of sweat down his back, underneath the rucksack and camping gear he carries. They pass beneath an elevated mine-car track, the wooden struts broken and hanging loosely across a chasm in the red rock ahead. At seven thousand feet the land flattens out, a hard ledge falling away into a slide of loose rock all down the mountainside.

“Don’t get too close to the edge,” Thorin calls out. He disappears behind a collapsed shed, emerges with a piece of torn burlap sacking in his hands. Strung up between two tilted posts, it casts a sliver of shade on the dusty ground, a small dent of shadow in the relentless desert sun. Bilbo kicks a stone over the ledge, listens to it crash against the mountainside until he can’t hear it anymore but it must still be falling. The view is nothing short of incredible, heat-haze making the ground below shimmer in shades of red-gold and brown, the earth spreading out until horizon-line meets sky. There is no wind, no moisture in the air. Just bright, vivid desert, miles and miles of it, and an ash-covered mountain in the center.

Under the shade of the makeshift tarp, Bilbo takes off his hat, pushes sweat-dampened hair off of his forehead. Thorin passes him a canteen and he gulps until his stomach hurts, then flops back
into the dirt. “We’re almost to the top,” Thorin says.

“Good,” Bilbo says, “that’s good.” He draws in a deep breath, the air dry and warm. His mouth feels full of sand. “Oh, how are you not dying?”

“I grew up here. I’m used to the desert.”

“The desert doesn’t like me.” Groaning, Bilbo pushes himself back up to a sitting position and dusts his hands off against the legs of his jeans. He would probably have an easier time if he was wearing the right clothing, he thinks; something cool and light, some high-tech hiking pants and a paper-thin shirt. Although right now, he’d rather be wearing nothing at all.

“Not possible,” Thorin says. The look he turns on Bilbo is kind, if weary, dust in the creases of his face, the bandana around his neck wet and discoloured. “Everyone likes you.”

“Do you, still?”

“You have to ask?”

“Yes, Thorin, I have to ask.”

Thorin turns away. Starts fiddling with the straps on his rucksack. “Of course I do,” he says, and the words are like water as they fall from his lips. Bilbo closes his eyes but can’t chase away the brightness of the sun. He wants to sink a little farther into those words, into the relief they bring, but they aren’t at the top of the mountain yet. They haven’t finished what they came here to achieve. So they get up, and they keep climbing. Up and up, through rock and rubble, cutting a trail across the ruined slope, dodging burnt-out buildings—houses perched right on the mountainside, now just crumbling lines of foundation—and rusted machinery, with the sun beating down on the backs of their necks, with the air so silent and still all they hear is their own breathing, their own footsteps over rough ground.

The main entrance to the mine is at the summit, a gate opening unto a network of shafts that bore through the mountain, all in search of silver. There used to be a rail system for carts, pulleys and levers and everything you’d expect in a working mine. Now there is only cracked rock and wood so charred it has started to petrify, worn smooth over the years. Thorin leads the way up a steep rock face, leans down from the top to grab Bilbo by the wrist and haul him up. The fire started from the base of the mountain. Here, on the peak of Erebor, the earth is still scorched, the buildings still in ruins, but it is not quite as much of a dead land as the slopes below. Thorin leads Bilbo to a shack of corrugated metal, tucked up against a pile of stones dislodged from the mine shafts. Inside, it is shaded but not cool. Sitting on the dirt floor with the door open, looking out into blinding sunlight with nothing but a thin line of red rock before the blue of the sky, they catch their breath. Bilbo wrestles his way out of his backpack and strips off his soaked t-shirt, wipes down his chest. Hunched over, his boots hanging out the door, he thinks for a moment that he’s going to throw up.

“You should drink more,” Thorin says. He unties the bandana from his neck, pours water over it from his canteen. “And hold this to the back of your neck.” When Bilbo doesn’t move—can’t move—to take the cloth, Thorin reaches over and drapes it over Bilbo’s neck himself, keeps his hand there lightly. The water’s not cold, not after six or seven hours in the sun, but the moisture helps. After a few minutes Bilbo feels Thorin’s hand move away, hears him rummaging in his pack. “Drink,” Thorin says, and presses a wide-mouthed water bottle into Bilbo’s hands. The warm water has a rush of citrus; Bilbo peers through the cloudy plastic to see an orange slice floating inside.

“Thank you,” he says, and takes another sip.
“Drink it slowly, but finish it.”

Bilbo does, and watches as Thorin squeezes another orange slice into a second bottle, fills it from his canteen. They sit there, re-hydrating, until the colour comes back to Bilbo’s cheeks and his hands stop trembling. The bandana on his neck is nearly dry—that is how parched the air is, up here on Erebor.

“We built this shack years ago,” Thorin says, knocking a knuckle against the wall. “Dwalin and I. Surprised it’s still standing, actually.”

“Did he live here, too?”

“Yeah, and his brother. You met him on Thanksgiving, remember?”

“Mmm.”

“I’ve known them all my life.”

“Why did you leave me Balin’s house?”

“He’s not going back. Someone might as well use it. Safer than that attic of yours, anyway.”

“My attic’s fine.”

“It’s not, and you know it.”

Bilbo sighs, exasperated, and steals the half-eaten orange out of Thorin’s hands. With his mouth full of fruit, he can’t get caught up in another argument. Later, when the sun isn’t quite so high in the sky, they will emerge from the shack, stretch their arms into the first hints of a cool night breeze. Thorin is radiating anger but trying to hide it. He keeps finding things to do around their “camp,” as he calls it: rock piles to clear, a half-fallen wall to be braced, some long-empty house to be explored in case—miraculously—something has changed since he was last up here. He wants, so desperately, to go back in time. It’s achingly clear to see. Bilbo leans against the warm ridge, feet bare, cuffs of his jeans rolled up, and tries to figure out what he’s meant to be doing here. What he should say, to make things better. But the thing is, there isn’t ever really anything you can do. You’re not in charge of other people’s happiness, not fundamentally. Try as you might, there are things you can’t make up for. He is throwing himself full-force into a void, basically, just by being here.

“Can you imagine what it used to be like?” Thorin asks him.

“You’ve told me the stories.”

“I’d give anything to see it again.”

“Thorin,” Bilbo says, and debates whether now is the time to tread carefully. It is, but he’s hot and he’s impatient, and so he says, “It’s never going to be like it was.”

“It could be better,” Thorin says. “We could—”

“Who is the ‘we’ here? You, on your own?”

“No, not on my own. You, with me.”

“Oh, so the two of us, on our own?”

“Yes.”
“You think the two of us could rebuild all of this”—Bilbo sweeps his arms wide, wonders if he could sweep far enough to wipe out the hurt that is gathering on Thorin’s face, too—“into something better than it used to be? You told me it was glory. I don’t see how we could ever top that.”

“You don’t understand!”

“No, I don’t. I don’t know what you’re trying to do. You leave me a house, and then you want me to move across the country. Make up your mind, Thorin. You can’t have both.”

“I thought you’d want to help.”

“I do. But I’m not an architect, Thorin, I’m not a builder, I’m not even any good with my hands, really. You’ve seen my models in studio. They’re awful. You don’t want me rebuilding your home.”

“That’s not true,” Thorin says.

“No?”

“No. It’s not about the buildings. It was never about the buildings.”

“Then what’s it about? Because I don’t know, and I’ve been trying so hard, for the better part of a year, to read your mind. But just when I think I get it, you . . . change.”

“You’re the one who’s changing.”

It’s a child’s argument, and that, more than anything, angers Bilbo. He takes a step back, realises he’s standing far too near the edge. Thorin bites his lip, and doesn’t reach out. Bilbo flails his arms, regains his balance on his own, and walks back towards the shack. The mountain that loomed so large from down all of a sudden feels far too small for the two of them.

The sun won’t set until almost nine at night. Through the long twilight, while Bilbo dozes, exhausted from the heat and the climb, Thorin paces. His footsteps are loud in the still air, crunching over dry bramble and brittle rock. They eat Dís’s sandwiches for dinner, even though Bilbo’s not hungry and Thorin looks as if he could chew glass and still be just as happy about it, which is to say, not happy at all. Bilbo gets up just before sunset, not really going anywhere but needing to move stiff limbs, needing some space from the force of Thorin’s gaze, eyes that are trying so hard to tell him something the man can’t put into words. Honestly, the only point in coming up here was for Thorin to confront his past, which, as it turns out, he’s already done. Nearly half the structures atop the ridge have been rebuilt: there are sturdy posts and beams propping up the main entrance to the mines. Erebor is already in the process of reclamation, wresting civilisation from barren land once again. All of it by Thorin’s hands. The real problem, it seems, is that no one but Thorin really wants to carry on. Dís certainly doesn’t, and neither do her boys; if Dwalin and his brother Balin have been up the mountain at all lately, they’re not here now. And anger is a fine fuel, and strong, and they are standing on the graves of hundreds of people, but Bilbo has seen grass growing on the slopes, small yellow flowers clustered together and blooming out of the rock. There should be hope here, too. His mother always said that a good story should end with hope.

When he goes back to find Thorin, who is staring moodily out into the deep-blue of the evening sky, Bilbo brings him a single yellow flower. “Blazing-star,” Thorin names it, and holds it in his hand with something like reverence. “I didn’t think anything would come back.”

“They’re growing out of the rocks,” Bilbo says, a gentler alternative to what he wants to say:
“Look, it’s not as hopeless as you think.”

“It’s early. They don’t usually bloom until June.”

“Well, perhaps this one is special.”

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

Thorin pitches a tent on a square of ground he’s cleared, a small yellow dome that doesn’t look nearly big enough for the two of them. When he starts a fire with flint and tinder, Bilbo is surprised. Though, there’s nothing left to burn here, really. The stack of wood in the center of a carefully constructed fire ring has been torn from broken buildings, and even though the flames spark up in the wind, there’s nothing for them to catch on. Bilbo sits down on a flat rock and holds his hands out to warm them, rubs his shoulders, sore from the straps of his pack. The stars are even clearer here than they were on the farm, with the moon just shy of its first quarter.

“I always meant to come back,” Thorin says, stirring the fire with a thin wooden slat. “After, as soon as I could, and then all the years we were living down in the valley. But then I’d get halfway, or even up to the top, sit right here and look out, and I didn’t know what to do. It didn’t . . . didn’t feel like my home anymore. And I was just a kid, I didn’t know how to rebuild it yet. So I left.”

Bilbo can understand that. It’s almost exactly what he did, when he left his parents’ place, when it became too much a house and not enough a home. And yes, he still dreams about Bag End, still wakes up looking for cream lace curtains and a window that opens out into a garden, but unlike some people he’s not obsessed with making his dreams into a new reality. “What do you want?” he muses, not even meaning to speak the words aloud. But there they are, hanging in the night air, without so much as the buzz of crickets for distraction.

“I want it to feel like home again,” Thorin says. It is, probably, the most honest he has ever been. He looks awfully young, Bilbo thinks, sitting there cross-legged by the fire, shirtless, hair dusty and tangled, hands searching for something to hold.

“Oh, Thorin.” I wish I knew how to help you, Bilbo thinks. I wish I could give you what you want. But all he can do is get each of them a fresh shirt from their packs, another layer against the night’s chill, and sit a little closer when he returns. Thorin takes the shirt and just stares at it, as if he’s forgotten what it is, what it does. Bilbo sighs, this time more fond than exasperated, and takes it out of his hands, tugs it over his head. “You’ll be all right,” he says. “In the end.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing here,” Thorin confesses, and hangs his head. Fights to get his arms through the sleeves of the shirt.

“That’s because it’s not the end.” Bilbo reaches over and straightens out Thorin’s collar. “Not yet.” He means the words to be hopeful, and they are, but they also start to unclench something inside of him. Something starts to let go.

After a while, when the wind picks up and the air gets truly cold, Thorin unrolls a sleeping bag from his pack and unzips it, drapes it over Bilbo’s shoulders. “Aren’t you cold, too?” Bilbo asks, and Thorin just shakes his head. They need this now, this little bit of distance between them. A few inches of dry rock, after the flood of revelations, what Bilbo hopes was honesty but fears were lies. Not on Thorin’s part, no—he is still sitting there staring at his hands, staring into the distance, all of his walls taken down. But on Bilbo’s part, maybe. It’s easy to say things, and so much harder to believe them. It always is.
It feels like the sort of night one should be awake for, all night long, but Bilbo is dead tired, fighting just to keep his eyes open. He leans back against a rock and watches the campfire drowsily. Next to him, so close they are almost touching, Thorin starts to hum, a slow rumble in his chest as he stokes the flames.

Well, I've seen them buried in a sheltered place in this town.

They tell you that this rain can sting; and look down,

there is no blood around, there's no sign of pain.

Hey, no pain, and seeing no red at all, see no rain.

Bilbo falls asleep to the sound of Thorin’s voice and the crackle of the fire, thinking that maybe this is what Thorin needed, a way to bridge the gap. He stirs, briefly, when Thorin lifts him up and carries him into the tent, lies down beside him under the nylon rustle of the sleeping bag. The fire is nothing but coals, glowing softly through the yellow dome of the tent. His head pillowed on Thorin’s arm, it’s so tempting to just go back to sleep. To measure his breaths to match Thorin’s, to think that everything will be all right. In the end. Whenever that is.

That’s what he’d said to Dís, only yesterday, standing in her kitchen. He’d been moping then, but doesn’t think he’s moping now. He’s become quite the pragmatist, in the last half an hour. “Whenever that is,” he’d said to her. What was it that she’d said back? He could try to remember, or he could go to sleep. His bones are weary, his eyes burn, and Thorin is too warm beside him but comforting all the same. Sleep seems the far better option.

The memory comes anyway. “Might be tomorrow,” she’d said. “Might be tomorrow.”

Chapter End Notes

A couple of fun things: two different 8tracks mixes, one by minorsingingairheads and one by izaveller, and Bilbo and Erebor lounging about, also by izaveller. Thank you! Be sure to check that out. I also made a picspam for this chapter, since I've kept you all waiting so damn long, and I thought it'd be nice if you had a little extra visual content to try to make up for that. (Sorry.)

If you're wondering why there was such a long break, you might've missed the frenzy that was Hobbit Big Bang. My story, "If There Were Water," is here in the archives, with gorgeous art by ewebean & noneedforsuspicion. I'm really fond of the outcome, and had a great time working with the artists, and you all have my thanks for putting up with me trying to write two stories at once (and mostly failing, because it is July already, apparently, and I certainly didn't mean for that to happen).

We're close to the end. I'm taking bets on which way things will turn out, but you'll have to wait to see if you're right.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The last time Bilbo slept out under the stars he was fourteen, camped out next to the sycamore tree in his parents’ backyard. It was early July, just before his first year of high school, a lazy summer of days spent lounging around the house with book after book, endless pitchers of iced tea and whole baskets of fresh strawberries. “Get some fresh air, you,” his mother said, often, and waved him out of the house. Lying next to an open window and paging through dusty novels didn’t qualify, so into the garden he went. It was a wet summer, thunderheads building nearly every afternoon, the sky his favourite dark blue-grey before clearing up in the evenings. He’d lie on his back in the tall grass, watch the petunias sway on the arbor, count how long it took for a cloud to pass by. One night, he spread a tarp and brought out his quilt, set up camp for the night in the yard to watch a comet streak across the sky. Ten years have passed and that is still one of his clearest memories: damp grass beneath him, cool breeze across his face, soft glow of lights from the kitchen window, and thousands of stars dotting the sky, a canopy of pinprick lights.

The western skies are so much clearer than he ever imagined. Without any humidity, the constellations are so vivid they look almost fake. Unaccountably awake in the pre-dawn hours and sitting on a rock beside the tent, Bilbo studies the spray of white across deep black, picking out Bootes, Lyra, with Vega burning brightest—all the names his father taught him, what seems so many years ago now. Thorin is snoring softly and Bilbo tells himself he is grateful for the solitude. He doesn’t know what time it is, but it’s definitely already “tomorrow,” and that’s later than he’d like. The exhaustion that swamped him earlier has vanished. He’s restless; his heart’s beating much too fast. Wrapped up in an old fleece borrowed from Dís, dry socks and sneakers back on his feet, Bilbo hugs his knees to his chest. He knows he is only imagining it but the near-morning wind smells of more than ash, more than the dead coals of their campfire. What kind of past is this conjuring up for Thorin? What does he see, when he looks out over this bare rock?

Erebor was more than just a mine. Bilbo noticed the sign yesterday, pointing to the road winding around the leeward slope, but didn’t go to see what lay beyond. By the time the sun rises, he’s walked through thirteen empty houses, some burnt down to the foundations, some with their second stories collapsed, all of them built into the rock and looking out onto a greener land. He sits down on a bench in the entryway of the fourteenth, wipes away a layer of dust and ash from the nameplate hanging beside the doorframe. Durin, it reads.

“What are you doing here?” Thorin ducks under the lopsided entrance and stands silhouetted against the pale early light. Every inch of him is confrontational.

“Just . . . trying to understand.”

“This was my house,” Thorin says. He crosses his arms over his chest and looks at Bilbo.

“But it says—”

“I changed my name. Afterwards . . .”

“Oh,” Bilbo says. He runs his fingers over the carving. “Oh. Right.”

Thorin sighs and kicks at a cluster of weeds growing up through the cracked stone floors. “Might as well give you the tour,” he says. “Come on.”
This house is better preserved than some of the others. Bilbo was expecting to find one house largely repaired, and that one would be Thorin’s, the first of his rebuilt vision of Erebor. But this isn’t a home. It’s a memorial.

Shattered picture frames on the mantel of a fireplace that’s fallen in on itself. A kitchen with one of its walls missing, open to the rock face beyond, coated with red desert dirt. The front bedroom—“This is where I was born,” Thorin says, and won’t go past the threshold—with a massive oaken bed, cracked in half. It’s not simply that Bilbo, as a literature grad, is too used to looking for metaphors. It’s that there really are metaphors everywhere in Erebor. They’re inescapable. It’s stifling to behold.

“Why are you doing this to yourself?” Bilbo asks, when they’re standing at the other end of the house, at the foot of a staircase that’s missing half its steps. “Why do you keep coming back to this?”

“I have to. No one else will.”

“They’ve moved on, Thorin. And you should, too.”

“They’ve forgotten!” Thorin hits the banister with a fist, produces an alarming crack. “They’ve left it all behind.”

“Well, maybe they had to.”

“How could they?”

“Sometimes, when things get . . . really bad,” Bilbo says, and cringes at how inadequate his words are, “sometimes you have to forget. Or else you can’t keep going.” Why didn’t he read philosophy, or psychology? Something useful, something practical. He suspects if he quotes Tolstoy, Thorin might hit him.

Thorin rolls his eyes, his upper lip drawn into a snarl. “Oh, so you’ll never go back to your home again?”

“It’s not mine anymore. I can’t just go walking in the front door.”

“Or maybe you don’t want it back.”

“That’s not true,” Bilbo says, shaking his head. “I do.”

“If you did, you’d fight for it,” Thorin says, and there’s that familiar bitterness again.

Bilbo’s patience runs out. “Thorin, there’s nothing I can do! Everyone else has realised it. Why haven’t you? Why can’t you?”

“I don’t know how to!” Thorin shouts, and moves as if to wrench the banister out of the ground. But while Bilbo watches, cringing, Thorin just sinks down. Deflates. “I don’t . . . know what I’m supposed to do,” he says. “I mean, fuck, Bilbo . . . What am I supposed to do? This has been—for so many years, this has been my end-game. This is what it’s all been for. If not this, then . . . what?”

“The funny thing about life,” Bilbo says, crouching down before Thorin to look him in the eye, “is that it goes on. Whether you have a direction or not. I’ve learned that, this past year.” When Thorin shakes his head, and reaches out to push Bilbo away, Bilbo presses on, saying, “No, no, it’s true. You’re the one who taught me that. Remember?”
“You don’t want to learn from me.”

“Stop it.”

“What?”

“You’re being an idiot. Again.”

“I mean it.”

“Well, then you’re a sincere idiot. Thorin, come on, you can’t seriously believe that. All the
time you spent teaching me . . . it wasn’t just model-building, you know. I’m still awful at cutting
foam-core in straight lines, no thanks to you. But I can do other things now. Things that I couldn’t,
before. And it’s— You’re the one. The reason I can.”

“Then why can’t I do what I need to do?”

“Who says you need to?”

Thorin looks up. Bilbo has seen his eyes hundreds—thousands—of times by now but will
never not be startled by how deep their blue runs. “If not me, then who?”

“Why anyone?”

Thorin doesn’t have an answer to that. He sits there at the bottom of the staircase, staring at
his hands while Bilbo scuffs the toe of his sneaker in the dirt. All the years and all the mountain
winds have yet to clear the smell of death from the house. It lingers on in every corner, every broken
floorboard. Bilbo nudges over a loose stair riser, absently, as if all he needs to do is ruin the place
enough to make Thorin see that it cannot be saved. A glint in the dust catches his eye and he squats
down, picks a ring from the debris. Wrought silver with a polished white stone, glimmering. Bilbo
turns it over in his fingers, rubs the soot away. He’s about to stand up when Thorin snatches the ring
from his hand and the suddenness of the movement knocks Bilbo off-balance. He falls to the ground,
bruising himself against the broken staircase, and looks up at Thorin in annoyance. “What the hell,”
he asks, “was that about?” He stands, brushes himself off, and waits, hands on his hips, for an
answer.

“Where did you get this?” Thorin asks. His voice is hushed, almost trembling. He looks as
though he’s about to be ill.

“It was just there,” Bilbo points, “in the dirt.”

Thorin is holding the ring up close, running a thumb over the stone. “I didn’t think I’d ever
see this again,” he says. “This stone . . .”

“Hello, are you not even going to apologise? And here I thought we were making progress.
Thorin? Are you ignoring me now? Really?” Bilbo shoves against Thorin’s shoulder, trying to get
him to look up. Thorin snarls and surges forward, drives Bilbo against a shuddering wall with a
forearm across his throat, the ring held fast in his other fist. Eyes wide, gasping, Bilbo struggles to
pry Thorin’s arm off of him. It’s hopeless, of course. Thorin has nearly a foot of height on him, and
at least 20 pounds, and Bilbo can no more move Thorin than he can shift the mountain they’re
standing on. Then Thorin flinches back, and looks at Bilbo, pain written so clear across his face for a
moment before he turns and runs out of the house. “Wait!” Bilbo calls after him, coughing. “Wait,
damn it!”

The sun is full-on blinding outside, high and clear, and Bilbo stumbles and squints as he
looks for Thorin. There are so many places he could have fled to—he knows this mountain better than anyone. Bilbo runs along the road, tripping over rubble, calling out Thorin’s name. He’s not even sure he’s going the right way. The road doesn’t seem to lead anywhere; the string of houses ends, giving way to a line of fencing that’s blackened like everything else in Erebor. Bilbo comes skidding to a stop at the road’s edge, where dirt track ends abruptly in a rock slide. Bent over, hands on his knees as he tries to catch his breath, he looks around. To the left, bare rock. To the right, a narrow stairway carved into the rock, curving down. Bilbo makes his way down it carefully, keeping a hand on the mountainside to steady himself until he comes to a wide ledge, dotted by row after row of stone cairns. He stops just short of the first one.

Reaching up to wipe his watering eyes and running nose, still stinging from being thrown against the wall, Bilbo finds his hand smeared with blood. He can taste it on his lips, warm and thick, and he lifts the hem of his shirt to wipe it away. Thorin is a silhouette at the far end, standing straight and tall next to the last row of cairns. Pressing a hand to his bleeding nose, Bilbo picks his way forward. There’s a strong wind kicking up on this side of the mountain. At least they’ll have some relief, when it comes time to hike down.

“Thorin, really, what the hell?” Bilbo keeps his distance and raises his voice instead, hangs back just enough to be out of arm’s reach. “What is wrong with you?” He can taste blood in his throat and tilts his head forward, breathes through his mouth. It dawns on him that this was probably a stupid idea, running down a mountain after the guy who just tried to choke him. But then again, this whole trip has been a stupid idea from the start, so what else is new? He used to be smart, once. What happened?

Thorin turns around as Bilbo is wiping his face on his shirt again. He’s still wearing that wounded look on his face and it only gets worse. Bilbo hides his hands behind his back, but it doesn’t help. But then, he doesn’t really want to help. He has this sick urge to see what will happen, just this once, if he refuses to back down.

“I . . . I shouldn’t have . . . Sorry,” Thorin finally says, and takes a step away from the edge, closer to Bilbo. Bilbo just looks at him, waiting for more. He’s owed more, isn’t he? Thorin doesn’t seem to know how to give it. Just stands there, looking miserable. “You should keep pressure on that,” he says, gesturing vaguely at Bilbo’s face. “It’ll stop sooner that way.”

“It wouldn’t have started if you hadn’t been a complete arse back there,” Bilbo says.

“I didn’t do that!”

“Yes, you did!”

“No, I wouldn’t . . . I do know my own strength, Bilbo.”

“I doubt that.”

“It’s the altitude,” Thorin says, and steps closer, grabs Bilbo’s shoulder when he goes to back away. He takes his bandana from his pocket, folds it over to find a clean square, and presses it to Bilbo’s nose, his other hand on the back of Bilbo’s head. Tugs Bilbo close to his chest. “We climbed too quickly yesterday.”

“Still your fault,” Bilbo mumbles through the cloth. His heart’s beating so loudly, standing there so close to Thorin. “Arse. You owe me an apology. A real one,” he clarifies, because even though he can’t look up to see Thorin’s face, he’s sure Thorin is frowning in argument.

“I would never hurt you.”
“Hah,” Bilbo says, and thinks, Oh, God, here we go, and that piece inside him that started to let go last night unravels just a bit farther.

“Willingly. I would never willingly hurt you.”

“Oh, keep telling yourself that. I’m sure it helps you sleep at night. Wait, no, it doesn’t. I know because I’ve seen you.” Bilbo twists and glances up at Thorin. “I’ve been right next to you. We’ve both . . . Well. You know. You were there, too.”

Thorin gives him that wounded look again. Says, “Stop it,” and tries to tilt Bilbo’s head down again.

“No. You didn’t stop back there when I asked you to, so why should I now? I’ve let you push me around for months, and all right, maybe I needed it at first, but enough is enough, Thorin. Really.” Bilbo reaches up and forces Thorin’s hands away. Steps out of the circle of his arms and tells himself he doesn’t miss the touch. “I haven’t exactly stood up for myself before, but if I don’t do it now, then when?”

Thorin looks shocked. A small part of Bilbo relishes it. Push farther, he thinks; so far that you can’t go back, so that he’ll understand just how much this won’t work anymore. Because this has always been Bilbo’s problem: he’s not good at confrontation. He’d rather talk around the problem, or wait for others to figure things out. And that’s why he’s gotten along so well with Thorin all along, Thorin who barges ahead heedlessly, who never stops to think about consequences. They were, he thought, balancing each other out. Now he sees that the scales have never been even. It’s just that his perspective was off, this entire time.

“What is this place?” Bilbo asks, though he already knows the answer.

“A graveyard,” Thorin says.

“And who dug the graves? Piled the stones?”

“I did.”

“All of them?”

Thorin nods. He’s looking at his hands—at Bilbo’s blood on his hands. You couldn’t ask for better symbolism, Bilbo thinks, and tells himself that it doesn’t hurt at all. Tries not to picture fourteen-year-old Thorin there with a shovel, standing over his mother’s dead body. His mother looks an awful lot like Dís, in Bilbo’s mind. He swallows and still tastes the blood from his stupid nose. Everything about this is wrong, but he can’t stop. This is, after all, the end.

“You may as well dig another one,” he says. “I’ll wait, if you like.” He crosses his arms over his chest, feigning a nonchalance he doesn’t feel at all.

“What— What the fuck are you talking about?” Thorin asks.

“If you keep going like this, you’re going to kill yourself.” Bilbo stares Thorin down. “Or possibly me. I’m not sure. What do you think, Thorin?”

“. . . I think you’ve lost it.”

“Oh, wonderful, let’s attack each other’s sanity. Yes. I have plenty of ammo for that. Where shall I start?”
“Don’t—” Thorin says. “Don’t go there.”

“You haven’t left me anywhere else to go. Look at yourself! What are you even doing, here? What was the point of all of this? Did you think we’d climb the mountain and somehow everything would fix itself?”

“Nothing’s broken, damn it,” Thorin insists, and Bilbo loses his mask, has to press his hand to his mouth to hold bitter laughter in, to keep salty blood out.

“You’re so wrong,” he says. “So wrong. We can’t even have an honest conversation about this.”

“About what, exactly?”

“About anything. Thorin, I—I think I love you, but we can’t go two days without hurting each other!”

Thorin opens his mouth as if to shout back, but then closes it again. Does this several times, while Bilbo watches, holding his breath. “You’ve never hurt me,” Thorin finally says. Carefully chosen words, yes, and not the worst ones he could have chosen, but not the right ones either.

Bilbo exhales. “Please don’t lie to me,” he says. “Not after . . . everything. I don’t deserve that, and you know it.” He meant for this to be a knock-down, drag-out fight but he’s tired, light-headed, and more than anything just sad.

They end up sitting side by side on the ledge, their backs to the graves as they look out over the valley, a swath of green stretching out towards the lake. Thorin keeps looking over at Bilbo like he’s sorry, but has yet to say it. Bilbo is sorry, sorrier than he’s been since the last time he was in a graveyard, but can’t figure out what to do about it. His legs are dangling over the edge, out into open air. His nose has stopped bleeding but the evidence is all over his shirt, their hands. He wipes his palms on his jeans and spreads it a little further. “What a mess we are,” he says softly.

Thorin takes a handful of dirt and holds it out over the edge, lets it go. The updraft carries it for a bit, and then it falls. “I never thought I would see that ring again,” he says. “It was my mother’s wedding ring. When I . . . when I buried her, she was so— I was sure that she had died with it on her finger.” He pulls the ring out of his pocket. It looks so small against his fingers, his broad palms. “They didn’t have enough money when they were first married to have rings made, so my father worked the silver into a band and left the setting bare. Several years later, he was mining up north and found this stone. It’s opal. You can see nearly every colour, reflected in it somewhere.”

Bilbo hugs his knees to his chest. He saw both of his parents buried with their rings and didn’t choke anyone for it. Someone should give him a medal.

“I didn’t mean to . . . shove you. I was just surprised, and angry. After so many years, to see this again . . . It’s like a miracle. Don’t you see?”

“Dís was right,” Bilbo says. “You are really awful at apologies.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“I don’t need a history lesson, Thorin. I need your honesty, not about the past or some distant dream future but right now. You and I. You told me once that we would make this work. The way I see it . . .” Bilbo swallows, and his throat is tight. “The way I see it, we’ve tried. And we’ve failed.”

“No, no, Bilbo—”
“There’s no such thing as miracles.”

Thorin’s face hardens. “What are you saying, exactly?”

“I’m saying . . . I don’t know who you are anymore, Thorin Oakenshield. Or Durin. Whatever your name is. And I’ve been wondering if I ever really knew.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

Bilbo tucks his chin to his knees. “I’m being a pragmatist,” he says, and breathes out all his air, pushes until his chest feels tight. Draws a deep breath in and says, “I can’t be what you need.”

“You can. I’m sure of it. We just have to . . . adjust. Something.”

Bilbo shakes his head. “I can’t,” he says. He kind of wants to cry.

“I’m the same person I’ve always been,” Thorin says. A hard note is creeping into his voice. “Maybe it’s you who’s changed.”

“Maybe.”

Thorin doesn’t tell him to change back. Small mercies, Bilbo supposes. They hike out in the early afternoon, bump along in the pickup back to the farm. With the windows down and the dust flying, the engine humming, Bilbo can pretend that they’re not speaking because it’s too loud. The boys run out to meet them and the apprehension on Fíli’s young face hurts to look at. Bilbo pats Kíli absently on the head and bites his lip. He washed his face with water from his canteen and he’s wearing Thorin’s spare shirt. Thorin, proving that he’s still the perfect Boy Scout even when he’s being completely impossible, unrolled it from his pack and thrust it into Bilbo’s arms at the bottom of the mountain, just before the drive back. “Don’t give Dís a heart-attack,” he said.

Bilbo can tell that Thorin’s upset with him, that he’s still thinking of counter-arguments, of how to make things work. There’s that determination he always found so admirable. Thorin gives him a long, inscrutable look before going inside. Bilbo lingers in the yard, hands in his pockets. He supposes he should be grateful that Thorin didn’t just leave him there, up on the mountain, but it’s not as though being back here with him is comfortable in any way. Not at all how it used to be. God, he misses those days. Long, aimless afternoons in Thorin’s garage, lounging around on the couch or a quilt on the floor, sunlight playing through the windows, music always soft in the background and the kitchen smelling permanently of fresh-ground coffee beans. It’s pointless to think about it now. Even if he goes back to the garage, it won’t be the same. Thorin won’t be coming back with him, that much is clear.

He’s still standing there, looking off into the distance, when Dís comes up behind him and claps a hand on his shoulder. “Nice shirt,” she says, and her smile is just wicked enough to look like her brother’s, and she raises an eyebrow, teasing.

“Don’t,” Bilbo says, “Please don’t. It’s not what you think.”

“No?”

“No.”

Dís sighs and slumps a little. Her arm is still around Bilbo’s shoulders. “Well, damn,” she says. “I mean, it was sort of obvious when Thorin came in and didn’t say anything. But still, one has to hope, right?”
“I’m sorry.”

“Oh, come on, don’t say that. It’s hardly your fault my brother’s a wreck. Actually, I think you deserve a lot of credit for putting up with him for so long.”

“What happens now?” Bilbo asks. It’s not that he wants to know, or expects Dís to have an answer. He’s just feeling a little lost, in all areas, and all senses of the word.

“Your flight out is tomorrow,” Dís says. When Bilbo looks at her, surprised, she lifts her arm from his shoulder to pat his head and smiles. “You left your ticket on Kíli’s dresser. I found it yesterday.”

“You’re not . . . mad?”

“What, that you’re not staying?” Dís asks. Bilbo nods. “I trust you,” she says, “and I’m sure you have your reasons.”

“What if they’re the wrong ones?” Bilbo asks. “I . . . I feel like I’m letting you all down.”

“Then stay.”

It sounds so simple. And as much as Bilbo would like to believe that Dís is only playing devil’s advocate, it’s obvious that she genuinely wishes he would stay. Would give it another shot. And he could almost see himself staying here, waking up in the mornings with the boys to check for eggs, to walk the fences, playing in the fields with Ere, working on the farm by Thorin’s side, sweat-drenched and sore and coming in at night to ice-cold water from the well and family dinners, Thorin’s narrow single bed in the back room. But would it really be like that? Would things really work out that way? Wouldn’t they just keep on going the way they are now, talking at cross-purposes, unable to see eye-to-eye, hurting each other?

Bilbo hangs his head. “It’s all right,” Dís tells him, but really it’s not.

They head back inside to find that Thorin’s gone, left out of the back door while they were standing out front, and neither of the boys knows where he’s headed. “Well, that’s just typical,” Dís says.

“Ere’s still here,” Fíli says, “so Uncle can’t have gone that far.”

“I bet he’ll be back for dinner,” Kíli adds.

“Shouldn’t we . . . I don’t know, go look for him?” Bilbo asks.

“It’s probably for the best,” Dís says. “I kind of want to hit him right now.”

“Why, Mom?” Kíli asks.

“You saw what it’s like up there,” Fíli cuts in, talking to Bilbo. “You saw what he’s like, up there. So what do you think?”

“Er,” Bilbo says, and rubs his nose. “I think . . . you boys have the right idea. Down here.”

Fíli nods. “Yeah,” he says. “I think so, too. Come on, Kí, let’s take Ere for a walk.” The boys leave, and Bilbo suspects they’ve gone to look for Thorin anyway. But that’s left him here with Dís and no idea what to say. There are so many questions he’d like to ask her, about Erebor before the fire, about the Durin family and the brother Thorin’s mentioned only once, whether she knows
anything about Azog and the enormous mystery surrounding him and his hatred for Thorin. Someone has yet to explain that one to him, but it’s just one on a long list of unknowns. Topping that list, currently, is the question of whether or not Thorin now hates him.

But what can he do? Stay out here, throw himself into an impossible project, rebuild Erebor, make it anew out of nothing and for no one, and continue living his life on someone else’s terms? Even for someone whom he loves—and he’ll admit it now, now that the words slipped out—that’s too much to ask. He has to make a life of his own, doesn’t he? He has a place to go back to, and four more years of school, and so many books yet to read. Can he really leave all that behind? For Thorin, he thinks he could. But he’s a pragmatist, yes, and even though it’s the last thing he wants to think, he cannot see anything good for either of them, should he choose to stay. They’ve proven it time and again: things go so well, until they don’t.

Dinner is a subdued affair. Fíli and Kíli come back, Erebor the dog in tow but no Thorin. The four of them in the farmhouse kitchen and try to talk about anything but the missing piece of the picture, and then Bilbo goes upstairs to shower. He’s standing there under the spray, rinsing out his bloodstained shirt and jeans, when he hears the front door open and shut. The rumble of Thorin’s voice carries through the thin walls, up the stairs. Are he and Dís fighting? No, it doesn’t sound like an argument. Heavy footsteps climb the stairs, pause outside the bathroom door while Bilbo Holds his breath. After they pass, he shuts off the shower. Pulls the curtain back to look out the window at the night sky, hazy pools of yellow from the sodium lights on the barn and silo breaking up the darkness. The wind through the cedar trees sounds like something shattering even as it brings a fresh, clear scent.

Back in Kíli’s bedroom, barefoot in his pajamas, Bilbo picks up his journal. He hasn’t written anything in it in a long time. It’s not much to speak of, a battered cardboard cover on a two-ring binder, pages water-stained and wrinkled from when he dropped it in a puddle coming out of the library one night. And he always feels a little bit silly writing in it. Talking to himself. As if that would help, right? Still, he shoved it into his satchel for this trip. “I don’t know what I was thinking,” he mutters. “Coming out here.”

There’s a knock on the door, and Bilbo hastily shoves the journal under the pillow. “Yes?” he says.

“Can we talk?” Thorin asks.

“Um, sure.”

“Can we talk not through a closed door?”

Bilbo stands and straightens the covers, goes to open the door. Thorin is leaning against the frame. Their faces are very close. “Did you want to come in, then?” Bilbo asks. Thorin shakes his head.

“Not here,” he says. “Can we . . . It feels weird, talking here.”

Sighing, Bilbo runs a hand through his hair. “All right,” he says. “Where to?”

Thorin leads them down to the end of the hall and into the back bedroom. His room, with one window looking out to the mountains and the other back towards the highway. Bilbo hesitates, and then follows him inside. “Sit wherever,” Thorin says, and it feels like a test. Bilbo takes the one chair, leaving Thorin the bed. Thorin opts to pace. The room is small; every step takes him halfway across the floor.
“You’re leaving,” Thorin says. Bilbo nods. “Tomorrow.” Bilbo nods again. “How can I make you see that you have to stay?”

“How can I stay, when you never asked me to come in the first place?” Bilbo counters.

“I was wrong about that.”

“We both were.”

“No, don’t say that. You . . . I’m glad you came here. I need you here.”

“Thorin, I never meant to stay.” That’s really not true, but Bilbo wants it to be, or needs it to be—he’s not sure which. He’s made up his mind and has to believe that he’s doing the right thing. Has to remind himself that if he stays they’re only going to find new ways to go wrong. “I was always going to go back.”

“Someday, maybe.”

“Tomorrow.”

“I don’t want you to leave,” Thorin says, and comes to a stop in front of Bilbo. Leans down over him. Bilbo nearly loses his resolve.

“What about what I want?” he asks, his throat tight.

Thorin backs off. “Is that what you want?” he asks slowly. “To leave? To go back and be all alone, again?” It’s cruel, to spell it out that way. Thorin has to know that.

“Yes,” Bilbo lies. He looks up, willing Thorin to recognise how much everything has come apart inside of him. To recognise that he’s only picking the lesser of two evils, the thing that will ruin him least.

Thorin goes to sit on the bed. He puts his head in his hands. His hair’s tied back but escaping, falling into his face. Without looking up, he holds one arm out towards Bilbo. “Before you go, then,” he says, hoarse, “we have one more night.” The question is unspoken, the way it always is between them. Bilbo knows that he could say no. Could say nothing, and just walk out of the room.

He goes over, lets Thorin draw him in close. Runs his fingers through long dark hair, bows his head down until his face is hidden too. It speaks volumes, really, that neither one of them can bear to look the other in the eyes for the rest of the night.

In the morning, Bilbo says his goodbyes, to Dís and the boys and Ere. “You’ll come back to visit us, right?” Kíli asks, arms wrapped around Bilbo’s stomach. “Right?” And Bilbo says he will, and gives Fíli a long hug, trying to push encouragement and empathy and all manner of things his way. Dís kisses him on the cheek. “Don’t be a stranger, Bilbo,” she murmurs into his ear. “Take care of yourself.” When they separate, he feels as though he’s letting go of someone he’s known for so much longer than three days. Balancing on the line between determination and resignation and miserable about it, Bilbo sinks into the passenger seat of Thorin’s Volvo. The set of Thorin’s jaw and the tense lines of his shoulders as he slides in behind the steering wheel are hard to watch, and the drive south is torture. There’s nothing either of them can say—are willing to say—that will fix this. He wants, and wants, but can’t. Why? Just open your mouth and say it, he tells himself; you’re a Baggins, you have a whole long history of being good with words, so just say it.

He can’t. Of course he can’t. What do you say, when you learn that loving someone means your heart living outside of your chest, and going off to break itself? How can you possibly stop it?
All he can do is take himself away, pull them apart, and hope that someday, somehow, each of them will figure out how to carry on, how to ignore all the pieces of themselves they’ve already left behind. Thorin always was carrying around a heartful of ghosts. Now Bilbo will be just another lost face, no different from any of the others. And Thorin will be all right, because he’s always all right, even when he’s destroying himself. And Bilbo will go back to the way things were, because he’s fine with being alone. Right?

They don’t listen to music on the way to the airport. It’s a small kindness. Bilbo doesn’t think he could stand anymore well-placed metaphors in his life. The more he studies Thorin, surreptitiously, the harder he has to work not to be afraid of what’s to come. Nearly everything he’s done this past year has had Thorin as its driving force. And what does he have to show for that now? An empty house he cannot hope to fill, waiting for him. A pale scar burnt into the palm of his hand. Memories, experiences, failures. If only Thorin would listen to him, if only he could get his words across, he might have something tangible, something that’s not absence in any other form. When they pull up to the curb at the airport outside the departure gates, Bilbo tries once more. “Thorin,” he says, “I wish I could make you understand.”

“What the hell do you know about it, anyway? You were lost ever since I met you. And you’re lecturing me about appreciating the rest of the world? If you’d seen half the things I’ve seen—Forget it. You’ve made your point. We don’t work. So that’s it.” Thorin gets out of the car and slams the door.

“Of course,” Bilbo mutters, fighting with his door handle. He’s sure Thorin hears him, though he gets no reaction.

“Goodbye,” Thorin tells him pointedly, his arms across his chest. Bilbo fiddles with the strap of his satchel. He’s waiting for something that won’t ever come, probably. When Thorin turns his head aside, Bilbo studies that face one last time, the strong profile of the nose, the veins sharp against his neck, eyes uncompromisingly blue. Well, Bilbo thinks, you were the one who pushed back. This is what you wanted, wasn’t it? Deal with it. He sighs, picks up his duffel, and walks away. The small part of him that’s still clinging to optimism makes him walk slowly, waiting for Thorin to call after him. He hears the car door shut and the engine sputter just as he steps into the airport.

On the plane he tries to read and ignore his seat-neighbour, a pale gangly kid who keeps staring at him. He can’t concentrate on the words on the page, but it’s a small gesture towards delaying the inevitable, coming to terms with the fact that he’s gone and made a stranger of himself, despite Dís’s warning. What’s done is done, but that doesn’t mean he has to face up to it just yet. The book smells like his attic, dusty, a little damp. Someone else’s notes are in the margins besides his own; that’s always bothered him. They’re not even particularly smart commentary. Bilbo flips the page with more force than necessary and tries to focus his gaze again. Danish philosophy is probably not the best choice of reading material for this situation. He reads another page, and shuts the book. The pale kid is still staring at him. He looks ill, actually. Bilbo shifts a little farther away. He switches planes, gets a new seat-neighbour, sleeps most of the way back. Wakes up disoriented and anxious half an hour out of Syracuse and watches the lights of the city come into view as night falls. What
happens next? He still doesn’t have an answer.

Chapter End Notes

Well . . . here we are. Who saw this coming? I'm sort of apprehensive about this chapter, actually; more so than probably any of the others. I'm not fully satisfied with where I've ended it, but the next scene didn't fit the tone right away and I kept writing and erasing a bridge, and finally just got frustrated with it. I hope it reads all right. I'm out of practice. This was supposed to be a longer chapter, to make up for the wait, but it didn't end up being that long after all. Alas. I got to write several of the things I'd been wanting to write: snarky Bilbo, defeated Thorin (briefly), a fight where they sort of switch roles, a little more of Dís and the kids. A few other small canon refs, some more obvious than the others. Also, uh, sorry if I put anyone off with the whole nosebleed thing. It is a very real symptom of altitude sickness, which Bilbo has a touch of, since he's not used to the mountains and the heat and is generally out of his element out here. It might seem sort of exaggerated but you don't even want to know about the worst nosebleeds I have had. This one is perfectly within reason, I think.

On a broader note, I said so on my tumblr, but I'll say it again here: I sort of lost motivation for a lot of things, for a long time, and I'd been trying to just push forward and continue on but it came to the point where it wasn't working. Hence the long breaks between chapters recently. I'm sorry for leaving you all hanging, and I want to thank you all for your support, your kindness, your patience. You've been the most amazing set of readers along this very long and confusing journey and your feedback means so much to me. This story wouldn't be half of what it is without you guys, so thank you, honestly, for being there for me. I have to admit that I feel sort of pressured to handle this story well, to give it an ending it deserves, and while that does make me anxious it's also encouraging. (I mean, I'd put a lot of pressure on myself anyway, let's be honest. Having you all as readers is a much more pleasant source of motivation, really.) I owe a lot of you replies; I'll get around to those soon. Any form of socialising/communication was making me really stressed for a while, so please forgive my long silence.

Last three things: here's a quick visual I did of the boys a little while ago, here's a picspam I made for this chapter, and the relevant music for this chapter, behind the scenes, is "You Were A Kindness" by The National. Thanks to minorsingingairheads for that 8tracks mix that introduced me to the song. You may all go forth and be heartbroken over it & its connections to our two resident problem children.

EDIT: Also, also! Check these out, a collage in the spirit of this chapter (which is to say, gorgeous but also really distressing) and a new 8tracks mix. Thanks to izaveller for both!
Chapter 22

Once upon a time, they lay on their backs on the roof of a rusted car, sunning themselves, and Thorin pretended that he believed in impermanence. “Perfection isn’t real,” he said, and Bilbo had been the one to argue irrationally that life should go on, exactly this way, forever. Once upon a time, their roles were swapped, and Bilbo hadn’t been afraid to disagree. Once upon a time, they had walked in the rain until they were soaked to the skin, stood on the north campus bridge and watched the river run past, and Thorin hadn’t threatened to throw him in, and they had gone back to his place together and gotten far too drunk, had woken up in the morning equally hungover and half on top of each other, Thorin’s hair still damp to the touch. The stories Bilbo tells himself on the flight back east all start the same way, in some now-distant past that feels more like a dream than a memory, even if he can swear it all happened. Once. It’s never the initial act that’s the problem—it’s the continuation. The permanence. If they could just find a way to live in a series of moments, little vignettes, like some Parisian novel, everything would be perfect. They’d wake up every morning to dew-damp grass and Erebor pawing at the door, to fresh-brewed coffee and lazy, elaborate breakfasts. Every day would be the same, only called by a different name, and it wouldn’t matter that they never made any progress because that wouldn’t be the point. You could skip a chapter, or go back and read the same one over again, and it wouldn’t matter. Nothing would matter.

Bilbo can’t even say how much he would like things not to matter right now. They do matter, of course; they matter immensely, and he’s just treading water and pretending he’s making progress towards the shore, for all the good it’s doing him. He is drowning. Sooner or later, the bottom of the ocean will catch up to him. He’s not in a Parisian novel, not in Nadja or A la recherche; he’s not some art-house kid floating by in a haze of cigarette smoke whose days are all alike and all equally unimportant. He is just someone who has missed a turn, somewhere, and now it is too late to go back.

This is why he doesn’t travel: he’s prone to overwrought metaphors, when he’s on the move.

The airport is largely deserted. Bilbo hauls himself and his bags off the plane and does not look back. If he were Orpheus, and Thorin were Eurydice—a thought which, at any other time, would be hilarious—they would have to rewrite the myth. Orpheus would leave Eurydice in the Underworld, not because he looked back when he shouldn’t have but because he never asked her to follow him in the first place. He went into Hell, and then walked out alone. Euridyce is, presumably, burning. Orpheus is back amongst the flowers.

The thought did cross Bilbo’s mind, to ask Thorin to come back East, to re-start their relationship on his terms this time. Thorin could have found work locally, Bilbo would go back to classes, would start teaching in the fall, and they would live in Balin’s house and throw dinner parties and grow vegetables in the garden. Why didn’t he just ask? Thorin would have said no, almost definitely, would probably even have laughed at him, but what really held Bilbo back was the fear that Thorin would say yes. He understands, better than Thorin gives him credit for, what it is to give
up on a dream, and how much that kills you. And he doesn’t want the responsibility. Doing it to himself is one thing, but doing it to someone else . . . he just couldn’t. If Thorin wants to run himself into the ground pursuing a hopeless cause, isn’t that his choice? Who is Bilbo, to stand in his way? Isn’t it just better to minimise the casualties, to try to contain the damage, to make a strategic retreat?

He’s not an idiot. He knows he’s running away. It’s just that there are nicer ways to say it. Bilbo’s not looking forward to facing Gandalf. The old man will probably tell him all the things he doesn’t want to hear, and nothing that he does, and it will be another insufferable car ride, another hour of his life gone wrong. But when his fellow passengers disperse and Bilbo looks around, there’s no sign of his not-uncle. “Is this just a day when everything is awful?” Bilbo asks out loud. “Is that what this is?” Even if he were to call Gandalf, there’s no telling when the old man would arrive. He’s sitting there on a bench, counting the cash in his wallet and wondering how much bus fare will be, when someone says his name.

“Bilbo Baggins. You look lost.”

Glancing up, startled, Bilbo sees a tall, slim man with a dark ponytail standing before him. He’s wearing dark jeans and a t-shirt and looks about a hundred times cleaner than Bilbo feels. “Yes,” Bilbo says, and then, “no. I mean, what?”

“I said, you look lost. Are you?”

“Er, no. Sorry, do I know you?”

“We haven’t officially met, no.”

“Right. I’m just, ah, waiting for the bus, so . . .” Bilbo gathers his things and moves to stand. The man has him at a severe height disadvantage.

“There’s no need to be alarmed,” he says, and steps back, puts his hands in his pockets. “This isn’t a test, and I’m not trying to rob you. Thorin asked me to come and meet you.”

“He did?” Bilbo asks, and his stomach twists. Standing up was a bad idea.

“It was quite a shock when he called this morning, I have to say. I wasn’t expecting to ever hear from him again.” The man gives Bilbo a once-over, surely noticing the darkness beneath his eyes, the rumpled state of his clothing. Surely judging. Bilbo cringes. “I’m Elrond Peredhel. It’s good to meet you at last, officially, albeit under somewhat unusual circumstances. Is that all you have?” he asks, tilting his head towards Bilbo’s duffel. When Bilbo nods, numbly, Elrond slings the bag over his shoulder. “I’m parked just out front. Shall we?”

It’s a typical early-summer night upstate, raining and cool. Bilbo climbs into the passenger side of an old Mercedes, the only car parked along the curb. The leather seat is cracked beneath him and Elrond tells him not to worry about getting it wet. While Bilbo leans back and tries to let the rain sink in metaphorically as much as physically, Elrond steers them gently out of the airport lot and towards the highway. The stereo’s on with the volume down low, a girl singing over guitar, cello, all sorts of string instruments. There’s a stuffed rabbit in the back seat, and a couple of chapter books. Elrond doesn’t look old enough to be a father. Dís didn’t look old enough to be a mother. But there they both are. Bilbo doesn’t think he could ever raise a child. To be responsible for something like that, someone who depends on you so entirely . . . it’s actually terrifying. How does anyone do it? He’s already proven himself incapable. Elrond notices him staring at the rabbit and says, “My daughter’s. She’s six.”

“Yes, um, he said that.”
“They get on like a house on fire, very nearly literally.” Elrond smiles at Bilbo, just the smallest tilt of his lips. It’s not the kindest analogy he could have chosen. Bilbo wonders if it was deliberate. “I had to bring her by the studio one day, early on, and she wandered over to his table and made herself right at home. Glue all over her hands. Took me a week to get it out of her hair. Neither of her brothers were ever so difficult, really.”

“Brothers?” Bilbo asks.

“Yes, my sons. Twins. They’re ten. I don’t think they’ve ever met Thorin, and it seems prudent to keep it that way. Not that he’s . . . well. You probably know him nearly as well as I do, at this point.”

Bilbo sits up straighter. “Nearly?” he asks. “Nearly?” He’s offended, more than willing to argue, even if it’s a stupid point of contention, particularly with someone who’s being nice enough to drive him home. No, not home, simply back. But really, doesn’t he know Thorin better than anyone, at this point? Even if they did just part on rather bad terms. Rather terrible terms.

“How long have you known Thorin Oakenshield?” Elrond asks. The windshield wipers drag slowly back and forth, distractingly loud.

“Almost a year,” Bilbo says, exaggerating. Long enough to know that’s not his real name, he thinks. Long enough for him to rearrange my entire life.

“It will be three years this August since I met him. I’m sure that whatever’s going on between the two of you has brought a lot to light, but there are only so many revelations one year—even the most intense of years—can produce.” The road is nearly empty as they drive through the suburbs, past the discount liquor store, a string of churches and parks. “I’m not trying to deny you anything,” Elrond says, easing to a stop at a red light. “Actually, I’m glad you two met. I just want to be sure you understand where I’m coming from when I ask after him. To be honest, I’ve been worried for a while now. He’s always been difficult to get along with, but I’d thought he and I had at least reached an understanding, after working together for so long. We were, for a time, on equal footing with each other. And then he turns in his final project, hardly says a word through critique, and just walks out the door afterwards. He didn’t even come to the end-of-the-year party.”

“Not really his thing,” Bilbo says. “Parties.”

“Yes, but parties with an open bar? He’s always come before, even when he probably shouldn’t have. Don’t forget, I tried being his friend once, I know what he’s like. And I know he’s gotten several job offers recently and refused every one, much to the dismay of his advisors, who have all felt the need to tell me about it. He never collected his portfolio, and even that friend of his, MacFundin, hasn’t been around to frighten off the undergrads. Something’s going on with him. And then for him to call this morning, very early this morning, mind you, and ask me to drive up here? Thorin hates owing favours. So that tells me something of what you’re worth, to him, but nothing about what’s going on. He was very terse over the phone. Didn’t answer any of my questions.”

“What else is new?” Bilbo asks.

“What happened?”

“To him, or . . . ?”

“To him, to you. Either.”

“None of your business,” Bilbo says, and hunches into his seat.
“Humour me.”

“I’d rather not, thanks.”

“Shall I tell you my theory, then?” Elrond asks. “Just to pass the time.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Bilbo says. It doesn’t, it doesn’t.

“You know, for a while, back in our first year, I was expecting . . .” Elrond drums his fingers on the steering wheel, and turns to look at Bilbo, as if he’s trying to figure something out. “You’ve walked across the bridge to North Campus, haven’t you?”

“Yes,” Bilbo says, not following.

“You know what those fences are for, then?”

“I don’t understand.”

“But you do. Because I’m willing to bet that you’ve thought it, too.”

“I wouldn’t—”

“I didn’t mean you would,” Elrond says. “Though, I suppose you have, and I’m sorry for that. Very glad you didn’t. But I meant that you must have wondered, about Thorin, about that long walk home he used to take every night he didn’t sleep in studio. Do you know what the statistics are?”

“No, I don’t,” Bilbo says. He’s got his arms crossed over his chest, his fingers twisted into his shirt. This isn’t a conversation he ever wanted to have.

“In the last twenty-two years, twenty-nine people have jumped from that bridge and others around the city. Three years ago, the year Thorin and I first started here, we had six students kill themselves one after another. Do you really think we weren’t all intensely aware of what was going on just around the corner from the studio? That when Milstein was built the year after, with all those windows, we didn’t walk over every day and hope we wouldn’t see anyone standing there on the walkway wall? How fast do you think you can run?”

“What?”

“Fast enough to get from the third floor of Rand over to the bridge before they jump?”

“I don’t think—”

“My legs are longer than yours. And I couldn’t do it.” Elrond exhales, hard, and presses his shoulders back into the car seat. When he speaks again, his voice is softer. “I’m worried about him. And you, now. That’s all I’m trying to say.”

Bilbo fiddles with his seatbelt. His hands won’t lie still. He doesn’t want to look over at Elrond, doesn’t want to even begin to guess at what sort of expression is on the man’s face.

“There are a lot of things in the long history of Thorin Oakenshield that I won’t even pretend to know about,” Elrond continues. “Some of it he’s told me when I’ve found him drunk under a drafting table at eight in the morning. Some of it I’ve guessed, or overheard. All of it, put together, is enough that I have to ask.” He turns again to look at Bilbo, rather than the road. They are coasting down a hill, straight and fast. “Is he all right? Wherever it is that you’ve left him, whatever he’s
They reach the bottom of the hill before Bilbo can answer, and Elrond has to look away to steer them around a turn. A line of trees whips past, and then open fields. There aren’t any lights anywhere, no other cars on the road. “I don’t know,” Bilbo finally says. “I hope so. I think so.”

“That’s not exactly the answer I was looking for.”

“Sorry.”

“No, no, it’s not your fault. Not at all. Please don’t think that.”

“I think he’s where he needs to be,” Bilbo says.

“That’s a thought that could go many ways. Would you care to clarify?”

They’re nearly back to the city. The rain’s stopped. Bilbo rolls down the window, just an inch or two, and the cool air across his forehead is the best thing he’s felt all day. “I don’t know,” he says again. “I don’t have any clarity. I can promise you he’s not going to throw himself off a bridge, but only because there aren’t any bridges out there.”

“He’s resourceful,” Elrond says, grim. “During our first year, when we were doing materials tests, his structure won out against all the rest. He doesn’t need a bridge.”

“If you’re so concerned about him, why didn’t you go after him yourself? Why does it all fall on me? Why does everyone—I tried, you know, I tried my best. It wasn’t enough.”

“I’m not blaming you. You’re blaming yourself, it’s clear, and I wish you wouldn’t, but I know my saying so isn’t going to stop you. After all, we hardly know each other. All we have in common is one of the most troublesome people I’ve ever met.”

“He really is,” Bilbo murmurs.

“Thorin never trusted me enough to let me help him. After he met you—and it was fairly obvious, you know, back in October when he stopped biting the heads off anyone who walked past his table in studio—after he met you, I thought, Well, at least he’s found someone who will help him. And he was unexpectedly pleasant towards the end of term, and I thought, It’s working, whoever it is, they’ve found a way to get through to him.” Elrond laughs a little, and shakes his head. “I wasn’t expecting you, of course.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I didn’t think you were his type.”

“What, too boring? Or just too pathetic?”

“Too male, actually. Though I shouldn’t assume, particularly not in this city.” They’re at the intersection of the main road and the turn-off towards campus. Before Bilbo can make some token protest, can claim that he’s reading too much into things, Elrond starts speaking again. “Particularly not when I get the same assumptions tossed in my direction on a near-daily basis, never mind the fact that there’s no truth to them,” he says, and takes them through the lower part of campus, driving slow. Bilbo doesn’t know if he’s ready to be back. Part of him wants to—needs to—ask Elrond to just keep driving. “But it was you, of course, except now you’re sitting here next to me and Thorin’s off making us worry. Which is very inconsiderate of him, really.”
“You sound surprised,” Bilbo notes, surprised himself.

“I am. Thorin can be as rude as he pleases, but he’s never inconsiderate.”

“Hah. I guess I do know him better than you do after all. He can be extremely inconsiderate when he puts his mind to it, believe me.”

“You’re angry with him.”

“I’m furious,” Bilbo says. “At both of us.”

“I’m not here to judge you, you know. If you need to talk . . .” Elrond’s offer hangs in the air as they make the last turn, out of campus, down to Bilbo’s street.

“What does it matter?” Bilbo asks. It’s not rhetorical the way it usually is when people ask that question. He desperately needs an answer.

“It matters,” Elrond says. “You haven’t been able to say his name this entire time, whether you’ve realised it or not. You’d rather look out the window than meet my eyes, even when it’s dark and raining and there’s nothing to see out there. I don’t know everything that happened between the two of you, and you certainly don’t have to tell me, but I can guess. Whatever it was, this past year has mattered for you. It will continue to matter.”

Bilbo hadn’t realised, and can’t answer, and doesn’t want to admit it. Instead he counts down houses from the street corner and watches his approach, and glances over at the driver’s seat just to prove that he can.

“It will continue to matter,” Elrond repeats, and when he swallows the corners of his mouth press together and tighten. “Just because someone is gone doesn’t mean you stop loving them.”

“He said goodbye,” Bilbo says. “And then he left me at the airport. I don’t think it’s my love we need to question here.”

“Either way, my answer’s still the same.”

Bilbo stops himself from letting out a laugh only because he’s holding his breath. When he lets it out, slowly, all he can do is shake his head, never mind that he’s not even sure what he’s disagreeing with at this point.

“Take care of yourself, Bilbo,” Elrond tells him when they finally come to a stop in front of Bilbo’s house.

“Thanks for the ride,” Bilbo says, still looking down. Still trying to get his hands to stop toying with the seatbelt, to stop trembling when they have nothing to hold.

“Don’t thank me, thank Thorin.”

Bilbo gets his bags and stands on the sidewalk, one hand on the car door. “Thank you,” he says, quietly, carefully. Elrond sighs.

“You’re going to be fine,” he says, and the sincerity in his voice is so strong that it’s almost convincing. “You can call me, you know. Anytime, if you need anything, call me.” He opens the glove-box and takes out a notebook and a pen, tears a sheet out and writes down his phone number. Bilbo takes the paper when Elrond holds it out the window, but doesn’t even read the number before slipping it into his pocket. He already knows he won’t call. Elrond catches his eye once more—a
long, unblinking, breathless minute—and then smiles at him, and drives off. Bilbo looks down the slope at his house, at faded once-white siding and crooked black shutters, and tells himself, “Welcome home,” even if it doesn’t feel like it.

Coming back to a place after being away, it always seems as though everything should be different. You’ve changed, or there’s new dust on the windowsills, or your sheets don’t smell quite right. And it is all of those things, but what’s worst is the emptiness and that hasn’t changed at all. Bilbo drops his bags by the door and goes to unlatch the windows, lets the night air blow through. Even the smallest tasks are daunting: unpacking, piling his clothing in the laundry hamper, showering. He eats a bowl of cereal sitting on the floor in his underwear and an oversized sweatshirt wearing thin at the elbows, his spoon mechanically shifting from bowl to mouth and back again. Is this what it’s going to be like now? Going through the motions? Has he, too, just regressed to the person he used to be?

There’s nothing to say, and to be the first to call is basically the same as an admission of guilt, but Bilbo can’t help reaching for his phone. It’s not in his satchel, where he usually keeps it. A quick search of the pockets of his duffel comes up empty. He digs through his hamper, turns out the pockets of his jeans—nothing. Perhaps it fell out in Elrond’s car? That doesn’t seem likely. Much more likely, Bilbo realises, his stomach sinking, is that it was stolen. His neighbour on the first leg of the flight, that pale kid that watched him from Salt Lake City to Chicago. The one with twitchy fingers. “Damn it,” Bilbo says, crumpling his dirty jeans in his hand. He throws them back into the hamper and tips his head back, breathing hard. There is a first time for everything, he has learned this year, even being robbed. “Oh, damn it, this is not what I needed.” He can feel his eyes burning from sheer frustration, from exhaustion, from trying not to cry. He is an adult, he has made the grown-up choice, what is right but not easy, and now he is on his own and he can handle it, he can, it will be fine. He’s lived without a phone for far longer than he has with, and he didn’t even pay for it in the first place, so it doesn’t matter. Never mind what Elrond said, it doesn’t matter. In fact, it’s better this way, probably.

He can’t sleep that night. Just a few days out West have set his body clock back and he stays up staring out the window until two in the morning thinking it’s only midnight, gets into bed only to stare at the ceiling instead. Cracked paint, and faint traces of spider webs. How old is this house? Thirty, forty years? It’s hardly historic, especially not for the area, but it’s old enough to have sagging floors and dark-wood trim, the rooflines of an older age. Thorin would know, could probably list off an entire inventory of architectural details that show the house’s age. Bilbo turns over, draws the sheets and thin summer blanket up to his chin, and shuts his eyes. Three o’clock comes, then four, mists rising in the street outside, and Bilbo switches on his bedside light and picks up a book he’s already read, back in an undergrad philosophy class. Four in the morning seems the right time for Kierkegaard. He hasn’t touched his own journal since leaving Dís’s house, beyond shoving it a dresser drawer, but Quidam’s diary says everything he would want to say anyway.

(March 17. Midnight.)

False alarm. Right now I have driven a hundred miles in sixteen hours, I have been nearly dead with anxiety and impatience—and for nothing. My life has been endangered in a ludicrous way—and for nothing. . . . How can a brain stand all this! This is a higher and rougher sea than is known in
Bilbo can’t claim serendipity; he’s read this before, knows what to look for. Validation—that’s what he’s seeking. Someone to put words to the way he’s feeling, to say, “Look, you are not the only one going through this.” The unfortunate thing about Kierkegaard, though, is that there is not exactly a happy ending as time passes. Bilbo flips pages, reads forward.

(April 24. Morning.)

A year ago today. I have gone astray; I am like someone who has come into a strange country where people speak another language and have other customs.

(May 27. Midnight.)

It is impossible. My edifice has collapsed.

Bilbo almost wants to tear out whole passages, mail them to Thorin heavily underlined, some sort of cryptic literary wake-up call. But he doesn’t think Thorin would understand. 19th century Danish philosophy is a bit of an obscure field, even when you know what you’re getting into.

(July 3. Midnight.)

Where shall we see each other again? In eternity. So there is certainly enough time for an understanding. Where is eternity? When does eternity begin? What language is spoken there? Or is there perhaps no speaking at all?

He stops there, because he knows what is coming only four days later. Knows, and wants to read, to push until the breaking point, but he can’t face it yet. Not tonight. He closes the book and tucks it under his pillow, closes his eyes to listen to the early morning birds instead, tries to ignore the hum of the refrigerator and the hiss of tires on rainy streets.

They tell you that things will look better in the morning. Bilbo’s morning is fog-bound, and his eyes burn when he opens them. He takes an aspirin, wipes the lenses of his glasses clear, and warms his hands over the kettle on the stove, waiting to make tea. The air is cool and damp, though it will burn off by lunchtime. Things don’t look better. They don’t look worse either, but it’s small comfort. Bilbo knows how these things go. This is just the first step of a long descent.

He falls asleep in front of his laptop that afternoon, half-heartedly reading Plato for a final paper. When he wakes up again, a crick in his neck, dry-lipped, it’s almost evening. The plant in his kitchen has died. Bilbo pinches leaves off of it as he stands there drinking a glass of water. He leaves the tap running, takes off his glasses, and ducks his head under. The shock snaps his eyes open, makes his shoulders tense. “Get it together,” he tells himself under his breath, and rubs at his hair with a kitchen towel. “Useless.” It’s been a long time since he’s slept a day away. Determined to make something of the hours he has left until he makes another mark on his calendar, Bilbo sits back at his desk and opens up his university e-mail account. There’s a conference call for papers that he’d meant to submit an abstract for, before he left. Might as well do it now, even if it won’t amount to anything. It doesn’t hit him until he’s already logged in and scrolling through his inbox that what he’s really doing is looking for a message from Thorin. There isn’t one, probably because the last thing Thorin said to him was “Goodbye.” Several days late, but that finally fulfilled the promise Bilbo had asked for: when Thorin left, he said goodbye.

When Bilbo starts to write, he hesitates, stares at the letters and numbers in the address line, at the blank subject line. He types, “Hello.” That’s not the hard part. It’s only logical that one should follow the other. What’s hard is what should come after. All night long he keeps coming back to it,
adding words and deleting them, close to discarding the whole thing. By the time he finally sends it, all he’s added is a question mark: “Hello?” The body of the e-mail is blank.

Bilbo spends the next several minutes breathing far too quickly, and then shuts down his laptop. Almost immediately, he turns it back on, his fingers tripping over themselves as he logs in, pulls his e-mail account back up. There won’t be a reply; he knows this. If there is one, ever, it won’t be within the next hour. Still, he sits up most of the night waiting, pacing, doing circuits of his attic, all the way out to where his head brushes up against the rafters, waiting. He is fairly sure that he’s the textbook definition of “pathetic” at this point. Miserably self-aware, Bilbo crawls into bed and smothers himself with his pillow.

Sleeping, waking up, and sleeping again, with nothing in between to distinguish the hours except restlessness—that is, apparently, his new routine. Just after four on Sunday afternoon, the quiet in his head becomes so overwhelming that it starts to make him feel sick. He can’t even look over at his laptop, still patiently logged in to his e-mail account. Instead, Bilbo digs his old bicycle out from behind the trash bins beside the house, hauls it up the steps to the street, and coasts down the hill. Down along the river, all the way out to Cass Park, the wind is in his face and loud in his ears. The water’s all stirred up from last night’s rain and the sky is that hazy orange it gets around sunset when it can’t make up its mind, whether to rain again or not. Bilbo rides past a couple of kids on rollerblades, ducks his head under the bridge, circles around the field, dodging geese. At the dog park he stops, leans up against the fence. Every dog there is not Erebor and it hurts. He has his hand wrapped around the fence links and is staring at a fair-haired young man with a golden retriever, trying to see them in the reverse colours, when he hears a shout and feels rough, wet puppy tongue on his fingers.

“Sorry, sorry,” a girl is saying as she runs over. “He’s a little excited. It’s our first time here.” She gets a grip on her puppy’s collar and hauls him back from the fence. The puppy whines. The girl’s very pretty—tall, red-headed, freckled, maybe high school aged—and very clean. Bilbo’s sweating and wearing yesterday’s t-shirt. This is becoming another pattern, encountering people who make him acutely aware of how he continually comes up short. The girl doesn’t seem to notice, though she’s staring right at him. “Where’s your dog?” she asks.

“He’s, er, with my . . . friend,” Bilbo says, feeling the heat rise to his cheeks. Ere’s not even his dog. “Out west.” Thorin’s not even his friend.

“Want to come in?” she asks. “To the yard, I mean. We could use another fetch partner, right, pup?” The puppy is pressing his nose to the fence again. Bilbo holds a finger to it absenty, breathes in and out, and then realises that the girl is still waiting for a response.

“No,” he says, straightening up. “But thanks. I should get going.”

“All right. Maybe next time!”

“Sure,” Bilbo lies, and doesn’t return her wave as he climbs back on his bicycle, doesn’t look back at the puppy still standing right up against the fence. His feet are heavy on the pedals as he heads back into town. Waiting for the light to change, Bilbo leans forward on his handlebars and makes himself a list. Things to do: get your life together. It is, granted, a short list, but there are a lot of sub-categories on there, such as buying proper groceries, doing laundry, returning long overdue library books, not thinking about Thorin, meeting with the professors on his dissertation committee, planning out the course he’ll be teaching in the fall term, paying rent, and not thinking about Thorin. The light changes. Bilbo pushes his legs into motion and crosses the highway, trying to build up a rhythm. He makes it halfway up the hill he lives on before he has to hop off and push the bicycle the rest of the way, panting, grateful that it’s still early enough in the summer that evenings are cool. The
crickets are out in force, chirping unseen from every garden and hedgerow he passes. The trees in the
cemetery are in full bloom. When he gets back up to his attic, Bilbo goes through his shelves and
stacks all his library books by the door. Time to start checking things off the list.

On Thursday, when the sun is just about to set, the streets are quiet except for the occasional rumble
of a passing bus or the kids from the house on the corner shouting across the yard as they play tag.
Bilbo is sitting on a park bench across the street from the laundromat, waiting for the washing
machine to finish. He’s spent too many days in the same clothes. Too many days in the same skin,
too, but that’s harder to change. That requires more than five dollars in quarters and a free evening.

He kind of hates doing laundry here. When he was younger, laundry day was one of his
favourite times. He’d stand behind the house with an armful of wet clothing, following his mother
down the line as she pinned shirts up to dry. That memory is faded now—he can’t smell the
detergent, can’t feel the sunshine warming his face, the weight of the laundry in his arms. Much
clearer is the memory of doing his laundry with Thorin in the basement of Balin’s house, and
hanging their things over tree branches outside while they messed around with Ere and watched the
clouds go by. He doesn’t have a clothesline at his apartment. He strings things up across the shower
stall instead, and watches the walls grow mould. Just last week he’d dragged in the stool from the
kitchen and balanced atop it with a spray-bottle filled with bleach and a rag, scrubbing, scrubbing,
trying to get the walls back to white.

There are dogs in this park, too, a puppy and an older, rangy-looking dog roaming around the
green, nosing fallen flower petals. Sometimes Bilbo thinks it would be a blessing to have amnesia.
Perhaps then every single thing wouldn’t remind him of what he’s trying, increasingly desperately, to
forget. He’s spent the past days writing letters in his head, frustrated and isolated and swallowing
back so much regret he’s lost his appetite. The laundry takes just over an hour, half to wash and half
to dry; by the time he’s piling warm, clean sheets into his bag the stars are out, the moon a crescent
sliver over the lake. Bilbo can’t see it from the windows of his apartment. Does it look the same,
rising out over Erebor? The mountain is so far away it may a well be another planet, with different
stars, a moon of its own. He’s folding socks when the line of poetry comes to him, something about
“distant bodies eclipsing each other / with versions of gravity and light.” Which comes out on top? If
he and Thorin are binary stars, do their orbits ever intersect? Where is their center? That’s the thing
about orbits, isn’t it, that you circle and circle and never get anywhere? He’s had this thought before,
almost exactly. When was that? Is he still the same person now as he was then?

Well, no. He’s not lying on his back on a couch with Thorin on top of him, for one thing, so
that’s definitely not the same.

It hardly seems fair. But of course, life isn’t fair; life often doesn’t make sense and things
happen to you and you have to find a way to go on. He knows all of this as well as he knows his
17th century British poets. It doesn’t help. Nothing helps. It’s almost five in the morning by the time
he finally closes his eyes and the cotton blanket on his bed may as well be a boulder—it’s smothering
him just the same.

And Friday passes, and the weekend goes by, and Bilbo writes a sort of terrible final paper
on Hannah Arendt and storytellers and the communities they build up around them, bitter about
every second of it. He can’t tell stories anymore. They repeat and repeat and amount to nothing, so
he’s given up. He hates Arendt’s storytellers for being able to create meaning, for leading their
communities onward towards some eventual ideal paradise or redemption or whatever word she
chooses to use when he’s stuck in limbo. He hates how Arendt’s storytellers can only tell proper
stories about people who have already died. That’s not exactly hopeful. He thinks he’s probably
missing a lot of what the point really is, but it’s the twenty-eighth of May and this is long over-due. He doesn’t have time to think about it anymore. Running off into the blue—and the expression’s all wrong, Bilbo thinks, it’s red, it’s mountains, it’s not blue at all—after Thorin during revisions week has put him behind in more ways than one. He’s nearly there, nearly done, but the wide-open summer before him is paralysing. Three months with nothing to do but read sounds like a dream but these days he’s not at all good at being on his own. Take away even the barest structure of classes and reading group, and what does that leave him with? He has visions of himself sleeping till noon, never leaving the attic, becoming madder by the day. The coming summer should be restful. More than anything, though, it worries him. He doesn’t have a good track record with summers.

Bilbo spends the rest of Monday cleaning the attic. It doesn’t need it—he’s already dusted everything that can be dusted. Going through the motions gives him something to focus on, though, and the soreness that comes with washing the floors on his knees, the lingering ache, is just enough of a distraction when he is done, when he finally sits down and makes himself have something to eat. It’s been hours, hours upon hours; he doesn’t even know where the time went. His back is stiff, and his neck. His hands smell of lemon and pine instead of coffee and ink as he rubs tired muscles. It is not acceptable to break your own bones, Bilbo reminds himself, tracing his fingers along the ridge of his collarbone. But it’s so thin, so sharp—how hard could it be? He can remember Thorin’s fingers tracing the same path, rough and strong and always warm. Thorin, who is at least twice as strong as Bilbo, would have had no trouble. A little extra pressure, and then a crack. That’s all it would take.

But no, he’s not doing this anymore, he’s not thinking these sorts of thoughts.

Except that he is. It’s eleven minutes after three in the morning and he is sitting in front of the fan in his underwear, eating stale bread and choking on it. Marveling at the fragility of the human body. If you think about it, what are we, anyway? Skin and muscle and bones, blood and sinew. All of it so easy to destroy. The lines of his kneecaps are pale, his ankles, the turn of his wrists. His face is sunburned and peeling. From his awning window he can see the cars passing on the street, tires hissing in the rain. Lightning flickers across the sky, still far off, too far for the accompanying thunder to be heard. Bilbo presses his hands against his eyes, skin hot and damp beneath his fingertips. He would give just about anything to have someone to talk to. The only words that come, though, are poetry. Again with the poetry. He doesn’t even study poetry anymore, hasn’t properly read Eliot in years, and it is neither good conversation material nor particularly helpful, but still: “Here is a place of disaffection,” he says, voice quiet against the whirr of the fan; “Time before and time after in a dim light . . . strained time-ridden faces distracted from distraction by distraction.”

Perhaps that’s what he needs: a distraction large enough to drive him away from all of this. Washing the dishes didn’t help, nor did scrubbing the shower; his bookshelf has never been so organised, his sweaters so colour-coded, and still his thoughts keep turning to Thorin. He needs to forget about Thorin. He needs to forget about this year, these past nine months of his life. There are twenty-three, nearly twenty-four years’ worth of other moments for him to dwell on. Other people, other voices, other sets of hands to be imagining. The voice inside his head has not been entirely his own for too long—anytime he starts to do something stupid the register drops, the tone changes, suddenly he’s a smoker, telling himself off with rough, rounded vowels—and he needs to change that. Needs to become his own person again. That was the point of leaving, wasn’t it?

Trying to bury the slow, horrible thought that there was no point at all, Bilbo stands up and goes into the bathroom. Avoiding his eyes in the mirror as he brushes his teeth, he hums a made-up melody to fill the silence. He lies flat on his back in bed, on top of the sheets, so hot that he can hardly stand to have anything touching him. The fan barely stirs the air. It’s a long, quiet night.

It’s a lot of long, quiet nights. On and on and on. That’s the last bit of the Kierkegaard, that’s what he’s been avoiding.
Today a year ago. Let us see. My philosophy of life was that under my reserve I concealed my melancholy. It was my pride that I was able to do that, it was my determination to keep that up with all my might. I have come to wreck. Upon what? Upon the incompatibility of individual disposition . . . What is it that confounds my life? That to me the maxim becomes meaningless: *ultra posse nemo obligatur* [no one is obligated beyond what he is able to do]. What is my guilt? That I have ventured upon an undertaking I could not achieve. What is my fault? That I have made a person unhappy. In what way unhappy? In possibility . . . What is my punishment? To endure this consciousness.

Even if you asked him, point-blank, why he went, he wouldn’t be able to tell you. He just wakes up one morning and decides: he’s had enough. Enough avoiding things, enough aimless hoping, enough guilt. Clearly it isn’t working. Give even the most reserved person long enough and they will come to their limit. Likewise, he has found his: four weeks and four days, two hours, twelve minutes. There are seconds in that equation too, but rather than stand around counting those Bilbo pulls on a t-shirt and a pair of jeans, digs his sneakers out of the back of the closet, and goes down to the side of the house to unlock his bicycle. The ride up to the botanical gardens is a hard one; it feels longer from his time away, looks almost unfamiliar in the high summer colours. Last time he was here, it was flooded. Now it is spectacularly verdant, nearly overwhelming in its saturation. Bilbo climbs past the oaks, coasts down past the lilacs already dropping blossoms. Walking his bicycle over the footbridge he stops for a minute and watches the water rush past below. It’s running clear clue. Soon the lake will be warm enough for swimming. Soon, he will have been here an entire year. Sometimes you don’t realise how far you’ve come because you don’t have all the pieces and you don’t want them, but time passes just the same and you grow up by virtue of growing older.

So here he is, staring down Thorin’s garage and Balin’s house—both of them his, now—and still standing, still breathing. On the other side of the bridge. He goes into the garage first, both longing for some familiarity and trying to tackle the hardest thing first. The space is just as he left it just over a month ago, except for that flannel shirt of Thorin’s that had been tossed over the reading chair. That shirt’s in Bilbo’s closet now. Thorin’s not getting it back, even if he asks for it. Bilbo throws open the kitchen window and lets a month of stale air clear out as he leans over the sink and reminds himself to do what he came here to do, which is move on.

A line from one of the songs he’d heard in Elrond’s car kept sticking in his head once he was alone again, and he’d looked it up, tracked down the girl’s entire discography. He downloaded her newest album last night and now he goes over to Thorin’s stereo and hooks up the mp3 player, puts it on. A strong beat; that is what he needs now. And it fits his mood almost exactly, right from the start.

*Well, if it’s better that way,*

*you’d be the first to say so.*

*Maybe I wasn’t so sure,*

*but it doesn’t matter who shot first.*

*It’s not about what anyone deserves.*

*If you should ever feel bad,*
consider it a study

in just how far it is

between a hand you touch and an arm you twist.

It's not about what was attached to it.

He walks through the garage trailing his fingers over every surface, the worn fabric of the couch, the lines of dust on the bookshelves, the scarred wood of the workbench and the cool iron of the woodstove as the album plays on and Lauren O’Connell sings about holding on, letting go, burning a house down, about losing a place that once was yours. He is standing at the foot of Thorin’s bed when she swears and he flinches—he’s turned the volume up too high. But maybe this is what he needs, these words that aren’t his own but sometimes he wishes were. The sheets on the bed are rumpled. He could almost pretend someone had slept in them just a few hours ago, had risen and climbed down that ladder to make a pot of coffee, had eaten a lazy breakfast at the kitchen table. He could almost pretend he’d been in that bed as well. Would he have an easier time sleeping if he were sleeping here? It’s possible. But he’s not sure he can bear to test that theory and have it fail. A large part of him thinks it would fail. It seems a smarter move to strip the sheets, to bundle them neatly into the hamper in the closet and shut the door. Moving on. This is what it means. It means cleaning up after the fact, picking up and putting things away and closing them off. “I want something returned to me,” he hears sung, from down beneath his feet, and thinks that his life would be a hell of a lot easier if he could give that something a name.

By the time the album runs out, the garage no longer smells like Thorin. Bilbo’s packed up a crate of books and movies, a couple of miscellaneous things he’s taking with him. He doesn’t know when he’ll come back. There doesn’t seem to be much of a reason to. He’ll do the laundry, at some point, and fold it all back up, tuck it away on the proper shelves. But not today. Today he lashes the crate to the rack on the back of his bicycle and walks over to the house. His house. He owns a house now. That is something he never expected, not after he signed away the deed to his family home, the only house he thought he’d ever have and need. Does he need this one? Wouldn’t it be easier to just carry on living in his attic, close to campus, high up and closed in and finishing things where he started them? The part of him that looks relentlessly for symbolic meaning in everything is torn between wanting to complete the pattern that way and wanting to believe that Thorin left him the keys to the house for a reason, and that there will be something inside that will help him to make sense of all of this. That will return something to him. So he unlocks the front door and steps inside.

It is only the seventh time he’s been in this house, and four of those were to do laundry and the fifth and sixth were to raid the pantry. There are so many rooms he’s never seen in the old farmhouse. He’s reminded, walking through the front hall, that Thorin’s garage was once a barn, that both it and this farmhouse were built in the early 1900s and have the history of a century behind them. Balin cleaned out his house when he left. The rooms are largely empty, some furniture and a couple of paintings on the walls, shelves mostly filled with books or curios. He must have resigned his professorship when he left, too. This does not look like a place anyone was planning on returning to. Bilbo wonders if Balin was the one who told Thorin to leave him the keys, or if the persuasion went the other way around. It’s nicer to think of Thorin being the one to make the grand gesture—to say, “Look, I’m leaving you, but at least I’m leaving you a house”—and getting the keys himself. It is finally getting easier to think of him, instead of harder and harder with each passing hour. After that first aborted e-mail attempt, Bilbo wrote back, and then again, and again, but he hasn’t received any replies. The kinder answer is that all he has is Thorin’s university address, and now that he’s graduated Thorin doesn’t have access anymore, but that’s a lot of optimism to accept. What’s simpler, what seems more obvious, is that they have nothing left to say to each other.
It’s an illusion that shatters the second the telephone rings.

The noise is so unusual it actually takes Bilbo some time to realise what it is. Whose phone sounds like that anymore? He’s scrambling down the stairs and running across the kitchen, slipping in his socks on the tile floor, to where he saw an old rotary phone on a table next to the study entrance when the ringing stops and then he feels like an idiot. Why should anyone be looking for him here? It’s far more likely that it’s simply a wrong number, or someone looking for the history professor who used to live here. Isn’t it a little too convenient, that he should be there right when someone—Thorin, it was Thorin, his mind chants, and he tells it furiously to shut up—should call?

The phone rings again, jangling and bright. Bilbo picks up the handset without thinking and says, before he can stop himself, “Hello?”

“Bilbo?”

“Oh God,” Bilbo panics, and hangs up. Thorin sounded about as shocked as he currently feels. He wants to talk to Thorin. He doesn’t want to talk to Thorin. He wants to talk to Thorin. He wants to call back, but how in the world do you redial on a rotary phone?

It rings again as he’s looking at the numbers. “Please don’t hang up,” Thorin says, the second the call connects. His breath is loud in Bilbo’s ear. “Please, Bilbo. Don’t hang up.”

“I’m here,” Bilbo says, and all of sudden he can hardly stand. The cord on the phone is long enough for him to sink to the ground and so he does, pressing the handset to his ear as he leans back against the wall.

Thorin lets out a laugh that is more breath than sound. “Do you have any idea how good it is to hear your voice?” he asks.

“Some,” Bilbo says, and can’t help the smile that spreads across his face.

“I’ve been calling you for days. Why did you never pick up?”

“This is the first time I’ve come over here.”

“No, I’ve been calling your cell, for days. Weeks. I thought . . . I thought you didn’t want to talk to me anymore.”

“Oh,” Bilbo says. He twists the cord around his fingers and watches it spring back.

“I guess you still don’t.”

“No! Oh, no, I was just . . . My cellphone was stolen on the plane. So that’s why.”

“You could have got another one, called me—”

“I don’t know your number,” Bilbo says, and wonders why the words leave a sour taste in his mouth. Then he gets it. “Hang on. Why am I on the defensive again? Why are you calling, anyway? You’re the one who said goodbye.”

“Not because I wanted to! You— I was calling to apologise.”

“Was?” Bilbo stresses.

“Am. I am calling to apologise. Bilbo, I’m sorry.”
“Specifically?”

“What?”

“What are you sorry for, specifically?”

“A lot of things. Would you like a list?”

“Yes. Actually, yes, at this point, I would like a list.”

“You’re impossible,” Thorin says. He doesn’t seem angry, though. “Really? A list?”

“Yes.”

Thorin sighs, a rush of breath into the phone that sounds a lot like static. “Well, get comfortable, because it’s a long one.”

“I’m on the floor in the kitchen of my new house,” Bilbo tells him. “About an 8 on the comfort scale, I’d say.”

“Oh? Only an 8?”

“It would be a 9 if I was in a chair, but apparently Balin doesn’t believe in cordless phones.” That earns him a laugh. Bilbo tries to squash the pride he feels at having made Thorin laugh—it’s been a long time since he’s done it, but he is here to move on, and it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t. “Go on,” he prompts Thorin, and swallows the tightness in his throat.

“Right. Yeah. Did you want it chronologically? Or in orders of magnitude?”

“Stop stalling.”

“I’m sorry for the way we left things.”

Bilbo’s quiet. He’s testing a theory. What will happen, if he simply waits?

“For the way I left things. I shouldn’t have told you that you were lost. I shouldn’t have shouted at you at the airport. I shouldn’t have made you . . . stay with me, that last night. I’m not good at saying goodbye. I wasn’t ready to let you go.”

“Is Dís standing beside you and narrating in your ear?” Bilbo has to ask, breaking his silence.

“What? No!”

“Because this is all sounding very reasonable, and not at all like the man who threw me against the wall of his childhood home and tried to choke me one of the last times I was able to look him in the eye.”

“. . . I wish you wouldn’t say it like that.”

“You’d rather I lie?”

“Look, I know I have issues with my temper, all right, I know, and I’m sorry I hurt you that day, I shouldn’t have, God, I wish I hadn’t, don’t you know that?” Thorin’s voice is ragged, deep. He sounds like he’s been smoking.

“What about all the other days? Are they on your list, too? Because they’re on mine.”
“Are we making calendars now?”

“We’re comparing lives. Or, loves, I suppose. I’ve said it to you now, at least once. You have yet to say it back.”

“You didn’t say it,” Thorin points out. “You said you’d thought it.”

“And you can’t even say the word. It’s love, Thorin, it’s not a disease, it’s not going to kill you, why don’t you just say it?”

“It could. People have died for stupider things. For worse things.”

“People. Not you.”

“Is that what you’re worried about? Obviously, I’m still alive.”

“Obviously,” Bilbo says. His words are met with a moment silence. He frowns.

“Have you been talking to Elrond?” Thorin asks, after the silence has stretched long enough, his words sharp and clearly not pleased. “About this?”

“No. I did talk to him, and it was one of the most informative car rides I’ve had in a long time, but no, I haven’t been talking to him.”

“I asked him to go and pick you up.”

“Yes, I know. What do you want, a medal?”

“A little gratitude would be nice.”

“Thorin, do you have any idea what these last weeks have been like for me? Not knowing anything about you, and doing all that I could not to think about it because the not-knowing was torture? This is the first day I’ve woken up and haven’t immediately wished I was still dreaming. Do you know what I’ve been dreaming about? You, mostly, which is almost hilarious considering that there are people I miss so much more than I could ever miss you. Take, for example, my parents. I would give anything to see them again, you know, actually anything, but it’s never going to happen. They’ve done all they can for me, and they’ve died, and you, who have not died, who could still be doing so much more, for me, for your family, for so many people, are instead so wrapped up in your fucking mountain that you can’t even be bothered to tell me you’re properly sorry?” Bilbo nearly stuffs his fist in his mouth to stop himself from talking.

“Isn’t that what I’ve been doing? Telling you I’m sorry? What more do you want me to apologise for, being born? Believe me, there are plenty of people who’d like to hear that one. I just didn’t think to put you on that list.”

“I’m not! You’ve broken my heart, and I’d let you do it over again, and I’d still be glad to have met you. Which partially goes to show you that there’s something very seriously wrong with me, but you’re not taking responsibility and I want you to be sorry for that! I want . . . I need you to be sorry for that.”

“I’m sorry I broke your heart,” Thorin says. For words that Bilbo has waited what feels like forever to hear, they hardly move him.

“I’m sure you are,” he says.
“Has all of this been my fault? Is that what you’re trying to say, Mr. ‘Conversation is a Two-Way Street’? You remember that, right? That’s rich.”

“If I put this into an architectural analogy, will you understand it better? I’m the roof. You’re the support beams. The floor is everything else, all of this, daily life, and I was doing all right down there. I wasn’t where I belonged but we were both even surfaces and I was managing. You came along and lifted me out of that. For a while it was fantastic. I saw sunlight again. Then you started leaving, bit by bit, and I had to learn to balance. Now you’ve left entirely and I’m back on the ground only this time I had to fall to get there, so I’m in pieces. Get the picture?”

“Hmmph. Your structural foundations need work.”

“This isn’t a critique session! This is my life! Your life! Have a little care in what you do, that’s all I’m asking, because yes, all right, I’m still here, I’m putting things back together, but where have you gone? What are you doing? Is there even anything that can be a roof over you at all, up on that mountain of yours?” That’s the other side of the equation, and it comes out in a rush, and Bilbo winces after he’s said it because he should be worrying about himself, not about Thorin, but he can’t help it.

“I’m not on the mountain,” Thorin says.

“Where are you?”

“I’m at the farm. Dís’s place.”

“I thought you said she wasn’t feeding you lines.”

“She’s not. She and the boys are out.”

“Have you been staying with them??”

“For a few days, yeah.”

“And before that you were, what, sleeping out under the stars?”

“I told you I was going to rebuild Erebor.”

“Stick by stick, if necessary.”

“Stone by stone,” Thorin says. Bilbo can practically picture him pacing Dís’s kitchen, those faded white curtains blowing in the early afternoon wind.

“So you’re still determined to do it.”

“I have to.”

“Why?” Bilbo asks. “No one expects you to. And you don’t have to make every choice in your life just to prove other people wrong. I mean that honestly—no one expects you to, no one is asking it of you, so why can’t you just move on?”

“You’re asking me to get over it?”

“No. You never get over it, not progressively. I’m telling you that you have to make the choice. You have to be over it. Just . . . decide to.”

“It’s not that simple.”
“Sometimes it is,” Bilbo says. He doesn’t say, “Look at me, I did it,” because it’s not quite true yet, but the sentiment is there. He hopes it gets through.

“Fuck, Bilbo, I’m telling you it’s not. I can’t—I can’t let this go.”

“I thought you wanted us to work things out. Isn’t that what you said to me?”

“Yeah, but—”

“But what you want more is commit yourself to a project that won’t work out, so that when it fails you can claim the world was against you and carry on just as you have all these years, and if you and I were to work out that would ruin your losing streak, wouldn’t it?”

“What the hell are you talking about? Where did all that come from?”

“I’ve had a lot of time, these past weeks, to think about things. A lot of time to reflect.”

“Get a better mirror,” Thorin snaps. “No, look, that’s not true at all. I wanted you to be the one to break my losing streak, not—not continue it. Which is what you’re doing.”

“It’s what we’re both doing,” Bilbo says. “It’s called self-sabotage, Thorin. It’s nothing new to me, really. I don’t know why it took me so long to give it a name. But I know what it is now, and if I can’t make you stop it—and I don’t think I can—then at least I can take myself out of the target zone.”

“I never wanted to hurt you,” Thorin says, very quietly. It is, probably, the kindest thing he could say right now. It nearly makes Bilbo cry.

“I know,” he says, rubbing at his eyes. He’s wondered that a lot, these past weeks. Thorin must have known he was doing it, admitted as much when they were standing out in front of Dís’s farm, but the bigger question, the more important question, is whether or not it was deliberate. Thorin could be lying, of course. It has to be said that he does lie about a lot of things. But this one? This one feels real.

“It just sort of . . . happened,” Thorin continues. “And I could see myself doing it, and I couldn’t stop it, and when you still stuck around I thought, Wait, maybe he doesn’t feel it, maybe we can work out, maybe this can keep going. And it turned into a habit. I’ve never been good at caring for things without tearing them to pieces. So . . . it was always going to happen to you.”

“Always?”

“Almost from the moment I saw you, actually,” Thorin says, and lets out a short laugh. “You looked so ridiculous, in that stupid sweater, rambling about literary space . . .”

“You were drunk.”

“Hungover. Clarification: I was hungover. It was fucking early on a Saturday morning, what else would I be? That, and angry. But then you smiled and, I don’t know, I couldn’t help it. I was so ready to hate you, but I couldn’t.”

“And what about now?” Bilbo asks.

“I don’t hate you, Bilbo. I’m frustrated with you.”

“Well, that makes two of us. I’m frustrated with you as well. Thorin, I’m tired. I’m tired of
arguing with you, and I’m exhausted with . . . well, everything, to be honest.” Bilbo pulls his legs up to his chest. The right knee of his jeans is wearing thin. “If this is the way we’re going to leave it, that we just don’t work, then can we please just leave it? I need— I need a clean break. So that I know, and can start thinking about other things instead.”

“Instead of me?”

“Instead of you, yes. I’ve been trying, but it’s very hard.” Bilbo lays his cheek down to his knee. The threadbare denim is soft against his skin.

“What if . . . you stopped trying? What if you came back?” Thorin says, as if it were so easy. “Come back out here. We don’t have to leave it, we don’t have to argue, if you’re out here with me I swear this time—”

“What, this time it will somehow, miraculously work out? Because we’ve already ruined it, so we’ve paid our dues and now we get to start over? I don’t know if it works that way. And more than that, I can’t. I have at least four more years until I get my degree. I have to stay. I’ve worked so hard to get here. It’s the first thing I’ve been doing that’s entirely my own since my parents died. I can’t just give it up.”

“That’s it, though,” Thorin says. “Erebor is exactly the same. So you do understand why I have to do it. No one expects you to get a Ph.D., you’ve just decided that you have to do it. To prove something to yourself. Right? Well, this is my proof, Bilbo. I owe it to myself to give it everything I have, and I can’t stop until I’ve done that.”

There’s not much to say after that. They stay on the phone, just quiet breathing and background noise, the crickets in the trees outside on Bilbo’s end, a drawer opening and shutting on Thorin’s.

“So what happens four years down the line?” Bilbo finally asks, because one of them has to and it’s not likely it’s going to be Thorin, not anytime today. “Will you have enough proof by then?”

“I might,” Thorin says.

“Even if it doesn’t work out? Even if you fail?”

Thorin is quiet for a minute. Then he sighs. “I know what you want me to say. But I don’t think I can say it honestly right now.”

“Then I’d rather you didn’t say it at all.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“How well you know me,” Bilbo says, thinking of it as a joke even when it’s the truth.

“I’m sorry,” Thorin says, again. “I guess it would be easier if I didn’t.”

“Not easier,” Bilbo says. “Just . . . not the same. But we could talk ‘what ifs’ all day, and it wouldn’t change anything.” He lifts his head, straightens up. “And besides,” he says, looking up at the ceiling, at the room around him, at a house that’s now his own, “I think we’re even now.”

“We are? How?”

“I finally feel like I know you, Thorin Oakenshield.”
“Even though . . . After everything, you still want to?”

“Like I said, there’s almost definitely something wrong with me.” Bilbo laughs, and toys with the phone cord, winds it around his fingers, lets it snap back. “Almost definitely. But yes, I do.”

“So does that mean . . . Can I call you again?” Thorin asks, his words running over each other in a rush. “Here, if you move in, or . . . not here, if you get a new phone?”

“When, four years from now?”

“Yeah. Or— Or sooner, maybe.”

“Yes,” Bilbo says, and takes a deep breath. “Yes, all right.”

And so it is.

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Chapter End Notes

Well. Here we are. Hello, all of you who have come to this point with me, and thanks so much for doing so. It’s meant so much more to me than I can express to have you all waiting in the wings, so to speak, all this time. Your response to this story has been amazing, beyond what I could’ve dreamt of, and you’ve all been lovely sounding boards and listeners and supporters; you’ve pushed me to be better, to write faster (not lately, but at some points here and there), to believe more in what it is I’m doing or trying to do here. So thank you, sincerely and completely. I hope that the ending gave you at least some of the things you were hoping for. I actually have 2 other ones written, one darker and one lighter, and I decided to go with this one (the in-between one), for better or worse.

There are a few people I want to mention by name. In no particular order, and certainly not in an exhaustive list: ewebean, for the first (and still one of my favourite) piece of fanart I’ve ever received and many more following, along with a wonderful & exciting new friendship; bilboo, for writing such excellent reviews and becoming something of a partner-in-arms in the modern AU world, as well as an all-around lovely person and friend; Syxx, and diemarysues, and everyone else who commented way back on Chapter 1 and encouraged me when I was hesitant to continue this story and who have stuck with me this far, producing some really excellent conversations in the comments and on IM or tumblr; ohmaedhros/bodysnatch3r, another modern-AU partner-in-crime and a source of endless inspiration (including, on a very small-scale detail level, Dwalin’s surname in this chapter); lisbergal, for undertaking the massive task of translating this rambling journey into Russian (Russian! that is amazing, seriously amazing); izaveller, my fellow architecture student, for some truly gorgeous fanart and collages and music playlists; all of you who I want to list by name but really if you scroll through the comments section and see your name there, THANK YOU, you are a fantastic human, I appreciate you and wish all good things for you; Tolkien, of course, but that’s a given, as we all most likely would never have met without him; all the musicians, and all the writers whom I’ve quoted at liberty here (with more proper
acknowledgements in the related work with annotations here on Ao3); my university deserves a place on here, for funding me throughout all this, unknowingly underwriting the longest piece of fiction I’ve ever produced (yes, this is now officially longer than the novel that was my undergrad honours thesis); and anyone I’ve forgotten, I’m sure there is at least one of you, I’m sorry, and thank you.

This is an imperfect project, and has been a massive learning experience. At some point I may come back and edit things, move some things around. It won’t ever change enough that you’d need to re-read it, but just a heads-up in case you get the strange urge, sometime next year or so, to come back and read a bit of it and things aren’t exactly as you remember them being. It’s not you, it’s me. Etc.

Other things to look at:
1. in ridiculously exciting news, sansael made a video for this fic
2. bofursunboundbraids drew the guys
3. bilboo made this gorgeous moodboard; I want to hang it on my wall
4. pandoras-shoes is at work on a podfic, coming in (I think) November
5. there's a new 8tracks mix, courtesy of partyking-thranduill
6. some time ago, izaveller made another collage
7. my own cover for the last chapter
8. Yarra's version of Bilbo & his sweater
9. 8tracks mix from buckynats

The tag for this on tumblr is #HTW fic (two words), so if you post anything you want me to see, or if you’re curious about what I’ve posted, that is the place to look.

Thank you. You’re all wonderful.

Works inspired by this one: How the West Was Won and Where It Got Us: extras by stickman, How the West Was Won and Where It Got Us - The Podfic by Pandor4, Sur notre conquête de l'Ouest et ce qu'elle nous a apporté by stickman, Studying by hobbitystmarymorstan (DraloreShimare), At Work by hobbitystmarymorstan (DraloreShimare)

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