Take From Me My Lace

by pibroch (littleblackdog)

Summary

Bilba Baggins, popular model for a premier lingerie company, isn't always entirely convinced that the perks of the job are worth the hassle. Can't she even go to the shops without being recognized?

But Thorin Oakenshield doesn't seem to recognize her at all, even with her nearly-naked breasts forever plastered across half of London.

That's... a very refreshing change.

Notes

You can either thank or blame the lovely ewelock for this AU. Here's her original post on the subject, and my initial reply on my tumblr:

http://pibroch.tumblr.com/post/47106415644

Be aware that the link above contains definite spoilers for things to come.
Also, be sure to keep an eye on ewelock's tumblr; she's been working on some gorgeous art for this AU idea.
Bilba held still, but not frozen stiff, as the camera clicked away. The shoot that morning had been a bit more dynamic, the green screen behind her eventually going to be magicked into some verdant meadow (precisely the sort of scene one wouldn’t find in London in January). The huge whirring fan tousling her hair—a stand-in for the fresh spring breeze—had driven the usually unruffled Bombur utterly ’round the bend.

The fan had some advantages, however, especially under the glare of studio lights. Lying prone across a rather lovely toile upholstered settee, Bilba thought back fondly on those refreshing currents of air; she hadn’t sweated at all that morning. It was a very different story at the moment, even trussed up in little more than a few delicate scraps of lace and silk.

“My face is melting,” she announced to the room at large, still staring coyly to the right as Ori had instructed. “Melting right off. Puddle-face Baggins, they’ll call me.”

Nearby, she heard Bofur cursing quietly, and Ori paused in his glacially slow shuffle toward her,
settling into a squat and lowering his camera with a pensive frown.

“You’ve gone a bit—” He motioned with one hand, spindly fingers fluttering at his own forehead, then glanced over to Bofur with an apologetic shrug. “Shiny. Maybe. Maybe?”

Relaxing, Bilba shifted into a more comfortable, natural pose on the settee, and waited for Bofur to tromp over with his case. She didn’t have to wait long at all.

“I’ve no idea how, but you’re doing this on purpose. Up.” Sitting up, Bilba made room for Bofur to roll out his brushes across the cushions and kneel between her knees. His usual jovial grin was missing, replaced with a tired, but still vaguely amused half-smile. It had been a long day.

Taking her chin gently between his thumb and index finger, Bofur tilted her face under the lights, then back. “Buggering new powder isn’t worth a pinch of piss, for all it’s twice the price. I’ve half a mind to write a strongly worded letter.”

“At least you got off easy this morning.” Smiling, she squeezed her stocking-clad legs together, pressing against his ribs for a moment. “Why can’t there be a lovely spring breeze in a French parlor, too? Surely there are windows I could theoretically open.”

Bofur’s expression lightened a smidgen more, and he plucked up a fat brush and a pot of loose, pale powder. “Bombur’ll flip a table if he hears you say that, love. Turn this way so I don’t get any of this on your lashes.”

Turning as she was bid, Bilba closed her eyes as the powder was dusted lightly over her brow, swept the bridge of her nose, over her chin, and down to her cleavage. Bofur’s hand, broad and slightly rough with calluses, had migrated down to curl against her neck; it was a much more welcome sort of warmth than the studio lights. This close, he always smelled of Imperial Leather soap, tobacco, and spun sugar—today, there was the added tang of lemon, and a richer sweetness she recognised.

“Tell me you have sherbet lemons and I’ll adore you forever,” she said, eyes still closed, and felt Bofur’s lemony chuckle ghosting warm across her face.

“You’ll adore me forever anyway.” Very gently, doubtlessly leaving her makeup completely unmarred, Bofur tweaked the tip of her nose. “You may have sweets later on, but only if you’re very, very good for the rest of the afternoon, and stop bloody sweating.”

Finally opening her eyes again, Bilba demurely fluttered her ridiculously long false lashes and tossed in a pout for good measure. The rosy gloss he’d chosen was perfect for pouting.

“Stop that, you tart,” Bofur said, chuckling again, and gathered up his kit with practiced ease. “I’m immune to your wily ways.”

“Not nearly,” she shot back, though she did abandon the admittedly silly ingénue routine. It worked for the cameras, apparently, but reality was a different kettle of fish. The notion of flouncing and fluttering her way through life was laughable.

Taking her chin again, barely touching, Bofur gave her another critical study under the lights’ glare, humming thoughtfully. “Lovely,” he said at last, dimples furrowing deep as his grin spread. “As always, my darlin’. Now, let’s get this show on the road.”

In truth, neither of them was entirely immune to the charms of the other, but the flirting had never gone beyond playful banter. There was a mutual understanding, born partially of Bilba’s hesitance to complicate a relationship with someone woven tightly around her happiness in so many other ways (Bofur was by far the best makeup artist she had ever worked with, the only one she wanted to work
with if given a choice in the matter, and a dear friend besides).

And, more importantly than all that nonsense, there was the matter of Bofur being quite cheerfully spoken for already—he and Nori had been together on and off for the better part of a decade, but the past three years living together had settled the pair of them into one of the most adorably comfortable couples Bilba had ever seen. She would never dream of begrudging Bofur a moment of that, and any torch she carried for him was more of a homey hearth fire, with coals banked low and steady.

Speaking of Nori, who was also a charming bloke in Bilba’s estimation, their esteemed technician was currently balanced up on a ladder to tweak one of the large side lamps, fiddling with the damnable lights even as Bofur packed up.

“How’s that,” he called down to his brother, and Ori clicked a few test photos while Bofur retreated out of shot.

Ori was biting his lip, shifting between peering at Bilba through the camera and with his naked eyes, while Bilba moved back into position partly on her stomach, showing off the ruffly bottom of her knickers. The hair piece Bombur had woven in to fill out her curls to subtly opulent volume had begun to itch a bit, but the lacy white babydoll was more comfortable to lounge about in than the buster from that morning.

“Better,” Ori said, and Bilba focused on cool, refreshing thoughts. “Just a few more, and then we’ll wrap.”

Letting the smooth, milky fabric slide over her hands, Bilba adjusted the babydoll absently on its cushioned hanger, and offered Bifur a wide, toothy smile when he came trotting over.

“These new pieces are gorgeous,” she said. “Very elegant.” Bifur acknowledged the compliment with a pleased glance and sound that was partway between a grunt and a sigh, then vanished as suddenly as he’d arrived, zipping off so quickly that the thick, piebald braid of his hair whipped off his shoulders.

Bilba wasn’t insulted in the least—she hadn’t known Bifur before the car accident that had put that jagged white scar across his scalp, gruesomely parting his salt and pepper hair, but she had worked with him for a number of years since. Bofur claimed his cousin had always been a bit eccentric, as creative types sometimes were, and was simply a bit quieter now. There had been complications early on, Bilba had been told: aphasia had taken intensive therapy to overcome, and the man still suffered from a stutter that made him disinclined to verbosity, a few barely noticeable physical tics, and occasional migraines. But considering everything, both Bofur and Bombur insisted that Bifur’s recovery had been remarkable.

Despite having no frame of reference, Bilba was inclined to agree based solely on her opinion of Bifur: he was an amazing designer, with a flair for stunning, flattering, and impossibly comfortable lingerie, and he had his own peculiar sort of politeness that never bothered her overmuch. She had nothing but glowing praise for him, even if he did occasionally dart off in the middle of conversations.

Doing up the rest of the buttons of her cardigan, more than a little pleased to be wrapped up in mossy green wool and her jeans again after the whole day in various skimpy skivvies, Bilba left the rack of
teddies, bustiers, and wispy slips with one final stroke of her fingers across the supple fabrics. One of her jumper pockets was stuffed with sherbet lemons, and she plucked one out as she moved off to gather up her coat and her bag, tossing the crinkly wrapper in a bin on her way by and popping the sweet in her mouth. A few curls of hair had managed to escape her hasty bun already, and she tucked the wayward tendrils behind her ears.

It had been drizzling when she’d come in to the studio that morning, chilly and damp, but anyone who had been outside in the past few hours claimed the weather had cleared up. It was undoubtedly still rather brisk outside, however, and Bilba anticipated being glad for her gloves and her scarf on the walk to the tube. Twiddling a wave at Bofur and Nori as she bundled herself up, Bilba shrugged into her brown peacoat, then wound her long, saffron coloured scarf ‘round her neck, turning her collar up a bit to press the fleecy knit closer.

“Have a good weekend, darlin’,” Bofur called, giving her a jaunty wave in return, while Nori nodded and smiled. Ori was already off to pour over the photos, Bombur was elbow deep brushing out wigs, and Bilba was keen to get going so she could get to the shops and pick up something for supper. Slinging her satchel strap across her chest, Bilba was nearly out the door when a firm hand around her elbow brought her up short, almost making her squawk with the shock of it.

She took a deep breath, turning just in time to catch hold of the box Bifur was pressing into her arms. It was glossy silver cardboard, with the letters “GG” embossed on the lid in fluid, twisting script. It stood for “Garnished & Gilded” but Bilba had rarely heard it called anything but “Gigi’s” by the public and even the media, and simply “Gandalf’s” by those involved in the company.

Bilba took the box, which was about the size of an A4 sheet of paper and as thick as four fingers, then raised her brows at Bifur. “What’s this, then?”

Beginning to open it before she even asked, Bilba found familiar silk and lace neatly folded inside—the white babydoll, with its gossamer fine flyaway and intricate black embroidery around the edges of the soft, unpadded cups. Even the panties were there, high-cut briefs with the lush rows of frilly lace across the bottom that she not-so-secretly thought was utterly delightful. And this particular set, just like every bit of lingerie she wore to photo shoots and publicity events, had been painstakingly tailored by Bifur to fit her every curve.

One of the very best perks of this job was the bespoke knickers, to be perfectly honest, and even the regular GG line was absolutely top quality. The nicest undies from Victoria's Secret couldn't hope to compare.

“F-f-for you to keep,” Bifur said, his voice forever gravelly, but now very warm as well. He turned his head slightly, jaw flexing in a way she knew would help stave off the worst of the stuttering for a sentence or two, then looked to her again. “And don't argue like you do. You know we can’t sell altered pieces. You wearing it is a b-better fate than being shut up in a cupboard. I make 'em to be worn.”

“Bifur, I—I—” Closing the lid again, willing to bet that the man had tucked the ultra sheer stockings inside as well, Bilba swallowed back all the perfectly legitimate arguments she knew Bifur wouldn't even pretend to acknowledge. “Just... thank you. This is too much, you know.”

Scoffing, Bifur shook his head and gave her elbow a friendly squeeze.

It wasn't until she was out of Studio Ri and standing on the pavement (it had, indeed, stopped raining, but the air had a bitter edge), that Bilba realized Bifur's kindness had condemned her to spending the tube ride home carrying a very recognizable lingerie box just slightly too large to fit inside her satchel. There would probably be at least a few posters of the holiday campaign still
lingering about, with her baps on full display in tasteful red satin, or pushed up to her throat in that spangled gold corset and garter set. Toting about this bloody box would simply make it easier for potential gawkers to put two and two together.

“Bugger,” she snarled quietly, pulling on her gloves with more force than strictly necessary. “Taxi!”

There was still the shopping to do— it had been a terribly busy week trying to get the first leg of the spring campaign ready for publication, and her cupboards were shamefully bare. Unwilling to spend another evening munching on pickles and tinned soup, Bilba tamped down her reservations and had the cabbie drop her off at the Tesco just down the street from her flat.

The very first thing she did when she got inside was to grab a trolley, even if she would've only needed a basket, and put both the box and her satchel inside it. And if she grabbed a completely unnecessary bag of crisps on the way by, tossing them in to obscure the box as much as possible, that was her business.

She made it almost completely through her list— just a few basic essentials, some fresh fruit and greens, and chicken for tomorrow— before she noticed the first sign that she'd been recognized. Just some teenage girls loitering around the yoghurt, but Bilba saw one of them freeze in a double take, elbowing another of her friends before the lot of them started whispering. Snatching up a tub of vanilla with probiotics, Bilba wheeled out of the aisle as quickly as possible without breaking into a run.

Getting the hell out of the store was worse; even when she tried to go through the self-checkout, there was still the one magazine turned backwards in its display, with her tousled head and arched back plastered across it in full-colour.

Oh for god's sake.

“Oh excuse me, miss? It's just— I mean, are you—” The uncertain, masculine voice behind her made Bilba turn her head before she thought better of it. There stood a young man in his Tesco uniform, looking nearly as red in the cheeks as his crimson shirt. “Oh my god, it's you!”

Oh for god's sake.

Chapter End Notes

As a special note about Bifur: I actually struggle with a stutter, though mine is not caused by head trauma. It feels really odd, but good, to explore a character working through a similar speech disorder.
Bilba knew, theoretically, that there were people who honestly enjoyed going to the gym. She had met people who had claimed to love it—the exercise, the sense of accomplishment, the socialization—and most of the people she saw slogging away on the machines every week seemed content enough. Some of them even smiled while they did their circuits, chattering about how many kilometres they’d done that day, or how many reps, or what have you.

She had seen these nutters with her own eyes, and she honestly had no idea what to make of them. She settled, more often than not, for nodding encouragingly whenever their passions for public fitness regimes came up.

It did come up, no matter how much she tried to avoid it; there was only so often a woman could go to the same gym before she became a regular. Only so many times she could workout over the course of a week before people started making assumptions that she liked being there, for whatever insane reason.

Bilba did not like going to the gym. It was, in her estimation, equivalent in pleasure to a visit to the dentist—not fun by any definition, but generally kept to a low simmer of necessary evil.

And yet, to the gym she went, four days a week like clockwork.

Saturday was usually Pilates and a short circuit around the machines for cardio and strength training. This particular Saturday, Bilba had resigned herself to spending a bit longer on the elliptical and doing a few more sets of crunches for good measure—she had been flustered enough at Tesco to actually buy the crisps, despite not really wanting them. Then, as these things sometimes went, she ended up finishing the whole bag while catching up on the episodes of QI she’d recorded before Christmas, and hadn’t had a chance to watch yet.

The Tesco lad, Alfie, had been newly hired and probably no more than seventeen. He’d also fallen all over himself, blushing and stammering and offering to pack up her groceries for her until the manager had swept in to shoo him off. All things considered, it was far from the most uncomfortable scenario she’d ever found herself in when being recognized, but Bilba had still felt her own face growing warm, especially since she hadn’t been able to leave the store before the evening crowd had noticed something awry and the nosy gawkers had closed in.

She wasn’t ashamed of her job—most days, she liked it well enough. Somedays, she even loved it. It paid the bills with enough left over for some lovely creature comforts, it allowed her to work with wonderful people, and it fed her dreadful addiction to fancy knickers. There was no doubt in her mind that she was incredibly lucky to have fallen into it as she did, evolving somehow from a part-time lark of a job for a family friend to help pay her way through university, to a internationally recognized and rather glamorous career.
All that aside, however, it would have been rather refreshing to pop out to the shops without being recognized, especially recognized for more than her face. It could get rather awkward, a titch embarrassing, and on especially inappropriate occasions, reactions did sometimes cross the line into obscene. On those (blessedly) rare days, Bilba found herself seriously considering other lines of work, but the good still vastly outweighed the bad, and so she stayed.

It wasn't as though a change of career was guaranteed to escape the occasionally rude bastard making lewd comments about her body, or even trying to take liberties uninvited and unwanted. Bilba wasn't certain there was a woman alive lucky enough to avoid that entirely, from librarians to police officers, politicians to shop clerks, or anything between and beyond.

Most librarians and shop clerks didn't have to stand at the tube station beside an eight-foot poster of their own bottom in skimpy lace knickers, however.

It was currently mid-morning, a relatively quiet period wedged neatly between the early morning rush and the afternoon crowd at the gym, and Bilba was pushing herself through fifteen extra minutes on the elliptical, nearly ready for her cool down. A few pieces of her hair had come loose from her bun, sticking wetly to her neck, while her dark red t-shirt was plastered against the small of her back and her chest.

Gandalf's long-standing sentiment for his advertisements was natural is beautiful. Ori, or any other photographer she had ever worked with on a GG shoot, was always instructed to treat any and all photoshopping with the lightest possible touch. There wasn't any magical thinning of her limbs, nor any inches shaved from her waist or her face; the woman posing in garter and bustier on the eleventh page of Glamour looked almost exactly like the woman who peered out at Bilba from her bathroom mirror (not counting the makeup and hair, softened lighting, and Ori's excellent eye for composition). The most significant changes were always the removal of her smattering of ruddy freckles and the faint stretchmarks she had on her hips, and Bilba didn't regret the loss of either.

She had learned, over the years, that Gandalf's proclamation about keeping her photos as true to life as possible extended farther than she had ever reasonably anticipated; it only took one shoot after a holiday in Greece and the subsequent glossy proofs of her wine-and-pasta potbelly in all its glory to convince her that committing to a stricter gym routine was the easiest course of action. She was curvier than some other models, and both she and Gandalf preferred it that way, but her own vanity did occasionally rear its head.

Gandalf's reaction to the potbelly photos had been to smile beatifically, with that damnably sincere twinkle in his bright blue eyes, and assure her that she was perfectly lovely, my dear. He'd actually seemed pleased.

At least she didn't have to worry overmuch about the inevitable creep of age; Gandalf had already informed her, without prompting, that she would have a place with Garnished & Gilded for as long as she wished, in whatever capacity. He simply tossed a lifetime of employment security in her lap with hardly a care in the world, and damn that batty old sod, she knew he meant every word.

Grabbing her towel, Bilba slowed her workout to a stop, hopping off the machine and slinging the plush terrycloth around the back of her neck. Catching her breath, she wiped down the machine absently, already thinking ahead to a refreshing shower and a pop down to her usual cafe for lunch.

Lost in thought, she didn't entirely realize she was staring at a person, rather than simply off into space, until a pointed throat-clearing shook her back to attention.

“Oh god,” she said, eyes snapping up and away from the very toned, well-muscled arm that had been the focus of her unintentional gawking, as gleaming biceps and triceps flexed beneath the
nearby pull-up bar. The man attached to that arm was levelling her with a cool, unblinking look that she couldn't read at all, holding himself up off the floor with what appeared to be minimal strain, and she was suddenly so very relieved that her workout had put a flush in her cheeks already.

The man wasn't someone she'd seen around the gym before— she would have remembered that face, handsome and distinct as it was, not to mention the long, well-turned-out lines of his body under that sleeveless top and dark mesh trousers. The combination of those steely eyes, with that sharp jut of a nose, and a swath of dark stubble should have been illegal, or at least required a bloody permit.

*Permit to be outrageously gorgeous and fit while Bilba Baggins puts her foot in it. Issued to one Handsome Gym Stranger; never expires.*

“I didn't— I wasn't—” Slapping her hand over her mouth, Bilba considered whether tossing her towel over her head and fleeing toward the ladies' locker room was an appropriate course of action.

She knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the sort of expression she'd been wearing while staring at this man. Bofur called it *ravishingly ravenous*; it was, apparently, a particular look that stole across her face whenever she got on to thinking about good food. There were occasions when Ori, flushed pink, would ask her to focus on supper during a shoot, just to get the proper sensual expression he was aiming for.

She'd been thinking about a delicious turkey and avocado sandwich this time, with juicy fresh tomato. She'd been *so hungry* for it.

“Oh god,” she said again, sliding her hand up to her sweat-damp, burning cheek. The man kept hanging there, not speaking or granting her the mercy of looking away. The weight of his pale, slate blue gaze was incredibly intense, and Bilba wanted desperately to sink into the floor. “Oh god, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to stare at all— I was just... I was thinking about lunch, and got distracted. Sorry, sorry again.”

“It's fine,” the man said, *finally*, his glance flickering away, releasing her like a snapped elastic band, and his arms tightening again as he lifted his chin above the bar without a hint of quivering. He made it look so easy, but then again, with those shoulders...

Thank goodness, she was free to scurry off as quick as her sore legs would carry her, and sod her stretching. She wasn't about to loiter around at this point, heading straight for the showers instead. With any luck at all, she might be able to scrub off this feeling of her skin being *on fire* with the force of her flush, from the roots of her hair to the soles of her feet.

As squeaky clean as possible from gym showers— she did, and always would, vastly prefer the particulars of her own bathroom, thank you kindly, but she had no intention of stepping foot outside this gym without rinsing off a bucket or two of sweat first— Bilba changed back into her jeans and blouse. She left her cardigan unbuttoned against the lingering warmth suffusing her from the workout and the water, and replaced squeaky trainers with her favourite brown loafers, the leather polished to a sheen. Her hair was still a little damp, curling loose around her shoulders, but not too wet to brave the chill outside if she tucked it under her coat collar.

She hadn't really considered the possibility of running into Handsome Stranger on her hurried way out, which was a silly omission in hindsight. As her treacherous luck would have it, she very nearly
ran into him in a literal sense, tripping over her own feet when she turned a corner by the main desk and there he was, filling up a glossy clear water bottle at one of the fountains.

His hair was spiking wet, whether with sweat or water she didn't know for certain, but the deep blue of his shirt had gone darker under his arms and around his neck. He wasn't quite as impossibly tall as he'd seemed hanging from that bar, but an inch or two shy of six feet still put him nearly a foot taller than her. He certainly held himself with a sizable sort of presence, all shoulders and quiet gravitas, and Bilba felt her stomach flutter foolishly when he glanced over at her fumbling.

“Hello again,” she managed, fingers worrying along the strap of her satchel, then swallowed when the man said nothing. His eyebrows crept ever so slightly upward, but that was the extent of his acknowledgement.

After one awkward, silent moment, Bilba gathered herself, taking a deep breath and lifting her chin. She even found the wherewithal to smile, just a little upturn of her lips, but true; she was more embarrassed about behaving so embarrassed, anyway.

“Right,” she said, calming. “Well, I hope you have a lovely day.”

And on that relatively high note, Bilba darted widely around him, making her way towards the large glass doors that led out into the chilly winter streets. She was determined not to turn back for one last peek, not willing to risk being caught out again, when a deep, slightly Northern accented voice called out from some distance behind her.

“Enjoy your lunch.” After that, Bilba couldn't help but look back for just an instant; the man didn't look cheerful, precisely, but the corner of his fine lips was quirked up ever so slightly as he watched her go.

Watched her face, not her bottom, which was a very important distinction.

Offering wordless thanks with an unusually clumsy little wave, Bilba hugged her coat a bit tighter and slipped outside, very aware that he could still see her through the glass as she paced off down the pavement. If he cared to look.
okay, so I've got to say: please, nobody get too excited about the speed of these updates, or grow too accustomed to it. I'm on a roll, but work/life will definitely throw a wrench in that too soon. It'll probably settle to about a chapter a week-ish.

For now though, here is Chapter 3!

And here is another gorgeous piece of Bilba art, this one by got-dem-kili-fili-feels: sexy Bilba this way!

Claiming that she didn't spare another thought for Handsome Gym Stranger would have been a lie of immense proportions, but Bilba liked to imagine she had put him mostly out of her mind after a day or two. He was nowhere to be seen when she trotted back into the gym on Monday morning (and yes, she had kept half an eye out, ostensibly to avoid another unexpected run-in); by Wednesday, with not a single sign of him, she was waffling somewhere between relieved and disappointed.

A brief reshoot of some pastoral corset photos flew by without incident, then a day of fittings with Bifur and tea with Gandalf on Thursday afternoon. No chiseled Northerners made surprise appearances, popping out from around corners.

By Friday, she was fighting a resurgence of anxiety, buzzing under her skin like tiny bees. Tomorrow, if he wasn't at the gym, she would write the whole thing off as a fluke. One more day, and then she was finished with this silliness.

Friday was, of course, also the day that she was splashed by a cab walking home from from a jaunt to the bookshop.

She knew better than to walk so close to the kerb after three days of rain, but there was a group of excited tourists snapping group photos of themselves overtaking nearly the entire span of the pavement, and beyond politeness' sake, Bilba didn't fancy taking the risk of being recognized and coaxed into an impromptu photo-op. She’d discovered that keeping her hair pinned up often helped maintain a little more anonymity, but she’d decided on a whim to leave it loose around her shoulders that morning. Her curls gone a bit wild from the dampness in the air and the briskness of the wind, fluffing up in some places. She’d caught sight of it in the bookshop window, and it was unfortunately reminiscent of Bombur's preferred “bedhead” look for some shoots; the clerk at the shop already knew who she was, but she’d gotten a curious glance or two from other patrons as she browsed.

She'd stopped being especially keen on unexpected photos with the public the first time her cousin Lobelia had emailed her a link to a backhandedly barbed article about Gigi's in the Daily Mail, complete with a few unflattering shots of her posing with some people outside a pub, where she'd been having a bite of lunch with Gandalf. It had been the height of summer, with the midday sun glaring down to show every shadow of her face in deep relief, her nose still ruddy from allergies after a photo shoot the day before with a Persian cat, and to top it all off, she’d had spinach in her teeth.
The fact that it had been Lobelia crowing about it (she'd cc'ed the email to half the family, of bloody course), had made the whole mess a thousand times worse.

Slipping around the tourists' boisterous chattering and laughter, Bilba was in perfect position to take the full brunt of the icy, filthy spray as the cab pulled up to drop off its fare— somehow, the tourists managed to avoid more than a few muddy flecks on their artfully distressed anoraks, and were striding off in a giggling, jostling pack an instant later, oblivious to Bilba's situation.

Her coat suffered under the deluge, gritty water beading unattractively on the warm brown wool, and she had unfortunately decided on a pleated tweed skirt and sage green tights to ward off the cold that morning. The tights fared worse than the coat, and offered less protection than her jeans might have done, soaking through in an instant. The feel of frigid water splashing up under her skirt was decidedly awful.

The only speck of luck in this whole mess was the fact that her new books were likely safe and dry inside her satchel (though the satchel itself was speckled with water, the leather had been weatherproofed).

“Bugger!” Stomping her feet ineffectually, as though she could kick the shockingly cold water off, Bilba looked down at the state of herself with hopeless frustration. This wasn't simply winter slush water, it was London kerb water, and she immediately felt the need for a long, piping hot bubble bath. After she'd had an equally hot shower. “Buggering, blasted, bugger! Shit!”

The back door of the cab flew open, and Bilba only had one flabbergasted moment to register Handsome Gym Stranger unfolding himself onto the pavement before he was wrenching the front door open as well, exposing the driver to Bilba's wide-eyed, sodden stare.

“Apologize to her,” Handsome Gym Stranger snapped, in tone of such firm, fierce command that the cabbie didn't even hesitate before babbling out how deeply sorry he was, withering under the other man's glare.

Holding up a placating hand, ignoring the squishy feeling in her loafers, Bilba shook her head. “No, it's fine; it's all right. It was an accident. It's fine.”

Handsome Gym Stranger scoffed harshly, pulling a few notes from his wallet and tossed them at the cabbie, before closing both car doors with just slightly more force than necessary. Then he turned, stepping back from the kerb as the cab pulled ever so cautiously away, and regarded Bilba with a lingering frown.

“It was an accident that could have been avoided if that idiot had been paying attention,” the man said, stripping off his dark grey overcoat with apparently no care at all about the weather. The navy blue button down shirt beneath fit perfectly across his wide chest, and Bilba couldn't help but remember the curves of muscle hidden beneath his sleeves. “Here.”

He held out his coat, stretched open for her to step inside it easily, and Bilba turned around to accept the offer before she could even begin to think better of it. Her own coat was wet and filthy, true enough, but the wool would have kept her warm enough for the walk even sopping. Still, the Handsome Gym Stranger's coat draped down past her skirt hem and below her knees, which was something her chilly thighs certainly appreciated. When he settled the heavy fabric over her shoulders, Bilba may have shivered a tiny bit— this was exactly the sort of ridiculous situation that was much more at home in a cheesy rom-com than in real life, and she was not Jennifer Aniston.

“I want to buy you a hot coffee,” the Handsome Stranger said from behind her, his hands resting for just a moment longer on her upper arms, before he retreated and she spun around again, swimming in
ample folds of charcoal fabric. His coat smelled of pine, bergamot, and man, with the faintest musk of what she thought might be woodsmoke; she did not bury her nose in it, even if it was the very definition of cosy and inviting. “Unless you’d rather go, get cleaned up and all. Do you need a cab?”

What she needed, in nearly equal measure, was to have coffee with Handsome Gym Stranger, but also to get *eau de London* washed off. Her legs felt gritty, even under her tights, and that was just disgusting.

“I need to get cleaned up,” she admitted after a brief internal struggle, just barely resisting the urge to curse again, and motioned further along the street. “But my flat is just down here, not far at all. No need for another cab, even if this one is a bit less sloppy. Thank you very much, though.”

Glancing down the direction she pointed, the man let loose a quiet hum from some place deep in his chest, running one hand over his clean-shaven jaw. Bilba wasn't certain which level of grooming she preferred... the stubble before had been very nice to look at, but Bofur would never let her hear the end of it if she waltzed in with a case of beard-burn for him to cover up.

Oh god, she hadn't just thought about beard-burn. Oh god.

“Would it...” The man began to say, then paused, unaware that he'd just shaken Bilba free of her spiral into private humiliation. “If you'd rather I didn't, I'd understand of course, but I would like to walk you home. If I may.”

The fact that Handsome Gym Stranger didn't *look* like a psychotic murderer was a point in his favour, but Bilba didn't often let random strangers know where she lived, either— she had learned that lesson early on, after a few creepy “fans” began hanging around her doorstep and digging through her bins, but that was three flats ago. When push came to shove, however, she found that she couldn't quite forget that wisely ingrained habit of caution so easily, even for *painfully* Handsome Gym Stranger.

“I appreciate the offer, but I'll be all right.” She smiled, hoping to soften any unintended insult, but the man looked gently resigned rather than upset. “Honestly, thank you very much. If I wasn't currently a health hazard, I'd be more than happy to take you up on that coffee, and even give you a proper hug for being such a gentleman.”

She was not imagining the way his gaze snapped to her face when she said that, nor did she think she was imagining the curious glint flashing in those hawk-sharp eyes. It may have been hope, perhaps even *interest*, but she wasn't certain enough (or tidy enough, at the moment) to be any bolder than she'd been already.

“Keep the coat,” Handsome Gym Stranger said, before she had even begun to offer it back to him, and that thin half-smile she recalled from nearly a week before was inching its way back onto his face. “Until tomorrow, at least. Will I see you at the gym again?”

“If you're there tomorrow morning, yes.” Fidgeting with the smooth lining of the coat, pleased that the size of it would hide the worst of her squirming, Bilba extended one hand out into the cool afternoon air, remembering at very nearly the last moment to tug her glove off. “I'm Bilba.”

Handsome Gym Stranger wasn't wearing gloves to begin with (there was a pair folded inside one of his coat pockets, smokey grey leather lined with cashmere, but she wouldn't find them until she got back to the flat). His hand, when it closed around her own, was dry and surprisingly warm, despite the weather.

“Thorin,” he replied; his grip was steady, and sat very comfortably between firm and polite. He
wasn't treating her hand like a soap bubble ready to burst at a single touch, and neither was he
channelling his unbridled machismo into crushing her bones.

Thorin. Somehow, it suited him, she thought.

“I'd like to consider that coffee invitation rescheduled rather than refused,” she said with a small,
twinkly grin of her own, giving his large hand a brief squeeze; she was, apparently, not quite finished
being bold. “If that suits you as well.”

“That suits.” Their shared grip broke mutually, if a bit slower than an average handshake might have
done, and Bilba curled her arm back inside the warmth of Thorin's coat, tugging it closed around
herself.

Taking an aborted half-step closer, Thorin reached out towards where her elbow might be beneath
the coat, stopping well shy of actually touching her. “You're shivering.”

“Yes, well, I'm dashed cold.” Oh, that was lovely. In an effort not to curse in front of the man—
because bugger it all, she was so damned cold, wet, and uncomfortable, but she was trying to make a
better impression than creepy-staring-sweaty-woman or covered-in-muck-woman-who-swears-like-
a-dockworker— Bilba had succeeded in sounding like her Gran.

Licking her lips, and just barely managing not to pull a face when she tasted a hint of dirt, she tried
again. “I'm just... yes. Yes, I'll be off now, before I freeze solid. I'll bring this back—” Fluttering the
coat a bit, and immediately regretting it as a draft billowed inside, Bilba shifted in her sloshy shoes.
“Tomorrow. Unless, I mean, it's probably gotten filthy; did you want me to have it dry-cleaned, or
—”

“Don't worry about that.” Shaking his head, Thorin stepped aside and swept his arm out, as if
holding open a door for her, or motioning for her to precede him. “Go on before you catch a chill.”

“Right. I'm off.” Taking a breath, Bilba started off towards home, turning a slightly backwards as she
went. Thorin was watching her go, attention on her face again (though she would admit that any hint
of her figure was drowning in his coat).

“Thank you again, Thorin,” she called back, before she'd gone too far at all; Thorin dipped a low
nod in her direction, while his eyes stayed fixed on her, looking as deep and greyish as the overcast
sky.

Bilba bit her lip as she kept on squeaking and squishing down the pavement with every step, fingers
twisting in borrowed wool.
Chapter 4

Chapter by littleblackdog

Chapter Notes

This is my inspiration for Thorin's coat.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Her mobile chirped the moment she slid her key in the door of her flat, with the unobtrusive little trill of her text alert muffled somewhere deep inside her satchel, but Bilba didn't bother fumbling for it until she'd gotten inside properly. Locking the door behind herself, she toed off her sodden shoes before taking a single step off her entrance rug; the feet of her tights, where the water had pooled in her shoes, were stained a dismal muddy grey. It was a darker shade of the same dirty splashes that crawled up her calves, disappearing under the hem of Thorin's coat.

Thorin's coat.

It was incredibly embarrassing, even alone in her own flat, but Bilba finally gave into the urge to press her face into the soft fur collar, sniffing deeply.

“Oh, that's very good,” she mumbled, leaning back against the door for a long, completely undignified moment before forcing herself to grow up, damn it. She shrugged out of the coat, noting with relief that the lining hadn't suffered too horribly from being pressed up against the mess of her, and hung it carefully on the coatrack tacked up nearby, spreading it across three pegs to help it dry.

Her own coat was another matter, mottled like the world's ugliest camouflage and already starting to stink as only wet wool could. Unbuttoning it quickly, Bilba dropped it in a pitiful pile beside her shoes and satchel— it would have to be dry-cleaned, regardless, and she wasn't about to hang it next to Thorin's coat and risk spreading the mire. Her jumper had survived unscathed, and in an attempt to keep it that way, she pulled it over her head, tossing the fine oatmeal-coloured knit over to the safety of the sofa.

Standing in her flat, barely inside the door, Bilba considered the merits of rushing to the bathroom and diving immediately into the shower, clothes and all, but dismissed that notion rather quickly. Instead, she steeled herself for the unpleasant task of peeling herself free of wet, gritty tights, balancing against the door when she needed to, then unzipped her skirt as well, shimmying it off her hips and letting it drop.

Stripped down to her knickers and bra— an elegantly simple cream silk and black lace set she had originally worn for a shoot last autumn, now without the matching garter belt and stockings— Bilba ignored every civilized instinct that railed against leaving her filthy clothes just laying there, opting for an immediate shower to chase the chill from her bones. The floorboards felt warmer than her bare feet, and the water that soon chugged up into her bath was warmer still, steam rising quickly as she adjusted the taps.

She spent unhurried ages the shower, first scrubbing herself pink but mostly just standing under the hot spray, and emerged forty-five minutes later, blessedly warm and bundled up in her cosiest dressing gown. It was plush yellow towelling, not nearly as fine as the patchwork masterpiece Bifur
had put together on one of his whims (fashioned from luxurious scraps he'd found around his workshop, and gifted to Bilba for no other occasion than a Wednesday), but her yellow robe was better equipped to deal with damp, just-showered skin.

Puttering around the kitchen, putting the kettle on for a desperately needed cup of tea, Bilba found herself unable to ignore the state of her wet clothes any longer. Leaving the kettle to heat, she steeled herself and went to gather the mess of tights and skirt, holding them well away from her body as she stuffed the lot into an empty laundry bag (she was *not* putting them in with her other dirty clothes). Her coat, she slung over a cheap plastic hanger and zipped up inside an old suit bag— she'd have to drop it off at the dry cleaners as soon as possible, but she didn't quite have the fortitude to make the trip at the moment.

That done, Bilba ducked back inside the bathroom to give her hands another wash, then it was back out to the kitchen just in time to click the kettle off and put the tea to steep.

Sitting at her kitchen table, hands wrapped around the heat of her earthenware mug, she breathed in the familiar scent of bergamot, and found her eyes straying toward the overcoat hanging just inside her flat. Who in the world gave a complete stranger their coat, for goodness sake? And an expensive coat, at that— heavy charcoal wool, with a sleek chocolate brown collar she recognized as real rabbit fur, she had expected to see a Burberry or Belstaff label when she took it off. Instead, she’d found a neat, white embroidered patch she didn’t recognize, simply Dale, stitched with a Savile Row address beneath. She had never heard of a tailoring shop called Dale, on Savile or otherwise; the coat was impeccably well-kept, but had a comfortable, worn-in feeling to the fabric that made her wonder how old it might be. Had Thorin bought it second-hand, inherited it, or had he actually just let her walk off with a bespoke coat he had worn and kept up for years? It certainly fit him as though it had been made for him...

Her tea was just barely on the safe side of scalding, and she took a fortifying sip, feeling the heat suffuse her from the inside out.

*Oh my god, you're that Gigi's girl!*  

*Wait, aren't you— cor, you got gorgeous tits! Lads, look at this!*  

*Hey there, babe, how much to see it in real life, eh?*

Thorin hadn't done a single thing— not a double-take, a knowing look, or sly remark— to indicate he had any idea who she was. Bilba wasn't self-important enough to think she was as recognizable as most film stars, or the Royals, or anything so ridiculous as all that, but her face (and the rest of her) was still plastered around hither and yon, and sometimes quite liberally depending on the breadth of Gandalf’s current campaign. If Thorin had ever used the tube around Christmas or Valentines, or walked by a lingerie store, he would have seen a poster. If he flipped through certain magazines in a waiting room, he would have seen an advert.

Perhaps, even if he had seen her, he hadn't made the connection; the twice he had met her in the flesh, she'd hardly been powdered and primped on silk sheets. But before Bilba could consider how unrealistic her sudden yearning to keep him ignorant actually was (for even just a bit longer, maybe), her mobile chirped again, reminding her of the text she hadn't checked earlier.

Her satchel, dry and unharmed from its dousing, was hanging next to Thorin’s overcoat; if she touched the coat as she passed, skimming her fingers over shiny cuff buttons, there wasn't anyone around to see.
Pulling her new books and mobile out of the bag, Bilba dropped the books on the arm of her sofa on the way by, and settled back in with her tea before unlocking her phone. Tapping her code across the smooth glass screen, she found a pair of unread texts from Gandalf waiting; the most recent was simply a trio of question marks, which she knew was a sign she had ignored a message requiring an answer.

The other text, received when she'd been getting in her door, simply said check your email.

Clicking out of her messages and into her inbox, Bilba expected to find anything from a fascinating article on obscure Welsh poetry (she did, in fact, have dual honours in Literature and Classics from King's), to a video of cats playing piano. One could never tell with Gandalf.

What she didn't expect, to the point of choking on her tea when she read it, was an email from British Airways, confirming her ticket purchase and upcoming flight from Heathrow to JFK. Her flight, scheduled to leave London in four hours.

She was dialling Gandalf's mobile before she'd even stopped coughing, glaring daggers at the tabletop in lieu of turning her ire on one dotty old codger. The call rang three times before connecting, bringing the slightly tinny sound of Gandalf's voice into her ear.

“Ah, there you are.” Gandalf seemed perfectly pleased, and blissfully unaware of the frustrated scrape of Bilba's fingernails over the side of her mug, making the tea judder. “Nearly packed, my dear? It is New York in January; you would do well to remember your scarf.”

Breathing deep, Bilba managed to keep her voice from sounding too strangled when she asked: “Where are you?”

“At this moment,” Gandalf said, over the faint hum of people in the background of the call. “I am enjoying an espresso and a truly delightful blueberry muffin at Caffè Nero in Terminal Five.”

Pressing her forehead into her palm, Bilba hunched over in her seat, both elbows braced on the table; her stomach flipped sickly. “Gandalf, why... we're not going to New York until next month. The show isn't until February—”

“And we still are, dear girl. This is something else, recently come up.” The sound of Gandalf sipping his espresso made Bilba think of coffee, of her might-possibly-be-a-date with Thorin, and she gritted her teeth against the frustrated shout threatening to escape. “This Lingerie Fashion Week next month,” Gandalf continued. “Should be quite the success, I imagine, and Garnished & Gilded has been asked to become more involved in these final planning stages, in the hopes of eventually bringing a similar event to London. I do realize this is terribly short notice, but it is also a very important opportunity we should not squander.”

“But why am I—” she began to say, hearing the desperate whinging creeping in, only to be cut off by Gandalf's gently admonishing sigh.

“You are the future of Garnished & Gilded, Bilba Baggins.” She flinched, her indignation withering under the brunt of his quiet, earnest tone. “Not simply the face, but the heart and the mind, and one day, undertakings such as these will be yours entirely.” He paused, chuckling softly and perhaps a touch bittersweet, and any further protests crumbled weakly in her breast. “I'll not be around forever, my dear.”

Oh, that was a low blow, taking her out right at the knees.

“All right, Gandalf.” Swallowing thickly, Bilba glanced up at Thorin's coat again, then back down at
the table. The return date for the ticket was Wednesday; at least she wasn't going to be spirited off across the pond for weeks. “I'll... I'll be there in an hour.”

Ending the call after Gandalf's goodbyes, Bilba cursed her own stupid lack of foresight—she hadn't gotten Thorin's mobile number, or even a **surname**. A furtive riffling through his coat pockets didn't turn up anything but a pair of gloves and a gold-toned zippo lighter, intricately engraved with angular designs on all sides. Nothing to indicate how she could contact him, or even how she might simply return his coat.

Hastily packing her small wheeled suitcase— and bringing only her basic business wardrobe; if Gandalf thought she was doing any modelling on this slapdash trip, that was *his* responsibility to plan—Bilba dressed for the flight, then slipped on a spare pair of loafers and a rusty red overcoat, snatching up her scarf on her way out the door (having forgotten it that morning, it was blessedly dry). Sending a quick text to Bofur as she trotted downstairs and out onto the pavement, Bilba walked up the street and waited for his reply, pulling her suitcase behind her.

Bofur answered her vague request for a favour with an unconditional: **sure thing love what do you need**? She typed out the details as she went, explaining that Gandalf was dragging her to the States without warning, and that there was a wet wool coat in her flat that desperately needed to be dropped off at the dry-cleaners. Bofur agreed easily, of course, with a winking smiley, his good wishes for a safe trip, and **bring us back a bobbyhead lady liberty xx**.

Not bothering to mention that the lot of them would be heading back to New York in only a few weeks anyway, Bilba thanked him, added a smiley of her own along with assurances that he was the sweetest man to ever grace the earth, then slipped her mobile into her pocket.

By this time, she was back to the spot where the splash had occurred, noting that a wide puddle was still lurking menacingly against the kerb. Peering around at the few passing people, Bilba wasn't terribly surprised to find no sign of Thorin, but his cab had dropped him off here for a **reason**. If she intended to make it to Heathrow within the time she'd told Gandalf, she was cutting things a little close, but Bilba still took a few minutes to duck inside the shops along this stretch, asking after a dark haired man in a blue shirt, not wearing a coat.

After fifteen minutes and no luck at all, she was forced to abandon the attempt, muttering crossly to herself as she strode out and hailed a cab.

**Chapter End Notes**

**mine is an evil laugh**

Oh **Gandalf**.

Folks, I swear things will eventually work out in fluffy happy sexy times. Eventually <3
Chapter 5

Chapter by littleblackdog

POSSIBLE TRIGGERS IN THIS CHAPTER

Okay, so here how I'm going to play this: there is no non-con, dub-con, extreme gore, extreme violence, incest, or death in this chapter, but there is some potentially difficult/unpleasant material.

For those of you who want to read it without knowing specifically what's coming, please do go ahead, but for those of you who would prefer to be prepared ahead of time and make a decision about your own comfort/care, I've included a brief outline of the unpleasant content in the end notes. It's as vague with actual chapter spoilers as I could make it.

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On a lighter note, you should head over to tumblr and check out the #lingerie model au tag for a bunch of amazing art by some truly lovely people. I wanted to link it all here, but it's honestly popping up too fast for me to keep proper track.

I even put some photo sets together on my own tumblr (the outfits from the cab splash): Bilba & Thorin.

Right then, now you're free to carry on to the fluffy lingerie AU that got out of hand. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Come on, come on, come on...” Tapping her toes inside her shoes, Bilba crossed her arms and watched the cool blue LED numbers above the lift oh so slowly count upwards to the seventeenth floor. The New York trip had been informative, exciting, but also an exhausting few days. As nice as it was to be back in London, she now had to consider the unintentionally purloined coat still waiting in her flat. All she wanted, desperately, was to go home and curl up in her own feathery duvet, get a few hours of sleep, and have some private time to fret about her current Thorin situation.

What she absolutely did not want to do at the moment was talk about knickers, sales projections, or expanding markets. She did not want to spend another instant in the Istari offices; she hadn't even wanted come into the office in the first place, already cranky from the jet lag and feeling a bit gassy from the otherwise delicious mushroom pasta she'd eaten on the flight home. But Gandalf had dragged her along (after wheedling through her lukewarm protests), just as he'd dragged her to the States this time, and to Milan the month before, to that horrifying sushi bar he had sworn was cleaner than it seemed, and to a thousand other pain in the arse adventures over the years.

No, she hadn't wanted to go into the office at all, having just stumbled off her second transatlantic flight in less than a week, bleary-eyed and fighting cramps, and perhaps a wee bit heartsick. It had already been half-seven in the evening when they caught a cab from Heathrow, and swaths of the Istari building's windows had been dark as their cab pulled up, but Gandalf had insisted, with that
damnable indulge me gleam in his eyes.

Of course Saruman was still there when they arrived— Bilba wasn't convinced their esteemed Managing Director didn't simply sleep with his eyes open, propped up at his own desk.

Istari Incorporated was a marvel of a business model, holding its own in an increasingly conglomerated economic stage. Still independent, without a parent company, they had somehow managed to stay afloat without expanding their operations beyond the design and manufacture of intimate apparel. Even Victoria Secret had a few other varied sorts of brands as its diversifying sisters, while Istari and its subsidiaries stuck firmly to their well turn-out wheelhouse.

The cornerstone of the company was, of course, their basic Blanche line of mass produced, affordable underwear— all y-fronts and cotton-blend knickers bundled up ten to a package and sold at Asda, Tesco, and every corner chemist. There was little creativity in the Istari workhorse— only rapid, large scale distribution for profit, and a proven product that performed well for its price.

Saruman kept tightest, greediest control of this aspect of the business, though it seemed to Bilba that Gandalf and their third partner, Radagast Bruni, were both more than content to allow Saruman to have his dominion.

Radagast, a perpetually cheery (and somewhat erratic) fellow, oversaw Wee Beasties. Istari’s second branch, it was entirely child focused and an absolute riot of colour and vibrant cartoon creatures printed across footie pyjamas and teensy rainbow undies, all made of organic cottons and renewable bamboo fibres. The brand was also wildly popular, which no doubt contributed to Saruman’s continued tolerance for Radagast’s wandering mind, as well as his rather artistic interpretation of office attire (the last time Bilba had seen him, Radagast had been puttering down a corridor on the building’s fourth floor, with what appeared to be an entire field’s worth of wildflowers woven through the long, untamed waves of his hair).

And then there was Garnished & Gilded— Gandalf’s baby, and always carefully tended with his personal touch— specializing in the finest, most luxurious pieces Istari offered. Their production runs were smaller than either Blanche or Wee Beasties, but they still supplied hundreds of small boutiques across Britain and Ireland, and even a few shops farther afield in the Commonwealth. Gigi’s online presence was a chicly beautiful web shop (designed on contract by Ori, incidentally, with a great deal of technical support from Nori), and their abundant sales through that medium extended to a global audience.

That evening, after nearly eight hours in the air and a five hour time difference, Bilba was about as keen to see Mr Saruman Belov as she ever was to see her— that is, not very. But still she followed Gandalf into Saruman’s spotless office, sat politely through an agonizingly detailed discussion of the trip, and offered her own largely unfettered opinions whenever Gandalf prompted (as he expected). And as she expected, Saruman merely favoured her with a cool, dismissive stare, though he made no attempts to interrupt when she spoke.

It had become a typical formula: Gandalf would once again draw her ever deeper into the business side of things, and Saruman would keep quiet, but not cordial about the whole thing, peering at Bilba with those impossibly dark eyes. His stance on her— just a model— having anything to do with business discussions, compared to Gandalf’s unsubtle notion of grooming his successor, was an argument Bilba avoided becoming tangled up in at all costs. There were many things in her life she could control, and some she could not; the wills and whims of Mistres Belov, Bruni, and Legris fit firmly into the latter category.

When she was finally dismissed from Saruman’s office, it was coming on eleven o’clock, and she could hardly muster the energy not to drag her feet as she dragged her suitcase over to the lift.
Gandalf was staying behind to catch up on paperwork, he’d explained, and she had gently refused his offer to see her to a cab— she wasn’t quite exhausted enough that she couldn’t find her way out of the familiar hallways of the Istari Building, sprawling though it might be.

Tapping her toes again, Bilba let out a sigh of utter relief when the lift finally dinged its arrival to the top floor, and the brushed steel doors slid open before her, whisper quiet.

It was late enough that the presence of someone else in the lift was startling for an instant, but the man’s coveralls, low-slung utility belt, and the wide push broom held in his spindly fingers marked him as one of the maintenance crew. She stepped aside to let the man disembark, but he shook his head, thin sandy hair flopping over his pale brow as he offered her a warm, closed-lip smile.

“Going down,” the custodian said—as groggy as she was, she couldn’t make out his name on the ID card clipped to his breast pocket without obviously staring, and so she didn’t risk trying. She did notice in passing, however, that the grainy little photo did not even begin to do justice to the man’s wide, astonishingly blue eyes.

“Ah, right.” Somehow, what he’d said didn’t entirely make sense, but it had been a terribly long day (after a series of exciting and stressful days), and Bilba dismissed the mutterings of her cotton-fuzzed brain, pulling her suitcase into the lift without further ado. There was a vitally important order to the rest of her evening: a cab, her flat, and then her duvet.

Pressing the button for the ground floor, Bilba brushed her fingers idly through her hair, combing a few stray strands away from her face as the doors closed, and the lift shifted to life with a moment’s vertigo. The custodian was humming to himself, very softly, and even in her current mood the tune was much more soothing than annoying.

They had only descended two floors (the Istari lifts were notoriously slow, though thankfully not quite as dizzying as quicker lifts), when the custodian spoke again, breaking the silence with a suddenness that made her jump.

“Oh!” The man was gazing over at her from his slouched stance, his head tilted curiously, and the snubbed bridge of his nose wrinkled. “A pity to see such a pretty lady wearing no jewelry at all. No lovely sparkles on her ears, or gleaming chains ‘round her neck. No rings.”

Bilba felt a chill wash through her, clearing the wooliness from her thoughts almost immediately. There was a very good chance that the man was simply fishing (a bit weirdly) for information about whether or not she was single. He certainly wouldn’t have been the first, or the oddest; she had long considered just getting herself a small zirconium to wear on her left hand, to ward off at least a few (generally) well-meaning hopefuls, but she hadn’t quite brought herself to actually do it. As much as she endured some unwanted flirting on occasion, suffering under the potential rumour mill wearing a fake wedding ring might sound a thousand times worse.

“I’ve just gotten back from abroad,” she said after a moment’s hesitation, not letting even a sliver of the tension pooling in her spine sour her tone. Patting her suitcase handle, Bilba smiled slightly. “And jewelry can be such a bother when travelling.”

They were passing the twelfth floor, and every progressive ding of their journey made Bilba’s stomach flutter. The custodian was staying well on his own side of the lift, not making a move towards her, but there was something...not quite right about the situation. She wasn’t certain if it was anything more sinister than the usual paranoia of a woman alone with a strange man in a confined space, but regardless, she didn’t dare relax.

This was not the sort of stress she needed, bugger it all.
“Such a pretty lady would look prettier with a ring.” The man rocked on his heels, faded grey trainers squeaking. “A band of gleaming gold, perfect and precious.”

The situation was spiralling into properly creepy, and Bilba reached out to punch the button for the next floor instead, seventh, rather than waiting to reach the ground. She could take the stairs instead, preferably after calling Gandalf from her mobile and getting him and at least one security guard the hell down here to walk with her.

It was that precise moment when two terrifying things happened at once, and either alone would have been more than sufficient to make her scream.

Her fingertip had just grazed the button marked seven, when clammy white fingers wrapped around her wrist without warning, squeezing tight like an iron band.

And almost simultaneously, the lift groaned alarmingly, the ominous sound of gears grinding together coming from far above her head; their downward motion stuttered sharply, making both Bilba and the terrifying custodian stumble to keep their feet. Then, no more than second or two later, Bilba felt her stomach fly up into her throat as the lift seemed to let go, sending them in a sickening freefall for a heart stopping moment, before knocking them both to their knees with a squeal of brakes and the force of their sudden stop.

The man’s grip released in the chaos, and Bilba scrambled away, pressing her back tight against the lift wall and sliding to her feet. The lights went out, plunging the lift into darkness, before flickering back almost immediately to the dimmer yellowish glow of the emergency lights.

The custodian hadn’t made a move towards her, kneeling in the centre of the lift floor with his head bowed and his narrow shoulders slumped, but she could still feel the ghost of his fingers clutching hard and bruising around the narrow bones of her wrist. He was a small man, thin and only slightly taller than her, but his grip had been terribly strong.

Her own heart was thunderous in her ears, blood pounding as her glance darted from the man to the emergency phone, but even over that din, she still heard the reedy thread of his voice begin speaking again.

“Baggins—” Her name, drawn out in a hiss at the end, made her shudder despite her best intentions to stifle all reactions. Fear flared cold in her belly, and simply grew worse as he continued, softly sibilating. “Her post box said Baggins, but the pictures... the pictures all say Belle. La Belle Bijou, not Baggins. No Baggins anywhere, nowhere. Why is that?”

Tow head tilting up, the man pinned her with eyes gleaming silver as fish scales in the dim light. She knew those eyes.

“Why is she false?” Smeagol Rivers spit the question at her furiously, his hands curling over his own knees like claws. “Where are her presents? Why don't you wear them— pretty things for a pretty, precious thing? Why don't you wear my gifts?”

He had lost at least three stone since she’d seen him last (when he'd been led away out of the courtroom in restraints), and had bleached his dark hair to sandy white, but Bilba still cursed herself for not recognizing him sooner. He was meant to be locked up, for god’s sake— charged with stalking and harassment, he’d been sectioned five years ago after court proceedings had put the very worst of his condition on display.

In a way, even after enduring the terror of his dogging her steps for months, Bilba still felt a twinge of pity for the man; she could not begin to imagine the torment of the demons that haunted him.
forever murmuring in his ears. He was deeply troubled, with a terrible illness that fought back against treatments at every turn, but he was also dangerously obsessed with her, and that was her current concern.

“I didn’t want to lose them,” she said, very carefully, but didn’t try to shuffle towards the phone while he was still watching. “So I left them at home. Did you... did you do something to the lift, Smeagol? To make it stop?”

His laughter was a strident cackling noise, and he actually fell onto his back, rolling with mirth. “Oh no— no, no, precious, not a thing. Not Smeagol, no— fate! It was fate!” Quick as a cat, he was suddenly crouched on the balls of his feet, and Bilba’s fingernails scraped the wall behind her, her hand clenching. He had never tried to harm her, violently or sexually; he had never even alluded to it during the worst of his ranting in court, or in any of the unnerving phone calls he’d once made to her old mobile number. When he’d been digging through her bins, peering in the windows of her flat, and leaving bits of stolen jewelry stuffed under her front door or in her letterbox, it had all been frighteningly invasive, but strangely distanced— he had never even touched her before today.

Whether that had been a conscious choice, or merely a lack of opportunity, Bilba certainly wasn’t going to risk her safety to find out.

“It was fate,” he said again, drawing up to stand; she took a steadying breath as he began to slink near. “Destiny, my precio— uh!”

It was at that precise moment when two years of kickboxing and a very intensive six-week self-defense course suddenly became the most important things she had ever done with her life. Afterwards, the finer details would blur, but Bilba would always remember the wet crunch of her palm driving up against his nose, the vicious thud of her knee into his groin, and the rush of adrenaline that sent her hand grasping his limp hair and smashing his forehead against the lift floor when he collapsed at her feet.

Breathing hard, her hands trembling ever so slightly, Bilba all but leapt over Smeagol’s prone, bleeding body (he was still alive, but he appeared unresponsive), slamming her hand against the emergency intercom button.

“Help,” she said into the speaker, urgently but pitched low (the thought of Smeagol waking up while they were still trapped inside the lift was not a comforting one, even if she was passably confident in her ability to keep him subdued for a while yet). “This is Bilba Baggins, I’m stuck in the lift, and there’s a man here who’s tried to assault me. Get these doors open, please.”

“Miss Baggins?” Bilba didn’t recognize the woman’s voice on the other end of the line, but she was relieved to hear that her tone was both concerned and composed. “I’m calling for the fire brigade immediately; your lift is stuck between floors, and we’ve lost power. Are you all right? Where is this man now?”

“He’s here. Unconscious for the moment.” Keeping her attention on Smeagol, watching hawk-like for the smallest twitch, Bilba wiped one sweaty hand on her thigh and kept her other thumb near the call button just in case they disconnected. She was dressed as she’d been on the plane, in loose-legged lycra trousers and a soft, forest green tunic; her coat and scarf were still slung over her luggage. Luckily enough, the comfortable clothes hadn’t restricted her movement at all when she’d put Smeagol down. “But I’m not sure for how long, so quick as you can would be preferable.”

“Are you hurt, Miss Baggins?” She knew, logically, that things would probably feel much different once she was safe, but at the moment, Bilba could only stifle giggles against her knuckles, more than a little breathlessly.
“No, not hurt,” she managed to say; her eyes may have been a bit gritty, but she blinked hard against the feeling. “But you know, I’ve had better days.”

It didn’t take long for the fire brigade to arrive, and even less time for Gandalf to be told of the situation; he and the security guard (her name was Tauriel, Bilba discovered) stayed on the intercom for a tense quarter hour, keeping Bilba up-to-date with the status of her upcoming release. By the time the sound of heavy boots began tromping around outside the steel doors, the rabbiting of Bilba’s heart had slowed to a beat that was merely tense, rather than manic, and her hands had stopped shaking.

Then the lift juddered, gears squealing faintly, and the doors were slowly pushed open, inch by inch.

The lift was stuck partially between floors, as Tauriel had told her, but the bottom third of the door was opening to bright lights and empty space; it would be more than enough room for Bilba to slip out, when the firefighter on the other side pried the doors open wider. The officer’s forearms were noticeably thick, even under the sleeves of his dark uniform jacket, and his gloved hands were immense, bracing between the doors to pull them farther apart.

“You all right, lass?” A man's face appeared in the gap—strong features, close-cropped dark beard, and a bald head marred with several deep scars. Under other circumstances, he might have looked intimidating enough to make Bilba hesitate, but at that moment, he was an altogether blessed sight. She thought of Bifur, of what a gruesome sight his scars made of such a dear friend, and felt a rush of irrational warmth towards this grizzled firefighter.

“Mostly, yes.” Behind her, Smeagol grunted muzzily, as he had been doing since the doors began to open. Abandoning both her suitcase and her surveillance, Bilba dropped to her hands and knees and gave the firefighter a brittle smile. “I’d like very much to get the hell out of this lift.”

“That, I can do,” the firefighter said, then looked back over his shoulder. “Here, I'll keep the doors secure, you help the lady down. She's a wee one. Feet first, lass, and don't worry about falling. Someone'll catch you.”

Bilba was already sticking her legs out the gap before the firefighter had finished speaking, desperate to be somewhere not so stifling. True to that promise, there were hands waiting to take hold of her thighs as she slid out, gripping tightly but not at all painful. The steady grasp migrated up to circle her waist when her bottom left the lift floor entirely, and Bilba found herself carried down gently rather than falling in very short order.

Her eyes were closed, as they had been since the first touch of the other firefighter; she needed a moment to collect herself before she faced the world at large again, and the safe circle of this officer's arms seemed as good a place as any to do so. Clutching two handfuls of his jacket, Bilba took a shuddering breath and pressed her forehead against the solid body before her, using it as an anchor to reel herself back in from the feeling of fluttering away entirely, like so much dandelion fluff.

“Jesus Christ,” she whispered, the tightness in her throat making her sound like a frog with a smoking habit. “Jesus... Listen, please, that man, the man in the lift, I've got a restraining order against him. Please, be careful with him; he's not well, not on his medication. He might be dangerous.”

“Noted,” the first firefighter replied, sounding slightly strained. Then, a moment later, she heard a harsh bark of laughter, sounding slightly muffled. He had moved inside the lift, she realized, when he called back to her. “I think you got him, lass. Laid flat out.”

“I think I broke his nose,” she said, still quiet and hoarse, and felt the second firefighter's hands seize
briefly where they rested supportively on her waist.

“Are you all right, Bilba?”

That voice.

Sucking in a surprised gasp, Bilba jerked back, eyes snapping open. Thorin allowed her to step away from him without argument, hands spreading wide and no longer touching her at all.

Thorin, who was standing before her in a black London Fire Brigade uniform, the reflective strips glinting dull silver under the office lights.

Her heart was in her mouth; her head was spinning.

“Bugger,” she cursed, vehemently, just before the black splotches swimming around the edges of her vision over took the sight of Thorin's frown, dragging her into the cool darkness of a faint.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter contains: stalking/harassment, a threatening situation with a stalker in an enclosed space, an unwanted but non-sexual touch by a stalker, some descriptions of canon-typical violence.

I also hope I've handled this Smeagol's severe mental illness with the care it deserves, while still keeping Gollum's canon instability and dangerous qualities.
“How much longer you going to sulk, then?”

Plucking his old leather jacket off its peg (the same jacket that Kili had made him swear to give over to his youngest nephew if he ever wanted rid of it, even now that it was scuffed grey and worn butter-soft with age), Thorin didn’t bother slamming his locker door; he would rather eat his own boots than lose his temper and give Dwalin the pleasure. They had been out at a primary school that afternoon, doing the usual fire safety lecturing (with Fili hamming up dressed in his fire kit), and Thorin had done his absolute damnedest not to grimace through the entire thing. Special errands like that were usually an enjoyable part of the job— while Thorin was reasonably good with children, Dwalin was some kind of long-suffering magnet for the wee and slobbery. Watching a tattooed giant of a man, with his fierce looking scars and gleaming bald head, be pawed at and climbed like a mountain by dozens of sticky little goblins hadn’t lost its charm yet, even after nearly a decade.

Today, however, Thorin would privately admit that his heart certainly hadn’t been invested in the proceedings. He had gotten through the presentation with his usual professionalism, but he knew he’d not smiled once, and he’d left Dwalin and Fili to deal with the unrehearsed interactions after the scripted talk. He had used the excuse of helping the teachers with most of the wrangling around the truck, but the little ones had deserved better from him.

Fili had been twelve— just barely too old for this sort of visit— when Thorin had first joined the London Fire Brigade, a few weeks after he’d mustered out of the Desert Rats. That year, Kili had delighted in regaling his older brother with tales of just how brilliant their Uncle Thorin was, and did he know that Mister Gloin had once chopped down a door with an axe, and there’s a puppy, Fee,
and her name is Minty and she licked my hand!

There had been something infectious about the way Kili’s eyes had lit up, and then the same awed look had chased off the jealousy in Fili’s gaze after a family trip to the fire station. Given the chance to put a similar brightness on a few more little faces every so often... well, Thorin hadn’t stood a chance.

Now seven years later, Fili and Kili were (nearly) men, Minty the Dalmatian-mix had retired to live out her golden years being spoiled rotten by a perpetually eager Kili (after much begging and bargaining with his mother, Dis), and despite enough A-Levels to head off to a few respectable universities, Fili had chosen to apply to the Brigade, passing the training with flying colours. Thorin hadn’t really considered that his oldest nephew’s juvenile chatter about wanting to be a fireman might survive all the way to this point; it was still surreal to see Fili in the station, kitted out in full gear. It was even more bizarre, and would never stop being worrisome, to see that the lad was now taking the same sorts of risks Thorin did.

Having Fili assigned to Luin Station, and on Blue Watch, had taken a bit of persuasion— having family members on the same shift could, theoretically, cause a dangerous conflict in case of emergency— but there were some benefits to Thorin’s authority as Station Manager. If Fili was going to make it his duty to put his life on the line, Thorin was going to be damn sure the lad had the most dependable officers at his back.

Thorin had every intention, however, once a few more years of experience had worn some of Fili’s brashness away, of transferring him over to manage one of the other Watches. He certainly had the physical ability and the determination to be a topnotch firefighter; with the proper tempering, Fili had the potential to be an excellent leader, as well.

Pulling his jacket on and yanking up the zip, Thorin made a point of not looking over at Dwalin, who was still leaning against the row of lockers and probably wearing the same too-damned-perceptive expression he’d been sporting since Thorin had trudged in to the station Monday morning. It was now Tuesday evening, the end of their day shifts for this week, and Dwalin hadn’t stopped picking at him like a dog with a bone.

“Thorin.” He had absolutely no obligation, nor any patience, to tell Dwalin a goddamn thing; stuffing his hands in his jacket pockets, Thorin started out towards the station’s rear door without a word.

“Oi,” Dwalin barked at his back, sharpness layered over honest concern, just serious enough to make Thorin’s stride falter. “No more pissing about— something’s wrong. Is it Dis, or the lads?”

Resting his fist against the row of lockers, jaw tightening, Thorin took a long breath and kept staring straight ahead.

“Neither,” he said eventually, forcing the rigid line of his shoulders to relax. “It’s nothing. Just leave it, Dwalin.”

Behind him, Dwalin snorted harshly. “I’d be more apt to believe you, if you’d look me in the eye.”

“Damn it—” Banging his hand against the steel mesh hard enough to rattle a half-dozen lockers, Thorin turned, levelling the other man with a hard, warning glare. “Can’t you just leave well enough alone?”

“I would—” Spreading his hands, Dwalin shrugged, not even pretending to retreat a single inch. “If you were actually well enough. You’re the one always harping on about keeping work and personal
separate, but it’s me now. We both know that’s a load of bollocks; neither of us would have a damn personal life if it weren’t."

Almost anyone else, and Thorin would have stormed out (perhaps after a scathing explanation of how this was absolutely no one’s business, so piss off). He would have, if it hadn’t been Dwalin asking— his brother in arms, in spirit, and everything but blood for decades. The man who’d forever had his back, and saved his life perhaps a dozen times over— in Kosovo, in Basra— in a reciprocal trend that hadn’t shown signs of faltering since they’d both moved on to civilian life. Dwalin had been there through burning buildings, bloody emergencies, and horrifying accidents. He had been there, and his brother Balin as well, in those blurry black months after the fire, when Thorin had lost touch with too many things. When he had nearly lost himself in the gutted, charred ruin of his childhood home.

For Dwalin, Thorin forced himself to pause, even if he despised the thought of trotting out such an embarrassing story and exposing his raw nerve to the light of day. He felt like an idiot for letting such a stupid, trivial thing rankle him even this long, aching like an infected splinter.

“I had a date.” Or, possibly a date; they hadn’t said explicitly, and he wasn’t about to assume anything about the woman. The very notion that she’d be interested might have been laughable a month before— for god’s sake, she was Belle Bijou, the glamorous and gorgeous model, who was just as impossibly stunning in the flesh as she was in any retouched advert he’d ever seen.

Thorin knew, objectively, that he kept himself in good physical condition; when he’d noticed her eyeing him up at the gym, he had assumed she would simply look her fill and move on. What he hadn’t expected at all, not in a million years, was the rise of a petal-pink blush across her cheeks, and a flood of apologetic, painfully endearing stammering when she realised she’d been caught. He hadn’t expected her to be so... human.

And while he also knew, perhaps less objectively, that she was a beautiful woman (with her deep blue eyes, the softly blunted line of her nose, and that petite but generously curved figure so entirely his type that it hit him like a punch to the gut), he still hadn’t quite expected the sudden rush of warmth that swept through him when she favoured him with a sweet, dimpling smile.

I’m Bilba, she’d said, and her hand had felt so small and supple in his grip, but not at all wilting. I’d like to consider that coffee invitation rescheduled rather than refused.

The feeling had been a sort of odd, bubbling warmth in the pit of his stomach, apparently able to drive all sensible thought out of his head; had he honestly thought Belle Bijou was going to keep some spontaneous, implicit date with him, especially after that mess with the cab?

Yes, unfortunately, he had honestly thought she would. More fool him.

“Well ring the fucking Evening Standard,” Dwalin said, his scarred eyebrow quirking up crookedly. “You had a date. What was so awful about it that’s got your arse in such a twist?”

An ugly grimace stole across Thorin’s face, but he schooled his expression back to stony almost immediately; damn it all, just because he was a miserable idiot, didn’t mean he had to plod around looking like one.

“She stood me up.” And kept his coat, but he wasn’t telling Dwalin that on pain of death. That sting cut deeper than the woman could have known. “I thought... Listen, it was a date I was keen to keep, but she obviously wasn’t. Nothing to be done about it. Now, if you’re through playing agony aunt, I’m off home to get some sleep.”
Without so much as a by-your-leave, Dwalin was shrugging his own battered leather bomber over the massive span of his shoulders, and crossing the distance between them in three strides. The clap of his hand on Thorin’s biceps was hard enough to rattle teeth.

“Come on,” he said, as a supportive slap became a tugging grip around Thorin’s upper arm. “We’re going for a pint.”

They were switching to their night shifts the following day, which meant there was about twelve hours until they were due back in the station Wednesday night. Some of that would necessarily be spent on sleep— he certainly wasn’t going to drag himself in unprepared and exhausted to a shift— but he could technically spare the time for a beer or two. It wasn’t likely to make him feel worse, at this point, and wasn’t that a cheery thought.

“Fine.” Jerking his arm out of the tether of Dwalin’s grip merely succeeded in earning him a thick arm wrapped round the back of his shoulders, keeping him close. Damn it. “Fine, Christ. But you’re buying, and we’re not talking.”

“—and then she never showed up.” Picking at the curling corner of the beermat sitting under his empty glass, Thorin heaved a short sigh. “End of story.”

Sprawled across the other bench of their booth, taking up nearly the entire seat with limbs and bulk, Dwalin waved for the server to bring them another round. It was coming on half-ten, and they’d already had two pints apiece, but Thorin found he preferred the heady feel of good bitter in his gut to the gnawing coldness from before they’d arrived at the pub.

“And kept your coat, as well.” Dwalin shook his head, sliding another full, foaming glass in Thorin’s direction when the server dropped them off. “Bitch.”

“Watch your fucking mouth,” Thorin snarled, attention snapping up to glare daggers at Dwalin’s unruffled face; oh, of course he’d done that on purpose, the canny prick. The rush of fury fizzled nearly as quickly as it had risen, and Thorin downed a long pull of beer in an attempt to chase the sour taste from his tongue. It wasn’t usually this easy for anyone, even Dwalin, to get his back up.

“God damn it,” he said after a moment, having emptied half the glass in three hard swallows. “I’m an idiot.”

“Aye,” Dwalin agreed, tapping his thumb idly against the side of his own dark bitter. “But good on you for having the balls to try punching above your weight after, what’s it been? Eight months out of the ring? Belle Bijou— Jesus fucking wept.”

Thorin wanted to argue, but found he couldn’t: Bilba was a gorgeous, sophisticated woman, and he was some stranger she’d run into twice. Also, rather depressingly, it had actually been eight months since he’d been on a date. Maybe closer to ten.

“Shut up and drink,” he said, deflating entirely. “So I can go home and feel sorry for myself in peace.”

By the start of shift Wednesday night, Thorin was still feeling rather wretched, but was sensible enough to hide it. He schooled his irritable scowl into something more neutral, and luckily enough, he had the excuse of paperwork to keep him in his office for a few hours rather than out with the others. Fili had already started giving him concerned side-eyes, and Thorin’s blood ran cold at the thought of an inquisitorial call from Dis (or worse still, a visit to his flat).
There was the problem of his coat, as well— it wasn't something he was willing to abandon, and not simply because of the potential embarrassment of explaining its unfortunate fate to family and friends who cared to ask. There hadn't been much salvageable after the fire, and Thorin made a point to guard what few treasures had survived.

When Bilba had disappeared down the pavement, draped nearly neck to foot in that achingly familiar wool, Thorin had been absolutely astonished with himself. He had known just as little about that woman as she'd known about him (except, of course, she'd never seen him in just his pants); he had offered one of his most cherished possessions to a virtual stranger, without an instant of hesitation. He hadn't truly realized the gravity of what he'd done until after the fact, but even left standing there in his shirtsleeves on a chilly January afternoon, Thorin hadn't regretted his startling decision.

Until Saturday morning found him loitering around the gym longer than his usual off-duty workout, and it gradually became apparent that Bilba was not coming.

Thorin was mentally composing a formal, coolly polite request for the coat's return (a letter, perhaps, to be dropped off at the Istari Building that actually sat only a few streets over from Luin Station), when the station intercom blared with the usual warning horn, followed by a calm voice calling for mobilization. On his feet and out of the office immediately, Thorin joined the others in the smooth, automatic process of donning their gear— Gloin had the information printout in hand, already dressed in his kit, and he read out the details of the emergency to the rest of them.

“Elevator rescue, lads—” Thorin frowned, snapping his coat closed; unless there was some sort of medical emergency or other immediate danger, elevator calls were usually left to a building’s maintenance staff to deal with, rather than involving the Brigade.

“Two people inside,” Gloin continued, sounding worryingly grave. “We're responding due to report of assault by the trapped woman. Police are on their way, but they're farther out.”

“Assault?” Fili repeated the word with utter horror, already scrambling into the truck's jumpseats with Gloin. Thorin was quick to follow, slipping into the captain's seat while Dwalin took the wheel. Clipping on the radio headset, Thorin patched in to the jumpseat area just in time to hear Fili say “— assaulted her still in there with her? We have to hurry!”

“We are hurrying,” Thorin said into the mic, tone sharp. “Focus, Fili. Gloin, where are we going?”

“Istari Building,” came the answer, and Thorin's stomach plunged straight down to his feet as Gloin read off the exact address, which Thorin then repeated mechanically to Dwalin.

They peeled out of the station less than two minutes after the first blare of the intercom, but Thorin would count the rest of this call in heartbeats rather than in minutes, until he had Bilba (shivering but not bleeding, clothing intact, no obvious injuries— oh thank god) held carefully in his hands.

“Bugger,” she said, staring up at him with wide, startled eyes. He watched the colour drain from her cheeks like water from a sieve— peaches-and-cream fading to sickly white.

And then Thorin was reaching out purely on reflex, catching Bilba's suddenly limp body before she could crumple down to meet the flecked office carpet.

Scooping up her deadweight to rest comfortably in his arms— a bridal carry, his mind provided unnecessarily, for lack of a better term— Thorin spared only a second to gather himself, making certain her head wasn't lolling away from him, before turning to Fili.

“Get a shock blanket,” he said, quieter than he might have done without an unconscious woman
cradled against his chest.

Chapter End Notes

can I also just say a big soppy thank you to all of you? Because your response to this AU so far has blown me away, and I am incredibly grateful <3

and in case it wasn't entirely clear, firefighter!Thorin used to be an army officer (serving in a unit with Dwalin).
Chapter 7

Chapter by littleblackdog

Chapter Notes

If you've wondered what Gandalf Legris looks like, here you go. <3

The room was spinning— she could feel it rolling around like a boat in stormy seas, even with her eyes still closed. She could also feel a hand stroking ever so gently over her forehead, smoothing her hair back.

Thorin.

Oh god, she’d fainted— was he— where— had she fainted? The fact that she was currently lying on her back, possibly on the floor, with her head cushioned on something softer than Berber carpet, seemed to support that theory. She certainly didn’t recall any conscious decision to have a quick kip in the corridor. Bilba blinked, squinting under the painful glare of fluorescents high above her head, and swallowed back the dangerous lurch of her stomach. Message received: sitting up just then would be a mistake.

A dark shape appeared in her field of vision, haloed by brightness, and the hand on her forehead paused its petting, sliding down to rest butterfly-soft on the side of her face. Blearily, the shadow resolved itself into Gandalf’s familiar visage of bushy brows and pale grey beard. He wasn’t far enough away to be standing— no, Gandalf was sitting next to her on the carpet, legs straight and ankles crossed, with her head pillowed comfortably on his thigh.

“Ah, thank goodness.” Even muddled as she was, Bilba could see the frayed edges of Gandalf’s usual tranquil composure, and the strain creasing around his bright eyes, though his smile and the tone of his voice were perfectly pleasant. “How are you feeling, my dear girl?”

She didn’t answer immediately, knowing that Gandalf was looking for the truth of the matter, rather than a neatly wrapped reassurance. Instead, she took a breath, and reached up to cup the back of his warm hand with her own, pressing his palm against her cheek.

“A bit shaky,” she said quietly, and was rather pleased to find her voice was steady. “But I’m all right. Did I... I fainted? How long was I out?”

“Only a few minutes— hardly any time at all.” Glancing away from her, Gandalf waved a hand at someone she could not see, but whose clipped footsteps had drawn near. “Yes, yes, she’s awake. Bilba, my dear, there is an officer here to ask you a few questions to help gauge your condition. Would you like to speak with him now, or wait?”

An officer... Bilba’s stomach fluttered this time, not the sickening churning of before. She hadn’t imagined Thorin, had she? It had only been a moment, but she’d seen him— he’d spoken to her, said her name. He had been the strong, steady hands helping her out of the lift, and the sturdy chest upon which she’d leaned, catching her breath.

Steeling herself again, she let go of Gandalf’s hand, dropping her arm back down to brace against the
carpet. “Gandalf, help me sit up, please?”

“If you like,” Gandalf said with a small sigh, and did just that, supporting her head as the lingering tendrils of the faint and her slowly blooming headache made her neck feel weak and noodley. Gandalf was sitting with his back propped against a wall, just a dozen feet away from the still-stuck elevator, and Bilba settled in to sit pressed close beside him, hip to hip. Her body had been draped with an alarmingly orange blanket, but the warmth of it was welcome, so she adjusted it to keep herself covered from the waist down.

Gandalf was dressed for the plane, as she was— his usual suit jacket had been foregone in favour of a cosy cashmere cardigan, muted lavender with pale pearlescent buttons (it wasn’t a jumper that had been bought in any shop, either, but rather handmade by a close friend). Bilba rested her cheek against the soft violet knit and looped her arm into the crook of Gandalf’s elbow, allowing him to lace their fingers together loosely.

The man standing over them was not Thorin, she discovered when she finally dared to look, and Bilba felt a sharp twist of disappointment. He was a firefighter, however— younger, perhaps in his twenties, with his helmet tucked under one arm and his sandy hair tousled, in what Bombur might have called an *artfully careless* way.

“Miss, er, Miss Baggins?” The officer tilted his head, and his eyes were shadowed with clear concern. “Are you all right, ma’am? The police should be here soon, ambulance too, but if there’s anything I can do in the meantime, we’ve got a basic medkit, if he— I mean, if you’re hurt at all— whatever you need—”

Mustering up a warm smile, tiny though it might be, Bilba shook her head (and then immediately regretting the move when her headache pulsed). “No, no, I’m fine. Not hurt at all, just a little shaken. But thank you, Officer...”

“Oh! Fili— I’m Fili.” The young man ducked, a deep, awkward sort of nod that was nearly a bow, but he wasn’t quite giving her the impression of a flustered fan. Instead, he seemed genuinely distressed by the thought that she may have been injured, and Bilba found herself wondering what these firefighters had been told about the nature of the emergency.

The lift was still stalled between floors, leaving perhaps a three foot opening into the cab (with the dark maw of the shaft yawning below it); everything was lit brighter again, rather than the ominous yellow emergency glow. The power issue had seemingly been sorted, even if the lift wasn’t quite moving yet.

When a pair of booted legs swung out of the very opening from which she had so recently escaped, followed swiftly by the rest of Thorin’s body stepping back down onto the corridor floor, Bilba’s attention flickered away from the young blond firefighter. Thorin had her suitcase in one hand, and her coat and scarf slung over his elbow.

“Miss Baggins?” Thorin wasn’t looking at her, setting her items neatly away from the lift shaft with what appeared to be completely detached professionalism; a small thorn of disappointment prodded her heart, stinging. “Miss Baggins?”

“Sorry—” Focus darting back to a pair of bright, earnest blue eyes, Bilba realized been ignoring the poor lad entirely, and making him fret even more. “Yes. Sorry, still a bit mixed-up. What were you saying?”

“Just, if you’re feeling up to it, ma’am, we thought you might want to move somewhere else, maybe one of these offices?” Fili’s brow furrowed, and one gloved hand stole up to rub his neck. “We’ve
got to get the... the other occupant out of the lift.”

“His name is Smeagol,” she replied, very quietly; her skin prickled with gooseflesh. The shuddery tension wasn't fully flushed from her, and primal fear she’d felt during that terrible moment when he had taken hold of her wrist seemed like it might take some time to banish entirely. “And he's not well. He could hurt himself, or one of you.”

“We know.” Fili was still frowning, but the resolute look he turned on her was reassuring. It was the expression of a man determined to fulfil an obligation, no matter how unpalatable. “We'll keep him safe and secure, until the police and the medics arrive. He's not entirely conscious yet, anyway.”

“We should still be elsewhere, I think,” Gandalf said, patting her hand briskly. “If only to spare my old bones any longer on this floor. Come, my dear.”

Fili offered them both a hand up, and Bilba took the assistance gladly. She also suppressed a wince as her wrist smarted sharply; she'd likely have a very obvious bruise tomorrow, but it didn't feel more serious than that. Keeping her arm around Gandalf's helped with the faint, lingering dizziness, and his warm, familiar presence at her side was even more comforting.

“The police will be here soon,” Fili said, glancing over towards the lift, where the first firefighter she recalled seeing, the large bald one, was climbing slowly out. Bilba kept her eyes averted after realizing what sort of burden the officer was carrying; she might not wish Smeagol Rivers any serious ill-will, but she still didn't want to look at him. Or really, be on the same continent, if at all possible. “They'll want to speak with you, I imagine, Miss Baggins.”

“We'll be just down here.” Gandalf motioned down the corridor, waving his hand at some random office door that hung halfway ajar, and Bilba found herself more than willing to be ushered away with haste.

She had no idea in whose office it was— there weren't any photographs on the desk or other personal paraphernalia to even give her a clue— and Bilba was careful not to shuffle any papers about as she settled into the comfortable guest seat, leaving the swivelling desk chair for Gandalf to perch upon. Resting her elbows on the desktop, she pressed her forehead into her palms, taking a few long, deep breaths.

“I'm fine,” she murmured, when the pads of Gandalf's fingers gently rubbed over her knuckles; somehow, the light touch managed to soothe some of her headache.

“Really,” she continued after a moment of shared silence, lifting her face to rest her chin on her hands, allowing Gandalf to study the truth in her expression. “Really fine. I promise.”

Smiling softly, Gandalf kept his arm stretched across the desk long enough to tuck some hair behind her ear. “I know, my dear girl. I have always known— you are a stronger person than even you give yourself credit for.”

The police arrived shortly thereafter, and Bilba was assured that at least two constables would be with Smeagol at all times, until it could be determined why he was no longer under psychiatric care. He had woken, apparently, somewhere between the lift and the ambulance that would take him to the hospital; Bilba flinched when he began to wail, the chilling scream echoing faintly from the corridor before fading completely as he was dragged off beyond her hearing.
Saruman had also descended from on high to oversee the proceedings, though that wasn't all that surprising—he was, of course, taking full advantage of the opportunity to glower balefully at the emergency responders, explaining in great detail precisely how displeased Istari Incorporated (and Istari Incorporated's fleet of legal representatives) would be if the details of this unfortunate affair came to light in the press. The story would be reported, but Bilba's name would not be mentioned.

If it were anyone else blustering on, Bilba would have expected to wake tomorrow with every gossip mag branded with a stock photo of herself and that terrible image of Smeagol snarling at reporters as he was led into the courtroom. But Saruman Belov had an impressive, somewhat terrifying ability to get his way, no matter the circumstances (except when faced with the combined mulish resolve of Gandalf and Radagast). With Saruman's media chokehold latching on quick and firm, Bilba would be surprised if she read more than a passing mention of this in the papers, all details vague and kept below the fold.

He had also slipped into the office for a moment, long enough to ask after Bilba's health; it was a brisk, no-nonsense inquiry—*are you well, Bilba*—but the fact that he'd asked at all was a pleasant surprise.

She reassured Saruman of her continued health, and a constable was ready to take her statement, but damn it all, she had no intention of letting Thorin vanish off with the other firefighters. Not without even attempting to explain herself, and apologize for standing him up; whether or not he was interested, at the very least she needed to return his coat.

“I'm sorry,” she said to the constable, not above feigning a bit of distress if it gave her a few minutes to dash out and possibly catch Thorin. Waving her hand at her face, she got to her feet. “I need a moment, please, just to step out for some air. So sorry, Constable; I won't be two shakes, I swear—”

And before anyone could argue, she was out in the corridor, slipping back off towards the lift and the murmur of voices still about. Fili was nowhere to be seen, nor indeed was the bald firefighter or the one with the dark ginger beard; there were a few police milling around, giving her appearance questioning looks, but that didn't matter.

Thorin had his back to her when she came around the corner; his helmet was missing, and his hair was flattened in a way that made her fingers twitch to comb it out. She squashed that thought almost instantly, hands fluttering awkwardly against her own thighs, and cleared her throat.

“How are you?” His shoulders stiffened, body freezing utterly for a second or two, before he glanced back at her with that same unreadable expression she remembered from that first meeting at the gym. In his hands, he was holding the heavy cotton blanket she'd left behind when she and Gandalf had relocated; Thorin had been in the process of folding it into a neat square, but he stopped when she spoke.

“Oh, I have a headache.” She smiled, just lifting one corner of her mouth. “And I'm gasping for a cuppa...
Thorin didn't offer a smile in return, and a fresh pulse of panic loosened her tongue even further.

“I'm sorry,” she said, gaining sudden steam. “I had every intention of seeing you Saturday, of going for coffee if you wanted— there honestly wasn't anything I wanted to do more, but there was an emergency. An emergency with work, and then suddenly I was on a plane Friday evening, and I didn't have any way to contact you, and I just got back tonight—” Pointing at her luggage sitting nearby, Bilba took a deep breath; she was blathering like an idiot, but Thorin wasn't stopping her or walking away. She chose, with a great swell of optimism, to take that as a good sign.

“I'm so sorry,” she said again, staring up into his cool eyes and willing him to believe her. “I swear, I never meant to stand you up.”

Thorin blinked, and his dark brows lowered, putting a small, furrowed line between them.

“You—” He stopped, shaking his head, and rubbed one gloved hand over his jaw. It was stubbled again, but lighter this time than their first meeting. “So it... it was a date, then?”

“Of course it was!” The words blurted out almost indignantly, but before Bilba could slap her hand over her mouth or otherwise try in vain to bite her exclamation back, Thorin's face seemed to split before her.

The half-smiles he'd turned on her before were handsome enough, but they were a candle next to the bonfire of this grin, broad and true, with white teeth gleaming and crinkles forming around his quickly thawing eyes. This was a beautiful expression, and Bilba found her heart skipping foolishly at the sight of it.

She watched him try to rein it back into impassiveness, but that was a bit like closing the stable door after the horse had bolted. She'd already seen a hint of the irrepressible happiness lurking beneath, and she wasn't likely to forget it soon.

“Of course it was a date,” she said, not bothering to stifle the shy smile creeping up her face. “But if you'd rather not ask me again, after what happened last time—”

“Bilba, would you like to have coffee with me?”

She managed not to laugh, but it was a close thing; the urge wasn't born of any sort of teasing, but from the giddiness bubbling up through her stomach like hiccoughs.

“I'd love to,” she said instead, beaming. Gandalf, for once, didn't have the worst timing on the face of the earth, and had just appeared around the corner. Bilba kept her attention firmly on Thorin, even as Gandalf drew up upon them. “Tomorrow?”

“Ah, I'm working tomorrow,” Thorin said, glancing momentarily at Gandalf as the man came to stand behind Bilba's shoulder (not quite crowded close enough to interrupt the conversation, but just near enough that Bilba could not ignore him for long). “Friday?”

She had no idea what her schedule was supposed to be like for the rest of the week— the New York trip had thrown everything out of whack— but she nodded regardless. Whatever issues might crop up, she would make it work, come hell or high water.

“Sure, yes, lovely. Really lovely.” Gandalf's presence made everything feel rushed, but she was determined to prepare for eventualities this time. “Yes, Friday. I'd like to give you my mobile number, and you can ring me, or text—” she began to say, only to have Gandalf's hand appear beside her face, with a crisp cream-coloured business card held between his index and middle
fingers.

“Here you are, my dear. Your information for the gentleman,” Gandalf said, and he had the audacity to *twinkle* at her with delight. If he was really so pleased with her stammering over making a date, perhaps he shouldn't have made her break the last one, damn it (and the fact that he hadn't actually *known* about the last one was completely irrelevant). “The good constable would like to speak with you now, Bilba, if that's convenient.”

“Ah, right.” *Damn it, damn it.* Plucking up the card, Bilba didn't notice it looked different until it was already passed over to Thorin's waiting hand. The mobile number was correct, she noted with great relief, but before she could read any more, Thorin had the card tucked safely away in one of the pockets of his coat.

She couldn't ask for it back, just to see it. That would be too odd.

She *couldn't*, not with Thorin giving her that warm, hopeful look that brightened his gaze and made her feel like she'd just won the lottery. So she said nothing, except some mumbling, silly version of good-bye, and offered Thorin a wave as she followed Gandalf back down the corridor.

*Darn Gandalf Legris.*
Chapter 8
Chapter by littleblackdog

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

When Thorin climbed back into the fire engine, it immediately became apparent that he hadn’t quite managed to wipe the grin off his face.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake.” Dwalin peered over at him from behind the wheel, eyes narrowed. Thorin, in response, studied the radio a bit more intently than was warranted; his mouth may have been curling up a bit at the corners. “You've got to be joking.”

“Shut up,” Thorin said cheerfully, and slid the firecom headset on one ear, patching in to Gloin and Fili back in the jumpseats.

“—Belle Bijou!” Fili’s voice was once again the first thing Thorin heard through the com, though his nephew’s tone was much happier now than it had been on the way to the Istari Building. “I can’t even believe... Gloin, did you see her? You saw her, right there, in real life? Talking to me? Holy shit, I just met Belle Bijou! Kili’s going to lose his mind—”

“Fili!” Good humour souring in one swift stroke, Thorin adjusted the mic. The scowling executive hadn’t scared him with those cool threats about legal action, but the man hadn’t needed to make the effort; even without Bilba’s contact information feeling so weighty in his pocket, Thorin would not have tolerated gossip mongering about a situation like this. “Keep your tongue in your head, and remember that woman is entitled to her privacy, and your respect. You know better.”

Dwalin snorted incredulously, starting up the engine and shifting the truck into drive. Thorin ignored him, listening to the uncomfortable silence suffusing the jumpseat area.

“Sorry, Uncle,” Fili said after a moment, subdued. “I just... Sorry.”

“And stop eying up Uncle’s girlfriend, there’s a good lad,” Dwalin said under his breath at the same time, thankfully quiet enough not to be picked up by the mic. Thorin still reached over and punched him hard in the shoulder.

“Gandalf.” Catching her incorrigible boss by the elbow, Bilba stopped them both in the corridor a few feet from the office door, still out of sight of the police officer within. “What was on that card? That wasn’t my business card.”

“Hm?” Gandalf hummed at her, somehow simultaneously managing to look almost entirely inscrutable, and pleased as punch. “Whatever do you mean, dear girl?”

It was a very close thing, but Bilba managed to refrain from either stomping her foot like a child, or stomping on his foot. There was a certain amount of decorum she clung to, mulishly, even when dealing with impossibly frustrating old nutters.
“I have had a very long day,” she said, squeezing her eyes closed and pressing her free hand against her faintly throbbing temple. “Just... Whatever you’ve done, just please tell me you’ve not buggered up my date.”

Breathing deep— in through her nose, out through her mouth— Bilba opened her eyes again, hoping for at least some kind of reassurance. What she found was a cream coloured card being held out in front of her nose, emblazoned with the same glossy black font and silver ampersand she expected from a Garnished & Gilded business card. She had a dozen like it stuffed inside her wallet, and a box of them in a desk drawer at her flat.

*Garnished & Gilded* was scrawled in large copperplate script, with *Fine Lingerie* typed in neat smallcaps beneath. The contact information printed near the bottom was perfectly correct— the Istari building address, her mobile phone number, her business email, Gigi’s website— but it was the startling presence of her real name, and the byline beneath, that caught Bilba’s eye.

*Belle Bijou, Model*— that was how all the cards in her wallet read. Those were three words she had carried on little rectangles of cream coloured card for nearly ten years, ever since Gandalf had taken her out for dinner one evening, during her first year of uni, and slid a box of one hundred freshly printed cards across the restaurant table.

*Bilba Baggins*, this card said, and under that: *Assistant Director*. She stared at the words for a long moment, not entirely believing her eyes. Then, she let go of Gandalf’s arm, stepping back, and pointed accusingly at the card.

Her mouth worked wordlessly, but not soundlessly. Someone squeaked, like air escaping a balloon; the noise stopped when Bilba clamped her teeth shut.

“Congratulations, my dear.” Gandalf’s eyes crinkled deeply at the corners in a fond smile, and he swept an arm towards the door in a grand gesture. “Shall we?”

“Shall—” Reining her voice back down from an indignant squawk, Bilba hissed between clenched teeth. “We most certainly shall *not*! What is that... that nonsense? *Assistant Director*? I’m not—”

“Is it within the realm of possibility,” Saruman snapped, stepping out into the corridor from the office door, looking more thunderous than usual. “To move this along at something approaching a reasonable pace? Bilba, the officer is waiting to take your statement, and I am waiting to get back to my business. Which I cannot do, as long as there are police cluttering up my building.”

“Did you know about this?” Swatting her hand in the direction of the card, not willing to touch it directly, Bilba turned to Saruman. “This... this! For goodness sake, I’m not *director* of anything!”

“I should think not.” Saruman sniffed, folding his arms across his chest. His only wardrobe concession to the lateness of the hour, which was inching ever closer to midnight, was a lack of suit jacket over his crisp white shirt and inky black waistcoat; even his pale blue tie was still knotted impeccably. “*Assistant Director*, and only of Garnished & Gilded. As we agreed, Gandalf.”

“Indeed,” Gandalf said, while Bilba sputtered, completely lost. Finally, Gandalf placed his hands upon her shoulders, anchoring her with his reassuring touch and keen, steady gaze.

“I say you are Assistant Director of Garnished & Gilded, Bilba Baggins.” She began to protest again, but Gandalf held her steadfast, towering over her not simply with physical height, but also with a surge of gravitas. “And so Assistant Director, you are— as well as our finest model. You are both, as you have been in all but name for quite some time.”
It was absolutely no use arguing with Gandalf, of course, so Bilba trudged into her police interview in a bit of a daze, answering all the officer's questions to the best of her abilities.

Then eventually, blessedly, she was ushered out of the building (after a quick stop by the security office and effusive thanks to a statuesque Tauriel), with a police officer keeping comfortably close by her side.

She did not expect the sight that greeted her when she stepped out into the night air, but Bofur's waiting arms were certainly a welcome surprise.

“They’re fine.” Leaning against a waiting cab with a packet of cigarettes tapping between his fingers, Bofur looked entirely frazzled, wrapped up in his old brown duffle coat and a pair of jeans. Jeans that must have been Nori's, too short in the leg, leaving strips of sagging socks visible above his trainers. Even the flaps of his ridiculous hat were drooping. “There’s my darlin’.”

The officer escorting Bilba out of the building and to a police car— they had offered her a ride home— tensed. “Ma’am,” the officer said questioningly, but Bilba was already waving her off with hasty assurances and thanks for all her help. Bilba closed the distance across the pavement in quick strides, not stopping until she had her face pressed against the scratchy wool of Bofur's coat, and his arms were squeezing just a shade too tight around her back.

“I’m fine,” she said, for what felt like the thousandth time that night, but still burrowed close into Bofur’s solid, familiar body. He pressed a kiss against her head, and she felt his breath gusting warm into her hair, huffing out in a great, relieved sigh.

“Course you are,” he mumbled, low and gruff, then pulled away just enough to look down into her face, with his arms kept looped around her. “I reckon you’re past ready to get home, eh? Would you rather yours or mine?”

“Mine,” she answered, with only a moment’s hesitation; as pleasant as Bofur’s flat was, she felt an aching sort of need to be on more familiar ground. She wanted to shut her own front door against the world and crawl into her own bed for a bit. “What are you even doing here?”

“Gandalf texted me.” Untangling himself a bit more, though keeping one arm curled around Bilba’s waist, Bofur reached back and popped the cab door open. “She’s fine,” he said to Nori, who was slouched in the backseat, wearing a black hoodie and what looked like a pair of pyjama bottoms in dark green plaid. His long brown hair was wound up in a messy bun at the nape of his neck.

“Of course she is.” Nori’s smile was a quick thing, gleaming sharp as knife in the jaundiced light of the cab’s interior. He patted the seat beside him. “Come on, then. You’re letting all the heat out.”

“In you go,” Bofur agreed, and Bilba found herself sandwiched between the pair of them in short order, giving the cabbie directions to Carrock House, up on Gladden Street. The handsome old building had been an expansive Georgian property at one point, but had long since been converted into several beautiful, well-lit flats.

Bilba had no desire to rehash the lift incident again that evening, not after walking through everything with the police once already, and neither Bofur nor Nori seemed inclined to push for details. Most of the drive was spent in easy silence, with her shoulders tucked under the weight of Bofur’s arm, and one of Nori’s hands laced through her own. She considered the card in her jacket.
pocket, Assistant Director, but even that seemed like too daunting a topic to broach in the peaceful hush of the cab.

Bofur only asked one question, and thankfully it wasn’t a difficult one to answer at all. “The sofa-bed free for the evening, darlin’?”

“If you like,” Bilba said, quietly relieved. She was still feeling skittish, and spending her night in an empty, silent flat would not have helped matters; she was going to wake up thinking there was someone else in the shadows, regardless, so it may as well be someone real.

When they pulled up outside her flat, Bofur paid the fare while Nori took her bag, leaving Bilba floundering with nothing to do but fish her keys from her coat. Inside Carrock, the corridor was lit dimmer than usual, but that oddity was quickly and easily explained by the astonishingly massive man currently changing a bulb in one of the wall sconces.

“Good evening, Beorn.” Bilba twiddled a wave at her enormous landlord, who never even bothered to pretend he needed a step stool (let alone a ladder) to reach any of the lights in the building. The man was seven feet tall if he was an inch, and built like a bear, with a wide barrel chest and arms nearly thicker than her waist; add to that an abundance of wiry black hair (from his bushy beard, to the pelt that peeked from his shirt collars and trailed down his forearms), as well as a stern suspicion of strangers, and Beorn Urs cut quite the intimidating figure.

He also never seemed to bloody sleep, forever tinkering around the building at all hours. Who changed a lightbulb at ten past one in the morning, for goodness sake?

“Welcome home, little bunny!” Bilba flinched, partly due to the silly nickname, but also because Beorn’s booming greeting likely woke at least one or two unfortunate neighbours. “I found your note; your wee green babies are happy as pigs in muck, all watered and tended. The hoya is blooming like mad.”

“Oh, thank you,” she said, wiping her feet. “I’ll make you a crumble this weekend, shall I?” Beorn grumbled good naturedly about it being no trouble, but didn’t actually refuse the offer of freshly made pudding. Bilba smiled, enjoying a rush of contentment at the thought of her plants thriving even without her careful nurturing; she had made the mistake of asking Bofur to care for them once during a three week trip to Spain, and came back to a flat littered with miserable wilted greenery.

Beorn turned a distinctly unimpressed glance toward Bofur and Nori, but he allowed them to follow Bilba up the stairs without comment—they had passed the gauntlet of suspicious glares and interrogations years ago, and were now permitted relatively free access to the building. Up past the landing, then down to the end of the corridor brought them to her door, painted a bright, nostalgic kelly green that reminded her so strongly of a sunny little cottage in the West Midlands.

“I’m going to sleep for a year,” she announced to the flat at large, the moment the three of them tumbled inside. “After I fetch you some blankets—”

She stalled, stumbling over her own feet when Nori bumped into her back, but didn’t fall.

Her coatrack. Her coatrack was empty.

Thorin’s coat.

“Don’t worry about that, darlin’,” Bofur was saying, shedding his own coat and his hat, and toeing off his trainers. “I know my way around your linen cupboard. You just pop off to bed.”

“Coat.” Her throat was tight; the word was hardly louder than a squeak. “Coat.”
“Hm?” Setting her suitcase to one side, padding casually into the flat and dragging Nori along, Bofur seemed too busy flicking on lamps to immediately notice her panic. It wasn't until Nori's elbow connected sharply with his ribs that Bofur caught on to her blank staring at the coatrack.

“Coat,” she said again, desperately; she couldn't show up for a date with Thorin, without his coat. She could not have lost his coat.

“It's still at the cleaners.” Whipping her head around, Bilba pinned Bofur with an incredulous stare, wild-eyed enough to make him lean back. “Whoa, easy now. You asked me to take it in, love. Remember?”

The text. She'd sent the text asking him to get a wet coat drycleaned, and hadn't said which coat.

“Oh god.” Relief was like a bucket of water dumped over her head, washing away the tight chill of anxiety. She sagged, and for the second time that night (though in an admittedly less dire situation at the moment), Bilba found herself stifling giggles against her hand.

Apparently satisfied that her laughter was a good sign, even if it was a wee bit frantic around the edges, Bofur shifted a few books out of the way and knelt on the sofa, leaning over the arm to waggle his eyebrows at her. “Oh, aye. Let's talk about that fancy old coat, eh? And perhaps you've got a tale or two about the likely tall and well-built bloke belonging to it? Has our dear Miss Baggins been keeping secrets?”

Just as suddenly as the relief had come, so came the faint heat of a flush, creeping up her neck.

“Are they sexy secrets,” Bofur continued, grinning with his chin propped up in his hands. “Because that was a damned sexy coat, believe you me—”

“If you shut him up,” Bilba said, shooting a glance at Nori. “I'll do a fry up for breakfast. Eggs, beans, and all.”

“Hey—” Bofur began to protest, while Nori simply said: “Sausages?”

She nodded, and Nori's hand snapped out quick as a snake to grab Bofur by the back of the shirt collar, hauling the other man down onto the sofa cushions. Before Bilba could even blink, Nori was perched on Bofur's chest, with a throw pillow brandished menacingly.

“Button it, Bofur.” Dodging all attempts to snatch the pillow, Nori somehow managed to take hold of both of Bofur's flailing wrists and pin them to the sofa one-handed. “I will smother you for sausages, I swear to god. Bifur's switched ours for meatless, again, and they taste like sawdust and shit.”

“Oh lord liftin'... You're worse than Bombur, you greedy arse.” Going dramatically limp, Bofur rolled his neck enough to peer over at Bilba. “And you— I'll have it out of you tomorrow, once you're rested and I'm a bit farther removed from imminent death. Don't think I'm above tickling it out of you, either.”

She didn't think that for a moment, but at the very least she'd bought herself some time to consider what she was going to say. Retreating off to her room after saying her goodnights, Bilba thought about how she'd describe Thorin.

She managed to work her way down the list from ridiculously handsome to astonishingly thoughtful, and all the way back to really, honestly ridiculously handsome again before she fell asleep. Her mobile was charging on the bedside table, and she was wearing the daftest little smile, pressed into her pillow.
you can see a mock-up of Bilba's Assistant Director business card over here.
Chapter 9

Chapter by littleblackdog

It was nearly eleven in the morning; Thorin had left the station a little more than an hour earlier, sparing a distracted nod for Red Watch as they arrived at nine-thirty to relieve Blue. He'd taken his bike to work, as usual— more comfortable than the tube, cheaper than taxies, and he had a guaranteed space to park it at the fire station— and the ride home through morning traffic had gone by in a blur.

At least the roads had been drier than the week before. It would have been just his luck to get a beautiful woman's phone number, then skid over a wet drain cover and smash head-on into a bus.

Sitting at his small kitchen table, Thorin rested his elbows on the dark wood and propped his chin on his folded hands. His mobile sat on the tabletop, its screen dark; beside that, there was cream coloured business card, and a tumbler glass of some thick, pea green slurry... presumably meant to be a beverage.

The drink— a smoothie of some kind or other— had been waiting for him in the refrigerator Monday evening when he'd gotten home from work, sitting ominously in an old glass milk bottle. It was part of a relentless, ruthless campaign by Dis to make certain he was getting whatever weird mix of dark greens, super fruits, and seeds she had decided he needed this week. Thorin had learned years ago that arguing with her about his own diet (which was fine) was not a battle worth the casualties, and so now he ate whatever she dropped off with only perfunctory grumbling about the stranger recipes.

He didn't bother throwing anything out and lying about having eaten it; somehow, she always knew. When he'd mentioned that freakish polygraph-like power in passing, complaining about her mother-henning over a Sunday meal with her and the lads, he had been inundated by matching looks of intense, dramatic empathy stealing across Fili and Kili's faces.

Staring consideringly at his mobile, Thorin took a sip of the smoothie, trying very hard not to smell it overmuch— the taste was fine, a bit tart, but under the strong scent of apples and banana, there was a thread of something that stank faintly like fish and old socks. It was better, he had learned, not to ask for details. Ignorance could occasionally be bliss.

At this particular moment, however, Thorin was feeling uncomfortably ignorant regarding what his next move should be. He had Bilba's mobile number. Tomorrow was Friday.

He needed to set up this date.

“Shit,” he said, taking a larger swig of the smoothie than was perhaps wise, and pulling a face.
He would have rung her, likely (possibly) with minimal fuss, if he didn't already know the sort of hellish night she'd just suffered. The last thing he wanted to do was wake her up, if she'd just managed to get a few hours of rest. But if he intended to be at all fit for his shift this evening, and still all right for thus-far theoretical coffee on Friday, he needed some bloody sleep as well.

He could text her instead, which was a less demanding and immediate sort of communication, but what the hell was he meant to say in a text? Especially when she didn't have his number already; he'd have to introduce himself. How was that meant to go?

Hello. This is Thorin.

God, that sounded awkward.

He wasn't entirely certain how it was possible to feel simultaneously like a thirteen year old boy and a two hundred year old fossil, but the smooth glass of his mobile screen had somehow evoked that in him. Or maybe it was the neatly embossed card that had him feeling as clumsy as Dwalin after too many pints.

Bilba Baggins.

Bilba Baggins, Assistant Director.

He hadn't expected that, to be honest, but he wasn't exactly up to date on the inner workings of lingerie company corporate hierarchy. Bilba obviously used a pseudonym for her modelling (even if she hadn't introduced herself as Bilba, no one's name was actually Belle Bijou); he wondered if it meant anything that she hadn't used that pseudonym when they'd first met. Surely more people recognized her as Belle.

Damn it, he was getting distracted. Finishing off the smoothie, Thorin pushed out his chair and took the glass over to the sink, rinsing the green film from the inside. If he left the residue, it would be infuriating to get clean later; he deliberately didn't consider what that might mean for his gut.

His phone beeped, screen lighting up with a text alert, and for one mad second, Thorin's pulse quickened. Which was a ridiculous reaction for several reasons, not the least of which being that Bilba didn't have his number.

The text, as it happened, was from Dwalin. It read simply: ring her you tit.

Piss off, Thorin typed out in return, knowing full well that ignoring the text was simply asking for a flood of more, each more abusive than the last. Before sending, he paused, then added: doing it now.

There wasn't a response, which meant Dwalin might be leaving him be to make the call, or possibly the other man had simply sent the original text before shuffling off to bed. Either way, Thorin was alone again, with only his phone and a business card for silent, expectant company.

He couldn't text her— not for this. It felt too graceless, too impersonal, and too distant.

And perhaps he was selfish enough to want to hear her voice.

“Shit,” he said again, and picked up the card, studying the number for a long moment before punching it into his phone.

“Hello?” She picked up on the third ring, and Thorin stepped away from the table, already starting to pace slowly around his flat. She didn't sound groggy, as though he'd woken her, but she didn't sound
alone either.

“—keep her. Like the cutest wee pet, and she feeds us!” The man’s voice in the background was loud, Irish, and full of laughter. Thorin swallowed, his tongue feeling foolishly dry, and his own words still came out gruffer than he’d intended.

“Hello, Bilba? It's Thorin.”

“Oh!” There was a bit of a scuffle on the other end of the line, a muffled hiss that sounded very much like Bilba telling someone to shut up, then her voice returning, sounding warm and happy in his ear.

“Good morning,” she said, the words curling around a smile he could hear, as well as imagine.

“Good morning,” he returned, pausing his pacing to rest his forehead against the refrigerator. Her card was still in his hand, and he slid it onto the worktop before he worried the edges unintentionally. His own smile was a weird, twitching thing, but it was there on his face all the same. “I— how are you?”

“Better.” The cool stainless steel of the freezer door was oddly nice, but Thorin found himself needing to move about again, stepping back to wander a loop around his small kitchen. “Thank you for asking. Much better. How are you?”

“Better.” The cool stainless steel of the freezer door was oddly nice, but Thorin found himself needing to move about again, stepping back to wander a loop around his small kitchen. “Thank you for asking. Much better. How are you?”

“Fine. I'm fine, thanks. Listen, about Friday—” Rubbing the back of his neck with his free hand, Thorin leaned against the counter and peered up at his ceiling. “I'm looking forward to it, to coffee. How does The Silver Platter Café suit, at seven?”

He had assumed she would know the place, or at least know of it—it was a cozy little café just around the corner from the gym where they’d first met, and though he’d only been in twice himself, Thorin had been pleased with the service and the food on both occasions. The dead silence on the other end of the line did not seem like an especially positive response, however.

“The Silver Platter,” Bilba said finally, barely two seconds before Thorin had scrambled enough thoughts together to suggest something else. She sounded strange, her voice gone softer, and he wished fervently that he could see her expression. “Yes, that's... that's my favourite café.”

“Really.” It wasn't a question; it was a single word crackling with dry disbelief, and Thorin hadn't meant to voice it at all. At least, not quite so cynically.

When she laughed, quiet but honest, he felt the tight, twisted up ache in his stomach release. He inhaled deeply, tilting the phone away from his mouth for a moment.

“Yes, really.” Her own breath was still chuffing faintly, amused. “Which is why you startled me with the suggestion. You said seven?”

“Seven, yeah.”

“That suits me; the Silver Platter at seven tomorrow. Thorin?”

He thought, he hoped, she sounded pleased. “Yes?”

“I'm looking forward to it, too, and not just for the coffee either— though the coffee there is delicious.” She paused, only for a second or two, and Thorin didn't fight the broad, probably foolish grin that started to spread across his face. She definitely sounded pleased, but not brashly confident, and that was oddly comforting. “I'm looking forward to seeing you again, and in less dire
circumstances if we can manage it. No lifts; no puddles.”

“I don't know about that. Do you think you'll still fancy me if I'm not a daring rescuer?” Making her laugh on purpose made the sound even more lovely; this was going well.

“Oh, I suppose you'll have to take that chance... and who said I fancy you?”

“Call it a hunch.” Steeling himself, Thorin added: “And if you had a similar suspicion, I wouldn't be terribly surprised.”

Bilba hummed a wordless, agreeing noise, and the loosening knot in Thorin's stomach turned into a warm weight instead. Then there was silence between them again, but this time it was much more comfortable—a mutual break for quiet thought, knowing that the other was still listening.

“You said you work today,” she said eventually, questioningly, and Thorin found himself nodding slightly, though she couldn't see it.

“Tonight, night shift. Today I'm sleeping.” Though sleep seemed miles off at the moment.

“Well, then I should leave you to it.” That was true, no matter how much Thorin wanted to disagree. “I... I hope you sleep well, Thorin.”

“Thank you.” He closed his eyes, just listening. “Until tomorrow?”

“Until tomorrow,” she agreed. “Bye, for now.”

“Bye.” He waited for the subtle shift from quiet to the emptiness of a disconnected call before lowering the phone from his ear, smearing his thumb across the screen. Slipping it into his pocket, Thorin huffed a short sigh, then pushed off from the counter, padding down towards his bedroom and pulling his tshirt up and over his head. There wasn't any excuse now; he needed sleep.

Less than five minutes later found him back in the kitchen, stripped down to just his pants. Bilba's card was still on the worktop where he'd left it, and Thorin snatched it up before moving it to the relatively safety of his wallet instead, tucked behind an old photo of Fili and Kili during a summer holiday in Cornwall, all pudgy cheeks and baby-toothed grins.

“Oh my god.” Sitting on the edge of her bathtub, Bilba pressed her hand against her mouth and stared down at her mobile. They'd made a date, with a time and a place and everything, and she had somehow refrained from babbling into the phone like a loon.

But The Silver Platter.

“Oh my god,” she said again, scrambling to her feet. “Oh shit.”

She had enough presence of mind to quickly save Thorin's number to her contacts, just in case her mobile decided to do something horrid like delete the call history, but then she was rushing back out into the kitchen in a flurry. Bofur and Nori were sitting around her table, polishing off their generous late-morning breakfasts, and both turned eager, anticipative looks in her direction the moment she appeared.

Then, almost immediately, both their expressions fell.

“Ah,” Bofur said, while Nori turned back to his beans with a frown and an aggressive stab of his fork. “That's not a happy face, my darlin'. Just tell me what stupid arsehole we have to kill. Is it
Mister Posh Coat? That tosser—"

“No, no—” Waving off the no doubt colourful barrage of threats and insults Bofur was more than willing to bring to bear in her defence (some of which, she was certain either he or Nori would actually enact if she truly asked), Bilba dropped to sit in an empty chair, dragging her own half-eaten plate close. Her eggs had gone cold and rubbery, but the fried mushrooms were still quite edible. “No one is killing anyone, thank you. It was good, very good... I've got a date, tomorrow.”

“And yet we're not singing from the rooftops,” Bofur said carefully, while Bilba popped a mushroom into her mouth, chewing morosely. “Help me out here, love.”

Swallowing, Bilba sucked a bit of grease from her thumb, then turned to Nori with a deadly grave expression on her face. Nori, for his part, froze under the scrutiny.

“If you'd had a choice,” Bilba began. “How long would you have waited to introduce Bofur to Dori?”

There hadn’t been any choice in the matter, in their case; Bofur had known Dori Rison through work before he’d even met Nori. Dori, who had been quite the accomplished model for Gigi’s men's line until his retirement from the business years ago, and who was now the proud owner and operator of gorgeous little café and tea shop— called The Silver Platter— only a short walk from Bilba's usual gym.

Dori, who was a darling man, a caring friend, and an incredibly nosy old worrywart.

Setting his fork down, Nori studied Bilba's face for a long, curious moment, before shifting his attention to Bofur, then back to her again.

“Er... Ten years?” Chewing his lip briefly, Nori shrugged. “No, maybe twenty. Forty years, at the outside.”

Before Bilba could attempt to smother her growing worry with more mushrooms, and perhaps some streaky bacon, Bofur was reaching over to pinch Nori's chin with his thumb, then planting a soft, sweet kiss against the other man's lips.

“What was that for,” Nori murmured after Bofur pulled away; neither of them noticed Bilba sneaking bacon from Bofur's plate. There wasn't a single sausage left on the entire table.

“For forty years, you soppy bastard,” Bofur said, claiming another kiss before releasing Nori's chin and pointing a finger in Bilba's direction as he settled back in his chair, wearing the most ridiculously blissful grin. “And don't think I missed that, sneak thief.”

“Mister Posh Coat,” Bilba said, ignoring the accusation even as she held a partially eaten slice of bacon daintily between her fingers. “Wants to meet for coffee at The Silver Platter, tomorrow, and I said yes.”

“Shit,” Nori said, the twin spots of pink fading slowly from his cheeks, while Bofur settled for a succinctly apprehensive: “Oh.”

“Exactly,” Bilba agreed, and finished off her bacon in two sharp bites.

Chapter End Notes
this is the last chapter before we get to the actual date, I swear. I will pummel my own creative process into submission if it tries to drag this out any further.

but this was just too much fun, so no apologies <3
“That is perhaps the stupidest—” Dori bent down, sliding a tray of petits fours back into the gleaming glass display, and Bilba didn’t bother leaning farther over the counter. Muffled or no, the derision in his tone was thicker than the rich fondant layered artfully over the elegant little cakes. “—maddest, most ill-conceived notion I’ve heard in ages.”

Straightening up again, wiping his hands on the cloth he’d set aside for just such a purpose, Dori levelled her with a withering look, all skeptically arched eyebrows and tightly pursed mouth. After a second or two of that, he let out a sigh, slinging the cloth over his shoulder.

“And I’ve known Gandalf for nearly thirty years,” he said. “So consider the source.”

Glancing at her watch— it was already a quarter to seven, bugger— Bilba tamped down the wild fluttering in her stomach and called up the most pleading, wide-eyed expression she had at her disposal.

“Please Dori, if anyone could understand, I thought it would be you.” When Dori continued to look entirely unimpressed, Bilba untwisted her fingers from the soft green cotton folds of her skirt, where they had been plucking at the subtle floral pattern in frustration.

“It’s not lying,” she said, tapping the spotless countertop, where one of the new business cards Gandalf had given her rested. “I am actually an Assistant Director, whatever in the world that means. I don’t think it’s unreasonable to lead with that, and ease into the notion that I also model. I assume you tell people you own a cafe, don’t you? Well, you also sweep the floors and clean the tables.”

Technically, Dori had a pair of rather sweet natured students who worked for him part-time, meant to be tending to customers and keeping everything clean while Dori handled greeting the customers, and preparing the food and beverages to his exacting standards. Technically, that was true, but Bilba had seen the man creeping up to buff invisible streaks from a table barely an instant after Arwen had finished wiping it down. And that was nothing compared to the glaring matches between Dori and Legolas regarding the schedule for descaling the machines.

“You do think you’re a clever lass.” Turning, Dori began straightening a various colourful boxes of tea on the neatly organized shelves behind the counter. There were a few customers scattered throughout the cafe, sipping beverages as they chatted in the lushly upholstered booths and tasteful round tables, but everyone appeared content for the moment; only she and Dori were lingering near the front counter.

“But tell me,” Dori said, precisely lining up deep blue boxes of custom blended chamomile. “Which seems like the more attractive option: that this man is really so unobservant that he’s never noticed the twenty-foot posters of your derriere gracing the sides of buses, or that he’s uninterested in the sight of you in naught but beautiful underthings?”

“For the love of— for me, for one evening, can you please just—”

The small silver bell above the door chimed, and Dori spun neatly on his heel, smoothing down the front of his black half-apron. The subtly false, welcoming smile he managed for most customers
shifted almost immediately into a truer, much less pinched expression.

Glancing at the door, Bilba expected to see Ori shuffling in for a caffeine fix, with a slouchy beanie pulled over his shaggy hair (lest Dori insist, without room for argument, that his brother was due for a trim), or perhaps even Gandalf popping by for a plate of blackcurrant macarons and some flirting (which would invariably end with the cafe closing at nine o’clock precisely, and both Gandalf and Dori wearing identical blissful smirks tomorrow). Either option was enough to send an unenthusiastic shiver down her spine— this was a first date, and she wasn’t ready to share Thorin quite yet. Having Dori meet him was daunting enough.

What she expected, and what she actually saw, were very different things.

“Ah, Thorin,” Dori said, and Bilba blinked owlishly, more than a little stunned. She most definitely had not told Dori her date’s name, had barely described him; how was this even bloody possible? “Hello; how are you this evening?”

“I’m good, thanks.” No matter how much she blinked, the man stepping inside the shop didn’t vanish in a puff of smoke, or resolve into some other bloke Dori would recognize. He stayed stubbornly, perfectly Thorin, from the polished toes of his boots, to the few faint streaks of grey in his thick, dark hair.

Then, of course, he turned those clear blue eyes in her direction, and Bilba felt the corners of her mouth lift almost entirely without her permission.

“Hello,” Thorin said, moving to stand just a smidgen less than an arm’s length away. There was a lower, warmer pitch weaving through the greeting, and the sound of it made Bilba think of crackling fireplaces and big, purring cats. His attention flickered down the length of her— over her loosely fitted jumper, the scalloped hem of her skirt hanging just to her knees, her tights— but only for a polite instant before returning to her face and staying there. “You look lovely.”

“So do you,” she meant to say, maybe a bit awkwardly, but by god it was the truth; well-fitted, dark wash jeans and a v-necked pullover in charcoal grey made for an excellent, attractively casual outfit, but it was the jacket that stole the show. The black leather bomber jacket that looked perfectly broken-in and soft as it hugged across his shoulders and his arms.

Well, as it turned out, Mister Sexy Posh Coat wasn’t a one trick pony.

She meant to return the compliment, which had sounded so sincere it curled her toes in her loafers, but Dori cut in before she could force the words to scrape past her dry tongue.

“This? Him?” Dori was pointing, actually pointing at Thorin, while his silvery grey eyebrows made a concerted effort to meet his pristinely combed hairline. “This is your date? Thorin Durinson?”

Bilba couldn’t claim she’d actually heard the surname before, but when Thorin didn't immediately voice any objection, she nodded carefully. “Er... yes? Why... you two, I mean... what?”

“He’s my cousin,” Dori explained, sounding unfairly annoyed by the (admittedly babbling) question, and Bilba pressed a hand against her own cheek, processing that information. A cousin, Dori’s cousin (and, presumably, Nori and Ori’s as well) in a city of eight million bloody people, for goodness sake.

Coming around the counter, Dori was suddenly, and rather worryingly, all sunshine and roses, where a moment before he had been his usual, somewhat brackish self.

“This is grand,” Dori was saying, as he ushered them farther in to the cafe, insistently. “What are the
odds, I mean, honestly.” Knowing it was pointless to resist, Bilba allowed herself to be shepherded, and Thorin followed along beside her. She felt the lightest touch of fingertips just above the small of her back, and when she glanced up, Thorin was watching her questioningly; she smiled, and the fingers resolved themselves into a broad hand, resting comfortably against her spine.

“And here we are.” Sweeping an arm outward, Dori motioned them towards a table that was far enough back for some illusion of privacy in the small cafe. Bilba noted, however, that it had a perfect line of sight from the front counter. “Is there anything I can get you both, or would you rather take some time?”

Thorin actually pulled out her chair for her before settling into his own seat, in a low-key, natural gesture that didn't seem even slightly flashy or put on, while Dori whipped a pair of thin, leather-bound menus from an apron pocket and placed them on the tabletop. Both men were looking at her expectantly, and Bilba found herself needing a moment. Or perhaps a series of moments.

“I'm still deciding,” she said, ignoring the slight narrowing of Dori's eyes. Yes, she knew the menu here upside-down and backwards, but no, she wasn't going to rush into her order.

Thorin agreed easily to the delay, and Dori huffed as though the pair of them had deeply disappointed him, leaving them with an ominous: “I'll be back.”

“For your cousin,” Bilba said, after Dori had vanished off towards the counter, doubtlessly to set up surveillance. Across the table, Thorin was adjusting the drape of his jacket over the back of his chair.

“Second cousin.” Seemingly satisfied with how the gorgeous black leather hung, Thorin turned back to her with a tiny shrug. “Once removed. I hadn't seen him in years before I stopped in here for the first time, around a month ago. You two know each other?”

For an instant, every thought in Bilba's head froze. They certainly did know each other— when Gandalf had first hired her, Dori had been recently retired, but he had never been far removed from those early photo shoots. It had been a toss-up, back then, whether he spent more time fussing over her (her posture, her presentation, her expression), or glowering behind Ori's shoulder. It was around that time that the youngest brother Rison had refused some generous scholarships from a few prestigious universities in favour of pursuing photography as his calling, much to the detriment of Dori's blood pressure— Nori still maintained that only Gandalf's offer of an ongoing contract with Gigi's had saved Ori's life after that debacle.

But she certainly didn't want to tell Thorin that.

“What am I saying,” Thorin continued after a pause that felt a hundred years long to Bilba's racing mind, and his vaguely amused expression seemed entirely unaware of the maelstrom he'd just unleashed. “Of course you do. You did say this was your favourite cafe.”

Oh god, yes, she had said that.

“It is,” she chirped, her voice too high, then took a breath. “Dori does the most amazing blends of tea.” Reaching out, she dragged a menu over to distract herself from staring; the warm-toned, muted light was very flattering, and Thorin had a sort of intensity that would have been all too easy to get caught up in.

“Bilba.” A finger, thick and blunted but also quite long, curled around one edge of her menu. She forced herself to look up again, only to find a small furrow of concern wrinkling Thorin's forehead, and a frown gracing his lips. “You don't... is something wrong?”
“No!” The menu dropped to the tabletop, and her hand wrapped around his; his skin was very warm and rougher than her own, but any calluses she felt were smooth. Instead of pulling away, Thorin closed his fingers gently, his thumb resting on her knuckles, and he stayed quiet as she fumbled for the rest of her answer.

“Nothing’s wrong.” There was a hint of heat tickling up her neck, and Bilba hoped the soft lighting managed to mask her no-doubt splotchy blush at least somewhat. “It’s just... I haven’t been on a date in ages, I feel entirely out of practice, and for god’s sake don’t tell him this, but Dori likes to think he’s my father.” She cut a very quick glance over towards the counter. “When he’s more like an impossibly snoopy uncle peering at us from behind a jar of biscotti.”

“We could go somewhere else,” Thorin offered, carefully, and Bilba felt a foolish rush of relief even as she shook her head.

“No, no that would actually hurt his feelings, quite a lot. And I’d rather stay, regardless.” Thorin didn’t seem entirely convinced, the corners of his mouth still turned down; Bilba squeezed his fingers. “Honestly, I’d rather stay. Dori is a dear friend, even if he drives me mad on occasion, and he brews the most astonishing rooibos chai.”

“All right.” His expression slowly lightening again, Thorin sat back in his chair, though he kept his arm stretched out across the small table, and his hand resting loosely in her grip. “Since we’re being so honest, I feel I should admit I’ve no idea what a rooey bose chy actually is. I’m assuming some sort of beverage.”

“Oh my lord,” Bilba said, her voice heavy with mock disappointment. “You're a coffee man.”

“I work ten and a half hour shifts,” Thorin explained, picking up his own menu with his other hand. “On my shorter days. Of course I’m a coffee man.”

“You're a firefighter.” Granted, blurting that out wasn’t the smoothest segue imaginable, but Bilba had already admitted to being a bit rusty at this dating thing. Surely that had to count for something.

Thorin chuckled, which wasn’t a bad reaction at all. “I am, yes. And you, Ms Baggins, are a burglar.”

It was an unexpected accusation, but Bilba caught on immediately— her unintentional theft of the first sexy coat— and was startled into a louder laugh than she’d meant to let loose.

“Hold on, now,” she said around her laughter. “It was a loan, if you’ll recall, and you never specified the length of the lending period. And, and, on top of that, I've brought it with me tonight so you can have it back. Hardly a burgle, by any definition.”

“Semantics, but fine. As you like.” Dipping his head, Thorin kept a slight, crooked smile, even as Arwen appeared beside them, her dark hair wound in a thick fishtail braid over one shoulder, and an order pad and pencil ready in her hands.

“Hello,” the young woman said, beaming sweetly at Bilba; if anyone were to guess which of the pair of them was the model, Bilba fully expected Arwen would be chosen ninety-nine out of a hundred times. Tall and well-proportioned, with flawless skin and fantastic bone structure, Arwen would have been a dream come true for most modelling agencies (and given that her family were old friends with the triumvirate of Istari Incorporated, she would have already had a foot in the door), but apparently she was quite content reading political science at uni, and floating around The Silver Platter in her skinny jeans, serving tea.
“What can I get you— Arwen began to say, only to be interrupted by Dori swooping in like a hawk, not *quite* bumping Arwen aside with his hip.

“I’ll handle this table, Arwen, dear.” Dori’s shooing motions were not the sort of thing a wise person ignored, and Arwen beat a hasty retreat, shooting Bilba a final confused look before trotting off to question another patron about something or other.

“All right, then.” Dori didn't bother with even the pretence of jotting anything down on a pad, and never had, as far as Bilba knew. Every order was invariably correct, regardless. “Have you decided?”

She had a chai with cinnamon bark, ginger, and hints of cocoa, while Thorin did indeed order a large black coffee (with *four* sugars, which she proceeded to call *coffee cake in a cup* when he gave her fragrant, milky chai the side-eye). It didn't take a great deal of coaxing to convince Thorin to try a taste of her tea, which he proceeded to describe as *not entirely bad*, maintaining a perfectly flat pokerface that sent her giggling into her hand.

Even with Dori lurking in the wings (apparently unsure which of them was most deserving of his heavy, monitory stares), it was a very comfortable hour or so of chatting, a fair amount of laughter and flirting, and their free hands lingering on the tabletop, brushing loosely together and apart in a strange, undiscussed intimacy.

It was nearly eight-thirty when Bilba shored up a burst of nerve and asked if Thorin would like to have supper with her, that night. He agreed immediately, and since The Silver Platter's menu encompassed lunch and brunch, they made their escape with only minimal tutting from Dori.

“We’ll be discussing that foolish plan of yours again, and at length,” Dori had hissed in her ear, as she was pulling her red coat over her soft, caramel coloured jumper (her nicer brown coat was still at the dry cleaners, with a middling chance of survival; nearly a week zipped up in a plastic bag, overlooked and marinading in kerb water, had done it no favours at all). Dori’s low tone reminded her of a thousand warnings on a hundred different shoots: *arch your spine, neck stretched, like this, so help me god*.

There was a rather nice pub within walking distance, and Thorin didn't object to Bilba taking hold of his hand again as they meandered through the chilly night air, both of them wearing their gloves. He'd retrieved his own fine grey pair from the paper shopping bag she'd carefully folded his wool coat into— *not* a Gigi's bag, she'd made certain— but now that she knew how warm his palm actually was, it was simple to imagine even through the layers of leather and cashmere. In fact, the twinkle in his eye as he'd turned towards her, after she reached up and caught his swinging arm to lace her fingers between his own, had been luminous in the glow of shops and streetlamps.

Over supper, she heard about his sister Dis, and his nephews— Fili, who she had apparently already met during the lift incident, and younger brother Kili, who was currently suffering through sixth form.

(“He’s more than capable,” Thorin had explained, his face pinching up in that half-proud, half-pained, entirely affectionate scowl Bilba remembered her own father wearing on occasion. “Smarter than he acts, smart enough for uni if he applied himself, but stubborn. I think the only reason Dis doesn't have my head mounted on her wall is the fact that he's still torn between applying to the brigade, and taking a gap year.”)

Bilba had avoided saying much about her own family; her parents had been killed in a car wreck when she wasn't quite Kili's age, and most of her extended relations wouldn't give *Mad Bilba* the
time of day now that she'd left the West Midlands behind in favour of her *indecent* profession in the wicked city. There wasn't really a good way to spin that for a first date.

Still, she spoke about the Risons—Nori was closer to Thorin's age than Dori, but had been rather wild and scarce even as a lad, while Ori was young enough to have avoided Thorin's notice as anything more than *another little cousin*. The Broadbeam family, Thorin did not know, which was a strange sort of relief; if she'd discovered that Bofur and Bombur were also his cousins, or Bifur was some distant uncle, the coincidences would have been far too thick on the ground.

It was late when they tumbled out of the pub, full of good food and still quite sober, laughter coming easily and hands clasped comfortably. Bilba didn't hesitate for a moment before giving her address to the cabbie that picked them up, unwilling to give her dark memories of Smeagol the power to make her nervous after such a gorgeous date.

Gladden Street, and then Carrock House, appeared a bit too quickly for Bilba's liking, but she bit back her disappointed sigh at the sight of home.

“Here we are,” she said as they stopped, popping the door and stepping out onto the kerb. Behind her, she heard Thorin tell the driver to wait, and then the sound of the other door opening and closing.

“Very nice,” Thorin said, waving a hand to indicate the beautiful old building as he came around the back of the cab. She murmured her thanks, and the pair of them ambled up the walkway, past the tall iron fence and the slightly wild hedgerow that separated Carrock House from the street. Thorin walked her all the way to the front door, then lingered upon the step when she made no immediate move to go inside.

“I had a lovely time tonight, Thorin.” Again, Bilba felt heat crawling up her neck, but she couldn't be bothered worrying about it. “Thank you for supper.”

“I'm glad you enjoyed it.” Thorin looked as though he was about to say more, but stopped, his attention flickering up and behind Bilba. She turned to see, in time to catch Beorn bent low and glaring dangerously from the gap between his curtains.

“Shoo!” She said the word aloud, even if distance and a double layer of glass prevented Beorn from hearing her, flapping her hand sharply for extra emphasis. “Go on— for goodness sake! My landlord —” There was a blush well and truly on her cheeks now; the warmth was unmistakeable. “Takes building security very seriously.”

“That's not a bad thing,” Thorin said, and Bilba didn't look back to him until Beorn had retreated. When the curtain did finally swing closed, she turned, and suddenly her stomach was fluttering around its generous meal. Thorin was close, but not crowding her, and for all there was nearly a foot difference in their heights, it didn't feel as though he was looming.

“I'd like to see you again,” she said, because it was either say *something*, or risk failing to stifle the urge to climb him like a very handsome tree. It was also something entirely true, and if Thorin's grin was any indication, the sentiment was probably returned. Feeling brave, she dared a bit more. “Soon, maybe?”

“I'd like that, very much.” Some of the strange awkwardness her front step had bricked up between them sloughed away, and Thorin took her hand again, his broad thumb stroking over her knuckles through their gloves. “I'm off until Tuesday, and then again next weekend. I could ring you tomorrow?”
“Definitely, yes.” But for the moment, there was a cab waiting at the kerb. “Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” Thorin parroted once more, then leaned down very slowly, giving her plenty of time to step away from the impending hug if she wished.

Of course she bloody didn’t wish, thank you. Instead, she slid into the strong bracket of his arms and looped her own around his ribs, not quite able to reach his shoulders without stretching and pulling them entirely, inexorability flush. His chest was solid as granite, his arms firm and thick under his sleeves, but he did not bring that obvious power to bear. The embrace was sturdy, but not squeezing, and she found herself in no great hurry to leave it.

“Goodnight, Bilba.” His voice was quiet, his breath warm even against her burning cheek, and she wondered if he could feel her blush when his lips brushed the lightest kiss just there, before he pulled gently away.

This wasn’t even remotely fair; she was a grown, worldly woman, and her knees actually felt jellied by a damned peck on the cheek.

“Goodnight,” she managed, her throat gone desert dry, and pressed his hand a bit tighter before letting him go entirely. Thorin paused an instant longer, seemingly studying her face as she found her keys in her bag, then ducked his head once and turned to start down the front step.

It was sheer luck that had Bilba glancing up towards the street, rather than unlocking the door immediately—there, rolling down Gladden Street, was the unmistakable red bulk of a bus.

And also there, in a matching red negligee and knickers, was a massive full-colour poster of Belle Bijou plastered down the side.

Oh shitting buggering shit shit shit.

“Thorin!” He had only made it as far as the bottom step before her outburst brought him up short. And as her fickle luck would have it, that meant he was the perfect height for her panicked solution. Reaching out, Bilba grabbed hold of one of the flaps of his breast pockets, tugging him into a firm, clumsy kiss.

Chapter End Notes

And finally we have achieved first date!

Also, let it be known that Dori/Gandalf makes me deliriously happy. So there’s that :D
He didn't know what to do with his hands.

Thorin felt every thought fly out of his mind like startled birds, leaving behind the press of soft lips against his, and some faint, fresh floral scent that had been wafting over him all evening, every time Bilba had swept her hair back. She was holding him by the jacket, tethered—she had called him, and he'd turned. She had pulled him, and he'd followed.

And now she was kissing him, her palm flattening against his chest, and his own hands were flexing at his sides, curling in an imagined grip he hadn't managed to reach for.

It was over before it really began, as Bilba drew away almost as quickly as she'd taken hold of him; it had only been few awkwardly stretched moments of pressure, of her mouth slanted over his and his nose jabbing her in the cheek. Thorin hadn't even closed his eyes, and so he was easily able to watch the progression of mortification sweeping over her face, furrowing her forehead and pursing her lips to a thin, bloodless line.

His stomach dropped to his feet, heavy as lead. She looked _appalled_.

“I— I'm sorry,” she stammered, quietly panicked, and his own idiocy hit him with all the force of a hammer, right between the eyes.

He would have been appalled with himself, too, if he’d kissed her and she’d gone as dead and cold as a slab of granite.

He still didn’t know exactly what to do with his hands, but he at least had a few ideas now (a hundred thousand things he _wanted_ to do, certainly); he settled for reaching out to rest his fingertips against the warmth of her jaw, and loosely catching her wrist with his other hand. Having her standing a few steps above him made leaning in a straightforward gesture, even if it felt anything but simple; his heart was pounding against his ribs.

Her mouth wasn’t nearly as soft this time, frozen taut at first, but Thorin thanked his lucky stars that Bilba was apparently better able to process surprises than he was. It was barely the space of a few worried heartbeats before the tension of her lips relaxed, parting gently against his; their heads tilted, slotting together much more comfortably, and Thorin slid his hand down her arm and around her palm, lacing their fingers as they had been tangled before.

It was gentle, slow, and Thorin felt heat pouring down his spine like water, filling him up and making him smile helplessly as Bilba bussed the corner of his mouth, then the centre of his top lip,
letting their kisses blend together unhurriedly. Her hand was on his chest again, stealing up over the collar of his jacket, and the knit of her glove tickled against the skin of his throat, startling a deep, low sound out of him.

Breaking apart was a gradual process of lengthening pauses between kisses, until eventually Thorin rested his forehead lightly against Bilba's, eyes closed, lingering in the warmth of their mingling breaths.

"Nothing to be sorry for," he murmured, hoarse, and felt the puff of her laughter ghosting against his chin.

"I think," she said, retreating a bit farther, just enough to brush a light kiss against his cheek, like a fond sort of punctuation. "I have to agree, on reflection."

The sconces illuminating the building's front step seemed too bright when Thorin finally opened his eyes; he felt mildly drunk, not from the two lagers he'd had at the pub, but from the sweet bite of peppermint on Bilba's lips, and the pleasant weight of her gaze on him. Bilba was smiling, flushed rosy pink from more than the chill of the night, and it took a sudden surge of self-control not to dip back in for another taste.

"Your nose is cold," he said, ducking close enough to brush his own nose against the smaller, rounded line of hers, just for an instant, before straightening up again.

She squeezed his fingers, her smile quirking at the corners, amused. "And your cab is waiting."

"It is, yeah." Stepping back with some effort, Thorin immediately missed the feel of her small hand against his neck; for god's sake, he needed to play this cool. Desperate pawing rarely made a good impression on a first date. "Goodnight, again."

"Goodnight, Thorin," she said, her voice hitching when he bent low enough to press a kiss against her knuckles; that breathy little hiccup jolted through him like lightning, and he swallowed thickly as they untangled from each other entirely. Bilba fished her keys out of her purse, and Thorin took another slow, backward step away from the building as she turned to unlock the door.

She paused halfway through the door, glancing back over her shoulder. Her hair was a bit rumpled from his foray into carding it away from her face, her curls falling loose and glinting with a halo of deep gold from the backlighting coming from inside.

"Goodnight," she said again, a whisper on the curling end of her smile, and then she was gone into the building, pulling the door firmly shut behind herself. Thorin heard the lock snap automatically, oddly pleased by the security, and took a long, bracing lungful of cold air before stuffing his hands in his jacket pockets and trotting off towards the idling cab.

After fire had gutted his family home, there had been a substantial estate to manage; it still bothered Thorin, seven years on, that he had allowed so many of the details to slip away from him, unattended. Grief and rage blinded him, and nearly a decade being shipped from one hot zone to another, from base to base, hadn’t prepared him for the crumbling of his oldest foundations. He’d hardly been a stranger to loss and death, to destruction on a much grander scale than the burnt out husk of one manor house, but seeing the tracks of soot licking up from Erebor's broken windows, blackening the grey stone walls, had taken him out at the knees.
Yes, there had been insurance, inheritance, funerals, and a hundred other small clamouring things, and for the first time in a very long time, Thorin had felt as though the ground had opened up beneath him, threatening to swallow him down into the same darkness that had overtaken the halls of Erebor Castle. If it hadn’t been for Dis, for her determination and ruthless attention to all those details lost amid Thorin’s haze, he shuddered to think of the state they would have found themselves in.

As happened, however, they had managed to piece some manner of decent life back together between the pair of them, largely for the sake of the lads.

A portion (too sizable a portion, according to Dis) of their assets had been routed into private investigations over the years, after the police inquest into the fire had come up with nothing more suspicious than accounts of an old patriarch with a fondness for drink and a growing fuzziness of faculties. The authorities told them (gently at first, then much more firmly as Thorin’s scepticism hadn’t waned) that the fire had been a tragic accident—there were any number of manor staff, family friends, and others willing to attest to Thror Durinson’s gradual decline, from a vibrant businessman and peer to a jaundice-eyed codger with too much of a penchant for brandy and cigarettes, both taken liberally and late into the night.

It was not, according to police and fire investigators, a wild notion to imagine that Baron Durinson had nodded off after a snifter or two, with a smouldering Sobraine in hand. *Accidents happened.*

Thorin hadn’t accepted that answer at the time, and seven years of experience in the Brigade had only managed to convince him that his instincts were right, even if he had no solid proof. Yet, at least.

Beyond his personal drive for answers, however, Thorin had made certain (and Dis had made doubly certain) that the lads would always be financially comfortable. A centuries-old family business in textiles had fallen apart decades ago, as so much manufacturing moved east, but the Durinson fortune was relatively vast; canny investments meant all of the money hadn’t dwindled along with the business.

Erebor Castle still sat, lonely and proud, on its sprawling estate grounds; the charred contents had been mucked out, the stink of smoke cleared, and the shattered windows boarded up, but there wasn’t any amount of cleaning that could banish the ghosts from its halls. Dis refused point-blank to move back to the cavernous estate, while Thorin felt haunted by every question still unanswered, and every niggling doubt in the back of his mind. How could he live in the rooms his grandfather, his father and mother, his *little brother* had died in, before he’d gotten justice for them?

It was his paycheque that kept him in his own flat, but family money that had bought Dis and the lads a three-storey, redbrick house in Wimbledon; the latter was where Thorin found himself on Monday morning, parking his bike in the garage and tucking his helmet under one arm.

Giving the front door a cursory knock, Thorin slipped inside without waiting for an answer, and was more than a bit surprised when he wasn’t greeted by an exuberant dog. Toeing off his boots and dropping his jacket and helmet, he allowed the muffled burble of what sounded like the television to lead him farther in, all the way to the lounge. What he found inside the dimly lit room made him pause, leaning against the doorway with his arms folded across his chest.

“What’s all this,” he asked, taking in the loose sprawl of pyjamas and lanky boyish limbs across the overstuffed sofa. Fili and Kili were both draped over the cushions, their heads at opposite ends and their legs tangled together under rumpled blankets; there was a small mountain of balled-up tissues piled on Kili’s chest, and Fili’s nose and top lip were cherry red and chapped.

Two pairs of glassy, bloodshot eyes swivelled in his direction, gleaming in the flickering light from
the telly, and the lads cried out a brief chorus of pitiful groans. Curled up on the floor with her back pressed against the sofa, Minty let her tail thud solidly on the carpet, but didn’t bother getting up, content with the fingers Kili was dragging idly through her ruff.

“Kee brought home plague,” Fili rasped, while his little brother succumbed to a bout of harsh, wet-sounding coughs. “Oh god, Thorin, save yourself.”

“Not my fault,” Kili managed to say, his voice just as painfully rough, and pressed his cheek against the arm of the sofa. His face was fever-flushed, but he looked a bit better than Fili’s sweaty, greenish pallor. “Everybody's sick. Whole school.”

“Fantastic.” Ignoring the psychosomatic tickle already starting in his own throat, Thorin didn’t move from the doorway. “Where’s your mum? Is she sick, too?”

“Not sick.” Fili waved a limp hand, vague and directionless, before slapping it over his forehead and pushing his fingers back through the damp spikes of his hair. “Making soup.”

The noise Kili made was halfway between a purr and a gurgle, apparently pleased at the notion of soup (or possibly just drowning in his own head fluids).

Beating a strategic retreat, Thorin absently wiped his palms against his jeans, already stubbornly opposed to the prospect of fighting off whatever bug had the lads laid out. He’d had his flu shot, damn it, but so had they. That did not bode well.

He found Dis standing at the butcher's block in her spacious, sunny kitchen, chopping a bunch of curly green leaves into narrow strips. Her face was rosy, spots of pink high on her usually fair cheeks, but there weren't any other signs of the dreaded lurgy. The kitchen was warm, which may have been enough to explain the flush; the homey scent of garlic, onions, and warm chicken broth was stronger here, compared to the faint whiffs creeping out through the rest of the house, muffled under the smell of lemon cleaner.

“There isn't any spinach in Grandmother's chicken soup,” Thorin said by way of greeting, and didn't flinch under the weight of his sister's unimpressed gaze, opting to investigate the simmering pot on the hob instead.

“It's kale, you barbarian.” The bundle of greens was quickly being reduced to a pile of short ribbons, Dis' knife not pausing its smooth slicing. “Give that a stir, would you?”

Gliding a wooden spoon through the cloudy yellowish broth, Thorin scraped the bottom of the pot to make certain nothing was sticking; shredded chicken, diced carrots and celery, and a few translucent pieces of onion rolled to the top, sinking and reappearing. The soup smelled delicious, and achingly familiar.

“You missed tomato lentil soup yesterday,” Dis said, bringing a heaping handful of kale over and reaching around Thorin's elbow to drop it in the pot. A measure of dried rotini, dark and likely whole wheat, followed directly after the greens, and Thorin kept slowly stirring the lot, separating the pasta before it could clump together. “And you also missed my little plague rats sicking up every fifteen minutes, like bloody clockwork. Lucky you.”

“Was that before or after they had the soup?” Ducking away from the dishcloth Dis swatted in his direction, Thorin abandoned the pot to simmer on its own. He and Bilba had enjoyed a proper supper date yesterday, which had been an exceptionally appealing way to spend his Sunday, even before he knew about the lads' rather messy misfortune.
“Arse,” Dis hissed, but she didn't bother hiding the smile twitching around her mouth and the corners of her eyes, which were the exact cool grey-blue shade as his own. Frerin's had been the same, though their brother's hair had favoured their mother's side of the family, deep gingery blonde. Both Thorin and Dis were dark headed, like their father, and sported bold Durinson noses; Dis and Frerin had actually been twins by virtue of sharing the womb, but it was Thorin and Dis who had always looked the part.

“I have to go to work,” Dis continued, pulling a pair of bowls and a small plate out of the cupboard and setting them up on a wooden breakfast tray waiting on the worktop. The announcement wasn’t surprising; Thorin could have gathered as much from the grey pinstriped trousers and crisp cream-coloured blouse protected under his sister’s apron, rather than jeans and a henley. “Just for a few hours. Can you keep an eye on the boys for a bit?”

A few crackers and a lush stem of green grapes filled the plate, and Dis gave the soup a stir with one hand while putting a pair of soup spoons onto the tray with the other. She was, as always, a whirlwind of calm efficiency, more than capable of giving any of the most disciplined soldiers Thorin had ever served with a run for their money.

“Yes, all right.” He might have argued that at nineteen and nearly seventeen years old, the lads hardly needed a nanny even if they were ill, but he had planned to move a bookcase for Dis that afternoon anyway. The only real difference would be the distinct lack of Fili helping him.

“Thank you.” Stripping off her apron, Dis took a quick inventory, glancing around the room and patting down her neat clothing. “The soup should be done in about ten minutes,” she said, adjusting the base of the long, thick braid that hung down the middle of her back, checking for loose hair. Without permission, Thorin found his thoughts wandering to lighter curls, amber brown and honey, smelling faintly of fresh flowers and soft as silk against his hands. He had kissed Bilba again after their supper date, in the dimness of a cab, deeper and sweeter than that first time.

“What’s that look?” Shaking his head sharply, banishing all those very satisfying memories from the fore of his mind, Thorin found Dis staring at him with a curious, birdlike tilt to her head. Damn it.

Playing ignorant was his only defense, and he knew already it was a poor one. “Hm?”

True to form, Dis raised both eyebrows, decidedly unconvinced by his noise of innocent query. “Don't hum at me. You have a look.” Flicking her arm, she checked her watch. “And I have no time to pry the reason out of you just now, but don’t think I’m forgetting. For god’s sake, you’re impossible.”

“Your definition of impossible is a bit loose.” Telling her to respect his privacy would be worse than waving a red flag for a bull, so Thorin swallowed back every version of mind your own business that attempted to bubble up out of his throat. He also began to mentally compose a few different texts he might send Dwalin, considering how much threat and how much pleading he needed to wind around the words in order to convince the man to keep his trap shut when Dis eventually rang him. And she would ring Dwalin, Thorin had little doubt, and Balin too.

“You’re blushing, Thorin.” He most certainly was not. “Feed my children; keep them hydrated. I should be back by six.”

Chapter End Notes
For the purposes of this story, I've had to play with ages a bit (dwarven aging doesn't really jive well with human lifespans). So, I've made Frerin and Dis twins, born less than a year after Thorin.
Chapter 12

Chapter by littleblackdog

Chapter Notes

Thank you folks for the comments on that last chapter, thank you for reading, for making me feel really great after my authorial constitution had atrophied from disuse, and thank you for being brilliant, lovely people.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The kitchen was quiet after Dis swanned out, except for the low burbling simmer of the soup. Thorin felt a wee bit lightheaded, not even slightly ready to entertain the notion of discussing Bilba with his sister; he gave the pot a perfunctory stir, keeping an eye on the time, and after a brief moment of indecision, he pulled his phone out of his pocket. He had already listened to Dis saying her goodbyes to the lads, and the thud of the front door closing. It was probably safe enough.

Punching in his passcode, Thorin fished a noodle out with the wooden spoon, blowing the steam away absently as he pulled up the messaging app. His last message from Bilba had come through at eight twenty-two that morning, finishing off a brief back-and-forth they’d had while enjoying their respective breakfasts, in their respective flats.

**Hope you have a good day**, he’d sent as their conversation wound down, knowing Bilba was only a few minutes from rushing out her door and off to catch the Tube. He had wondered, vaguely and largely neutral, if work for her that morning meant sitting behind a desk in some office, or stripping down to hardly anything at all and posing for flashing cameras, but Bilba didn’t volunteer any details, and he didn’t ask. He didn’t take issue with either scenario; what he knew about her job didn’t bother him. He would hardly have asked her out in the first place if it did.

**You too**, she’d responded, and then less than a minute after that, added: **the AM already started quite nicely xx**

He’d grinned into his coffee like an idiot after that, considering and discarding a dozen different ridiculous answers before popping the last crust of toast into his mouth and settling for a succinct yes it did. It took another long drag of coffee before he managed to sign the text off with the same pair of kisses Bilba had used— it didn’t feel as awkward as he thought it would.

Now, standing in his sister’s kitchen, Thorin put a spoonful of hot soup into his mouth (another two minutes or so for the pasta to finish; the stock was decent, if a bit bland, which might be for the best considering the lads’ sour stomachs), and considered his phone. If he wanted to get out ahead of Dis’ snooping, he knew he should text Dwalin sooner rather than later.

There was a blaring honk from the other room— one of the lads blowing his nose with enough force to make Thorin’s sinuses ache in commiseration. Forcing himself to stop over-thinking things, Thorin set the spoon aside and tapped out a quick message, not to Dwalin.

**Apparelltly I look suspiciously happy today.** It wasn't precisely what Dis had said, but it was close enough.
The soup was done, ladled neatly into bowls, by the time Thorin's phone beeped on the worktop, and he left the tray where it sat for a moment. He had hoped, but not expected, a response so quickly; she was at work, after all.

**Good,** Bilba had answered. **I'd hate to be the only one of us with this silly smile stuck on my face.**

That was a much nicer image than what waited for him in the lounge, but Thorin had suffered through worse assignments than a pair of mucus-drenched teenagers. Reading the message one more time, Thorin slid his phone back into his pocket and hoisted the tray.

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After the monstrously unwieldy oak bookcase was moved from the second floor to the third, and the boxes of books moved up after it (he left it to Dis to unpack and reorganize them), Thorin headed back down to the kitchen for water, and found enough recognizable ingredients in the fridge to assemble a respectable sandwich as well.

He was halfway through his lunch, flipping through Sunday's Guardian, when Fili shuffled out through the dining room and into the kitchen, wrapped in an afghan and scuffing his socks against the hardwood. The lad looked *slightly* less like a corpse now that he'd had soup and possibly a nap, if the bleariness in his eyes and red creases on his face were anything to go by.

“Sorry I didn't help.” Keeping himself curled up like a cocoon, Fili still managed to fumble a carton of orange juice out of the fridge, setting it on the butcher's block with careful movements. He still sounded as though he'd been gargling gravel. “With the bookcase.”

Thorin waved off the apology, going back to his newspaper as Fili fetched a hefty mug down from the cupboard, then dragged himself and his hard-won supplies over to the dining table. Settling heavily in a chair, keeping politely distant from Thorin, Fili leaned on one elbow and poured himself a large measure of juice.

“Should be fine,” Fili continued, producing a pair of dark green gel capsules from somewhere in the folds of his blanket. “Tomorrow. For work. No worries.”

The expression he made when swallowing the pills was incredibly pained, but after a few long gulps of juice, Fili forced what Thorin assumed was meant to be a reassuring grin.

Thorin was less than reassured. “You're not spreading this through Blue Watch; you're taking the day off. No arguments.”

“I'll be fine,” Fili insisted, low and stubborn, but wilted under Thorin's steady stare.

“Going to bring Kee some pills,” he said eventually, pouring more juice into the mug before hauling himself to his feet, wavering faintly.

Thorin was struck by a twinge of regretful nostalgia in his chest—he remembered that precise mix of disappointment, embarrassed relief, and a hint of shame stealing across Fili's face years before, when a particularly nasty bout of stomach flu had kept him home from playing in some crucial rugby match for his school team. Neither of his nephews enjoyed feeling anything less than dependable, which was usually an admirable trait. It would be for the best in the long run, however, if it was eventually tempered with a bit more good sense.
“There's more soup whenever you want it.” Standing, Thorin came around the table and snatched up the juice carton, then ignored the stale stink of sweat and sickness long enough to clasp Fili on the upper arm, squeezing gently. “Go tell your brother I need to borrow some joggers and a t-shirt; I think I'll go for a run this afternoon.”

Fili's laugh was hardly more than a rasp of breath, but his grin was back, more amused and much less strained this time. “Oh, well, thank you so much for not making me feel like more of a lazy sod,” he managed, sniffing wetly. “Really means a lot, Uncle.”

Minty had been pleased to join him for a jog through the neighbourhood, her leash looped around his waist; an hour at a steady pace had all the kinks worked out of his joints from lugging that damned bookcase, and the fresh, cold air was a nice change from the stale smell of illness faintly lingering in the house. A pair of lined tracksuit bottoms from Kili, and a t-shirt and hoodie from Fili had kept him more than warm enough, even with the sun hidden behind a dark layer of clouds.

The thick white plumes of their breaths faded when they returned to the warmth of the house, and the dog loped towards the kitchen the moment Thorin unhooked her leash, her lolling tongue heralding a likely visit to her water dish. Yanking the hoodie over his head, Thorin peeked briefly into the lounge— wheezy snores greeted him, just a few seconds out of perfect sync with each other, along with the drone of the television— before climbing the stairs to grab a quick shower in the guest bath.

He came back downstairs ten minutes later, back in his jeans and feeling fresh and looser than he had most of the day. Following Minty's trail towards the kitchen, Thorin was intent on one of the yoghurt pots he'd seen in Dis' fridge, until an entirely unexpected chime of laughter brought him up short. Bilba?

Scrambling into the lounge wasn't one of the more graceful moments of his life, but it was slightly less embarrassing with only the dog to witness it— Fili and Kili were still dead to the world, faces lax in sick, medicated sleep.

Of course Bilba wasn't in his sister's house; Thorin knew the notion was absurd, but he had heard her.

The television was still chattering, the picture vivid and warm-toned; some kind of interview, it looked like, with an older, white-haired man Thorin vaguely recognized. Gandalf Legris, was scrawled across the bottom of the screen in neat white font, clearly legible against the backdrop of the man's grey, subtly patterned suit jacket. Below that name, smaller, it read: Managing Director – Garnished & Gilded, Istari Inc.

That was where Thorin had seen the man before: in the Istari Building, the night Bilba had been stuck in the lift.

And there on the television, some distance behind Gandalf Legris' shoulder but still clearly within frame, sat Bilba, perched on a tall stool in front of a large mirror. She was smiling, wrapped in a pale pink silk robe, with her hair being piled in curlers by a large ginger bloke at her back, while another man with a dark moustache slicked vividly red varnish over her fingernails. The sight she made was more than gorgeous enough to make his breath catch in his throat.
Legris was speaking, but his voice was little more than a meaningless buzz at the edge of Thorin's attention. Just over half of Bilba's hair had already been wound up in the huge, multicoloured curlers, and the creamy slope of her neck was bare on one side, leading down to the collar of her robe. He knew how warm that skin was, and how softly Bilba would sigh if kissed just there, an inch or two below her ear.

He watched her laugh again, eyes twinkling, at something the moustached man said, and Thorin was so incredibly pleased that his nephews were asleep. Then Bilba's attention shifted, and she reached for the mobile phone sitting nearby, obviously being careful not to smudge her nails.

She had been beautiful before, candid and happy with her colleagues, but the softening of her expression as she studied her phone was something else entirely. Under the bright, warm lights of what Thorin assumed was some sort of modelling studio or set, the apples of Bilba's cheeks quickly flushed pink, and her teeth closed over her bottom lip. One of the men said something, and she ducked her head to one side, pressing the mobile against her chest to keep the screen hidden from curious eyes, looking equal parts delighted and endearingly shy.

She looked... smitten.

Thorin had no idea when this might have been filmed. It could have been months before, or weeks. The chances of it being that morning, of it being his ridiculous little text that had put that fond look on her face, were miniscule, at best. All but impossible and perhaps a wee bit delusional, at worst. Still, he felt something clench in his gut when he noticed the large, boldly numbered wall clock just barely visible in the corner of the shot. The top quarter of the clock face was cut off, but he could see the base of the hands, pointing upward.

Ten past eleven, give or take a few minutes. If he was reading it correctly.

Feeling clumsy, Thorin patted himself down for his mobile, nearly dropping it in his haste to get it out of his pocket. On the television screen, the interview with Legris finished up, switching to a series of shorter scenes perhaps later in the day, with Bilba stripped down to bra and knickers of shimmering gold silk, patterned with delicate, lacy embroidery the same scarlet as her fingernails. There was a voiceover yammering on with the video, but Thorin didn't have a sliver of attention to spare for it, even if he cared to listen— he unlocked his phone on the fourth attempt at getting the bloody passcode correct, while Bilba stretched and posed in front of a blank white backdrop.

He glanced down for an instant, just long enough to call up his text log with Bilba— the text he'd sent that morning, apparently I look suspiciously happy today, had been sent at twelve minutes past eleven.

When he looked up again, Bilba was still posing, sultry and stunning, but no longer alone on the desolate white stage.

Now she was pressed against some bloke in a sleek, blood-red suit, with her spine arched and her fingers tangled in the back of his curling auburn hair.

It was a short walk from the nearest Tube station to Studio Ri, and Bilba took a few minutes to stop on the way, popping in to a coffee shop— she came out with five drinks balanced firmly on a tray, and a strong Earl Grey in her other hand. She knew the spring in her step was going to earn her no
end of friendly teasing once she got to the studio, but she hoped the fact that her cheeriness resulted in a tea order might temper it.

What was the harm in a bit of well-meant bribery between friends, really?

Bifur was climbing out of a cab when Bilba made it to the studio, with a vibrant pink and orange nubbly scarf tucked incongruously into the collar of his shearling coat, and his hair springing up in a wild nimbus, rather than tamed back in a braid. He was frowning, looking all the fiercer for the scars on his head, until he saw her striding up the pavement and the darkness in his expression fell away like a dropped veil.

“Morning,” he said, as the cab pulled away, and held out a hand towards the tray of drinks. “Can-can I?”

Bilba had her satchel slung across her chest, while Bifur was loaded down with two leather portfolios, and a sagging rucksack that Bilba expected contained an expansive sewing kit, a rainbow of fabric swatches, and possibly a prototype or two. Once a photo shoot was underway, there were usually any number of little tweaks Bifur made to the garments; when he wasn't actively sewing her into a bra, he was invariably sketching out something new.

“Oh no, I've got it.” She smiled wide, and carefully linked her arm (the one holding only her own tea) through his when he offered his elbow. “But thank you, Bifur.”

They headed towards the doors, and into the warm hominess of the studio; there were the stark white and green screens, the coils of cabling and harsh-looking lighting rigs, but it somehow managed to exude comfort and familiarity. The more casual spaces— like the makeup and hair stations where the brothers Broadbeam had certainly left their mark over the years, and the lounge area with its mismatched furniture, generous squishy pillows, and always a few piles of books— felt almost as cozy as Bilba's own flat, though her attempts to bring in a few plants had always ended in disaster. Ori was utterly hopeless at keeping even the heartiest cactus alive, which was actually a morbidly impressive ability.

Bifur was not effusively chatty on his best days, and judging by the tension in his posture and the rhythmic clenching and unclenching of his jaw, Bilba did not imagine this was an especially good day. She hoped he wasn't suffering through the first bloom of a migraine, but if he was, of course he would be too stubborn to postpone a shoot.

“They had hibiscus white tea,” she said, tilting her cheek to rest lightly against Bifur's arm for just a moment as they walked inside. The studio entrance was decorated with a few large, matted prints of Ori's photographs— richly hued, astonishingly dynamic portraits and crisp, black and white landscapes. “I thought you might like it, with a dash of honey.”

Bifur hummed something approaching a gruff agreement, but then Bilba became aware of the unexpected chatter coming from farther in the studio.

There were people, so many people, and cameras.

Oh god.

Not just Ori's collection of gear, but video cameras, and not just Bofur and Nori bickering playfully while Bombur chuckled and lovingly brushed out hairpieces. There were a half-dozen strangers milling around the studio, and Gandalf standing in the middle of it all, looking so utterly tranquil and benign that Bilba knew instantly to set the blame squarely on his shoulders for this bedlam.
“What,” Bilba said, sounding strangled, and the pull of Bifur's momentum was the only reason she didn't skid to a halt.

“What,” she said again, after Bifur had all but dragged her into the fray before disentangling himself and snatching his tea; Gandalf was suddenly within questioning distance, and Bilba was not about to miss the opportunity. “Gandalf, what in the world is going on?”

“Television spot,” Gandalf answered cheerfully, then cocked his head at her. “More publicity before Fashion Week. I'm certain I mentioned it to you, my dear.”

“I'm certain you didn't,” she said between her teeth, and didn't even apologize for not offering him a tea before striding off towards the somewhat secluded nook that housed Ori's desk.

And that was where she found Ori hiding as well, hunched behind his massive computer monitor; he blinked up at her when she set down the cardboard carryout tray, just beside his keyboard.

“Tea,” she said, feeling the sharp souring of her mood simmer down to something manageable. A bloody television spot, of all the damn things.

“Hm? Oh! Oh, ta.” Taking the cup she offered him, Ori wrapped both hands around the warm paper, and began twisting his chair slowly, side to side. “This is... certainly something,” he said, tilting his scruffy chin out towards the studio space. “When it rains it pours, I guess. I mean, when Mister Legris said last week that the telly people were coming—”

“Last week?” Ori's dark eyes went wide, and he stopped spinning, frozen. Taking a deep breath, Bilba lowered her voice. “He told you about this last week?”

“Yes?” The word sounded more like a question than an answer, and Ori's attention flickered uncomfortably away from her face, to the computer screen, then up again and over her shoulder. “He rang us when you were in New York, gave us the details and all— you didn't know?”

Before Bilba could explain that no, she most certainly had not known until she'd wandered in five minutes ago, Bofur appeared beside her, looking surprisingly thunderous.

“He brought his own makeup.” Leaning against the cluttered desktop, both fists planted over piles of test prints and sketches, Bofur spoke in a low, dangerous sort of growl. It was all the more disturbing, considering how much effort it actually took to shake the man's pleasant demeanour. “That prick,” Bofur continued, and Bilba wordlessly pulled a cup of milky, sweetened tea out of the tray and held it out as an offering. “That smarmy prick— ah, cheers, love— brought his own makeup, because mine couldn't possibly be laced with endangered bee pollen, or powdered tigers' bones, or what ever the hell else he wants smeared all over his practically perfect face.”

Taking a long swig of his tea, Bofur snarled at nothing in particular, then scrubbed one hand over his own face and turned a somewhat strained grin in Bilba's direction, shaking off his anger like a wet dog.

“So, darlin', how was the supper date? Brighten my day.” Ori visibly perked up at the mention of a date, because nosiness was apparently a trait Bilba unconsciously sought out when choosing her friends.

“Good. It was very good.” That was an understatement of tremendous proportions, but Bilba didn't feel entirely comfortable going into any more detail during this invasion of strange television people. Still, she felt strangely guilty underselling what had been perhaps the most comfortable, most enjoyable second date she'd had in years.
“It was wonderful,” she amended, and resisted the urge to squirm in her shoes when Bofur's grin turned so very fond, and Ori sighed softly, propping his chin on one hand. She immediately changed the subject, and not without reason. “But hold on, who brought his own makeup?”

“Mister Legris didn't tell her,” Ori piped up, popping the lid off his tea and blowing on it.

“He didn't?” It was more than slightly worrying when Bofur stepped near, wrapping his arm around her shoulders and bussing a quick kiss against the crown of her head. “Ah, love. Have a gander this way.”

She turned when he gently urged her, and her eyes followed the line of his arm as he pointed across the busy studio. It only took a moment to catch sight of the tall, slender figure leaning over Bofur's usual makeup table, meticulously checking every angle of his face and the precise fall of his hair in the lighted mirror.

“Oh.” Eurig Smaug— when Bilba had first met him, a little more than six years ago, he had been in the process of losing both his first name and any hint of a Welsh lilt, in favour of a mononym and a sonorous RP baritone. Smaug— just Smaug, thank you— had been a fiery up and coming model when Bilba had already been comfortably ensconced in her permanent Gigi's contract. With intense, almond-shaped eyes of shifting bronze, thick auburn hair, a sharply angular face and a slender but densely muscled body, Smaug had quickly become a favourite in haute couture circles, as well as some more mainstream designers who wanted to freshen their images.

His look was aggressively unique; Bilba knew how fervidly Smaug detested being thought of as anything less than extraordinary.

They had started seeing each other barely a week after they'd met, and ended up dating for seven months. Long enough for Bilba to move into his sleek, ultramodern flat (he had asked her to live with him after only a month, though she'd held on to her own lease for three months after that); their schedules meant they were rarely home at the same time.

Seven months had also been plenty of time for Bilba to chafe under Smaug's artful, gradually overbearing attempts at handling her (her friends, her career, her life).

The eventual breakup had been extremely heated, then decidedly cold for quite some time after that — for as long as Bilba had known him, Smaug had never been one to swallow failure with anything approaching grace. But now, with a few years perspective between them, their relationship had mended to something different than strictly cool professionalism. It wasn't intimate or affectionate, nor even what she might term friendly, but it was something more than simple colleagues.

There were a great many reasons why Bilba had sworn off dating people from within her work life, and the crackle of weird tension that still snapped between her and Smaug was high on that list. Still, they worked extraordinarily well together from the camera's perspective; this would not be the first shoot they had done together, and Bilba doubted it would be the last either.

“Shit,” she murmured. Ori's words came back to her in a rush, and she couldn't help repeating them, resigned. “When it rains it pours.”

“Sometimes,” Bofur agreed, giving her a squeeze. “But I wager you've got a wee bit of sunshine waiting for you, and mine's just over there—” He pointed to where Nori was directing a pack of scrambling camera crew to move their gear out of the way of his set. “I say we have some fun today, like we always do, and sod the rest. What do you think?”

Bilba thought back to her mood that morning, when Thorin's simple text before breakfast— good
morning Bilba— had sent her stomach fluttering as though it was stuffed full of startled sparrows, flapping harder than butterflies ever could. She thought about the brilliance of his rare, open smile, and the sense of respect infused through his every gesture with her. The touch of his hands, large and warm, stroking over her knuckles and gently carding through her hair, and the heat of his mouth on her skin.

“I say that's an excellent plan,” she said after a moment, feeling buoyant again; then Ori cleared his throat.

“I think you'll like the shoot today, Bilba,” he said, setting his tea aside and riffling through his papers until he pulled out a set of sketches, spreading them out in a loose storyboard.

Turning back to the desk, Bilba studied the drawings with growing delight. The first set of poses were relatively normal fare, though they didn't lack Ori's particular flair for beautiful composition. The latter poses, though... they were something different.

Oh yes, this was going to be fun.

Chapter End Notes

So yes, there's a humanized Smaug in this, and yes, he's meant to look more than a bit like good Mister Cumberbatch. You'll notice a few changes, however, like the eye and hair colour (Gingerbatch is usually more of an orange-y ginger, while this Smaug is darker auburn, like fire drake scales), that should harken more to Smaug the dragon than Benedict.
Chapter 13

Chapter by littleblackdog

Chapter Notes

Very mild warning that Smaug is not always the nicest fellow-- a bit tetchy, and a bit creepy. He's a dragon made human, with all the avarice and hot-temper that entails, but I'm trying to balance that without making him entirely unlikable.

Edit: Oh! I almost forgot, we've got a cover now! Done by the wonderful lastminutewaffles you can find it over here, or at the top of Chapter One. And you'll also notice a Related Work listing on this story, which contains some gorgeous fanart by Shivi, who is just a darling.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bilba wasn’t precisely bashful of her body— she stripped down to skimp...
“I heard about last week,” he said, keeping just as quiet as she was; his voice was like a great purring cat, a deeper register now than when they’d met. He smelled unfairly good— sandalwood, jasmine, and tobacco— still wearing Clive Christian No. 1, and no doubt still smoking like a chimney. “That lunatic in the lift; I thought they’d locked that beast up and thrown away the key. Did he hurt you?”

Her immediate instinct was to take issue with his phrasing, but she swallowed that back, knowing for absolute certain that Smaug wouldn’t actually give a fig how insulting he sounded. He might apologise, possibly, but the insincerity of it would be another splinter under her skin.

“I’m fine,” she said instead, not bothering to explain that Smeagol had been enjoying unmonitored day passes to leave hospital grounds for over a year. The man’s treatments had been going very well, apparently; the lift incident had been a major, unpredicted step backward.

“I meant to ring you,” Smaug continued, shifting ever so slightly closer into her space, and Bilba drew back an equal amount; the move earned her a frown, small and a little sad, dropping the corners of Smaug’s lips. “But I knew you’d say you were fine no matter what; I wanted to see you. Those enchanting blue eyes still don’t hide very much at all, do they, darling?”

She glanced away from his face before she could think better of it, focusing on the drape of the curtains, then bristled when a self-satisfied sort of laugh rumbled from deep in Smaug’s chest. “I don’t want to speak about this,” she said, still staring stubbornly at a fixed point; she didn’t see him take note of the yellowed ring of bruises Smeagol’s fingers had squeezed into her skin, until one of his hands was already sliding down along her arm, curling around her wrist. Her attempt at maintaining her modesty by keeping her hands clamped over her chest meant his knuckles were brushing the minty green silk and white lace of her bra.

“What about this, Bilba?” The bruises didn’t hurt anymore, almost faded to nothing at all, but the sensation of fingers closing around them like a bracelet, even loosely— clammy white fingers wrapped around her wrist without warning, squeezing tight like an iron band— made agitation well up through her entire body in a cold, tidal rush.

The curtains draping around her were soft beige cotton, not the claustrophobic walls of a lift, and the studio was so much brighter than the dim, yellowed glow of emergency lighting. She wasn’t dragged back there by her own mind; she wasn’t being swept away by panic. But she wasn’t comfortable by any stretch of the imagination.

“Let go.” Her voice was deceptively calm, utterly toneless compared to the sick churning in her belly. “Right this instant, Eurig, or I swear I’ll scream.”

Smaug, shockingly enough, complied without question— both the hand around her wrist, and the hand still wrapped around her elbow withdrew, though he didn't step out of her space even a millimetre.

“Hardly fine, I would say.” He sighed— a long, troubled exhale that ghosted faint and hot over her hair— then finally took a step backward. “You’re trembling, you’ve gone pale, and it’s just us here, for goodness sake. Bilba, please, I hope you know you can talk to me, about anything.”

She really couldn’t, and they both knew it, but Bilba was too polite to point that out. Instead, she said nothing at all, standing perfectly poised and still as a statue, decidedly not looking at Smaug. After a strained moment of silence, she listened as he sighed again, dramatically, and his gleaming leather shoes clicked against the hardwood floor in retreat.

Taking a deep breath, then another, Bilba waited another quiet minute or two before looking up; she
was alone behind the curtains. Pressing one hand against her stomach, she willed it to settle down.

For a few nights after the lift incident, Bilba had woken up in the wee hours, feeling clammy and cold, with her heart hammering against her ribs. It was normal, she thought, to suffer a bout of nightmares after something so dreadful; the dreams were fuzzy, unremembered things shortly after she woke, all their details burning away in the light of morning like fog. Now, nearly a week later, her sleep was largely untroubled. And, despite her dates with Thorin, despite his physical closeness, his size and obvious strength, despite him touching her, she hadn't once felt like that.

She considered, very briefly, whether or not she needed to cancel this photo shoot.

No. No, she was fine, no matter what Smaug thought he knew. If he had an ounce of civility rattling around in that clever brain of his, he might have realized how alarming and wildly inappropriate it was to corner her like that, no matter any other circumstances, but especially after such an incident (even a woman he knew, had dated, had lived with). But unfortunately, there wasn't a single living soul who had a higher opinion of Smaug's charm than Smaug himself.

Shaking off the last tendrils of sour fear clinging to her, Bilba thought about the sketches Ori had shown her; it looked like it would be a good shoot. Bofur had suggested that they have fun, like they always do.

Her stomach calmed, sinking back slowly like a receding tide, and the skittering feelings eased. She was fine.

From the other side of the curtain, she heard a loud clatter, then Nori's voice hollering some very creative cursing at one of the television crew. If Bofur's answering laughter was anything to go by, the damage wasn't serious, and Bilba felt her expression twist up into a grin without really expecting it.

They were going to have fun, like they always did.

Finishing up stripping out of her own clothes, Bilba gathered up the first outfit Bifur had provided—a straightforward bra and knickers set, done in ivory silk, embellished with intricate curlicues of gold thread and tiny glass beads the colour of rubies. It was gorgeous, as were the other pieces she had seen waiting for her: all golds and deep jewel-toned reds, for the most part, as another boost for Gigi's pre-Valentine's campaign.

She had taken her mobile out of her coat before she'd hung it up, not willing to leave it unattended within reach of the strangers buzzing around the studio. Now the phone sat on a chair in the corner, beneath the folded mass of her clothes; after strapping herself into the cream knickers and wriggling everything into place, Bilba fished the phone out from under her cardigan. She didn't unlock it, but just kept it in hand as she slipped on her robe and finally trotted out to makeup and hair.

“I don't care how dead sexy Mister Posh Coat is; you're letting that dry a bit before you do anything else.” Bofur pointed at her hand and the mobile pressed against her chest, as he secured the top back on the bottle of crimson nail varnish. “No sexting with wet nails.”

Behind her shoulders, Bilba heard Bombur make a choked sound, partway between a surprised gasp and a tutting admonishment. She wasn't entirely certain she wanted to know what it had been like for the two of them, growing up with a brother so entirely opposite—for Bombur, especially, who was
reserved, soft-spoken, and very nearly timid, while Bofur was bold, brash, and occasionally outrageous.

Bilba couldn't even pretend to understand sibling dynamics. If one of her cousins had ever teased her like Bofur teased Bombur, there would have been a war in the gently rolling fields of Hobbiton. But amazingly enough, the brothers got on very well indeed.

“Aw, look, Bom's gone all pink, too.” Grinning wide and toothy, Bofur set the little bottle on the table. “Stop scandalizing my baby brother with your torrid affairs, you wild woman.”

“I wish I could say you were raised by wolves,” Bombur grumbled, combing out another section of Bilba's hair to wind it up in a roller. “I really do.”

“Could we, please—” Bilba glanced over at Gandalf, who was still giving his interview, chatting carelessly to the television woman with the perfect teeth while an astonishingly intimidating video camera peered at them. “Please at least try to keep my personal life a bit more personal while the telly people are here? Please?”

Bofur mimed turning a key and locking his mouth shut, but the cheeky smile lingering under his moustache didn't exactly inspire trust and confidence.

“You can't possibly be serious.” Smaug, in Bilba's experience, was a force of nature when truly roused to a fury— during the worst of their domestic rows, when things had truly soured between them, she had actually fled their flat on more than one occasion rather than endure his raving. At the moment, he was nowhere close to furious, but he was annoyed enough to make Bilba (and almost everyone else in the room) immediately wary.

Wrapped in a short black robe, stripped out of the sleek suits he'd been wearing for the first half of the shoot, Smaug shot a heated glare in Bilba's direction— as if this was even slightly her fault— before turning his attention back to Ori, who was keeping his camera held up against his chest like a shield. Or perhaps Ori was simply trying to keep the incredibly expensive equipment as safe and secure as possible, wrapped up in his arms like a baby; Smaug had something of a reputation for throwing things about when his temper ran hot (there were a few pieces of crockery Bilba had once owned that might have attested to how well-earned that reputation actually was, if they hadn't been smashed to bits and swept into the bin years ago).

The television crew was packing up, content with the shots they'd gotten that morning and eager to edit and prep a promo to air that afternoon, but they all conspicuously slowed their work as Smaug's ill temper grew more apparent.

Tossing his head aggressively, Smaug inhaled a long breath through his nose, looming over Ori. “This is absurd.”

After their exchange in the dressing room that morning, followed by a few hours of draping herself over the elegant lines of his svelt carmine suit, Bilba found herself suddenly and completely fed up to the back teeth with Eurig bloody Smaug.

Just because she preferred to avoid wearing heels in her private life, didn't mean she couldn't walk in them when the situation demanded; despite the ludicrous six-inch stilettos and two-inch platforms strapped to her feet, Bilba did not teeter as she crossed the set. Not quite wedging herself between the
two men, she still managed to draw Smaug's attention from Ori, folding her arms across her chest and clearing her throat sharply.

Smaug turned toward her again, eyes sparkling, and Bilba stood a bit straighter in her flawlessly tailored, perfectly crisp attire. Bifur had done the pencil skirt in a particularly flattering shade of ivory, while the gorgeous taffeta blouse, with its deep neckline and soft bow sitting at her hip, was the same rich blood red as her nails and the stain painted over her lips— it was not a timid outfit, and damn it, she would not be timid either.

“You didn't seem to find it absurd when I was the one in my pants, and you were dressed for dinner at the Ritz,” she said, and watched as faint, fine lines appeared at the corners of Smaug's narrowing eyes. A bit of sartorial equality was not a sign of the apocalypse, no matter what sort of tantrum he wanted to throw.

“The clothes—” Each word was bitten off by the guillotine of his teeth, his accent growing even less natural and much more clipped. “Are hardly the issue; don't be obtuse.”

The fact that his words could still sting her even slightly, especially when she spoke fully expecting to draw his ire, was deeply annoying.

“It’s this nonsense,” Smaug continued, sweeping a hand out to indicate the mobile pinboard Ori was always wheeling from place to place around the studio. It was shingled with layers of sketches, photo proofs, reference shots, and other miscellany Ori wanted on hand during a shoot; at the moment, the sketches he had shown Bilba earlier were tacked across the middle of the board, beginning with the poses from that morning.

It was, of course, the latter sketches that had Smaug’s back up— those poses with the female model dressed to the nines and standing tall, while the male model was down to skimpy pants and on his knees, or draped over the female model like a living shawl. There were a number of solo poses for Smaug as well, as their had been for Bilba, but those weren't the problem, of course.

“Oh, really?” Taking another step forward, close enough to point directly at a sketch they’d recreated that morning, with Bilba perched over Smaug's lap, one of his long hands spanning the bare curve of her back. Nearby, Ori slunk back a few subtle steps. “But this—”

“Enough.” Gandalf didn't raise his voice much at all, simply spoke loudly enough to be heard, his tone calm but firm. Bilba swallowed back her next words, feeling slightly lightheaded and still nettled.

“That's quite enough,” Gandalf said again, and a quick glance up revealed his expression was gravely neutral, without a hint of his usual playfulness. “This is a discussion Mister Smaug and I will have in private.”

It was a whirlwind after that, with Gandalf turing crisply on his heel and walking towards Ori's little corner of an office; Smaug only hesitated an instant before following, eating up the distance with long, angry strides. That left Bilba, plucking gingerly at the neat hem of her blouse, just as silent and still as the others in the room.

“What a tit,” Nori muttered after the few awkward moments it took for the television crew to hesitantly restart their retreat. Swooping in close, Nori clapped one hand over Ori's shoulder, and though he was startled by the contact, Ori never looked in danger of unlacing his spindly finger from their steady grip around his camera. “You're a smarter man than me, little brother. I'd have cracked him one, and then Gandalf might have killed me for giving one of his models a crooked nose. God knows what that face is insured for.”
“I’d be more worried about Mister Belov,” Ori said, visibly relaxing, like a pillbug coming uncurled. “And his fleet of solicitors.”

“See?” Nori grinned, reaching up to ruffle the back of Ori’s hair. “Always the clever one. Oi, you lot —” Turning from his brother, Nori slipped back into the role of tetchy set director as easily as he might put on a favourite pair of slippers, flicking his arm out toward the lingering television crew, then pointing towards the exit. “You’re done; clear out.”

There was a surprising lack of shouting from Gandalf and Smaug’s tête-à-tête, which could either be the herald of good news, or very bad. The television crew was gone in short order, leaving only a pile of discarded take-away cups clogging up the bin and a trio of large, half-empty cardboard pastry boxes as evidence of their visit.

By the time Smaug reappeared, Bilba had been eyeing a sinfully plump raspberry scone with undisguised longing for what felt like a century, while the remaining abandoned pastries had been summarily polished off by the five lucky sods not wearing lipstick.

“If we might move this along,” Smaug snapped at the room at large, but without any real teeth this time; he had clearly been worn down to more snark than bite. He sloughed off his robe without complaint, baring miles of smooth, toned skin, and a pair of sleek claret briefs, stitched with a dark gold Gigi’s logo on the waistband. The neat, thin line of auburn hair peeking up from the briefs, trailing up over firm muscles to the divot of Smaug’s navel, perfectly complimented the deep red of the pants.

“Bilba, dear,” he said, flawlessly polite, and extended a gracious hand toward her, palm up. “Shall we?”

Chapter End Notes

I want to wish a very happy Canada Day to any of you folks who live with me up here in the Great White (or, currently Great Soggy) North. I know I’m a bit early, but there’s only a slim chance I’ll have another chapter out by July 1st.

Even if this rain keeps up in my neck of the woods, I’ll still be enjoying a few beers and a barbecue, and I hope you all have a great weekend too!
Chapter 14

Chapter by littleblackdog

Chapter Notes

Happy Canada Day! You can thank a rainy, miserably muggy long weekend for this quick chapter. With Thorin being his usual suave self, because I missed him as much as you folks.

Oh, and I forgot to mention I did a little face-casting photo reference thing for this story over on my tumblr: here.

One of the things that Dis had been adamant about when searching for the right house, after the fire, was the need for a spacious back garden. Somewhere green, safe, and large enough for the lads to play in; they'd been twelve and nine when Erebor had been gutted, which meant they'd had plenty of time to get used to the rolling fields and fresh air of the Yorkshire countryside.

It hadn't been cheap by any stretch of the imagination to find even a faint echo of a replica around London, but Thorin certainly hadn't felt any need to argue. He'd grown up exploring the same fields and woodlands of the Erebor grounds, and understood the appeal.

It was in Dis' well-kept wedge of greenery, with its great twisting walnut tree shivering grey and skeletal in the winter air, that Thorin found a bit of peace and quiet to get his thoughts back in order.

Sitting on the back step of the house, Thorin gave Minty a scratch behind the ears when she butted her head against his knees. They'd already been outside long enough for the dog to grow bored sniffing around the damp foliage— not an insignificant amount of time— but Thorin still had no idea what he should do.

His mobile was heavy in his hands, its screen dark. His tongue tasted sour, far in the back of his mouth, mostly caused by the knowledge that he was being incredibly, inexcusably stupid.

"It's her job," he said, staring into Minty's gentle, liver-brown eyes. The dog, as expected, said nothing. "I know it's her job. And I don't... I don't have a problem with it."

It didn't feel as though he was trying to convince himself, which was a good sign. It felt true, though perhaps a bit shaky around the edges.

"I don't have a problem with her job," he repeated, and took a deep, bracing breath. Minty rested her chin on top of his knees, and her muzzle was noticeably warm and damp through the cold denim.

He wasn't thrilled with the sight of her pressed flush against some painfully posh looking man, but surely he could be forgiven a twinge of discomfort about it. Just a whisper of some ill-feeling— not jealousy, but a faint, tight tingling under his skin, more akin to irritation.

If this was going to be a problem, he needed to know it now, before he delved too deep. This needed to be a momentary lapse, a vexation he could shake off like a stifling shroud, or he needed to acknowledge his limitations and back off.
Modelling was her job, or part of her job. And modelling meant *this*.

He needed to decide whether or not he could handle this.

Then, when his phone rang, shrill and impossibly loud in the otherwise peaceful yard, Thorin was startled enough to drop it.

“Shit—” It hit the ground before he could catch it, the corner of the rubber case bouncing once off the flagstone between his socked feet. It settled face-down, any possible damage still unseen, but the fact that it *kept* ringing was promising, at least.

“Hang on, hang *on,*” he said to no one as he scrambled to pick it up, while Minty stepped back, whuffing softly (and if it sounded like she was laughing at him, Thorin was sensible enough to know it was all in his head). The screen was in one piece, thankfully not cracked or scratched that he noticed with a cursory glance; the caller-id displayed his default background, no photo, and simply read: *B – Mobile.*

It was the fourth ring, just about to switch to voicemail, and he slid his thumb across the *Answer* button without a second thought, pressing the phone to his ear and trying very hard not to sound as off-kilter as he felt.

“Hello?” Immediately after that greeting, he tilted his mouth away, sucking in a steady breath; Bilba's voice was still warm and sweet in his ear, washing over him.

“Hello,” she said, only a wee bit tinny through the speaker of his phone. “Thorin? It's Bilba. Is this... a bad time?”

Shit.

Beside him, Minty sat back on her haunches, tail thudding lazily as she nosed against his free hand. Oh, that was perfect.

“No! No, not at all.” He smiled, giving the dog a grateful rub over the neck and up to her ears. If he sounded out of sorts, Minty was a much better excuse than: *I was having an utterly ridiculous and humiliating crisis of masculine pride, and then I dropped my phone like a wanker, and possibly panicked, just a tiny bit, when I saw it was you calling.*

“But your nephews are ill? Is there...” Bilba's voice trailed off, and he heard a distant shuffling through the line. He wondered what she might be doing, which very quickly shifted to wondering if she was still stripped down to just knickers, and he immediately slammed the brakes on that train of thought. She was speaking again after only a few seconds, quieter and earnestly concerned. “I mean, this isn't meant to sound silly, or odd, but if there's anything I can do, anything that might help... I'd be happy to.”

Something tight and aching in Thorin's chest released, like a great straining knot coming unraveled, and made him acutely aware of its presence through its sudden absence. He hadn't really known it was there, until it was gone, and now he found himself swallowing back a strangled sort of laugh.
bubbling beneath his chin.

He had already delved too deep to let a flare of insecurity dictate his happiness.

He could handle this, and gladly. It was just a job.

“Thank you, Bilba,” he said emphatically, meaning several different things, while grinning wide and foolish. “But we’re all right. Just a nasty cold, I think. The lads are fed, watered, and loaded with Night Nurse, and Dis should be back—” He tucked his phone against his shoulder, lowering his arm for a moment to check his watch. “In two hours or so.”

“It sounds like you’ve got things well in hand.” He could hear an answering smile brightening Bilba’s tone, as well as a thread of flirtatious warmth that wound tightly around him. “Though that’s hardly surprising. You are rather capable, I’ve noticed.”

“Have you? I’m flattered.”

“And quite sweet, as well,” she continued, chuckling in his ear as he grumbled half-hearted protest. “Hush you; I happen to have a weakness for sweets.”

“And aren’t I lucky,” he murmured, low and honest.

“You are,” she agreed, soft, as though they were sharing some secret between them. Perhaps they were. “Thorin, I wondered, would you... I know you have work tomorrow, as do I, and I won’t be at all offended if you’d rather not, but if you wanted to drop by my place this evening, we could have supper? Just... just supper. No expectations, except some pleasant company over a meal, after a long day.”

Thorin’s immediate instinct was to accept, enthusiastically, and it only took a moment's hesitation to realize he had no reason to say no.

“I’d like that.” After hours spent tending to snoring, gassy, congested boys (even if he loved the pair of them beyond reason), the prospect of an evening in Bilba’s company felt like a glass of water being offered to a parched man. “That sounds, yes, that sounds wonderful.”

“All right, so, sometime after seven, you said?” Tucked away amongst the racks of wardrobe, unashamedly hiding while Smaug’s solo photos were being finished up, Bilba pressed her phone closer to her ear, listening to Thorin briefly outline their plans again as her fingers danced idly along a row of silky underthings. “You’ll text. Yes, sounds good. All right. I’ll see you soon.”

She was still poured into the pencil skirt and blouse, prepared for a quick call-back if Ori deemed it necessary, but she had lost the deadly tall stilettos in favour of a pair of plain, peachy-pink ballet flats she kept in the studio for just such a situation. That meant when she turned, finding Smaug lurking behind her again, she had lost the few extra inches of height afforded to her in front of the camera; Smaug towered over her by more than a foot, affecting a grand presence even dressed down to pants (black boxer briefs now, embroidered with delicate red filigree over one hip; his robe was hanging open).

“Damn it, Eurig—” She pressed her hand, and the phone held in it, against her thudding heart, and used his given name purely because she knew it nettled him. It had actually never suited the man as
well as simply Smaug, but that hardly mattered at that moment. As she'd told Thorin, it had been a long day, and her patience felt ever so slightly frayed. “Does Ori want more shots?”

There was a lengthy, increasingly tense silence as Smaug simply stared at her, impenetrable as marble. It wasn't until Bilba opened her mouth to repeat the question, that Smaug finally deigned to answer.

“No,” he said, and Bilba did not miss the quick flicker of his eyes from her face, to her phone, then back again. “He seems satisfied with what he has. I was going to ask if you had plans for this evening; I thought we might have dinner. After everything, I worry about you all alone in that flat—let me take you out, anywhere you like.”

It was similar to a number of offers he had extended before, after their breakup, and she agreed on occasion; it had never gone further than dinner, drinks, and once (years ago) a very ill-advised snog encouraged by too much Pinot and a secluded table at Le Gavroche.

“Thank you.” She smiled, perhaps not as wide as she had while on the phone, and shook her head. “But I already have plans. Some other time?”

For an instant, there was a visible widening of his eyes, a lift of his brows; Smaug was honestly surprised she had turned him down, or at least wanted to appear surprised. Surprised, and not entirely pleased, but then his expression smoothed in a blink, shifting to composed disappointment.

“Certainly, Bilba.” When he extended his hand, palm up and long fingers just slightly curled, she couldn't think of an excuse to refuse something so simple without coming across as rude, even if she had a good idea of his intentions. Instead, she allowed him to take her hand in his, again, but this time he wasn't simply leading her onto the set. This time, he wrapped his fingers around her palm, all but engulfing her smaller hand, and bent sharply at his waist, ducking low enough to press a dry, lingering kiss against her knuckles.

“The offer,” he murmured, keeping his pose and looking up at her for once, through the dark sweep of his eyelashes, subtly defined with clear mascara. “Still stands, should you change your mind.”

He kissed her hand again, light as a butterfly, his fingertips straying up to stroke the inside of her wrist, and Bilba gently extracted herself from his grasp with as much poise as she could muster.

“Thank you,” she said again, and moved to slip around him. She was intent on getting out of the studio if they'd truly been dismissed for the day, and heading down to the shops; she still had plenty of time to put something tasty and suitably impressive together for supper.

Smaug didn't reach for her as she moved past, much to her relief, but he did speak up again just as she made it to the ends of the racks, delaying her escape.

“Bilba, I couldn't help but overhear—” More eavesdrop, really, if one were to nitpick, and Bilba had no doubt that every second had been entirely deliberate. “The plans you mentioned—hardly my affair, of course, but it did sound rather... friendly.”

Smaug let that vague insinuation hang between them, coloured with the faintest hint of curiosity; Bilba refrained from offering assurances that it was, indeed, none of his business. She could have said nothing at all, letting his words dangle like a lure: potentially dangerous if engaged, but worthless if ignored.

“A supper date,” she said instead, and regretted offering even that much information when Smaug's gaze sharpened, searching her face.
When she turned away, unspeakably glad for the excuse of Nori's voice calling for her from across the studio, the weight of that stare seemed to drag over the back of her neck like a heavy caress, making her shiver despite her best intentions.

“Are you staying for supper?” Dis had apparently stopped at the shops on her way back from work, and was now unpacking a canvas grocery bag onto the kitchen island: chicken breasts, bean sprouts, broccoli, and a bun of dark, grainy bread. Leaning against the cooker, Thorin checked his watch again; it was already a quarter to six.

“Ginger chicken and rice,” Dis continued, as she moved to get her apron off its peg and slip it over her head. “Good for the boys' stomachs, and a bit spicy for their sinuses. How long have they been sleeping?”

“Most of the afternoon, on and off.” Knives and cutting boards were being laid out, and the fry pan wouldn't be far behind. Thorin stepped briskly out of the way as Dis glided around her kitchen, grabbing bits and pieces (an onion snatched from the basket, a colander put in the sink, a knob of ginger from the freezer, a pan on the hob) as she went. “And no, I'll not be staying.”

“Had enough for the day, have we, big brother?” Dis was smirking as she peeled the chicken out of its package, laying a fillet out on the cutting board to be neatly cubed. “Put a dash of oil in that pan, would you? Grapeseed, in the cupboard, there.”

He did as he was bid, mentally calculating whether or not he should bother stopping off at home before heading to Bilba's flat. If he wanted to change out of t-shirt and jeans, he needed to leave as soon as possible; otherwise, he could linger a bit longer.

He was, admittedly, a bit distracted, but Dis' hip knocking him out of the way quickly brought him back to the present.

“You're out of sorts,” she said, dropping the chicken into the hot pan with a crackle. “Give that a quick stir while I wash my hands, please.” The tap started with a gush, and Dis raised her voice to be heard over it. “And tell me what's the matter. It's something more than just a day fussing over the boys; you were the same this morning.”

He couldn't blame work, not without Fili's corroboration. Vague truths were his only recourse.

“I met someone.” The tap shut off abruptly, leaving the kitchen in a cloud of thick, pregnant silence, broken only by the sizzle of frying chicken. Hazarding a glance over, Thorin found Dis staring at him, exactly as he had feared she might be: pale blue eyes sparking bright with curiosity, and sporting a wide, gleeful smile. She looked all of seven years old again, despite threads of grey streaking faintly through her forelock.

“You met someone.” Shaking water and clinging soap from her hands, then grabbing a towel to finish the job, Dis closed on him like a grinning shark. “What sort of someone? When? Where?”

“I met a woman.” Thorin sighed through his nose, setting aside the fish slice he'd been using to push the chicken around the pan. “Recently. So recently, in fact, that I'm not prepared to discuss this any further.”

“Thorin—”
"No." His sister meant well, and he knew it, but there were _some_ limits. "Dis, leave it. It's new, and it's good, so please, leave it until I say, all right? I promise, if it gets serious, you'll know."

When Dis stepped closer, reaching up, Thorin let her press a cool, slightly damp hand against his cheek. Her manic smile had calmed, but not faded entirely, in the face of his refusal to share.

"You are a stubborn old sod," she said, and clicked her tongue. "But, it's good? This _someone_, she's good?"

"Yeah." Thorin didn't bother trying to stop his mouth from curling up, too busy tamping down a dozen different distracting thoughts. "She's... she's very good."

"Oh my _god_—" Ducking away as Dis tried to pinch his face, Thorin flinched when his chest was swatted with a towel. "Look at that face; you're _smitten_!"

Am _not_, was the entirely childish response he barely managed to bite back, opting for the only slightly less mortifying: "I'm leaving, is what I'm doing. I have a... thing." _Shit_. "A date. I have a date."

It was too late to salvage his pride from that fumbling mess; Dis was already shaking with laughter, bracing herself against the cooker and pressing a hand over her mouth.

"A _thing_," she gasped, between fits of giggles that did not suit a woman of her bearing and age _at all_. "Holy hell, a _thing_. Go on then, go get ready for your _thing_, your _date-thing_, you massive, adorable _twit_."

It was the perfect opportunity to flee, but Thorin hesitated, one hand curling around the edge of the worktop as he leaned his hips back against it.

"Do I—" He swallowed, rubbing at the back of his neck. His jeans weren't in bad shape, dark and only a bit worn at the knees, but his t-shirt was old, faded from its original navy to ashy blue, with _London Fire Brigade_ stitched in red over the left breast. Not a bad choice for moving a bookcase, at least. "I should change, yeah?"

"Should you— You should change, yes," Dis said, still giggling, and flapped her hand at him. "This? No. Do not wear one of your ratty old work shirts on a _thing_. God help me, you're worse than Kili."

"Your chicken is going to burn." Pushing away from the worktop, Thorin left Dis to hiss curses at the quickly browning pan. If he didn't hit terrible traffic, he could probably be home and then over to Bilba's by around seven-thirty.

"Have fun," Dis called after him, clearly still _far_ too amused for his comfort, but Thorin was silently grateful that she had at least refrained from hollering _date-thing_ loud enough for the lads to hear.
Chapter 15

Chapter by littleblackdog

Chapter Notes

I've answered a couple of questions over on my tumblr, with some rather hefty spoilers for things coming up in this story (largely Smaug-related). If you're in the mood for some truly massive spoilers, you can find some here and here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was nearly six o'clock when Bilba finally staggered into Carrock House, awkwardly shifting her satchel and a grocery bag as she fumbled with her keys. Beorn wasn't out among the wild greenery he kept barely tamed out front; that absence would have marked a rare day in the warmer months, but now the gardens were sleeping for the winter.

One of the Carrock's cats— a sleek calico moggie, with a black splotch over her nose as though she'd peeked too deep into an ink pot— was lurking just inside the entryway, and proceeded to wind her way around Bilba's ankles in greeting. Carrock House was pet-friendly, to put it mildly; amongst her neighbours lived an army of cats, a few small dogs, and even a trio of rabbits on the third floor. If he could have managed it, Beorn himself would have collected a menagerie, but the realities of city-life needed to be considered. Still, he kept a pair of middling-sized terriers, an elderly tabby, and the beehives currently wrapped safely in the back garden.

Bilba was, as far as she knew, the only resident of Carrock House who didn't own a pet. She had nothing against animals, except the havoc their dander tended to play on her sinuses; it was more a matter of her often erratic schedule. She could ask Beorn to water her plants on occasion, but she could not walk out on a cat for hours, days, or weeks on end (or foist the poor beast off on someone else) without suffering guilt.

“I'm a bit pressed for time, puss,” she said, gently pushing the friendly calico away with her foot. The cat gave one plaintive meow before resuming its position near the door, resigned to waiting for a more benevolent human to arrive.

Beorn's laugh was a muffled boom from somewhere down the ground floor corridor, and Bilba all but dashed towards the stairs. She didn't want to risk being caught up in a conversation; Beorn was much more persistent than the calico cat, and Bilba simply didn't have a half-hour (or more) to chat.

She didn't entirely relax until her flat door closed behind her, and she was leaning back against the kelly green wood.

After a brief moment to wallow in relief— she never liked putting that disappointed frown on Beorn's face— Bilba pushed herself away from the door, toeing off her loafers, stripping out of her coat, and dropping her satchel. The groceries were quickly tucked away in the fridge, and then she was unwinding her hair from its untidy bun and padding down towards the bath.

The eighteen layers of makeup had been chiseled off her face back at the studio (actually, Bofur used very nice disposable wipes that smelled of lavender), but her hair was still a nest of mousse, spray, and pomade, gumming up her curls into perfectly loose and flowing shapes. Pretty to look at, but
oddly crunchy to touch, and not at all what she wanted during a date.

After a very speedy shower, Bilba checked her phone—eight minutes past six, and no texts waiting—then set about rushing through a truncated version of her normal routine. Teeth brushed, everything moisturized, tangles gently worked out of her hair before a blast from her diffused dryer, and just a touch of makeup; Bofur was her source for the loveliest products, smooth, light, and effective.

It was coming up on half six when Bilba was finally standing in her spare room, the one she'd converted entirely into a wardrobe almost immediately after moving into the flat. Wrapped in a towel, not bothering with a robe, she scanned the neatly organized racks and shelves, hunting for a bolt of inspiration. Tendrils of panic were tickling the back of her thoughts, reminding her of the supper not yet started, and the fact that this would be the first time Thorin saw the inside of her flat.

Inviting him to her home, after two dates. Two wonderful dates, granted, but this was far less cautious than she was used to.

“No expectations,” she said softly, rubbing the sleeve of a teal charmeuse blouse between her fingers and thumb. “Just supper. Hop to it, Bilba, my girl.”

She settled, after another few moments of fretting, on a pair of chocolate brown jeans and a sleeveless blouse—beige chiffon with a soft, loose ruffle running down either side of the buttons. It wasn't too fancy for an evening in, but it wasn't joggers and a ratty vest, either (Bilba didn't actually own a ratty vest, but the point still stood).

Nabbing a loose, sage green cardigan and foregoing socks (her floor, much like the rest of the flat, was comfortably warm, radiators pinging), Bilba found herself in the kitchen by twenty to seven, popping her little iPod into its speakers to croon some background noise, and laying out the makings of supper across her worktop. She'd picked up fresh sausage and four lovely, thick-cut pork chops on the way home, along with a bag of Brussels sprouts; by the time her phone chimed, the sausage was already chopped and sizzling away in a pan, keeping fragrant company with minced onion, apple, and a sprinkle of fennel seeds.

Setting her peeler aside and wiping bits of carrot from her fingers, Bilba reached for her mobile, smiling as she read Thorin's text: anything I could bring?

Just you, she returned, feeling a bit less anxious with her kitchen warm and working around her. She'd never felt the urge to turn her love of cooking into a job, but the act of putting a delicious meal together (whether just for herself, or a few friends) was one of her favourite pastimes. Possibly only rivalled by eating the meal, if she was being completely honest.

If you're sure, came the reply after only a few seconds, then: I should be there in 20 minutes.

I'm sure, she reassured him, see you soon xx

There was enough time to give the sausage mixture a stir before her phone chirped again. The text was simply a pair of answering kisses—Xx—without even the pretence of a little message attached.

“My god, you're cute,” she muttered, turning back to her carrots with a silly grin. “You're too cute, and it's hardly fair at all.”
The growl of some sort of engine from down on the street wouldn't normally have been strange enough to make Bilba think twice. At that moment, however, she happened to have been peeking out her front windows as she tidied up a few things (making certain the flat was more cosy than cluttered, despite the shelves stuffed full of books, the stacks of more books, a forest of potted plants, and too many nicknacks and heirlooms scattered about), and the sight of a motorcycle pulling up to the kerb just outside the gate of Carrock House was certainly not a usual occurrence.

The rider cut the engine, swinging one leg over to dismount the bike before tugging the glossy black helmet off his head. Bilba couldn't see his face in the dark of the evening, not from this distance, but she could see the sudden bright rectangle of a mobile screen light up in his palm, only a moment before her own phone began to ring.

It was Thorin's name in her call-display, and Bilba blinked at it, then shot a glance back towards the window as she connected the call and brought the phone to her ear.

“Hello,” she said, not quite daring to peer outside properly again.

“Hello, Bilba.” Bilba couldn't help but note the similarities between that voice, deep and resonant, and the dull rumble of the motorcycle. “I'm here, but— a question. I drove; is there a good place for me to leave my bike, out of the way, or should I find a spot down the street? Either works for me.”

“Um.” Swallowing, thrown for a bit of loop by the images of Thorin on the back of a motorcycle, all denim and leather and thighs, Bilba tried vainly to shake some sense back into her brain. “Oh, yes, of course, yes. There's a little gravel drive, just up the righthand side of the building, around the hedge. Some of my neighbours keep their bicycles there; it should be fine.”

“I see it,” Thorin said. “I'll just be a minute.”

A minute wasn't nearly enough time for Bilba to get herself sorted after that revelation— a motorcycle, for goodness sake— but she nodded anyway, pulling her cardigan over her bare arms. “Be right down.”

The calico cat had been usurped from its sentry post in the entryway, replaced by a suspiciously glowering Beorn, leaning out the open front door and completely blocking her exit as he glared into the night.

“Beorn,” Bilba said, and her landlord's dark, shaggy head whipped around towards the sound of her voice, his thunderous expression faltering. “May I get past, please?”

Beorn's mountainous form didn't shift an inch. “You're not wearing a coat, little bunny.”

“Oh, I'm not going far.” Calling up her sweetest smile, Bilba wrapped her cardigan a bit tighter around herself. “I have a friend coming over for supper, and I'm just letting him in. He's parking his motorcycle over in the driveway, if that's all right.”

“A friend.” Beorn's face was granite, hard and unmoving, with the twist of a frown clearly visible amidst his bushy black beard, but he did step aside with only a grunt of displeasure. Bilba decided then and there that she would make him a spice cake later that week; most of the time, his dedication to keeping Carrock House safe and secure was nothing but a comfort.

“Thank you,” she said, and reached up to give his enormous forearm a gentle squeeze as she passed. “I have my keys, so don't worry about the door.”
That hardly mattered, as she fully expected the man to remain looming in the hall until she brought Thorin inside, but it seemed polite to say.

The evening air was brisk as Bilba slipped outside, heading towards the drive; she drew near in time to hear the purr of an engine cut off again, and the crunch of gravel, before popping around the hedge to find Thorin with a helmet under one arm, looking surprised to see her.

“My landlord is guarding the entryway,” she said by way of greeting, trying very hard not to stare at the motorcycle, or Thorin’s leather jacket (which she had seen before, of course, but never with the benefit of this new knowledge). “So I thought it best I come warn you.”

“Ah, yes.” Peeling off his gloves, Thorin pushed one hand back through his hair before motioning for Bilba to precede him towards the house. “He takes building security very seriously, if I recall.”

“He always means well, really.” Falling into step beside Thorin, keeping noticeably close, Bilba was pleased when his arm curled loosely behind her, his hand splayed above the small of her back. “Just please, don’t expect him to be delighted to see you, possibly ever. But I’m delighted to see you, if that helps.”

“It helps immensely,” Thorin said, and a glance over confirmed he was smiling down at her, fond and crooked.

They had made it to the step already, and true to form, Beorn was still waiting, leaning partway out the door. He moved aside when they moved closer, but not enough for Thorin and Bilba to stay side-by-side as they passed the threshold.

“This is your friend, I suppose,” Beorn rumbled, before Bilba could say a word of introduction, and favoured Thorin with a decidedly narrow look. “Thought you were a trespasser, sneaking in unwanted.”

Though his tone clearly implied that Beorn wasn’t entirely convinced Thorin didn’t still qualify as such, Thorin held out his hand, open and steady.

“Thorin Durinson,” he said, calmly meeting Beorn's scrutiny, and didn’t even flinch when a truly massive paw of a hand closed around his own. “Good to meet you.”

“Beorn Urs. The Carrock’s mine.” There was no audible crack of bone, but Bilba still sent Beorn a pointed look from behind Thorin’s shoulder, until the handshake released. “Durinson, eh? Yorkshire?”

“Aye,” Thorin replied, and Bilba felt her curiosity tweak. It may have been a guess, based on the Northern flavour wound loosely through Thorin’s accent, but Beorn had sounded surer than that. “But London now.”

Beorn hummed, clearly winding up for a barrage of questioning; Bilba looped her arm around Thorin's elbow, giving a small tug.

“If you'll pardon us, Beorn, I've a pan on the hob. Have a good evening.”

It would have been too obvious, and possibly quite difficult, to actually drag Thorin off towards the staircase, but if he hadn't followed the cues of her more delicate manoeuvring, Bilba might have seriously considered trying. Thankfully, Thorin stepped beside her when she turned to make their escape.

“You ring me if you need anything, little bunny,” Beorn called after them, and it took effort for Bilba
to bite back a curse. “Or holler, even, and I’ll be right up.”

Oh, wasn't that just grand. And, of course, it proceeded to get even better shortly thereafter.

“Little bunny,” Thorin murmured, half-question and half-laughter, as they climbed past the landing.

“No, no.” Putting one palm against Thorin’s chest, Bilba stopped him on the staircase, only two stairs from the top, but continued up herself until the difference in their heights all but evened out. It was reminiscent of their first date, and the impromptu kisses that had followed, but that was hardly the sort of thing Bilba wanted to be thinking of at that precise moment.

“Absolutely none of that,” she said firmly, then pointed to her own mouth. “That phrase will never pass your lips, if they would ever like to meet these lips again.”

Thorin, to his credit, had the furrowed brow of a man both confused and apologetic, without a hint of teasing lurking anywhere in his expression. “I, er... All right. Understood.”

“Thank you, Thorin.” Feeling slightly guilty for spoiling the formerly playful mood, Bilba leaned in, claiming a brief, gentle kiss. Thorin returned the kiss just as gently, one hand reaching out to cup her waist, and Bilba felt tingles down to her toes.

“Come on,” she said after another moment of that, pulling back and drawing Thorin up with her, down the corridor and into the privacy of her flat.

“Bilba,” Thorin said, reaching for her hand before even bothering with his coat or boots. He didn't reel her in, but simply pressed her fingers between his own, and Bilba watched the question clearly churning behind his concerned gaze.

This was not how she'd intended the evening to go, awkward almost from the start. At least Thorin didn't seem offended, merely curious and a bit worried; Bilba sighed, and moved in close enough to hug him round the ribs, pleased when he returned the embrace without hesitation.

“I'm not cross,” she said, breathing in the smell of leather (pleasing, even if his coat was chilled from the evening air) and whatever faintly spicy cologne Thorin was wearing. “Honestly. But it's a silly nickname, and I'd simply rather not have you calling me a little anything, when it comes down to it. All right?”

“Of course.” The kiss against the crown of her head was a lovely addition to an already cosy hug, as well as the warmth of Thorin's breath through her hair. It wouldn't have been a terrible evening if they spent it just like that, standing tangled together barely inside her front door, but there was still the matter of the meal currently cooking in her kitchen.

Giving Thorin's broad, muscled bulk a final squeeze, Bilba leaned back to find his expression mirroring the contentment warming her own chest, softening his eyes.

“Let's have supper,” Bilba said, smiling wide.

Thorin hadn't had a meal so delicious in a very long time... or possibly ever, though he would never even think of saying as much to Dis. He'd eaten far too many tasty (and some less than tasty) meals at his sister's table to risk his personal safety that way.
Sitting at Bilba's dining table, however, stuffed just shy of painfully full with pork chops (which had, fittingly enough, also been stuffed with sausage, apples, and spices), roasted potatoes, and vegetables, Thorin found he had no compunctions about his sister's potentially wounded feelings.

“That was possibly the greatest meal I've ever eaten,” he said, after Bilba tutted at him to stay put while she moved their dishes to the sink. He was left with just a heavy bottomed pint glass, and only another mouthful or two of rich, earthy cider.

(“My cousin Drogo always sends a few bottles down to me at Christmas,” Bilba had explained. “Hobbiton apples are the sweetest you'll find.”

And if her voice wavered, bittersweet, when she'd talked about her family, Thorin was wise enough not to press.)

Bilba hummed wordless acknowledgment of his compliment, running a quick spray of water over the plates before turning back to face him, hands braced on either side of her hips. As lovely as she was in skirts (and god help him, she was breathtaking), Thorin decided he had a particular appreciation for Bilba in jeans. It was a comfortable look, paired with that soft, gauzy blouse, and the notion that she was growing comfortable with him was absolutely fantastic.

The only thing that made him twitch was the red lacquer still painted over her nails— the last time he'd seen those nails, they'd been carding through another man's hair. The memory was a mild bother, but easy enough to shake off.

Easy enough, especially when he was suddenly being levelled with such a steady, sultry stare.

“Flattery,” Bilba said, with eyes looking dark and gleaming in the warm, yellowish glow of the lamps scattered around the flat. “May get you an invitation to the sofa, if you like.”

And yes, he might have been feeling heavy and very nearly dazed from the food, but he wasn't far gone enough to consider refusing such an enticing offer.

Hauling himself to his feet, Thorin smoothed a hand over his shirt— the blessedly unwrinkled button-down, grey with thin darker grey stripes, had been the first vaguely dressy thing he'd laid hands upon when he'd bolted into his bedroom. It was more suitable, at least, than his t-shirt had been.

When Bilba started off towards the lounge, beckoning him to follow with a crook of her finger and a swing of her hips, he followed, gladly. When she bade him sit, he sank onto the cushions of the plush tweed sofa.

And when she settled down in his lap, legs slung over his thighs and her arm snaking around his shoulders, Thorin met her half-way, drinking in deep, cider-flavoured kisses.

“I should go,” he murmured, then nuzzled another kiss against the impossibly soft skin of Bilba's inner arm, just above the crook of her elbow. She was lying across his chest, flattening against him as he'd shifted and sprawled over her sofa, with her face tucked into the hollow of his throat; when he spoke, the fingers she had laced through his hair tightened, nails scraping his scalp and sending a pleasant shudder down his spine.
Morning came early, as would his morning shift at the station. Thorin had not allowed himself to forget that, even when he'd had Bilba pressing him back against the upholstery and moaning breathily into his mouth.

Over an hour of snogging on the sofa, both of them fully aware that their night had no intentions of going further, was actually pleasantly frustrating.

“You should,” Bilba agreed, punctuated by the wet press of her lips against his Adam's apple, then another under his chin. Thorin was infinitely glad he’d taken the few extra minutes back at his flat—after brushing his teeth and sparing a long, considering look at his rarely used tin of pomade before thinking better of it—to shave. And, as luck would have it, he’d even managed that hasty bit of grooming without slitting his throat, despite the weird thrumming sensation under his skin, pulsing with every tick of his watch.

Back in the present, curled together on Bilba's very comfortable sofa, they both moved with what might have been good intentions, but only far enough to bring their mouths together—damp breaths mingling, lips brushing and sucking, sensitive, and tongues sliding slow. All of it was beautifully familiar now, and still made the banked smoulder of arousal swell deep in Thorin's gut. And lower, even, as Bilba's leg shifted between his thighs; Thorin arched his neck, breaking away from their kisses long enough to inhale, pressing his head back against the sofa.

“I feel terrible for not offering you coffee,” Bilba continued, smoothly transferring her attention to the edge of his jaw, peppering kisses and the occasional, gentle scrape of her teeth as her words ghosted over his cheek. “Or dessert.”

“Jesus Christ—” Thorin's hands tightened against her ribs, sliding farther up the warm, dewy skin where Bilba's blouse had hitched up in the back. Getting hold of himself with some effort, he turned, taking full advantage of the substantial bulk he had on his side to roll Bilba off his chest, wedging her snugly between his body and the back of the sofa.

Her cheeks were flushed, lushly pink, as she looked up at him with blue eyes blown wide and her mouth parted wetly. For a split second, Thorin found that language had escaped him, leaving no other recourse but to kiss her again while he waited for his brain to recover from its short circuit.

“Gorgeous woman,” he managed to say, as Bilba's arms wrapped around his neck and she wriggled against him.

“Next time,” she whispered, sweet and wicked, while their lips were still touching. “We'll have dessert, next time.”

“I'm—” Those two words, next time, jolted through him like lightning, and Thorin heaved himself up from their tangle with a great rush of fortitude. “I'm going.”

He risked looking over, and found Bilba exactly as tempting as he'd feared, sprawled and rumpled across the cushions.

“And next time,” he rumbled, throat gone dry, and was more than a little gratified to see want in Bilba's expression, mirroring the ache lancing through him. “We'll have all the time in the world.”

Getting his feet under him, pointedly ignoring the wobbly feeling in his knees, Thorin braced an arm on the back of the sofa and leaned close, cupping her face with one hand.

The taste of cider had long since faded, but the plushness of Bilba's lips still managed to make him feel drunk on her kisses, warm and besotted. This time, he pulled back after little more than a peck, bussing her top lip.
“So I'll not be rushed,” he said, brushing his nose across her cheek, and the corner of her smile. “And I'll savour dessert properly.”

Chapter End Notes

The basic recipe for stuffed pork chops is here, if any of you folks are interested, though both Bilba and I share a love for tinkering around with recipes quite a lot.
It was just past one in the morning—a little over five hours into their Thursday night shift—and the smell of frittata was infinitely more appealing than the plastic stink of burnt formica still lingering from their last call (some students cooking chips before heading off to the pub, an unattended pan of hot oil, and a kitchen fire). Thorin broke off another eggy piece of lunch with his fork, chasing a stubborn bit of tomato around the plate, and didn't dare steal a surreptitious glance at his mobile. He hardly expected another message this late—Bilba had presumably gone to bed while he’d been trudging through a smoke-filled flat. There wasn't any reason, beyond the embarrassingly soppy, to re-read their conversation.

I can't believe I'm even considering this, she had texted him earlier that night, while Thorin had been hidden away in the office with his paperwork, keeping up a playful debate about the merits of motorcycles as transport in London. And then, before Thorin had the chance to reassure her that she hardly needed to ride his bike, that he wasn't insulted if she was uncomfortable with the idea, the station intercom had blared its warning, dragging his brain back entirely to work.

Got to go, he had tapped out quickly, already on his feet and moving out from behind his desk. Work.

Then he'd stuffed his mobile in his trouser pocket, and hadn't been able to spare it a thought until he was back at the station, attempting to swat away the headache he'd managed to earn on that call. Beyond the shrill screaming of the students' fire alarm (which was a noise he'd never complain about, considering the lives it saved), there had also been some heinous racket blasting from their stereo, and after the scene was secure and the fire extinguished, there had been the drunken, panicked jabbering of half-cut students.

Thorin downed a coffee and a pair of paracetamol tablets in the station's neat kitchen before fishing his phone out again, where a pair of messages had been waiting for him.

Be safe xx, Bilba had texted shortly after his hasty goodbye, then eight minutes later had added: And fine yes, if it's not raining on Sunday I'll consider a ride.

It wasn't an enthusiastic yes, per se, but it was enough to make Thorin hide a grin behind his coffee cup.

And now, a few hours later, he could still feel an unbearably stupid smile making the corners of his mouth twitch dangerously when he allowed his thoughts to wander.

"How is it?" Fili's question from the kitchen, as the lad leaned out of the pass-through that opened into their little mess hall, managed to haul Thorin back to the present. "Good?"

"Getting better, laddie," Gloin answered around a mouthful of egg; it was double-edged compliment, obliquely referring to the fish curry incident that would not be repeated. Fili didn't have the best track record in their kitchen, but he'd never learn if he didn't take a turn as cook on occasion.

"Thorin looks like he's loving it," Dwalin said, shooting Thorin a sideways glance that was
unbearably smug and knowing. Fili, of course, responded to the praise by perking up like a pup being offered a biscuit.

"Thorin?" Resisting the urge to give Dwalin a sharp kick under the table, not entirely convinced he could manage it subtly enough to go unnoticed (and damn it, he didn't need something else to explain right now), Thorin turned to face Fili's tentatively hopeful, carefully restrained expression. "It's good?"

Nodding, Thorin swept his fork over his half-empty plate; luckily enough, he didn't have to waste any effort couching criticism constructively. It actually was tasty. A bit rubbery, but edible, at least. "It's good."

If Kili had been anywhere in the vicinity, Thorin had little doubt that a flurry of fist bumps and whooping would have followed; without his brother to encourage him to rowdiness, Fili simply grinned, impossibly wide and toothy, and disappeared back into the kitchen.

"You are an arsehole, Fundinson," Thorin said under his breath, jabbing his fork in Dwalin's direction. Steel tines might have actually punctured rough, callused knuckle if Dwalin hadn't snatched his hand back, quick as a snake. Gloin glanced between the pair of them, but apparently decided he was content not to ask (for the moment, at least), shovelling in another forkful of lunch with nothing more than an amused grunt.

The frittata, unfortunately, was not quite as tasty on the way back up.

Thorin had one arm braced against the toilet tank, while his other hand clutchted at the edge of the bowl; his stomach gave another violent heave, not quite content with just ejecting his lunch. No, his damned gut seemed hell-bent on retching up every single thing he'd ever eaten.

There were black spots swimming at the edge of his vision, winking in and out of existence, and while the tile floor might have been doing murder to his knees, he wasn't entirely confident in his ability to stand at the moment. The pounding of his own heart in his ears wasn't quite loud enough to drown out the sharp rap of a knock, just before the door swung open without waiting for his say-so.

"Uncle?"

"Get out," Thorin managed during this blessed lull in the waves of nausea, and didn't bother lifting his head to glare at Fili. "Now. Out."

"Would that I could," Fili said, and Thorin pressed down on the handle of the toilet, letting the worst of the smell and the mess disappear in a powerful swirl of water. He had, thank god, managed to stumble away from the free weights in their gym and make it to the loo before he'd lost his battle against surging sickness— he would never, ever have been able to live down the ignominy of vomiting all over his own boots in the middle of the station.

Avoiding that misery seemed a cold comfort at the moment, however, as he knelt on the tile, hugging the toilet, with his nephew shuffling up behind him, entirely uninvited.

"I've got to take you home," Fili continued, once the noise of the flush had subsided. "We had a vote, and you're out for the rest of the shift, and tomorrow night too."

"Like hell I am—" Thorin managed, just barely, to swallow back the gagging sensation still lingering behind his absolutely foul tongue. "Like, ugh, like hell. Water, ten minutes, I'll be fine."

"You're sick." Either the back of his hand was very cool, or his forehead was very warm; Thorin
wasn't entirely certain which, but resting his head on his hand felt lovely. It helped dull the forceful throbbing in his temples, even just a tiny bit. "Properly sick, with that bloody plague Kili dragged home, and I'm so sorry about it, Thorin, really. I know it's awful, but you should be feeling a better by Saturday... Sunday at the latest, probably. Remember what you said to me, about making the rest of the Watch sick."

"I'm fine," he said again, slurring, then threw his elbow back when hands rucked up under his armpits, trying to lift him. Fili grunted, but didn't let him go. "No— no, damn it."

"You're going home, Uncle." The room lurched, and Thorin had to squeeze his eyes shut against the wild spinning. His muscles were like jelly, and Fili, damn him, was taking full advantage, hauling him up like a sack of potatoes. "There we go, arm over my shoulders. Right... got your feet? Not going to sick up again?"

The room, even hidden on the other side of his eyelids, still felt as though it was reeling; Thorin called up a low growl rather than answer.

"Right, good, brilliant." When the support of Fili's dense, compact body shifted beside him, Thorin had little choice but to follow, unless he wanted to try navigating on his own. "Dwalin'll be disappointed you came without a fuss, you know— said he wanted an excuse to give you a blast with one of the hoses."

His flat was alternating between too cold by at least ten degrees and sweltering hot, despite the fact that he hadn't touched the thermostat since Fili had dragged him to his sofa. The lad had lingered just long enough to fetch a bucket from under the kitchen cupboard (earning a narrow, unimpressed glare at the implication that Thorin couldn't make it the half-dozen steps to his own toilet), and set out six bottles of water on the low coffee table. He'd mumbled something about pyjamas before Thorin had dismissed him, in a tone sharper than was strictly polite, but Fili had taken the opportunity to flee rather than take offence.

Thorin felt entirely uncomfortable in his skin, to say nothing about the briefs and t-shirt clinging stubbornly to him with sickly sweat— he'd shimmied out of his jeans, but hadn't bothered stripping any further, melting against cool, brown leather cushions of the sofa instead. The wooly throw he usually kept folded over the back was wretched to wrap up in, leaving his calves chilly above his socks and his body too warm, but the cosiness of his duvet was an impossible distance away, out of reach in his bedroom.

His stomach was settled, or relatively so; at the moment, he had nothing else left to sick up.

"Sleep it off," he ordered, breathing wet against his own forearm; the lingering smell was faint but awful, and he regretted not taking a minute to brush his teeth. Or, at the very least, rinse his mouth a bit more thoroughly than he'd managed. "Just... just sleep it off."

"Good god, man."

He had slept, fitful and light between shaky trips to the toilet, and now he was being dragged out of even that meagre respite, feeling muzzy, his thoughts gone heavy and thick as treacle.

Blinking, vision bleary beneath the crook of his arm thrown over his face, Thorin wasn't completely certain what he wished for more— either that the familiar figure hovering over him would vanish like a mirage born from the fever he knew was scorching through him, or that she would bring him his duvet.
"You look pitiful," Dis said, arms akimbo. Her hair hanging loose behind her shoulders, dark waves starkly backlit by the white halo of one of his lamps, glowing like a beacon in his shadowy flat. The curtains, thick enough to block even the brightest midday glare, had been drawn closed when he'd first stumbled home that morning, and he hadn't touched them since, content in his dark cocoon. Thorin had no idea what day it was, let alone what time, but his sister was dressed down to a russet henley jumper and a faded pair of jeans, which meant she hadn't come straight from work.

"Bah... Felt worse." Rolling over to curl more comfortably on his side, his movements slow and cautious, Thorin was very pleased to note his guts didn't make any attempt to escape through his mouth. That was a good sign. The softening of his consonants, blunted by the pressure gradually building in his sinuses, was not. "Don't need taunting or tending... but good of you, dropping by. Now, go."

"You need these." There was a dull rattle, and when Thorin peered back up again, Dis was holding a small orange bottle with a white lid between her thumb and fingers, shaking the contents. "Oin's orders when he heard you were down with this. Same as the boys took— should help sort out your aches, and knock hell out of the fever. The last bit's the most important, by the way, and it's the reason I'm not leaving until you down a pair of pills."

Sighing, Thorin untangled one arm from the twisted mess of his blanket, holding out a hand for the pill bottle. Dis, as expected, did one better and dropped two gleaming green gel capsules onto his palm. She also held out a bottle of water, this one gone slightly foggy with condensation on the outside, likely from the chill of his fridge; at that moment, with his throat feeling raw and his mouth cottony, the thought of any water colder than room temperature seemed almost too good to be true.

The pills gouged like razors going down, but he swallowed them under Dis' watchful stare. He also chugged half the water, thirst overcoming caution; thankfully, his stomach didn't seem inclined to protest the sudden influx of fluid.

Still, he wasn't foolish enough to push his luck too horribly. Twisting the lid back on, he set the half-empty bottle on the coffee table, well within reach, and snagged a handful of tissues as well.

"You... ugh. You didn't bring soup, did you?" Dis merely narrowed her eyes at the unenthusiastic tone of his question, then turned away politely as Thorin blew his stuffy nose. In the time it took him to neaten himself up, wiping his face and blotting a bit of sweat from his brow, Dis entertained herself with her mobile, tapping away at the screen with a dangerously amused smile playing around her lips.

Wait, no— Dis kept her sleek little smartphone safe and secure in a tan leather cover... not wrapped in a rugged, rubbery black case that looked more than a bit like the thick tread of an off-road tyre.

"Dis!" Shouting hurt, worse than swallowing the pills had done, but the room only seemed to wavered slightly when he tried to sit up enough to grab hold of his impossibly prying sister. That was an improvement on the underwater feeling he'd been suffering. "What are you even— give me my phone!"

"Oh sit down, brother." Thorin may have been able to gain his feet without too much difficulty, but any sense of accomplishment was short-lived. It only took one press of Dis' hand against his shoulder to inform Thorin that his muscles were still shivery, frustratingly weak; she didn't even push him down hard, but his knees wobbled, and then the sofa was under his arse again, sudden and startling.

"I changed my damned passcode," he said, voice gone growly with equal parts frustrated disbelief and congestion. "God's sake, how are you— I changed it."
"Yes, you did," Dis agreed absently, still sweeping her thumb across the very obviously unlocked screen of his bloody phone. "You changed it from Kili's birthday, to Fili's, backwards. Very canny, Mister Bond."

"Piss off." Thorin found himself without enough energy to get any substantial rush of temper riled up at this audacious, but not especially surprising, invasion of his privacy. Weak as a kitten or no, he was still frightfully annoyed. "Dis, I'm serious. Give me my phone."

"Fine, fine." With a gentle toss, his mobile landed safely in a nest of blanket folds, and Dis didn't bother to look even mildly chagrined. "It was trying to vibrate itself to pieces in your jeans when I came in. The call display just said B, which upon further investigation, I presume to be this new woman you're seeing. I'll warn you now that if either of the boys see that piss-poor attempt at subterfuge, they will probably call you Jay-Z behind your back until the end of time."

"Hell." Thorin didn't actually swoon back onto the sofa, but he did flop down against the cushions and press both hands against his face, half-tempted to try suffocating himself. "First, I have no idea what that means, you madwoman. Second, why, why are you here, jabbering nonsense at me? Can't you just leave me to be sick and miserable on my own, please." Taking a deep breath, he pushed his hands back, gripping his doubtlessly ridiculously mussed hair and levelling his sister with the chilliest glare he could muster. "And maybe, for a change, you can try minding your own business. Novel, I know."

Dis stared back, serenely unperturbed. "You're always such a grouch when you're ill. Check your messages; this B person is quite concerned that you've apparently vanished off the face of the earth."

"What?" Of course, the moment Thorin desperately wanted to find his phone, it was suddenly trapped in the morass of the blanket, just out of reach no matter how fervently he dug around for it. "Shit, what time is it?"

"Nearly eight."

"Eight PM?" Thorin managed to get hold of the rectangular shape of his phone, but it was still buried, and the room was pulsing at the edges of his vision, shuddering in time with the throb of his headache.

"It's still Friday," Dis assured him, more than a bit teasing, then bent to pick up his mobile when it tumbled off the sofa, thudding against the hardwood. "Here, you tit. Relax, would you please? You're grey as a corpse."

Snatching the phone, Thorin unlocked it— he'd have to change the bloody passcode again, the minute he could think without his brain feeling as though it was about to leak out his nose— and found he'd missed two calls, and a handful of polite, carefully worried texts, starting just after eight that morning.

The last message he'd sent to Bilba, he'd told her he'd been leaving on a call. Then, radio silence for nearly twenty-four hours.

Oh, Christ.

"Eight PM," Thorin said again, just as disbelieving as the first time, even if his phone offered further evidence of the time. Last he'd checked, blinking blearily at the green LEDs of his microwave in between shaky trips to the toilet, it hadn't even been close to noon.

Dis hummed agreement. "Considering how Fili and Kili got on, and the dozens of people who've
come through the clinic the past week or so, I'd wager you're finished vomiting by now. If that helps."

Peering at his phone, Thorin felt an odd sick feeling churn in his gut that had little to do with the flu from hell that was still ravaging every cell in his body.

**Hope all is well**, Bilba had said in her second most recent text, sent three hours ago, followed twelve minutes later by: **please let me know you're ok?**

"I suppose I've no hope of you buggering off anytime soon," Thorin said, leaning back and rubbing a hand over his eyes. He didn't relish the idea of ringing Bilba with Dis lurking around his flat, probably whipping up some sort of wheatgrass goulash in his kitchen.

Thorin very purposefully ignored his pangs of hunger at that thought; his stomach, at least, seemed convinced that his sister's *creative* cooking sounded like just the thing to fill the hole that hours of vomiting had left behind.

"Brother, I love you," Dis said, perching on the arm of the sofa. "But after tending to the boys, and watching the stream of folks shuffling past my office to see Oin all week, I'd be more than willing to pass the baton on this one. You ring up B to come over and feed your sorry arse, and I'll be out of your hair in a heartbeat. After I meet her, of course."

There was absolutely no chance in hell of that happening, for a vast number of reasons; Thorin attempted to communicate a few of the most pertinent objections simply through the strength of his glare.

"I am perfectly capable of taking care of *myself*."

"Right." Sweeping her hand outward, encompassing the whole of his living room (the tangled blanket, the stale and sweaty state of his t-shirt and briefs, the bucket three-quarters full of used tissues). "You haven't had a thing to eat— not crackers, or tinned soup, or even a cup of tea— all day. You could *desperately* use a shower, preferably without collapsing and drowning in your own tub. I'm not letting you stew in your own misery, all alone."

"Fine." Thorin groaned, sour guilt jabbing at him with every wasted minute that Bilba was still worrying about him. "Jesus, fine. I've got to make a call."

"I'll leave you to it," Dis said, without even a hint of sarcasm, and patted the blanket over his feet. "You should try to eat, as well. Broth or toast?"

"Doesn't matter, but unless you brought broth, or soup for that matter, it'll be toast." Dis' amused little smirk spoke volumes, and Thorin tapped his phone against his chest impatiently. "Of course you brought broth. Right. I'm off to the loo."

It was easy enough to ignore Dis' conspicuously mild objections that ringing a woman from the toilet was not on— his sister did, on occasion, know when pushing further would be pushing too far. Thorin fled into a sanctuary of relative solitude and blue stone tiles, locking the door behind himself, already pressing dial on Bilba's number before sitting his arse on the closed toilet lid. There was a lengthy pause before the first dull ring in his ear, his mobile reception suffering a bit in his hiding spot, but Bilba's voice was clear enough when she picked up, almost immediately.

"Hello? Thorin?"

"I'm sorry," he began, realizing belatedly that sickness had made his own voice dip impossibly
deeper, croaky as an old toad. "Yes, yes Bilba, it's me. I'm so sorry I didn't ring you earlier."

"My god, what's wrong?" The plastic of the toilet lid was uncomfortably cold through the thin cotton of his pants, and Thorin gripped the mobile a bit tighter, feeling the shivers of a chill start up again. "You sound terrible. Did something— are you all right?"

"I'm fine. My nephews managed to give me the flu; nothing serious." Even through the hollow, tinny connection of his mobile, Thorin could hear Bilba's little hiccough of breath, quiet, sounding dangerously wet. "Are you... Bilba?"

"The flu? Oh, that's dreadful. How are you feeling?" The question was abrupt, and only a bit wobbly around the edges; Thorin dragged a hand over the rasp of his stubble.

"Weak as a kitten, and sore as hell," he answered honestly, which seemed the fair thing to do when he'd so obviously worried her. "I've been stuck on the sofa all day, sleeping. But I'm getting there— feeling better than this morning, at least."

"Do you need anything? Food? Medicine? Anything I can do."

"You're a lovely woman." Thorin sat back, smiling small and foolish even as the sudden cold of the toilet tank pressed against his spine. His thoughts, already muzzy from the fever, were unravelling into something even softer and less defined now, like a mess of cotton wool crammed into his skull. Damn Dis and her damn pills— she had probably given him a rhino-sized dose, just to make certain he'd be especially pliable to her overwhelming, sisterly tending.

"I've had medicine," he said, still aware enough to swallow back a stream of increasingly soppy compliments, even if just barely. "And Dis is here, making certain I eat and all."

"Good. That's good." There was a pause, but not the sort that invited Thorin to fill it. He waited instead, listening to Bilba's breathing in his ear.

"I'm glad you rang," she said eventually; closing his eyes, Thorin could easily imagine the relieved smile that lit up her words, which was a much more pleasant image to consider than whether or not her eyes had possibly welled up. "It's... I'm silly. Silly, and very glad you rang. You're certain I can't do anything?"

He shook his head, though she couldn't see, and found his former dizziness was dulled to almost nothing. "Don't want you getting sick. Last thing in the world I want."

"Sweet man. You should go back to sleep, darling— you're starting to slur."

"I am," Thorin agreed, just as there was a light rap on the door.

"All right?" Dis called, and Thorin had at least enough presence of mind remaining not to raise his voice back to answer. Avoiding a coughing fit while Bilba was on the line seemed preferable. Instead, he hauled himself to his feet, joints aching, and shuffled close enough to undo the lock, cracking the door open.

"All right," he said, speaking to both women, then shooed Dis off with a flap of his hand. She rolled her eyes, dramatic and mocking, but still retreated back towards the kitchen without a fuss. Thorin leaned back against the doorframe, watching her go, making certain she didn't double back to snoop at the keyhole. The curse of a close family— nothing was sacred, and privacy was for other people.

"Please don't get sick," he said quietly, before his dull brain could think better of the childish request. Silly as it was, it earned him a breathy, fond laugh on the other end of the call.
"I'll do my very best not to." There was a clatter, not through the phone but coming from his kitchen; Thorin ignored it when Dis didn't start cursing. Bilba's voice was gentle in his ear, earnest where she might have been teasing instead, and acting as a very pleasant distraction. "If you promise to ring me if you need anything. All right?"

He had no intention of inviting Bilba over into his plague pit of a flat, especially since it would be her first impression of the place. Thorin didn't feel any guilt growling out a simple "I promise," however, knowing that Dis wouldn't leave him alone long enough to have need for anything.

"Thank you, Thorin." Bilba smiled, listening carefully to the snuffling, wheezing breaths coming through the phone. The flu. Just the flu, wreaking havoc with his sinuses it seemed.

Nothing to worry about.

Wiping a hint of dampness away from her eye, Bilba made her goodbyes, tinged with regret and relief, and ended the call with a tap of her thumb. It was good to hear his voice, better than good, after the day she'd had.

Setting her phone down on the kitchen table, Bilba rested her lips against her folded hands; her skin smelled of flour and peaches, with just a faint whiff of onions clinging. Her kitchen— her entire flat smelled like a bakery, thick and warm in the air, and there were pans, bowls, and cooling racks littered over every relatively flat surface.

It had been a long, anxious sort of day... and it was possible Bilba's pantry had paid the price for her fretting. Her cupboards were covered in dozens of perfectly browned scones and biscuits, frosted fairy cakes and sweet loaves, pastries and pies— there was utterly no chance she could find the space to freeze it all, or to store it all before things began to stale and mould, and she certainly couldn't eat it all herself.

Her stomach was still fluttering, her hands itching to do something rather than twine round each other, wringing. Lifting another generous wedge of chicken and mushroom pie from the half-empty dish sitting by her elbow, Bilba slid it on to her plate (already flecked with crumbs). She took up her fork in one hand, and her phone in the other.

Texting rather than phoning gave her the freedom to dig into warm gravy and pastry immediately, and beyond that, she wasn't entirely convinced she could articulate her problem without tripping over her own tongue anyway. As mortifying as it was for anyone to see the state of her kitchen at the moment, Bilba still snapped a photo of the largest pile of scones and braided danishes, and sent it to Bofur, along with the message: please come and take some of this.

A moment later, with a mouthful of savoury pie and a belly full of butterflies, she sent another text before she could think better of it.

And I think I need to breakup with mr posh coat.

Chapter End Notes

Hey folks. Let's get this show on the road, huh?

Thank you, as ever, for reading and for sticking with me.
Her plate of pie was nearly gone by the time her phone buzzed, chiming its innocuous little ring; Bofur’s face peered up at her from the screen, and the broad, silly grin of his photo was doubtlessly at odds with the conversation about to happen. Taking a breath, setting her fork down gently, Bilba picked up the phone.

“Hello,” she started to say, but as she’d fully expected, Bofur didn’t have quite the same concern for proper phone etiquette.

“What the hell did he do?” It wasn’t quite a shout, but it was still loud enough that Bilba tilted the phone away from her ear just slightly. “You were head over bloody heels yesterday, and now you’re living in a damned cake shop of misery— tell me, right now, what he did and where you want him buried.”

“He saved people from a burning building.” To be honest, Bilba hadn’t the foggiest idea about what Thorin had actually done at work last night, but that sort of rescue did seem like it would be a rather significant part of being a firefighter.

“He— Sorry?” There was a muffled thud, and Nori's voice squawking with what sounded like surprise, not quite intelligible from her end of the call. “Shush, would you— yeah, yes. Nori says hello, darlin’. Now, wait, Bilba.” The background noise faded suddenly, leaving Bilba alone with only the empty quiet of her flat, and Bofur's increasingly incredulous tone in her ear. “He what?”

“Mr Posh Coat is a firefighter,” she explained, which was a fact she hadn’t volunteered up until this point. In fact, after their first coffee date, and the realization that Thorin was known to the brothers Rison (related to them, even), Bilba had been even more careful with what details she shared with her friends in these early days of dating. Dori, in an unsurprising move, had also refused to blabber any information about Bilba's new beau— he did rather enjoy the opportunity to get one over on Nori, who had apparently always been something of a handful even since they were lads, cagey and clever.

Sibling dynamics weren’t something Bilba understood through experience, but she could certainly attest that family relationships could be knotty, prickly little things, binding people together or tearing them apart. If, for example, she lived the rest of her days and never heard another word from a few of her more venomous relations, Bilba might compare that feeling to a rather sizable thorn being finally removed from her side.

“Firefighter. All right.” There was a pregnant sort of pause, one which Bilba had no idea how to fill for what felt like ages, before Bofur huffed out what sounded like a mildly frustrated breath. “I feel as though I'm missing some detail here.”

“It's just...” Honestly, nothing she thought she could articulate, or cared to dredge up, but she was fairly certain Bofur would not be satisfied with that answer after she called him. Slumping farther down onto her folded arms, Bilba tucked the phone closer against her shoulder and closed her eyes. When she found her voice again, it was very quiet, embarrassingly small.
“I'm terrified,” she said, somewhat surprised when Bofur didn't ask her to speak up. “Utterly terrified that I'll—I'll care about him, so much, and then one day he won't come home. It's just so dangerous, what he does, it's brave and terrifying and deadly, and I can't... I don't think I can do that again.”

The other end of the call had just enough of the ambient hush of Bofur's breathing to let her know he was still there, still listening, but not another sound. Her eyes had gone hot again, and she scrubbed them against one of the velvety patches of her dressing gown's sleeve.

Eventually, finally, Bofur broke the delicate shell of silence. “What are you wearing?”

It was enough to startle her to laughter, unforeseen enough to banish the brittleness clinging to her heart for a moment or two, and Bilba was fiercely reminded why she did love Bofur so very much.

“She doesn't even have to try anymore,” he said, a smile twinkling in his eye, which was purely for Bilba's benefit, of course. “She's wearing jeans and a jumper, and my dressing gown, too.”

“Good enough.” There was a grunt, a shuffle, then: “I'm headed to Bilba's, love. You need anything?” Nori's answer wasn't entirely audible, but Bofur's warm chuckle was, as was the wet smack of a kiss. “Mm, best not to wait up; might be a bit. Got a lager-and-chips sort of emergency, I think.”

Bilba sat up, frowning. “Hold on just a minute—”

“Get your shoes on, my girl,” Bofur said, his attention on her again. “I'm on my way now, and we're going for chips and a chat. I know you, Bilba Baggins— you've been holed up in that flat all day, moping about in your little burrow, and now a dashing, devilishly charming, impossibly clever man is taking you out for some air and some perspective, and a disgusting amount of greasy chips. Who could say no to that, eh?”

“I could,” she found herself saying, just to be mulish.

“Oh, let’s not get all mulish on me, my girl,” he replied with a chuckle. “You know you can say no, you know you're not going to say no. You're going to have that lager-and-chips emergency you've been waiting for this entire day.”

Bilba thought of how comfortable she was in her own flat, considered the allure of her armchair, a thick book, and a hot cup of tea, when compared to dragging herself out into the city for chips on a chilly Friday evening. Glancing outside, she saw it was even drizzling, ever so slightly.

It should have been an easy choice; it would have been, before Thorin bloody Durinson.

But now her flat was full of a foolish amount of baked goods, smelling delightful but reminding her too much of the fear that had soured her belly most of the day. Bilba was sitting in the same chair Thorin had filled only a few nights before, when he'd complimented her cooking and curled her toes— already, the idea of him never seated there again made her feel ill.

This was all happening far too fast.

Picking up the pie dish— there were, perhaps, two decently sized pieces left— Bilba stood and slid it into her refrigerator. Everything else would keep. “Yes, fine. All right.”
Bilba found the time, before Bofur arrived at her front door, to exchange her jumper for one without a kilo of flour dusted all over it, and tuck the wild mess of her hair into a quick twist at the nape of her neck. No matter how odd and disconcertingly empty her flat felt at the moment, no matter how fretful her day had been, she certainly had no intention of venturing out into public without making some effort to put herself together.

Bofur, conversely, had no compunction about turning up in grey joggers and a faded t-shirt, layered under two horribly clashing jumpers and his duffle coat, with his hair peeking out at all angles under his hat, and his moustache tufting stubbornly on one side. There were fading pink lines on his face, from what she guessed were the creases of a pillow.

“Did I wake you? At eight on a Friday?” Bilba asked, unable to resist teasing, as she was hustled out onto the cold of the street.

“No a word, you.” Scrubbing his hand under his nose, Bofur fought to tweak his moustache up from its sad, one-sided drooping. “Nori's got those Miss Marple DVDs from Ori at Christmas, and the sneaky bugger scratches my head so I don't talk when he's watching. Put's me right out.”

They weren't far from a number of decent take-aways, but Bofur dragged her a few streets farther than necessary for chips, down to the Ivy Bush Pub. It was a small, friendly sort of place that reminded her of the Green Dragon back home, and while they did a decent enough business, they also enjoyed a mellower, more pleasant clientele than some other places nearby.

The pub was busy, but not packed full, and it wasn't long at all before they were tucked into a corner table out of the way, with two enormous plates of chips and battered haddock between them, and two pints. Bilba had been half-way to asking for a cup of tea until Bofur had levelled her with a patient sort of look, and suddenly she'd been ordering the thickest, blackest stout on tap.

“Eat your chips,” Bofur had said, when it became clear that all she planned to do was sit, twitchy, waiting for him to start the awkward questions. Bilba hadn't wasted the opportunity to delay further conversation, trying her best to bury anxiety under a smothering layer of grease. As it happened, however, the words began spilling out as the food disappeared, whether she wanted them to or not.

“I know, I know that it can happen anytime, to anyone,” she said at length, while Bofur shook out a bit more vinegar onto his plate. Her own hands were shaking too, though they were twisted together in her lap, oily-slick fingertips digging into a napkin. “Anyone can— my parents, they were an architect and an artist, for god's sake, out for a Sunday drive, and they... it didn't matter. He puts himself in danger, every day. He... he drives a motorcycle! What am I even thinking?”

Bofur hummed, swallowing a mouthful. “And if you don't want to live like that, darlin', you know what I'm going to say. You've got quite the fortified comfort zone, locked up behind all those safe, boring old safety. Coming to London, leaving home after everything that happened, wasn't that daring enough for one lifetime? Not all of us are meant to storm into burning buildings, or zip around London traffic on a cycle like a madman, or— or to run off and live in the back of a rotten old van for a year like a vagrant—”

Bofur's hand on her wrist brought her up short; his eyes were dark and impossibly warm when she glanced up, making her face flush with heat to match. It had amazed Bilba when she'd first met the
perpetually jovial make-up artist (who would one day become one of her very dearest friends), that the man didn't keep a flat, or even a room somewhere. No, at the time, Bofur had been “between residences,” unwilling to bunk with his brother or cousin for longer than a few days at a time, and spending the lion’s share of his money on the tools of his trade rather than a roof over his head.

That had been years ago, and it wasn't something Bofur was ashamed of, but it certainly wasn't fair of her to bring it up like that, with such meanness. It made Bilba feel even worse when he didn't rise to the bait, choosing to offer sweetness instead of returning the sour.

“Two things,” he said, as his thumb drew slow circles over the flutter of her pulse. “You've got to ask yourself. First, can you stop borrowing trouble and worrying about things you'll not be able to change? Because you'll never be able to make this work thinking like that, even if you want to.”

“And what's the second thing,” Bilba managed to ask, even with her throat feeling so tight, so hellishly parched. With her free hand she took up her pint, draining too much in a single swallow.

“That's the easier one.” Bofur smiled, crooked and at odds with the uneven fall of his moustache. “Just, is it worth it? Simple as that. And luckily enough for you, this might be a big hurdle, but it's early days yet. I could fill encyclopedias with all the things I didn't know about Nori until it was too late, and I was good and snared.” His expression turned cheekier, dimples deepening. “And he'd say the same, no doubt.”

That wasn't entirely true, Bilba could almost guarantee it— compared to Bofur, Nori had always been something of a closed book, with some shady, mysterious periods in his past that he took great pains to avoid discussing.

“You're right,” Bilba said after a few moments, though she neglected to mention how very snared she already felt, and not entirely unpleasantly. Already, she truly enjoyed Thorin's company, his sturdy presence in her life.

But was it worth it?

Bofur squeezed her wrist gently, lingering like a lifeline, then withdrew, picking up his pint and tipping it jauntily in her direction. “Honestly, darlin’, when am I not?”

An hour or two later, Bilba found herself back at her flat, which thankfully looked much less like the aftermath of a bakery explosion. Bofur had offered to stay over if she wanted the company, but Bilba had politely demurred, sending him off laden with a truly obscene amount of food. He and Nori would polish off a fair share by themselves, she didn't doubt, but there was enough to be passed around, if Ori, Bombur, or Bifur were interested.

Bilba had extracted a promise that Dori would be kept in the dark about this entire debacle, and so hopefully would Gandalf— it wasn't unheard of for Bilba to get caught up in a spot of stress-baking, and she dreaded being pressed to explain her fears to either her boss, or her quasi-mentor. Both were lovely men, of course, but Dori could be impossibly overbearing (and knew too many details of her love life already, thank you), and Gandalf was meddlesome at the best of times.

Beorn had also been prowling out around the shrubbery when she’d arrived back at Carrock House, doing whatever it was he did rather than sleep like a normal person, and Bilba had managed to foist a lemon loaf, a box of biscuits, and two mince pies on her peculiar landlord.
By the end of it all, she'd only kept a few scones, the remains of her chicken pie, and half a batch of pain au chocolat that she couldn't bear to part with, against her better judgement.

The cupboards were all wiped down, the dishes washed and dried, and Bilba felt as wrung out as her dishrag when she finally crawled into bed, well after midnight. Bofur hadn't pushed her to make any sort of decision, but he had given her a great deal to mull over, and damn the man, he had been right about the benefits of a bit of distance and a friendly ear.

Her mobile buzzed once, just as she began to drift off—a frisson of something between fear and joy shivered through her when she reached over to check the message, squinting against the brightness of the screen.

A text from Bofur, informing her that he'd made it home.

Thank you, she sent back, meaning a great many things. Less than a minute later, the phone vibrated against her palm, and Bilba hid her foolish smile in her pillow as she read.

Anytime love xx.

It was Saturday morning, just before ten, when Thorin stepped out of the shower, feeling incrementally more human than he had even an hour before. Certainly, much better than he had for the past two days or so; there wasn't any arguing with that.

He hadn't shaved since Monday evening, just before he'd headed over to Bilba's flat for supper, and it certainly showed. Swiping his forearm over the mirror, clearing a swath of fog away, Thorin lifted his chin, scratching his fingers through the thick, rough stubble. It would only be another day or two before it could be reasonably called a beard; Durinson men tended toward particularly hairy (as did Durinson women, though not all of them took to it with the same panache Dis had adopted, alternatively shaving or not, entirely based on her mood rather than the weather or her clothing).

Other things besides his imminent beard deserved priority at the moment, however, and the wretched taste lingering in his mouth was paramount on that list.

Good morning, he tapped out across his mobile, once he had a towel secured around his waist and a good mouthful of foam, brushing away what he hoped were the last dredges of illness (other than the annoying aching of his entire body, but that was easy enough to ignore). He vividly remembered his conversation with Bilba the night before; though he hadn't been entirely clearheaded at the time, at least he didn't recall making too much of an arse of himself.

There wasn't an answering text straight away, which wasn't entirely surprising, and Thorin didn't dwell on it as he finished up at the sink. He dragged his hand through his damp hair, giving it a cursory taming, and didn't bother with his beard just yet, leaving the toilet in favour of sorting out the fierce growling of his stomach. Exchanging his towel for a clean pair of pyjama bottoms, Thorin stretched some of the worst kinks out of his spine as he padded into the kitchen.

Dis had left sometime after he'd succumbed to the medicine and dropped into a heavy sleep, at first nearly drowning in his soup bowl before she'd roused him just enough to stumble back to the sofa. His flat showed no obvious, outward sign of its recent invasion, except for the little orange pill bottle on his worktop, and the note stuck to his refrigerator door, scrawled in Dis' neat cursive:
There is a breakfast casserole behind the milk. It can be microwaved so you’ve no excuses. If by some miracle you decide to use the oven, cook at 200 for a half hour.

It might last the weekend, unless you have company.

And do give “company” my best.

-D

PS: take your damn pills or I’ll know. And I’ll be back.

Purposely bypassing the pills, Thorin opened the fridge, and did indeed find a squarish dish of what looked like some sort of omelette mixture under a layer of cling film, as well as three fresh bottles of mysterious slurry beverage. *Smoothies*, Dis called them, without a hint of irony, even when their texture was far from smooth. Two were pea-green, as he'd come to expect lately, and the third was vivid orange, with a layer of tiny brownish seeds settled on the bottom. Fantastic.

“I am a grown man,” Thorin grumbled, but still reached over to turn the oven on to preheat; he could be annoyed and practical simultaneously. He was also slightly more inclined towards tolerance when he discovered Dis had prepped his coffeemaker, leaving it ready to brew. Pouring himself a short glass of the strange orange drink (of course, it didn't smell especially like citrus, because that would make too much sense), he took a seat at the table, pushing aside a slight wave of dizziness, and fished his phone out of the pocket of his pyjama bottoms.

There was no text from Bilba yet, so Thorin checked his email, responding briefly to a few work-related messages. The casserole went into the oven, then came out again, piping hot and rather tasty, despite being bogged down with slippery bits of zucchini rather than sausage or ham.

Even after his meal was polished off, smoothie and coffee drank, and dishes cleaned up, Thorin's mobile sat stubbornly dark and silent on the table. Normally, he wouldn't have been bothered— it had only been a little over an hour since his text, and Bilba wasn't obligated in any way to return his greeting. It felt unpleasantly *needy* to worry about something so stupid, but after yesterday...

He was almost certain he hadn't said any profoundly embarrassing on the phone with her, and he had apologized, *sincerely*, for the radio silence. He remembered that. An apology she'd accepted, hadn't she? She hadn't hung up in his ear, at least, and she'd seemed concerned enough about his illness.

Ignoring him now seemed petty, and not at all what he expected.

It was incredibly early to make that sort of assumption, regardless. It was Saturday morning; perhaps she was having a lie in.

He was getting far too hung up on a simple *good morning*.

“*Fuck.*” He needed to get out of his flat. To run, until his legs burned and he could banish the sick staleness in his lungs, along with the tight knot in his chest. But Dis’ damn casserole was sitting heavy in his gut, and there was a slight chance his fever hadn't *quite* broken yet.

That would be the sanest, simplest explanation for his anxiousness: he was still a bit poorly, and it was muddling his head. Anything else would be pitiful, or worse, *creepy*.

Bilba had been fine on the phone, just a wee bit worried about him.

Haden't she?
Yanking open the pill bottle, Thorin found four gel capsules waiting inside; he swallowed two with a coffee chaser, then stalked off to throw on a pair of jeans and a thermal shirt, under a sweatshirt. His bike would do well with some attention, his hands could use some distraction from idleness, and the cold outside might keep him awake as the pills tried to drag him under.

On his way out the door, toolkit in hand, he stuffed his mobile in his pocket. If it felt heavy as a brick and just as inert, he didn't let himself notice.

Chapter End Notes

Sassy Sister Dis, and now BFF Bofur? Yep.

For Bilba's crisis and Bofur's advice, I tried for a mix between Bilbo's reluctance to leave the safety of Bag End at the beginning of the journey to Erebor, and his talk with Bofur when trying to sneak back to Rivendell.

And The Ivy Bush is the name of an inn in the Shire's Westfarthing, and counted Old Gaffer Gamgee as a patron. I've tried, as much as possible, to weave in tiny canon details where they make sense.

Again, thank you for reading, and thank you if you've taken the time to leave comments. You folks are, as always, just fabulous <3
Chapter 18

Chapter by littleblackdog

Chapter Notes

I feel I should mention there's a minor injury and a bit of blood in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The fact that her cupboards were far closer to bare than they’d been yesterday morning didn’t truly occur to Bilba until she was standing, staring into her pitiful refrigerator, barefoot and wrapped up tightly in her dressing gown.

There wasn’t an egg left in her entire flat, nor enough butter to scrape over a single piece of toast. No fruit left in the crisper besides a stem of green grapes, empty jam jars sitting clean and dried on the worktop, an empty sugar bag in the bin (and an empty sugar bowl on the table)—there was hardly enough milk sloshing around in her last carton to have a decent cup of tea, and certainly not enough for even a bowl of cold cereal.

Ignoring the chill creeping up her bare calves, Bilba leaned deeper into the fridge, desperately willing something tasty to appear, possibly hiding behind the jar of olives. Something, anything that was not leftover chicken pie, thank you and good morning.

Oh, she did hope the lads appreciated the fruits of her labour (and her worry). Her growling stomach was certainly voicing its disapproval that she hadn’t appreciated more of it. At least the fish and chips hadn’t sat too heavily, despite the hour, the grease, and the second pint she’d ordered after the first. She was feeling poorly enough without adding a sour stomach to the mix.

“Stupid,” she hissed, picking up the pathetic remains of what had been a good sized block of cheddar. Most of it was now grated up in a batch of cheese and onion scones, folded in to the tender dough along with some crumbly bits of bacon.

Wait just a moment, dough—

Pulling the freezer open, Bilba let out a wordless trill of excitement; there, amongst the frozen odds and ends, she’d tucked a few plastic bags of uncooked scones, ready to be popped in the oven. And, she now recalled, there was also a dish of pain au chocolat hidden away in her pantry cupboard.

She had been clever the night before, despite everything.

“Well done, you,” she said, not feeling at all awkward about talking to herself in the empty flat.

“You had a moment of brilliance in an otherwise horrid day, Bilba my girl.”

Even without an abundance of milk, tea was non-negotiable for any sort of morning to begin, and Bilba put the kettle to boil with perhaps slightly more force than necessary after switching the oven on to heat. It was hardly the poor kettle’s fault that she was in this state: hungry, weary from a restless night, and still so very unsure of what she wanted to do about Thorin.

While breakfast was baking, Bilba had her first fortifying cup of tea, gave her tub a thorough scrub, and brushed out her sleep-tangled hair, twisting it off her neck and pinning it up. It seemed like just
the sort of quiet, contemplative Saturday morning, perfect for a long soak and a think.

Shortly thereafter, Bilba found herself gathering up a fresh cup of tea, plopping two hot scones and some grapes onto a plate, as the steady gush of water echoed faintly from the loo. Her mobile was sitting on the kitchen table, dark and quiet. She’d been picking it up and setting it back down again all morning, every time her hands were otherwise idle.

Balancing her dishes carefully in one arm, she reached out, hesitating with her fingers poised just over the smooth glass screen. Then, taking a breath, she flicked the small switch that set the phone to silent, leaving it where it lay as she padded off to the bath.

The bathroom door clicked closed just as the mobile’s screen blinked to life, displaying a message alert and buzzing softly on the tabletop.

There were days when Thorin hated his flat. Granted, rent wasn’t a complete fortune (relatively speaking), it wasn’t a long drive to work, and it was near enough to the Tube when the weather made riding his bike inadvisable. The landlord kept the place fairly well, and his neighbours weren’t rowdy; most of the time, he was neutral about the place. It was somewhere to sleep, to keep his clothes and the few odds and ends he’d kept or collected over the years, but he didn’t have any sort of emotional investment in the sparse little one bedroom flat.

But then there were days when modern and sparse crossed that unpleasant line into simply stark and cold, banishing any illusion he may have harboured that this place might ever feel like home.

There was a cramped parking structure tucked beneath the building, underground, that was poorly lit and stinking of petrol and mildew. It did keep his bike dry and safe, but at that moment, that seemed like a cold sort of comfort.

Kneeling on frigid concrete with solvent fumes reacting rather spectacularly with his medication, Thorin wiped away grime and excess cleaner from his bike chain; there wasn't any suitable space for this outside his building, only the pavement and the street beyond, and he wasn't in any sort of mood to ride over to Luin Station and make use of that garage, as he usually would have done. He just... he wanted something to do, something to tear apart and put back together. The thought of lazing about his flat for hours made his skin itch, like ants were crawling beneath.

There was a lovely space outside Bilba's flat—a gravelled drive around the side of Carrock House—that actually would have been perfect for this. Sheltered from the wind, but open to the fresh air, with a very comfortable sofa and exceedingly pleasant company only a few staircases away once he finished his work.

“Fucking hell”—Yanking his hand back from the sharp bite of sprocket and chain, where he'd caught his finger between unforgiving metal teeth, Thorin swore again, pressing a greasy rag against the bloom of blood at his fingertip. “Jesus fucking, fucking hell.”

It wasn't the worst pinch the Bonnie had inflicted on him since he'd inherited it, and it certainly wasn't the worst injury he'd ever inflicted on himself; it was far more frustrating than painful. He was making stupid mistakes, not paying attention to the task at hand, and the consequences were chaffing his pride and heating his temper.

Of course, his mobile took that opportunity to beep in his pocket; holding the rag in place with his
injured hand, making his finger throb slightly, Thorin dug the phone out of his jeans. A text was waiting for him on screen, from Kili.

U home??

Thorin stamped down the sharp jab in his gut, blaming it on the medicine rather than a fizzle of dashed hope. It wasn't a convincing excuse, even in the privacy of his own mind.

Yes, he answered, wiping his forehead with the back of his wrist. As cold as it was in the parking garage, there was still a thin film of sweat on his brow and his upper lip. He'd barely pressed send before Kili's next text arrived, lightning quick.

Let me in pls?

The question of why his nephew was at his door on a Saturday morning— though really it was early Saturday afternoon, at this point— wasn't something Thorin bothered considering. The answer, more likely than not, was Dis.

Coming, he typed, slower than usual with his left thumb, then reached out to start gathering his tools, placing them neatly in their case, along with the cans of cleaner and lubricant. He was comfortable enough leaving the Bonnie in the garage— he checked the building’s locks himself at least monthly, and he'd made sure the security cameras weren't simply for show before he signed the lease— but he wasn't about to leave his gear strewn about.

His fingertip was still sluggishly bleeding, oozing up around the nail, when he slipped out into the brisk afternoon air. Kili was waiting on the front stoop, craning around to peer curiously into the building’s windows as much as he could. His hands were shoved deep into the pockets of his blue bomber jacket, the hood of a grey hoodie pulled up over his head, and a backpack hanging off one shoulder, rocking from heel to toe in his boots. Or rather, in a pair of Thorin's old combat boots, which the lad had grown into the year before, enthusiastically.

If they looked incredibly foolish with slim, turned up jeans, Thorin was resigned to enduring the fashion of it for the sake of his nephew's brilliant grin. At least he kept them properly laced and tied, unlike some of the young idiots Thorin had seen slouching around shops and streets, with oversized boots hanging open and scuffing along the pavement.

“You're going to give my neighbours heart attacks,” Thorin called out, making an inattentive Kili jump nearly out of his skin.

“Shit!” Ducking his head, Kili hunched deeper into his jacket, taking a deep breath. “Sorry, sorry— you ninja—” It was clear the exact moment Kili's eyes widened under his hood, registering the smears of red painted over Thorin's hand. “Oh god, is that... why is there blood? Is that your blood?”

“Nothing serious.” Vaulting the steps up to the main doors, Thorin pressed his toolkit against Kili's chest. “Hold this.”

“Nothing... why is there blood?” The question was pitched high, but not squeaking, and Kili's arms came up to cradle his new burden without argument, leaving Thorin free to fetch his keys from his pocket and let them both inside.

“Just a scratch. Stop gawking.” Kili was tight on his heels as they made their way down the corridor to his flat, while Thorin was being careful not to leave either blood or any lingering grease on the bland beige carpeting.
Ushering his nephew in first, Thorin closed his door, tossing his keys into their usual bowl. He motioned to the toolkit as he toed off his trainers. “You can set that down anywhere. I’ve got to wash up.”

Bilba tried a half-dozen different books before giving up—she'd attempted both old favourites and fresh novels, but apparently this was not going to be the sort of bath wherein she could relax properly and get lost in an engaging narrative, or even some fascinating nonfiction. Her mind was whirring, too much to give even her most well-loved texts the attention they deserved.

Defeated, she laid back against the porcelain curve of her tub, staring up at the ceiling and stretching out her legs. The bubble bath she'd added at the last minute foamed thick and soft, smelling of fresh roses and a hint of lemon; the scent complemented the bergamot in her tea rather well, and conjured up memories of warm, happy summers in the countryside.

Her toenails, peeking out of the thick white bubbles, were still vividly red with the same varnish she'd wiped off her fingers two days ago. Red like a fire engine, of course.

“It's his job,” she murmured, swirling steaming water around with her hands, letting it glide over her collarbones and splash gently up, over her throat. “I know it's his job. I've known, from nearly the beginning.”

And yet she still went out with him. She still said yes when, standing outside a broken-down lift, Thorin had smiled that damned gorgeous smile and asked her out to coffee.

For goodness sake, he'd been wearing his uniform when he'd asked her. This wasn't a surprise.

_Not like your job would be to him, eh, Bilba my girl?_

“Oh bugger.” She sank deeper, until the water sloshed up to her chin.

Bofur had asked her if it was worth it, simple as that. As though there was anything simple about any of this.

“Need a hand?” Kili called through the bathroom door, which was closed all but a sliver. If Thorin glanced over, he fully expected to see his nephew's dark eye peeking through the crack. Instead, he kept his attention on clean-up, rinsing soap and filth down the sink drain.

“Funny.” His fingernail was starting to blacken, just at the root. He probably wouldn't lose it. Unless he wanted to deal with Kili's well-meant fussing, however, he'd need a plaster for the time being. “I'm fine, Kili.”

Drying his hands, Thorin pulled an old box out of the medicine chest; his fingertip was wrapped up in no time at all, and he tossed the wrapper in the bin as he moved back into the hall. Kili was quick enough not to scramble back when Thorin opened the bathroom door, already leaning against the opposite wall with a guileless expression.
“You still need a haircut,” Thorin said, holding up his bandaged hand for a brief moment so Kili wouldn't have further reason ask. With his hood pulled down, Kili’s mop of hair was a frizzy mess of static, hanging down to his shoulders in dark, wavy hanks.

“Ponytail, Uncle. Nineteen ninety-three.” Kili’s grin was toothy, and not even slightly cowed. “And the earring. I’ve seen the photos.”

Waving off the memory of his own questionable style—he’d done any number of things at sixteen that he’d rather Kili never repeat, if possible—Thorin moved off towards the kitchen. Choosing to look like a tit wasn't nearly the worst way Kili could take after him, all things considered.

And at least there hadn't been YouTube to worry about twenty years ago. A great deal of mortifying evidence was lost on what few dusty old VHS tapes had survived the fire, stuffed in cardboard boxes in storage, and thankfully so. Thorin could live a long, happy life if he was never forced to endure listening to his sixteen-year-old self butchering Kashmir on his battered Gretsch guitar.

“So, nephew.” Opening the refrigerator, Thorin pulled out a bottle of water for himself, and stretched to the back to fetch one of the cans of cola he kept on hand for whenever the lads were over. “To what do I owe the invasion?”

Kili accepted his drink with thanks, and a rueful scrub of his hand through his hair. “Fee said you were poorly, and I figured, you know, it's sort of partly thanks to me... and Fee as well, obviously. Hang on.” Snapping his cola open, Kili's slurping was audible even as he scampered back out towards the front door, returning with his backpack yawning open like a great sagging mouth. “Brought some films,” Kili announced. Before Thorin could remind him of the distinct lack of Blu-ray players in the flat (there was nothing wrong with DVDs, damn it), Kili was pulling a slim, shiny black box out of the bag. “And the PS3 so we can watch them, and a huge bag of wine gums, which I know you like. If you're not busy and stuff, I mean. I can go, if you're busy, I just thought... you might like the company? Is it... it's okay?”

One thing Thorin had never been, even at Kili's age, was so damned eager.

Biting back a sigh, Thorin came around to loop his arm over Kili's shoulders, squeezing the lad tight for just a moment. The flat seemed less miserable already, less grey, and unquestionably less barren, even if Kili's enthusiasm could occasionally veer into exhausting. “Yeah, it's okay. Come on, then.”

Bilba jerked awake, sputtering and splashing—falling asleep in the bath, especially accidentally, was not the wisest thing she'd ever done.

The water wasn't even lukewarm anymore, making her shiver and break out in gooseflesh, and her joints felt stiff. There would be no saving this bath with the judicious application of more hot water, unless she were truly committed to the notion, and the pruned state of her hands didn't encourage Bilba to linger either. Levering herself up out of the water was horrid, especially as the water sloughed off her bare skin, leaving her even colder in the air.

She wasn’t entirely certain when she’d nodded off, nor how long she'd been napping; there wasn’t a clock or even a window in her bathroom to give her a clue. Chaffing a towel over her body, rubbing some warmth back, Bilba dried off as quickly as she could, eager to slip back into her dressing gown.
There hadn’t been any world-shaking revelations in her dreams, as far as she recalled. She almost regretted the decision to hide away in the bath; she didn’t feel any closer to an answer, or any more relaxed than she had before she’d gotten in.

Back in her kitchen, fixing more tea and jotting down a shopping list to restock her larder, Bilba frowned at the grumbling in her stomach. She remembered being in the bath for nearly an hour before she’d fallen asleep, and then another hour and a half of damp dozing on top of that.

“Lazy, lazy...” Curling her bare toes into the throw rug she kept in front of the kitchen sink, Bilba was feeling warmer by the moment. Her radiators were pinging with heat, and the tea was piping hot without a spot of milk.

Then she padded over to the table, waking her mobile with a tap of her thumb, and found a number of messages waiting.

The latest was from Ori, and read: **pies are amazing. Thx soooo much.**

There were a few other texts, from Bombur, Bifur and even Nori, all expressing similar sentiments. Bilba smiled, inordinately pleased that her frenzied baking had produced something at least somewhat edible, even if her own empty cupboards were deeply annoying.

There was also a text from Bofur— **hope your morning is better my lovely. Be brave xx**— that made her press a smile against her teacup.

The final new text in the list, however, startled the smile right off her face. From Thorin, received just after she’d gone to the bath, a simple **good morning**.

Morning, which was past now, and on any other day Bilba wouldn’t have given a second thought to sending an answering hello. No crisis, no panic, no uncertainty.

Today, Bilba stared at her mobile, and only hesitated an instant before tapping the screen again, connecting the call. She was still unsure of a great many things, but she couldn’t bear to give him the cold shoulder. It seemed so unbearably rude; her father would have been appalled if she’d even considered it.

Even now, after years away from the green pastures of Hobbiton, she would always be a Baggins of Bag End. Brave or no, dash it all, she would be **polite**.

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They were just getting into the film— the second-to-latest Bond flick, after Thorin had vetoed both *Black Hawk Down* and *Inglourious Basterds* for different reasons— when Thorin’s mobile went off, earning him the most unimpressed teenage stare from the other end of the sofa.

“Keep going if you like,” he murmured, motioning to the telly, but Kili was already pausing, leaving Daniel Craig frozen, face distorted mid-word.

Hauling himself up, Thorin pulled out his phone, and nearly stumbled over his own feet when he saw the call display. He forced himself to slip into the kitchen before accepting the call, removing himself entirely from Kili’s view before pressing the phone to his ear.

“Hello?”

*I know*, he didn’t say, scrubbing his hand over his face instead.

“How are you? Feeling any better?” She sounded painfully earnest, and Thorin felt his frustration begin to crumble weakly around the edges.

He’d been called impatient and exacting, professionally and in private life, though he’d never suffered any complaints of unprofessionalism. His superiors, both in the army and in the brigade, had never been given reason to doubt his effectiveness in achieving objectives.

*Moody* had been a personal favourite of Frerin’s when they were growing up. *Prideful*, their mother had said, always well within earshot of their father and layered with meaning.

Swallowing that pride was bitter, and not always worth the attempt.

“Much improved,” he said, all too aware of the tight rasp clinging to his words. Covering the mouthpiece with one hand, he cleared his throat hard, deeply annoyed with himself.

“Good.” Bilba did not sound terribly convinced, but there was nothing to be done about it. “I’m glad. Very glad. You... you had me worried.”

The words were strangely soft, like a confession, but before Thorin could say anything at all, Bilba pushed onward, her voice brightening.

“I’m just shamefully late getting started today,” she said. “Fell asleep in the bath, of all the silly things. But I wanted to call, to check in, before I’m off on my errands. Is there anything you need? Anything at all, even just some company. If you like.”

“Company,” Thorin repeated, before he could think better of the notion, then baulked almost immediately. “No, I’d rather not risk you getting ill.”

“I imagine I’d be ill already, if it was going to happen. But here I am, fit as a fiddle.”

Rubbing the bridge of his nose, Thorin fought against the urge to be appallingly selfish, but in the end, it was Bilba who dashed his best intentions.

“But if you’d rather not,” she said. “I completely understand. The important thing is for you to rest, to get well. It’s just good to hear your voice, sounding better— more yourself today, and less like... well, like a toad with a smoking habit.”

That was enough to startle a chuckle out of him, entirely unexpected and entirely foolish.

“Thank you so much for that,” he said, resolve collapsing like old stone. Her answering laugh was bright as a bell. Fell asleep in the bath... god, he was an idiot. A gun-shy, awkward, pessimistic fool of a man, and some days he drove himself utterly *batty* with it. “All right then, if you’re really willing to brave the dreaded lurgy, we could go out this evening. After the past two days I’ve had, I’d relish a meal outside this flat. And some pleasant company.”

“That sounds lovely, Thorin.” And it *did* sound lovely, even as Bilba’s heart made a concerted effort to rabbit out of her chest, but this was it. This was her only possible avenue, whatever the outcome:
another date.

Either the start of more dates, or possibly a polite, considerate end to them. She wouldn’t make up her mind until she saw him again.

*Is it worth it*, Bofur had asked her.

Bilba was altogether shocked that the answer felt so very much like *yes*.

When Thorin slipped back into the lounge, the television was still paused, and Kili was gnawing on far too many wine gums at once, like a dog with a mouthful of peanut butter. It might not have been such a suspicious sight, if not for the wide, side-eyed glances in between fixed staring at the frozen picture on telly.

“Don’t choke,” Thorin said firmly, then sank back onto the sofa with a resigned huff. “All right. How much did you hear?”

It looked painful, and not entirely physically possible, but Kili somehow managed to swallow the mass of chewy sweets in one attempt, going a bit watery-eyed for his trouble. “Nothing!”

At Thorin’s deeply dubious look, the lad amended his statement, shuffling around on the cushions to tuck his socked feet under his thighs. “Okay, maybe a little bit. A little bit about a... a *date* thing?”

The tips of the lad’s ears, just peeking out between strands of hair, had gone red, and there was a worrying amount of fascination lighting up his eyes. Thorin bit back a pained sort of groan, not just because dealing with a curious Dis was more than bad enough on its own, but also because his damned sister had been *right*.

*A date thing*. God help him— twenty years between them, and he was *still* the same awkward knobhead his nephew was growing into when it came to things like this.

Except, of course, only one of them wanted to *talk* about it.

Without an immediate kibosh being levelled down on the entire thing, Kili had already perked up, leaning in with obvious excitement. “Do you have a date? With who? Do you have a girlfriend? You never said you had a girlfriend!” There was a pause, barely enough time for a breath, before Kili was narrowing his eyes considerably. “Do you have a *boyfriend*?”

Dropping his head back against the sofa, Thorin let out a long, exasperated sigh and squeezed his eyes closed.

“Because that would be brilliant, too, you know—” Kili was still talking. Thorin let it wash over him, inescapable as a tide. “Fee and I wouldn’t care— I mean, we’d *care* and all, but not like it was gross or anything. You remember, Fili was drooling over half the rugby club when he was in Sixth Form, girls *and* guys, and I don’t think *I* swing that way, but I can see how, like, the bloke who plays Thor is *stupidly* fit—”

“Just stop.” Not bothering to look over unless he absolutely had to, Thorin simply held up a quelling hand. “Stop. I don’t have a boyfriend. I don’t have a girlfriend, either.” He had a headache, but that was beside the point. “There is a woman, and we are seeing each other. That’s it.”
“You’re dating her,” Kili said, not quite a question, but Thorin hummed vague agreement regardless. “But she’s not your girlfriend. So... are you dating anyone else, too? Is she?”

Growling low in his throat, Thorin finally straightened up, shooting Kili a sharp, warning glare.

“No.” Well, he wasn’t seeing anyone else. Bilba hadn’t mentioned, one way or the other, but Thorin didn’t dare dwell on the idea with Kili loafing around his flat. “Now, we’re done with this. Put the damned film back on.”

Chapter End Notes

I think it's in one of the behind-the-scene featurettes of the film, or possibly in another interview, where Richard is talking about how Thorin treats Fili and Kili differently. Fili, as the older brother and heir, is given more responsibilities, and Thorin is harder on him, expects more from him. While Kili is given more leeway, and is allowed to be more excitable, more playful, and Thorin is more forgiving.

And while there's no throne to inherit here, I've sort of kept that dynamic.

Thank you for reading!
Getting Kili to leave in a timely manner proved no trouble at all—the lad was almost troublingly overeager about the idea of Thorin’s date, all but vibrating with unasked questions and whatever else. Still, perhaps as a testament to his excitement, Kili did shuffle out of the flat without a word of argument not long after the film was through, rather than linger or make a nosy little pest of himself.

And speaking of nosy little pests.

“Give my love to your mum,” Thorin had said, as Kili was zipping up his pack and shrugging back into his coat. “And unless she asks—”

“Not a word about your not-girlfriend.” Making a show of tapping the side of his nose, Kili had grinned, crooked and toothy. “I’ve met Mum, you know. She can be a bit... intense, yeah, but don’t even worry. I’ve got your back, Uncle.”

A friendly clap on the arm had turned into an unexpected hug goodbye, and Thorin was hard-pressed to keep a sharp jolt of ill humour from showing on his face. It hadn’t been all that long since he’d had a date, for goodness’ sake; the lad didn’t need to cling to him as though he was witnessing a miracle and giddy with it.

Then Kili had been off in a flurry, leaving Thorin alone in a silent flat, with about five hours to spare.

It was an abundance of time, even with the flat still feeling a bit close and stuffy after his illness; cracking a few windows was Thorin’s first order of business, letting the relatively fresh, cool London air slip inside to flush out the staleness. After that, in the spirit of better to be safe than sorry, he set about tidying up; he hadn’t slept in his bedroom since Fili had dragged him home from work, bunking on the sofa instead, but he still stripped the bed, hunting down a fresh set of sheets. There was a vague, presumptuous sort of awareness that came with doing so, but Thorin set that aside in favour of planning for any and all possible outcomes; he had never been accused of a lack of preparedness.

Eventually, after a quick bite of lunch followed by an unintended nap (he wasn’t, he hated to admit, feeling entirely healthy and hale yet, but it wasn’t anything serious), and another shower, Thorin found himself standing outside a bustling restaurant, mobile pressed against his ear, listening to it ring.

“Hello,” Bilba said, once she picked up. “Thorin?”

“Sorry, Bilba—” He looked back at the restaurant’s brightly lit windows, and the score of smiling couples filling their tables. Not one of those people was the woman he’d been expecting to find, nor had the hostess found a reservation for Baggins on her list. He had also asked her to check for Durinson, and even Bijou— the latter had earned him a curious squint, nothing overt. Thorin hadn’t noticed until he was standing back on the pavement, pulling Bilba’s name up from his contact list, that there was an advert kiosk glowing brightly just across the street, one side of which was plastered with her coyly smiling face, and red lace clad... assets.

It wasn’t a bad view, of course, but he vastly would have preferred to see the real thing. “Which
restaurant did you say, again? What street?”

“Entmoot, on Fangorn. Lots of plants in the front windows.” There was a pause, and a shuffling sound from the other end of the phone. “Where are you now?”

“On my way.” He had an idea of where he’d gone wrong, at least. “Five minutes.”

Fifteen minutes later, Thorin pulled out his phone again, oddly grateful for the chill in the air. If his face was flushed, it was easy enough to blame the cold January night.

It was hideously embarrassing, but also inestimably helpful that Bilba stayed on the phone with him as he cut through a side alley, her voice guiding him back to the correct path. She also ordered his food for him, because, as she informed him (speaking quietly for a moment, almost under her breath), Entmoot had a reputation for almost impossibly slow service, though their fare was delicious enough to be worth the wait.

“You should see the sign,” Bilba was still explaining, when Thorin finally caught sight of her. “After the next corner. Turn right, not across the street.”

She was standing outside of a small restaurant, under the shadow of an awning. An awning, Thorin noticed as he drew nearer, was actually made of twisted vines and thin branches, growing up from the potted trees pressed tightly against the building’s front. Thorin could scarcely imagine how the place would look at the height of summer, when that mess of branches was dense and heavy with leaves; there was still a generous amount of greenery, however, thanks to the thick pine boughs and bunches of holly draped over the lintels of the door and windows.

There were fairy lights wound through the naked branches, glowing soft yellowish white, making Bilba’s hair glint deep gold and copper where it curled over her shoulders. Her deep blue skirt was peeking out from beneath the hem of her coat, leading down into what looked like smooth, bare legs. Until she turned, still oblivious to his approach, and Thorin saw the dark seams of her stockings.

“I think I've got it,” Thorin said, more gruffly than he intended, his mouth feeling dry. He was close enough that his voice startled her, making her turn with a squeaking breath, the hand not holding her mobile came up to press against her chest.

“Goodness' sake,” she scolded half-heartedly, but her mouth was lifting into a surprised smile, making Thorin's heart give a foolish sort of lurch.

“You didn't have to wait outside,” he said, noticing the pink blooming in her own cheeks and reddening her nose, not to mention the scarce protection offered by her sheer (utterly unfairly sexy) stockings. “In the cold.”

Rather than answer, Bilba simply looked up at him— her expression faltered, and she seemed to consider something, consider him, not quite worryingly but at least with more hesitancy than he expected. It was only a moment's pause, a blip of awkward silence, before her smile recovered, spreading across her face and lighting her eyes, tender and welcoming.

“Warm me up, then,” she said, tucking her mobile into the handbag that hung from her elbow and opening her arms. “If you're so worried about it.”

He’d had all good intentions to keep his germs to himself, no matter Bilba's assurances that she wouldn’t catch whatever irritating bug was still making his joints achy, but some intuition tickling in the back of Thorin’s mind sent him leaning in to the embrace without further thought. There was something in her bearing, some seriousness and faint sadness lurking behind her smile, which urged
him onward, drawing her close with an arm around her waist. He'd taken off his gloves to use his mobile, and her cheek felt cool under his hand when he cupped her jaw; her lips were warmer, and silky with some sort of sweet smelling balm.

The kiss was brief, a gentle hello, until Bilba decided it should be otherwise, gripping Thorin's coat and pulling him down. He could feel her flex, rising to her tiptoes, and it wasn't much of a strain to lift her off the pavement, ever so slightly, into the sling of his arm. Her other hand, the one not holding tightly to the rabbit fur at his collar, crept into the back of his hair, nails scratching lightly across his scalp.

Sweet, slow kisses, growing hot and close with mingling breath in the cool of the night, until Thorin retreated with a quiet groan, huffing in a bracing gasp of air and bowing to rest their brows together.

“Warmer?” he asked, after another breath, and didn't try to avoid the peck Bilba craned up to press against his bottom lip.

“Much,” she murmured, as he set her carefully back on her feet. Her thumb brushed his lips, catching on the tackiness where she'd managed to share her balm. Her mouth was pink, but not a smeared mess; he wasn't terribly concerned about the state of his own mouth, streaked with balm or not, when she was still looking at him so fondly. “What a fetching colour on you, Thorin.”

“Entirely worth it.” Not stepping too far back, he pulled a handkerchief from his coat pocket, giving his mouth a quick wipe. When Bilba gave him a playful nod, all clear, he swept back in to lay another light kiss on her brow. Her hair smelled of flowers, fresh and summery, under the rich scent of evergreens wafting from the nearby boughs.

There was no one gawking from the restaurant when they turned to go in, which was a pleasant surprise, though a few other people passing on the pavement were giving them second looks. It chaffed faintly under his skin, daring him to give in and squirm or bristle under the scrutiny, but he wouldn't regret those kisses.

Bilba's palm was soft, her fingers laced through his even as he held the door for her, and she gently pulled him inside after her, keeping him near even as they checked their coats. The botanical theme continued inside as well, with ivy creeping over the trellises lining every wall, and innumerable pot plants growing lushly throughout the dining floor.

Given the fact that Bilba's flat looked a bit like greenhouse, with verdant little plants and vibrant blooms filling nearly every surface that wasn't already stacked with books, Thorin was beginning to better understand her choice of restaurant.

“I've no idea how you got here,” she said, leading him towards what he assumed was their table, partially hidden behind some kind of enormous, waxy leafed frond. “You should have been coming from the other way, if you were following my directions.”

He had been following her directions, but after an instant's consideration, Thorin made a tactical decision to keep that to himself.

“Luck,” he said instead, and when he pulled her chair out for her, he bent to press a kiss against the crook of her neck as she sat, just beside the strap of her dress. “And motivation.”
Just as Bilba had warned him, their orders took ages to arrive—only the wine came at any sort of pace approaching promptly. But even in the absence of meals before them, the conversation didn’t lag unduly, nor did the lulls feel anything but natural and intimate. The very last vestiges of whatever tension Bilba had been harbouring seemed to bleed out before their entrees appeared, and their server approached the table so rarely and so serenely that Thorin very nearly forgot they were in a public restaurant at all. His attention narrowed to the woman seated before him: to the peal of her laughter, the deep blue of her dress reflected in the stormy colour of her eyes, and the warm press of her calf against his under the table.

But gradually, the meal wound down, and they were back outside on the pavement sooner than Thorin might have preferred. It was late—late enough that the Entmoot staff had begun lifting chairs onto tables after the last few diners had filtered out—but there were enough cabs about that no one was stuck waiting for long.

Holding the cab door open, Thorin followed Bilba inside; she gave her address to the cabbie and reached out to find Thorin’s hand at the same time, thumb stroking over his knuckles in the dark interior.

“Are you all right, Bilba?” he asked after a few minutes of silence, watching her profile shift from stark to shadowed as passing city lights flickered over her face. When she glanced over at him, turning from her thoughtful staring out the cab’s window, Thorin knew he wasn’t imagining the stubborn furrowing of her brows under the fall of her hair.

“Completely,” she said, earnest, but perhaps sounding mildly surprised by her own answer. “Yes. Better than.”

When she scooted closer across the seat, even going so far as to switch her seatbelt with a quick snap, there really wasn’t anything to do but kiss her. Her shoulders fit perfectly under his arm, her shorter frame tucked up against his side, soft and welcoming. When Thorin bent to her, he found her already craning up towards him; her mouth tasted of red wine, with traces of coffee and sugared apple lingering from her dessert. The slide of her tongue against his own was scorching, and then her hand slipped into his coat, under his suit jacket, and Thorin thought he might catch fire from the feel of her fingers skating up his ribs and across his chest, her touch warm even through the fabric of his shirt.

They’d done this before, kissing deep and breathless in the shadowed interior of a taxi, and then again, laid out across her sofa for a languid hour. They did it again at that moment, filling the back of this cab with quiet, breathy hums and the wet press of mouths, until the cab slowed, rolling to a complete halt, and the cabbie cleared his throat.

Carrock House loomed outside Bilba’s window, the entrance brightly lit, and her hands were suddenly gone from inside his coat, their absence leaving him chilled. Her next words, however, were more than hot enough.

“Would you like to come up? For coffee?” she said, fetching some money from her purse before Thorin could reach for his own wallet. He was, admittedly, more than a wee bit distracted by the question.

She passed a few notes to the driver with a murmur of thanks, before turning back with a dewy flush painted pink across her cheeks, visible even in the dim light, and a curling smile playing over her lips. “Or dessert?”

They had shared some sort of creamy, buttery tart, bursting with winter fruit, as they lingered over coffees at Entmoot. But Thorin had spectacularly fond memories of their last date and his quiet
promise to her—next time, he’d said, when she’d spoken so cheekily about dessert while they were tangled up in one another on her sofa, next time I’ll not be rushed, and savour dessert properly.

“I’d love to,” he said this time, before climbing out of the cab. He did not dash like an idiot, but neither did he dawdle coming around to open her door, offering a hand as she stepped out onto the pavement. And, since the opportunity presented itself, he bent to press a quick kiss against her knuckles while she gained her feet.

Closing the door harder than necessary on the subtle but painfully tactless thumbs-up gesture the cabbie was flashing him in the rear-view mirror, Thorin followed as Bilba gave their joined hands a slight tug, leading him through the gate and up the path. There was, of course, a shift of curtains in one of the building’s windows—the watchful presence of Bilba’s landlord was not a surprise, but the man didn’t lumber out to glower this time, even as Bilba unlocked the front door, and the pair of them headed for the stairs.

“I already know,” Bilba said, as they climbed to her flat, giving his hand a slight squeeze. “That you’ll likely ruffle at this, but if you’re not feeling quite up to anything—”

They had just stepped into the corridor, with the incongruously bright green door of Bilba’s flat only a few steps away, and Thorin was incredibly glad for the bit of privacy offered by the late hour. Struck with a great sense of purpose and pride, and before he could think better of it, he reached down and scooped her up, one arm behind her back and the other under her knees. Her hands came up automatically, gripping his coat, and Thorin had the presence of mind to muffle her surprised shriek in a searching kiss.

“Bilba,” he said after a long moment of that, pulling back just enough to brush his mouth against her heated cheek. “Whatever you like, I’m up for it. Don’t doubt that for a minute.”

“Oh god—” The words were muffled, pressed into the hollow of his throat as she buried her face there, and her palm smacked lightly against his chest. “I honestly... I didn’t realise how lewd that sounded until you said it. I just meant, if you were feeling poorly... oh lord.”

“Sweet woman.” He was trying very hard not to pay too much attention to the feel of her thigh under his hand, warm and cushiony beneath the thin wisp of her stockings. Not while they were still in the corridor. “Keys?”

“What? Oh!” The palm on his chest thumped him again, just as gently as before. “Put me down, for goodness sake.”

He did as she asked, setting her back on her feet with only mild disappointment—disappointment that lasted perhaps a minute, just long enough for Bilba to open her door and hustle them both inside. The corridor had been dimly lit, enough that Thorin squinted at the sudden wash of light from a lamp Bilba clicked on, just inside the entranceway.

“Your coat,” she said, even as she reached past him to fix the door chain and bolt. That brought them chest to chest, or near enough considering her height, and Thorin was more than happy to let himself be pressed back against the door, as Bilba stretched to wrap her arms around his neck.

“I’m picking you up again,” he announced, even as he reached down to lift her, his hands spanning the generous curve of her bottom. Bilba didn’t voice any objections and the firm press of her thighs around his waist as she made all good efforts to climb him like a tree hardly seemed averse to the idea.
Their coats did come off, eventually, ending up tossed over the back of the sofa rather than hung up. Thorin had also lost his suit jacket, possibly in her kitchen, but he wasn’t even remotely concerned at this juncture.

No, at the moment, he was far more interested in the line of smooth skin being slowly revealed, as he carefully pulled down the tiny zipper at the back of her dress. Standing, looming tall behind her, his hands felt too large and too rough for such a delicate procedure, but every scrape of his calluses against her bare back made Bilba sigh, arching up to encourage further kisses along her neck.

“You’re gorgeous,” he said, mouthing at the shell of her ear, feeling her shiver. He used both hands to push the open dress farther, sliding deep blue fabric down over her arms to bare her shoulders entirely. From this angle, standing behind her, he could see the swell of her breasts bared as well, curving out of the lacy blue cups of her bra.

“Flatterer.” Shimmying slightly, jostling her bottom back against him in a sinfully tempting way, Bilba freed her arms entirely and twisted at the waist, just enough to catch him by the collar.

She tugged him down into a deeper kiss, and Thorin slid his arm around her, up the wrinkling folds of her dress where it still pooled over her hips. He found naked skin, and then the bottom edge of her bra; when she took his bottom lip between her teeth, sucking, it felt like she’d found a direct line to his cock, a live wire sparking down his nerves. He groaned, sounding too broken already, and allowed his fingers to wander up over lace, finding her nipple tightening into a bud, perfect for rolling under his thumb.

“Oh—” Releasing his lip with a gasp, Bilba turned completely in his arms, facing him now, and Thorin had never lost a shirt so quickly in his life. Her hands were impossibly deft, popping buttons faster than he could follow, and suddenly his shirttail was pulled free, and fingernails were forging paths through his chest hair.

“I don’t even know where to start,” she said so quietly, her eyes gone wide and dark as they seemed to follow every line of him, and Thorin felt frozen under the slow scrutiny. He kept himself relatively well, dedicated to his job and the physicality of it, but the years had left their scars, as well as a thicker middle than he’d had ten years ago (even if it was still firm with muscle). He’d known a few women who hadn’t been overly fond of his pelt, either— it was thickest on his chest, but he wasn’t lacking in hair over his stomach, leading down towards his belt, and in the small of his back.

He wasn't some svelte, shorn-smooth model by any stretch of the imagination.

But judging by the blatantly hungry look Bilba turned on him, looking up through the sweep of her lashes and pressing white teeth into the plump bow of her own lip, it didn't seem as though she was displeased.

His stomach gave a slight lurch when she stepped back, taking the warm grip of her hands off his ribs, but then she was pushing her dress down over her hips, letting the fabric puddle like water around her stockinged feet.

He wasn't a model, no, and his knowledge of fancy knickers was novice, at best. But, he was forced to admit that the sight of her sent him reeling, dressed down to bra and panties of rich blue silk and bits of black lace, with an intricate little garter belt holding up the tops of her stockings. She was something taken straight from a billboard, pulled from a glossy magazine— some untouchable beauty, ideal and apart.

Until he dragged his eyes up again, and there was Bilba, every inch of her impossibly beautiful, real and there and touchable, smiling so fondly and wanting him.
“Come on,” she said, nearly a giggle, and climbed onto the pale yellow sheets of her bed, pushing the thick quilts out of the way. Bare limbs, soft blankets, and *Bilba* drew him in like a moth to a flame, until she stopped him short with a raised hand. “But lose the trousers first, if you please.”

Chapter End Notes

by the end of the next chapter, we'll have earned at least that Mature rating-- you have my good word on that <3
Chapter 20

Chapter by littleblackdog

Chapter Notes

So yeah, this is basically a direct continuation of Chapter 19, and is composed of almost nothing but sex. After 60k words of awkward rom-com shenanigans, I just wanted to write some fucking, okay? <3

There's not a whole helluva lot of plot here, folks, so if gratuitous boning with some fluffy things woven in isn't your cup of tea, you can skip this entire chapter without missing much. There will be some more plot-like content with the next update, promise.

When she’d said she didn’t know where to start, Bilba hadn’t been exaggerating.

There was just so much of him, and having Thorin stripping down to his black boxer-briefs, then crawling up the bed to bracket her in against the pillows, certainly didn’t help her focus. He was all muscle, heavy and dense without that chiselled severity she saw in most male models she’d worked with. Thorin was thick all over, with shoulders so wide she couldn’t reach around them completely, and arms built as big as her thighs, or bigger. Not as impossibly enormous as Beorn, nor as tall as Smaug, but Thorin managed to fill every speck of Bilba’s attention, with acres of naked skin, solid muscle, and black whorls of hair.

When he knelt on the mattress, moving up slowly to lie beside her, Bilba was reminded of nothing less than shifting boulders— he was a landslide of a man, a moving mountain, and the deep gravel of his voice simply enforced the comparison.

“May I?” he asked, when he’d settled, propped on one elbow. The dim light of her beside lamp threw the landscape of him into flattering shadows, softening his edges but still letting her drink in the sight. At her nod, Thorin reached out, sliding one hand over her bare side; his palm was callused, rough enough to make her shiver, and broad enough to span the curve of her ribs. Then he was leaning in, brushing her mouth with another kiss, and Bilba sank into the sensation, shifting nearer and slipping one knee between his thighs.

His chest was warm under her hands, the hair surprisingly soft, and she buried her fingers in it, scratching lightly. There were a few knots of scars, but she didn’t linger on them, more focused on exploring what spots might make him flare hotter, rather than remember darker days. They kissed slowly, banked heat growing steadily between them, with hands and mouths blazing trails over skin. It was tender, comfortable— more comfortable than any first fumble into bed had any right to be— but the sensation of Thorin’s scratchy palms and the quiet, growling sounds he was breathing into her mouth certainly weren’t boring by any definition. Bilba’s skin felt electrified, especially when she arched in closer, pressing herself against the solid, almost woolly warmth of him.

His thumb found her breast again, working her nipple in a slow, steady roll through the fabric of her bra; heat curled down between her legs, sparking with every touch, and Bilba pulled out of their kisses just long enough to gasp, hips rolling against his thigh.

“Sensitive,” he murmured, nosing into her hair as she rocked into him; his tone was a deep,
gratifying mix of wonder and pleasure, and Bilba found herself laying wet kisses along his throat to feel the purr of it. When she pressed her teeth against his collar, Thorin’s hips jerked forward, his cock half-hard and hot as a brand against her stomach, and he groaned so deeply they both shook with it.

Looking up at him was nearly too much— heat swept through her at the sight of his parted mouth, thin lips flushed, and the wild wanting in his eyes. It was immensely gratifying to push his shoulder and have him roll onto his back for her, and Bilba wasted absolutely no time in swinging one leg over his hips, perching herself on the hard shelf of his stomach.

“Someone’s sensitive too.” Smiling, she stretched up to press a finger against the spot she’d bitten; it hadn’t been hard enough to leave a mark, but she could certainly fix that if Thorin was keen. He groaned again, breathing out her name and some half-formed curse, and Bilba felt herself grow slicker, grinding down against his belly.

His fingers, thick as they were, were surprising deft at unhooking the delicate clasps of her bra, and soon enough Bilba was shucking the straps off her shoulders, tossing the thing over the side of the bed. His hands were instantly on her sides again, sliding up until he was cradling under the swell of her breasts, the weight of them dropping slightly without the support of wire and lace.

His thumbs teased upward, following the bottom curves and squeezing so gently, and Bilba arched her chest forward, encouraging more. He chuckled, low and breathy, and kept up the glacial pace of his exploration as Bilba’s nipples tightened, almost painful, in the cool of the open air.

She very nearly moved his hands were she wanted them, but thought better of it at the last moment, reaching down her own stomach instead. Her fingers slipped past the lacy belt of her suspenders and inside her knickers, no teasing pace in the slightest; at the first press against the stiff bump of her clit, Bilba bent forward, bracing her other hand on Thorin’s chest. Her mouth fell open, wordless and squeaking softly as she rubbed herself off, and her eyes fluttered closed, only to snap open again at the great, tectonic shift beneath her.

Thorin heaved himself to sit up, not enough to buck her off, but just enough to bring his head to her breasts, latching on to one nipple, wet and tender and exactly what she needed. Bilba wrapped her arm around the back of his head, holding him there and holding herself steady as she kept a steady pace with her fingers, rubbing in time with every flutter of his tongue.

“Oh god—” When he sucked, the cord of heat between her breast and her clit snapped tight, and Bilba bowed her head to pepper kisses into his hair, muttering and panting. “Oh, Thorin, please just there— yes, oh.”

His hand engulfed her other breast, kneading softly, and he released her right nipple just long enough to give the left one a long lick before going back to his sucking; his fingers played through the swath of dampness left behind, slickly rolling the pebbled nipple in rhythmic circles. Bilba gripped him closer, her knees squeezing around his ribs, as her hand worked furiously over her clit and with the rocking of her hips.

She tried to pace herself, to draw out the shuddering bliss skittering through her nerves, but Thorin was urging her on with every raw groan against her breast, every pluck of his fingers. Her own hands knew their way well enough to bring her so deliciously close with a few practiced strokes, leaving her wound tense and tight as piano wire, until she snapped, pushing herself over that edge with a sharp cry.

The feeling tightened, bright as the sun, then unraveled, spilling over and quaking through her; her
body jerked, and she pressed her face against Thorin’s shoulder, curling over and into him as she shook with such a quick, vivid orgasm. Her hand was so wet, and she was still quivering slick and hot under the sodden scrap of her knickers when Thorin rolled them over, laying her back against the warm muss of sheets.

Her breasts were throbbing, not sore but aware from all that attention, and Thorin’s mouth was shining pinker than before. When he licked his lips, leaning over her, Bilba couldn’t help but clench her thighs.

“You are so impossibly beautiful,” he said, and bent to trail soft kisses in the centre of her chest. His hair was already wildly out of place from her combing fingers, with a few strands curled down to stick against his forehead. “Taking your pleasure. Just breathtaking.”

He moved lower, brushing the long line of his nose over the curve of her belly, making her twist with the tickle of it before kissing just beneath her garter belt, in the triangle of skin left bare above the hem of her knickers. Bilba’s toes dug into the sheets when he looked up at her, curling one thick finger under a suspender strap.

His smile was luminous in the soft light of the lamp, while his eyes were blown dark and fathomless. “Let me give you more, Bilba. I want to see more.”

When his hand found her knee, Bilba yielded to the gentle pressure and parted her legs, letting him settle the breadth his shoulders between them. She knew her knickers were already clinging damp, and the wet press of Thorin’s mouth against the inside of her thigh, high enough to find skin instead of stocking, only served to exacerbate that situation.

“But first—” There was a small, curious tug on her suspenders, and a slight shrug of Thorin’s massive shoulders. “A bit of help, please. Done all right so far, but I’ve little faith in my dexterity with you laid out like this.”

It was an easy enough thing to giggle about, while Thorin was still smiling up at her, looking keen but not at all frustrated. Bilba reached down, unhooking the suspenders from her stockings with a flick, and then took the opportunity to push Thorin’s hair back from his face, stroking down his temple and behind his ear. He turned, planting a kiss against the heel of her palm, before ducking in than scant distance more and pressing the bridge of his nose against the damp silk of her knickers.

Bilba gasped, her legs tensing, and her bum lifted from the bed almost of its own volition. Her knickers were sliding down before her scattered thoughts caught up again, and suddenly Thorin’s breath was ghosting over naked, slick flesh and neatly trimmed hair.

“Sufficiently dexterous,” she said, her voice almost embarrassingly wobbly as Thorin stripped her knickers down past her knees, her stockings rolling loose as well. “Sneaky, you sneaky, gorgeous —”

The first lap of his tongue, butterfly-light but so achingly close to her clit, made her throw her head back hard into the pillows. “Shit,” she hissed, clenching her teeth in an attempt not to start swearing; Thorin’s tongue was licking her properly now, circling her clit before delving down, narrowing to a point and thrusting inside. It was unfairly tempting to grind against his nose, seeking friction—the angle was nearly perfect, and when she gave in, hips rolling, Thorin’s hands took firm hold of her arse, dragging her in even tighter to his face as he licked her senseless.

Her nerves were already charged, tingling faintly with recent climax, and Thorin was so overwhelmingly single-minded in his task; Bilba’s world was quickly narrowed to the head between her thighs, and the great muscled arch of shoulders heaving just below, the curve of his back
gleaming with just the barest sheen of sweat.

When he turned his attention back to her clit, first with the flat of his tongue and then with gentle suction, Thorin also brought a hand up—a single long finger felt marvellously thick pushing inside her, bigger and less forgiving than his tongue had been, but with better reach as well. Wet as she was, getting wetter with every pull of lips against her clit, it didn't take any time at all before that finger was thrusting smoothly in and out, keeping time with every tiny, increasingly jerky shift of her hips.

Bilba was craning her neck, burying her face in a pillow to muffle at least some of the noises Thorin was pulling out of her, when he worked another finger in beside the first; the stretch came with the slightest burn, fleeting and exquisite as she gave way to the gradual press, opening up further. Two fingers, broad and callused, curled inside her, and Bilba could feel the bumps of his knuckles when she clenched around him, pleasure winding tight and hot again, already, when he groaned urgently against her flesh—

Thorin pushed her farther, urging her through the crest of another climax, drawing it out until she was swatting at his head with a weak hand, squirming with sensation and sliding her stockinged feet over his ribs.

“Enough, god, enough...” There didn't seem to be enough air in the room, but Bilba tried to catch her fair share anyway, gulping deep breaths as Thorin retreated. He dragged himself up, flopping heavily beside her, but Bilba had barely enough muscle control to roll her head over towards him.

“Kiss,” she murmured, flapping her hand in the most pathetic come hither, and Thorin looked genuinely surprised. Still, he didn’t hesitate, bringing his damp, reddened face forward enough to press their mouths together; the combination of slickness, her own musk, and the feel of Thorin’s tongue back on her body was more than enough to make Bilba sigh, shivering with lingering aftershocks.

“Two minutes,” she said, in between messy kisses. “Two minutes, and a condom from the drawer, and then I want this.” It was almost shocking to reach down and find Thorin still in his pants, straining against the stretch of his boxer briefs, and he made a punched-out, wheezy sound when she slid her hand under his waistband.

His cock was feverishly hot, trapped as it was, with even more girth than she’d expected. She felt a foreskin, pulled back away from the smooth wet head of him, and her heart gave an excited leap when he thrust hard into the circle of her fingers, whining behind his teeth.

“Oh yes, lovely.” Taking another breath, Bilba shuffled closer, stealing another quick kiss before speaking against Thorin’s tense mouth. “I want every inch of this.”

“You’re going to kill me.” Huffing through his nose, Thorin took hold of her wrist, tugging her hand out of his pants and slinging her arm around his ribs instead. “Two minutes,” he said, kissing her forehead, then again on the lips. “And you’ll have it.”

It was really closer to ten minutes before Bilba found the wherewithal to pull away from what had become some rather involved snogging, with Thorin rutting slow circles against her hip. Eventually, though, she did stretch out towards her bedside drawer, fetching a foil packet and a small bottle of
lubricant; she was more than ready, but she hadn’t forgotten the feel of that impressive girth, now lying bare and red against Thorin’s stomach. His pants had gone over the side of the mattress, as had her garter belt and stockings, leaving them both entirely nude, and Bilba was still rendered more than a bit fluttery just looking at him.

There was some discussion of preferences, broken by Thorin’s bass deep groan as Bilba rolled the condom over his cock, and then he was lying back against a mound of pillows, helping Bilba clamber up into his lap.

“There we are,” she said, almost absently, as she steadied herself on her wide-spread knees. Thorin’s hands, broad and sturdy on her hips, squeezed reassuringly, then a bit tighter when she took hold of his cock, getting them both into good position.

“Easy,” Thorin replied, sounding hoarse but also carefully composed. “Entirely at your leisure.”

Bilba made absolutely certain to catch his eye as she started lowering herself, rocking just enough to grind against his entire length before pressing the head of his cock inside. She watched his expression tighten, even as her own mouth fell slack in a gasp of his name, relaxing herself to bring him deeper. There was the briefest false start, too much stretch too quickly that had her rising up again, until she shifted just so. Then it was simply a matter of bearing down and revelling in the feel of his length filling her to the brim, tight and hot as a brand.

There was a definite dragging sensation the first time she lifted up again, but the dull twinge of it wasn’t bad by any measure. Bilba braced herself on Thorin’s chest, letting his grip on her hips help guide the way, and soon enough they’d found a sweet rhythm amid the sound of slapping skin and harsh, panting breaths.

When her thigh cramped, biting sharply, Bilba barely had to say a word before Thorin was hoisting her up, slinging her legs over his elbows and taking all her weight. The shift of position allowed him deeper, and Bilba felt every thrust shuddering up through her bones, making her cling tighter to him as the tension swelled again, with arms wrapped around his neck and heels digging into his back.

“All right?” Thorin asked, in a murmur as rough as gravel against her ear, and Bilba nodded fiercely, tilting into a deep, searching kiss.

She wriggled in his lap, panted into his mouth, then bent to scrape her teeth against the straining tendons in his throat. And in return he came apart under her, cursing low under his breath and jerking his hips, once, twice, as he held her tightly against his chest. He was still hard and quivering, keeping himself deep inside, when he reached between them to thumb her clit, rubbing quicker than the pulse she could feel thrumming in his neck, and Bilba followed the sensation just that little bit farther, tumbling into a long, shivery orgasm.

Thorin was barely awake when she trotted back into the bedroom from a quick trip to the loo, dozing under the salvaged, rumpled quilts. The bedside lamp was still turned on, dimmed to a burnished sort of glow beneath the embroidered shade, and he looked like a great lazy cat watching her with his eyes half mast.

Slipping out of her robe, not bothering with her usual nightclothes, Bilba pulled the lamp chain and crawled under the blankets, finding an altogether nude, furnace-hot body waiting beneath. There was
a slight shuffle of limbs in the darkness, until they settled together like spoons in a drawer, with Thorin bracketed up behind her, and his arm slung loosely over her side. He breathed out a relaxed sort of sigh, ruffling the curls at her nape now exposed by the single, loose braid she'd used to tame her hair, and brushed a few light kisses against her shoulder.

“You are altogether unexpected,” he said, so quietly she might not have heard it without his mouth so close to her ear. She stretched, enough to touch the tops of his feet with her toes, and laced her fingers through the hand he had splayed over the slight pot of her belly.

“Is that a good thing?”

Thorin's answering laugh was gratifying: a rasping chuckle and a nuzzle, ending with a press of lips behind her ear.

“Entirely good.”
Chapter 21

Chapter by littleblackdog

Chapter Notes

Sex and plot in this one; we're growing as people, together :)

It was warm when Bilba gradually drifted awake— much warmer than she usually kept her flat for sleeping, even with the blankets crumpled down to bare most of her back. There was also the drag of butterfly-light touches drawing her skin up in gooseflesh, tracing patterns over her shoulder blade and down her spine, and Bilba squirmed deeper into the bed with a grumble.

“Mm, tickles.” Bilba reached back without looking, catching hold of Thorin's thick wrist. She reconsidered her plan almost immediately, abandoning the cushy pillow mashed against her cheek in favour of rolling over, using Thorin's arm as leverage. He hardly shifted at all, letting her pull her weight around without complaint, until she was facing him, curling up like a weevil against the hirsute wall of his chest.

“Good morning,” she murmured, her eyes still not quite open, and felt the deep rumble of his chuckle before she heard it. The hand he'd been tracing over her back returned, reaching out to draw idly over her arm, and down the curve of her ribs.

“It is indeed.” Thorin's voice was gruff, but laced with enough fondness to curl her toes. Bilba smiled when a kiss was pressed against her forehead, just south of her no doubt fluffy hairline. Even a braid could only do so much to tame bedhead in Baggins curls— her mother had never had such a wild mess to contend with in the mornings, as far as Bilba could recall.

“I didn't expect freckles,” Thorin continued, touches tickling again, and Bilba finally forced her eyes to focus, blinking up at him. Of course, the rumpled state of his hair was deadly attractive, as was the swath of stubble darkening his jaw.

“Hadn't seen any on your face,” he explained when she raised her brows, questioning silently rather than run the risk of blurting something foolish. He really was just stupidly handsome, and it was far too early in the morning for Bilba to deal with the sight of him in any reasonable fashion.

His exploring hand drifted upward, and his thumb brushed gently over the tip of her nose and across her cheek. “Until now.”

There weren't many— a scant handful on her face, and only a few more scattered over her shoulders, back, and the crest of her hips. They were one of the very few things Gandalf didn't kick up a fuss about editing out of her photos, though he still clucked with mild disapproval every time he looked over any retouched proofs. Natural is beautiful.

Yes, well, natural could go soak its head in this instance. She was allowed a quirk or two, and she was certainly allowed to set a few conditions regarding how precisely her nearly-naked bottom was presented to all and sundry.

Her mother had worn her honeyed Tookish curls long and loose, down to her waist. She'd had
sparking blue eyes, the same button nose that Bilba saw in the mirror every day, and freckles dashed across her cheeks. Freckles that would multiply like constellations across her chest and shoulders every sweet summer in the countryside, trekking fields and sketching wildlife with her rollicking young daughter in tow.

There were some days, when Bilba was draped over a sofa with a corset pushing her breasts up to her throat, or teetering down a runway in skimpy knickers while cameras snapped around her, when she wondered what her mother would think of all of it. Bungo was a simpler puzzle to solve— her father would have been flustered beyond measure, mortified at first, but ultimately gruffly supportive, whatever his wee girl chose. Because she'd always been his dear little bumblebee, and he'd always been her kind and patient Papa, no matter how many mad adventures she'd gotten up to her neck in as a young lass. But Belladonna...

Bilba liked to think her mother would have been pleased by the life her daughter had managed to carve out, despite everything. And Belladonna would have been especially encouraged by the patchwork little family Bilba had found and held dear— the Broadbeams, Risons, and Gandalf, of course— peculiar as they all were.

She liked to think her mother would be happy for her, and proud of the woman she had become, even if the finer details weren't anything like her childhood dreams.

Belladonna had never been one to shy away from forging a new path, after all.

But none of that meant Bilba wanted to see her own freckly bum splash across the side of a bus. It was a small, silly thing, but freckles were for a little girl with skinned knees, singing walking songs and catching fireflies in the garden behind Bag End; they were not for Belle Bijou.

“A touch of makeup does wonders,” Bilba said aloud, instead of giving voice to any of memories now jostling for attention her head. She’d already dropped her gaze down to Thorin's chest, until his finger crooked under her chin urged her to meet his eyes again.

“They're lovely,” he said, with a grave sort of furrow between his brows and an emphatic earnestness weighing down his tone, and leaned in to plant a soft kiss against the ball of her shoulder.

It took a long moment, but then Bilba realised where the shift in mood was coming from. It wasn't simply her momentary distraction; he thought she was self-conscious of her freckles, of course.

It wasn't entirely accurate, but it was close enough to the truth for Bilba Baggins, Assistant Director at Garnished and Gilded.

Rather than discuss it further, Bilba reached up, looping her arm around his neck and carding her fingers into the thick hair of his nape.

“You are a darling man.” She shifted under the blankets until she could slide her knee up over his thigh, shivering when his broad palm pressed its way down her spine in return, drawing her in even closer. Despite the murky paths her mind had brought her down, the cosy, intimate feeling of morning hadn't quite faded, and Bilba felt an answering swell of heat between her legs when Thorin's erection bumped against her stomach.

Sweet anticipation wasn't the only thing she felt, however, twinging deep inside. She tightened her muscles, testing the waters, and tried not to flinch at the ache she found— not sore enough to be actually painful, but just a wee bit too tender for anything athletic. At least until she’d had a hot shower and a cup of tea.
There were innumerable other options, however, and Bilba could think of at least one off-hand that she could hardly imagine Thorin finding disagreeable.

“Good morning, again,” she said with a smile, finding his cock with her free hand and giving it a soft rub of greeting. Thorin curled closer to her, nuzzling against her hair as he rumbled with a low, pleased sort of growl.

The angle wasn't quite right, and he was thick enough that both hands would have been better than one. Thorin didn't seem to mind overly much, however, rutting into the circle of her fingers when she slid back his velvety foreskin, teasing her thumb over the damp head beneath. His breath was huffing hot, ruffling the few loose curls that had escaped her braid, gusting over the crook of her neck.

His hips jerked forward when Bilba's mouth found his collarbone; she sucked, just hard enough to draw up a faint redness, then nipped the spot with insistent teeth, and Thorin's cock pressed harder against her palm.

His own hands weren't idle, one squeezing her bum while the other stroked along her thigh where her leg was still hooked over his side. His touch was firm, not tickling at all anymore, and his chest hair was delightfully scratchy against her nipples.

It was beautiful, especially the urgent sound of her name tumbling from his lips, which she managed to draw out of him by nibbling another red mark on his chest, not far from the first. He said it again, more strangled this time, when she stretched up just long enough to peck a kiss against his chin, before disappearing beneath the quilts.

Under the cocoon of blankets, the air almost stifling hot and thick with the scent of sleepy skin and musk. There seemed to be acres of nude body, as well, stretched out across her sheets, and Bilba burrowed deeper for a taste.

Mouthing over Thorin's hipbone, where the hair wasn't quite so thick, was faintly tangy with sweat; the softer skin of his cock tasted the same, until she licked up to the head, slick and saltier. The stuffiness of the blankets over her head and the impossible heat Thorin apparently exuded like a furnace was much more comforting than claustrophobic, making Bilba feel sheltered and hidden away from the rest of the world. Hidden away from secrets, and jobs, from responsibilities and ugly realities. There was only this: a little den she'd hollowed out for herself, a lazy Sunday morning, and a sweet, gorgeous man writhing under her.

Her jaw was twinging by the time Thorin lifted the quilts, muttering a hoarse warning and staring down at her with his face flushed bright and a dark, fiery gleam in his eyes. It had been ages since she'd done this, usually preferring to back off and finish things with her hand at this point in the proceedings. After a split-second of consideration, however, Bilba took a deep breath through her nose and sank lower instead, steadying him with a hand wrapped around the base. She couldn't take the whole of him, but judicious application of her tongue seemed to do the trick.

The blankets were pushed down to her shoulders, and Thorin's hands fisted in that soft fabric as his entire body tensed, and he came groaning the same quiet, broken cursing she remembered from the night before.

“Fuck, Bilba—” Bilba pulled away gently, ducking just long enough to wipe her mouth before crawling back up to settle against Thorin's side. He made space for her immediately, tucked in between the cradle of his arm and his ribs, which were still shuddering with unsteady breaths.

“Fuck,” he said again, then scrubbed his free hand over his face. “Sorry, just... Damn it. Come here.”
The world shifted as she was rolled, flat onto her back with Thorin leaning over to bring them face to face, his elbows propped on either side of her. He bent, kissing her forehead, then down to the corner of her lips.

“I'm man enough to admit,” he murmured, dragging his nose lightly over her cheek. “That after all that, I'm still concerned my morning breath will put you off.”

Bilba laughed, reaching up to cup his raspy jaw. “Oh, I'm hardly put off. It's not— oh!”

She’d been distracted enough not to take too much notice of his shifting balance and wandering hand, until the first touch of a broad palm against her stomach, sliding down slowly below her navel.

“It's not awful,” she continued, her words catching on a gasp, and used her hold on his jaw to draw him in for a long, lazy kiss. By the time they broke apart, Bilba was squirming from the slow roll of fingertips teasing her, pleasure overcoming any lingering discomfort.

“Softly,” she said anyway, spreading her thighs wider even as Thorin's fingers paused. She made sure to infuse her smile with a healthy dose of reassurance, and all the keen arousal thrumming through her as well. “Soft and sweet, darling, and afterwards I'll wash your back in the shower, if you like.”

“You do drive an easy bargain, don’t you,” Thorin said after a moment or two of silence, letting his own answering smile rise back into place.

After enjoying the hot, friendly shower Bilba had offered (and secretly enjoying some entirely unnecessary fussing when he peeled the plaster from his finger, and she noticed his blackened fingernail), Thorin was presented with a neatly folded pile of clothes. There was a plain, greenish t-shirt, faded and worn soft with age, and a pair of dark brown joggers—all much too large for Bilba.

He took them in hand, standing in her bathroom with just a fluffy beige towel tucked around his waist, but made no move to put them on immediately. “Whose are these?”

“You’re welcome,” Bilba replied dryly, cinching the tie of her elaborate patchwork robe. It wasn’t quite as appealing as the flimsy slip of a nightdress she wore beneath it, but Thorin remembered enough of his family’s business to appreciate the quality and craftsmanship.

“They belong to a friend,” she continued. “But he won’t mind the loan. As lovely as the scenery might be, I assumed you wouldn’t be keen to eat breakfast in the buff.”

_They belong to a friend._ Thorin was reminded, with a sour twist in his gut, of the conversation he’d had with Kili the day before.

_She’s not your girlfriend._

Are you dating anyone else? Is she?

“Thorin?” He blinked, glancing up from the clothes still held in his hands, to find Bilba watching him questioningly. She knocked her rinsed toothbrush on the side of the sink, shutting off the taps with a quick twist before turning to face him fully. “The shirt might be a bit snug, but it will certainly fit better than anything from my closet, and I imagine toast crumbs could get awfully itchy in all that
“I— sure.” Swallowing back a surge of inappropriate jealousy, the weight of it settling inside him like a stone, Thorin tossed the shirt onto the toilet lid and dragged the joggers up over his legs, trying not to let his irritation rule his movement. They were long enough, and slightly loose around the waist; the shirt, when he pulled it over his head, was significantly tighter, stretched across the breadth of his chest and his biceps, but still wearable.

At least the shirt smelled of washing powder, rather than some unfamiliar cologne. That was a small mercy, he supposed.

Combing his hand back through his damp hair, tidying what the shirt had mussed, Thorin forced himself back to cool composure and looked over to Bilba again. She was now leaning a hip against the sink, with the fingertips of one hand pressed lightly against her lips, and wide blue eyes focused intently on his torso.

“I adore Bofur,” she said out of nowhere, making Thorin reel from her flippancy and boil with resentment at the name— Bofur— until she carried on, oblivious to his silent turmoil. “I do; he’s my dearest friend and Nori is lucky to have him. But good lord, he’s never filled out that shirt like that.”

“You— what? Nori?” There was a dull pain starting behind Thorin’s eyes, not yet a proper headache but definitely threatening to develop, and somehow, this woman had a great deal to do with it.

There was obviously more happening here than Thorin could parse properly, especially as Bilba closed the distance between them, rubbing one hand over his stomach and then higher, grinning cheekily and peering up at him through her lashes. The saucy expression didn’t last, however, quickly lost under a wave of concern and a furrowed brow.

“Something’s the matter,” she said, and it was definitely not a question, though she did sound quite surprised. And just like that, Thorin remembered that damned name— she’d mentioned a Bofur before, on their first coffee date at Dori’s cafe. Some bloke Thorin had never met, and all but married to the middle Rison brother, if Thorin correctly recalled the finer details of the conversation.

If he’d been alone, Thorin might have smacked himself; he was acting like an idiot, possessive in a way that made a sour taste crawl up into the back of his throat. Neither of them had mentioned exclusivity, not this early on, and now was not the time to bring it up. No matter how much the alternative rankled him.

Good god, he was terrible at dating.

“Coffee,” he said instead, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and bending down to press a firm kiss against the crown of her hair. “Or tea. Sorry, need to clear my head a bit, I think.”

Clear his head, indeed.

As it turned out, Bilba only had a few old packets of instant coffee in the back of her pantry; she was slightly mortified, but Thorin didn’t mind the somewhat stale brew. He’d certainly had worse.

She also put on a pot of truly remarkable tea, richly smoky and surprisingly robust, which after being coaxed into a taste Thorin did switch in for the dreges of his coffee. It complimented the impressive
breakfast she put together— thick toast, fried tomatoes, bacon, and eggs done perfectly runny—
puttering around her neat kitchen with a level of skill and ease that set him back on his heels.

There had been a part of him that expected the fashion model cliché of scant meals and careful
dieting, but Bilba had never seemed to shy from food as far as he’d noticed. She kept real butter in
the house, meats and creamy cheeses, and semi-skimmed milk rather than some watery alternative.
To be completely honest, it was something of a relief— he hadn’t considered her dietary habits a
serious concern, but having his sister forever harping on his health with her wheatgrass and seaweed
was enough for one lifetime.

He wouldn’t give Dis too much grief about it, though— she’d made it her mission to keep him alive
and healthy as a horse, for a good many years to come if she had her way. Considering all they’d
been through and all they’d lost, he’d willingly choke down a mountain of her zucchini lasagne to
help put her mind at ease.

There were some quirks of his little sister, however, that he was not so quick to excuse.

He’d just caught Bilba around the waist as she’d finished refilling their teacups, reeling her in to sit on
his lap rather than back in her chair, when the trill of his phone sounded dimly from her bedroom.
There was the slightest chance it was important, possibly work ringing him on his day off, and that
would only happen in the case of a dire emergency that their on-call staff couldn’t handle. That slight
chance was, unfortunately, enough to coax him up.

“It's probably nothing,” he said, pressing his face into the welcoming crook of her neck for a quick
kiss, before rising to his feet and shifting her down onto his chair. “Just have to check it's not work.”

Bilba waved him off, dragging her teacup over towards his place setting. “If you're too long, I'm
finishing your eggs.”

That was fair enough, and Thorin said as much back to her as he padded down the hallway to the
bedroom. His mobile was still in his trouser pocket, and his trousers were in a crumpled pile at the
foot of Bilba's bed. Extracting the phone, Thorin killed two birds with one stone, shaking out the
worst of the wrinkles and laying his trousers over Bilba's deep green bedspread.

The call display said Dis, and Thorin only stared at it for a moment before pressing the button to
ignore the call. He took the phone back out with him, however; she might not ring him again, but it
was simpler to have it near enough to check.

There was a third door in the hallway, almost directly across from the one leading to the toilet, which
Thorin had never really taken note of; before this moment, it had always been closed. Now, it hung
partially ajar, enough to see a portion of one wall inside, covered entirely by ordered wooden shelves
and racks of clothes, hanging in ordered rows.

It was unbearably nosy, but Thorin couldn't help but pause, angling himself to peer farther inside,
easing the door open a few centimetres more with a push of his toe.

The room was nearly the same size as her bedroom, and jam-packed with more clothing than he had
ever owned. He had seen shops on the High Street with less stock on offer than Bilba had neatly
tucked into this... calling it a closet seemed almost like a disservice.

This was more in line with the sort of thing he had expected, dating a model (which was still an
entirely surreal concept just on the face of it). It also reminded him, with a bittersweet twinge
somewhere deep in his chest, of his mother's expansive wardrobe in the Erebor estate. Thrain had
never passed up the opportunity to drape his wife in the finest garments, as befitting the wife of a
textile heir—even a textile heir whose family business had abandoned the tangibility of manufacturing years before in favour of investments and obscure market trading. Money was never in short supply, their legacy fixed by that combination of shrewd investments and well-established power, and Thorin’s mother had always dressed like a queen.

Back in the present, Thorin shook himself sharply, and immediately abandoned his snooping; that had been more than enough woolgathering for one morning. His misplaced jealousy hadn’t managed to ruin the mood beyond salvaging, and he certainly wasn’t about to allow old ghosts to best him either.

Bilba was still in his chair when he arrived back in the kitchen, and she glanced up at him without a speck of guilt anywhere on her face, munching away on a piece of his toast.

“You have to go,” she said, after swallowing her pilfered prize. It was pitched as a question rather than a command, and Thorin shook his head, scooping her up out of the chair just far enough to slide back into a comfortable seat before settling her back in his lap. She huffed at him, but any trace of annoyance was belied by the warmth in her eyes, and the sweet kiss she pecked against his lips.

“I don’t have to go.” There had been a hint of butter glistening on Bilba’s mouth, now on Thorin’s as well, and he made a point to lick it off them both.

They were in the midst of sharing the remainder of their breakfast (and a few more savoury, flavoured kisses) when Thorin's phone sounded off again, this time with the chime of his text alert.

“Ignore it,” he said, nosing under Bilba's chin, then kissing down to the hollow of her throat. He hadn’t shaved that morning, and every scrape of his stubble against her soft skin made her shiver pleasantly.

A series of further chimes, one after the other in increasingly rapid succession, finally made him heave a deep, annoyed sigh, resting his forehead in the crook of her neck.

“Could be important,” Bilba said quietly, stroking the hair at his temple and behind his ear, where he knew a few streaks of silver were sprinkled in amongst the dark sable brown.

“I very much doubt that.” Hugging her tightly for a moment, revelling just a bit longer in the softness without interruption, Thorin then reached out to where his mobile lay on the tabletop. All the waiting texts were, of course, from Dis.

Hello?

Still alive?

How are you feeling?

Hello? Ignoring me?

???

Mildly worried.

Thorin.

Thorin?

At least let me know you’re not dead on your sofa.
And there came his headache again, pulsing back to life.

“Just... one minute,” he said to Bilba, one arm still wrapped snugly around her back. “It’s my sister checking up, since I’ve been ill.”

“Shall I...” Bilba said, trailing off and motioning towards the living room. “Give you some privacy?”

“Not unless you’d like to,” he replied, and then hooked his chin over Bilba’s shoulder when she made no move to get up. He had every intention of sending a brief, curt text assuring Dis of his wellbeing, but his phone chirped once more before he could type a single word.

You’re not answering your door. 30 seconds and I’m turning on your GPS.

“Oh god’s sake.” Mashing his thumb firmly against the call icon instead, Thorin pressed the phone to his ear; it had the chance to ring just once before Dis picked up.

“Well, good morning.” She sounded so chipper, so entirely guiltless, that he very nearly threw the phone. “Feeling groggy? The medication will do that, though you should be out of doses by now.”

“Dis.”

“Hmm, irritability isn’t supposed to be a side effect.” He squeezed his eyes shut, resisting the urge to growl like some kind of feral animal. Dis hardly needed the ammunition.

“It’s a side effect of something I could name,” he did grit out, then cracked his eyes open again, startled, when Bilba kissed his cheek. Taking a deep breath, he tilted the phone briefly away from his mouth and returned the fond gesture, forcing himself calmer.

“I’m fine, Dis,” he said, going back to the call. “No worse for wear. Now, stop pestering me; I’m hanging up.”

“Wait! Wait, wait, just one second!” It was so tempting to end the call, but he knew without a shadow of a doubt that she’d simply ring him back. “I rang to invite you to supper, you tetchy old codger.”

“Yes, all right.” Refusing the invitation outright would simply raise more questions, and it was terribly presumptuous to assume Bilba would want him lingering around into the evening. “I’ll probably be round.”

“Not even asking what we’re having? You are eager to get off the phone, aren’t you?” Dis laughed, sounding shrewd but not unkind. “Would it be out of line to use your GPS to send a bouquet? Because you’d only be this impatient if you were equally as happy before I rang, and you seem especially impatient. Oh god, no, you didn’t actually answer your phone in the middle of sex did you? Please, please tell me you know better than that.”

“You are horrid,” he said flatly, refusing to rise to the bait. Maddening as she could be, Thorin trusted his sister to respect certain boundaries; she did indeed have the password to enable GPS tracking on his phone, but that was only for emergency situations. “Goodbye, Dis.”

“Give B a kiss good morning for me,” his sister was calling out as Thorin disconnected the call, loudly enough that Bilba giggled, leaning heavier on his chest.

“Your sister reminds me of a few of my cousins,” she said, rubbing a palm soothingly over his thin, stretched t-shirt. “Good-natured, caring, but with a bit of mischief. A Tookish spirit, they called it back home.”
“Tookish,” he repeated, curious, and Bilba sat back just enough to smile at him, warm and bright as summer sunlight.

“A wild, adventurous family, the Tooks,” she explained, both hands rising to card slowly through his hair. “But good people. Kind and loyal friends. My mum... my mother was a Took.” The hushed gravity that had settled over this conversation was not lost on Thorin, and he waited, listening carefully even as Bilba quieted, playing silently with his hair for a few long moments, and not quite meeting his eyes.

“I think she would have liked you,” she said eventually, sounding almost distracted. Thorin felt his gut twist warmly, surprised, but infinitely pleased. Bilba’s smile didn’t fade, even as she hummed thoughtfully, looking as though she was miles away. Perhaps years away, as well.

Then, just as suddenly as it had come, she was shaking that stillness and faint air of melancholy away, stroking her thumbs against the grain of his stubble. “Yes, she definitely would have liked you. Mum was always keen on a good adventure.”
In terms of timeline, we're skipping ahead a few weeks now, FYI.

And I'm about to head out to watch Desolation for the second time, but I thought I'd post this first. You are all awesome folks, and I hope you have a fabulous weekend :)

“What do you mean, you haven’t told him yet?” Bofur paused, razor thin angle brush in hand, and Bilba took the cue to open her eye despite her half-finished liner. They were sitting in her kitchen, with Bofur perched backward on his chair and one of his cosmetics kits spread over her table.

He had been touching up her makeup for a special night out at the pub, but now he was simply gaping at her, his mouth hanging open in shock.

“You’ve been dating the fella’ for what, two, three weeks? Yeah, I wager I’ve daubing concealer over damned beard burn for about that long. Three weeks, and you haven’t told him you model knickers for a living?”

It had indeed been about three weeks since she and Thorin had spent that first night together at her flat, and another week or so on top of that since they’d begun dating properly. Bilba decided to keep the minor correction to herself. Adding time wouldn't help her cause in Bofur's eyes, after all.

“It... it hasn’t come up,” she tried, fully aware how weak that reasoning sounded, shifting in her seat to curl one leg up under herself. She wasn’t dressed to head out yet, still wrapped up in her robe, while Bofur had arrived at her flat in a pair of his nicer jeans and a pink striped shirt under a saggy burgundy cardigan.

He had looked fairly natty, if still as quintessentially unfussy as usual, until his face contracted into a strange, shifting grimace, rather like she was causing him physical agony. “It hasn’t— Oh my good god, Bilba.”

There was a faint click of a door from down the hall, as Nori returned from a trip to the loo, and Bofur instantly leaned out of his seat, voice rising. “You’re not going to believe this one, love. Someone’s been keeping secrets from Mister Posh Coat, like her actual job. He doesn’t know she’s a bloody model.”

“He knows I work for Gigi’s,” Bilba cut in, crossing her arms tightly. “He just... I am actually an assistant director, you know — officially and by the books. Even Saruman agreed to it. It’s not a lie.”

Nori, dressed like a shadow head to foot in black trousers (covered in pockets and lashed across his hips with a thick belt), and an inky long sleeved shirt, fetched his bottle of beer from the worktop and took a swig, leaning back against the cupboards.

“Actus non facit reum,” he said, levelling Bilba with a meaningful look and tipping his bottle in her direction. “Nisi mens sit rea. There ain’t a guilty action without a guilty mind.”
It wasn’t the first time Nori had come out with some surprising tidbit of knowledge, or some unexpected skill— the man wasn’t unintelligent by any stretch of the imagination, though he could be incredibly coarse, and rougher around the edges than Bilba truly understood.

“Right,” Bofur agreed, sounding somewhat dreamy; he cleared his throat sharply a second later, when Nori’s tongue darted out to lick over the mouth of his beer. “Right, yeah. Bilba. I’m sensing a guilty mind here, darlin’. The lady protests too much, and all that.”

It was too much to hope, she supposed, that the pair of them would have gotten too distracted by winding each other up and forget about her little issue.

“Hold up, now.” Nori’s long brown hair was tied back in a braid, and he was fiddling with the end hanging over one shoulder, but his attention was still keen on her. “Posh Coat doesn’t know you’re a model? Is he blind? This close to Valentine’s, Gandalf’s got you plastered over half the city.”

She felt her face heat, not from Nori's words, but from the memories of those times she'd nearly made an arse of herself, making certain Thorin avoided posters and adverts as much as possible when they were together.

“I've been careful, when we're out.” He hadn't complained yet about being pulled into unexpected kisses, though Bilba was secretly terrified of the first time some paparazzo was having an especially slow news day and decided to snap a candid. She wasn't extremely famous— recognizable but not hounded by the press— but it would be just her luck to make some desperate editor's cut when she badly needed anonymity. Seeing himself jammed into a sordid corner of *The Sun*’s front page was not the way she wanted Thorin to discover the entire truth.

“He's got to be blind,” Nori said again, looking to Bofur with a disbelieving shake of his head. “Or thick as a fucking plank. Christ almighty.”

“Maybe he's so thick—” Bofur leaned forward, gesturing expansively, ratcheting up the theatrics as he was wont to do when he got on a roll. “That he won't even think to get livid. Maybe he'll forget you never told him about the international modelling career, and there you go, mess all sorted. What were we ever worried about.”

“It’s not the end of the world,” she said, glancing away. One of the rugs in her living room was curled under at the corner, and she focused on that instead of her friends’ judgemental stares. “It’s not a major thing, is it? Not really. I mean, he already knows I work in fashion, and it won’t be many more years before I’m modelling far less and in the office more, anyway. I’m already twenty-eight, posing next to seventeen year olds with impossibly perky breasts.”

“So your plan is,” Bofur started, prodding her in the knee with the handle of his brush until she met his gaze again. “To just keep this poor, dim bloke in the dark for a few more years. This is what you’re telling us. I’d like to state for the record that this is the daftest notion you’ve ever had, ever, and also your breasts are absolutely spectacular.”

“I... thank you, I suppose.” It did sound utterly barmy, admittedly, but the alternative was already daunting enough to put her in a cold sweat. “But what am I supposed to say now, after all this time? ‘Hello darling, don’t you look handsome. Oh, by the way, I forgot to mention that I regularly strip down to my pants and wiggle my bum in front of cameras.’” Twisting around in her seat, Bilba propped her elbows on the table and rested her forehead on her folded hands. “I cannot imagine a good way to begin that conversation.”

“You tell me the story, and I’ll stick to it,” Nori said, shrugging. “But, best to remember that Ori’s tagging along tonight. Not an especially dab hand at stretching the truth, my baby brother.”
“He does that thing.” Bofur waved at his own face, scrunching his nose. “With the blushing and fluttering his hands. You know the thing.”

Bilba knew exactly what Bofur was talking about, and the thought of Ori’s endearing attempts to be anything but perfectly earnest made her want to bang her head against the table. “I’m doomed. Completely doomed.”

“But at least you’ll look fabulous if everything goes to shit,” Bofur said, scraping his chair across the floor to scoot closer. “Now, up, let me polish you up. Even if the fella’ is blind, you’re a wee bit Clockwork Orange for anyone’s taste.”

It had stopped drizzling at some point between the time they’d gone down to catch the Tube, and when they’d climbed back up to the street again. The pavement was still gleaming wet in the streetlamps as they walked up to the address Thorin had given her.

“So he’s meeting your friends, at his bar. Hm.” Bofur shoved his hands in the pockets of his duffle coat, peering up at the long, hand-lettered sign stretched out above the pub. The All-Welcome didn’t sound terribly intimidating, at least.

“Looks quite nice,” Ori said, huddled in his own oversized coat. Bilba had a suspicion that it had been Dori’s at some point, probably years ago; the pea coat was flecked grey wool with bright silver buttons, and an unexpected, richly purple paisley lining. It hung loosely from on Ori’s shoulders, though he probably had an enormous jumper layered under it, as well as at least two shirts.

“It does look nice,” Bilba agreed, linking her arm through Ori’s, and shooting Bofur a pointed look. Behave. “And a sight cosier than this soggy night. Shall we?”

The pub had a familiar atmosphere; it seemed quite old-fashioned without being kitschy, all dark wood and worn leather seating. Definitely not some rough leather bar, or glossy gastropub. A point in Thorin’s favour, she thought.

And speaking of Thorin, Bilba caught sight of him almost the same moment he noticed them, from his seat at a booth across the bar. Bilba didn’t bother stifling her grin, tugging gently on Ori’s arm.

“There he is,” she said, giving a small wave, and Bofur hooted with laughter.

“I think we could’ve guessed that, darlin’.“ Crowding close, he elbowed Nori in the ribs. “How come you never look at me like the sun shines out of my arse anymore?”

“'Cause now I know you are an arse, Sunshine,” Nori replied easily, slinging his arm over Bofur’s shoulders as the four of them started over towards Thorin’s booth. The pub was busy enough to bode well for the drinks, but not unpleasantly crowded.

“Is that—What the hell,” Nori said suddenly, his usual enviable sang froid wavering ever so slightly with shock, and Bilba just managed to keep a straight face.

“Oh, yes,” she said, already feeling giddy with nervous energy; this had the potential to go very poorly. “You know Thorin, don’t you Nori? Completely slipped my mind.”

It hadn’t, actually, but both Bofur and Nori had been harping on her to various degrees about her
tiny, unimportant omission, and she’d bitten her tongue about anything else to avoid further argument. She wasn’t even certain of Nori’s opinion on Thorin; the fact that Dori was on friendly terms with him was actually not a promising sign.

“Hello, darling.” Giving Ori’s arm a brief squeeze of thanks, Bilba extracted herself, sweeping up to Thorin where he stood next to the green leather booth. He didn’t hesitate to bend down for a brief kiss, cupping one broad hand against the side of her neck, and for whatever reason that small thing managed to banish a fraction of her nerves.

“Hello,” he said, low and private, before turning back to the others with a stony, carefully neutral sort of expression.

That was her cue to make introductions, watching the men shake hands; names were exchanged, coats and scarves doffed, and they were all piling into the roomy u-shaped booth. Except Thorin, who lingered standing, motioning towards the busy bar.

“I’ll handle the round. What’s everyone having?”

Both Nori and Bofur were simple— the darkest stout available on tap— while Bilba preferred cider. Ori picked anxiously at his nails, craning up to peer at the bar, until finally deciding on some local brown ale. Thorin repeated it all back once, nodding, before heading over to order.

“Right.” Bofur laid his hands on the table top, palms down, and looked meaningfully from Nori to Bilba and back again. “How the hell do you know Mister Posh Coat? And Bilba, you knew?”

Nori, seated between Bofur and Ori (with Bilba on Bofur’s other side), slid both his arms up over the back of the booth, stretching out. “We’re related,” he said, making a point to ruffle Ori’s already messy hair, making the younger man squawk. “And through Ma’s side, as well, so definitely related. Cousins or something, distant— old money we never seen a penny of. Toffs, the lot of ‘em.”

“Unkind,” Bilba tutted, though Nori had been perfectly matter-of-fact, not sounding even slightly bitter. Nori simply shrugged, his right hand finding Bofur’s earring and gently flicking the small, dangling charm. He was always doing something with his fingers, not fidgety but busy; none of the electronics at Studio Ri (or anywhere else, honestly) were safe from Nori’s habitual fiddling, and he couldn’t always be relied upon to put things back in their proper order after the fact.

“Gospel truth, old Durinson was richer than god,” he continued, while Bofur did nothing to discourage the touching, leaning into it instead. “Had a big old house in the North, burned down years ago, but I remember spending a summer there once when I was a kid— you won’t remember, Ori, little as you were. Fire was a real tragedy, though... bunch of folk didn’t make it.”

Bilba hadn’t known most of that, and listening to Nori rhyme off such horrible history made her heart seize in her chest, aching. This wasn’t the time— Thorin hadn’t mentioned these things to her, just as she hadn’t shared any great details of her parents’ car crash or her struggles afterward, and she didn’t imagine he’d be keen to trot it all out in front of her friends over a few pints.

“Let’s try not to bring the conversation down so low, so early on,” she said, swallowing the lump of sadness that had tightened in her throat. “Keep it light, please. For me.”

“No worries, my darlin’. I’m king of keeping it light,” Bofur said with his most disarming, toothy grin, and Bilba was torn between sinking under the table, and laughing her head off to keep from panicking. Both Bofur and Nori had made it abundantly clear how ridiculous they thought her secrecy was, and while Ori had been more polite about it, he had obviously agreed.
It would be a miracle if she made it through this evening.

“He’s handsome, Bilba,” Ori said, leaning in across the table and keeping his voice quiet. There was a dusting of pink creeping over his cheeks, above the wispy scruff he’d been cultivating since Christmas. As she’d expected, he was layered like an onion in a thick brown pullover, loose at its deep v-neck, with the collars of what looked like three more shirts visible around his throat, but she doubted that overheating was the reason for the blush. “I mean, really handsome. And he’s nice, you said?”

Bofur turned to Nori, still grinning wide. “See, this is exactly why I said we should drag him out to that Bear club and set him loose. A night out on the prowl to shake the cobwebs loose, or even just get him a friendly little cuddle. And Dori’d take a fit, which I know you’d like, love. Fringe benefit.”

“Not a soul knows me in this pub,” Nori replied, as Ori turned beet red all the way to the roots of his hair. “So it wouldn't really put me out overmuch to murder you in it, Sunshine.”

Ignoring the threat entirely, Bofur twisted in his seat enough to gawk over the top of the booth, reaching out to smack Ori on the shoulder.

“Look, Jesus wept, look at that. There's one for you, Ori, my lad. Big as a fucking draught horse.”

It was horrid, but Bilba actually felt somewhat relieved that the focus had shifted to Ori, even if the poor man was hunched over the table hiding his head under his arms.

There was indeed a very large man talking to Thorin at the bar, while the bartender was pulling pints, and Bilba had a tickling of recognition in the back of her brain. There was something about the man... something strangely familiar, with that bald head, and the sheer size of him, a bit bigger than Thorin in breadth and height (and so standing at least six feet tall). Then the man shifted his stance, and Bilba could see his face in profile rather than just the back of his head— the dark beard and distinct, strong line of his nose were enough to place him.

One of the other firefighters, from that awful night in the lift with Smeagol Rivers.

The firefighter who had pulled the lift doors open, the first blessedly friendly face she’d seen after that horrible incident, was the same firefighter who was now on his way over to their table, following beside Thorin, with four pint glasses balanced in his extraordinarily large hands.

“Bilba,” Thorin said, closing in on the table and setting down his own burden: her half pint of cider, and his own lager. He motioned to the others as he named them off. “Bofur, my cousins Nori and Ori— Dwalin Fundinson, my Crew Manager.”

The man, Dwalin, set three of the pints on the table, keeping one tall glass of dark beer for himself. When he spoke, his voice was the same gruff Scottish burr Bilba vaguely recalled. “Evening.”

It was friendly nods rather than handshakes this time, which was probably for the best considering how wide and wild Ori's eyes had gone. Dressed down to battered jeans and a long-sleeved shirt (rolled up to the elbows, putting thickly muscled, tattooed forearms on display), and in a calmer situation than that damned lift, Dwalin still cut quite the imposing figure. Bilba hadn't noticed before, but beyond the scars slashed across his nose and up over the dome of his head, the man was also missing a good sized piece of his right ear.

“Grab a seat if you like, mate,” Bofur offered, and luckily enough, Dwalin's refusal managed to all but cover the squeaking sound of Ori's sharp inhale.

“Nah, I'll leave you to it,” he said, tipping his head back towards the bar, which was still bustling
with patrons ordering. “I'm set. But good to meet you, and Miss Baggins, of course.”

“A pleasure to see you again,” Bilba said, a bit uncertain in the face of the man’s rough tone, sounding partway between joking and deadly serious. “And I, well, I don’t think I ever thanked you properly, sir. For the lift—”

“Just the job.” Dwalin cut her off, brusque and with no room for argument, but dipped his chin in acknowledgement. “A bad situation, but good things turned out. Still can’t believe you gave this miserable old git the time of day, but whenever you need to put some cracks his stubborn skull, let me know.”

She smiled, cutting a glance to Thorin. “I’ll keep that in mind, thank you.”

“You’ll pay for that, Fundinson.” Thorin pointed sharply at his friend, while Dwalin burbled a husky laugh into his pint, before turning to go. There was a bit of a to-do under the table, what Bilba assumed were some meaningful kicks, but Ori simply sank low in his seat, not saying a word as Dwalin disappeared over to the other side of the pub.

Settling in beside her, Thorin lifted his left arm to rest across the top of the booth above her back, high enough that Bilba could have ignored it if she wished. She didn’t wish, thank you very much; the booth was sufficiently large enough to spread out, giving them all ample space, but she still scooted closer to him, pressing the side of her knee against his thigh. His hand was warm when it came around to rest lightly on her upper arm, just below the short, fluttery sleeve of her blouse.

“Cheers,” Bofur said, dragging his pint and Nori's over from the table's edge. Ori was reaching for his as well, swallowing visibly before he even raised the glass to his lips. Thorin didn't make mention of Ori's flush or twitchy fingers, which was for the best in a great many respects.

They chatted amiably for a time— Bilba had actually known that Thorin was once a solider, before Nori even mentioned it, which was something of a relief. It might have put a significant damper on the entire evening had devolved into a constant stream of Nori bringing up unexpected, unknown things about the man she was dating. When it came to the past, Thorin was often a private, taciturn man— Bilba could hardly fault him for that, especially given her own reluctance to lay everything plain, especially so soon— but he hadn't been completely mum in their month of seeing each other. He was making an effort to be sociable with her friends, she could tell. He wasn't astonishingly gregarious, but he was polite and quietly charming (which had won her over in the first place), and he didn't seem to chafe at Bofur's increasingly boisterous humour, or at the tendency of Bofur's wit and Nori’s storytelling to take the reins of conversation. It was surprisingly calm, for the most part— hardly the hurly burly she'd fretted about. Even Ori’s jittery awkwardness didn’t raise many red flags, as far as Bilba could tell, after his unsubtle response to Dwalin's visit. Thorin didn't ask, or even seem overly concerned about the young man’s suspicious stammer every time their banter alluded even vaguely to their jobs, and Bilba's role with them.

They were finishing up the round, and just as Bilba was offering to buy the next one, there was a faint noise of feedback humming in the air, then an amplified plucking of strings sounding from somewhere on the other side of the lessening crowd. It was only a moment or two more before the music started, some innocuous jazz tune with a middling sort of rhythm, and Thorin tapped his fingers against his empty glass for a few beats, clinking in time.

“Oh, Dwalin will hate this,” he said, one corner of his mouth twitching up. “Didn’t realise they’d be playing tonight. I’ll be surprised if he doesn’t strangle one of them before the end of the set.”

“He doesn’t like music?” Bilba asked, with the same incredulous tone she might have used if she’d
been told Dwalin hated a cozy evening spent beside a warm hearth, or freshly baked bread. It made no sense at all, even if this particular music wasn’t spectacular.

“No, he loves it.” Thorin pointed in the direction of the band, which was slowly coming into better view as the crowd waiting by the bar petered off, wandering to their tables. “He’s playing now—there, with the viol and the scowl that could strip paint. He hates music played poorly.”

“Don’t know what sort of hole they found that guitarist in,” Bofur said, turning to watch with a pained expression. “But they should have left him there, and stuffed that sax player in too. Christ, it sounds like a bag of cats being kicked ‘round a pitch. Your mate’s not half bad, though.”

“He’s better with a decent band,” Thorin explained. “Suffers this for the free beer. The lass on the sax with the tin ear—it’s her mother who runs this place.”

When Ori winced, Bilba noticed; it was simply enough to work out why he suddenly looked as though he’d sat on a brass tack.

“The one with the pink pieces in her hair?” she said, as though there were any other young woman currently in sight, blowing inexpertly into a slender saxophone. “Oh, are she and Dwalin...”

Thorin’s shoulder rolled gently under the weight of her head, where she leaned against him. “Not as far as I know.”

“Need more liquor to listen to this racket,” Nori said suddenly, clapping his brother on the shoulder. “Off your arse and help me carry.”

When Bilba reiterated her offer to cover the round, she was waved off, and then the Risons were off towards the bar, leaving Bofur to sprawl even more bonelessly across the rest of the booth.

“Could be worse,” he said, popping one fingertip against his ear a few times. “Could be louder.”

Dwalin was still wearing a thunderous grimace by the time Bilba and her group were readying to leave, sawing away on his viol between pints. Allowing Thorin to help her into her coat, Bilba gave his hand a quick squeeze of thanks before reaching out and taking hold of Ori’s instead, twining their fingers together.

“Come on,” she said, rubbing her thumb along knobbly knuckles, and returning Ori’s surprised look with a smile. “Let’s go listen for a minute more. It’s not awful, really, and Dwalin is quite good.”

Ori, despite being on the slim side (except for a persistent pouch of a belly, almost always hidden under layers), was still a fair bit taller and larger than she was—if he truly had objected to being dragged over towards the band, he could have easily dug in his heels. He came along willingly enough, despite his painfully awkward slouching, as though he was trying to disappear into the depths of his own oversized coat.

There was no stage, just a cleared corner large enough for the musicians and their instruments; most of the nearby tables were full, so Bilba didn’t bring them too close, trying to remain discreet. Dragging Ori into the midst of embarrassment wasn’t an attractive notion, and not the sort of thing she ever wanted to do (he got enough of that from the two hooligans who’d been teasing him for hours), but a little peek wouldn’t hurt anyone.
“I can try to find out,” she murmured softly, tugging Ori down to help be heard over the music. “If he might be interested, if you like. Subtly, I promise.”

“No!” Ori immediately pressed his free hand against his forehead, pinning Bilba with a panicky stare and squeezing her fingers tightly. “God, no, he's not— look at him, for goodness sake. It's stupid.” Thorin and the others were winding their way near, and Ori leaned even closer to whisper in her ear. “Even if—even if he liked men, what are the chances he'd like me? No, shush, it's not... no. No.”

“All right,” she said, as soothingly as she could manage, taking the opportunity to peck a light kiss on the apple of his cheek. “Whatever you like, Ori.”

“Thank yo— Oh!” Ori's voice rose to a squawk as both Bofur and Nori swept in behind him, holding his shoulders and smacking a loud kiss each on either side of his face.

“Stop it,” Bilba tried to scold without chuckling, for Ori's sake at the very least. The teasing was never meant cruelly, but the younger man was oft times a sensitive soul; a soft heart was one of his most endearing and admirable traits, though it sometimes caused him undue grief. “Stop it, now. You two are worse than children when you get wound up, I swear.”

“And you're dead sexy when your fussy,” Bofur laughed, but he did leave Ori be, except to catch him by the back of the collar. “We're in; we're off. I need a dose of fresh London air clogging me lungs.”

Thorin was watching the entire exchange with something akin to bewilderment, but a bit stonier than that. He still took her hand, however, when she reached for him, and they followed the others into the night.
“Fairly confident they didn't despise me,” Thorin said, hugging Bilba close to his side as they made their way down the pavement. She had accepted an invitation back to his flat, while her friends tottered off to catch a late bus, laughing buoyantly as they went.

The statement was only partly joking— Thorin knew he wasn’t the most jovial man, by most standards. It was only by some amazing stroke of luck that Bilba hadn’t been put off by his reserved (and grumpy, Dis would have said, while Dwalin or Balin likely would have said worse) nature, even at first.

He had been told, on more than one occasion, that he often made an unfriendly first impression.

“Of course they didn’t!” He barely felt the thud of Bilba’s palm thwacking lightly against his stomach, cushioned by his jumper and coat, but the playful admonishment in her voice was clear enough. “I like you an enormous amount, and I’m terribly particular. You’re eminently likable.”

That was deserving of a kiss, at the very least, and Thorin ducked down to claim one, lifting Bilba’s chin with his free hand. She tasted faintly of sweet apples from her cider, and smiled against his mouth, humming.

“Thank you,” he said, brushing their noses together, then straightened back up. Her face felt cold already, but luckily enough, his flat wasn’t far. A warm bed seemed a much better prospect than snogging on a dark, chilly corner.

He'd been entirely correct: a warm bed had been an excellent choice.

Thorin felt altogether boneless, stretched out under his duvet with post-orgasm lethargy doing its best to pull him under. He had no intention of giving in to sleep until Bilba padded back in from her trip to the loo, however, no matter how sinfully comfortable his pillow had become. It smelled very faintly of her hair. When either of them had work the next day, it was easier for him to leave for a shift from her flat than it was for her to spend the night at his, but she had slept over a few times.

He would admit, privately, to having suffered a twinge of trepidation the first time he'd invited her 'round; he'd been over to her place several times, and had an appreciation for the homey, lived-in feel she'd cultivated. Then he'd discovered that she'd only been living in Carrock House for not quite three years, and his desolate little flat seemed even more pathetically barren in comparison.

Seven years since Erebor had been lost, and Thorin hadn't managed to carve out a true home since.

The house Dis had bought was beautiful and much more comfortable, which was exactly what the lads had needed after that trauma, but Thorin hadn't expended nearly the effort his sister had done on his own lodgings. His flat was just a bunk— a place to sleep. Temporary.
On her first visit, Bilba hadn't commented on the lack of decor beyond the utilitarian; he didn't even have any art or photographs up on the walls, or a single houseplant. He kept some books, though nowhere near the astonishing number scattered around Bilba's flat, and a modest collection of DVDs. Anything that had survived the fire was either hidden away in storage, or salvaged by Dis; the only exceptions were his winter coat, the silver ring he'd been given by his grandfather when he'd turned twenty, and a gold cigarette lighter, embossed with the Durinson family seal. He also kept a fireproof safe in his closet, packed full of official reports, chemical analyses, newspaper articles, as well as every scrap of evidence any freelance investigator had ever provided him. Every single piece of information he had been able to gather about the fire, neatly organized and annotated, with additional paper and digital copies of everything housed elsewhere— one set in Balin's office, another in a safe deposit box rented through a private company (the keys to which would be bequeathed to Dis and Fili upon the event of his death).

But all of those files he kept on-site had been safely locked away when Bilba had first wandered through his lounge, running her fingers along the dark leather arm of his sofa, and over the spines filling his bookshelf. She had seen his battered copies of *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Once and Future King*, and the slim volume of Neruda poetry that he'd had returned to him after a mutual breakup some years ago, but she'd not seen the thick ring binder of grisly photographs from a gutted Erebor, and that was most certainly for the best.

Thorin was under no illusions that his investigation looked like anything short of obsession. Even Dis had allowed the strength of her own rage and resolve to waiver— after years of authorities claiming the entire tragedy had been accidental, of dismissing their concerns at every opportunity, even his sister had begun to doubt. Or, if not doubt, then at least she had begun to move on. Move on. Thorin had learned to hate that phrase so very much.

He didn't blame Dis for stepping aside from the hunt for answers. She had the lads to worry after, and they needed a stable, normal life; it was her responsibility to make sure their family endured and thrived again, through Fili and Kili.

Just as it was Thorin's responsibility to find the truth, and see justice done.

“You're a million miles away.” Thorin blinked, turning away from the murky middle distance he'd been staring into, lost in thought. Bilba was standing in the doorway of his bedroom, cast in soft shadows and deep gold by the warm light of his bedside lamp. She was draped in one of his t-shirts, hanging loose off her frame with a London Fire Brigade logo stitched small on the chest, and nothing but her bare legs peeking out beneath.

“Come here,” he said, sounding huskier than he expected, and pushed the blankets down on one side. “And I won't be so far.”

She breathed out a quiet laugh, and didn't bother stripping out of his shirt before she crawled back into bed, flicking off the light and pulling the duvet up to her chin. It felt natural to let her ease close in the dark, slotted up against his ribs with his arm curving down around her back.

“I've changed my mind,” he murmured, even as he slipped his hand under the hem of her pilfered shirt, curling over the bare curve of her hip. “Go back over there. Your feet are like ice.”

Of course she wedged them between his calves, the cold drawing out a hiss from him that sounded like steam escaping a broken pipe. The sleepy kisses she pressed against his neck didn't feel especially apologetic— it was the silent, shaking laughter that ruined the illusion.
They settled together in a tangle, the sheets warming around them. Sleep crept up peacefully, or at least less troubled than he had slept alone in a long time. The feel of her— warm, soft, and welcome in his arms— helped shore up his defences against the worst of the nightmares.

“Thorin?” Thorin jerked out of his doze, making a questioning noise in the back of his throat.

“I wanted to ask,” she said, and he could feel her chin propped up against his chest, tilting her head up to look at him. His eyelids felt as though they were made of lead, and it took a great swell of determination to prise them open, just enough to make out the vaguest shape of her face in the shadowed room.

“Thorin,” she said again, more softly this time, and he tightened his fingers into the meat of her hip.

“I'm awake,” he managed, even if he would rather not have been. Bilba's hand found his head in the darkness, stroking over his cheekbone and up over his brow.

“Did you like them? My friends.” There was a pause, long enough for Bilba's thumbnail to scratch the hairs of his eyebrow the wrong way, sending a small shudder through him, then smooth them down again. “If you didn't... to be fair, I didn't especially like them at first, either. They really do grow on you.”

This was exactly the sort of conversation he'd expected to have before she'd ridden his hips to aching and wrung him dry.

It was a challenge to scrape together enough wits and awareness to give her query the attention it deserved, but Thorin had undergone enough endurance training in his life to get through this.

“Hm, I liked them fine. They're... enthusiastic.” Enthusiastic, boisterous, flirty, and handsy... the last was almost entire Bofur, and Thorin had suffered a few slight twinges of annoyance during the course of the evening. Nothing worth mentioning— possessiveness was not an attractive or healthy trait to cultivate, and so he had tamped down any ill-will.

He stretched under the quilts, grumbling out a sigh as he strung more words together in some semblance of an answer. “Pleasant enough fellows. And they care about you. That's good enough for me.”

They love you, he didn't say, because those words led down dangerous paths— especially dangerous in such early days.

They love you, and I think I can understand why.

They love you, as I can see myself learning to.

As I can see myself starting to.

When Bilba leaned up, catching his mouth in a kiss, Thorin reached out with his free hand, combing his fingers through the loose curls of her hair. She tasted of cinnamon toothpaste, and Thorin was all too aware of the stale beer flavour lingering on the back of his own tongue, but Bilba didn't seem put off.

She kissed him firmly, dragging her hand down his throat and over his chest, until her palm rested just over his heart.

“May I,” she said, barely more than a breath, and kissed his upper lip, then again on his cheek, before tucking her face into the crook of his neck. “May I be honest with you?”
His heart, beating steady under the press of her small hand, suffered a twist of chill. Thorin knew his body stiffened, losing its weary sprawl, just as he knew Bilba would feel it too.

He breathed against her hair, and the scent of floral shampoo and sex; he was very much awake now. His voice, when he found it, was pitched low and even. “I hope you have been.”

“... I have.” He couldn't reach the lamp, and Bilba was lying partly on his shoulder, but this felt like a serious enough conversation to have in the light.

“Mostly, I have,” Bilba continued, and Thorin's throat was too tight to speak. He didn't move, leaving them in darkness, staring at nothing. “It's just... do you remember the night we went to Entmoot? The day before, when you were ill, and I didn't— I was afraid, Thorin. I thought something had happened, and I was afraid.”

“I apologized for that.” She didn't seem to be accusing him of anything, not directly, but his hackles were still rising.

“You did, and I appreciated that, even if it wasn't necessary.” Her hand on his chest was stroking now, gentling him like a horse. “You needn't have apologized for getting sick. I was afraid— oh hell.”

Her arm wrapped tightly around his chest, squeezing him against her, and Thorin could feel her trembling through the thin cotton shirt. It was automatic reflex to draw her in, to hold her close, even if a cynical portion of his brain was crowing.

This had been too good to last.

“I want to tell you,” she said, the words small and cracking around the edges. “My parents... there was an accident when I was young, and they were killed. And you— I was a silly little child again, afraid you wouldn't come home, like they didn't come home. I know your job can be dangerous.”

Thorin was suddenly intensely grateful for the darkness in the room. He had no idea what to say in the face of her fear. There was no way he could honestly allay it— he could never promise to be safe, only to be careful.

“Thorin, when we went to Entmoot, I thought I might break up with you that night.”

He'd half-expected it, but the whispered words still hit him like a punch to the gut, stealing his breath. He surprised himself a moment later by rasping into the shadows: “Why didn't you?”

_Why did you sleep with me instead?_

“Because.” She was dragging herself up, a dark shape looming over him, and her fingers were tangled in his hair. “Because I found my courage.” When she kissed him, holding his head in the cradle of her hands, Thorin couldn't swallow back the deep, broken groan that rattled out of him.

“I don't want to give you up,” she murmured into his mouth, and it should have been too much. It should have been terrifying, so close to a promise. It tasted sweet, and hot with cinnamon. “I won’t. I want to be brave, Thorin.”

“Good,” was all he could say to that, spanning her shoulder blades with his palms and craning up to claim another, deeper kiss.

Eventually she pulled away, slowly, smoothing her hands across his brow and back over his hair, petting him again. It didn't feel like a patronizing gesture anymore, as it had done only a short while
earlier.

“Look at me,” she said, not phrased as a command but rather as self-deprecation. “Spoiling the mood so spectacularly. I’m sorry—we were having a lovely evening, and here I am fouling it up like ants at a picnic.”

“No, you’re not.” It wasn’t the greatest show of timing he’d ever witnessed, dragging this all to light in the middle of the night in post-coital laziness, but he was hardly going to mention that. “You haven’t spoiled anything. Is that what’s been bothering you?” Had she really been chewing this over for weeks?

“A bit,” she admitted, settling down next to him again. His eyes had adjusted enough to see her face across the pillow, well enough to make out the bow of her frown. “I just... I wanted you to know that your job doesn’t scare me silly anymore. I wanted you to know that this, that you are worth the risks.”

He flinched when her fingers tapped his cheek, surprising him. “But I’ll still worry, mind; I’ll probably always worry. I’d worry if you were a banker, for goodness sake.”

“I’m careful,” he said, then swallowed hard when the words came out too thickly. He was worth the risks. “You... you’re all right?”

“I’m all right,” Bilba said, and he didn’t need to see her smile to hear it wind into her tone. “Are you?”

“Yes.” This was a part with which Thorin had never been especially skilled, but he forced himself to say more. If he was worth the risks, she was certainly worth this. “You should tell me, if you’re troubled. If I can do anything—even if I can’t. You can talk to me, if you like.”

“Thank you,” she said after a moment, then nuzzled into his shoulder. He was incredibly relieved that her face wasn’t wet; they’d managed to navigate this rather disturbing discussion without any tears or any shouting, which felt like a victory. He hadn’t always been the deftest hand at this sort of thing.

“Go to sleep, darling.” she murmured against his skin, warm breath and a shiver of gooseflesh, and Thorin hummed agreement.

After all that, sleep seemed miles away, but Thorin was used to that. It was after midnight now; he’d just come off a dayshift at eight o’clock, getting home with hardly enough time to shower and change before heading to meet Bilba at the All-Welcome, and he needed some sleep for his switchover to nightshift that evening.

He stretched out, feeling Bilba gradually relax against him, and made every effort to think about nothing at all. Until, eventually, his silent staring up into the dark shifted smoothly into unremembered dreams, between one breath and the next.

Bilba was perhaps the sneakiest, stealthiest person Thorin had ever met, and he’d known veteran snipers trained to melt into the landscape. It was almost disturbing how silently she could move, when she was of a mind, but it was also a perk he hadn’t considered. He slept lightly, for the most part, which in the past had made sharing a bed something of an annoyance.
But with Bilba, he hadn’t yet been bothered by her shifting around, or getting up for a glass of water, or whatever else. It wasn’t simply that she slept through the night, either—he’d woken in the morning, on more than one occasion, to find a drink on the nightstand that hadn’t been there earlier, or empty sheets beside him and the smell of breakfast in the air.

His personal favourite mornings were any when she stayed in bed, all soft skin and softer kisses, still warm and pliant with sleep, but there was also something to be said for the delicious breakfasts she could put together out of anything at all.

The smell of something cooking woke him that morning—a sweet, nutty scent that he didn’t recognize, but that sent his stomach grumbling almost immediately. There was a rich aroma of coffee wafting through as well, and Thorin knew that was entirely for his benefit. A glass jar of loose, spidery looking tea leaves had taken up residence in one of his cupboards, and he had no doubt that a spoonful of them was already steeping for Bilba’s own breakfast.

Hauling himself out of bed, Thorin pulled on a pair of flannel pyjama bottoms and, after a brief stop in the toilet, padded out to the kitchen.

Bilba was still wearing his t-shirt, barefoot and barelegged, with her hair twisted up into a loose knot. She glanced up from the pot she was stirring when Thorin came into the room, favouring him with a glowing smile that warmed him to his toes.

They were all right.

“Good morning,” she said, then squeaked when he drew up behind her, bending low enough to wrap both arms around her stomach and lay a lingering kiss in the crook of her neck. Whatever she was cooking smelled delicious, but her skin smelled even better, still musky with sleep.

“It is,” he agreed, tracing a path up the side of her throat, feeling his own smile growing as she bent her head to encourage his attention. “A very good morning.”

She hummed pleasantly, setting her stirring spoon aside and rubbing both hands over his forearms. “I was just about to come get you for breakfast.”

He purposely kept his mouth shut, swallowing back all assurances that she really didn’t have to cook him breakfast. Bilba had made it clear very soon after their first night together, in that tenaciously polite way of hers, that she had absolutely no intention of starting a morning without a proper meal, and neither would he if she had anything to say about it.

“You’re out of eggs,” she said, shivering as he rubbed his nose behind her ear, finding that sweet spot that never failed to make her thighs clench when he was between them. “So I—oh. I made toast and porridge.”

Leaning over, Thorin peered into the pot, while Bilba craned around enough to press a kiss against the hinge of his jaw. “I had no idea I had oats.”

“You didn’t.” She kissed him again, a firm peck on the cheek, then wriggled out of his hold with a twist of her hips. “It’s quinoa, believe it or not; I added the apple and the nuts. You have the oddest pantry of anyone I’ve ever met. Bowls, please?”

Thorin did as he was bid, fetching enough dishes to set their places, and they were settled in and eating in almost no time at all. The soles of Bilba’s feet were flat against the tops of his, her toes tickling his ankles under the table, and the quinoa was surprisingly tasty, topped with milk and a bit of sugar. He’d only ever followed Dis’ instructions with the stuff: treat it like rice.
It was a beautiful morning, with good food and better company, but as he recalled from a poem his mother could recite from memory, nothing gold could stay.

The intercom buzzed once, brief and perfunctory, just before Dis' voice drifted through the flat, coming from the speaker by the front door.

“It's cold and raining and I've got my hands full,” she said, tinny through the speaker. “I'm coming up.”

“Shit.” Thorin dropped a piece of toast back onto his plate, rasping his hand over his jaw. There was nothing to be done: Dis had a key, and he wasn't about to turn his sister away at the door.

Bilba had gone stiff beside him, frozen with her cup of tea poised at her lips. Thorin took a deep, fortifying breath. “That's my sister.”

“Oh god!” The tea clattered down, sloshing but not spilling, and Bilba was on her feet in an instant. “Oh god, your sister, here, and I'm a complete disaster— I'm not even wearing pants, for goodness sake!”

The fact that Bilba was apparently completely naked under the long drape of his t-shirt was a surprise that Thorin was deeply irritated he'd been robbed of a chance to discover on his own.

“Two shakes,” Bilba continued, already dashing out of the kitchen, calling back over her shoulder. “I'll just be two shakes of a lamb's tail!”

A few short moments later his front door rattled, and Thorin considered the cost-benefit potential of a strategic retreat back to bed.

Dis knew his shift schedule, which meant she knew he'd gotten off a dayshift the evening before, with a nightshift looming that night, in a little less than twelve hours. She didn't announce her arrival as she stomped inside, but Thorin stood up regardless; his aggravation at the interruption wasn't quite enough to stop him from helping her with whatever burden she was dragging into his flat.

“Oh, good,” she said, as he came out to the front door. She did indeed have her hands full, weighed down by several canvas bags, a cardboard tray with two takeaway cups, and a half-folded umbrella. “You're up. Take this, would you?”

Dis pushed one of the bags and the tray of drinks into Thorin's arms, and he grunted at the shock of icy wet canvas against his naked chest. She propped the umbrella against the wall, where it immediately began leaving a puddle on his floor, and nestled the other bags down by the boots she was currently untying.

“Merry belated Christmas.” Toeing her boots off, Dis stripped out of her soggy coat and scarf without waiting for any sort of invitation. “I was at the chemist's, and they had those socks you wear for half-off. And I brought hot chocolates, because you drink too much coffee and that rain is freezing. Oh, hello.”

Thorin resisted all urges to shy away from his sister's sly smirking, meeting her amused gaze with his own completely bland expression.

“You look like you lost a fight with a hoover, brother.” Sweeping past him and taking the tray of hot chocolates, Dis made a point of poking one finger at his collarbone, where his chest hair thinned and he was dotted by a handful of faint, reddish love bites. He swatted at her, and turned to follow even as he carefully opened the damp shopping bag.
There were three bundles of socks inside, five pair to a pack, all dark shades of grey, blue, and black, with *Blanche by Istari* printed on the cardboard tag at the top of each. It was the brand he preferred for work socks—affordable and decent quality—before he'd even met Bilba.

There was also a bag of oranges and a box of eggs, with the socks serving as a buffer between them.

“I can buy my own damn groceries,” he said, not for the first time, and ignored Dis' answering chuckle.

“You can buy quick-cook garbage, you mean. Or whip up enough chili to eat nothing else for a week, you lazy—oh!” Dis stopped a step inside his kitchen, no doubt noticing the pair of place settings at the table and the half-eaten breakfast. When she turned back to face him, there was a bright, accusatory spark in her eyes. “Why didn't you say you had *company*?”

Rolling his own eyes heavenward, Thorin slipped around his sister, laying the bag on the worktop. “At what point in that entire conversation do you imagine you asked?”

It was obvious when Dis shook off the surprise and found her feet again. She was over at the cooker in short order, setting the tray of drinks aside and lifting the lid on the nearly empty pot of porridge. “Well, pardon me, but I never assumed you'd have company on a work night. What *is* this?”

“Quinoa porridge. It's good.” Fishing the socks out of the bag, Thorin levelled Dis with a stern look. “I'm putting these away. Do not go snooping.”

“Of course not.” It was actually rather eerie how perfectly his sister could mimic complete innocence, when she was of a mind. “I wouldn't dream of it.”

“I mean it, Dis.” Leaving his sister to whatever trouble she was going to get up to, Thorin trotted down to his bedroom and tossed the socks onto the rumpled bed. The room was empty, and Bilba's clothes were missing as well. The shirt she'd slept in was folded neatly and laying on the quilts, and Thorin picked it up on his way out, pulling it on.

Any mystery was solved when he walked back into the hallway, and was nearly bowled over. The bathroom door opened a fraction and Bilba darted out, apparently headed back towards the bedroom. “Whoa there,” he said, too loud if her furtive shushing was any clue, and then allowed himself to be hustled back into the small loo.

“Oh my god, Thorin.” Bilba was dressed in her jeans and floral blouse from the night before, with her hair pulled back into a neat bun, with only a few curls falling loose around her ears. If he didn't have very fond memories to remind him, Thorin might never have guessed she'd been sleep-tousled and half naked less than ten minutes earlier.

She was also very pale, and wild around the eyes in a way that made him reach out, taking her shoulders between his hands. “You don't—Bilba, I know this is sudden. You don't need to meet her.”

The notion that Bilba was so painfully unwilling to meet his family made a sharp sliver of doubt lodge in his throat, but Thorin wasn't about to bring that up now.

“I *want* to,” Bilba said, blinking up at him. She sounded sincere, if somewhat confused. “Do you...not want me to meet her?”

This was getting to be a mess; strategic retreat to bed was still an option, in his opinion.
Thorin exhaled a great huff of air, more than a little agitated by the turn the morning had taken. “Of course I do, but not if you're beside yourself about it.” His tone was too sharp, too impatient, and Bilba's eyes narrowed from wide and liquid to flinty. She shrugged out of his hold, leaning back against the sink and setting her fists on her hips.

“I'm hardly beside myself,” she said, in slow, carefully enunciated words that simply served to get his hackles up. “And I'm not going to argue with you when your sister, whom I've never met, is in the next room.”

The bathroom had become crowded, hot with unexpected temper, and Thorin could feel himself revving up to say something he would regret. Taking a deep breath, he shuffled a step backward, as far as the wee room would allow, and dragged his hand over his face before crossing his arms.

They were both quiet for a long, tense moment, while Thorin stared at a spot on the wall far over Bilba's head. Until eventually, a gentle touch against the back of his hand made him startle.

Bilba had twin spots of colour high on her cheeks, freckles dusting across her freshly washed face, and an oddly amused glint in her eyes that he did not expect.

“If this is our first proper row,” she said, circling his wrist with her fingers as much as she could. “It's rather silly, isn't it? And in the loo, of all places.”

_Silly_ was a kind word for it. Gradually, Thorin unclenched, pushing the frustration aside in favour of focusing on Bilba's thumb tracing circles over his pulse.

“I'd like you to meet Dis,” he said, once he was confident he would sound as composed as he was beginning to feel. He chose his words with care, striving for calm and clarity. “When you feel comfortable.”

Bilba kept her grip on his wrist, and reached up with her free hand, cupping his jaw. Her smile was a small thing, wavering around the edges, but deeply fond in a way he was happily becoming familiar with.

“I told you,” she said, nodding once. “I found my courage. Let's test that, shall we?”

Chapter End Notes

_Dissssss! Dis and Bilbaaaa! And yes, Bilba is more than a bit concerned about Thorin's sister being more observant than he is, and recognizing her._

_Happy holidays, dear readers. I hope you're all joyful, healthy, and surrounded by good cheer._
Chapter 24

Chapter by littleblackdog

Chapter Notes

In a shameless bout of self promotion, I'm going to mention that if you've read my Heartsong/Soulmark AU "Made and Remade the Necklace of Songs" and were ever interested in a sequel, there are now two!

For more Bagginshield, look to "In Shapes That Renew"

And for other pairings explored (specifically Dwalin/Ori so far), look to "The Songs of Every Poet Past"

As always, I truly thank you folks for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bilba had been so very close the night before to simply laying it all plain, to opening the floodgates... only to backpedal so spectacularly at the last moment. She'd wanted to be honest with him, desperately wanted it all out in the open if only to stop this sour, squirming feeling in her stomach every time she was reminded of the secret, and yet she'd still baulked at the whole truth.

It shouldn't have been such an enormous hurdle— it was just a job. A somewhat normal, generally innocuous sort of job. She wasn't some secret MI-6 spook, or international jewelry thief, or anything so ridiculous.

She simply... modelled. And, not to forget her recent promotion, helped run a luxury clothing line. That wasn't terrible.

But the longer she said nothing, the more awkward it became to tell him anything at all.

Her fears and her indecision before their dinner at Entmoot had been important to share, as had her decision to overcome them. She hadn't been lying when she'd agreed with Thorin: that incident had been weighing on her mind. But, of course, it hadn't been the only thing.

There was no way on this green earth that she could have started admitting the rest of it, however, with Thorin pressed up close beside her under the shelter of warm quilts and deep shadows.

She had realized the night before, partway through confessing her doubts and her determination, that she had succeeded in creating perhaps the absolutely worst time imaginable to tell him about her tiny omission regarding the exact nature of her job.

Darling, your job is dangerous and had me in fits, but I've chosen to overlook that.

Oh and while we're on the subject, I strip down to skimpy knickers for a living. Okay?

Poor timing, indeed— poor enough to take the starch out of anything she'd said about him being important to her. It would have sounded too manipulative, when she'd not meant it that way at all.
She hadn’t confessed her fears in some artful, awful plan to guilt him into accepting her job, as she’d accepted the realities of his, but she wouldn’t have blamed him for his own doubts if she’d actually told him everything the night before.

So she’d swallowed the rest of her secrets, ignoring the squirming feeling still lingering, and forced herself to sleep with Thorin’s slow, steady breathing lulling her.

And now, it seemed her hesitance was coming back to bite her in the arse.

Thorin's sister.

Bilba wasn’t one to make assumptions, but having seen Thorin’s closet, she was fairly convinced he didn't wear frilly garters and thongs under his jeans— he was not a person at whom most of her adverts were aimed. Of course Gigi’s had their Gentleman’s line of luxury briefs and silky robes, and even a varied selection of specially cut lingerie designed for more traditionally masculine body shapes, but she couldn't imagine Thorin taking any interest at all.

In fact, daring to imagine Thorin trussed up in a little scrap of lacy knickers was doing nothing for her concentration, and was not even slightly helpful to the current, potentially disastrous state of affairs.

No, now was not the time.

With Thorin, Bilba had been surprised when he hadn't recognized her, but the situation wasn't beyond imagining. Dis, on the other hand... whether or not she was the sort of woman to spare even the slightest care for lingerie, she was most definitely a target of the Garnished and Gilded advertising campaigns.

The chance that Dis would let the cat out of the bag was terrifyingly high, and Bilba walked out of Thorin’s bathroom feeling queasy. Queasy, possibly a touch lightheaded, but determined to weather whatever storm might come from this. Thorin's arm curled around her shoulders was like an anchor, keeping her from drifting off into panic as they made their way back down the short corridor, and through the empty lounge. Dis, Bilba presumed, was waiting in the kitchen.

Waiting, and prodding at the pot of quinoa with a wooden spoon and a suspicious frown, apparently.

“Dis,” Thorin said, teeth gritted, and Bilba braced herself, watching with terrified resignation as the woman turned towards them both.

Thorin's sister could have easily been his twin, though Bilba knew she wasn't— the same dark chestnut hair (though Dis wore hers longer than Bilba's, draping in thick waves down to the small of her back), pale greyish-blue eyes, and a strong nose almost identical to Thorin's jutting from the middle of her well-proportioned face. She was also tall but not at all willowy, broad in the shoulders and narrower in the hip, and was dressed in dark jeans and a flannel shirt in Black Watch plaid, peeking out from beneath the scooped neck of a black jumper.

Dis was a very striking woman, some tiny sliver of calm in Bilba's brain noted, while the rest of her attention was focused on ignoring the worrisome darkness creeping into the edges of her vision, and on not panicking.

The very last thing she needed to do was faint, for goodness sake. Crumpling like some Victorian maid did not make a good first impression in the slightest.

Thorin's hand, broad and warm, gently squeezed her upper arm; Dis blinked at her, spoon still in hand, then tilted her head to one side in a considering, curious sort of gesture.
This was it. This was the moment.

“Oh, hello,” Dis said, after pausing thoughtfully for perhaps the most stressful five seconds of Bilba's entire life. Then she pointed the spoon at the pot. “This is surprisingly good.”

“It's—” Bilba swallowed, her bare toes tensing against the floor. “Thank you. It's rather nice with cinnamon as well.”

“Oh, yes, that would be good.” Dis balanced the spoon carefully over the pot handle, sweeping an arm out towards the table with a flourish and a slowly blooming smile. “Let's not stand around like statues, shall we? And I'm Dis, by the way, since my brother seems to have left either his tongue or his manners in the other room.”

Bilba found herself drawn where Dis motioned, slipping out of Thorin's loose hold like a moth to a flame. There was a hand being held out across the table, with short unpainted nails and several intricately patterned gold rings on the long fingers, and Bilba reached out to accept the handshake.

It wasn't quite the dwarfing size of Thorin's thick paw, but Dis' grip still engulfed her hand almost completely. The grip was warm, and firm without being tight.

“Bilba,” she said, and managed not to wince when Dis' eyes narrowed ever so slightly, scanning her face. This felt like watching an accident happening—a vase tipping off a shelf, without being able to do a thing to stop it shattering. Except, of course, Bilba was also playing the role of the vase. “It's a pleasure to meet you, Dis.”

“Bilba,” Dis repeated, almost a question, then turned to Thorin with an imperious wave. “Mugs, brother. I've only brought two drinks, but we can divvy them up. Hot chocolate, Bilba?”

“Um.” Was it more courteous to accept, or politely decline? Her teacup was just there, within reach, but also nearly empty and surely gone lukewarm. Bilba was completely frazzled, and even her manners were flitting away like startled sparrows. “Y-yes, please, if you don't mind. That would be lovely.”

“So terribly sorry I interrupted breakfast,” Dis was saying, as Thorin groused under his breath, fetching a trio of mugs from the cupboard. “Although not the worst timing imaginable; looks as though you were nearly finished up.”

It was true, the dishes littering the table were all nearly empty, save for a few bites of toast and dregs of tea.

“Yes, I suppose you could be slightly more inconvenient,” Thorin muttered, barely audible, as he set the mugs on the table and dragged a chair around. He ended up sitting perpendicular between them both, but closer to Bilba. Close enough, in fact, to reach down and find her hands wringing in her lap, and prise them gently apart. He laced his fingers between hers, then lifted their joined hands onto the table.

Dis had already begun taking the plastic lids from the take-away cups, pouring a healthy splash of dark, fragrant hot chocolate in each of Thorin's mismatched mugs. She didn't say anything about Thorin's display of affection, but she did give their handholding a sideways look that Bilba had no idea how to interpret.

“Here we are.” Dis slid two mugs in their direction, stacking the empty paper cups one inside the other and taking up her own drink in two hands. She smiled over the rim, fixing Bilba with a steady look. “So, shall we do questions now? That's still the thing, isn't it? It's been so long since Thorin's
introduced me to a girlfriend—"

"Stop it." Thorin's tone was hard as granite, and held enough edge to make Bilba shiver with gooseflesh. Dis, conversely, simply laughed; it was a carefree, husky sound that seemed well-suited to her almost effortlessly regal bearing, and the keen glint in her eyes.

"Yes, right, sorry." Taking a small sip of her drink, Dis licked a drop from her top lip. "Where did you two meet?"

"At the gym," Bilba said, trying desperately to sound less anxious than she felt. She thought about meeting Saruman Belov for the first time, when Gandalf had dragged her from her weedy little student flat into the expansive, gleaming Istari Building. That had been a harrowing sort of day, especially when Saruman had simply stared at her across the hulking monolith of his desk, with those impossibly dark, unblinking eyes.

Somehow, this meeting actually felt more nerve-wracking than suffering Saruman's penetrating judgement a decade ago, when she'd stood in silence, braced for the inevitable torrent of too short, too fat, not with that face, and are you mad Gandalf?

Yes, sharing hot chocolate with this woman was more terrifying than Saruman Belov could ever hope to be. Bilba was tense as a piano wire, waiting for the other shoe to drop with Thorin's palm pressed warm and comforting against her own.

"Of course you did." Dis' tone was clearly teasing again, but it seemed good-natured enough, and Thorin didn't rile. "Where else would it have been, with him? It had to be somewhere between work, the gym, and home. Not exactly the clubbing sort, my brother."

"Neither am I," Bilba said, feeling slightly defensive on Thorin's behalf. Between the Broadbeams and the Risons, she'd been witness to many more strident, sour sibling interactions than this wee bit of poking fun. She'd seen harping and explosive arguing that apparently never dimmed the love between them all, but she still didn't quite understand it.

Glancing over at Thorin, Bilba found him looking back at her, with the corner of his mouth lifted in his private, half-smile... the particularly fond one that she took great pleasure coaxing out of him on any occasion.

"I'm a bit of a homebody, truth be told," she said with a small smile of her own, rubbing her thumb over his rough knuckles, then shifted her attention back to Dis. "It might sound a bit dull, I suppose, but an armchair, a good book, and a cup of tea is my idea of a fine evening."

"Not dull in the slightest," Dis replied, her own eyes drifting over to Thorin for a split second. "Some homely comfort certainly does a person good, from time to time."

"I think so, too," Thorin said, taking a drink from his mug. There was something in the air, a sense of ease settling between them, that made Bilba feel vaguely as though she'd passed some kind of test. The siblings might have looked alike, but Dis was certainly not her brother's twin in personality. Dis took deft reins of the conversation, steering it effortlessly toward topics of family (Bilba didn't mention having met Fili before, even if it had only been for a moment, and Thorin didn't bring up the lift incident either), as well as some of the oddities of living in London after life in the countryside. The Durinsons had left Erebor for the city seven years ago, only about three years later than Bilba had first stepped off the train from Hobbiton. It was actually a very pleasant conversation, all things considered, and by the time their drinks were empty, Bilba was almost distracted enough to relax.
There was a chance, slim as it was, that Dis honestly hadn't recognized her at all. And wouldn't that be a miracle.

But then the conversation strayed to Dis' job— social work, apparently, in a private office with a small GP practice attached— and Bilba felt the hairs on her arms rise.

“But enough about good Doctor Oin's quirks, hilarious as they are,” Dis said, resting her chin on her palm and looking altogether more open in her posture. It wasn't at all fair that this was going so well, when the rug was about to be pulled out from under the whole mess. “What about you, Bilba? What is it you do?”

Oh good lord.

“I... I work in sales.” Resisting the urge to lick her dry lips, Bilba quickly shuffled her thoughts into some semblance of an order. She could do this; she'd had the entire conversation to prepare. This wasn't impossible. “Assistant Director of a small subsidiary company.”

With any luck at all, that had sounded hideously dull enough—

“Oh?” Dis' rings clinked absently against her mug; Bilba imagination immediately shifted to the clangour of bells tolling, portents of doom. “What company, if I may ask?”

“Istari,” Bilba squeaked, breathless for an instant and fighting not to show it. Beside her, Thorin shifted in his seat; Bilba had a feeling he was watching her with concern, but she didn't dare even glance over. Instead, she focused on reining her voice back under control. “Istari Incorporated... one of their subsidiaries.”

Dis blinked, and a fine furrow appeared between her brows. “Istari? Aren't they the, well, the pants people?”

Then, like in some overly dramatic sequence of a film, time itself seemed to slow to a crawl. Bilba watched, cold resignation washing over her, as Dis' expression lit up with recognition.

“That's it,” she said with a bright laugh, snapping her fingers and pointing Bilba's way. “That's exactly who you look like. That model, what's her name... Bella something or other.”

Dis laughed again, pressing a hand against her cheek. “Oh lord, you must get that all the time, working there. I'm so sorry.”

Bilba had absolutely no idea what to say, and even if she could have cobbled some words together in a vaguely sensible order, Thorin was already talking.

“Dis, you can't be serious.” Now Thorin was laughing, not as boisterous as his sister, but a rough, disbelieving chuckle. “She is Belle Bijou, the model. She doesn't look that different, for god's sake.”

“She's what,” Dis said, while Bilba's entire world narrowed to four short words.

She is Belle Bijou.

“Don't make a fuss, Dis.” Thorin didn't sound at all like a man who'd just had an epiphany about the woman he was dating, but rather like a long-suffering older brother. “Please.”

“Who's making a fuss? I'm understandably surprised.” Throwing up her hands in mock exasperation, Dis' face had split in a grin. It reminded Bilba of Thorin's rarest, most luminous smiles: all white teeth, faint laugh lines, and bright eyes gleaming like cold water in winter sunlight. “It's not every
day my brother introduces me to his girlfriend, let alone his girlfriend who is also a famous lingerie model. I'm allowed a moment to process that.”

A moment to process it. Yes, that sounded like just the thing.

“Bilba, I'm sorry,” Dis said again, still smiling. “You must think I'm a twit for not realizing.”

“Not at all.” Bilba swallowed, tongue dry as a desert, and found her own smile somewhere down deep in the reserves of politeness all Bagginses kept for emergencies. “No, no, it's fine. It's... I prefer it, more often than not, when people don't recognize me.” It was better, easier, less uncomfortable for everyone, most of the time.

How in the hell could Thorin have known, when she hadn't known that he knew?

That convoluted question alone was enough to give her a headache.

“Well, it doesn't make a difference to me, if that helps.” Dis shrugged, flicking a lock of hair away from her face. “And you're an assistant director as well, you said? That's excellent. More stability, I'd imagine.”

Before Bilba could say anything else, Dis was snapping her fingers again— apparently, a habit when she had a realization. “You model for Gigi's— do you know Dori, then? Dori Rison?”

“I do, yes,” Bilba said. “He was a mentor, of a sort.” She'd certainly gotten a great deal of advice from him when she'd first started out, though only a fraction of it had actually been solicited. Dori always had an opinion, even now. “He's a good friend.”

“We had drinks with Nori and young Ori last night.” Thorin added, his thumb tracing slowly over the back of her hand. Bilba was too aware of the touch, almost flinching, and she feared Thorin would notice.

He'd apparently noticed much more, without her realizing.

“What a small world,” Dis mused, while Bilba carefully extracted her hand from Thorin's loose grip, using the excuse of wrapping her fingers around her empty mug. There was little to no heat left to leech from the smooth ceramic; it wasn't even as warm as Thorin's hand had been, but it was a safer anchor while she collected herself.

She had years of experience faking pleasant facial expressions, which was quite handy at the moment.

There was a brief lull, vaguely awkward, until Dis pushed her own mug away with an air of finality. “Right then,” she said, dipping her head in Bilba's direction. “It's been a genuine pleasure, Bilba, but I should be off. You two are more than welcome to come by the house for supper, your next free evening. Open invitation.”

“We'll see,” Thorin said, with a hint of blandness that made Bilba glance his way for just a moment. He was looking at his sister rather than at her, thankfully, with his eyebrows raised in what looked like fond exasperation.

“That sounds lovely, Dis,” Bilba said. “Thank you.”

And it did, truly. If Bilba set aside all the nerve-wracking surprises the morning had piled upon her, it had actually been a pleasant first meeting. Dis was a charming woman, and she was Thorin's family. Bilba understood the importance of that, with so little of her own left... so little worth mentioning, at
least. There were an abundance of Bagginses and Baggins-relations who wouldn't give her the time of day anymore, since she'd moved to London Town and took up such an unseemly profession.

Dis got to her feet, and both Thorin and Bilba followed suit. “Are you the hugging sort?” Dis asked, and Bilba was quite relieved that the woman didn't simply swoop in.

“Oh, yes; yes, certainly,” she answered anyway for courtesy's sake, only stammering slightly with surprise, and found herself immediately pulled into a firm embrace. Dis was larger than her in nearly every sense, though Bilba wasn't slim—significantly taller, with broader shoulders and a thick build that balanced with her height—and the hug felt nearly as all-encompassing as one of Thorin's.

“If the old codger won't come,” Dis whispered, still loudly enough to be heard throughout the kitchen. “Your invitation still stands. We eat at six-thirty, and feel free to drop in—”

“Goodbye, Dis,” Thorin cut in, and Dis' arms were suddenly retracting their hold, no longer hemming Bilba tight against the cushion of a soft jumper and a full bosom. Her hands lingered on Bilba's shoulder for a moment longer, squeezing lightly.

“My address is in Thorin's mobile,” Dis said, peering down at Bilba with ash blue eyes that were almost unsettlingly familiar, if less stern than Thorin's usual look. Then she was stepping back, waving her brother off with a flick of her wrists. “I'm going, you grump. I'm off. Have a good shift.”

There were a few more goodbyes exchanged, and Dis hustled off to the door, Thorin at her heels. Bilba was left in the kitchen, just out of sight of the entranceway, and she immediately scrambled to pull her mobile out of her pocket.

He already knew about belle, she texted Bofur, not quite cowering beside the refrigerator as she listened to low Durinson voices still chatting as Dis gathered her things to leave. Her hands were trembling enough that she was grateful for autocorrect. Oh god I'm an idiot.

There was the sound of a door closing, and Bilba tucked the phone away again, trying her damnest to look calm and guiltless when Thorin came back into the room. Judging by the dubious twist of his mouth as he levelled her with a meaningful look, not quite a grimace, she wasn't entirely convinced she'd succeeded.

“Your sister seems sweet,” she blurted, sinking back to lean heavier against the worktop when his eyebrows rose, wrinkling his forehead.

“I'm going to ask this,” Thorin began, each word falling heavily between them as he stepped farther into the room. “And I'd like the truth, even if you think I'd rather not hear it.”

Bilba nodded slightly, and gripped the edges of the counter on either side of her hips. Thorin was drawing closer, and her heart was thrumming madly, making every effort to rabbit out of her mouth.

“Tell me,” he said, pushing dishes aside and perching on the edge of his table, arms crossed and facing her. “Did you honestly have your feelings hurt when Dis didn't recognize you straight away?”

Oh god.

“Because I have to say,” Thorin continued, and it was clear now that the odd grimaced expression was an attempt to stifle a growing smirk. “That would be only slightly endearing, and largely ridiculous.”

She couldn't help but press a hand over her mouth, holding back a wholly inappropriate, almost hysterical giggle she could feel bubbling up her throat. He thought she was pouting, for goodness
sake, because his sister hadn't recognized her.

“And I would also have to tell you—” Thorin stood up again, closing the space between them in two slow strides. He had apparently given up the battle against allowing his amusement to show, letting his suppressed smirk split into a fond, mirthful smile that lit his entire face and crinkled lines at the corners of his eyes. “That as gorgeous as Belle Bijou is, I still much prefer the even more breathtakingly beautiful Bilba Baggins, here in my flat.”

One hand lifted, and Thorin brushed a loose piece of hair away from her temple, tucking it back behind her ear.

“Having tea in my kitchen,” he said, quiet and close, as he gently pulled her hand away from her face. His large fingers curled around her clammy palm, and he bent, pressing a trio of soft kisses along her knuckles, one after each sentence. “Reordering my bookshelves when I'm not looking. Waking, rumpled and warm with sleep, in my bed.”

*I much prefer Bilba Baggins.*

She was *not* going to cry. That would be an unforgivably silly reaction, and she *would not* do it.

The grittiness blooming in her eyes, on the other hand, was determined to make a liar of her— more of one than she'd already made herself, in intention if not in deed. She squeezed them shut, leaning in until her forehead rested on Thorin's collar, squishing their joined hands between them.

“And here in my arms,” Thorin murmured against her hair, and Bilba sucked in a deep, shaky breath.

“Stop it.” Her voice was small, and sounded dangerously wet, but as long as she could keep her face hidden in his shirt, it didn't count. “Stop. You're just... you're too soppy, for goodness sake.”

“You find it endearing,” he said, nosing at the tip of her ear. “And you suffer the worst of me, too, stubborn and all rough edges. For which I am infinitely glad.”

She didn't have to tell him the whole truth. Not this minute. She could ease into it later— *I didn't think you knew I was Belle Bijou.*

Her mobile buzzed in her pocket; Bilba ignored it.

“I didn't think you knew,” she said, eyes still firmly shut. “I didn't think you knew I was Belle Bijou.”

She wasn't a liar. Even simple omission sat venomously in her gut, like a bitter, icy stone, and it wasn't fair. It wasn't fair of her to risk poisoning something like this with her own fear, when she'd told Thorin she would be brave.

Thorin stilled, his lips just touching the shell of her ear. “You what?”

Thorin kept his flat cooler than she kept hers; it had never before felt quite so draughty, however, as it did just then, with Thorin pulling away from their warm embrace. Bilba shivered, finally opening her eyes to find Thorin staring down at her, unblinking and unreadable. He'd taken his hands back, leaving her completely untethered as he loomed in front of her.

“I didn't think you knew,” she said again, hastily wiping a bit of dampness from her cheek. “And I didn't know how to bring it up. I wasn't... I hadn't meant to keep it secret. I was trying to figure out the best way to tell you, without you thinking I'd been lying this whole time.” She laughed, weak and hollow, and dropped her eyes down to the cuff of Thorin's sleeve. It was the shirt she'd slept in,
and she knew how soft that thin fabric was, stretched loosely over his biceps, and how much it smelled of Thorin's reassuring musk.

“But, as it turns out—” She wondered, vaguely, if this was the moment she'd been fretting about for a month. If this was when she cocked everything up beyond saving. “I needn't have worried myself. You already knew.”

“I did,” Thorin agreed, his voice perfectly level. “I've known since I first saw you at the gym. I was stunned you spoke to me, that you were so... natural. So genuine.”

Oh god.

“Bugger,” she whispered, mostly to herself. She had never in her life felt more foolish, and considering the paths her life had taken, that was saying something.

“You thought you were lying to me,” Thorin said, and Bilba almost wished he'd shout at her, get cross, even storm around the flat. Anything but this quiet coolness. “All this time.”

“I was afraid you wouldn't see me!” Apparently, if Thorin wasn't going to shout, Bilba would. She took a deep breath, fists clenching at her sides, and exhaled slowly through her nose.

“I was afraid,” she repeated, more calmly, while Thorin waited. “That you wouldn't see me anymore, if you knew. No one—” Her words cracked, and she closed her hands tighter, grounding herself with the bite of her nails into her palms. “Most people don't see Bilba, once they've seen Belle. Most people... men or women, they expect the glamour, parties and whatever else, and I don't... I don't date much, if you've not guessed already. And I truly wanted to date you.”

There was a long, dense silence; Bilba could hear her own heartbeat thudding in her ears, but that was all.

“You must have thought I was a complete moron,” Thorin said eventually, as the quiet began to press too heavy, and Bilba was moments away from a bout of uncharacteristic, panicky claustrophobia.

“No, no, Thorin—” It was such a risk to reach out, and Thorin was like steel beneath her hands, but she took hold of him regardless, fingertips pressing into his forearms. “Never, never that. You're brilliant, and clever, and wonderful, I just... I thought maybe, unobservant?”

“You're poster'd twenty-feet long down the sides of buses, Bilba.” It was a good sign, maybe, that Thorin didn't shake off her pawing. “How unobservant did you imagine I was?”

“I'm so sorry.” There really wasn't anything else for it; everything was laid plain, and Bilba felt a weird sense of relief somewhere in the midst of her sinking dread. “I am, Thorin. I never meant to let this get away from me like this, and I feel so stupid. I should never have... I shouldn't have tried to keep it secret, and now I've hurt you, when I never intended to. I'm sorry.”

She was crying properly now; despite all good efforts not to let loose the tears stinging her eyes, her cheeks were wet and itchy, and her breath was hiccoughing. Not full sobbing, thank goodness, but enough to make her squirm with embarrassment, fighting the urge to simply flee. To hide away, in her little flat with her books and her solitude, and never make such a horrid mistake again.

This wasn't what she'd intended at all, not ever, but she couldn't imagine why she'd ever expected anything else.

The stupidest, maddest, most ill-conceived notion, Dori had called her attempt at secrecy, weeks
before when she and Thorin had been moments away from their first date. And the pushy old snoop had been right, damn him.

“Stop that,” Thorin said, gruff but not angry, and drew her in with an arm looping around her back. Bilba followed the surprising pull, unresisting, until she was being held against the firm, warm wall of his chest again, and wrapped her own arms tightly, desperately, around his ribs.

The calluses of his fingers scraped lightly as he wiped damp tracks from the parts of her cheek he could reach; the rest, he could probably feel soaking into his shirt, but he said nothing about it.

“Stop,” he said, softer, and cupped her jaw with his broad hand, though he didn't try to lift her face, allowing her privacy. “You won't sway me like that, you know. I have a little sister; I've been inured to women crying.”

There was a shade of humour in his tone, faint and dry, and a kiss pressed against the top of her head. Bilba felt dizzy, and clung to him all the harder.

“Having met your sister,” she murmured, partially muffled by his shirt. “I must say she doesn't seem the weepy type.”

“Nothing wrong with tears.” Thorin kissed her crown again, then lingered there. His breath was hot against the roots of her hair. “I'm not happy about this, Bilba.”

That plain sentence stung, sharper than any shouting might have done. She chewed her lip, then said:

“I know. I'm sorry.”

“I believe you.” Pressed against her cheek, Thorin's chest expanded in a deep inhalation, which soon gusted out in a long, ragged sigh. “I can't do this, unless I know you're going to be honest with me from here, forward. Whatever you choose to share with me, however much, let it be honest. As I'll be with you. Can you do that?”

Of course I can, she didn't say, keeping that brash pronouncement bitten behind her teeth.

Instead, she paused, then leaned back, pulling away from Thorin's embrace just enough to look up into his stony, shuttered face.

“I can,” she said, and watched him thaw ever so slightly before her eyes. “I will, Thorin, I promise.”

Slowly, the clouds seemed to part, and Thorin looked simply tired, rather than so painfully closed off.

“You're giving me grey hair,” he said, and even if the ground was still somewhat shakier than an hour before, Bilba was confident that their foundation was stronger.

“You already had grey hair, love.” She found her smile, hopeful and only a bit wobbly, and stretched up to ruffle the thick hair above his ear. “It's distinguished.”

Thorin was laughing when he kissed her— a hoarse chuckle into her mouth. Bilba drank it down, buoyed by the warmth of their mingled breath, and the promise sealed between them.
Oh, that's been so long in coming, I'm desperately hoping it didn't disappoint.

But at least it's out of the way now, and we can move on to more romance, more drama, more story, more shenanigans, and all good things <3
“Have a good shift,” Bilba had said, craning up to claim a brief, soft kiss as they said their goodbyes at his front door. Thorin had returned the kiss, one broad hand cupping the back of her head as he bent to her, and Bilba's bones had felt jellied with relief.

“Thanks,” he had murmured, pulling back just enough to keep his nose brushing her cheek. “Now, stop fretting. We're all right, yeah?”

That assurance had settled in her belly, heavy and pulsing warm as she'd trotted down the pavement away from Thorin's flat and towards the nearest Tube station. They were all right. Things had gone... better than they might have done.

She was all the way home again, already planning the rest of her Sunday to consist of little more than curling up with a book and a cup of tea, when she finally remembered her mobile. It had migrated from her pocket to her purse before she’d left Thorin's flat, and she hadn't yet thought to read the message she'd gotten when she was in the midst of confessing her mistake.

The text, when she checked it, was a actually a photo message— Bofur's face stared up at her from the screen of her phone, with his hair a tragic flyaway mess and what looked like a pillow and part of Nori's bare, tattooed shoulder behind his head. Besides being obviously still in bed when he'd answered her, he was also wearing the most dramatic, unconvincing look of shock she had ever seen in her life.

The photo was captioned: you don't say.

“Oh, you arse,” Bilba said aloud, shaking her head at the phone, but she was laughing.

There were heavy footsteps across the station's concrete floor, then the rattle of metal against metal, and Thorin glanced over to where Dwalin was just arriving. After a mutual nod and grunt of greeting, he turned back to continue stowing his own gear in his locker.

It was the start of their first night shift of two, and Thorin had said goodbye to Bilba hours ago, first at his door, then again, silently, as he watched her head off down the street from his flat window. He was still feeling somewhat out of sorts about the secret she'd thought she'd been keeping, but he couldn't get the sight of her wide, watery blue eyes out of his mind. She'd looked devastated, heartbroken that she'd hurt him, and apparently he was helpless in the face of that genuine, tearful apology.

Or, more likely, he was helpless in the face of Bilba Baggins, and the affection that swelled up in his chest at the very thought of her.

Damn it.
She'd promised they'd be truthful from here out. That was good enough.

“Well thank fuck for that.” Thorin looked to where Dwalin stood, bare-chested, just doing up the flies of his station uniform trousers.

“Thank fuck for what,” Thorin said, desert dry, knowing full well he was going to regret asking.

Leaving his shirt hanging on its peg for the moment, Dwalin closed the few steps between them and leaned against the row of lockers just beside Thorin, crossing his thick, tattooed arms.

“Thank fuck,” he said, in a perfectly conversational way, low enough that the blokes from Green Watch, just getting off for the night, might not hear most of it from farther down the row. “You're looking like you've got a bur up your arse. One more shift of suffering through that shit-eating grin you think you're hiding, and I couldn't be held responsible for my actions. Meeting the lass's mates didn't go so smooth, I take it.”

“One more word of this conversation—” Already dressed in his own uniform, Thorin shut his locker door with somewhat more force than strictly necessary. “And I won't be responsible for my actions.”

“Bit of a row's good for the blood, now and then,” Dwalin said with a shrug, as though Thorin hadn't uttered a word. Green Watch was clearing out, thankfully, leaving him and Dwalin alone, offering a few friendly waves as they went. “Though I'd take a pub fight over a domestic, every time. Punch up with some lippy prick who's had too many pints is better than a cold shoulder and a cold sofa, eh?” He continued to talk even as Thorin turned and stalked out of the locker room.

“Fair do's to her mates, you're an arsehole on first meeting,” he called out, before Thorin disappeared through the door. “But you get better. I'd give it some time!”

“Who's an arsehole?” Fili asked, stepping deftly out of Thorin's way; the lad was still in his civvies, jeans and an oxblood red jacket, and no doubt headed to his own locker.

“Dwalin,” Thorin replied, then paused his exit just long enough to lean back into the room, pointing meaningfully at the arsehole in question. “And you, piss off and mind your business.”

He trusted that as much as Dwalin might take the piss out of him when they were chatting in relative privacy, the man wouldn't likely go blabbing to Fili. Still, saying it plain felt good.

“Oh aye, sir.” Dwalin saluted loosely, obviously still profoundly amused by the whole thing, and Thorin flipped him off before beating a strategic retreat.

“No, nope, I'm not even going to ask,” he heard Fili say. And with any luck at all, it was the truth.

One thing she hadn't kept secret from Thorin, even when she'd been hazy at best about the exact details of her job, was her upcoming trip across the Pond.

A week in New York, next week to be exact, and in the meantime there was a staggering amount of things to do before boarding the plane on Saturday. A Lingerie Fashion Week was an exciting new idea— not a show exclusively for buyers and industry folk, as usually happened, but for media and the public as well. Exciting, and past due, but it was certainly not without its workload.
Preparations were in full swing already, of course, but Bilba had never been officially consulted on paperwork and such things before Gandalf had had her name stencilled on an office door just beside his own: Bilba Baggins, Assistant Director. She’d had her opinions before, of course, and the vast majority of people in the Istari Building had long ago stopped batting a single eyelash at her presence at meetings, dragged here and there by Gandalf. But this was different. This was formalized, signed off by Saruman himself, and Bilba could already feel her stomach fluttering with nerves at the thought of mucking it all up.

And beyond those new responsibilities, there was still the matter of the show itself, and her modelling in it. That, at least, was old hat for her, though not without its own anxieties.

All of this amounted to a hellishly frantic few days, during which she hardly left the Istari Building to do more than sleep, with her mornings spent down on the Second Floor being sewn into various elaborate knickers in Bifur's workrooms, perfecting the fit, and her afternoons devoted to paperwork, and following Gandalf around hither and yon like a lost lamb. It was exhausting, but also oddly thrilling, and Gandalf had just the worst sort of twinkle in his eye every time she caught him looking at her. It was at twinkle of isn't this all wonderful fun, and nothing to worry about at all.

It was a twinkle that had caused no end of trouble for her, in the past.

Thorin's schedule meant he was sleeping Monday, and catching up on sleep most of Tuesday as well, which meant their conversation was largely limited to infrequent texts. By Wednesday, Bilba had hardly any notion of what day it even was anymore— she was currently perched on a sturdy step stool, trussed up a bra and knickers of the softest lilac silk, with frothy bits of cream and coral lace, being cinched into a waspie by Bifur's big, gentle hands. The colours were fresh, soft, and evocative of springtime in the countryside; Bilba had little doubt that similar tones in a the hands of another, less skilful designer might have had her looking like an Easter egg, but Bifur was a wonder.

Bifur was behind her, his palms feeling along the boning that now nipped in her waist, squeezing here and there. “Too tight?”

“No, it’s fine.” Bilba straightened her posture a bit more, taking a deep breath and feeling the fabric shift with her. “Perfectly fine. Not biting at all.”

Bifur hummed a wordless affirmative, sounding pleased, and padded over to one of his worktables. He had an impossible array of notebooks, fabrics, tools, and bits of unfinished projects, seemingly scattered everywhere, but he was able to grab a biro and begin scribbling down notes without searching for a thing. There was some sort of order to this chaos, though Bilba couldn’t suss it.

“Perfect, indeed.” The sound of an unexpected voice— familiar, sonorous, and not entirely welcome— nearly made Bilba shriek, though she managed to swallow it back to a subtle gasp. Smaug seemed to melt out of the background, appearing as if from thin air, though in reality he’d simply been lurking, unmoving and unnoticed, by the workroom door. The door which had been shut behind her when she’d come down for fittings, and which was still closed now.

He sauntered forward, affecting that liquid roll of muscle and lean lines he so favoured, coming within arm’s reach of Bilba. He was dressed in a slim-cut suit of deep charcoal grey, with a bottle green cashmere jumper layered under the jacket, and a sly, curling smile lighting up his face.

“Though you’re rather fond of a bit of biting,” he murmured, leaning close as if sharing a secret; his voice was a deep rumble, but still probably loud enough for Bifur to hear. Bilba felt heat wash over her cheeks, no doubt flushing pink. “If memory serves.”

“You-you’re n-not—” Bifur began to say, his stutter mounting with his agitation, only to have
Smaug began speaking over him without sparing a glance his way, waving a careless hand.

“Yes, yes, I’m not due for another few hours, I know.” His clear, copper-brown eyes were still trained on Bilba, straying from her face, down the length of her neck and back up again, slow and heavy as a caress. “I just left a meeting with Saruman, and thought, why not see if my dear Bilba would care for some lunch and stimulating company. My treat, and my absolute pleasure, of course.”

“Lunch?” It was noon, or close enough, and Bilba had been ignoring the gurgling in her stomach in the interests of getting this fitting over with. Of course, it would choose that precise moment to growl audibly, making Smaug’s smile widen with amusement. She called up a polite smile of her own, trying very hard not to shiver under his rapt attention. “Not worried you’ll be tired of me by next week?”

It was actually quite a large, impressive feather in the cap of Istari that Gigi’s had managed to hire Smaug for the New York trip; unlike Bilba, he was entirely freelance, without a contract tying him to any one company. Saruman would likely have paid a small fortune to procure Smaug’s employment for so long a stretch, and especially for such a prominent event.

“I could never tire of you,” he said, sounding so utterly earnest that something traitorous and warm curled in the pit of Bilba’s empty stomach, entirely without her permission. She swallowed it back, allowing her fingers to brush absently along the lace at her hips.

“We’re in the middle of fittings,” she tried, glancing over to Bifur, who was frowning thunderously and massaging the side of his jaw. She felt a pang of inappropriate amusement at the thought that though Smaug had interrupted him, quite discourteously, Bifur was still the one with the pins, and it would be Smaug’s turn at fittings that afternoon.

“There’s no reason to refuse, no polite excuse she could cobble together, and the most annoying part of all was the fact that Smaug was, in general, excellent company. A clever conversationalist, well-read and expressive, too charming for anyone’s good... unless something flared his temper, of course. Then his mood could shift from gregarious to acidic in the blink of an eye, still sharp as a razor but turned about unpleasantly, deeply cutting rather than captivatingly witty.

They were about to spend an entire week together, possibly living in each others’ pockets for the majority of the time, depending on their schedule for professional socializing and networking. Bilba truly wanted to keep things as cordial as possible, and Smaug hadn’t done anything worth rebuffing a friendly invitation. The same sort he’d extended, and she’d accepted, several times before.

Nothing to warrant rejection, except sneak into Bifur’s workshop while she was getting fitted. Granted, the door hadn’t been locked, but it had been closed, and there hadn’t been a knock. The unannounced nature of his arrival sat a bit ill, to be honest.

Deeply ingrained manners and consideration for their professional relationship warred briefly with a nagging doubt in the back of Bilba’s mind, and the former was about to win out, when a jaunty tapping on the door saved her from answering.

“Knock, knock,” Bofur called out, as he slipped inside the room, with a pair of brown paper bags and a tray of takeaway cups in hand. “Hope you’re not decent, darlin’— Oh.”

When it came to Smaug, Bofur was never strictly impolite (or at least, not without cause, in Bilba’s
experience), though he was less concerned with maintaining an amiable relationship than Bilba was. Immediately, both men seemed to draw up to their full heights (which, if it was some sort of masculine contest, Smaug won by a few inches), and the easy grin fell from Bofur’s face, replaced by a blandly neutral stare.

When she and Smaug had been dating, and things had begun to go south, her close, admittedly flirty friendship with Bofur had become one of the bones of contention. Certain accusations and insinuations had been thrown about on more than one occasion.

Neither man was especially fond of the other, even now, almost seven years since.

“I come bearing soup,” Bofur said, lifting the bags and not bothering to greet Smaug. “Lunch for the hard-working souls stuck inside. Chicken and lentil for the lady, beetroot for my dear cousin, and plenty of naan. And tea.”

“Bilba has lunch plans,” Smaug said, sharper than necessary, and this was a situation that needed to be defused before it was properly lit. Bofur would be with them in New York as well, and Bilba would much rather everyone make it back to England alive and still in one piece at the end of the week, if possible.

“Bilba does, indeed,” she said, hopping carefully off the step stool and losing the near half-metre of height it afforded her. “Bifur, may I have a robe please? Smaug, I was going to mention, Bofur is bringing me lunch today, since I’ve so much work this afternoon and can’t pop out. But I do appreciate the offer—could we reschedule?”

There was a cream silk robe being laid over her shoulders, and Bilba slipped her arms into the sleeves, murmuring her thanks to Bifur with a sweet smile back at the man. Bofur had begun clearing a spot on one of the worktables, and the warm, savoury scents wafting from the bags were heavenly.

Bilba pulled the robe closed, turning back to Smaug as she secured the belt in place; there was a gleam in his eyes now, not the annoyed flare that Bofur’s arrival had put there, and he was leaning into her space again, towering over her all the more since she’d stepped barefoot onto the floor.

“Of course,” he said, and reached down to take her hand in his own, his long, graceful fingers all but swallowing hers. His skin was warm, velvety smooth, and she would have wagered from the precise trim and polish of his nails that he’d recently had a manicure. It was so entirely unlike Thorin’s wide, callused hand, with its thick fingers and rough edges. “What about tomorrow? Let me take you out for dinner, wherever you like.”

Oh lord, this was not going smoothly at all.

“Tomorrow? Tomorrow’s... Thursday, isn’t it?” Ignoring the meaningful, exaggerated expressions of agony Bofur was sending her way, just out of Smaug’s view, Bilba gave the hand grasping hers a friendly, apologetic squeeze. “Tomorrow is Valentine’s.”

“Oh course,” he said, and reached down to take her hand in his own, his long, graceful fingers all but swallowing hers. His skin was warm, velvety smooth, and she would have wagered from the precise trim and polish of his nails that he’d recently had a manicure. It was so entirely unlike Thorin’s wide, callused hand, with its thick fingers and rough edges. “What about tomorrow? Let me take you out for dinner, wherever you like.”

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“Wherever you like,” Smaug repeated, dipping his head and favouring her with a small, private smile. It wasn’t his polished, public look, but rather a crooked, fond quirk of his full lips. This was a smile Bilba remembered from early days, when Smaug was still Eurig at home, and he would happily spend hours curled around her in his lush, expansive bed, holding her close and rumbling quiet words of *treasured* and *forever* into the crook of her neck. “Name the place, anywhere, and don’t worry about reservations. I will handle everything.”

“Smaug,” she said, because he really did prefer the surname now, even if it felt odd and distanced to her. “I’m sorry, but I can’t tomorrow.” Taking a steadying breath, she dearly hoped she was making
the wisest decision as she continued. “I’ll be having dinner with my boyfriend.”

There was no explosion, no outburst. Just a pause, a slow blink, and then a minute hardening of Smaug's fine features into an impassive, porcelain mask.

“Boyfriend?” Tilting his head, a bit like a bird, Smaug slackened his fingers around her own, but didn't pull back his arm. She was now holding his hand, rather than the other way around. “Oh, I... hadn't heard. You never said.”

_We hardly ring each other up to chat, do we, she didn't say._

Nor did she say: _that's because it's none of your business._

In fact, she didn't have a chance to utter a word before Bofur was speaking up, calling out to them as he stirred a plastic spoon through his own little cup of soup.

“How is Mister Tall, Dark, and Ridiculously Handsome, darlin'? Oh, and if you'd be so kind, please let him know I'd consider it a personal favour if he'd shave before whatever you get up to between now and Saturday. Dealing with beard burn on a live catwalk'll be a right pain in the arse.”

Swivelling her head around so fast she felt nearly dizzy, Bilba levelled Bofur with the sourest frown she had at her disposal, and was mildly placated when he visibly withered under the look. Bifur also gave him a smack in the back of the skull— not too terribly hard, but enough to have him sputtering.

“I should be off,” Smaug said suddenly, stepping away but keeping their hands loosely entwined. “If you're certain I can't treat you to lunch.”

The offer was made much more coolly this time, with the shutters obviously having closed over whatever vulnerability Smaug had been willing to expose to her, and Bilba felt the sting of its loss. It wasn't heartbreaking, but it was sad... and perhaps a slight, guilty relief.

“I'm certain,” she said, smiling gently up at him. “But thank you. Another time, really.”

Smaug hummed something like an affirmative, then drew his hand back, smoothing it absently over the front of his jumper. “I'll be back this afternoon for my fitting. Be ready at two.”

Without waiting for agreement, Smaug swept out of the room in several long strides, letting the door close hard, but not slammed, behind him. There was the lingering scent of cologne, darker and spicier than Smaug's usual choice of Clive Christian, under the hearty smells of lunch being slurped nearby

“That was horridly rude, Bofur,” she said, feeling entirely out of sorts now, and not especially charitable towards ill manners. “And I would appreciate it if you didn't trot out my private life as fodder for your vulgar, unkind antics, if you please. I cannot believe I even have to tell you that, for goodness sake.”

“Oh, Christ have _mercy._” Pushing his soup aside, Bofur dropped his head onto his palm, elbow braced on the tabletop. “I was out of line, all right? That prick just gets under my skin, after everything— even the _look_ of him, Jesus.”

Bilba didn't say anything, but she did pad quietly to the table, dragging her own soup over to sit across from Bofur's hunched form. Popping the plastic lid from the waxed paper cup, she waited; Bifur was dunking a torn piece of naan into his rich maroon soup, not speaking either. Until finally, after a few lengthy moments of that silence, Bofur let out a deep, irritated groan.
“I'm sorry.” He took a deep breath, then exhaled it hard enough to ruffle his moustache. “That wasn't fair to you, and I am sorry, love.”

“Thank you.” Bilba reached across the table, giving Bofur's forearm a squeeze. “Please, do try to be civil with Smaug? For me? This next week will be ghastly otherwise.”

And it would be simpler to replace a make-up artist, in the case of an untenable conflict of personalities, than it would be to replace a well-respected, highly sought model with a known name. Especially given the likely obscene amount of money Saruman would have already signed away to cover Smaug’s fee.

If it came down to it, Bilba was confident that Gandalf would kick up a extraordinary fuss rather than lose Bofur for the trip, but that wasn’t a battle that needed fighting.

“He's a smug, nasty shite,” Bofur said, taking up his spoon again and jabbing at the noodles floating around his soup. “And I've no idea why you even give him the time of day, instead of a boot to the bollocks like he deserves.”

“Because,” Bilba said, looking to Bifur as well. “Any unpleasantness between Smaug and I was years ago, and I'm not one for carrying around such resentment for no reason at all.” When Bofur opened his mouth, the start of an argument taking shape behind his teeth, Bilba held up a quelling hand. “No, listen. We were both younger, and more than a little foolish, and I've chosen to forgive rather than get bogged down by past mistakes. But I've not forgotten anything, and I'm not about to make those mistakes again. All right?”

Bofur's mouth was drawn down in a mutinous scowl, while Bifur looked only slightly less grim. Wonderful.

“He is an arse,” Bifur said, enunciating every syllable with great purpose, pausing briefly to lick his lips with a red-stained tongue. “But it's up to y-you.”

“Thank you, Bifur.” Bilba offered a warm, grateful smile, then raised both eyebrows in Bofur's direction.

“Fine,” he said, shrugging hard. “Fine. I'll... behave myself. But only as much as that arsehole keeps himself reined in, mind.”

“That's all I ask.” Bilba gave Bofur's arm a pat, then tucked enthusiastically in to her lunch.

It was indeed all she could ask, realistically. It was better than a powder keg, at least.

Chapter End Notes

You may recall this Fashion Week thing being mentioned ages ago. Well, we've finally arrived, almost. Head's up for anyone wanting some Thorin & Smaug tension.

As always, I am deeply grateful for all of you reading, and for those who leave comments and kudos. Thank you so much for sticking around and exploring this AU with me so far; I'm excited to see where we go from here, and I hope you are as well <3
Chapter 26
Chapter by littleblackdog

Chapter Notes

A chapter in which nothing but sweetness and a bit of nostalgia happens, because they deserve to be plainly happy for a little while <3

You can find a photoset for this chapter over here

It was a quiet Thursday morning, and in this lull wedged between the rush of the very early-goers and the noon crowd, the gym was comfortably quiet. Not entirely empty, but near enough for Thorin's preference.

Thorin was in the middle of his second set of pull-ups, keeping count silently as his arms and back flexed to lift him to the bar, when an unexpected, but very pleasantly familiar voice shook him out of his concentration.

"Goodness, what are the odds." Finishing his rep, Thorin began to lower himself as Bilba came around from behind him, only to stay hanging where he was when she held up a single finger to keep him in place— one moment please. The curling corners of her lips were amused, and more than a tad cheeky. "Oh no, no, don’t let me stop you. This is a sight that deserves an encore, after all the times I’ve remembered it.”

Thorin huffed a breath through his nose, snorting like a bull, but pulled himself into another rep. He wasn’t wearing a dip belt at the moment, lifting only himself without any extra weight, so it wasn’t difficult to speak to her as he continued on.

“Going to ogle me again, are you?”

Bilba crossed her arms, one hip cocked out to the side in her loosely fitted shorts, and appeared to do just that for one long moment. Thorin could almost feel the slow drag of her gaze over him, lingering on his bare, straining arms; it was definitely not a bad sensation, by any stretch of the imagination.

“I really am,” she said, and she was smiling properly now, her eyes glinting bright and laughing above the petal-pink flush of her cheeks. “And I’m certainly not thinking about sandwiches this time, if you were concerned. Well, not entirely about sandwiches.”

Thinking about sandwiches— that had been Bilba’s excuse when they’d first met, and he’d noticed her staring at him working out on this same pull-up bar. He'd thought it was an awkward, poorly planned, and panicky response to being caught making eyes at a complete stranger, but after a month of dating, he’d seen the same half-lidded, heated glaze fall over her expression whenever she got a bit peckish and started daydreaming.

His girlfriend, prone to making bedroom eyes about lunch. This was his life now, and Thorin was enjoying it thoroughly.

At the moment, however, Bilba seemed to have eyes only for him, watching intently with her teeth peering out to press into the plush jut of her bottom lip. Thorin took a breath, then pulled himself
higher, lifting his entire chest above the bar in a muscle up. His arms were braced straight, pushing
down on the bar, and he kept himself there for a few seconds, revelling in Bilba's look of surprise.

“Now you're just showing off,” she said, as he eased out of the pose and came back down to
hanging. Thorin pulled himself into another muscle up before answering, grinning at her from his
distant perch above the bar.

“I really am.” She laughed, one hand pressed against her cheek, and the warmth blooming in
Thorin's chest was hotter than any burn of strain in his arms. She was utterly gorgeous, and he was
utterly gone.

Upon reflection, he found he was too happy to be embarrassed about it. Endorphins and Bilba were
a heady combination.

Showing off or not, it was still easier to talk without worrying about the equipment, and he was
getting a wee bit distracted. Thorin lowered himself again, this time dropping from the bar
completely, his trainers planting firm against the floor.

“But what do you expect,” he said, grabbing his towel, wiping his hands before slinging it over his
shoulder. He wasn't usually keen on effusive displays in public, nor was Bilba, but the gym floor
was still mostly quiet. Reaching out, Thorin cupped her cheek, bending down to press a quick kiss
against her forehead. “With my girlfriend watching?”

“Silly man.” Bilba leaned up, pressing her smiling mouth against his in another peck. She smelled as
though she'd been working out already, pleasantly salty and fresh with good sweat, and there were a
few small wisps curling free from her ponytail, clinging to the skin along her hairline.

“Thought you were at work today,” he said, partially a question, and shuffled to a more respectable
distance.

Between his shifts earlier in the week, and Bilba’s preparations for her upcoming trip, they hadn’t
had the chance to see each other in a few days. After the revelations and the subsequent tension on
Sunday, it was a somewhat awkward time to spend entirely apart, but perhaps it had been for the
best. It had given him a chance to force himself to consider his reaction to her quasi-lying, alone and
uninfluenced.

He had told her they were good, but he probably wouldn’t have felt quite so convinced of it himself
if he’d not had the chance to mull things over.

To brood about it, Dis would have said, if he ever had any intention of telling her about Bilba’s
botched attempt at deception. Which he didn’t. He and his sister were close (as they had been all
their lives, though that connection had become especially fundamental after the fire), but he still
clung doggedly to some semblance of privacy.

“I am at work.” Bilba gestured at the gym around them, shrugging slightly. “It’s shortly before a
show, and this is part of the process: making certain everything looks tip-top, and all that. And, to be
honest, I desperately needed some time out of that bloody building.”

get a reservation somewhere, if you’d rather.” Finding a decent restaurant might be a bit of a feat at
the eleventh hour, but Thorin was willing to take the chance if she was tired.

“You know it’s actually Valentine’s Day, Thorin,” Bilba said. “Reservations will be worth more
than gold today, and anyway, I like to cook for you. It’s relaxing, a night in.”
And there was that sultry expression again, with her eyes going dark and her lashes sweeping down — even if part of it was the thought of a delicious supper, Thorin would claim at least partial responsibility for putting that devastatingly attractive look on her face.

“A night in,” he said after a moment, when the quiet between them had grown too heated for the situation. His voice was gruff, his throat dry, and he felt a bolt of deep satisfaction when Bilba shivered at the sound of her own words echoed back at her. “Right. You’re letting me bring wine, yes?”

“Yes, yes, lovely.” Glancing around him, over his shoulder, Bilba heaved a short sigh. “I’ve got to get back to it; there’s a yoga class starting in five minutes, and I’m meant to be in it. I’ll see you tonight, darling?”

Bilba doing yoga was an image that snared his attention, but this was not the proper time, and Thorin reeled himself back to the conversation before he could truly drift away.

“Definitely,” he said, leaning in for a parting kiss when Bilba took hold of his elbow, coaxing him down. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Thorin arrived at Carrock House that evening, shortly before eight o’clock. He parked the Bonnie up in the little gravel drive, and then gingerly unzipped the backpack he’d brought along. Luckily enough, the building was well-lit on the outside— even hidden away behind the ample shrubbery where he was, he was able to assess the damage.

The roses were mostly unscathed, only slightly squashed from the trip shoved in a sack, and the wine bottle beneath them was completely fine. Thorin swore under his breath, even as relief washed over him, and set about trying to fluff the flowers back into the neat shape they’d been in when he left his own flat. He managed to jab himself with the tiny prickles several times, cursing with each sting.

Then the sound of a deep, rumbling voice from the bushes startled him enough that the roses nearly ended up strewn over the gravel, only to be fumbling caught at the last moment.

“Here again, I see.” Bilba’s landlord seemed to melt out of the shadows, crossing his massive arms over his chest and wearing a by-now familiar scowl. It was the same disgruntled twist of his mouth as every other time he’d met Thorin on the Carrock’s grounds. “I suppose I ought get used to you, should I? The little bunny seems fond, for whatever reason.”

There was a note of assessment layered there, and possibly a warning as well. Thorin didn’t allow it to chafe him overmuch, firming his hold on the roses and meeting Beorn’s sharp brown eyes steadily.

“I’m under no illusions that I’ll find myself in your good graces soon, Mister Urs.” Thorin dipped his chin slightly, but didn’t lower his gaze at all. “But as long as Bilba is so fond, I’ll be around.”

Beorn huffed at him, a great gust of air that rasped at the end, nearly like a growl. The silence settled between them, taut and heavy, until finally Beorn seemed to relax minutely, his wide shoulders lowering perhaps a fraction of an inch.

Thorin hesitated for a moment, earning an unimpressed narrowing of Beorn’s gaze in the dim light, then held the little pot of flowers out. It was rare for Thorin to feel dwarfed by anyone—he was relatively tall, eking just barely over six feet, and quite broadly built—but Beorn was something else altogether. When the giant of a man snatched the flower pot, it looked like a teacup in his palms, but his thick fingers were impossibly deft as they fussed over the glossy green leaves and delicate yellow blossoms.

Thorin watched, vaguely entranced by the dexterity of those enormous, heavily set paws; it was only a few seconds before Beorn was handing the roses back, neated and primped, looking (to Thorin’s eye, at least) even more lush than they had straight from the flower shop.

“Thanks.” Any questions he might have had about the reason for Beorn’s offer of help remained unspoken, in the spirit of gift horses and not counting teeth.

Beorn snorted, waving one hand in clear dismissal. “Little bunny deserves the best.”

“She truly does,” Thorin agreed, fetching the wine and slinging the empty backpack over the seat of the Bonnie. He nodded once, then left Beorn to it (lurking in the bushes or patrolling the grounds—whatever had the landlord out and about), heading up towards the front door and taking a deep breath before pushing the buzzer for Bilba’s flat. He also made a point of smiling slightly at the beetle-black eye of the camera aperture, knowing that Bilba would be able to see him from the tiny screen of her intercom panel (he deeply appreciated the level of security at Carrock House, even if Beorn wasn’t the friendliest chap).

He held the flowers lower than the camera could see, keeping them a surprise.

Shortly thereafter, he heard the snick of the door locks unlatching, and Bilba’s voice came through the speaker. “Come on up, darling.”

There were a trio of cats on the stairs when he started up, one calico and a pair of tabbies, which was something he’d come to expect on his visits to the Carrock. There were usually a few curious beasts willing to approach him, if he lingered too long in the building’s corridors. It was worse if he’d been spending time at Dis’ house, with Minty’s scent and copious amounts of fur suffusing his clothes.

On this occasion, one cat in particular was laid out long and boneless across the entirety of a stair tread, apparently sleeping soundly, and Thorin stepped carefully over it. The last thing he needed tonight was to tumble ignobly down the stairs with a shrieking cat under his boot. If the fall didn’t break his neck, Beorn would doubtlessly be willing to finish the job.

Finally he was at Bilba’s landing, then her door, rapping his knuckles against the bright green wood.

Bilba’s momentary exasperation seemed to fade, settling into something like amused annoyance, and
she cupped the ornate little flowerpot in both hands, drawing it close enough to inhale the scent before stepping out of the doorway to let him through.

“Well, come in then,” she said, keeping the roses close to her chest. “You’re lucky they’re so lovely, or I might be cross. Oh, and it’s a rose bush, you sneaky, thoughtful sod. Thank you.”

“I thought you’d appreciate something living.” Slipping inside, Thorin closed the door behind himself, then glanced meaningfully deeper into the flat and the dozens of plants littered about. “And these should still be blooming when you get back from your trip.”

Hanging his coat on a peg and toeing off his boots, Thorin followed on Bilba’s heels, padding across the hardwood towards her kitchen. The roses were set gently on the worktop, as was the wine, still chilled from Thorin’s refrigerator and the drive over on a brisk February evening. Only then did Thorin find a small hand creeping up the front of his jumper, urging him down into a slow kiss.

Bilba tasted of mint, sharp and fresh from the balm on her lips, tingling. Deeper than that, there was familiar heat and the gust of her quiet sigh into his mouth, filling him up as he bent to her, sliding his hand along her smooth jaw and into the silk of her hair. Her own arms were slung around his neck, fingers playing along his collar and leaving a trail of gooseflesh wherever they teased. She bit his lip, the barest tug of her teeth jolting like lightning into the pit of his gut, and Thorin braced his other hand against the cupboard behind her, squeezing the edge of the worktop hard.

Separating was a gradual process, punctuated with a few more kisses, each softer than the one before it, until eventually they were standing against her kitchen cupboards, still close enough for Thorin to brush another kiss against the bridge of her nose, and then another on her forehead. Her arms slid down his body as he straightened up, until they settled around his hips and her hands snuck into the back pockets of his black jeans, pinching.

“Hey now,” he objected, without any sincerity at all, and Bilba’s sly grin was unrepentant as she dug her fingertips into the meat of his arse.

“Hush, I’ve missed you. Missed your bum.” She leaned forward, until her chin was propped on his chest, and her breasts were pressed flush against him. There really wasn’t anything to do at that point but wrap his arm around her, holding her close as he peered down into her laughing expression. The lights in the flat were low, already turned down dim and romantic, darkening Bilba’s eyes to the colour of a deep, storm-battered sea.

“Missed you too,” he said quietly, sober with the truth of it, then dragged his hand over the generous curve of her bum to chase off any growing seriousness. Bilba laughed again, brighter and louder this time, and smacked her palm lightly against his shoulder before wriggling out of his embrace. She headed toward the refrigerator, fetching a plate of finger foods to set out on the worktop. Thorin recognized prawns, and the green tips of asparagus rolled in some thin meat, but the rest was all various bits of colour layered over toast.

“Be a love and open that wine, please,” Bilba said, using the little step stool she kept by the sink to take a pair of glasses down from the cupboard. Thorin had made the mistake, only once, of reaching over her head to get something out of easy range for her, unprompted and unasked. Now he knew better, and left her alone to her putter around her kitchen as she pleased, acting as a dutiful retriever of high things only when it was requested.

The wine was a simple matter with a corkscrew from the drawer, and Thorin poured a measure for each of them before turning his attention to the food, plucking up one of the wrapped asparagus pieces when Bilba knocked her hip against his.
“Supper will be done in just two shakes,” she said, taking one of the toast pieces and turning to the cooker as she munched away.

“Oh god, I’m going—I’m going to—” Bilba was panting hot against his neck, her bare feet digging into the backs of his thighs, and Thorin heaved a deep, shuddering breath. She was so close, so close already, from his touch and his attentions, and damned if that didn’t make his blood sing—

“God,” Bilba said again, arching against his rhythm, keeping time with his thrusts and turning his bones to liquid with every twist and grind of her hips. “Oh Thorin, I’m going to—going to have to clean this table for days. Oh, oh god.”

The actual words took a few seconds to register, but when they did, Thorin’s hips stuttered, and he slowed his pace, pulling back enough to look into Bilba’s flushed face, haloed by the wildly mussed hair spread over that very table.

“Sorry?” He shuffled his feet, his crumpled jeans still tangled around one ankle. He very purposely pressed deeper into the slick heat of her, somewhat mollified to feel her clench around him, and watch her face go slack with pleasure for just an instant. The sensation certainly made his toes curl against the floor, buzzing under his skin and tightening his balls. “Did you—we could go to the bedroom, you know, or the sofa? I can carry you, just like this.”

As a demonstration (or at least partly for that reason), Thorin used his grip around the back of her thigh to hoist one of her legs up, hooking it over his shoulder and sinking into her just that little bit deeper. Bilba, in response, stretched back until she was lying prone and squirming on the tabletop, her nails scraping against the wood. Her dress was gone, draped over the back of a chair, as was her pearly pink bra. Her knickers... Thorin had no idea where they’d ended up. He hadn’t been paying a great deal of attention to where he’d tossed them. Somewhere distant, more than likely—possibly over by the sink, and the dishes they’d piled there once the remains of their delicious meal had been cleared away.

They’d also moved the candles Bilba had placed between their settings; it had been romantic lighting for the meal, certainly, but current activities would not have benefited from open flames in close proximity to flailing limbs and flyaway hair. Thorin was all too aware of the potential dangers, and had taken the time to blow the candles out as he carried them to a safer perch on the worktop.

“Go? No, no, don’t you dare,” Bilba said, reaching back to grab hold of the edge of the table behind her head, bearing down on his cock in an unexpected move that tore a sudden, desperate groan from his throat.

“Stay, darling.” Her legs tightened around his back, pulling him in, and Thorin went more than willingly, starting up another steady rhythm of thrusts, deep and slow. Bilba made a low, purring sort of noise under him, smiling blissfully and craning her neck back as he gradually began fucking her properly again. “Yes, Thorin, stay just here. Just like this. Perfect, just like this.”

“Worth the cleanup?” he said, pitched as a question, and bowed over enough to taste the salty sweet skin of her throat, kissing up towards her ear. It was difficult to lose the mood entirely when she was so willing, so eager under him, taking and giving pleasure with abandon.

“Entirely worth it,” she answered, without a moment’s hesitation. She gasped when he brought a
hand up to fondle one of her peaked nipples, where it was brushing over his chest with every rolling thrust, then started making faint wheezy sounds when his other hand found her clit, his thumb stroking against it in the same rhythm. He bent close to catch a few wet, messy kisses, shuddering when she started murmuring nonsense sentiments and breathy curses against his mouth. Just like this, he could bring her over the edge in only a few more minutes, or hold them both on the cusp of it for perfect ages.

Entirely worth it.

Worth the cleanup— worth the mess. That probably shouldn’t have felt like such a meaningful compliment, but only a few minutes ago, one gorgeous, fussy Bilba Baggins had dragged him down onto her freshly cleared dining table, after feeding him a perfectly done, buttery tender steak. Only a few minutes ago, she’d hopped up onto the table where they’d just eaten, flirted, and shared easy conversation, and proceeded to pull him into the vee of her smooth legs, kissing him senseless as she unbuckled his belt with her clever, quick fingers. Gorgeous, and fussy, and yet he was still entirely worth the bother of getting sweaty and filthy together on her poor table, when he knew her bedroom was only a handful of steps down the hallway.

As Thorin was coming to understand, entirely worth it was not trivial praise by any stretch of the imagination. Not here, now, with this woman.

Entirely worth it were three simple words that meant a great deal, curling up warmly in his chest and taking root there.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

I wanted to mention, there's a Hobbit Big Bang happening right now, and I'll be writing a story for it (actually, it's currently in the works, and I am so excited about it).

If you're an author or an artist who might like to take part, sign-ups are still open! You can find more info over here: http://hobbitstory.livejournal.com

It was only barely two short days after the best Valentine's Day in her recent memory, and it was also obscenely early for a Saturday morning, but Bilba’s alarm clock continued to beep, no matter how much she willed it to stop. If she moved, she wouldn’t be able to hit snooze in good conscience, not even once. She would have to get up, get showered and dressed, and get to the bloody airport in that order. There wasn’t anything else for it.

There was a great, tectonic sort of shift behind her, and Bilba was suddenly squished flat into her pillow, gently crushed under a boulder of dense, sleep-warm body. Thorin jabbed unerringly at the clock’s buttons, silencing the strident beeping with ease, then rolled back to his own side of the bed, letting her take a full breath again.

His arm stayed outstretched, shifting from reaching for the clock, to curling around her. He drew her closer, until her back was pressed against his chest and his broad hand crept up under the thin shirt she’d slept in, fingers spanning over her bare belly. His breath was hot against her neck, as he inhaled deeply, then exhaled long and slow, rumbling with a quiet, half-asleep growling noise.

“Have to get up,” he murmured, nuzzling his long nose into her hair, making her shiver.

“I know.” She kept her voice almost inaudibly soft in the cosy stillness of the dark bedroom, unwilling to break the peace any more than necessary. “Go back to sleep; your shift’s not for hours yet.”

Bilba felt a little cluster of slow, open-mouthed kisses being pressed behind her ear, then Thorin’s words ghosted over the dampness left behind. “M’awake now. Shower?”

She had to be out the door in just over an hour, if she was going to arrive at Heathrow with ample time before their flight, which was scheduled to depart shortly after eight o’clock. Thorin was on day shift, not due at his fire station until half nine. If Bilba had been even slightly adept at denying herself, she probably would have rolled over, given Thorin a kiss on the forehead, and told him again to go back to sleep. It would have been a far more sensible choice.

She did roll over, and there was a kiss, but it was no gently dismissive peck. Bilba pressed close, bringing one hand up to stroke over the rasp of Thorin’s stubbly jaw, and leaned in to catch his mouth. In the shadows, she managed to stray off-target by a few centimetres, at first kissing his chin, then his bottom lip, but then she found her way.

The taste was stale, but that didn’t matter overmuch— the thought of a week with an ocean yawning
between them was more of a nuisance, especially now, cocooned in her fluffy duvet, with Thorin’s hand sliding around to stroke the small of her back, and his firm cock prodding her thigh. This was a much better place to stay, rather than being stuffed into a plane for endless hours. She kissed him slowly, swallowing his quiet hum of pleasure and letting the vibration of it sink into her bones, warming her from the inside out.

“Shower,” she said, retreating just enough to whisper the word against his wet mouth. “Join me?”

They tumbled out of bed together in a great mess of limbs without bothering to turn on the bedside lamp, catching toes on sheets, tripping over forgotten luggage, and cursing sleepy reflexes.

The shower was too hot at first, because Thorin had been the one to turn on the taps, while Bilba brushed the tangles out of her hair, leaving it puffed and wild around her shoulders. Stepping over the lip of the tub, she hissed when the fiery spray hit her skin, and Thorin slipped in behind her as she fiddled with the temperature, kissing apologies against the crown of her head.

“Forgot,” he said, his hands slipping down over the slickness of her skin, across her arms, bending low to hug her around the curve of her stomach. His bristly chin rested on her shoulder, and Bilba turned her head, letting him brush more kisses against her cheek.

The water was better now, not turning her into a tomato, and the company was nothing to complain about either.

Thorin insisted on helping her down with her luggage, lifting the four bags easily into the taxi. The sky was still dark, without even a hint of daybreak easing over the buildings yet, but there was enough light from the streetlamps to notice that his dubious expression still hadn't faded, even as he closed the boot with a firm thud.

When he'd first seen the quartet of bags—two wheeled suitcases, and a pair of hefty holdalls—Thorin hadn't done more than raise his eyebrows. Not a word of judgement had passed his lips, until he’d discovered that Bilba wasn’t responsible for bringing any of her outfits for work related purposes; anything for modelling, or indeed anything she'd be wearing during “official” socializing and networking, was brought separately, organized by Bifur and Gandalf.

After he'd learned that, Thorin had expressed some... disbelief about Bilba's notions of appropriate packing.

“You must have half your bloody flat in there,” he had said the night before, sitting propped up against the headboard of her bed, bare-chested, with the covers pooled down at his waist. Even that gorgeous image, coupled with the thought of what she had planned to do with that expansive bare chest while it was still within nibbling distance, hadn't been enough for Bilba to ignore the scoffing skepticism in his tone.

She then proceeded to explain, in no uncertain terms, that packing light might be perfectly fine for other people, but she had a certain standard of comfort she wasn’t about to cast aside, just because she was hopping on a plane. She wasn't the sort to just go running off into the blue with only a rucksack and a mobile phone—Thorin had mentioned something about soldiers' kits, and Bilba lugging more gear than an entire platoon, and she'd smacked him with a pillow.

She didn't mention the fact that she had actually packed her own pillow, among a few other
particular conveniences (hotels, even the nicer ones, rarely had just the right blend of thickness, weight, and softness in the pillows they provided).

The discussion had ended in a stalemate and a peacemaking sort of kiss, and Bilba had thoroughly enjoyed the rest of her evening home (her last evening home for a week), with her stubborn arse of a boyfriend.

But now it was morning, or near enough to be going with, and Bilba absolutely refused to get into a row, even a playful one, before she hopped into a cab.

“Stop it with that face,” she said, and when Thorin turned his attention to her, the first syllable of some argument on the tip of his tongue, she swept in and caught him around the waist first. Lacing her fingers together in the small of his back, her arms tucked between the lining of his unzipped coat and the skin-warm shirt beneath, Bilba pressed herself tightly against him, hugging hard. After a moment of hesitation, of surprise, Thorin’s arms came around her, one hand stroking over the back of her head.

“I expect mortifyingly sappy texts,” she murmured, taking a deep inhale of the scent of him with her cheek rubbing against his chest. He was dressed in the same long-sleeved shirt he'd come over wearing, a thick cotton blend old enough to have developed a fleecy, comforting sort of softness, and which now smelled like a captivating mix of the pair of them: Thorin's pleasant, natural musk layered with her own soap, bergamot and vetiver.

Thorin huffed a laugh into her hair, his breath much warmer than the chilly air around them. “I'll see what I can do.”

“Sonnets,” she insisted, gently pinching his ribs as she forced herself to draw back, to untangle. Thorin's hands dropped to cradle her waist, and Bilba was forced to imagine the drag of his thumbs over her hips; with her wool coat buttoned up, it wasn't as though she could actually feel anything more than just the weight of his touch.

“Limericks, maybe,” he countered, in a rare display of silliness, wearing a small, plainly amused smile. Bilba counted herself very lucky that she was privy to such displays of easy comfort from this man, for whom ease and comfort were rather uncommon, especially outwardly.

“That's acceptable.” They were still touching each other, hands resting on sides and arms slightly bent, and Bilba tilted her head up to meet the slow dip of his, catching his kiss in the narrow distance between them. It was a soft kiss at first, just a lingering buss of his mouth over her top lip, but it had Bilba stretching up onto her toes, seeking.

“I should go,” she said after a long moment, already missing the slide of Thorin’s nose against her cheek, and the taste of coffee on his tongue. She'd bought a little French press two weeks ago, to stop him arguing that instant coffee's fine, don't worry about it Bilba.

“Yeah.” His fingers bit into her hips, not too hard but gripping firm, steady, and then he was stepping back, spreading one arm out to usher her towards the cab door. “I'll leave your spare keys with Beorn after I gather my kit.”

Thorin could (and had before) leave for work directly from her flat, and it didn't make any sense for her to kick him out before half five in the morning, just because she had a plane to catch. Nor did it seem particularly polite, when she'd been the one to invite him to stay over the night before. So Bilba had pressed a spare set of her house keys into his palm, which wasn’t something she'd done with anyone since Smaug (and that had been his idea, before he'd convinced her to simply break her lease and move in with him).
These days, no one could get into her flat without her or Beorn to let them in; not Bofur, not even Gandalf had his own access to her flat, and her dear boss had been the one to recommend Carrock House in the first place, as Beorn was an old friend. In fact, when she'd thought to fetch them for Thorin, Bilba had found her spare keys all but forgotten in the back of her bedside drawer, buried under lip balm, a paperback she'd never finished, a slim packet of tissues, and a nearly empty box of condoms. She'd never really thought it likely that she'd need them... not like this.

*Keep them,* she didn't say to him, because it had only been a little more than a month since they'd begun seeing each other, and some things were the sort of big decisions that shouldn't be made impulsively, standing on the chilly pavement, still drowsy and feeling a wee bit fragile. Some milestones deserved more time, and more thought, and giving Thorin the keys to her flat, *to keep,* certainly felt like that sort of thing.

“Thank you,” she said instead, and grabbed his hand before he could grab the handle of the taxi door and open it for her. He wasn't wearing gloves, and she pressed a hard kiss against his rough knuckles.

There were lines crinkling the corners of his eyes when he smiled at her, and Bilba could still feel the tightening of his thick fingers around her hand, comfortingly solid, long after she and the cab had pulled away.

Bilba would have hardly been surprised if she were the first of their company to arrive, but Ori's place was actually on the way between Carrock and Heathrow, and (since she also trusted him to be packed and ready at a reasonable hour, unlike *some people*), they had mutually decided that she would pick him up on the way. Directing the cabbie towards the very posh little townhouse that he still shared with Dori, Bilba began to climb out of the taxi, only to find Ori's front door already swinging open the moment her foot touched the pavement.

“—you remember the power plug for your laptop?” That was Dori, wrapped in a brocade silk dressing gown in shades of watery blue and mauve, with matching pyjama bottoms peeking out above his slippers. “And the travel adapter? Useless without that, you know.”

“Yeah, yes, I know,” Ori answered, tumbling out of the house in a flurry, dragging his suitcase behind him and weighted down by his laptop bag strung over his chest. “I've got it, okay? Nothing to fret about.”

Dori visibly fluffed up at that, trotting down from the threshold on Ori’s heels, snatching up the suitcase with what looked like no effort in the slightest. It was easy to forget when Dori was pouring delicate designs into the steamed milk of a frothy drink or piping fine swirls of icing onto a fancy cake, that the man was actually as strong as a bull.

“Who’s fretting? I'm certainly not.” Ignoring Ori's protests, Dori carried the luggage all the way to the taxi, flashing a smile at her as he passed. “Good morning, Bilba dear.”

“Ah, good morning, Dori.” She’d finished getting out of the cab as the brother had chattered at each other, closing the door behind herself in an attempt to keep it warm inside, and stay in the cabbie's good graces. It was damned early, and they were something of an eccentric fare to deal with. “Ori, love, good morning.”
Ori was flushed faintly pink, likely from enduring Dori's fussing, under the floppy knit of his bright blue beanie. The hat matched precisely nothing else he was wearing, not a single layer, but it went well with the sprigs of fair, gingery hair peeking out around his neck. He'd managed to avoid being strong-armed into a haircut, it seemed.

“Morning,” he said, drawing up next to her, then under his breath: “There is nothing about this that isn't incredibly awkward. You have no idea.”

Just as Bilba was about to agree, she did indeed have no idea what he was on about, the boot closed with a thud and Dori was hustling over to them, reaching over to tug sharply at Ori's coat collar and smooth his fingers over the sides of his younger brother's face.

“If you go clubbing,” Dori said, perfectly calm, and Ori made a strangled, choking noise in the back of his throat. “Bring someone with you; someone we know. If you decide to wander around New York at night, by yourself, I will find out. Mark my words, I will find out.”

Before Ori could find his breath to formulate any sort of answer, Dori was turning to Bilba, tucking a piece of her hair behind her ear in a familiar gesture, finicky but fond. “Take care, dear. Remember your posture, always what's best for the assets, remember to smile with your eyes, and give them hell.”

“Dori,” Ori managed to gasp, sounding shocked and perhaps a bit mortified, only to be waved off.

“Oh shush.” There was a dramatic flap of fabric as Dori turned on his heel and all but sprinted back up towards the house's front door, his dressing gown flowing behind him like water. He leaned inside, and Bilba watched with more than a little confusion as he called into the house, almost loudly enough to risk bothering the neighbours. “You're going to be late!”

When Gandalf appeared in the doorway just a moment later, straightening his pewter grey car coat and carrying a leather valise, Bilba suddenly understood Ori's clandestine complaint, and Dori's relatively chipper mood.

“I'm never late,” Gandalf began saying, allowing Dori to brush some invisible bit of lint or other trifle from his shoulder. Gandalf’s eyes were narrowed by the width of his grin, and his hair was styled neater than Bilba had possibly ever seen it, with every silver wisp combed back from his face. “We shall arrive precisely—”

“Oh please,” Dori interrupted, crossing his arms and leaning back against the doorframe. “Spare me, you dotty old thing. You'd not have found your socks before Easter if it weren't for me, let alone found your way to Heathrow on time.”

“See,” Ori hissed quietly, leaning very close to Bilba's ear. “Awkward. They never... they only ever sleep over at Gandalf's, or wherever else. Then last night, I come down to make some toast before bed, and there he is with Dori on the sofa, watching Netflix.”

She was so hesitant to ask, but the alternative was letting her imagination run away with her, and based on the images Ori's fretful tone had planted in her brain, doing that could be much worse. “Do you mean actually watching Netflix, or...”

Ori's eyes went as wide as saucers, and his spindly hand curled around Bilba's elbow like a lifeline. “No! God, no, actually watching an old film, something black and white. But it's Mister Legris, and he's my boss, and this is so weird.”

“I think it's sweet,” Bilba said, buoyed by a surge of joy about her own rather fantastic love life, and
Ori made a sad little whimper.

She wasn't quite buoyed enough to keep staring as Gandalf's hand found its way to the back of Dori's neck, nor did she watch the drawn-out kiss that followed, punctuated by hums of pleasure, audible even from the kerb. But the foolish little smile didn't drop from her face, even as she glanced away to give the gentlemen a moment of privacy on this crisp morning, letting Ori bury his flushed face in the thick wool folds of her scarf.

Bofur arrived at their gate only shortly before they were meant to board, without Nori (who wasn't coming with them on this particular trip). Their esteemed technician-slash-set director was certainly present in spirit, however, or at least present in the conspicuous pattern of purpling love bites dotting up from Bofur's collar, the skewed state of his shirt under his open jacket, and the pathetically blissful expression on his face.

Plopping down to sit in an empty chair, sandwiching Ori between himself and Bilba, Bofur leaned back and adjusted his belt buckle, going so far as to undo and refasten it. “Morning, my darlin's. Lovely day for it. Hey, did you know the toilet cubicles here are absolutely roomy? Bigger than my first flat.”

“Oh lord.” Ori dropped his pen onto the sketchbook he'd had propped in his lap, cradling his face in his hands.

“You didn't,” Bilba said, knowing full well he had. Even if she hadn't been so certain, Bofur's answering wink was bordering on obscene. Pretending she couldn't feel the blush creeping up her face, Bilba shook her head in mock disappointment, then used the novel she'd been reading to motion at Bofur's spotted neck. “You'll be keeping all the beard burn cracks to yourself now that you've settled into that fancy glass house, Mister Broadbeam. You look as though you've been mauled. And your shirt is inside-out.”

“And what a grand mauling it was, too,” Bofur laughed, glancing down at the mixed up state of his clothes, while Ori seemed to be making all good efforts to sink into his chair.

Smaug was flying separately, arriving later, and that was an indefinable sort of relief. Bilba had never been an especially good traveller, and an eight hour flight stretching before her didn't improve matters one bit; her pleasant mood from the morning wasn't powerful enough to sustain past their juddering take off, and it didn't seem terribly wise to try and deal with Smaug when her nerves were already fraying. Especially not when she'd already been trying so hard not to snap at him, every time they'd interacted over the past few weeks.

In the years since they'd ended their romantic relationship, Smaug had always run hot and cold with his affection for her, while Bilba had become more convinced, the more time passed, that she had avoided quite an unpleasant fate by breaking it off when she had. She would admit, however, that it did occasionally feel good to be reminded that she was desired by someone who knew her as more than Belle Bijou, and by someone as demanding and particular as Eurig Smaug.
She took comfort in the fact that she had no intention (not even before she’d met Thorin) of giving in to one of Smaug’s whims, on those days when the man had decided he fancied her again. He was not an easy man to love, but she had tried it, once. And, in his way, he’d loved her back, even if it hadn’t been the sort of love she’d needed, and certainly not the sort she deserved. She liked to think she was wise enough to know that now, where she’d been more than a bit too naive before.

But to be admired and wanted by someone so painfully self-absorbed was a strange sort of flattery, and while it certainly never had any lasting sort of bearing on her self-worth, there were days when it felt oddly... nice. It was drifting into more awkward territory now, however— Smaug had never been quite so dogged before, when he was in this sort of amiable mood. Persistence, in this case, was most definitely not an admirable or romantic quality.

Bilba wasn’t quite sure the best way to approach the issue without risking the souring of their working relationship. If it could possibly be avoided, she preferred not to return to that cold tension that had cropped up between them, in the long months after she’d packed her bags and walked out for the last time, leaving him standing, fuming, in the middle of his flat. Surely they’d moved past that now, so many years removed from the initial hurt feelings. Hadn’t they?

It wasn’t something she could simply leave to sort itself out; his behaviour was straying toward inappropriate and needed to be addressed. After they returned from New York, of course.

At the moment, however, after remembering to tip the very polite bellhop for carrying her bags, Bilba barely took the time to doff her coat before she was flopping down on her hotel bedspread, stretching out tired, cramped muscles and sinking into the soft quilts. There was nothing pressing on her schedule until tomorrow, at least nothing official, but in the meantime, a shower, a snack, and a nap seemed like very pressing matters indeed.

She would worry about Smaug and all that unpleasantness later, once this Fashion Week business was out of the way.
Chapter 28

Chapter by littleblackdog

Chapter Notes

Some cute family bits, some sexy bits, and no real plotty bits. But, we're getting there.

It was Sunday evening, just after a lovely supper in the hotel restaurant, and Bilba was taking the opportunity to unwind somewhat before she turned in for the night. She had just spent a long, frightfully dull day following behind Gandalf as he flitted from meeting to meeting with the Fashion Week organizers, chatting about the possibility of spearheading a similar event in England. She had retained the information, mostly, but to be honest, she wouldn’t engage with it fully until she was back in her own, familiar territory again. Travelling was enough stress on her constitution, and luckily enough, Gandalf seemed more than happy to handle all the talking.

Tomorrow would be the first day of the show, properly, and Gigi’s had an exhibition scheduled. Bilba was honestly looking forward to hours of standing around in her knickers, if it meant a short respite from the more managerial side of things. She certainly didn’t hate the planning and organizing — she had a strange feeling that she might just grow to love it, given enough time to get used to the idea— but for the moment, she still wasn’t entirely comfortable with being considered some sort of executive.

“We're only here for a bloody week.” Lounging crossways on the rumpled quilts of his hotel bed, with his head tilted back over the edge, Bofur waggled the slim diary he’d been leafing through.

“How is it possible that he’s got a list of fifteen restaurants, when we're here for a week? Jesus wept, most days our lunch is catered anyway.”

The diary was Bombur’s, keeping his schedules neat and tidy, which was especially important when you considered the size of his family. Bilba had met his wife, Dolira, on more than one occasion, and their eight children— well, it was nine now, with the arrival of a daughter just before Christmas. While the children were angels, as sweet-tempered as their father, Bilba still had no earthly idea how Bombur could maintain such calm and mild manners, while juggling so many responsibilities at home, along with a job that sometimes had such uncertain hours and might drag him half-way round the globe. He owned and operated his own hair salon, however, in addition to his Gigi’s contract and freelance work for a few other companies; if he ever wanted more stability, he explained to her once over a cuppa, the salon did well enough to support him. He enjoyed Gigi’s shoots, especially the opportunity to work with his brother and cousin to create a complete picture, a complete work of art (that complimentary phrasing had, of course, sent Bilba blushing behind her teacup).

Bombur was a fine fellow, no two ways about it. There were days when a single warm glance from his perpetually jolly face could make Bilba feel a hundred times jollier herself.

“They’re just options, I imagine,” she said, perched delicately on the edge of Bombur’s bed, while Bombur himself was standing over by the windows, speaking quietly into his mobile.

“They’re penciled into time slots. All of them.” Bofur held the diary out for her to see, upside-down, but she could make out the list of restaurants on one side, with their corresponding numbers marked here and there on the week’s calendar. “Look at this: Wednesday, supper and drinks at Aska, then
dessert at The Marrow, then on the way back here afterward... I think that’s a kebab stand he’s got written in. I feel like I need a Tums just looking at this.”

Bilba was about to disagree— it didn’t look like an entirely unreasonable list at all, if taken as suggestions whenever they grew tired of whatever might be served around the hotel or at the venue. She was always a staunch supporter of having a plan in place, especially when travelling, and had been known to get slightly testy should said plan begin to crumble. For the most part, Bombur agreed with the sentiment. Bofur, on the other hand, had always been much more laissez-faire; he and Thorin would have gotten along swimmingly, teasing her for her copious luggage.

Before she could say anything, however, a shift in Bombur’s tone made Bofur swing himself upright, diary forgotten as he gave his brother a questioning stare.

“She’s up so late, don’t you— Oh, yes, hello Cupcake. You’re feeling poorly, still?” Noticing Bofur’s attention, Bombur wriggled his eyebrows, conveying some message that Bilba had no hope of interpreting. “But you’re taking the medicine, just like Mummy says? That’s my sweet girl. Yes, of course I will, but you need to sleep for the medicine to work right.”

“Let me,” Bofur murmured, reaching out his hand, and Bombur’s unusually sombre frown quirked up into a small smile.

“There’s someone here who’d like to say hello, Cupcake; is that all right? Just hang on.” Passing the phone over, Bombur took a deep breath, his smile widening as his brother pressed the mobile to his ear, starting with a boisterous: “Hello, hello my wee princess!”

Bilba could hear a tiny squeal coming through the phone’s speaker, even from across the room, and Bofur’s answering grin was utterly luminous, all teeth and deep dimples.

“Gilly’s down with a cold,” Bombur explained quietly, as he came over and settled down to sit beside Bilba. Gilly, if she was keeping them straight, was Bombur’s third oldest girl, only five or six years old. “Luckily she’s the last one to get it, and the others are well on the mend, otherwise I’d still be home. No way could I leave Lira with all the little ones sneezing into the drapes.”

Bilba leaned slightly against Bombur’s arm, giving the man’s hand a pat where it rested on the bedspread. “Poor lamb. She’s doing well, otherwise?”

“Other than a tummy ache, and driving her mum up the wall, not wanting to sleep, aye, she’s fine and dandy.” Bombur leaned back, sighing as he peered up towards the ceiling. On the other bed, Bofur was singing softly into the mobile, something much more gentle and sweet than his usual raunchy tunes. “Bo will put her right out, luck willing. And then he’ll get a kiss before I do when we get back home.”

Sure enough, it was only a moment or two later than Bofur’s lullaby trailed off into silence, and then he was speaking into the phone again, still little more than a whisper. “She’s sleeping? Brilliant. No, don’t fret about it, love. Sometimes a wee princess needs a minstrel, is all. Yeah, you too. Aye, I’ll tell him. Night, Lira.”

Disconnecting the call with a push of his thumb, Bofur tossed the phone to his brother without looking; Bomber caught it easily, with the same unerring deftness that the pair of them used to throw brushes and bottles around Bilba while they prepped her for a shoot.

“Dolira says she’s leaving you, marrying me.” Flopping back down, Bofur drummed his sock feet against the mattress, fidgeting not unlike an enormous child himself. “Though she might change her mind when she remembers that I’m utter shite at changing nappies, pun entirely intended. Remember
the gaffer tape?"

Bombur made a sharp, inelegant sort of snorting sound, craning over to set his mobile on the bedside table. "Do you mean, do I remember coming home from a date with my gorgeous wife, to find you’d managed to tape two of my children together by the bums? No, completely slipped my mind."

Begging off an evening of further revelry for the sake of putting on her best, most rested face tomorrow— Bofur and Bombur, along with Bifur and possibly Ori, were all headed off to find a decent pub within walking distance— Bilba retreated to her room before nine o’clock (though jetlag still had its claws dug deeply into her internal clock). She pattered around, fussing with the toiletries she had set out in the loo, changing into her nightclothes, feeling tired but restless in a way that did not bode well for a decent night’s sleep. If this was how things were going to be, she may as well have gone out with the lads.

It was ten past nine— Bilba had been alone in her room for less than twenty minutes before she broke down, and did the silly thing she had been trying so hard to avoid.

There was a five hour difference between New York and London, and Bilba wasn’t about to forget that, especially not when Thorin was working. He never put his mobile on vibrate, which meant a text was out of the question, and of course ringing him wasn’t polite at all. It was the middle of the night back home, and Thorin had just come off a dayshift.

Snatching up her mobile, Bilba plopped down on the mattress, bringing her legs up and tucking her feet under her knees. Feeling altogether ridiculous, but not ridiculous enough to stop herself, she called up her email application, and tapped out a short message.

I hope you had a good day, and that you’re having sweet dreams.

Oh, and if you’re still looking for your green shirt, it’s only fair of me to admit that I took it. In fact, it’s all I’m wearing just now. Xxx

She signed it simply Bilba, and then, before she could think better of it, typed out the subject line: NY is chilly miss you.

She sent it with a quick flick of her thumb and a frisson of embarrassment, then fell back against the bed, burying her face into the cool cotton pillowcases. His phone wasn’t set to alert him to emails, so her foolish urge wouldn’t wake him for no good reason.

Pushing down her quilts to crawl beneath them, Bilba traded her mobile for the novel she’d left sitting on the bedside table, double checking that the alarm clock was properly set, before snuggling in to read a few chapters. Hopefully, she could quiet her brain down enough to sleep; emailing Thorin, even if he wouldn’t read her inane little message until sometime the next day, had managed to at least quell the mild achy feeling in her chest.

She was hardly a half dozen pages in to her book when her mobile began to buzz, juddering slightly against the base of the ornately shaded lamp; Bilba reached out to check who in the world was ringing her, expecting to see Bofur’s face, or possibly Ori’s, only to find her caller ID lit up with a photo of a gleaming blue motorcycle, with a long, thickly muscled leg swung over the side, black leather jacket, and Thorin’s face, indulgently amused half-smile firmly in place as he’d let her snap the picture.
Thorin – Mobile, the screen announced, overtop the excessively sexy photo. Bilba blinked at it, not quite believing, until the mobile vibrated against her palm, almost seeming to grow more insistent with every buzz.

Her cheeks felt warm, and she curled up against a pillow as she accepted the call. “Hello?”

“Hello, you little burglar.” Thorin’s voice was a deep rumble, but not hoarse from sleep, so far as she could tell. The clock on her bedside table was still stubbornly convinced that it was much too late for Thorin to be calling, so Bilba looked pointedly away from its harsh red numbers. “Working your way backward through my wardrobe, are you? Why on earth do you have that shirt?”

“It’s soft, and smells of you.” She didn’t want to ask, not with the nagging worry that doing so might break some sort of spell, but Bilba found the question spilling out regardless. “What are you doing up? It’s nearly half two, isn’t it?”

“It’s fine. I’ll sleep,” Thorin said, and it wasn’t at all difficult to imagine his unconcerned shrug. “Soon, probably. I’ve got all day to laze about like a slug before my shift tonight.”

“Oh, really.” More likely, he’d be off tinkering with his bike, or possibly tidying his sparse flat. If he thought of it in the afternoon, he might catch a short nap. “You only laze about like a slug if I’m lying on top of you.”

Thorin’s chuckle was warm, but not as warm as his hands would have been. “Having you in my bed is certainly a compelling motive for a bit of laziness, I’ll admit.”

Flirting just before she had to sleep actually seemed like an excellent idea— Bilba was getting a bit hot and bothered, but the low simmer of arousal starting to hum under her skin would likely sweeten her dreams. She usually slept poorly when she was away from the comforts of home, so this could very well have been a sensible decision. It was worth a try, at least.

“No wonder you’re chilly,” Thorin continued, after a brief moment of mutual, comfortable silence. His words were very quiet now, and pitched low enough that Bilba fancied she could almost feel them growling through the phone. “Wearing nothing but my ratty old t-shirt.”

There was a thread of tentative question buried there, and Bilba had to press her teeth into her knuckle; they weren’t really going to do this, were they? It would be easy enough to ignore the subtle hint, if she wasn’t interested, and she trusted Thorin would understand if she didn’t engage.

“I’m getting warmer now,” she murmured after only a few seconds of indecision, and immediately felt the need to clench her thighs together under the quilts. Apparently, yes, they were very much going to do this, if the hot, empty pang growing between her legs was any indication. “Nestled up under these lovely, soft sheets. What about you, darling; are you warm enough?”

Yes, indulging in a little more than flirting was a particularly attractive notion, if she was being honest with herself.

“No quite,” Thorin said, and Bilba could hear the smile in his voice now. “Someone stole my shirt, after all. I might catch a chill, myself.”

There was a fine line between seductive and silly, it seemed, at least when it came to dancing around something like this. Bilba was feeling more than a little of each at the moment, bubbling up like champagne in her belly.

“I’m going to have a giggle fit,” she warned, and Thorin sighed, partway to a chuckle himself. “It’s only... the innuendo is much better in person, darling. I’m awful, I’m sorry.”
“Hardly awful.” There was another sigh, this one breathier, and Bilba imagined Thorin rolling over across the span of his firm mattress, with his bare chest peeking out from beneath the plain but cosy blue quilts. “And we can just chat, if you like. I’m not at all disappointed by the company, though that’s also much better in person.”

Just chatting was an option, of course, but Bilba was swiftly struck by a surge of appetite. Courage, and daring that her mother would have been proud of (but no, absolutely not, she had no intention of thinking of her mother at the moment).

“I could tell you all about my day of hideously boring meetings, I suppose.” Bilba uncurled from her loose foetal position, swallowing around the sudden dryness in her throat. “Or, if you wanted, we could discuss all the things we might be doing this minute, if I had you right here with me. No innuendo.”

“Bilba—” The sound of her name, tinged with surprised, but bolstered by a growl creeping in beneath the last syllable, made the knot in the pit of her stomach tighten, hot and insistent. “Jesus, you... You did that on purpose.”

She really hadn't, but that wasn't important. The stirred up, breathless quality of Thorin's voice was a gratifying side effect of her dithering, and she had every intention of enjoying it.

She hummed instead, burrowing one hand under the blankets to play with the hem of her pilfered t-shirt, where it rucked up to the tops of her thighs. “Talk to me, Thorin.”

“Talk to me, Thorin.”

Those words, in Bilba's quiet voice, were most definitely an order, rather than a request. Thorin pressed his mobile tightly between his ear and shoulder, hastily closing his laptop and shifting it, and the files he'd been blearily leafing through, off the side of his mattress and safely under the bed.

Bilba was inarguably an unfailingly polite, demure woman— that sweet, but persnickety temperament held its own charms, making Thorin feel privately proud to be considered worthy of her attentions.

She could get unbearably fussy about something as simple as a few scuffs of mud tracked over her floors, and Thorin occasionally found himself feeling unaccountably boorish next to her manners (he wasn't boorish, and it only ever took a few moments spent with Dwalin or the lads to reassure him of that), but Bilba Baggins was not simply a delicate lady of plummy fussing and polished teaspoons.

She was kind, and sharply witty, but in this particular situation, Thorin was reminded of another of her more unexpected traits: Bilba was bold, perhaps especially when it came to sex. He couldn't remember ever having known a woman so exuberant in bed, or so familiar with her own pleasures.

That was the reason he'd hadn't hesitated to bring up the notion, however subtly he'd broached it, of taking this call in a more intimate direction. The darkness in his flat felt bleak, and even after two day shifts under his belt, sleep seemed as elusive as smoke, slipping through his fingers and suffocating him in equal measure.

He'd already resigned himself to a long night burying himself in work, both official and not, but then he'd happened to be searching his inbox when Bilba's email had come through. The brief, fond message had been enough to light a flare of warmth in the hollowed pit of his chest, carved out by insomnia and unpleasant memories, and the sound of her voice through the phone had made him feel
even warmer.

Now, with the image of her spread over fine hotel sheets, with his thin t-shirt draped over her and her cheeks already flushing pink... Now, Thorin felt that warmth boil up in his blood.

“Talk to you,” he repeated, to buy himself a moment or two to settle back comfortably. He wasn’t a poet by any stretch of the imagination, but for Bilba, he felt both a particular inspiration to quality, and foolishly tongue-tied at the same time.

You started this, you arse. Talk.

“I miss the taste of you,” he said, and immediately felt the tips of his ears start to burn. That was a bit more pathetic than he’d anticipated, but Bilba made an encouraging murmur, and he pressed on. “Your mouth... I feel your kisses down to my bones, did you know that? If I was there with you now, I’d want your mouth, your soft lips, opening under my tongue.”

“And such a nice tongue it is, too,” Bilba said, sly and quiet, and Thorin slid his free hand down to palm his cock, already starting to rise under the cotton of his pants. “Slick and clever, and lovely, everywhere. Thorin, I’m putting the phone on speaker— I want both hands.”

“Fuck.” There was nothing even remotely tentative about that, and Thorin bit back another, rougher curse at the images Bilba was conjuring up. He pushed his pants down his thighs, letting his cock out to lay hard against his stomach, but didn’t take hold of it yet. He had no patience to fumble with his own phone. “Both hands. And what are you doing with those two hands?”

“Wishing they were yours,” she answered immediately, earnestly, and Thorin's heels dug into the mattress as his hips gave a sharp twitch. “Your hands, big and broad, warming up my breasts. Squeezing so sweet, and your tongue, your mouth—”

“Would you want me to suck them, Bilba?” It was slightly harder to hear her, now that she’d set her mobile aside, but her purring, pleased noise came through clearly enough. There was a bottle of lotion on his beside table, and Thorin snatched it up blindly, slicking his hand. “Your gorgeous breasts, perfect and plush in my hands. I'd suck them to aching, if you let me, making you squirm with every tug on those pretty pink nipples.”

“Oh my god—” Thorin had never considered himself especially adept at dirty talk— he tended towards taciturn in bed, mostly curses and, with Bilba especially, compliments. He was still worried about treading a line between filthy and ridiculous, but Bilba's voice was shuddering, bolstering him.

“Pinch your nipples for me,” he said, feeling his balls tighten at the reedy whine that answered him. Thorin wrapped his hand around his cock, hissing softly at the coolness of the lotion, and twisted his grip in time with the slow roll of his hips. “Just how you like, gently. Just like that.”

“Tell me what you're doing,” Bilba said, between quickening breaths, and Thorin doubted this was going to last long for either of them. He was almost thirty-eight years old, for god's sake, and he hadn't known phone sex was a particular kink of his until he had Bilba panting in his ear.

Maybe it had more to do with the woman than the kink.

“Fucking my fist,” he said, cruder than he might have done; Bilba's moan sounded shattered, and Thorin heaved a few deep breaths, imagining the smell of her, musky and salty sweet in his nose and in the back of his throat. “Thinking about your ruby hard nipples against my tongue, and how wet you are, just soaked for me. You bouncing in my lap, fucking down onto my cock.”

“I need more hands,” Bilba hissed, sounding pained, then a high-pitched gasp that had Thorin
rubbing his thumb over the head of his cock, smearing slick and clenching his jaw so hard his neck ached from it. “More hands, and your mouth on my clit, and your cock, your cock stretching me so wide I'm dying from it, Thorin—”

Neither of them made much sense after that, all muttering pleas and stuttered urging, until Bilba was wheezing, coming, with the sound of his name broken on every second or third panting breath. Her face would be rosy, red and hot and beautiful flushing down her neck, her soft body drawn taut and arching into him, and Thorin could see it all behind his eyelids, clear as day and hot as hell, as he striped his cock with a few hard, final jerks.

Bilba curled over onto her side, smiling at the mobile phone still resting on her spare pillow, and rocking slightly onto her hand as little shivers of her climax lingered. She could hear Thorin, all heaving breaths and quiet, rasping curses, and could easily picture the glassy look in his eyes, the way his hair would cling to the sweat on his forehead, and the final desperate twitches of his hips as he came into his hand.

“Well,” she said, after taking a few moments to gather herself. Her throat was parched and her muscles were loose and watery, but she managed to catch her breath well enough. “Again, better in person. But that was damned good, too.”

Thorin's chuckle sounded ruined, sleepy and sated in a way that made her smile curl even wider with satisfaction. “Damned good,” he murmured. “Agreed.”

“Go to sleep, darling.” She shuffled a bit closer to the phone, listening to Thorin grumble half-heartedly. He didn't often drop off to sleep like a stone after an orgasm, but Thorin usually got at least a bit drowsy, and no matter what he might argue, it was late back home. “You've earned a good night's rest.”
Chapter 29

Chapter by littleblackdog

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After a drowsy, fond goodnight from Thorin, Bilba set her mobile aside and slid out of bed, shuffling barefoot across the pale green carpet. A quick trip to the loo and a cool splash from the taps on her face was just the thing, and she snagged a bottle of water from the small refrigerator on her way back to bed.

She was taking a long, soothing drink, still standing beside her mussed mattress, when a knock on the door yanked her quite suddenly out of her cosy, post-orgasm languor.

It was about twenty past ten o’clock— not so late as to be immediately suspicious, but still altogether unanticipated. Bilba suffered a brief flash of worry before glancing over and finding that yes, she had remembered to fasten the thick steel loop of the internal lock before she’d gotten into bed in the first place.

Taking a breath, she padded over to fetch the fluffy white robe from where it hung on the back of the bathroom door. It was too large, too long, but wrapping up in the plush terrycloth offered much more modesty than Thorin’s thin t-shirt.

Tying the robe snugly around her waist, Bilba had to rise just a bit onto her toes in order to get a proper view through the peephole, but when she did, it only took an instant of investigating before she had the urge to knock her forehead against the thick door, hard.

Smaug was ever so slightly distorted through the small lens, standing close enough to the door that one of his cheekbones seemed to bulge even more than their sharp, defined reality. Bilba considered whether or not she had been quiet enough on her trek to the door to convince him that she wasn’t in, or perhaps that she was sleeping already... she hadn’t called out for her visitor to announce themselves, nor had she stubbed a toe or anything so loud on the way. Ignoring him, without letting him know that was precisely what she was doing, might be possible.

It was also entirely juvenile, and not especially polite, even if he never discovered that she’d snubbed him.

Bugger all, but unexpected visitors could be such a bother.

Tugging the edges of her robe, making absolutely certain that she was securely covered from neck to ankle, Bilba reached up and undid the lock, then pulled the door open.

Smaug’s head snapped up, his coppery eyes gone wide with surprise, and Bilba saw that he had been writing out a note on a pad of hotel stationary, with a slim, gold-toned biro. He paused, blinking slow as his eyes travelled down the length of her, before returning his gaze to her face and giving the notepad a slight wiggle.

“I didn’t want to text.” Smaug’s lips twitched at the corners, in a faint, apologetic sort of smile. “You never sleep well when we’re travelling, and I didn’t want to be a bother if you’d already retired.”

He twisted the cap back on his biro, tucking it into the inner pocket of his suit coat. Smaug’s current wardrobe was much better fit for company than Bilba’s: a sleek cut suit in deep navy wool, over top
a maroon jumper and lily white collared shirt. The row of small buttons down the front of the jumper looked like cabochons, rounded smooth and gleaming like droplets of blood—possibly glass or plastic, but knowing Smaug, probably garnets.

“But I see I’ve done just that,” Smaug continued, motioning elegantly with his long fingers, in a move that seemed to encompass her robed body, her face scrubbed bare of any makeup, and the loose, lazy braid she’d fixed her hair into. “Sorry. It’s...nothing important. Or at least, nothing that won’t keep until morning.”

Smaug bowed his head, with that little smile still in place, and Bilba resigned herself to asking. She’d worry about it all night, otherwise.

“No, no, it’s fine.” She did not move aside to let him inside, no matter how awkward it was to chat at length in her doorway. “Is something the matter?”

Smaug didn’t complain about the lack of invitation; his eyes didn’t even flit into the room behind her, and he seemed perfectly content to stand in the corridor. This was the first she’d seen of him since arriving in New York, and she wondered how long ago his flight had arrived. The impeccable state of his clothes and hair didn’t mean a great deal; he would have primped expertly before even leaving the airport.

“Not precisely.” He held the notepad in his right hand, tapping it up and down between the fingers and thumb of his left. It looked almost like a nervous gesture, which immediately set Bilba back on her heels. “I wanted...Well. I wanted to apologise for my behaviour the last time we spoke.”

Bilba’s tongue was lead in her mouth, absolute bewilderment weighing it down behind her teeth. She couldn’t have eked out a word if her life depended on it. Luckily enough, Smaug wasn’t quite finished.

“I was surprised,” he said, his head still lowered somewhat, watching her through the dark sweep of his eyelashes. “That you were seeing someone, and perhaps more surprised still at how...At how I felt about it.”

This was a dream, obviously. She’d fallen asleep, still floating on the pleasure of Thorin’s voice rumbling in her ear, and now she was dreaming.

Smaug couldn’t possibly be standing in a hotel corridor, talking about his feelings.

“I wouldn’t have asked you to dinner if I’d known.” The notepad was still flicking a broken rhythm against his fingers, staccato as her heart, fluttering like a startled bird against her ribs. “Wouldn’t have flirted, as I did. And I won’t, not anymore, as much as it might pain me not to tell you how lovely you are, and what a treasure.”

His smile twisted sadly, widening but losing most of its amusement in favour of melancholy defeat. “I’ll do my level best not to step on any toes, Bilba. I promise.”

What a load of cobblers—she clamped her teeth hard on any and all incredulous exclamations. Before she could piece a more appropriate reaction together, however, Smaug was holding out his hand in the space between them, palm up and empty.

“Friends?” Sincerity was practically dripping from his pores, his expression still hangdog but hopeful, and Bilba barely managed not to close the door in his face. Even if this wasn’t some sort of game, but rather a genuine overture of friendship, she fancied that she knew his capricious moods better than most. He could be as unpredictable as a force of nature, when the mood struck him.
Smaug the tempest—a hurricane in a bespoke suit.

Still, if he decided to break his short-term contract and bugger off for the week because he was cross with her, it would be a calamity. Saruman would be livid, and Gigi’s would be embarrassed amongst their competitors and peers.

Bilba reached out, letting Smaug wrap his fingers around her own, clasping her hand with a familiar, snug grip. He didn’t bend to kiss her knuckles, as she expected, but he did keep the hold for longer than was usual for a simple handshake between colleagues. It was mortifying to remember that she had very recently been rubbing herself off with the fingers that Smaug was currently squeezing, even if she had washed and dried her hands since; Bilba felt her cheeks heating with a blush, entirely without her permission. If he’d actually tried to kiss her hand, she might have caught fire.

“Friends,” she said evenly, offering up a tiny smile of her own.

“Pretend I’m not here,” Ori had said, before proceeding to dart around Bilba, his camera clicking and whirring away. That was nothing new, but the fact that Ori was snapping countless shots of her being primped and fussed over in preparation for a show was something they’d only ever done rarely. He’d taken the occasional candid of them all working over the years, of course, but this was something more than an impromptu snap of Nori’s broad grin as he adjusted the studio lights, or a rare moment of Bofur looking keenly serious, with a makeup brush clamped in his teeth.

Ori would be taking a number of photos during the exhibitions and catwalks, possibly for use in some Gigi’s promotions, but he was also buzzing around like a gnat in an oversized cardigan while Bilba was still in her robe and curlers, getting ready. He hoped to have a generous, engaging photoset by the end of the week: to bolster his portfolio, possibly sell a few to magazines, and hopefully put together enough to build a gallery exhibition (once he cleared it with Gandalf and Saruman). *Behind the scenes at a fashion show* wasn’t a new concept for a photography show, but Ori was still excited to put his own spin on it, and Bilba found his enthusiasm contagious.

Even without taking Ori’s cheeriness lightening her mood into consideration, chronicling work at Gigi’s had often been an attractive notion to her. Bilba had no plans to write a book anytime soon, but that vague possibility was forever simmering in the back of her mind. Years in the future, when she was retired from strutting around in knickers, and settled comfortably behind a desk—yes, then she might actually put pen to paper, or fingers to keyboard more likely, and share some of her favourite memories from this bizarre, wonderful life. There would be a bigger market for tell-alls and backbiting exposes, of course, but she had no interest in that sort of tripe; the tabloids could shovel their own rubbish without her to help them along.

But writing about her friends, her merry little family... that sounded as though it could be quite a pleasant distraction, later on.

“I like that smile best.” Glancing up from her woolgathering, Bilba found Ori crouched by her knees, his camera hardly lowered from his face, and his big brown eyes shining bright and laddish. Behind her, Bombur was humming softly to himself, winding silk flowers into a delicate crown in her hair. Gandalf hadn’t been able to resist the pun that their spring collection was *in full bloom*, but the lush, pastel hued looks Bifur had put together were far too gorgeous to ever be considered a joke.

“You’re always pretty when you smile,” Ori continued, gnawing slightly at his bottom lip, which was curled up in a crooked little grin of his own. “But just then? When you’re not paying attention, lost in whatever thought’s got you mulling, and it’s not for show or for anything else? That’s my
favourite smile.”

Careful not to jostle too much while Bombur did his work, Bilba was just able to reach Ori’s face, and gave the tip of his bold nose a gentle tap.

“You are such a fine man, Ori Rison, and a charmer too.” She tweaked the soft knit of his beanie when he ducked his head, and let him fiddle self-consciously with his camera without further remark. It was a few minutes before he was up again, his face obscured by the dark, shiny lens as he clicked away, and if his shoulders were just a wee bit straighter, even with dozens of strangers milling (sometimes frantically) around them prepping other models, Bilba didn’t consider mentioning it.

Bilba flexed her toes against the low, but soft pile of the carpet; it wasn’t quite as satisfying in stockings as it would have been in bare feet, but she was determined to dredge every ounce of joy she could from her last few moments of freedom. There was an open shoebox sitting on the arm of the plushly upholstered chair that dominated the corner of Bifur and Ori’s room, and Ori himself was curled up in the seat, pawing interestedly at the sleek, hellish clodhoppers waiting inside.

The shoes were rich golden pumps, with razor-sharp pointed toes and tall, spindly heels, nearly as thin as pencils, and Bilba hated them already.

There was absolutely nothing wrong with a fancy ballet flat or, at a stretch, even a pretty little kitten heel. The reality was that she would always be at least a head shorter than most other women striding down catwalks with her, and Bilba had long ago gotten over any discomfort about it. Propping her up on stilts wasn’t fooling anyone.

This evening, there would be no catwalks, and Bilba didn’t foresee any situation in which she’d be flashing her knickers— it was Thursday night, nearly the end of their week abroad, and there was some sort of dinner and cocktails event from which she simply couldn’t weasel away. An evening of professional socializing, which was actually something Bilba might have been enthusiastic about, if not for those damned shoes.

The entire outfit had been collected and assembled by someone at Istari (it was not, Bifur had told her, one of his designs, nor had he had the time to alter it), and it was quite beautiful. The dress was black and sleek, with a large, widely spaced design of golden flowers and slender branches trailing from the hem, up towards the deeply plunging vee of a neckline, and down the long, tight sleeves. More of her cleavage was on display than she would usually have chosen for such an event, but it didn’t cross any lines into uncomfortably low, so she refrained from fetching a shawl from her luggage. The jewelry was simple, thank goodness: just a pair of earrings, gold with pearls, that hung like gleaming bunches of grapes from her earlobes. The shoes would be frustrating enough, without being weighed down by a king’s ransom of baubles.

“It’s hardly fair that you all get a pass from this nonsense,” she muttered, while Bofur swept some deep chocolatey shadow into the crease of her eyelid. Bombur had already twisted her hair into an elegant chignon, taming her curls into a smooth knot at her nape. The restrained style emphasized the bare curve of her neck, making the line from her jaw, all the way down to her fair, unblemished cleavage look much longer than usual. Bofur had already given her a few brushes of powder between the swells of her breasts and over her collar bones, adding a subtle, alluring shimmer, and somewhat obscuring her faint smattering of freckles.

Smokey eyes and a dusty pink lipstick were on Bofur’s agenda, and Bilba had agreed easily— a vivid red on her lips might have complimented the gold in her dress especially well, but she wasn’t
keen on checking her teeth in every piece of silverware all evening, and there would doubtlessly be photographers buzzing about.

“Hardly fair at all, aye,” Bofur said, sounding mildly distracted as he continued to carefully contour her eye. “I’d look smashing in that dress.”

“Got the calves for it,” Bifur grumbled around a crunching mouthful of fresh veg, plucked from the platter of snacks spread out across the neatly made blankets at the foot of his bed. There had been sandwiches ordered as well, impressively tasty and polished off before she’d slipped into the dress. Everyone but Bilba had also already begun dipping in to their evening’s indulgence of whiskey and canned beer.

Bofur grinned, tipping his head in Bifur’s direction as he surveyed Bilba’s face. “Thanks, cousin. I’ve always thought so.”

“These are so pretty,” Ori said thoughtfully, ever so slightly flushed in the face from his beer, rocking one gilded shoe back and forth across his folded legs. “And I think they might fit me.”

He slapped a hand over his mouth barely an instant later, his eyes going comically wide beneath the messy fringe of his hair, and silence fell heavy upon the room.

It was a well known, but rarely discussed fact among their group of friends and colleagues that, though her stature was rather petite, Bilba had rather… unexpectedly sizable feet. Not excessively large, she would point out vehemently whenever the topic was broached, but certainly not dainty size sevens either.

Bilba turned her head slowly, levelling a mortified Ori with a long, narrow look. With his hand still hiding half his face, Ori sunk further into the thickly cushioned chair, not saying a word. One golden shoe was still balanced on his knee.

The exaggerated sound of a camera shutter was entirely unexpected, and it was more than enough to distract Bilba from Ori’s cowering. Bofur, still standing in front of Bilba, had pulled his mobile out of his pocket, apparently to snap a photo of Ori.

When it became clear that the attention of the room had shifted to him, Bofur offered a loose shrug. “Figured his brothers might want one last picture, before Bilba skins him.”

Another moment or two of silence followed, until Bifur began to shake with soft, wheezy laughter, followed by Bombur’s poorly stifled snickering, and then they were all simply gone, hooting with mirth.

“You’re all horrid,” Bilba managed to say, between her own helpless giggles, all the while trying not to ruin poor Bofur’s work with watery eyes. Though, really, it would serve him right for starting this foolishness.

Eventually, they gathered themselves together enough to have Bilba fit for public viewing, and just in time, as well. She was taking final stock of herself in the full-length mirror inside the closet door, smoothing the silky fabric over the curves of her hips and fluttering her eyes to get used to the fan of false lashes Bofur had glued artfully in place, when there was a knock on the door.

“I imagine that’s Gandalf,” she said, while Ori, seated closest, went to answer.
Ori’s subsequent shriek, a bit like a trod upon cat, was their first clue that it certainly was not Gandalf.

“Good evening to you, too.” Smaug appeared entirely unruffled by the strangled excuse for a greeting, standing tall and poised in the doorway. He must have been poured into his suit, with inky black wool cutting closely down his slim figure without a single snag or wrinkle to break the line, but it was the bold embroidery on the lapels that immediately drew the eye.

Flowers, stitched in gold and copper, framed either side of his starkly white, unbuttoned shirt collar and the bare hollow of his throat. A design obviously meant to hearken back to the gilded florals of her dress.

He stepped past Ori with a fluid but determined step, moving like a flood; a moue of distaste flickered over his face as his gaze swept over the room, the liquor, empty plates, and lounging bodies. The sour look was gone in a flash when Bilba abandoned her meagre camouflage, closing the closet door that blocked her partially from view.

“My goodness,” Smaug said, letting his eyes flit down the whole length of her, from her head to her stockinged toes, and back up again. It wasn’t especially lewd, not as heated as Bilba had come to expect from him, but not bland either. It was almost polite. “You do look stunning, Bilba. Ready to go?”

She made absolutely no move to fetch her shoes, propping one hand on her hip. “I thought Gandalf was going to be my escort. Is something wrong?”

“He’s been delayed. A business call; I didn’t pry.” Smaug waved his hand toward the still-open door, fingers fanning out lazily. “Ms. Silvan had been contracted as my date for the evening, but given that she’s also my security, I do hope you’ll forgive the company.”

Bilba was entirely shocked when she glanced over, finally noticing the woman standing stock-still in the corridor. A familiar woman, with that tall frame and dignified bearing, her spine held straight but not rigid, fair complexion, and long red hair draped over one shoulder in a thick braid. She hadn’t been wearing a deep green cocktail dress the last time Bilba saw her, but she was still entirely recognizable.

“Tauriel?” The woman’s attention had been keenly elsewhere, focused somewhere farther down the hallway, but she turned at the sound of Bilba calling her name. As far as Bilba was aware, Tauriel Silvan was a security guard for Istari Incorporated—she had also been the blessedly calm voice on the other end of the phone while Bilba was trapped in that damned lift with Smeagol Rivers.

“Good evening, Ms. Baggins.” Tauriel inclined her head, and the stern expression she’d been wearing shifted to something slightly softer. “Gentlemen.”

“Hang on.” From his seat on Ori’s bed, Bofur tilted his tumbler of Jameson in Smaug’s direction, the ice clinking softly. “You’ve got a personal bodyguard now? Seriously? You’re not Sting, or bloody 1D.”

Bilba knew Bofur well enough to gauge his current drunkenness as quite low, but that certainly didn’t mean he wasn’t apt to say something that Bilba would come to regret over the next few hours.

“Bombur, my shoes, please,” she said, perhaps a bit quickly, but not quickly enough to stop Smaug from looking down on Bofur with a sharp, imperious lift of his perfectly groomed brows.

“One would think,” Smaug said, his voice clipping like whip cracks around every syllable. “That
you might be slightly less dismissive of the dangers presented by overeager admirers, considering recent events. Rather insensitive, but perhaps I shouldn’t have expected better.”

“Listen here, you puffed up—” Bofur began to sit up, legs swinging over the side of the bed and face gone hard, and Bilba darted forward, wrapping one hand around Smaug’s upper arm as she hopped to slip her shoes on.

“Stop it, the pair of you.” She teetered on the heels, ever so slightly, and she leaned on Smaug for just an instant to gain her balance. “I swear, you are not having a spat tonight— I refuse to deal with it. I’m off to this damned party, thank you and good evening.”

It was a gamble, and not a particularly safe one, but by some stroke of luck she would never, ever question, Smaug actually seemed to back down rather than flare up. He was still tense as a piano wire beside her, but he kept his mouth shut, and blessedly, so did Bofur.

It was an actual miracle. Bilba could have wept with relief, but she settled for hustling Smaug the hell out of the room with all possible haste.

Chapter End Notes

If you're interested, I put together a photoset for Bilba and Smaug's party outfits. You can find it over here: [http://pibroch.tumblr.com/post/73351466766](http://pibroch.tumblr.com/post/73351466766)

We should have a bit of Smaug being his charming self at the party (which might sound a bit ominous), and also check back in with Thorin next chapter, if things work out as planned. As always, thank you for reading!
Chapter 30

Chapter by littleblackdog

Chapter Notes

Mentions of terminal illness and character death in this chapter, but not our main cast, okay?

And, in my usual style of shameless self-promotion, I’ve got another story on the go (which should be updating later this week). It’s Dwalin/fem!Bilbo/Balin, with polyamorous dwarves as a cultural norm, and it's a lot of fun for me. You can find it over here: Gem

Dinner, as it turned out, was actually an appetizer sort of affair rather than anything substantial, and Bilba was intensely grateful she’d polished off a few generous wedges of sandwich before the lads had wolfed down the rest. What nibbles she managed to snag as they mingled were delicious, and she wished Bombur was there to gush over delicate flavours and artful presentation with her— Smaug couldn’t have cared less about the joys of cooking, still likely burning toast to a crisp on those rare occasions he didn’t order in or eat out, and Tauriel had wandered off in a very purposeful way shortly after they’d slipped into the party. Every time Bilba caught sight of her, with a flash of green or a swing of that long auburn braid, Tauriel was slowly circling the room, bowing out of conversation politely but awkwardly every time she was approached.

“Not the subtlest bodyguard,” Bilba said, leaning close to Smaug’s arm and lowering her voice to a murmur. They’d just recently extracted themselves from a chat with a pack of designers from all over the States, and now she and Smaug were enjoying a brief respite, sipping perfectly chilled white wine. The wine was sweeter than the company, but to be fair, Smaug had been behaving himself well enough. “And that’s not a criticism, by any means. She seems quite adept.”

Smaug hummed, idly tapping one finger against the stem of his glass as he bent slightly closer to speak. The click of a nearby camera shutter wasn’t out of place— there were photographers flitting here and there, as she’d expected— but Bilba still flinched at the sound. “She’s pleased enough now that she’s not glued to my arm for the evening and expected to socialize. Adept at surveying the room, certainly, but much less so at small talk. Not like your silver tongue.”

It was a compliment, she supposed, but not one she felt the need to acknowledge. Instead, Bilba straightened her posture and held her nearly empty glass out towards Smaug.

“Will you hold this please?” Smaug baulked at her request for the barest instant, before accepting the glass. “I’m going to pop off to the ladies’.”

Before Smaug could say another word, she darted around a passing couple, and quickly tried to vanish among the much more statuesque crowd— even the wait staff were taller than she was, so it wasn’t altogether difficult to put a few towering bodies between herself and Smaug. She was fairly confident he wouldn’t trail her to the loo, but it never hurt to claim a bit of privacy on her own terms.

Bilba spared a nod and a smile for Tauriel as she made her way towards the toilets (it had been more of an excuse to slip away than anything, but Bilba was still going to use the opportunity). Tauriel
was hovering around a small table of wineglasses and a pillar prettily decked in fancy fairy lights, and the woman seemed to startle when Bilba caught her eye, as though she’d expected to be invisible in her meagre camouflage. After a flickering glance around the room again, Tauriel twiddled a small wave in Bilba’s direction; not adept at small talk, Smaug had said. Being thrust into a bustling party of industry professionals, models, and creative types, could be quite intimidating and more than a wee bit odd. Bilba recalled the feeling well enough from her first forays into this side of things.

She would make a point of checking in with Tauriel when she came back from the ladies’, Bilba decided. While it was technically true that she hardly knew the woman, they had spent a very tense quarter hour on the phone together under incredibly stressful circumstances, and Bilba had gotten just a tiny bit weepy into the woman’s collar when she’d popped down to Istari’s security office to thank her afterward. They weren’t strangers, and Bilba hadn’t been able to get more than a word in edgewise to her on their way here, with Smaug droning away about this and that.

Darting into the loos, Bilba relieved herself of her half-glass of wine; it wasn’t until she was washing her hands, absently checking her teeth in the mirror for any stray bits or pips as she scrubbed between her fingers, that a familiar ginger head peeked in through the main door.

“Ms. Baggins.” Tauriel stepped inside, letting the weighted door swing silently shut behind herself. A trio of women had hustled out shortly after Bilba had entered; she and Tauriel were alone in the loos.

“Oh, hello,” Bilba said, rinsing the last of the vanilla scented lather from her hands. It wasn’t a terrible mix against her perfume—much nicer than the sharp, generic soap smell she’d expected.

“I don’t mean to interrupt.” Tauriel gestured vaguely, encompassing the whole of the ladies’ lavatory, then fiddled her fingers behind one ear as though trying to tuck back hair that hadn’t actually come loose from her sleek braid. “I’m sorry if I’m intruding, I only… is everything all right?”

“Everything’s fine, Tauriel, thank you.” Drying her hands, Bilba paused before she began fussing with her own hair, and focused on the other woman instead. “What about you? It’s all a bit boring, isn’t it?”

Between one of Bilba’s questions and the next, it was entirely apparent when all initial, automatic assurances died on Tauriel’s tongue. The woman hesitated, shifting on her mid-heeled black slingbacks (and yes, Bilba was entirely jealous of such a sensible but lovely shoe), then took a few halting steps farther into the room and away from the door.

“I’m not—” Tauriel stopped, glancing away then back to Bilba’s face. A touch of taupe shadow on her lids, very subdued and simple, didn’t distract from the discomfort darkening her dappled green eyes and putting a furrow between her brows. “This isn’t really my sort of job.”

Bilba didn’t ask her to clarify whether she simply meant the party, or the entire experience of personally guarding Smaug.

“Well, you’re doing wonderfully,” Bilba said instead, diplomatically but not entirely untruthfully. Then, giving in to impulse, she added: “No one’s stabbed Smaug yet, which is something of a marvel. You must be fending them off well enough.”

Tauriel looked mildly horrified, eyes going wide enough to show white all the way around, and Bilba held up both hands in what she hoped was a calming way.

“Kidding,” she said. “Just a joke. A poor one. I’m sorry; I shouldn’t make light of your
“No.” The wild expression faded, replaced with a small, careful lift at the corner of Tauriel’s mouth, too unsure to be called a smile. “No, it’s fine. I’m usually not this out of sorts, you know? It’s certainly not my first time on bodyguard duties, but this… people keep trying to ask me about my dress, my hair, my underwear. Is that, I mean, I know that’s the business, but that seems invasive. Isn’t it?”

“Occupational hazard, I’m afraid.” Leaning against the bank of sinks, Bilba crossed her arms loosely. “You do look rather like a model, if you don’t mind me saying so, and we’re accustomed to the questions. But you’ve no obligation to let anyone make you uncomfortable.”

Tauriel gained a faint, blotchy redness creeping up her throat, and ducked her head at the compliment; it was an adoral reaction, but also somewhat sad, considering how shocked the woman looked about a flattering, but accurate observation.

“Thank you, Ms. Baggins,” she said, then cleared her throat, clearly trying to shake off the momentary fluster. “I’m, um, I’m used to working in a suit— no one talks to the woman in the black suit, standing at the edges. This is a bit different.”

*Ms. Silvan had been contracted as my date for the evening*, Smaug had said. His date, dressed and painted up to fit at Smaug’s side, as carefully polished and well-chosen as any of his accessories. Bilba didn’t imagine for a second that Saruman had allowed Smaug to demand anything untoward, and there were good reasons to have Tauriel blend in with the crowd rather than stick out like a sore thumb, but the notion that the woman was so uncomfortable with the pretense made Bilba’s stomach clench, uneasy and annoyed.

“It won’t be much longer,” Bilba said, which was the only comfort she could realistically offer. “Smaug won’t want to stay for more than another hour or two, I wouldn’t imagine. Though he’ll likely be headed out on the town after this.”

“That would at least be better than this—” Tauriel’s head snapped around at the sound of raised voices outside the bathroom, all awkwardness burned away by a sudden rush of alertness. Bilba considered the taut line of her shoulder and the cock of her head, and couldn’t help imagining birds of prey. When the voices didn’t amount to more than a few peals of raucous laughter, fading with distance, it was astonishing to watch the melt of sleek, coiled tension from Tauriel’s posture.

“I should get back out there,” Tauriel said, still watching the door for a long moment, before turning back to Bilba. The slight quirk of her lips bloomed into a proper smile, one that lit her eyes with a sudden, impulsive sort of playfulness. “You might joke, but you wouldn’t be the one who had to explain it to Mister Belov if something happened while I was in the toilet. Terribly embarrassing. May I walk you out, Ms. Baggins?”

Bilba considered it carefully— how long could she reasonably hide away in the loo before it crossed the line from taking a moment, to entirely childish? Not much longer, but still, she had another few moments to spare.

“Not this minute, Tauriel.” Offering a smile of her own, Bilba motioned to the wall of mirrors above the sinks. “Thank you, but I’m just going to primp a bit, I think. Too many photographers milling around.”

“Of course.” Nodding deeply, Tauriel seemed to armour herself, standing taller and licking her lips. It was that moment when the door swung open, admitting a pair of giggling women (a model Bilba vaguely recognised, and another woman with a press badge clipped to her pearlescent mauve
cocktail dress). Bilba spared their new company an appropriately fleeting greeting for having met them inside public toilets, then jerked her head slightly in Tauriel’s direction, coaxing the woman to get back to her watchful skulking, if she wanted.

Tauriel vanished out the door shortly thereafter, while Bilba made a point of ignoring whatever conversation the two other women were having between the walls of their toilet cubicles. She really had nothing to primp—there wasn’t a single stray hair escaping from Bombur’s precise styling, and her makeup was still as flawless as it had been five minutes after Bofur painted it over her skin—but she didn’t want to go back out to Smaug quite yet.

One of the women in the cubicles was press, but Bilba had no idea what sort of press, and the last thing she wanted was to risk being pegged as the model who lingers alone in lavatories too long. There were any number of unpleasant spins such a story could take, if it were given space in a tabloid.

Giving her teeth a final glance, and her lips the barest daub of pink gloss from her clutch, Bilba made her exit before the other women were through with their business. She hoped Gandalf had finally decided to grace them all with his presence, though that was looking less likely as the evening wore on—it left her as the face of Garnished and Gilded in two respects, as a model and an assistant director, and she hadn’t expected to shoulder the dual responsibilities alone.

Or, more accurately, not alone. Also saddled with Smaug, who had hobnobbing down to a science, but invariably for his own gain.

If she’d been slightly less fond of Tauriel, she might have encouraged her to distract Smaug for a while, but Bilba felt guilty even thinking it. She wouldn’t inflict him on the other woman, especially not while Tauriel was already off-kilter, and Smaug was notoriously adept at smelling blood in the water in any given situation.

The party was still going strong, but when Bilba didn’t catch sight of Smaug immediately upon her return, she slipped around a few chatting groups with a pleasant smile and a quick step. She wasn’t hiding, but nor was she actively searching for him—that seemed fair enough, considering he hadn’t unglued himself from her side for more than a few seconds all evening long.

Friends, he’d said to her. And, to his credit, he hadn’t made any overtly inappropriate advances since then: no pet names murmured hotly against her ear, his arm hadn’t tried to curl around her waist, and the hand he laid so often on her back stayed high above her bum. It may have seemed like a low bar to accept for behaviour, and perhaps it was, but there was a certain odd intimacy between them even now. They had been nearly naked and draped over each other many times, even as recently as earlier that day. It was work, and that was separate from private life, but there was a physicality to their professional relationship that sometimes spilled over without conscious thought, on both their parts.

And, of course, it was best if they appeared friendly at public events, considering they were both there working for the same brand. Discord, in this case, would not sell knickers.

Roaming leisurely, keeping half an eye out for Smaug amongst the crowd, Bilba quickly considered if it was more important to try and begin a conversation with one of her industry peers, networking as she was meant to be doing, or perhaps wander over towards a tray of nibbles first—

It was possible that she was slightly distracted by a passing waiter, who was holding a silver tray too high for her to gauge the types of hors d’œuvre he was carrying, but that was certainly no good excuse for stumbling directly into another person.
“Oh!” Narrowly sidestepping a splash of red wine over her dress, Bilba reeled from the shock of
knocking into a sturdy body head-on. She had just enough presence of mind to catch the man by the
arm when their collision jostled him enough to send him stumbling, though there would have been
precious little Bilba could have done if he’d truly been going down in a pile.

“Fuck,” the man swore, loudly enough to garner a displeased hiss from someone nearby, and
wrapped a large hand around Bilba’s elbow. In his other hand, he held a dripping wine glass, and
there was a small puddle on the floor by their shoes. “Sorry, shit, sorry. You all right?”

The accent was a surprise, after nearly a week of various American dialects being the norm—a soft
Welsh lilt in a rich rasp of a voice.

“Yes, fine.” Despite being a good foot shorter than the man, Bilba had certainly not taken the brunt
of their bump; she’d hardly even teetered on her heels. “I’m fine. No harm done at all. Are you all
right? I’m so sorry— I wasn’t watching my step—”

The man waved away her apologies with a literal sweep of his hand, after he removed it from her
arm and took a polite step back. He offered her a brief smile, closed-mouthed and crooked; there
was something familiar about his face, the strong line of his jaw and his striking eyes especially,
though Bilba found she couldn’t immediately place him.

“Like you said: no harm done.” Without pause, the man reached into his grey suit jacket and
produced a handkerchief, and suddenly Bilba had a strange man crouched at her feet, mopping up
his stray spill of wine as though nothing at all were amiss.

“But let’s not tempt another tumble,” the man said, rising again smoothly, keeping the stained
handkerchief scrunched in his hand even as he deposited his glass on the tray of a passing waiter.
“There, sorted.”

There was a spot of red on the cuff of the man’s creamy white shirt, a near match to the deep carmine
of his tie, and Bilba was about to bring it to the man’s attention when she noticed the curious
expression that had overtaken his features.

“Belle Bijou,” he said, almost disbelieving, and offered her a deep nod of his head. “I’d heard Gigi’s
was showing here, and wondered if I’d see a familiar face this week.”

Immediately wary, though not overwhelmingly so, Bilba struggled harder to recall why the man
seemed familiar to her, when she was obviously quite familiar to him. Or, at least, Belle was familiar
to him.

“I’m embarrassed to say you have me at a disadvantage,” she said, glancing briefly across the room,
and relaxing ever so slightly when she caught sight of Tauriel not too very far away. All Smaug’s
talk of security and such had managed to get under her skin, dredging up some unpleasant anxieties
she’d hoped she had moved well past, even after the incident with Smeagol.

“Ah.” Ducking his head again, the man extended a greeting hand to her. “Bard Bowman, and it’s
no embarrassment. We’ve not met formally.”

Bard Bowman. The name clicked like a key turning in Bilba’s mind, locking a face to a name and
this man to a memory. Bard Bowman, a model who had done some very fine, frequent freelance
work for Gigi’s Gentleman’s line back before Bilba’s time with the company, and who, if she
remembered correctly, had emigrated across the Pond some years back.

“Oh, goodness—” Accepting his offered handshake after an awkward moment’s pause, Bilba didn’t
have to force the buoyantly delighted grin from creeping up over her face. Gandalf would be pleased as punch to see Bard, she had little doubt, and though it was true that she’d never met the man before, there was something special about Gigi’s that forever fostered a strange sense of family.

“Bilba Baggins,” she said, gently squeezing his fingers; she was happy to see his own expression brighten as her own did. “Belle’s a fine name for a poster, but I prefer Bilba among friends. It’s a pleasure, Bard.”

“Likewise, Bilba.”

They exchanged a few pleasantries, with Bilba managing to inquire about Bard’s current involvement in the industry without being terribly insulting— the man was well into his thirties if he was a day, and though the shelf-life for male models tended to be longer than for women, the wear of time was a reality of which neither of them was ignorant. He was still modelling, as it turned out (though most of his work was in general menswear now, and he’d recently taken a short break from the business).

To be honest, Bilba was hardly surprised. The man was still strikingly handsome, and the figure he cut under his somewhat ill-fitted suit was certainly impressive, tall and well-formed, without being either bulky or slender.

“I certainly can’t regret leaving home,” he said eventually, when the conversation turned to his move across the Atlantic. “My wife, Johanna, she was from the States originally— Chicago— and wanted the kids to be closer to their grandparents. Jo was a teacher, proper career needing roots and all, but I can work pretty much anywhere, you know? I had a friend or two in New York, made some calls, and in the end, it wasn’t much of a problem to pack up and start fresh, when Jo got the job offer.”

The words were plain, but there was a tenderness layered beneath that Bilba couldn’t overlook, and it was tender in both senses of the word: there was love there, clearly, but pain also, putting tightness in his tone.

“What does she teach?” Bilba asked, while considered whether to leave that unpleasantness lie without discussion or to gently inquire, but the choice was taken from her when Bard’s mouth lifted in a painful, melancholy ghost of a smile.

“Maths,” he said, lifting a thumb to wipe at the corner of one eye, though his cheeks were perfectly dry and his voice was steady. “Cleverer than me by a mile at least, and the kindest, sweetest soul. The kids take after her, thank god.” Bard chuckled softly, sadly, and Bilba didn’t hesitate to reach out ever so slowly, and then laid her hand on his forearm when he didn’t draw back.

“She, uh—” Bilba noticed the hard bob of his Adam’s apple above the loosened knot of his tie, as Bard swallowed, then cleared his throat. “Jo passed away, year before last. Cancer, caught late, aggressive. Nothing they could do.”

There was a glitter in Bard’s eyes, and Bilba felt an answering heat bloom in her own, but both of them blinked anything more serious than that speck of brightness away. This was hardly the place for such an emotionally charged discussion, especially with press and cameras about.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, briefly tightening her grip on his arm.

“Thanks.” Bard cleared his throat again, giving her hand a pat, and sounded genuinely grateful. “Anyway, I’ve been taking a break, staying home. Though it might be retirement, but my kids are getting tired of me hanging about like a sad old sack. Booted my arse out the door, told me to go find some work again, whatever I wanted. Getting back into the swing of things now.”
He motioned at the room with a jerk of his chin, and the people in it. “Not exactly the most forgiving crowd for a man my age, especially not when I’ve stepped out of it for a while, but I had a foot in the door with some old friends. Can’t hurt to get my face seen at a do like this, remind folks I’m around, dredge up more gigs where I can.”

It was a long shot, of course, but Bilba immediately reached for her handbag, snapping the gold-toned clasp open and fishing out one of her business cards.

“Here.” Bard hesitated for only an instant before plucking the card from her fingers, and Bilba noticed the exact moment when his quick glance turned up a different job title than he had expected to see. Bilba Baggins, the card read, in smooth black ink across thick, creamy paper, Assistant Director.

“I know it’s not exactly local,” she said, while Bard’s slack, surprised stare strayed from the little card, darting up to look at her face again. “But, if you’re ever interested in coming back to Gigi’s, please do give me a ring. Or if you just want some numbers for other companies back home, and a good word. I’m sure Gandalf would agree— he still speaks fondly of you, and Dori Rison does as well.”

The card vanished, lost first within the grip of Bard’s large, long fingered hand, and then into the folds of his jacket, tucked away in his inner breast pocket.

“You’re serious,” he said, and Bilba nodded, smiling her brightest. “You… you don’t even know me, Bilba.”

“I trust Gandalf’s nose for people,” she explained, riffling absently through her clutch again, pushing the little tubes and compacts of makeup aside. “In fact, I’m going to put your number in my mobile, if that’s all right… if I can find the little… Oh. Oh bugger.”

She took a deep, calming breath, checking the bottom of the small handbag once more, before beginning to mentally pour back over the last few hours, trying to remember.

“Ah, I must have left it back in the room,” she said, trying very hard not to let her heart flutter away in a panic. There was personal information on that phone, though nothing terribly sordid, and she knew she’d had it with her. She vividly remembered slipping it into her bag before Smaug had appeared to escort her.

She’d only had it out of her bag once since she’d left the room, sending Bofur a quick text when they’d first arrived. After that, with Smaug beside her the entire time, chattering away, it had stayed firmly and politely in her bag, set to silent mode. And she hadn’t taken the opportunity to check it in the loo before Tauriel had come in, either.

The unexpected pressure of a palm against the small of her back made her spine snap tense, almost sending her jumping out of her skin, but Smaug didn’t seem at all put off by her reaction.

“Bilba, darling.” He was looming close to her side, not quite pressed against her, and apparently falling back to the familiar pet names. “I wondered where you’d wandered off.”

“Smaug.” Snapping her clutch shut, Bilba swallowed back all potential announcements of her missing mobile, even less willing to cause a fuss with Smaug there. “Have you met Bard Bowman? Bard, this is Smaug.”

“I’m familiar,” Bard said, and held out a hand to shake, just as steady and professional as he’d offered the same hand to Bilba, but without the welcoming smile this time. “Smaug. It’s been a few
“Has it?” Smaug pressed the handshake very briefly, dropping Bard’s grip after a flick of his wrist. “I’m sure. A pleasure to see you.” The tone of dismissal hung heavy as lead between them, as Smaug shifted his attention back to Bilba with barely a split second pause.

“Has it?” Smaug said, circling his fingers in a swirling gesture toward the room. “Is becoming unbearably tedious; I want a cigarette and a palatable wine, neither of which I am allowed here, apparently. Shall we go, darling?”

Gandalf still hadn’t arrived, but there was no guarantee he would; the evening was dragging on, and Bilba had no intention of wandering out of this soiree and back to her rooms alone, without some company to walk to her door, whether Smaug or Tauriel. Especially when she didn’t even had a mobile phone in case of emergency.

No, she had no intention of being abandoned, but nor was she keen on leaving while her mobile was still missing. There was little she could do that wouldn’t encourage a search, however, getting others involved and all the ruckus that went along with that. She’d be the silly model playing at executive, who couldn’t keep track of a mobile—that was not attention she wanted, particularly not when any negativity could reflect upon her brand.

There was a chance, Bilba would reflect later, that she had been feeling rather over her head for most of the evening, and was utterly terrified of mucking up.

At that moment, however, she was beyond that sort of navel gaz ing and simply determined to play things calm and collected. Realistically, this was a party with industry professionals, hotel staff, and journalists milling around—there was a relatively good chance that if her phone was found, it would be returned, likely to the event staff. There was certainly no guarantee, but she might get lucky.

If not, well, it was passcode locked. The idea of being without her phone while travelling made her anxious, certainly, and she’d have to let Thorin know so he wouldn’t worry when his texts went unanswered for the rest of the week, but in the end, it was just a phone.

It was fine, really. Sort of.

She simply preferred it when all of her things were present and accounted for, and in proper order. Oh god, how could she have lost her bloody phone, of all things?

“Bilba?” When she glanced up, Smaug was peering at her with concern, both perfectly plucked brows raised, waiting. “Is everything all right?”

“Hm? Oh, yes, sorry.” Shaking herself free of the spiral of mounting discomfort and self-recrimination, Bilba shoved all those feeling down for the moment. “Yes, I suppose we should go—tomorrow is a busy day.”

Bard had been favouring Smaug with a bland sort of look, but Bilba managed to catch his attention with little more than tilt of her head in his direction. “Might we run into each other, Bard? Tomorrow? We’ve an early flight home Saturday morning, but I’m sure Gandalf would love to see you.”

“I’ll be around tomorrow, yeah,” Bard answered. “As audience, though, not work.”

Smaug’s fingers curled against Bilba’s hip, tightening. Gooseflesh crept up her spine, and she shifted to the left, stepping away just enough to remove herself from Smaug’s hold. He let her go
without argument, though not without a low, impatient hiss of breath escaping his teeth.

“Well, please do drop by,” she said, and held her hand out again for Bard to take hold of. She pressed his fingers, and letting a small, entirely genuine smile quirk her lips. “And do keep in mind what I said.”

“I will.” When their handshake broke, Bard gave his chest a pat, just over his heart. Her business card was there, safe in his pocket. “And thank you, again.”

Smaug and Bard exchanged the barest excuse of farewells, hardly a word, before Bilba found herself being hustled towards the exit, with Smaug taking hold of her elbow. Bilba allowed it, since the grip wasn’t nearly as firm as she’d expected, especially considering the annoyed flare of heat she had noticed in his eyes, unspoken but present.

They’d only taken a handful of steps before Tauriel was falling in line on Smaug’s other side, with a stony set to her jaw that didn’t fade until Bilba assured her there wasn’t anything amiss, despite the sense of purpose obvious in Smaug’s determined pace. He simply wanted to leave, and Bilba agreed — the evening was wearing on, and it had been rather a wash from the beginning, to be completely honest. Though meeting Bard had been an unexpected fortune— she had a good inkling about it, and trusted the feeling.

Bilba certainly felt as though she could have done more, networked more effectively, but there wasn’t anything to be done for that now.

If Gandalf had wanted things done differently, he ought not have vanished without warning.
After that somewhat stressful evening, Bilba didn’t think to question her luck when Smaug made no attempt to cajole her into going out for drinks with him. She simply made her thank yous, her goodbyes, and with a great sigh of relief, slipped into her quiet hotel room and closed the door on the rest of the world.

The shoes were the first thing gone— Bilba stepped out of them immediately, wriggling and stretching her aching toes against the carpet as she padded farther into her room. She clicked on a lamp as she passed, banishing the darkness with warm, yellowish light, and did a quick survey.

No sleek black screen glinted up at her from the bedside table, the dresser, or anywhere else around the room. She even peeked in the en suite loo, and dug through her luggage, just to be sure. As she’d expected, there was no sign of her mobile anywhere.

The clock on her bedside was glowing, displaying the time— twenty past eleven. Still early enough that the lads would still be awake, she hoped, pulling on her plain brown loafers before creeping back out into the corridor. Her initial search of the room had taken a short while, but she couldn’t ignore the instinct to keep an eye out for Smaug as she headed down the hall, past Gandalf’s room, and on to Ori and Bifur’s door.

She could hear laughter from inside, and felt a flood of relief as she knocked.

It only took a moment for Bifur to answer, with his hair fluffing in a wild nimbus, and a flush of red across the bridge of his nose. His jeans and jumper were gone, leaving him in only a violently orange t-shirt and a pair of blue striped boxers, with naked, hairy legs and knobbly knees beneath.

“Y-y-you’re b-back,” he managed, and grinned despite the significant worsening of his stutter, pulling the door open wide to admit her. Tired and full of beer, Bilba knew from experience that Bifur would have less control over the flow of his words than usual, but he didn’t seem bothered by his lapse at the moment. “Good ti-time?”

“Not a terrible time,” she said, and bumped her shoulder gently against Bifur as she passed, earning a quick, friendly squeeze of his arm around her back as they both walked farther into the room. “But not my idea of a fantastic evening, either. What in the world is going on here?”

There were far too many beer cans scattered around— more than she remembered them buying, to be honest. Bofur was sitting cross-legged on the floor between the beds, with an array of nail varnishes set out on the bedside table behind him, and a quick glance down confirmed that Bifur’s toenails had been painted bright, bubblegum pink. That wasn’t entirely unusual: there was a great deal of camaraderie amongst the lot of them, familial comfort, and their skills were often shared around for one reason or other.

Bilba couldn’t count the number of times she’d seen Nori’s face painted up, usually when Bofur was eager to test a new look or product, and both Bifur and Bofur’s hair was occasionally curled, pinned up, or plaited elaborately when Bombur was in the mood. The results of Bifur’s experiments and bouts of whimsy were usually less fleeting than his cousins’, simply due to the nature of his work.
Her patchwork robe wasn’t the only gorgeous piece of clothing he’d thrown together when the fancy struck him.

There were limits, however, and Bilba certainly hadn’t expected to find Ori perched on a chair in the middle of the room, with a white towel wrapped around his shoulders and a dozen or more shiny aluminium foils glinting in his sandy ginger hair. Bombur was nowhere to be seen, but the sound of running water could be heard from beyond the open bathroom door.

There were a few smears of dye on the towel, staining it rich plum purple in spots.

“Oh my good lord.” Bilba pressed one hand against her cheek, staring at Ori with wide eyes. “What…”

The sound of running water stopped, and an instant later, Bombur appeared in the washroom doorway, drying his hands.

“Now, we’ll leave that for about a half hour—” Bombur began to say, before noticing her. “Oh, Bilba. Uh, hello.”

“Oh my good lord.” Bilba repeated, louder this time. “Dori is going to kill you. He’s going to kill you all, and me too, just to be sure. Is that purple? Is it permanent?”

“I’m a grown man,” Ori said, his voice cracking with annoyance. It hardly helped matters that he looked so silly, folded with his knees bent under his chin and his socked feet braced on the seat of his chair, his hair sprigged up in more aluminium than a takeaway container. He was dressed down to his pyjamas, tartan bottoms and a heather grey t-shirt, cradling a half-drunk bottle of water between his spindly hands.

“Hey, we managed to talk him out of the tattoo, at least,” Bofur piped up from the floor, giving one of the little bottles of varnish a vigorous shake. “It’s a bit of hair dye, love. Harmless.”

“And it’s demi-permanent,” Bombur added unapologetically, as though he hadn’t just widowed his own wife. Dori was going to murder someone.

Bilba shuffled over, flopping down on the end of one bed with a sigh. “Tell me there’s still some whiskey, please.”

“Aye, some. Get it, will you, Bom?” Bofur waved his hand over towards his brother, as Bombur fetched the bottle from somewhere, and a clean tumbler. It wasn’t until Bilba was set with two fingers of warm amber liquor, clinking with a few cubes of ice, that Bofur scooted close enough to pat her on the knee with one big hand.

“You all right, darlin’?Managed to get through the evening with His Posh and Pissiness, I see.”

The whiskey was lush in her mouth, smooth and thick with a bit of sweetness, and more than a little heat, trickling down her throat and pooling in her belly. Bilba sipped it twice before answering. “Smaug was… surprisingly well behaved, and Tauriel is lovely company. And I ran into Bard Bowman.”

Bifur made an inquisitive sound from his lounge on the other bed, then spoke, slowly and carefully. “Bard? Been ages.”

Nodding, Bilba swirled her glass slightly, thinking back to the conversation. “He’s well. I gave him my card, in case I could talk him into taking some work across the Pond again. I rather hope he’s interested.”
She paused, peering down into the whiskey, before shifting her attention up, flitting between all four men. “Unrelated to that, I… well. Have any of you seen my phone? I may have misplaced it. Already checked my room, and nothing.”

“But it wouldn’t be in here,” Ori said, shaking his head quickly enough to make the foils in his hair crinkle softly. Bombur tutted, swatting Ori on the shoulder and sending a clear, silent command to be careful. “Ah, sorry! It’s just, Bilba, you texted Bofur from the dinner, didn’t you? So you wouldn’t have left your mobile in here.”

There was a headache blooming behind Bilba’s temples, not quite throbbing yet; she tipped back another, larger sip of whiskey.

“I lived in hope,” she said, and toed off her loafers, lifting her legs onto the bed and tucking them under herself. The length of her dress kept the pose more than demure enough for this company, especially since there wasn’t a man in the room who hadn’t seen her stripped down to sheer lingerie on many occasions, or wearing even less.

“A fool’s hope, of course,” she continued, rubbing her forehead absently. “Yes, so, I must have lost it at the party, because it’s not in my bag— I emptied the entire thing. May I borrow someone’s mobile to text Thorin? I don’t want him worrying if he tries to get hold of me tomorrow.”

There was some chattering, some questions about where she recalled having the phone last, if she’d checked at the party, and subtly roundabout questions as to whether this might be a PR emergency. Bilba answered them all in the same calm, even tone of voice, and gratefully accepted Bofur’s mobile when he pressed it into her hand, trading her now nearly empty tumbler for the phone.

“Jesus, it must be serious,” Bofur said, as Bilba almost instantly began typing out a message for Thorin. “You know his number just off hand? I don’t think I’d remember Nori’s number without speed dial.”

“You don’t even kn-know your own n-number,” Bifur said, swinging one leg over the edge of his bed, and landing a hard enough kick to Bofur’s side to elicit a breathless groan. “Finish up. Looks silly half d-done.”

Hello Thorin. It’s Bilba, she typed, while Bofur went back to his painting (grumbling about bullies and broken ribs), Bombur puttered around tidying, and Ori shifted around in his seat, snatching up one of his notebooks.

I’m using Bofur’s phone, she continued. I think I’ve lost mine. You can text me at this number and Bofur will make sure I get it. Miss you xx

She read it over again, then once more, before pressing send. The phone made a low swoosh of sound, and Bilba made doubly sure it had gone before craning back and laying the mobile carefully on the bedside table. It was nearly four in the morning back home; even if he’d been struck by another bout of troubled sleep, Thorin likely wasn’t awake at the moment. Or, at least, she hoped he wasn’t. She also hoped that the soft chime of his text alert, which was much less strident than his ringtone, wouldn’t wake him.

“Thank you, Bofur,” she said, then let her attention settle on Ori, who was busy writing away in the hardbound notebook he had balanced on his lap. Upside down and from this angle, Bilba couldn’t make out much detail of what was scrawled across the blank, creamy pages— one page of text, it looked like, and across from it, a loose, half-formed sketch of what might have been a woman’s face, and more text around her. There wasn’t much white space remaining, from what Bilba could see, and it wasn’t more than a moment or two before he turned to fresh page, as she’d expected.
University had been Dori’s dream for his youngest brother, perhaps for business, or even a proper art school. Something creative, something that satisfied Ori’s passions and played to his abilities, but professional and stable—something secure. Certainly, Dori hadn’t expected Ori to make a career of self-taught photography, some savvy and sage advice from Nori (as well as a few favours called in, whether Ori knew it or not), and no small amount of good luck.

Bilba knew that Dori was still stubbornly conflicted about the entire thing: profoundly proud of Ori, but unable to dismiss his lingering worries entirely. The tempered, realistic quality of Dori’s enthusiasm had ignited tensions between the brothers on more than one occasion, with Ori chafing under Dori’s doubts, and both of them frustrating the other to no end. Bilba could sympathize with the pair of them—the dreamer and the realist. Most days, she felt both extremes beating side-by-side in her own heart, what her family had called Tookish daring and Baggins sense.

It may very well have been her Baggins sense that sniffed out something strange in this situation—Ori wasn’t some rebellious teen, nor was he just generally the sort for wild hair colours, piercings, or tattoos. Even without Dori’s influence, Ori’s style always drifted towards cozy, layers of warm knits and soft corduroy, with a few little bits of unexpected flair. It wasn’t a look that required primping, or anything more than the most basic effort to maintain.

Purple hair… Bilba certainly hadn’t seen that coming.

“So, Ori, what brought this on?” she asked, twiddling her fingers towards her own hair. Ori’s attention flickered up from his notebook, then back down again almost instantly; big brown eyes were fixed on the paper in front of him, though the pen had stopped moving across the page.

“Just felt like it.” There was pinkness creeping over the apples of Ori’s cheeks and across the bridge of his nose, and his long, spindly fingers began to fiddle with his biro. “No, um, yeah. No real reason.”

Ori Rison was the worst liar on the face of the earth, and it would be adorable if it weren’t so tragic.

“Well, knowing Bombur, I’m sure it will be lovely,” Bilba said, as diplomatically as she could muster. Glancing around, she reassured herself that everyone except Ori was wearing some varying expression of disbelief. None of them bought Ori’s deflection as truth, of course, but none of them seemed eager to push him either. Not even Bofur, who had a certain skill for inappropriate timing and uncomfortable candor, made any attempt to press the issue.

That didn’t mean he didn’t speak up, however.

“She’s not going to shave his head, for goodness sake,” she said, trying very hard to sound more convinced of that statement than she felt. It was probably true. Bleach would be more likely, if Dori decided to make an issue of it.

“He won’t,” Ori agreed, with a definite thread of determination in his words, though his pen was still tapping nervously. “He might not be thrilled, but… no, he won’t. Even if he wants to, I won’t.”
won’t let him.”

Sitting up straighter, Ori pushed back his shoulders, breathing deeply enough to puff out his chest under his thin t-shirt.

“I can do what I like,” he said. “Dori can’t stop me making my own decisions, even if he thinks they’re stupid. He can tut and fuss and give me that look all he wants, but he can’t stop me. I’m twenty-seven years old, and I can do what I like.”

The measured cadence of Ori’s words made them sound almost like a mantra, and Bilba had little doubt that he’d been repeating similar sentiments to himself for quite some time.

It also felt as though there was more to this than simply some hair dye, especially given the earnestness of Ori’s self assurance. Something more than a punt at rebellion through cosmetics.

Think as she might, however, Bilba couldn’t quite put her finger on what it was.

There was a text waiting on Thorin’s phone when he woke up, but in a rare show of inattention, he didn’t notice straight away.

It was Friday morning, after a Thursday night spent at the pub had run longer than he had intended. Thorin dragged himself out of bed with bleary eyes and an ache in his joints that he probably wouldn’t have suffered ten, or even five years ago after an evening out drinking. It hadn’t even been a wild night, not by any stretch of the imagination— just a few beers and some conversation.

Well, all right, admittedly it had turned into more than a few beers, and Thorin should have known better, but he was surrounded by terrible influences.

His mobile was still in the pocket of his jeans, which in turn were crumpled up in the corner of his bedroom, when Thorin shuffled out and down the hallway, intent on the toilet, his toothbrush, and an intensely hot shower. Every minute spent under the spray, letting the punishing heat of the water redden his skin and soak into his muscles, succeeded in making Thorin feel fractionally more human.

When he finally slipped out of the bathroom to fetch some fresh clothes for the day, barefoot, hips wrapped in a towel and hair spiking damply, the lingering scent of soap wasn’t strong enough to disguise the smell of toast and coffee.

He hadn’t made either that morning.

Dragging one hand up over his face, partly annoyance and partly to slick his hair back somewhat, Thorin padded out through his flat and stuck his head into the kitchen.

Ah, yes. He’d forgotten he had a guest.

“Morning,” Thorin said, mildly chagrined that Dwalin was already up and eating, despite having nearly pickled himself the night before, with far more determination than Thorin had done. It had quickly devolved into the same friendly sibling competition that an evening out with both Dwalin and Balin always became, wherein Dwalin flat-out refused to concede to the sad truth that his brother, though older and less bulky than Dwalin, could drink like a damned fish when he was in the mood.
Thorin hadn’t been drinking competitively, but it was still Balin’s fault that he was nursing a headache that morning. Being faced with the knowledge that Balin had actually Googled his girlfriend was bad enough, but then the troublesome old git had actually twinkled at him, and asked if he knew whether *Ms Baggins* Wikipedia page was correct about her age.

Having the piss taken out of him for dating a woman ten years his junior had not been especially pleasant, especially considering Thorin’s own deeply buried insecurities about that very thing. Drowning himself in beer had seemed a reasonable response, all things considered.

Back in the present, Dwalin grunted something that might have been a greeting around a mouthful of toast, crumbs speckling his beard. There was also a smear of vibrant pink on the top of his bald head, only partially recognizable as a lipstick print—the young woman (Thorin could never remember her name for the life of him) whose mother ran the All Welcome Pub had been there last night, though not squawking on her saxophone this time. She’d been out with a pack of her equally young, equally enthusiastic mates, celebrating her acceptance offer from some university or other, and had been wearing the same bright magenta colour on her lips as the streaks in her hair.

Dwalin had suffered a squealing hug from her for all of three seconds, and a loud, smacking kiss planted on his skull, before shooing her and her friends off with his gruff congratulations. Thorin wasn’t entirely certain if Dwalin was more disappointed that he’d likely lost his occasional gig for free beer, or pleased that he’d never be tempted to sit through that godawful caterwauling again just for the liquor. It was certainly clear that Dwalin hadn’t been overly keen on the affectionate attention, however—the girl and her friends weren’t even stumbling out the pub door before Dwalin was scowling like a gargoyle and vainly trying to scuff away the glitter that had clung to his black t-shirt.

Neither Balin or Thorin had mentioned the very noticeable, nearly neon lipstick left behind on Dwalin’s head, and it seemed as though a night spent sleeping on Thorin’s sofa hadn’t managed to wipe it off either.

“Listen, I know your girl’s been gone a while,” Dwalin said suddenly, reaching out to pick up his coffee mug in one huge, tattooed hand. “But *I’m* not that desperate yet, mate. Go put some clothes on, for fuck’s sake, before you start shedding in my food. There’ll likely still be eggs left if you get your arse in gear.”

Snapping his mind out of the distracted wandering he’d fallen into, Thorin spared one brief, longing glance at the coffee pot—still enough for a large cup of his own, for the moment.

“There’d damn well better be eggs,” he said, trying to be as authoritative as possible even as he hoisted his towel a bit higher on his hips, turning to go. “And coffee, too, or you’re on housekeeping chores for a month. Detailing the truck, and all.”

“Blatant abuse of authority,” Dwalin called out from behind him, chewing noisily on toast again. “Conduct unbecoming an arsehole!”

“Well lucky I’m not an arsehole, then!” Thorin shouted back, probably too loud considering his neighbours and the somewhat early hour, and headed down to his bedroom.

He tossed his damp towel into the hamper beside his dresser, then proceeded to dig around until he found clean pants, a pair of joggers, and a dark t-shirt, pulling the loose, comfortable clothes on with efficient movements. There hadn’t been any seriousness in his threat to put Dwalin on cleaning duty above and beyond the usual roster, but the chance that Dwalin would polish off the entirety of breakfast before Thorin could enjoy more than a sniff of coffee was a real risk.

It was only then that he thought of his mobile, and when a glance over at his bedside table turned up
nothing, Thorin took a moment to hunt down his discarded jeans.

He checked it for messages on his way back to the kitchen, and found one text waiting, from a number he didn’t recognize.

The text itself offered explanation enough— Bilba had lost her phone. It was nearly the end of her trip, anyway, which was more fortunate than losing it early on, but it was still an annoying, inconvenient situation. Thorin had a strong inkling that Bilba would be feeling frazzled by the whole thing.

It was just past half nine in the morning, and it would be earlier still on Bilba’s end, but Thorin typed out a reply regardless, as he ambled slowly back towards the kitchen.

**Does Bilba have any tracking installed on her phone?**

He wanted to wish her good morning, to send his sympathies about the phone, he wanted to speak with her, but none of that felt like the sort of sentiment he would willingly funnel through someone else. Especially not someone like Bofur, who might be Bilba’s good friend, but Thorin hardly knew him from Adam.

The text was sent off just as Thorin entered the kitchen again, and wonder of wonders, there was still coffee to be had. Setting his mobile on the table, not expecting an answer straight away, he set about pouring himself a generous mug.

“Eggs on the cooker,” Dwalin said, jerking his head in that direction, but made no move to get up from his seat at the table. “Any word from the little missus, you sad old bastard?”

Thorin leaned against the cupboards, stirring the sugar into his coffee, and fixed Dwalin with a bland look. “If you ever call her that to her face, I’ll not be held responsible for the fate of your balls. Fair warning.”

Chapter End Notes

We're nearly done with all this New York business, which will bring me no end of delight, holy shit.

This chapter however, is almost entirely for those of us (myself included) who've been eager for a bit of Knitted Axes. Though just the teeniest hint for now, I think it's pretty cute <3
“What on earth do you mean?” Spreading her arms wide, Bilba indicated the milling frenzy occurring around them. It was less than forty minutes before the final showing of the week—a loosely formal runway setup with only two or three models from each of the numerous designers taking part, but the staging was very nearly as elaborate as a full production show, with a live band and all—and backstage was buzzing with preparations. “It’s the absolute last minute! It’s the spectacular, Gandalf.”

“Yes, I am quite aware.” Massaging above his brow, Gandalf allowed his eyes to drift shut. “And yet that doesn’t change the fact that he has refused to take part. Our Mister Smaug is suffering a migraine, apparently, and is quite unable to bear the noise and lights.”

“But his contract—”

“Is superseded by health concerns,” Gandalf continued. He looked exhausted, altogether too washed out and frazzled even compared to his customary rumpled state, and Bilba immediately felt a stab of guilt for having any part in worsening the situation. “Exactly as would be the case for any of our models in such a situation. And regardless, Saruman has made himself perfectly clear on the matter, as well: under no circumstances are we to disturb Mister Smaug’s rest.”

“Saruman?” Bilba shifted in her seat, glancing around in case of curious ears. Bombur and Bofur were both lingering nearby, making a grand show of certainly not listening as they fussed with tasks, while Bifur was standing at Gandalf’s elbow, with his arms crossed and mouth pursed tight. Otherwise, their preparation area was relatively private. “You asked him?”

Gandalf finally opened his eyes again, straightening up with a long, deep breath. “No, he rang me before I could even consider it. Which, as you can imagine, means he is immensely serious, and best to be heeded. In this case, at least.”

It also meant that Saruman had become somehow informed of the situation; Smaug had gone over Gandalf’s head.

“We can’t even try to borrow another model,” Bilba said, rather than allow any choice words about a certain troublemaking prat to escape her lips. “Especially not a male model, if we’d like to maintain our friendships here. It’s only a half hour until the show starts, but we could… no, we can’t call in a replacement that quickly. Oh, this is dreadful. This is—if we don’t show any of the Gentleman’s—”

This was the grand finale of her very first show with Assistant Director hanging over her, which was a title that felt much more like a guillotine than a badge of honour at the moment. A lost mobile was one thing, but a botched showing without a single stitch of their men’s line parading down the
catwalk was something else entirely.

“Calm down, my dear.” Gandalf’s hand was a gentle weight on her shoulder, its warmth leeching through the silk of her robe. “Deep breath, and be calm. We cannot always choose what troubles crop up, or when, but this is hardly the end of the world. We will adapt, and make do. Now then, we may be stuck for more traditional choices, but what about our team, hm?”

Gandalf raised his voice, just a smidge, and looked to Bombur and Bofur. “Any volunteers, gentlemen? You would be compensated, of course.”

It was likely out of respect for their limited window of time that neither man even bothered to pretend they hadn’t been listening to every word.

“Honestly? Have you seen those skimpy wee pants?” Jerking a thumb towards several pairs of neatly folded briefs, Bofur patted the pot of his stomach with his free hand. “Unless you’ve time to let them out a mile, cousin, me and Bom aren’t squeezing into them. And I’ve a couple, ah, let’s call them less than appropriate tattoos you might not want to be parading about, Mister Legris.”

“But you could ask Ori,” Bombur added, only to be silenced almost immediately by a small wave of Gandalf’s hand.

“No, no, not Ori. Even if the lad agreed, there would be… far more complications than I would prefer.” Which was, of course, carefully phrased code for Dori would murder them all. “And if we want our own photographs of this event, which I can assure you we do, his talents are required elsewhere.”

At the moment, Ori was likely off checking his equipment and flitting around here and there amongst the models, taking full advantage of the goodwill garnered by his adorable puppy eyes as he gathered more impromptu photographs for his latest project.

“Wait, just wait,” Bilba said, gripping at the sides of her chair as though it might help anchor her thoughts. The wild notion that had taken root in her brain was growing, blooming, bursting with desperate salvation. It was not likely to work, but damn it, it would be worth the try. Anything would be worth the try, at this point. “Bard Bowman. He said he would be in the audience today. We could, I mean, it wouldn’t hurt to ask him, would it?”

Bombur frowned, rolling a can of hair spray between his palms. “Pluck him out of the audience? Just like that?”

“I did say ask him. This shouldn’t be a kidnapping, or anything of the sort.” Bilba looked up at Gandalf, trying to judge if the curious tilt of his head was a good, considering sort of expression or not. He could be so hard to read, even after all these years. “Gandalf? What do you think?”

“Bard Bowman, you say.” Turning to Bifur, Gandalf hummed questioningly. Bifur hummed in reply, shrugging, and Gandalf’s lips quirked up into a tiny smile. “No, it certainly wouldn’t hurt to ask. Brilliant, Bilba— very well done. If you’ll all pardon me a moment.”

And with that, Gandalf was sweeping off with a long, elegant stride and the click of his fine leather shoes.

“Brilliant.” Bifur echoed, biting the word off sharply at both ends. There was a bright gleam in his eyes, and the clap of his large hands together was nearly loud enough to startle Bilba out of her skin. “Good. He’s b-better to dress.”

“Absolutely no arguments here, cousin,” Bofur said, grinning. “Only met him a couple of times,
myself, ages ago now, but what are the chances he’s an absolutely unmitigated arsehole too, eh?”

“Bofur,” Bilba said softly, her tone mild but warning. “Easy.”

“Easy, nothing. The man’s a prick, and I’d say so to his face.” Dismissive or not, Bofur still reeled himself in to a more professional manner. Relatively, at least. “Here, let’s finish your face, love; it’s much more pleasant. You’re hardly half-way tarted up, and I might just have a chiseled jaw to see to in a minute.”

It was only shortly thereafter that Gandalf reappeared, with a clearly bewildered Welshman on his heels. As Bilba was currently in the midst of having her lips artfully lined in soft, coral pink, she managed to offer only a slight twiddle of her fingers in greeting. It was a much more muted reaction than the relief flooding through her veins might have warranted, in any other circumstance.

“When you mentioned you might have work for me,” Bard said to her, even as he began stripping out of his grey suit jacket. “I’ll admit, I didn’t quite expect this.”

“Good Mister Bowman has agreed to model for us,” Gandalf announced, which was largely unnecessary, but somehow hearing the words aloud did actually manage to further ease the crackle of tension in the air. “And we are so very pleased to have you back, Bard, truly.”

“Ah, it’s no trouble.” Bard’s shirt disappeared next, tiny buttons slipping easily through the crisp blue cotton, and the thin white vee-necked shirt beneath was yanked over his head without pause, leaving him bare to his belt. His chest was every bit as impressive as Bilba had guessed, hewn in well-proportioned angles and sweeping curves from his broad shoulders, down to the nip of his waist. “Couldn’t very well leave you all in the lurch, could I? It’s certainly not a hardship, having the opportunity to model for you again.”

“Twenty minutes,” Bombur said, motioning towards the empty chair he’d dragged over and set up only a short distance to Bilba’s left. “And, begging your pardon, but your hair’s entirely the wrong sort of mess at the moment.”

“Right, sorry.” Dropping into the chair wearing just a pair of trousers, Bard toed off his Oxfords, seemingly heedless of any scuffing. His socks matched the grey of his suit, with argyle diamonds peeking out from his cuffs in complementary blues. “Do your worst, lads. I’m at your mercy.”

After all was said and done— underwear wriggled into, runways walked, and flashbulbs endured for what felt like the span of a decade and barely a blink all at the same time— Bilba found herself backstage again, feeling altogether bubblier than the champagne they were sharing. It was finished, wrapped up neatly, and they had somehow managed to avoid or at least recover from the multitude of pitfalls that had been hounding her thoughts for weeks.

It wouldn’t be long before they needed to pack up, after which they would be hustling back to the hotel rooms, and an early flight the next morning. For the moment, however, it seemed they were all eager to let the tension bleed away in a great, relaxing rush.
“A toast, I think.” Gandalf lifted his paper cup, smiling wide enough that his eyes appeared to very nearly vanish amid wrinkles and bushy brows. “To our salvation in the final hour—” He tipped his head first toward Bard, who was perched on a tall chair, wearing his own t-shirt again and the delicately embroidered, mint green briefs from their G Gentlemen spring line.

“And to our esteemed Assistant Director,” Gandalf continued, turning to Bilba. “Whose determination, cleverness, and bravery in the face of every new challenge set before her, ensured an inarguably triumphant week. Kudos, my dear girl, and my very deepest thanks.”

“For goodness sake.” There was nothing to be done to stop it: the rest of their team was already raising cups and raising voices in cheer. Bilba took a fortifying sip of champagne, ducking away from the effusive praise, though she wasn’t entirely able to suppress a tiny, flattered grin. “It’s not as though we could have done anything at all like this without the lot of you, so hush.”

“Oh, aye, agreed.” Slinging his arm around the back of her chair, Bofur leaned in a pressed a kiss against Bilba’s temple. “I know I’ve been brilliant, and this lot— Finely done, lads. A great show, all around.”

A chorus of agreement followed, and a few more brief, congratulatory toasts simply served to put more pink in Ori’s cheeks. They only spared time for a small cup each, though some had purposely been poured more generously than others, but it was a wonderfully relaxing cap to a long, stressful week. The champagne was crisp (though slightly too warm), the company was grand, and their return flight was only a day away. Bilba’s brightening mood had a great deal to do with that fact, and it was simply encouraged further by her friends’ broad grins and ringing laughter.

They might be in the home stretch, but they weren’t yet properly home, and the prospect was making the soles of her feet itch. Even without a handsome, burly firefighter waiting for her on the other side of the Atlantic, Bilba would have been eager to return to the familiar cosiness of her flat, her armchair, and her miniature forest of potted plants.

A taste for travel, for adventure, had very likely been inherited from her mother, but Bilba had always been more than a little of a homebody at heart. Journeys could be exciting, invigorating things, but returning back to the comforts of home again was profoundly sweet as well.

“Right, then,” Bard said all too soon, reaching back to set his empty cup on the vanity table behind his chair. “It’s about time I headed off, I think. Might still manage some mingling before everyone clears out. Gandalf—”

Standing, Bard held out a hand to shake, which Gandalf accepted without hesitation.

“Thank you.” Bard’s smile was lopsided, dimpling only one cheek. “Not how I expected to spend my afternoon, but I really appreciate the opportunity. Truly.”

Gandalf kept their hands held together for a moment longer, reaching up to clasp Bard’s wrist as well. “I should be thanking you for such a well-timed rescue. And Bilba, of course, for having the idea in the first place. It’s been wonderful to see you, Bard.”

“Yeah, you too.” The handshake fell away as Bard turned to the rest of them, dipping his head slightly. “All of you. It’s been good getting out there again.”
It was far too early for any sensible person to be awake, especially any sensible person who might just have been celebrating a tiny bit the evening before. Damn the Broadbeams, their wheedling charm, and their hollow legs— Bilba should have never agreed to help polish off the last of the beer.

Yet, there she was shuffling through the airport, feeling bleary and wool-headed in an unpleasant state that was trying valiantly to be a hangover, but never quite managed to reach beyond *just a bit grotty*. Her head was aching only mildly, and her stomach wasn’t unsettled, which was a blessing. It had still been a misery to drag herself out of her comfortable hotel bed in the wee hours, however.

She would nap for ages on the plane, she decided, and woe be to anyone who thought otherwise.

Their luggage had already been checked, security had been cleared, and Bilba was settled in a squashy chair in the first class departure lounge. She wondered if it would bother Ori if she rested her head against his shoulder; if he hadn’t been engrossed in the first lines of a new sketch in his notebook, she already would have leaned over the pair of armrests between them. The hoodie Ori was wrapped up in looked wonderfully soft and thick, even if the contrast of thick black and bright purple stripes was rather hard on her tired eyes. Then again, the purple was a pleasant match for the sprigs of hair peeking out of his knit cap.

Maybe she should shuffle across their little ring of chairs and curl up in the empty seat beside Bombur instead, but that would involve *moving*...

Before she could do more than gaze at Ori’s shoulder wistfully, there was suddenly a crisp white paper coffee cup being dangled in front of her face.

“There wasn’t much open so early.” Bilba dragged her attention away from the proffered cup, from the perfectly manicured hand holding it, up the sleeve of a burgundy cardigan, all the way to a long, angular face she hadn’t even *slightly* expected to see.

Smaug smiled, tilting his head minutely toward the cup. It was a match for the one held in his other hand. “But I thought you might enjoy something near enough to tea.”

Bilba very nearly gave into the urge to rub her eyes, as though that might help banish whatever sort of hallucination she was suffering, but then Ori let out a quiet, panicked sound and jerked ramrod tense beside her.

It was not a hallucination, apparently.

“How?” Gobsmacked or not, Bilba’s manners took over automatically, and she reached out to take the paper cup. It was very warm to the touch— hot enough that she immediately shifted her grip to the insulating ring of brown card circling it partway up.

Without a word of explanation, Smaug stepped over and lowered himself into the empty chair just across from Bilba’s, leaving only a small coffee table and a bit of leg room between them. He crossed his legs, revealing a strip of scarlet sock peeking out from the cuff of his neatly pressed black trousers, and took a sip from his own cup.

There was a faint thud, as Bifur, sitting on Ori’s left, snapped the cover of his novel shut. Gandalf was off somewhere chatting on his mobile, Bofur was snoring wheezily from his sprawl over two chairs (not the most elegant or appropriate pose for the Concorde Room, but it was early enough that no one kicked up a fuss).

Bombur, with only one empty seat separating him from Smaug, had the wide, wild eyes of a rabbit frozen in car headlights.
“Um.” Bilba glancing from the tea in her hand, to Smaug’s expectant smile, and back again. Neither of these incongruous things was polite enough to evaporate like mist in the morning.

“Good morning,” Smaug said, then after a brief pause, rolled his attention ever so lazily over the other chaps sitting in their group. “All.”

Mumbled, half-hearted greetings followed, and Bilba was intensely relieved when Bofur did not wake up.

“What are you,” Bilba began to ask, then stopped herself, reconsidering.

“Thank you,” she said instead, lifting her cup ever so slightly. She balanced it on the arm of her chair, not quite willing to take a drink. “Are you… joining us?”

“Yes.” Bilba’s stomach dropped to her feet. Beside her, Ori shifted in his seat and breathed out the quietest groan, a pained noise that was barely audible over the creak of upholstery.

“I had planned to stay in the city a bit longer,” Smaug explained, sparing Ori a sharp look while one long finger tapped out a steady beat against the side of his cup. “But after yesterday, I’d much rather the comforts of home. Terribly sorry to leave you in the lurch, of course.”

“How’s the head-headache?” Bifur’s voice was a low rasp, steady and rumbling.

“Ghastly.” Smaug’s smile curled higher on one side, and the sly effect was distinctly reptilian. “But improving. I’ll live, I’m sure.”

Oh, this was going to be a wonderful flight.

“Ah, good, it appears as though we’re all here.” Bilba hadn’t heard him approach, but the light touch of Gandalf’s hand against her shoulder was much more comforting than startling. “Including Mister Smaug. Grand.”

“Yes, Gandalf, please do thank Saurman for me,” Smaug said. “For sorting things out so quickly.”

If she were the gambling sort, Bilba would have put money on the notion that Smaug had once again contacted Saruman directly, and Gandalf was only informed after the fact. There was only one slight consolation in this entire chest-pounding farce: Gandalf had confided in her that despite Saruman bending over backward, their stern Managing Director was privately not at all keen on Smaug’s bluster.

Bilba wouldn’t go so far as to say she had any sort of plan, precisely, but there did appear to be far less enthusiasm than she’d feared when it came to Smaug’s continued retention with Garnished and Gilded. And that was the sort of information she very carefully filed away, for a rainy day.

“He was pleased to assist,” Gandalf said, keeping his fingers curled loosely against Bilba’s shoulder. “I’m sure. Now, we’ll be boarding shortly; is everyone sorted?”

There was the usual momentary scramble, during which Bifur gave his sleeping cousin a kick to the shin. Bofur woke with a snort, pushing his hat up from its slouch over his eyes.

“Jesus.” Scrubbing a hand across his face, Bofur sat up, swinging his boots back onto the floor with twin thumps. “Is it time— oh Jesus.”

Silence reigned for a long, quivering moment; Smaug’s all too pleased expression didn’t falter, even as Bofur stared at him, as one might stare at an insect just fallen into a previously lovely bowl of
“I’m not,” Bofur said finally, throwing both hands up and shaking his head. “Nope, not even bothered. Let’s just get home, eh?”

“A fine idea,” Gandalf agreed, just as the announcement sounded to begin boarding. “And fine timing, as well. Shall we?”

Bilba made sure to latch on to Gandalf’s arm, rather than wait for Smaug to offer his own, and received a quick, knowing wink of one glittering blue eye as Gandalf allowed the hold. She did make quite an awkward sight, however, between balancing her admittedly heavy hand baggage, and her arm notched into the loop of Gandalf elbow, all the while holding a full, sloshing cup of tea.

“May I help, Bilba?” Smaug hadn’t quite shouldered Ori out of the way in his journey to Bilba’s side, though that was largely due to the near-leap Ori had made to get out of Smaug’s path.

Smaug had wrapped his fingers around the handle of her small, wheeled luggage, before Bilba could say one word. He didn’t try to drag it off without permission, but he did stay with their hands overlapping around textured plastic, as though the possibility of refusal never entered his mind.

Of course, that was the moment when the strap of Bilba’s satchel slipped down from her shoulder; the sudden shift of weight onto her forearm forced her to let the handle go, and that, apparently, was enough agreement to satisfy Smaug’s sense of propriety.

It was only luggage, and it wasn’t as though Smaug had any of his own to worry about; as was his habit, his bags would have all been checked.

It was only luggage, and they had hours trapped together in a plane ahead of them. Bilba would pick her battles.

“Yes, thank you,” she said, hoisting her satchel back in place. Smaug deftly manoeuvred the bag around the chairs, with a surprising ease for someone who hardly ever touched his own luggage.

Behind Smaug’s back, Bofur made a scandalously rude gesture, and Bombur delivered a hard slap to his brother’s arm for the trouble.

Only a few more hours, and she would be home. A few more hours, and Thorin would be waiting for her at Heathrow, ready to bundle her off and tuck her into bed.

Bilba firmed her resolve, and began a silent count of minutes.

It was a little past nine in the morning when the text arrived, though Thorin didn’t hear the alert immediately. There were only a few wispy clouds marring the pale winter sky, the air was crisp without being biting — a perfectly gorgeous Saturday for a run, and Thorin was busy taking full advantage.

And if he was also keen to run off some of the thrumming energy that was sizzling through his nerves like electric shocks, that was no one else’s business.

It was every kind of foolish, and more than a wee bit pathetic, but he had missed Bilba. He’d missed
the soft weight of her curled under his arm, the smell of her hair, and every single thing about her
tongue, from the clever words and easy laughter that spilled across it, to the wet slide of it against his
skin.

He also missed her sharp wit and flirting being no more than a quick text away. The past couple of
days had been a special sort of annoyance, with only rare messages arriving from Bofur’s number.
Regardless, it hardly felt the same, talking through someone else.

Bilba would be in the air shortly, if she wasn’t already, and Thorin would be waiting at the airport
that evening. Only a few more hours... not that he was keeping count or anything so ridiculous as all
that.

It wasn’t until Thorin slipped inside a corner shop to buy bottle of water that he also pulled his
mobile from the pocket of his thin running jacket, and noticed the text alert waiting for him.

At first, he assumed it was Bilba letting him know she was still on schedule, or not on schedule as
the case might be. But the message had been sent from a blocked number— presumably not Bilba’s,
unless she’d picked up a new phone, and not Bofur’s either.

Standing down by gleaming coolers packed with fizzy drinks and various juices, Thorin called up
the strange message with a flick of his thumb. Probably some advert or other spam, he imagined, but
it needed to be checked on the off chance it was indeed Bilba, or possibly work.

Thorin scanned the message once, quickly, then once more, blindly setting his unopened water on a
nearby shelf.

It was only after his third reading, as his eyes dragged disbelieving across every word, that Thorin’s
brain finally gave him a hard kick in the arse. He was gone, dashing out of the shop and back onto
the street, in the span of four thundering heartbeats.

His run before had been perfectly controlled: familiar exercise for his body and a relaxation for his
mind. Now he ran like a man pursued, a man possessed, darting around startled pedestrians as his
legs ate up the distance back towards his flat.

He very nearly fumbled his keys trying to get in the main doors of his building, and did drop them
once while he fought with his own door, his mobile wedged tight between his shoulder and skull.

“Fuck,” he snarled, fishing the jangling keyring off the carpet. “Fucking goddamn fucker—”

“Oh, now that’s charming,” Dis said into his ear, having finally picked up her damn phone. “Hello to
you, too, brother dear—”

“Dis.” Thorin had no time and even less patience for his sister’s playful banter, and no qualms about
interrupting her before she picked up steam. “I need a favour.”

Shouldering his way into his flat, Thorin kicked the door shut behind himself and started down the
hallway to his bedroom.

“Thorin? What’s wrong?” As he had expected, Dis easily caught on to the deadly seriousness of his
mood. “What do you need?”

Thorin stripped out of his joggers, snatching up a relatively clean pair of jeans from the top of his
laundry pile and yanking them on instead.

“I need—” With a hard, awkward shimmy and an unfortunate rip of fabric, Thorin was free of his
sweat-damp shirt and his jacket in one fell swoop. With a better hold on his mobile now, gripped against his palm like a lifeline, he focused his attention on Dis. “I need you to pick up Bilba at the airport. Something’s come up, and I can’t— I just need you to do this for me. Please, Dis.”

The sound of Dis’ displeased hum came through clearly, as did a mental image of her doubtlessly terrifying grimace. “Thorin, tell me what’s wrong.”

Whether or not he left her in the dark, Thorin was confident that his sister would do as he asked; after everything they’d been through over the years, there was little if anything either of them wouldn’t do for the other. Family had always been precious to the Durinsons, but so much more so now, when the lion’s share of it had been snatched away.

Dis was his sister, however, as well as being one of his dearest friends and closest confidants. He owed her the truth, or some of it at least.

“I found more information on the fire.” Grabbing a henley from his closet, Thorin continued speaking over Dis’ immediate objections. “No, listen. Listen, Dis, this is important—”

“Is it? Is it so very important that you’d leave that sweet woman standing there, abandoned at Heathrow?”

Thorin flinched, his fist tightening around the shirt. “So important that I’m ringing you, begging. Please, Dis.”

“For god’s sake.” There was a long, breathy sigh, before Dis continued. “Fine. Yes, all right. But if this was anyone else, you unmitigated arsehole—”

“I know, I know— Damn it, I’m sorry.”

“Choke on your damn sorrys. I’m not the one who needs to hear them.” Dis paused for an instant, likely cooling her temper. Thorin couldn’t bring himself to bristle at the venom in her voice, especially not when his own guilt was already burning in his gut. “What time does her plane get in?”

“Seven-thirty, Terminal Five. Thank you.”

“Just shut up, Thorin. Arsehole.” Without anything further, she disconnected the call, leaving Thorin with an empty silence ringing in his ear.

Thorin stared at his mobile for a minute more, wishing desperately that he could text Bilba, even if she wouldn’t get the message until she’d already deplaned. Something, anything, to let her know that he hadn’t blown her off without a damned good reason.

June 2nd, the text read, stark words still saved in his phone. When Erebor blazed like dry tinder. There were secondary fires started in the kitchen and the front hall meant to seal the exits. The old man died weeping before the smoke ever touched him. Want more? Come to Erebor. Come today.

Thorin felt sickness roll up his throat, but he swallowed it back.

There were secondary fires meant to seal the exits. Any fire investigators who’d ever looked over the scene or the reports afterwards had called that theory inconclusive, but Thorin had known it in his bones for years. His family had been trapped inside Erebor with purpose, with malice. And his grandfather...

Come to Erebor. Come today.
Thorin pulled the henley over his head, jamming his mobile into his pocket with far too much force. He’d take the train— quicker than his bike, and less likely to get him killed when all he could see was a growing red haze.

_Come to Erebor._

He couldn’t allow himself to linger on the thought of Bilba’s smile, bright and eager as she looked for him waiting, crumbling to confusion. To disappointment. He couldn’t bear that, and this anger too. He couldn’t even dare allow himself to wonder if she would forgive him, or if she would understand.

_Come to Erebor._

That was all he could do.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for your patience while I got a bit lost in my Hobbit Big Bang story, and a few other personal things afterward.

We should be back to regular updates now, I hope, though I'll also be working on Gem. I'm going to shoot for alternating updates each week, but we'll see.

Have I mentioned lately that I adore you all? Because I do <3
Chapter 33

Chapter by littleblackdog

Chapter Notes

Mentions of past canonical character death and grief in here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Smaug was well-behaved for the entire flight, which Bilba chalked up as an absolute miracle. In fact, he’d been so quiet and unobtrusive, she’d nearly forgotten he was on board at all. After stowing her baggage in the overhead for her, he’d slunk over to his window seat, popped on a set of headphones, and that had been that.

The lack of pestering might have made her nervous, waiting for the other shoe to drop, if she hadn’t been so well acquainted with the vagaries of his moods. Such a bout of self-inflicted solitude was hardly atypical, though there was usually more warning before he grew bored of flirting with her. And, as an added bonus, Smaug’s wandering attention allowed Bilba to quietly pass off her truly horrid excuse for tea (befouled with skimmed milk and the chemical tang of artificial sweetener) to one of the flight attendants to be binned.

Tauriel—whom Smaug had actually left standing in the corridor outside the First Class lounge as though she were a dog tied to a bicycle rack—was much better company than Bilba had feared she would suffer.

They had lowered the partition between their seats, which were square in the middle of the First Class cabin (Bilba had no love for the window view, thank you kindly), and chatted very amiably about this and that. It seemed Tauriel kept a herb garden in her tiny East London flat, and they spent ages discussing proper light and drainage in winter.

Bilba could see Smaug, seated across the aisle from Tauriel, reclined back so far he was nearly flat. His head was lolled to one side, facing the window and the endless blue sky beyond, and his entire body had sunk into a slack, boneless sprawl.

Behind her, Ori was snoring with the usual wheezy hiccough he almost invariably developed on an aeroplane. Bilba could feel her own eyes growing heavy, even as she extolled the virtues of Greek oregano. She regretted her indulgences the night before even more now: the longer they spoke, Tauriel began to blossom before her, becoming more animated within the comfort of their quiet discussion. It was a very good look for her.

Eventually, however, one last jaw-cracking yawn forced Bilba to beg off further chatting in favour of the nap she’d promised herself.

“Please someone wake me in an hour… maybe two,” Bilba murmured, mostly to Tauriel. She was already nuzzling into her pillow, but her words were clear enough that Tauriel hummed something that sounded like amused agreement. “Mm, just please don’t let me sleep the entire way. Ta.”
“Ms Baggins.” Her name carried on a soft, lilting voice wasn’t enough to wake her properly; Bilba’s eyes remained firmly shut, and she began to slip back into deeper sleep almost instantly. “Bilba?”

The touch of a hand on her shoulder, however, shaking her ever so slightly, brought her wide awake with a short, sharp snort.

She blinked, gritty-eyed and cotton-mouthed. Tauriel looked pinched, as though she was trying very hard to bite back laughter, and gave Bilba’s arm a gentle pat. “We’re landing shortly. Almost home.”

Oh, lord, she’d slept for nearly five hours— her internal clock was going to be rubbish for days. That was all a bit too complex to articulate at the moment (and perhaps a slightly cranky observation, she would admit), so Bilba simply stared at Tauriel until the other woman had the good sense to look ever so mildly chagrined.

“You… you seemed tired,” Taurielexplained with a jerky roll of her shoulders, and lowered her voice. “I did try to wake you, once, and you swatted at me. Then he told me to leave you alone.”

Bilba glanced over where Tauriel indicated, and found Gandalf perched serenely in his seat, flipping through a magazine.

What a meddling old sack he could be, and always so sure he knew best for her.

“It’s fine.” Swallowing in a vain attempt to rid her tongue of its current sandpaper texture, Bilba reached deep into her reserves and found a sincere smile. She was all too aware she’d woken in a snappish mood, and fought to banish it as quickly as possible. “Honestly, nothing to worry about. After this week, the rest won’t have done me any harm at all. Thank you, Tauriel.”

The intercom came alive with the captain announcing their descent, which was then followed by a chorus of mumbling and shuffling as their cohort began adjusting seats and gathering particulars together. Uncurling, Bilba adjusted her cardigan and blouse, slipping her arms back into the sleeves of her coat.

Almost home, Tauriel had said, and Bilba felt her initial grouchiness begin to fall away as the warmth of those words sink into her bones. Almost home, to her flat, her own bed, and an entire Sunday ahead of her, free from work and worries.

An entire lazy, languorous Sunday to spend with her very own lovely boyfriend, and wasn’t that a splendid thought.

Sometime between deplaning and picking up their luggage, Ori had stuffed every strand and stripe of his hair up inside his bright blue beanie. He’d even had his hood pulled up over as well, while they waited at the baggage carousels, until Bofur tugged it down with quick fingers and a tutting laugh.

“There’s a fine line, Ori, my lad, between caution and fear.” Wrapping an arm around Ori’s back, Bofur used his free hand to adjust his own hat to a jaunty angle. “And an even finer one between subtly camouflaged and calling attention. You’ve got this; you’re golden. No wrapping up like a mummy required.”
“I’ve got this,” Ori repeated, standing taller by the second, even if his fingers were worrying at the hem of his wooly cardigan. “Of course I have. It’s going to be nothing.”

“Nothing at all,” Bombur agreed, shooting Bilba a meaningful glance out of the corner of his eye. If Dori was out for blood after Ori’s new style became public knowledge, it was Bombur who might be thrust into the line of fire, having done the deed. He didn’t look worried, precisely, but he had the tapping feet and shifting stance of a man not entirely at ease either.

“I’ve no idea why you’re so concerned, my dear boy,” Gandalf said, all while watching the parade of bags intently. “I think you look rather smart. And your brother hardly has room to complain about bold fashion choices— never forget that I knew Dori Rison during the eighties.”

Gandalf’s eyes were sparkling with keen humour when he finally looked over, favouring Ori with a wink. “And also never forget that there is abundant photographic evidence. Now, isn’t that your bag?”

Bilba had managed to secure a trolley for her bags, and had taken control of the handle before Smaug could get anywhere near. It was astonishing he hadn’t simply vanished like mist in the morning the moment he had his own posh leather luggage in hand, but so far he’d made no move to rush off.

The lot of them strolled into the arrivals area in an odd clump of bodies and baggage, but they’d not made it more than two steps before Bofur let out a deafening whoop, surging forward. The display garnered no end of looks from other travellers— curiosity and perhaps concern at first, then almost universally melting into adoring smiles when Bofur dropped his holdall in favour of scooping two wee, squealing children up into his arms.

Bombur didn’t quite break into a run like his brother, but he made damn good time across the room. It wasn’t more than a moment before he was being greeted with an enthusiastic kiss by his lovely wife; Dolira had taken hold of the front of his jacket and hauled him in without so much as a hello.

“Keep it clean, you two,” Bofur called out, with a pair of children dangling from his neck and arm like fruit from a tree. “Nine’s plenty for a while, eh?”

When Bifur meandered off to join his family, he was treated to hugs from the children as well— Gilly and Oscar, if Bilba remembered correctly, neither one older than seven, and both with their mother’s warm brown complexion and her curly hair, though Oscar’s was black and Gilly’s was a brassy auburn that leaned more toward her father’s ginger. The rest of the brood was likely still at home, considering the fact that Bofur hadn’t been completely overcome by a tidal wave of tiny bodies.

“Nine,” Tauriel murmured, half-question and all shock. “Did he… nine?”

Bilba nodded, offering back a small wave when Oscar blew her a smacking kiss over Bofur’s shoulder. “Nine, yes.”

“Wow.” With her eyes wide, perhaps a bit wild, Tauriel gripped a bit tighter at the luggage strap across her chest. She was carrying Smaug’s larger valise in her other hand. “That’s, I mean… wow. I’m an only child— I can’t even imagine.”
“Neither could I, honestly—” There were few benefits to her height when trying to spot someone in a crowd, but Bilba somehow managed to catch a glimpse of familiar silver hair and a plum coloured coat farther up the loose line of those waiting. “Oh! There they are, Gandalf.”

“You have keen eyes, my dear.” It was absolutely enchanting how Gandalf’s expression lit up, even as he tried to smooth out the front of his hopelessly wrinkled shirt. Luckily enough, he’d also worn his fine knit lavender cardigan (a hand-crafted gift, and one which he almost never flew without, the romantic old sod), and he proceeded to button that up over the worst of the mess. Bilba considered mentioning the fact that his row of buttoning was one askew, leaving an extra empty hole dangling at his hem, but in the end she kept mum.

They continued farther through arrivals, leaving the Broadbeams to catch up or perhaps simply make their exit on their own. With every step, Bilba very pointedly ignored the twisting sick feeling that began in her belly; Smaug was still hanging around at her heels, but she would not allow her nervousness to spoil the joy of seeing Thorin.

No, Smaug would not ruin this, even if this situation was also the first time the two men would meet, and Bilba had been hoping desperately that meeting might never, ever happen.

But, as it turned out, Dori was busy having an animated conversation with a different Durinson than Bilba had been expecting.

Gandalf cleared his throat at a meaningful sort of volume before Bilba could piece her thoughts back together, and Dori stopped mid-sentence, turning towards them.

“I was wondering about the ruckus,” Dori said, then flapped one hand in a clear shooing motion toward Gandalf. “Let me see my brother, would you— what in the world?”

For a split second, Bilba was sure some purple hair had crept free of its knitted snare, and judging by Ori’s sudden paleness, she wasn’t the only one who’d thought so.

It was simply Smaug’s continued presence that had snared Dori’s attention, however; there was a subtle tightening at the corners of Dori’s mouth, while Smaug returned the look with nothing but bland boredom writ large across his face.

“Well,” Dori said, then again, sharp as a whip crack. Reaching out, he nabbed Gandalf unresisting hand, pressing their palms together in an unusual public display. “Well. It’s about time we were off, don’t you think? Dis, it’s been splendid—you must drop by the shop, and soon.”

Bilba didn’t hear any of this, truth be told. She was far too busy trying to calm the thundering of her heart, pounding like timpani in her ears.

When she was not quite fifteen years old, Bilba had been surprised by her Uncle Hildigrim coming in through the front door of Bag End, when she’d been expecting the rattle of the knob to herald her parents’ return home. It had been a balmy Sunday evening in the middle of August—earlier that day, Bilba had begged off joining her parents for a leisurely afternoon drive through the countryside in favour of sitting in the garden instead, with her nose in a book.

“You are your father’s daughter,” her mother had said, singsong with fond laughter. She had kissed the top of Bilba’s head before following Bungo out to the car.

Belladonna was wearing a coral pink sundress printed with tiny daisies, and she smelled of cinnamon chewing gum. Bungo had been wearing his favourite straw trilby, and had promised Bilba they’d bring home something for supper.
But neither of them had walked back into Bag End that evening, or any evening after.

Bilba had expected her parents at the door and found herself wailing into Uncle Grim’s shoulder as the very foundations of her world collapsed. Now, thirteen years later, she had expected to see Thorin the airport, but was faced with his sister instead.

A hundred scenarios were flashing through her mind, in vivid technicolour, and each was more horrific than the last. The last message Thorin had sent to Bofur’s mobile had been sometime the day before—what if something had happened in the meantime?

“Dis?” Somehow, Bilba managed to keep her voice steady, though the results did verge on eerily, coolly calm.

Before she could force any further words out, with every question she feared to ask caught behind her teeth, Dis was already explaining.

“Something came up,” she said, perfectly conversational and not at all dour as Uncle Grim had been. “Something that just couldn’t wait, and he rang me in a panic this morning, asking me if I’d mind picking you up. Told him it was no trouble at all. Anyway, good flight?”

Relief washed over her in a tidal rush, momentarily jellying her knees, but Bilba managed not to swoon or anything as embarrassing as all that. That was mostly due to Gandalf’s arm wrapping smoothly around her back, mooring her, hemming her in between his valise and the solid warmth of his side.

“Our dear Bilba napped through most of it, I fear,” he said, saving her the trouble of stammering out some kind of reply. “But didn’t miss much at all; it was altogether uneventful. You must be Ms Durinson.”

“And you must be Gandalf Legris.” Dis dipped a friendly nod rather than reach for a handshake, with Gandalf’s arms already engaged elsewhere. “Dori has nothing but the absolute worst things to say about you.”

“And every word of it true,” Dori added. “Dis, you remember my youngest brother Ori? Gracious, it’s been years.”

“As well as Ms Tauriel Silvan,” Gandalf said, as Ori twiddled a wave. “Who was kind enough to act as security for this trip, and Mister Smaug, another of our models—oh, where’s he gone?”

Indeed, the space Smaug had so recently been occupying was completely empty of one svelte ginger; Bilba hadn’t even noticed him leave.

“What? Shit—” Tauriel mouth dropped open for one mortified instant, working soundlessly, before she sucked in a huge breath and began again, her face flushing scarlet. “Mister Legris, I’m sorry, so sorry, it’s just, Mister Belov will have my head if I lost him—I still have his bag!”

Tauriel held up the suitcase in question; panic was quickly giving way to a steely glint in her eyes that did not bode well for Smaug’s continued health. Gandalf merely shook his head.

“Let me worry about Saruman,” he said. “You’ve done a remarkable job, Tauriel, and no minor hiccup at this late hour is going to change that, I promise. Take this as a sign your week is over—go, enjoy the rest of your weekend. The office is on your way home, isn’t it? Drop that bag off there, and put it out of your head.”

“No doubt His Magnificence swanned off in a snit anyway,” Dori said, not quite under his breath,
and Gandalf deftly pretended not to hear. Dis, on the other hand, was wearing a profoundly amused smirk.

“Glad to see the drama’s not all for the cameras on Top Model.” When Tauriel turned to face her, pink-cheeked and still clutching Smaug’s bag, Dis broke into helpless laughter. “Sorry, sorry— oh lord. It shouldn’t be this funny.”

“It’s not— no. No, it’s fine.” Tauriel lowered her arm, her whole body slumping as the suitcase hung down by her side again. “Should have put a bell on him straight off, anyway. Or maybe a leash.”

Dis had only just managed to stifle her laughter when that annoyed mutter sent her off again, clapping a hand over her mouth to suffocate the snort she made. Even while recovering from her previous frazzle, Bilba had to admit that the thought of Smaug trussed up and sulking at the end of one of those child tethers was more than chuckle-worthy, especially after the week they’d all just had.

Smaug’s unannounced exit seemed to be impetus enough to spur the rest of them on, as well; after one final supportive tightening of his arm, Gandalf unwound himself from around Bilba’s back. Goodbyes were exchanged, luggage was shifted around when Dori insisted on carrying something, and they broke apart easily. Gandalf, Dori, Ori, and Tauriel set off together, with the Broadbeams already headed out as well, all aiming to catch cabs and buses, while Bilba followed Dis to the lifts.

Before they separated too far, Bilba distinctly heard the precise moment Dori noticed the crooked buttons on Gandalf’s cardigan, and the sweet-natured squabbling that followed. She smiled for Gandalf, who revelled in being fussed over no matter how often he groused about it, and for Ori, who would likely be enjoying this further distraction for as long as it took attention away from him and his hair.

“I still can’t believe it,” Dis said while they waited, motioning to Bilba’s trolley of baggage. “That’s all yours. And I can’t wait to hear what Thorin had to say about it either.”

Bilba sniffed, brushing some invisible lint off the side of her larger duffle. “It wasn’t anything he said more than once, that’s for certain.”

“Ha! Oh, excellent— now I want to hear it even more.” The lift dinged, and the doors slid open to reveal an empty carriage. Dis, despite her teasing, was kind enough to help wheel the trolley inside without veering off course. “My brother forgets not everyone wants to travel with just a toothbrush and a dry pair of socks.”

Pushing the button to bring them down to the car park, Dis leaned back against the wall, slipping her hands into the pockets of her navy blue coat. Her hair was draped over one shoulder in a single thick braid, rather than loose as it had been the first and only other time they’d met, and Bilba counted multiple earrings she hadn’t noticed before: two gold hoops and a single small stud in each lobe.

“But there’s really nothing wrong, is there?” Bilba asked, unable to ignore the sliver of worry left behind from her earlier fear. “With Thorin, I mean. Nothing serious, I hope?”

“There’s a good deal wrong with him, and he’s always too serious. You must have noticed by now that he’s determined to give himself an aneurysm before he’s forty.” With a shift of momentum, the lift eased to a stop, and the doors whooshed smoothly open. “But I’m his little sister. I’m fairly certain it’s the law that I get to take the piss out of him, especially when he’s busy taking himself too seriously.”

Helping get the trolley out of the lift, Dis offered Bilba an apologetic sort of shrug. “Nothing’s
wrong, though, no. Just an appointment or something; nothing to be worried about. Don’t tell him I let him off the hook so easy, though.”

They hadn’t even driven out of Heathrow completely when Bilba’s stomach decided it had been ignored long enough, thank you kindly. The car radio was switched on to some classic rock station, but it wasn’t nearly loud enough to disguise such a deafening, indignant gurgle.

“Ah, pardon me.” She could feel a creep of heat over her face that had nothing to do with the warm air gusting from the car’s vents. “It seems I’m going to be reminded that I slept through dinner.”

“Your trip was a week, wasn’t it,” Dis said, turning her roomy little hatchback onto the motorway, and glancing over in time to catch Bilba’s nod. “Listen, do please tell me if you’d rather not— I promise you won’t hurt my feelings— but if you’d like and if you’re not too tired of course, you’re welcome over for a bite of supper. The boys will have eaten already, but I imagine my fridge is still better stocked than yours at the moment.”

“I couldn’t impose,” Bilba began to say, only to have her stomach growl again, low and dangerous.

“I wouldn’t have offered if it was an imposition.” Checking her mirrors, Dis slid easily into the next lane, passing a trundling Volkswagen. “And my house is on the way, which makes it even less trouble. But, again, if you’d rather just head home and unwind, I understand completely.”

Bilba had given her refrigerator and pantry their usual cleaning out before a trip like this: anything that ran a risk of spoiling had been passed on to Beorn, including her milk, the last few eggs, and her fresh bread. She knew she had some onion soup that she’d frozen in bags, which would be easy enough to pop in a saucepan, but an empty flat and an empty fridge still seemed a rather bleak prospect when she’d been so eagerly expecting company.

“I made cottage pie,” Dis added. “If that makes any difference. I’ve also got salad, and knowing my lads, there’s almost certainly pizza by now as well.”

The very thought of hot, homemade cottage pie made Bilba’s mouth start to water. Reheated onion soup, no matter how tasty the batch had been before she’d divvied leftovers up for freezing, suddenly didn’t seem all that appealing.

She hardly knew Dis at all, but from what Thorin had told her, his sister was grand. It felt… odd, and certainly more than a little forward, to spend time with Thorin’s family without him knowing. To meet his nephews without him to introduce her.

But, then again, cottage pie.

“If you’re sure it’s all right,” Bilba said, plucking at the hem of her loose, comfortable blouse. She was dressed for the plane, not so much for meeting her boyfriend’s relations, but there wasn’t much to be done about that now. “Then yes, I’d love to, Dis. Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes
It's weird, right, that Smaug was behaving himself, hung around until he discovered Bilba did indeed have a drive, then buggered off in a huff. Really weird. Huh.

This chapter came quicker than I expected-- you can blame yourselves for that, and your wonderful response to the last chapter, your lovely comments, and your continued support of this weird AU I adore so much. Thank you all so very much.

Next up, Fili and Kili! And checking in on Thorin as well, more than likely.

But first, I've made a promise to work on Gem <3
Scenery was little more than a dull blur outside the train windows, and his fellow passengers weren’t much clearer to Thorin’s divided attention. He had reread the text a dozen more times since he’d boarded and claimed a seat; his gut was rolling, sick and hot.

Taking a deep breath, he pressed the back of his skull against his headrest, counting silently until the urge to smash his mobile subsided. Once he had a better leash on himself, Thorin looked back at his phone, pressing his thumb harder than necessary to shut down his text application in favour of his contacts list.

It was Saturday morning, which meant Thorin didn’t hesitate before bypassing Balin’s office number in favour of tapping the man’s home phone instead. Determined to remain as calm as possible, he began counting again as the call connected and began to ring. This conversation was going to be unpleasant enough— the very last thing he needed was Balin fretting over Thorin’s state of mind.

Finally, after enough rings that Thorin was surprised he hadn’t been shuffled off to voicemail, there was a click and a familiar Scottish burr in his ear. “Yes, hello?”

“Balin.” There had been a slightly harried quality to Balin’s greeting, which prompted Thorin to ask: “Is this a bad time?”

“Thorin? No, no not at all. Just, ah—” There was a thud, and some sort of rustling through the line, then the sharp, staccato bark of a small dog. “Just walked in the door. I’ve found myself saddled with Harley for the weekend, if you couldn’t tell. Yes, there you go, you’re free, pup. Hush, _hush_ now, you miniature monster.”

Harley was Dwalin’s snowy white mutt, whose personality was much larger than her tiny frame should have been able to contain. For the moment, she seemed to quiet down easily enough, but Thorin hardly envied Balin his stubborn little houseguest.

Given Balin’s relatively unruffled demeanor (the annoyances of exuberant terriers underfoot aside), Thorin was fairly confident of the answer to his next question before he voiced it. “Balin, have you been talking to Dis yet today?”

“I haven’t, no. Why? Is something wrong?”

“No, nothing’s wrong.” That wasn’t precisely true, but it was kinder to lead with reassurances when the problem wasn’t some dire emergency with Dis or the lads. “I got a message this morning— a text from an unknown number. Whoever it was knew things. Things about the fire.”

There was no need, of course, to specify which fire.

“A text? What sort of things?” There was a pause, but not long enough for Thorin to respond before Balin was continuing, his tone gone soft and perfectly even. “Thorin, where are you now?”

“On the train.” Thorin had no patience for beating around the bush in his current frame of mind, and it wasn’t as though Balin could talk him out of anything, even if he tried. He was already on the
train, and his mind was made up. “I’m going to Erebor.”

“Thorin—”

“Whoever sent the text knew things, Balin. Things that didn’t make the papers, that no one should know.” Swallowing over the painfully dry fist that had formed in his throat, Thorin pressed his free hand over his eyes and lowered his voice to a near murmur into his mobile. “They knew the doors had been blocked off. They said—they claimed Thror didn’t die of the smoke. This is serious, Balin; this is real. Our first real lead in nearly four years.”

“No one knows any of that, laddie.” Balin’s voice was infuriatingly calm, as though he were trying to soothe a wild animal. “The theories are sound, yes, but they’re just that: theories. None of it has ever been proved— none of it can be proved. After this long, after all the work that’s been done, you know that as well as I do.”

“And you know it wasn’t an accident,” Thorin hissed, his teeth clenched tight. “So someone knows the truth about what happened.”

Over the years, Balin had been much less scathing than Dis with his insistence that Thorin let this all rest, but the sentiment was the same: they both wanted him to stop obsessing. As for Dwalin, Thorin knew better than to assume his best friend’s silence on the matter meant he actually agreed with Thorin’s continued interest in the tragedy. All it likely meant was that Dwalin wouldn’t actively disagree, and that was a meagre sort of comfort.

“Whoever sent this text,” Thorin continued, quietly enough to keep his nearest neighbours from overhearing a worrying amount of this admittedly unusual conversation. “Could have information. They said they had more to tell me, but only if I came to Erebor, today. They might have a description, a name— who set the fire, and why.”

“Or it might be a prank,” Balin countered. “Or something worse. Regardless, whatever this is, you trudging all the way up to that castle, chasing after some mystery with a mobile phone isn’t going to solve anything. For god’s sake, Thorin, you don’t have to let this kill you, as well. You have a choice— you’ve built a life that could be free of all this misery, if you’d only allow it. Your sister’s done it, for her own good and her sons’. For your own good, laddie, let it be. Let it rest.”

“I can’t.” Outside the train window, a smatter of cold rain had begun, nearly sleet by the sound of the icy pinging against the glass. Thorin blinked back the heat that had bloomed in his eyes, and peered up at the grey, mottled sky. He wondered if there would be any snow in Erebor, dusting the overgrown grounds like a pale shroud. “Do you remember, Balin, how Frerin would always get hiccoughs when he ate curry? Didn’t matter how mild it was.”

“Thorin—”

“Do you ever think about how things might have gone, if the lads hadn’t been visiting their father that week? If they’d been home instead?” The rain sounded light and metallic, like coins or shell casings spilled across a hard floor. “There isn’t any choice, Balin. Not for me.”

“Damn it.” The quiet curse didn’t sound at all annoyed, but rather, profoundly sad. “Damn it all. Yes, all right. All right. Let me… let me get the computer booted up. I’ll check the cameras and ring you back shortly. How much longer ‘til you arrive?”

“About an hour.” There were over two dozen privately maintained, motion-sensitive security cameras scattered over the ruins of the manor house and hemming the grounds. Any videos were automatically downloaded to some sort of password protected digital storage, accessible by a very
select few. Thorin hadn’t even tried to understand the details when Balin had set the entire thing up. “Thank you.”

“You can thank me by not getting yourself killed, you daft arse.” Balin sighed, a great shuddering gust of air. Harley yapped again, and the noise was swiftly followed by the strident squeaking of a dog toy. “And for the love of god, would you at least stop going off on these half-cocked ventures all alone? I ought to have you microchipped like this wee beast.”

There was indeed a light skiff of snow lingering over the expansive, overgrown grounds beyond the gates of Erebor, and laid smooth and white over the rebuilt roof of the manor. Most of the remaining trees were skeletal, twisting up against the dull grey sky like grasping hands, but a few copses of thick Scots pine still stood sentinel farther from the main house. Everything was so quiet, silent as a grave, especially once the taxi pulled away, heading back towards town.

The tyre tracks of the cab that brought him were the only marks on the road leading to Erebor, and the thick chain that spanned the wide iron gates was still firmly locked and undisturbed. There wasn’t even a birdsong to break the stillness as Thorin undid the heavy padlocks—not a sound except the faint scrape of metal against metal, the turning of the key and the click of the tumblers giving way. No flutter of startled wings or anything else when the dry hinges of the gates gave a loud, piercing scream as he pushed them open just wide enough to slip inside.

In his perusals of the recordings, Balin hadn’t found a single thing skulking about during the past week, other than the usual wildlife—deer and a few foxes, and not much else. Even transients rarely wandered this far north, miles out of town in the middle of nowhere, and especially not in winter.

Thorin trekked up the long flagstone drive, his hands stuffed in his pockets and his boots crunching through undisturbed frost. The stone hulk of Erebor loomed before him like an immense, bare skull, with dark, boarded windows as its sightless sockets.

It was little wonder Dis had refused to move the boys back here. There wasn’t even the barest shade of the warm, welcoming home it had once been reflected from these eerie ruins.

Thorin had no doubt that Balin was watching; he nodded toward the camera at the front doors as he unlocked them, then clicked on the torch he’d remembered to bring, before stepping inside the grand entrance hall. The faint midday sun peeking wanly through the overcast sky spilled in behind him, cutting a sharp triangle of light across the dusty parquet flooring. Everything was shadow and dense gloom, the musty reek of abandonment, and the lingering smell of smoke and charred wood.

The burnt stench may have been a product of his own mind; Thorin wasn’t entirely sure. The worst of the damage had been scoured out years ago, in the process of replacing or rebuilding much of what the fire had gutted. New floors, new roof, new plaster and panels on the walls. Thorin swung the jaundiced beam of torchlight around, following the curve of the wide staircase—Dis hadn’t broken two of her milk teeth tripping up those steps, more than thirty years ago. There wouldn’t be any faded penciled lines on a doorframe, somewhere on the second floor of the east wing, marking growing heights with letters and ages.

The floor under Thorin’s feet hadn’t bubbled and blackened to charcoal beneath searing heat and licking flame, nor had it borne the brunt of the enormous crystal chandelier crashing down into a twisted ruin from its melted moorings. It was all new, very nearly untouched, but far from
immaculate in its deserted state of despair.

Everything was cobwebs and memories, but nothing was the same as it had been. That dissonance was a knife, twisting deep and cruelly under his ribs.

It was a mausoleum— prettied up, perhaps, but still a tomb.

“You can’t go home again,” he whispered, stepping farther inside. “True enough.”

The manor’s interior was even more disturbingly desolate than the silent, frozen grounds. The air was so thick and stale, it trailed over his skin like a physical touch; no one had walked these halls in some time.

Leaving the door wide open for the sake of the sunlight and the breeze, and perhaps as much a challenge as it was an invitation, Thorin walked resolutely over to the staircase and planted himself on a lower step to wait.

When Dis pulled up in front of a large red brick house, Bilba was momentarily stunned. Thorin’s flat wasn’t necessarily *shabby*, but it couldn’t be compared to this.

Nori had said the Durinsons were wealthy, but beyond a penchant for particularly nice coats, Thorin very nearly lived like a monk.

“Home again, home again,” Dis murmured, sing-song and playful as she eased the sedan up onto the driveway, parking just in front of the firmly shut garage door. “You need any of your bags?”

“No, thank you.” Nothing except her mobile, perhaps, and she was on the wrong side of the Atlantic for that now. “This is a beautiful home.”

“Thanks, yes. So beautiful that neither of my lads wants to leave.” Dis laughed, opening her door. “Which may have been my dastardly, motherly plan all along, but if you mention it, I’ll deny everything. Come on, let’s go see what the hungry hordes left behind.”

There were little solar lanterns marking the path from the drive, and a pair of bright sconces spilling golden light on either side of the front door. When Dis ushered her inside, Bilba found herself in a neat entrance way, with crisp white wainscoting and warm, buttery yellow walls. There was a recessed cupboard to her left, and that was what Dis opened before asking for Bilba’s coat.

“Do you mind dogs?” Dis asked, slinging Bilba’s wool jacket onto a hanger, while Bilba toed off her loafers.

“Er, not usually.” It very much depended on the dog in question, though Bilba kept that caveat to herself for the time being. Beorn’s pair of terriers, for example, were clever things and quite well behaved. She would give Dis’ dog the benefit of the doubt, and possibly curse herself later for leaving her allergy pills buried somewhere in her luggage.

“What about teenagers,” Dis continued, tucking her own coat and shoes away before cocking her head down the hallway. “Because I’ve got a pair of them, and I’m fairly certain they shed more. Ah, here’s my girl.”
The click of nails against hardwood heralded the cheery approach of a leggy white dog, its coat flecked with black spots and its long, dark tail wagging excitedly.

“This is Minty.” Dis bent, giving the dog a scratch under her leather collar, but Bilba appeared to be the main attraction.

“Hello, Minty,” was all Bilba had a chance to say, before a wet muzzle was nosing eagerly at her open palm. It only took a brief moment of sniffing, and then the dog was pressed tightly against the thigh of Bilba’s dark jeans, gazing up adoringly with her pink tongue lolling.

“I think you’ve made a friend,” Dis said, doing a poor job of stifling her laughter as Minty’s tail thudded heavily against the floor. “If she’s too much, let me know and I’ll tell her to go lie down. Same goes for the lads, incidentally, if they get a bit too much to deal with.”

Turning, Dis strode down the corridor in her grey sock feet, leaving Bilba and Minty to trail behind.

“There had better be supper left, you locusts,” she called out, leading the way into a large kitchen, with a lovely dining area attached. The worktops were beige granite, flecked with gold and green tones that complimented the pale wood cupboards and yellow walls, and the brushed steel appliances looked well-kept and gorgeous.

“In the oven,” a voice shouted back, sounding young and male, and altogether distracted.

Dis shook her head, then motioned toward the dining table as she moved towards the sink. “Have a seat if you like, Bilba. Or, if you want the loo, it’s back the way we came in, just on the other side of the stairs.”

“Yes, I might freshen up, if you don’t mind.” The stuffy feeling of the plane was still stuck to her, even more so than her new canine burdock, and Bilba certainly wouldn’t pass up the chance to clear a bit of it away. “Back this way, you said?”

“The door on the right as you’re coming in,” Dis said, giving her hands a wash. “Holler if you need anything.”

It was easy enough to find the loo, and Bilba felt the tiniest pang of guilt as she shut the door firmly in Minty’s face. A pitiful whine from the other side of the door nearly broke her resolve, but a moment alone was hardly too much to ask. Taking a breath, Bilba turned on the taps to wash her own hands, and gave herself a long looking over in the vanity mirror.

Her hair was already tied back, with only a few frizzy wisps escaping here and there—not terrible, all things considered. The lengthy nap on the plane had done her more good than harm, as well, preventing her eyes from looking too dark and exhausted. Her blouse was rumpled, the collar sitting crooked until she gave it a sharp tug, and in the end she decided to take a page from Gandalf’s book, doing up a few buttons of her cozy blue cardigan to cover the worst wrinkles.

She briefly considered the dozens of natty, casual outfits in her closet that she might have chosen to wear when meeting Thorin’s nephews for the first time—though it wasn’t quite the first time meeting Fili. It would be their first formal meeting, however, their first meeting after she and Thorin had begun seeing each other, and Bilba couldn’t help a sudden surge of self-consciousness.

His nephews were so important to Thorin; that was easy enough to gather from the inexhaustibly proud way he would tell stories about them, and the brilliant fondness that always lit his face when their names were mentioned. Bilba had managed to make a fairly good impression on Dis so far, or at least she thought she had, but Fili and Kili…
It had been her choice to be tossed into the deep end of this pool— she had agreed to come to Dis’ home for supper, after all— but she still dearly wished Thorin was here to help keep her head above water.

“It’s fine,” she said softly, then exhaled into her cupped palm to check the state of her breath. The humbug she’d had on the plane to keep her ears from popping during landing had left a hint of peppermint freshness behind, thank goodness. There weren’t any specks between her teeth. It was all fine.

“Right, yes.” She straightened up, squaring her shoulders. It was all fine. “Hop to it, Bilba my girl.”

Minty was curled up, waiting patiently outside the door when Bilba made her exit, and the dog wasted no time hopping to her feet. Her head butted gently against Bilba’s hip, but she seemed content to simply walk side by side now, rather than making all efforts to glue them both together. It was progress.

The familiar, homey scent of meat and gravy would have been enough to lead Bilba back to the kitchen if she’d forgotten her way. Dis already had plates and cutlery laid out on the worktop, and was standing in front of the open door of her large refrigerator when Bilba walked in.

“Pie’s nearly hot again,” Dis said, glancing at Bilba. “I’ve got water, milk, a few kinds of juice— what would you like?”

“Water would be lovely. Anything I can do to help?”

Pushing the fridge closed again, Dis whipped her braid back over her shoulder. “Ah, I don’t think, no—”

“Mum, who are you talking to—” A voice spoke from the direction of the dining room, bringing with it the slap of bare feet against hardwood, and a familiar tousled mass of hair. Fili froze dead in his tracks halfway around the table, the exact moment he caught sight of Bilba standing in the middle of the kitchen.

The sound the poor lad made could have been described as a wheezy squeak, like air eeking out of a balloon. Bilba immediately decided the only polite response would be to never speak a word about it to anyone, however, so it hardly mattered how strangled it may or may not have sounded.


“Such a poet, my boy,” Dis said under her breath, barely audible as she fetched ice for their glasses. Fili didn’t appear to notice his mother’s commentary.

Bilba smiled, genuine and (she hoped) reassuringly. “Hello, Fili. It’s wonderful to see you again.”

“Oh,” Fili said again, his blue eyes wide and wild, while Dis swung around to stare at them both.

“Wait, hang on,” she said, setting the tall, faceted glasses on the worktop with a thud. “Again? You two have met before? Fili, did you know Thorin had a girlfriend, and never told me?”

“What,” Fili squawked, and Bilba resisted the urge to bury her face in her hands. “Thorin, and you—
you’re, Ms Baggins— Thorin has a girlfriend?"

“Oh thank god,” another voice said from behind the gobsmacked statue Fili was currently imitating. “Finally— I mean, no, what? Who has a girlfriend?”

The young man shuffling out from the far doorway, the same way Fili had come, was much more a vision of how Bilba imagined Thorin must have looked as a lad. A few inches taller than Fili, with dark brown hair hanging in messy waves down to his shoulders, Bilba was certain this was young Kili, in the flesh.

In the flesh, and in the midst of a double-take.

“Is this,” he said, his eyes darting quickly from Bilba, to his mother, over to his brother, and back again. “You’re not— that’s Belle Bijou!”

Oh, this was going smashingly.

“You didn’t give them any warning at all,” Bilba said, perhaps a wee bit accusatory, and Dis found her humour again, smirking.

“Of course I didn’t.” Sliding one full glass across the worktop, toward where Bilba stood, Dis took a sip of her own water before continuing. “I wasn’t about to rob myself of those sweet gawping faces, and anyway, I didn’t want them whinging about tagging along to Heathrow. Now, my dear, darling boys, how long precisely have you known your uncle had a girlfriend, hm?”

“I didn’t know anything,” Fili said, while at the same time, Kili chimed in with: “Only a month, maybe!”

As though they were connected by some invisible cord, both Fili and Dis swivelled toward Kili in perfect unison. Only Fili was close enough to land a loud smack against his brother’s arm, however, open palmed and landing on the bare skin just below the sleeve of Kili’s faded black t-shirt.

“Kee! You never said anything!”

“I couldn’t!” Kili ducked back, slipping around the far end of the table and out of reach with skittering, practiced grace. “Thorin made me promise.”

“Fili,” Dis said, chastising and inquisitive all at once. “If you didn’t know anything, then how do you know Bilba?”

“Who’s Bilba?” Kili asked, before Fili could get a single word out.

Raising her hand, Bilba twiddled a small wave. “That would be me. Hello.”

Kili blinked, looking entirely shocked that she had spoken, as though he’d forgotten she wasn’t actually a glossy photo.

“You,” he said, swallowing hard enough that his throat bobbed visibly, like a bouncing ball. “But you’re— are you Belle Bijou? You are, aren’t you? I mean, you look just like her, right?”

“I am, yes.” Having been sitting placidly up to this point, Minty decided it was past time to give Bilba’s leg a gentle headbutt, and Bilba pacified her with a scratch behind her warm, velvety ears. “Professionally, I’m Belle Bijou. But it’s a business name— I’m really Bilba. Bilba Baggins. And it’s very good to meet you at last, Kili.”
“Oh god.” Kili was all limbs and plaid pyjama bottoms, nearly tripping over his own feet in his attempt to scramble into the kitchen. He didn’t get too close, but he did come nearer, still staring as though Bilba might vanish if he were to blink. “Hi, yes. Good, really good to meet you too, Miss, um. Ms Boggins.”

“Baggins,” Fili hissed, darting forward to stand next to his brother. The pair of them were hovering in the wide, open archway that separated the kitchen from the dining area. “Ms Baggins. I’m glad, I mean—it’s good to see you. Ma’am.”

Dis looked as though she was nearly dying, leaning heavily against the worktop with one hand clapped over her mouth and her broad shoulders shaking like an earthquake. She was scarcely making a sound, except a few faint, desperate squeals of laughter she couldn’t quite manage to stifle, and her cheeks were rosy pink. She was also being absolutely no help whatsoever.

“Please,” Bilba said. “There’s no need for all that. Just Bilba is perfectly fine, really.” Suddenly, the oven timer beeped, and Kili nearly leapt out of his skin.

“There we are,” Dis managed to say, though she still sounded short of breath. “Boys, set these dishes out on the table, would you? We’re famished.”

That request set off another round of awkward scrambling; it was a minor miracle that the plates made it intact, and not a single fork fell clattering to the hardwood. Dis busied herself with wiping tears from her eyes and getting the baking dish out of the oven, while Bilba floundered somewhat, trying her very best to stay out of the way.

Shortly thereafter, Bilba found herself hustled into a dining chair, with a generous portion of nicely browned cottage pie set before her, steaming hot and fragrant. The potatoes had a lovely golden crust, and the ground meat was broken up by a good amount of colourful vegetables.

“I’m fairly certain I taught you both better,” Dis said, settling in her own seat and cutting a sideways glance towards her sons. The pair of them were a bit like moths at a garden light, flickering around the periphery, never quite standing still. “Even the dog’s knows to go lay down without being told. So, either sit or pop off back to the lounge, but stop gawking.”

“We’re not,” Kili insisted, and after a brief, silent exchange, both lads sunk into chairs. Dis was at the head of the table, with Bilba seated around the side; the boys hemmed them in, with Fili nabbing the empty chair at Bilba’s right elbow, and Kili sitting directly across from her, on his mother’s left.

They were being particularly careful not to stare openly at Bilba for too long a span, but the meaningful looks they shared with each other over the table spoke volumes. It might have been embarrassing, if Dis wasn’t so obviously amused and Fili and Kili weren’t so obviously, adorably befuddled.

It was terribly cute, truth be told. And, on top of that, the food was wonderful.

“This is absolutely delicious,” Bilba said, once she’d tucked in and gotten the first taste of rich brown gravy. Dis dabbed her mouth with a napkin, smiling.

“I’ll have to tell my dear brother you said that. He’s forever grousing about my cooking.”

“Yeah,” Kili said. “But there’s usually lentils in the cottage pie you make when Thorin’s over, and no beef.”

“And cauliflower in the mash,” Fili added, prompting Dis to wave her fork in a vaguely threatening way.
“Not a word, you traitors,” she said. “If you both managed to keep a secret like Bilba, you can button your lips about me making certain your uncle is getting his Five a Day. Or I can make lentil pie all the time, if you’d rather.”

“I wasn’t keeping any secrets, just so everyone’s clear.” Fili sat back, his arms crossed over his unzipped hoodie. It was dark heather grey, while the shirt beneath was navy blue, and stitched on the left breast with a logo Bilba recognized easily, London Fire Brigade. “Kee’s the one who’s kept his mouth shut for a month.”

“Yet you’re the one who’s met Bilba before,” Dis said archly, her dark brows raised high, and Kili let out a wordless, unimpressed squawk.

“Yeah, at work,” Fili began to say, and Bilba set her fork down, bracing for a discussion about her last unpleasant encounter with Smeagol Rivers. But Fili surprised her, following up with a rather tactful: “And we’re supposed to keep some things private when we go out on a call. I didn’t even know that Thorin knew her— sorry, Ms Baggins— let alone that he’s dating her!”

This was getting almost as bad as listening to Dori and Nori talking circles around each other, and that ridiculous rubbish could go on for ages.

“To be fair, we weren’t dating at the time,” Bilba said, and decided she would at least make a punt at wrapping up the final threads of who knew what when. Surely there were at least a handful of other topics they could explore instead. “Though Thorin and I had met before that evening. That’s when I met Fili; and Dis, I met you last week. And just to sort it all out, Kili, I’ve met just you this evening.”

“Which is brilliant,” Kili said, wearing a toothy, winsome grin that swept much easier over his face than it did his uncle’s. “I keep wanting to pinch myself, this is so— wow. You’re seriously dating Thorin?”

Nodding, Bilba felt things slowly steadying under her feet, and took up her fork again. “I seriously am. Your uncle is a very dear man, you know.”

“Oh, he’s great,” Kili agreed. “But you’re, well— you’re Belle Bijou.”

That was precisely the sort of nonsense she had been glad to avoid with Thorin for so long, but then again, she hadn’t been being entirely truthful with him. And that had very nearly ended poorly.

The trill of a phone ringing saved Bilba from the trouble of cobbling a polite, but firm response together— she was a bit insulted on Thorin’s behalf, to be honest. Belle Bijou was a figment, a creation of good lighting, fancy lingerie, and a hundred other artful procedures. Thorin Durinson was a real person, who also happened to be considerate, kind, and much sweeter than one might expect. Not to mention brave, and scandalously handsome.

And Bilba Baggins was a real person as well; certainly more real than Belle bloody Bijou.

“Sit, sit—” Dis pushed out her chair, waving her sons off. “I’ll get it. You two, behave.”

There was a cordless phone resting in a cradle on the worktop, pushed back beside a trio of ceramic canisters labelled Flour, Sugar, and Tea. Dis snatched up the handset, cutting off the insistent ringing with a press of her thumb and set the phone to her ear.

“Hello,” she said, stepping towards the door that led into the hallway, but stopped dead mid-stride. “What? Thorin?”

It was rude to eavesdrop, but Bilba couldn’t help but crane her head toward the one-sided
conversation. Dis caught her peering over, and favoured Bilba with a cheeky wink.

“Bilba.” Dis said, though it was pitched like a question, perfectly earnest. “No, I didn’t— oh shit, that wasn’t today? You said to pick her up Sunday!”

It was an inspired performance, truly, utterly believable. But Bilba was struck by more guilt than humour at the joke.

“Thorin, you prat!” Dis, on the other hand, seemed to be picking up steam. “No, no, don’t you shout at me—you said Sunday!”

“Oh, that’s cruel,” Fili murmured, though a glance over confirmed he had bitten his lip to help hold back a smile.

Bilba stood, scuttling over towards where Dis stood, and held up her hands in apologetic appeal. Silently, she mouthed: Please, let me?

Thankfully, Dis relented almost at once, rolling her eyes playfully. “Hang on, hang on, would you. Of course I’m joking, and you deserved it, too. Here, I’ve only kidnapped her, so you can relax.”

Then there was a phone being pressed into Bilba’s hands, which she only barely managed not to fumble. Thorin’s voice was loud enough to be audible even before she brought the handset to her ear.

“—fucking damn it, Dis! Dis, don’t you hang up on me, I swear—”

“Shh, you’ve been passed off, darling.” Bilba finally pressed the phone close when Thorin immediately stopped roaring fiercely enough to deafen her. “I think you’ve given me tinnitus.”

“Bilba?” Thorin was hoarse as an old frog, making Bilba’s throat tickle in sympathy. “How— why are you at my sister’s house?”

“I hadn’t had supper.” Giving in to the exaggerated shooing motions Dis was making with her arms, Bilba slipped out into the corridor for a bit of privacy. “So she invited me ‘round, since there won’t be anything decent at my flat until I get to the shops. Are you all right? You sound dreadful.”

“Bit of dry air.” There was an audible inhale, then a rough, muffled cough from Thorin’s end of the call. “Nothing to worry over. Dis didn’t harangue you into anything, did she? If you’re tired—”

“I’m not half as tired as you sound,” Bilba said softly, propping her shoulder against the hallway wall. “I slept most of the flight, honestly. What about you? Is something wrong?”

“No, nothing’s wrong. Everything’s fine now, at any rate.” Thorin sounded awfully worn down and weary for there to be truly nothing wrong, but before Bilba could bring that up, he was continuing. “Bilba, love, I’m sorry I didn’t come pick you up. There was a situation with my grandfather’s estate, cropped up without warning, and it had to be seen to today.”

“It’s all right.” And it was, truly. Bilba was much more concerned about Thorin than she was about a minor hiccup that had already been resolved. “Your sister was very kind to extend the invitation, and your nephews are certainly charming.”

“Oh lord,” Thorin groaned. “I can just imagine. Do you want me to come get you? I’ve just gotten back into town now; I can be there in… forty minutes. Yeah, forty.”

That would be plenty of time to finish her meal, and socialise with the Durinsons for a little while
longer, but forty minutes was also time Thorin could be spending getting himself and his rasping, sandpaper voice back home to bed.

“It’s out of your way,” she said. “I don’t mind getting a cab home.”

“Bilba.” There was a tiny hitch at the end as he spoke her name, barely noticeable, but it made Bilba’s chest constrict. “I… I’d like to come. I want to see you.”

As much as her conscience tweaked about dragging him from wherever he was, all the way to Wimbledon then to her flat, there wasn’t much resistance Bilba could dredge up when faced with Thorin Durinson sounding so very small.

“Okay,” she said, closing her eyes for a moment when Thorin let out a shuddering breath. “Yes, all right. I want to see you, too. I’ve missed you terribly, you know.”

Chapter End Notes

I seriously can never, ever resist giving Dwalin a tiny dog in any modern AU. It's a problem.

A long awaited reunion coming up next chapter, my dear readers <3
There's a bit more about the fire here and the deaths it caused, as well as some talk of injury. Nothing too gruesome, but I want you to be aware.

“Everything all right?” Dis asked, the moment Bilba slipped back into the kitchen. All three Durinsons were seated at the table, but had craned around to peer at her, wide eyed and heads tilted, like a trio of curious owls.

Bilba offered what she hoped was a convincing nod, despite her doubts. There was a shiver of worry lingering under her skin. “Well enough, I think. He’s coming round to pick me up in a short while. Should be here in about forty minutes, he said.”

“Greedy twit.” Dis let out a gusty sigh. “Can’t even let me have you for one evening. I poach his date once, one time before our cousin’s wedding, ten years ago, and he’s never gotten over it. And he hadn’t even asked her yet, so it doesn’t even count as poaching, anyway. Entirely not my fault that he was dragging his arse about it.”

“Mum,” Fili groaned, elbow on the table and head in his hand. “Not the Bethany story.”

“I liked Bethany,” Kili said thoughtfully, while Bilba claimed her seat again, trying to keep up with the thread of conversation. “She had pretty hair, and she always used to let me sneak caramels before tea.”

“My point,” Dis said emphatically, looking between her sons. “Is that I dearly love my brother, but it’s a constant struggle being the more charming and attractive of the pair of us.”

Kili hummed, fishing his hand into the box of Cadbury Fingers that had appeared at some point while Bilba had been on the phone. “Oh yeah,” he said, biting the ends off three biscuits at once and mumbling around the crumbs. “I know exactly what you mean, Mum.”

“Piss off!” Kili ducked away from his brother’s attempted smack, and a few strays bits of biscuit sprayed across the table.

“Manners,” Dis said, hardly raising her voice in the slightest, but the boys settled immediately. “And that includes talking with your mouth full. Bilba’s going to think you were raised by wolves; is that what you want?”

“I don’t—” Bilba floundered, not at all expecting to be thrust back into the discussion so abruptly as two pairs of wide, worried eyes turned her way. “No—that is— ah. You’re… you’re lovely, boys.”

“Jesus Christ,” Dis said under her breath, while the brothers perked up, grinning at the compliment. “Don’t encourage them, would you?”

“D’you think I could record that?” Wiping his hand on the front of his t-shirt, Kili clicked his fingers
at his brother. “Fee, you got your phone on you? I need video evidence of Belle Bijou saying I’m lovely, and this’ll be the greatest day of my life.”

It wasn’t long before the lads were unceremoniously banished back to the lounge to watch telly, but not until after Dis had confiscated the box of biscuits. Tea was steeped, poured into a matched set of blue earthenware cups, and Bilba wrapped both hands around the glossy pottery, letting the heat soak into her skin. Standing at the worktop, Dis finished piling leftover pie into a dish suitable for travel and transport—it would be coming home with Bilba, apparently.

“In case he wants to head out straight off,” Dis explained. “Simple enough to shove a fork in his hand and set him loose on this when you get back to yours. I’d be shocked if he’s eaten much at all today.”

Bilba stroked one thumb over the copper brown rim of her teacup, and considered how much she ought to ask. Should she wait, and ask Thorin for an explanation? It was family business, Thorin had said on the phone: something to do with his grandfather’s estate. Dis had been monumentally vague at the airport, explaining Thorin’s absence as an appointment or something. Was it simply a matter of Dis deciding the details were none of Bilba’s concern, or was it Thorin who was truly keeping his sister uninformed?

It was a bramble of family issues, rife with potential missteps and thorns. Despite her curiosity, Bilba decided she would rather avoid the danger of tripping over her own tongue and falling in head-first.

So instead of uttering a single word about Thorin and why on earth Dis didn’t expect her brother to have eaten that day, Bilba rewound her thoughts back to their earlier conversations, searching for a safer topic.

Dis was friendly and buoyant, encouraging a familiar comfort in her presence, but the woman was Thorin’s sister. Bilba still felt a coil of nerves twisted in her stomach; she was in the midst of an attempt to make a good impression on her boyfriend’s family, after all.

“Ignore me if this is too forward,” Bilba said, remaining cautious, while giving in to the urge to sate a fraction of her curiosity. “But, the Bethany story?”

Dis let out a breathy laugh, which felt like a good sign that Bilba hadn’t entirely put her foot in it by asking.

“It’s not nearly as convoluted as Fili makes it sound,” she said, leaning back against the worktop. “Nor as interesting, honestly. I knew her from school, though I admit I didn’t know that Thorin fancied her. Probably wouldn’t have asked her to the wedding if I had.” Dis’ mouth curled up at one corner, and there was a certain sweet shyness hidden in the lopsided smile that Bilba hadn’t expected to see.

“Hardly surprising he did, though,” Dis continued. “She’s a fantastic woman. Thorin was still in the army at the time, just home for a furlough; I think he ended up going stag, him and Frerin both. Our cousin Dain’s wedding—God, that was a party.”

Shying sharply away from discussing Frerin (Thorin had mentioned his late brother once, and the wounded hunch of his shoulders had convinced her not to pry), Bilba thought back to the wistfulness in Kili’s tone. “You and she aren’t still…”
“Hm? No, not for years.” Dis’ smile didn’t fade; if anything, it widened into something much sunnier. “She’s a florist now, last I heard, with a wife and a baby on the way. A florist in Limerick, which I know sounds something like the start of a joke, but there you go. And I am currently unattached, so it’s a lucky break for Thorin that he saw you first, Ms Bilba Baggins.”

Ducking her head, Bilba could feel a tickle of heat creeping over her cheeks— Dis sounded sincere, but also playfully teasing enough that it was complimentary rather than awkward. Bilba had never really had a firmly established type, at least not in a physical sense, but there was no denying that Dis was as gorgeous as her brother. At the moment, Bilba certainly had an appreciation for piercing blue eyes and broad shoulders. She also had a wonderful boyfriend, but it wasn’t impossible to imagine how things may have been different, if another Durinson sibling had appeared at her gym that December morning.

“Very lucky for him, indeed,” Bilba replied, glancing sideways at Dis, who favoured her with a cheeky wink before snapping the lid on the dish of pie.

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Thorin shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans, ignoring the sharp bite in his knee that accompanied every step. The scrapes had clotted up before he’d even boarded the train back to London, but they still stung with every jarring movement— his skin was raw and red over his palms, and torn bloody across his knee, where he’d managed to put a rip through the thick denim.

He was sore all over, from the roots of his hair down to the soles of his feet, and deeper still; there was a different sort of ache down in the pit of his stomach, tight and hot with impotent anger.

There hadn’t been a single living soul in Erebor, except him. No one else, despite the taunting text he’d received at half three in the afternoon, from another blocked number: *come find me where the old man blubbered his last breath.*

Most of Erebor had been rebuilt, but the old family wing was still a burned out ruin, barricaded off from the rest of the manor with boards and sheets of thick plastic. It had been last on the docket for renovations— the family wing had been where most of the bodies had been recovered, and where investigators had spent the longest time combing through debris.

When Dis had outright refused to even consider moving back to the estate, Thorin had seized the opportunity and demanded the rooms be left as they were. Already searched countless times, with evidence removed and photographs taken, the family wing would still remain a blackened shell. There might be more information to be found amid the wreckage, unseen and unnoticed so far. Letting it lie vacant and undisturbed, sealed against change and the slow erosion of time… Dis thought it was inexcusably morbid, but she hadn’t pressed the issue after a few angry rows. Thorin wouldn’t be swayed.

*Where the old man blubbered his last breath.* Thror’s body had been found in his grand study, four doors down the corridor from the master bedroom, where Thorin’s grandmother, Beatrice, had succumbed to the smoke while still asleep in bed.

Thror hadn’t woken his wife; he had been in the study, splayed across the remains of the carpet. Lying in front of safe he’d had hidden beneath his desk, with the thick steel door opened wide, and the contents turned to ashes. Whatever had been inside that safe, it had apparently been more precious to Baron Thror Durinson than the lives of his wife, his son and daughter-in-law, his
grandchildren. And whatever it was, it had always seemed obvious that the fire had taken it, just as surely as it had taken Thorin’s family.

It had been Frerin who dragged Dis outside, before dashing back in to try and save the others. Thorin knew all too well how horrific it would have been, going back into that inferno without protective gear. He knew how long his brother would have lasted, blinded by smoke and gasping for air even as the fire consumed every breath. He knew that Frerin had been idiotic to try, and courageous to a fault.

*Come find me,* the text had said, and Thorin had been on his feet and vaulting the stairs in an instant, after hours of waiting, of pacing and cursing through the front rooms.

He had sorely missed having a pry-axe as he broke his way through the barricade, yanking and cracking boards by hand and under a few sharp kicks of his boot. It was noisy, messy, and Thorin’s mobile was ringing in his pocket before he’d even made a space wide enough to squeeze through. Rather than answer the call— no doubt Balin, and no doubt concerned— Thorin had turned the phone to silent mode and shimmied between jagged bits of lumber and torn plastic. Into the dark and the dank, where the stink of charcoal and ruin still hung thick enough to choke, and time had further weakened the charred remains.

Thorin had years of experience traversing the pitfalls and hazards of buildings damaged by fire, and even before he had joined the Brigade, there had been some truly ramshackle locations under his boots while he’d been in the service. Years of learning his own feet, of watching his steps and careful testing, of caution and due care. Years of avoiding the sorts of clumsy mistakes that might get him, or worse, a member of his team, killed.

So, when he did take the tumble, there was no real excuse for it beyond his own stupidity, his own good sense chased away by rage and the gnawing need to hunt, to catch whatever smug, vicious bastard had dragged him up here in the first place.

He’d been damn lucky that the worst he’d gotten was a few scrapes and bruises when the floor gave way under him. It had still taken him the better part of an hour to haul himself free of that disaster, gagging on dust and ash the entire time, with his hands slick with his own blood and his leg shooting electric shocks of pain. But he hadn’t broken a bone, or snapped his neck, and he hadn’t impaled himself on anything; though it was far from ideal, it could have been so much worse.

No one had come to check about the commotion, or even to take advantage of his mistake. Not a single person had appeared, to help or to hinder, or even to simply observe him as he slowly edged out of the hole he’d landed in, trying desperately to avoid bringing the entire wing down upon his head.

Not a single person in the whole of Erebor, except him. The only flecks of dust disturbed had been what he had kicked up, and the uncomfortable amount he’d breathed in. Mould as well, creeping into his throat and nose, making his eyes water.

The walk from Erebor into town had been miserable, and the tense conversation he’d had with Balin on the way had been worse still. Stained with dried blood and smeared with soot, his clothes torn and filthy, Thorin had suffered a number of concerned glances when he’s boarded the train. Even after he’d cleaned up as best he could in the cramped toilet, Thorin was far from looking whole and hale after the wretched, *pointless* day he’d endured.

And now he was trudging up from the bus terminal, towards his sister’s house; the sheer amount of shit he expected to catch when Dis got a good look at him in this state was staggering.
It had drizzled rain earlier, during his walk from Erebor, and Thorin’s clothes had dried on him since then, stiff and clammy. A hot shower and a few hours of blessed unconsciousness in a warm bed were as tempting as a siren’s song, but it was the possibility of company and comfort that kept his feet lurching forward along the pavement. The outdoor lights of Dis’ house were on, and Thorin focused on the welcoming glow of them growing nearer, setting a goal.

He was brought up short, however, by the sounds of furious, familiar whispering as he took his first steps up the drive.

“—don’t pick up the bins ‘til Tuesday,” Fili hissed. Thorin stopped, watching the pair of lumpy figures arguing in the shadows. “D’you honestly think Mum won’t notice before then?”

“What the hell am I meant to do?” That was Kili, of course, with a sort of panicked whinging clinging to every word. It was suspicious enough that Thorin decided not to announce himself straight away. “I need rid of them, now! Yesterday, preferably. Fuck, shit, he’s going to kill me; he’s going to know, and he’s going to murder me—”

“Shut up, oh my god, shut up, Kee!” The lads were pacing, milling around each other, and Thorin could just make out a shoebox sized bundle of something being held by one of them— Kili, he was fairly sure.

The shape Thorin was certain was Fili, by his height and his bearing, reached up and took Kili’s head in his hands.

“Listen,” Fili said, low and much calmer than he’d been a moment before. It was his very professional, work tone, usually reserved for reassuring people at accidents and other unpleasant situations. “Just listen. He’s not going to know, because we’re never going to breathe a word of this. You’re going to take those back up to your room, you’re going to hide them back where they were — but don’t pin the ones back on your closet door, yeah? And then Tuesday morning, you’re going to get up early and sneak them all out to the bins before collection, okay?”

“Fuck that, no!” There was a slight commotion, as Kili swatted his brother away. Whatever he was holding, he stretched it far out in front of him, and Fili stepped back from it as though it was going to burn him.

“I’m not keeping these,” Kili insisted. “Not for one more second, let alone three more days! He’ll know, he’ll sniff it out, and some of it’s yours anyway, so why am I the one hiding it? Not a fucking chance, brother—”

“Jesus, Kee, we don’t have time to argue about this,” Fili snapped, throwing his hands up. “We could have had this sorted a half hour ago, but you just had to panic at the last minute. Now Thorin’s going to be here any second! You think he’ll murder you? If he catches me with this, can you imagine what’ll happen with work—”

Thorin felt a swell of anger in his already churning stomach. His nephews were hiding something, from their mother and from him, and it was sounding more and more like a serious matter. Something stolen? Something illegal? Was it drugs?

They were half right. Thorin would definitely murder someone, if it was drugs.

Fishing his torch out of his coat pocket, Thorin clicked it on without a second thought, illuminating Fili and Kili in a beam of bright, pitiless light. They shouted, wordless and startled, both of their heads snapping up to squint at him.
“What the hell are you two doing,” he said, his voice hard as steel, and gruff from the day of punishment he’d put it through.

“Shit,” Kili squeaked, and immediately dropped the box in his hands (which actually was a shoebox, bright blue, with stark white stripes cutting along the side).

The box hit the paved drive with a thud—the corner caught the brunt of the fall, and the box tipped on its side, lid popping open and contents tumbling out across the dark asphalt.

“Shit,” Fili echoed, louder and pitched high with alarm. Thorin was simply relieved when the mess turned out to be papers and magazines rather than bags of pills or powder, or anything worse.

A gust of wind chose that moment to blow through, rustling the spill of papers; that seemed impetus enough to break the frozen tableau the lads had adopted. Falling to his knees, Kili began to scramble to gather it all up, while Fili held up both hands, palms open, and smiled weakly at Thorin.

“We can explain,” he said, pointedly stepping on one of the magazines to keep it still.

One of the papers broke free from Kili’s frantic grabbing, fluttering down the drive and snagging on the toe of Thorin’s boot.

Entirely confused and more than a little curious, Thorin bent down to pick it up, ignoring the twinge in his knee exactly as he ignored the lads’ panicky cries.

It was a glossy page, which looked to have been carefully cut from a magazine. On one side, there was the end of some sort of article—something about make-up, if the pictures inset amid the text were anything to judge by. Thorin’s thoughts immediately went to unexpected places, considering several possibilities about his nephews and makeup, but surely they didn’t think he’d murder them for anything like that—

Then he flipped the page over, and was faced with his girlfriend striking an alluring pose in nothing but purple lacy lingerie, with her head thrown back and her hair tumbling loosely around her shoulders. She was gorgeous, with her eyes closed and her painted lips parted in a smile, beneath the elegant curls of the “G&G” logo. There were tiny holes at the corners of the page, where it had been tacked up; small mercies, he supposed, that it wasn’t one of pages he assumed only rarely saw the light of day.

Thorin didn’t dare glance over to try and get a better look at the rest of the box’s contents. Suddenly, he was far less keen on knowing the details.

“It’s not what it looks like,” Fili began to say, but fell instantly silent when Thorin shushed him.

“No,” Thorin said, carefully folding the lingerie advert into a neat square. He was too tired to deal with this in any sort of reasonable way. At the moment, it was all he could do to keep from laughing, which would probably terrify the lads even more. “Let’s just… let’s not talk about this. Here.”

He held out the folded page, pinched between his index and middle finger, and waited while Fili gathered up the nerve to close the distance between them and snatch it.

“You, er…” Clutching the page in his hand, Fili shifted nervously, never quite taking his eyes from Thorin’s face. “You don’t want to talk?”

“You’re not cross?” Kili added in a very small voice, still kneeling on the pavement.

“I don’t want to talk,” Thorin agreed, and very purposely did not answer the second question,
flicking his torch off and plunging them all into darkness again. Then, almost immediately, he clicked it back on again, with the light shining menacingly up under his own chin. The twin expressions of horror he could just make out on the lads’ faces was precisely the reaction he’d been hoping for.

“But not a word,” he said quietly, nearly a growl. “Not an insinuation, not a meaningful glance, not a single thought about any of this in Bilba’s presence, or I will know. If you make her uncomfortable in the slightest, I will know it. Do you understand?”

“Yeah.” Fili was nodding so vigorously, it was lucky his head didn’t pop off his shoulders. “Yeah, of course, Thorin.”

“Totally, yeah,” Kili said, hugging a mass of bent and crumpled magazine pages to his chest. How many of the bloody things did his nephews have? “Not a word, we swear. We’d never, I mean… Bilba’s great. Really, amazingly great, and we wouldn’t—”

“We would never want to make her uncomfortable,” Fili finished, entirely, achingly sincere.

“Good.” The torch stayed on, but Thorin tossed it towards Fili, the light bobbing and swinging as the lad fumbled it. “Gather all this up before you come in. Bin it. Double time, or you’ll be explaining this to your mother.”

“Yes, sir,” they intoned, and Thorin left them to it, heading up towards the door.

Bilba was too distracted by munching on biscuits and recounting a particularly amusing story from a swimsuit photo shoot in Greece to a giggling Dis; she didn’t hear either the front door, or the heavy thud of footsteps, until Thorin was already standing in the kitchen doorway. The smile on his face was stunning — his lips slightly parted, with a hint of teeth peeking through the thick, dark stubble of beard he’d accrued while she was away, and the corners of his eyes crinkled. An answering joy bubbled up from the pit of Bilba’s belly, and she popped the last bite of her biscuit into her mouth, brushing her hands against her jeans as she stood.

“Jesus Christ,” Dis said, turning in her seat to gawp at her brother. “You look like death warmed over.”

Then, and only then, when the brightness of Thorin’s expression fell into annoyance and exhaustion, did Bilba notice the state of him.

“Oh my goodness.” She closed the distance between them in a few rushed strides, cataloguing every rip and tear, every stain maring his jeans, and the bruised shadows under his eyes. Bilba didn’t hesitate to reach for him, laying one hand against his chest and the other against the rough line of his jaw. “Thorin?”

“I’m fine,” he said, his voice the same sandpaper rasp it had been over the phone, but more worrying in person. His arms came around her, drawing her into a hug so gentle she could have stepped away easily, but Bilba had no intention of passing up the chance to have him near again.

She rested her cheek over his heart, but nearly flinched away at the smell of him: a bitter burnt stink, layered with something musty and distinctly unpleasant. His shirt felt gritty against her skin, but his breath was a warm, sorely missed comfort gusting into her hair as he pressed a kiss against the crown of her head.
“Long day,” he murmured, barely audible, and squeezed her ever so slightly. “You ready to go home?”

“You don’t—” Raising her head to look up at him, making no attempt to put a more appropriate space between them, Bilba brushed her fingers against his beard. “Do you want a bite to eat, before we go? Or a moment to sit? A word with your sister?”

The noise that rumbled up out of Thorin’s throat was unsure, unhappy, and Bilba stroked his cheek soothingly, without more than a passing concern for Dis watching them.

“Herd him over to the table, if you can,” Dis said, gaining her feet and padding over to snatch up the cordless phone. “Sit down before you fall down, Thorin, you idiot. I’ll ring for a cab.”

“I’m fine,” Thorin insisted, but kept one arm wrapped around Bilba’s back as they shuffled over to the dining table. He wasn’t leaning on her, precisely, but there was a weariness to his posture, and in the heavy flop he made into a chair.

Scooting another chair closer to his side, Bilba took hold of Thorin’s hand, then gasped at the angry, scabbing cuts she found across his palm.

“What in the world,” she began to say, but Thorin simple curled his fingers around her own, bending to kiss her temple.

“Please,” he whispered, while Dis began speaking into the phone. “Don’t. Later, I promise, just… I want to get home. I don’t want to talk about it here.”

Bilba swallowed, meeting the pleading look in Thorin’s stare, then crumbling under the weight of it.

“All right,” she said, and returned the kiss as softly as she was able, catching the corner of his mouth with the barest touch of her lips. The relieved sag of his shoulders was thanks enough, even if every minute without explanation sat ill with her.

Chapter End Notes

Do you understand how long I’ve been waiting to do that scene with Fili, Kili, and the adverts? Ages and ages, oh wow.

Works inspired by this one: [Take From Me My Lace Fanart](#) by [Shivi](#)

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