## Softer Strokes

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**Archive Warning:** Graphic Depictions Of Violence  
**Category:** M/M  
**Fandom:** The Hobbit - All Media Types  
**Relationship:** Bilbo Baggins/Thorin Oakenshield  
**Character:** Bilbo Baggins, Thorin Oakenshield, Dís (Tolkien), Fíli, Kíli, Dwalin (Tolkien), Gandalf | Mithrandir  
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### Summary

Thorin is a well known artist living a secluded life in the Swiss Alps. Bilbo is a former history professor living in a trauma rehabilitation centre after a devastating accident that took his parents lives. Through a mutual friend, Bilbo finds himself in Switzerland, and Thorin finds himself with company for the next few months, and neither of them are prepared for what that will bring.
Chapter 1

December 29th 2010

Bilbo has never been particularly fond of cars.

In his experience, they're too testy, too unreliable. He remembers being eighteen and taking his test, scared out of his wits but doing it anyway just to get it over and done with. He has never owned a car, and now in his early thirties, he never wants to.

It’s sunset when he’s sat in the back of his parents car, singing along to the Christmas music channel. It all feels very festive, with snow covered fields on either side of them as they drive through the Wiltshire countryside. It’s been four days since Christmas and they’re still working their way through the gifted baked goods they had received from friends and family. Bilbo loved coming back down south for the holidays. It’s slightly warmer, and Wiltshire isn’t exactly paradise, but despite the greyness of its towns and cities, it’s home.

Bilbo is thirty one and feels like a kid as he and Belladonna sing along to Wham!, that depressing Christmas song no longer sad, but funny, and enough to wind Bungo up, though he would never turn the radio off.

The M4 is quiet. The pass a sign that says they’re near Swindon, but they’re actually looking for Royal Wootton Bassett. It’s a turn in the road north and they’re there before you can think.

They had been in Trowbridge visiting family – Prim and Drogo, and Frodo, their newborn. They saved visiting Prim for last every year. She was always the best company, calm but funny, catty but subtle about it. She said things to them about the rest of the family she wouldn’t dare utter to anyone else. The Baggs clan could be snotty and stuck up, and Bilbo was infinitely glad that Prim and Drogo were nothing like that.

Belladonna changes the station and a love song comes from the speakers, filling the car with George Michael’s soulful voice. It’s one Bilbo knows too well, associating it with heartbreak most of the time. Now, though, he and Belladonna are too tipsy and riding the Christmas high to care just how loud they’re singing along to Careless Whisper. It’s a good song, and Bilbo wouldn’t be ashamed to admit that he knows every word.

“Didn’t you dance to this at New Year’s last year?” Belladonna asks, turning in her seat to look at him. Her cheeks are flushed red from wine and the warmth in the car, but she smiled, happy and tipsy, with Bilbo much the same.

“Yes, and I managed to make a complete tit of myself in the process,” Bilbo says. Belladonna laughs, grinning at her son. He finds himself smiling back.

“Well, I’m glad you avoided that this year,” she says. “You know…”

“Oh, mum, no,” Bilbo whines, knowing what’s coming next.

“Oh come on Bilbo, he was looking at you for ages! I could probably get his number from Prim, if you wanted. It’s about time you settled down with someone,” Belladonna says. She takes her phone out of her bag and out of instinct, Bilbo leans forward and takes it from her.

“I’m not settling with someone I met at a Christmas party,” he says, but he gives her back the phone, smiling apologetically. “I’ll get there.”
“Of course you will. Just do it before we die, we want to see you get married one day,” Belladonna says. Bilbo rolls his eyes.

“It’s technically not legal here, you know that, right?” he asks.

“It will be one day. Trust me, I know these things,” Belladonna says, tapping her nose. Her eyes, the same as Bilbo’s, sparkle at him knowingly and he can’t help but think that maybe she’s right. Or maybe that’s the alcohol talking.

“Have you two decided where you’re going in the summer?” he asks, changing the subject. Bilbo can practically sense his father ready to jump into conversation, and jump he does.

“We’ve been looking at this lovely little hamlet in southern Italy, actually. Really quiet, really isolated. We could barely find it on the map, but I’m sure we’ll manage. There’s this bridge over the river that cuts through the town, and—“

Bilbo lets his father talk, listening and not listening, content to just look out of the window at the snow falling heavier and heavier outside, white clumps of it sticking to the grass and the roads before being melted or compacted under wheels. You got a lot of black ice on these roads in the winter. Bilbo ignores that thought and let his attention go back to his father, asking him a question.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come with us?” he asks, voice full of concern. Bilbo makes eye contact with him in the rear view mirror and shrugs.

“I’ll probably have work to do,” he says. It’s a depressing thought, really.

“Think you can come down for your birthday, then?” Belladonna asks, hope in her voice. Bilbo smiles at her. The effect of the alcohol is diminishing, but he still feels a little lightheaded. It’s the alcohol leaving his system, he thinks, or maybe he’s about to throw up. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d thrown up after a Christmas party, or in the back of his parents car. Even just thinking of that one drunken night back in 1999 is enough to bring a flush to his face, even though he knows no one else is remembering it at the time.

“I will. Nothing fancy, though,” Bilbo says, smiling at his mother. She seems content with that and looks back out of the windscreen. From the back seat, Bilbo sees her thick, curly hair coming out of its intricate up-do and for a moment, considers leaning forwards and fixing it for her.

That’s the last thought he has before everything starts spinning.

Brakes screeching, the radio going static, his parents crying out in fear and shock, and Bilbo has no idea what’s happening beyond the sound of tyres squealing along the tarmac of the motorway and his helpless reaching for something to secure himself with. It’s a horrible, horrible feeling, and Bilbo wants it to end, and the last thing he can remember is the cold strike of fear in his chest before they collide with something very solid. Bilbo is thrown forward and his head hits the back of his fathers seat so hard he cal see stars. Something hot blooms from his forehead and he can feel blood trickling down the side of his nose. He's fading, hes fading...

"Mum?" he manages, though his head feels like it's full of cotton wool. "Dad?"

Neither of them answer him. George Michael is still playing. Bilbo is fading out and all he can think is that his mothers hair is now completely ruined.

After that, everything is dark.

Bilbo has never been fond of cars, after all.
February 19th 2012

“Have you made your mind up yet?” Dis asks, and Thorin has to focus hard not to screw up the cloud he’s working so meticulously on. He puts her on loudspeaker and uses his other hand to steady his canvas.

“I told you, I’m not interested,” he says. “Besides, Marseilles is too far away. I think I’ll just stay here.”

“Thorin…”

“We talked about this. I’m not interested in an exhibition,” he says, and he can feel Dis sighing, knowing she’s pushing her glasses up into her hair and rubbing the bridge of her nose. It’s been a while since he saw her, but she’s still his sister, and he knows her. He doesn’t have to strain to imagine her reactions over the phone.

Unfortunately, it works the other way around, too.

“The boys will be there on opening night,” she says. Thorin pauses and then sets his brush down. Fili and Kili, his teenage nephews, are the only people he lets stay here, usually for a couple of weeks in the summer. It’s the only time Thorin actually sees Dis these days, when she drops him off.

“When’s the exhibition?” he asks.

“August until January. You have a few weeks to make a decision before they give the slot to someone else,” Dis says. It’s February now, so it’s a while until the exhibition, but still…

“Do you know who?” he asks.

“Smaug Von Brandt,” Dis says, and Thorin stands, tajing his phone with him and turning loudspeaker off, pressing it to his ear. He runs his fingers through his hair. He’s glad that he’s not having this conversation face to face, because Dis would be giving him that look, telling him without words that it’s down to him in the end. He is the gallery’s first choice, after all.

“What collection?” he can already feel himself getting angry, but he keeps his voice as calm as possible. Smaug Von Brandt? No way is he giving that worm any kind of satisfaction. Still…

“Not sure. Probably that portrait series he did last year, the one with all of the fire and body horror going on. It was really popular online,” Dis says, totally calm. Thorin doesn’t know how she can say it so nonchalantly, like it isn’t the worst new in the world. Well… It’s not the worst news in the world, but Thorin has always had a flare for the dramatic.
“Any chance of getting Ori’s paintings in?” he asks, knowing it’s futile anyway.

“He’s still a kid, there’s no chance, otherwise I would have already gotten things going at the gallery. No, it’s you or Smaug, and they want an answer by the end of March.” Thorin can hear Dis pulling the phone away from her ear and saying something to the boys, probably about homework. It’s a Sunday, so they’ll be in their pyjamas and wreaking havoc at home, so of course Dis is trying to sit them down and get them to do some homework. He hears a response and it’s definitely Fili, speaking a mix of French and English.

“I’ll let you know in a few weeks,” he says, though they both know his answer already. Dis hums.

“Want to speak to the boys?” she asks, changing the subject. Thorin smiles.

“Put them on.”

He talks to Fili and Kili for a good hour, no doubt giving Dis the phone bill from hell. They slip between French and English, but Thorin understands them perfectly, used to their choice of language by now. Despite being born in Scotland, they’ve lived in Lyon with their mother for the last nine years, ever since their father died, going to a French school and picking up the language faster than any of them expected.

Fili is seventeen and wants to send Thorin photos of an old castle he went to in Germany with his school. They have a deal that the better Fili gets at photography, the more of his photos Thorin will paint. He has a good dozen or so canvases of ruins or hills or French villages in his garage that are just from Fili’s photos, done in oil or gouache. Fili usually leaves with one or two of them in tow, though what he does with them, Thorin doesn’t know.

Kili is much more hyperactive and Thorin is glad when he takes the phone from Fili and launches into a vivid description of a movie he saw the week before, something to do with dragons and wizards, leaving Thorin no room to respond at all. He’s content just to listen. Kili switches from subject to subject and Thorin tries to keep up, but once Kili starts talking about some TV show, he’s lost. He doesn’t own a TV, and the only time he watches movies is on his laptop, usually illegally downloaded and terrible, not something you would show a fourteen year old. He asks Thorin if he’s coming to see them soon, and Thorin tells him maybe, but the idea of coming down from his ivory tower is a little daunting. He tells Kili he will try to come down for his birthday in May, but it’s an empty promise. He can’t help but feel like the worst uncle in the world. Fili was here for his seventeenth, but that’s at the end of July, so he was off of school by then. They spent the day driving around and taking photos on Fili’s new camera.

Kili is fifteen this year and Thorin still doesn’t know what he likes. Fili is the creative sort, like everyone else in the family. Photography and sketching and short stories, but Kili… Thorin has no idea. He’s still only a kid, so he has a thousand and one phases to go through yet, but still, he feels bad. Dis will help him out if he asks, but he doesn’t think he can stand the guilt.

“Put your mum back on,” he tells them after a while. They spend a good five minutes saying goodbye to him before Dis takes the phone, laughing a little at the noise they’re still making. Little rascals, they are.

“Call me, Thorin. I worry about you,” she says, her voice low so the boys don’t hear. “And think about it, will you? Actually think about it. It could be good for you, and for us. You need to interact with people.”

“I do interact with people,” Thorin says, but Dis laughs disbelievingly.
“Going into town to buy food and paint twice a month isn’t the same as actually socialising. You’re lonely. You speak French, go and make some friends,” she says. “I love you.”

“Love you too,” Thorin says, and then the phone goes dead.

He stands there in his kitchen for a few minutes, making himself a cup of coffee methodically. He heads back out to his balcony, looking over the valley where he’s situated halfway up a mountain. There’s very little to see beyond the mountains and pine forests, and the edge of the town glowing in the morning. It’s a little too dark to be painting, but the sun will be coming up soon and Thorin can really get to work, adding more details he can’t quite see right now.

It’s always been therapeutic for Thorin. When he was ten, he got his first set of paints, cheap watercolours from his dad, and thirty years later, he has yet to set the paintbrush down for good. After he let home, he would try to do some sketches every day – people he saw on the bus, interesting trees, random items from around his flat. It wasn’t until he had the confidence (and the gift of a massive canvas from Dis and Frerin) that he started to paint boldly, and he realised then at nineteen years old, that he would probably be doing this for the rest of his life. And when Dis suggested he sell his paintings, things started to look up, for both of them. Thorin gained popularity and people wanted to buy his paintings. Dis got half of what he made from sales to help her get through university. She still gets fifty percent of what he makes, which isn’t much these days, but it’s not like they’re struggling.

Thorin picks his paintbrush up and gets back to work, and honestly, he doesn’t know what else he could want right now.

The trauma rehabilitation centre is quiet this early in the morning. Bilbo sits on a bench outside, looking at the gardens with a blanket around his shoulders and a hot cup of tea in his hands. It’s freezing and his breath comes out in a frozen cloud, but he doesn’t want to go back inside. A quiet house this early in the morning when no one else is awake, it brings back too many memories he would rather just forget.

Early morning mist rolls off of the grass and down the hill towards Bilbo. It’s beautiful, and he wishes he has a camera to take a photo of it. He left his phone in his room, so he’ll have to wait until tomorrow to take it, unless he wants to walk back up to his room, and he really doesn’t want to do that. It’s a lovely morning, the sun not quite up, but the bench faces east and the sky is starting to lighten at the horizon.

He’s tired. He had a nightmare the night before, squealing tires and blood running down his face and woke up early in a cold sweat. He’s had a shower and eaten some toast, but even thinking about it, Bilbo’s stomach rolls and the half healed scar on his arm itches. He doesn’t look at it, just ignores it and takes a sip from his tea. The tea here isn’t great, but it wakes him up and warms him from the inside out.

Bilbo has been here for two months. It’s been two months since his attempt and he’s barely healing. He has one-on-one therapy today, and part of him can’t wait to unload everything he’s been feeling for the last week. It’s all been fuzzy thought processes and bad nightmares, with maybe a few good hours where he reads emails from his family and tries to focus on some of the books he brought with him. In two months, he’s been able to read maybe one chapter of Thucydides and two summer flicks that he didn’t even have to think about. He used to be able to mark maybe twenty essays on Ancient Spartan politics in the space of an hour, and now, his eyes just slide off of the words and he can barely bring himself to keep up with his former students, or with the family members that keep in contact with him.
He misses teaching, really. He misses seeing hopeful new students at the start of each year and helping the ones that stayed get ready for their final exams. He misses reciting Tyrtaeus and Xenophon and even Aristotle, as bitter as he is. He even misses the terrible essays and analysis papers that his students turned in during their first couple of months in the course. It’s always nice to see how they progress throughout the year, and Bilbo always tried his hardest to make them understand that they did have potential, and that they could do so much better than they thought. Some of Bilbo’s students stay in touch with him through emails and send him links to books they think he might like or events that they’ve been to. It’s nice to hear from them, and Bilbo can’t help but feel immensely proud of them all, but it makes him miss work something fierce.

He sighs and finishes off his tea and heads back inside, where it is decidedly warmer. A few people are up by then – most people wake early at Oak Manor. Bilbo nods to people he recognises on his way back to the kitchen and finds himself alone again when he sets his mug by the sink and heads back to his room.

The first thing he noticed about his room when he first came here was the painting. It’s stunning, really, bold colours and impeccable detailing. Bilbo isn’t much of an artist, nor does he know much about the finer details of the craft, but he knows good art when he sees it. On his first say, he spent a long time just looking at it, letting himself imagine he was in the Alps, nothing but woodland and mountains around him. The Matterhorn is only a shadow in the background, a smaller mountain ridge the main focus, painted in monochrome only just tinted with blue. He looks at it when he sits back down on his bed and closes his eyes, wishing, not for the first time, that he was somewhere as idyllic as all that.

But he’s in Cornwall, and it’s the middle of winter, and even inside, he’s still cold.

The day passes slowly. Bilbo meets his therapist at eleven and talks for an hour about his last week. He goes over emails and the things he’s managed to read, and when Lindir finally asks him the one question he asks every week, Bilbo isn’t quite sure how to respond.

“Have you had any suicidal ideation?” Lindir asks. His voice is gentle as always, not cold, but calm, contained, like he has all of the time in the world. Bilbo looks at the scar on his right wrist.

“I’m not sure,” he says honestly.

“What do you mean?” Lindir tilts his head to the side like a curious bird.

“I mean I don’t know if it’s ideation or not,” Bilbo says. He pulls his sleeve back down over his scar, but the brush of fabric over it makes him shiver. “You know, looked too long at a knife, went out into the garden at six in the morning today, didn’t eat at all on Tuesday. That kind of thing.”

“I see.” Lindir writes something in his notebook. “Are you taking your medication?”

“Every day, twice a day with breakfast and dinner,” Bilbo says.

“And you’re socialising? Staying in contact with your family?” Lindir looks back up, his eyes impossibly calming to look into. Maybe that’s why he became a therapist. He gives off that wonderfully kind energy that puts Bilbo at ease.

“Yes. I had an email from Prim yesterday, I haven’t responded though,” he says. It was accompanied with a picture of Frodo, now a year and a half old, tottering around uncontrollably. He tells Lindir this and he doesn’t miss the smile the therapist gives him.

“Do you think you’ll stay with them once you leave?” he asks. Bilbo shrugs.
“If they’ll have me. They live in Wiltshire, it’s rather quiet there. Prim wants me to stay with them, but I’m not sure if I can bring myself to,” he says.

“Why is that?”

“They have a toddler. I don’t know if I can handle that like… this.” Bilbo gestures to himself. “I love Frodo, but I wouldn’t want to make Prim and Drogo worry about me as well as him.”

“So where will you go?” Lindir asks.

“I don’t know. I doubt I can go back to teaching for a while, especially after I tried to off myself. I have other family, but they’re…” Bilbo flounders for a word to describe them. “Loud. Nosy. I can’t deal with that right now.”


“Exactly. Though, I don’t know where I’ll be able to find that.” He runs a hand through his hair, not even pretending to think about out.

“Think about it. You’ve been making excellent progress lately. Do you have any requests while we have a few minutes left?” Lindir closes his notebook, which tells Bilbo that they’re pretty much done. He shakes his head.

“Not that I can think of,” he says.

“Then I believe we’re done for today. I’ll see you next week.” Lindir stands and goes to open the door for Bilbo. When it closes, Bilbo takes a moment to breathe, trying to shake off that odd feeling he got coming out of therapy every week. His hands are trembling and his scar is itching, so he shoves his hands into his cardigan pockets and walks away from Lindir’s office.

He spends a while in the common room, listening to the radio with the others and talking to them every now and then. It’s slow going and peaceful. Boring is another word for it, if he’s being honest, but boring is what he needed after his episode.

He eats lunch quickly and retreats back to his room for a nap, waking up in the late afternoon. He goes back to the common room, only to be found by an attendant who tells him he has a guest.

“Since when do I get guests?” he asks. The attendant shrugs.

“You do now. Says he knew you from a few years ago. You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” she says. But Bilbo’s curiosity is piqued.

“Did he give a name?” he asked.

“Gandalf Grey.”

Bilbo stops in his tracks, looking at her. He hasn’t heard that name in ages, at least, not since the crash. He had been at the hospital at Bilbo’s bedside, being the one to break the news to him that his parents were gone, killed on impact, and that there was barely anything recognisable about them. He can’t even remember how he knows Gandalf. He’s an old family friend, that’s true, but he’s never been introduced to Bilbo properly. They’ve met on a handful of occasions, and Bilbo still doesn’t know why Gandalf was there when his parents died.

“Yes. Yeah, sorry,” he says. He pulls his cardigan around him closer and follows her through the house to the room where people here meet guests. And of course, Gandalf is sitting there, in one of the comfortable armchairs, and beaming up at Bilbo when he comes into the room. He stands and walks over and, after assuring the attendant that they’re perfectly fine, pulls Bilbo into a hug.

“Well, you look much better than the last time I saw you,” he says, holding Bilbo at arms length, looking him up and down. “That scar healed nicely. You can barely see it.”

“Gandalf, what are you doing here?” Bilbo demands, stepping back from him. Seeing the old man, dressed in a long dark grey coat and looking as dapper as ever, is almost too painful. He just brings back bad memories of his time in the hospital after the crash. Bilbo spent New Year’s that year in a hospital bed with a horrific migraine, unable to do much but pull the blankets over his bed and not take part in any of the festivities going on.

“I’m here to see an old friend,” Gandalf says simply, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

“Why?” Bilbo folds his arms over his chest, refusing to sit down when Gandalf gestures to the armchair opposite his.

“I have a proposition for you. And a way out of this… lovely place.” Gandalf looks around the room, not with distaste, but with disappointment. Bilbo had the same look on his face the first time he came here. It’s a nice place, if not a little archaic. It’s not entirely accessible and the amount of vintage furniture around is a little disturbing.

“I need to be here. I can’t be alone, not if I don’t want another attempt,” Bilbo says. Gandalf raises an eyebrow at him.

“It’s a farmhouse in the Swiss Alps, away from most of society with a stunning view of the mountains,” he says bluntly, and Bilbo narrows his eyes at him.

“I can’t afford that,” he says. “I don’t know why you’d even suggest it.”

Gandalf says nothing and just looks at him, and Bilbo has always hated that. There are people in life, people like Gandalf, who are so sure of their influence and persuasiveness that they don’t even try, and it works, damn him. Gandalf could give a convincing argument just by stating a fact in that ridiculously calm voice of his and looking at someone with that expression and he would win.

Bilbo stays standing, glaring at Gandalf with what he hopes is a scorching look. He has never been able to sway the man with just a look alone, but Gandalf’s smile fades.

“I tried to kill myself, I can’t just waltz over to the middle of nowhere in Switzerland alone-“

“You won’t be alone, Bilbo. The farmhouse is owned by an old friend of mine, he said he’s happy to accommodate you for as long as you need,” Gandalf says, interrupting him gently. Bilbo finally sits down and drops his head into his hands. His anxiety is getting worse the longer this conversation goes on. He looks at Gandalf through the gaps in his fingers.

“Who’s this friend?” he asks quietly.

“Thorin Durin.”

Oh. Oh.

“Gandalf…”
“Bilbo, it’s wonderful up there. He doesn’t get out much, so you won’t be alone, and he’s much better company than he seems at first,” Gandalf says. His voice is kind and soft, like when he told Bilbo his parents had died, but the circumstances are so, so different. “As welcoming as this place is, you’re not enjoying yourself.”

“I slit my wrist, I’m here to recover, not to enjoy myself,” Bilbo says, but he knows that he’s wrong.

“Maybe not. But it helps. And if I know you, I know that boredom has never been good for you. Tell me, what has your therapist said about your progress?” Gandalf asks, leaning forward. His eyes are both kind and knowing at the same time, and Bilbo can’t lie even if he wanted to.

“Slow. It’s going slow,” he says. “But it’s only been two months, this isn’t something I can just get over.”

“Think about it. Try it. Get some mountain air in your lungs and get back into old hobbies. Thorin is a very quiet person, he won’t disturb you unless you touch his work,” Gandalf says, not even trying to argue with him. He knows – and Bilbo knows – that he’s won, and as infuriating as it is, just the thought of leaking Oak Manor is strangely appealing.

“Can you give me his email address? I’d like to contact him before I make a decision,” he says. His voice is surprisingly calm and without hesitation, Gandalf hands him a card with Thorin Durin’s name, email, and phone number written on it in Gandalf’s impeccable handwriting. He takes it and tucks it into his back pocket, standing up. Gandalf does the same.

“I hope to hear from you soon, old friend,” he says. He holds his hand out and Bilbo shakes it reluctantly. Without another word, Gandalf leaves the room with an elegant swish of his coat, and he’s gone, just like that.

Chapter End Notes

Von Brandt - German, "from an area cleansed with fire"

Gandalf hasn’t actually asked Thorin about this yet because he’s a little shit.

Anywayyy
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

cw: suicide attempt, details about the car accident + suicide attempt

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

February 20th 2012

Thorin hasn’t heard Gandalf’s voice in years, so when he picks up the phone, he knows something is going on.

“Gandalf. I hope you’re calling for a reason,” he says. He’s still in bed on his laptop, and doesn’t even bother to hide the tiredness in his voice.

“I have a proposition for you,” Gandalf says, and he sounds way too cheery for someone no doubt about to drag Thorin into something shady, or weird. He sighs and sits up properly.

“Whatever it is, I’m not interested,” he says.

“You’ll be paid.”

“Not interested.”

“All you have to do is let someone stay in your home for a while. That’s it. Nothing too strenuous.” Gandalf sounds like he’s smiling and Thorin hates it.

“And why should I do that? You know I don’t let people come here,” Thorin says. He hears Gandalf laugh lightly on the other end of the phone and resists the urge to throw it at the nearest wall. He wonders if the sound of it breaking will be satisfying or not, or if it will be worth the repair cost.

“He needs somewhere quiet.”

“Why?”

“To recover. I can’t say much else, but he’s an old family friend, and I know he’s not making much progress in way of healing where he is now. You should be getting an email from him some time today,” Gandalf says. His voice has an edge to it, and Thorin wonders for a moment when he means by ‘healing’. He shakes his head.

“You already told him, didn’t you?” he says.

“Yes.”

“And I have absolutely no way out of it?”

“I doubt it.”
“Damn you.”

“Let me know when you’ve both come to a decision. This will be very good for you,” Gandalf says. Thorin presses his phone against his chest and swears loudly before going back to it.

“I make no promises,” he says, and then Gandalf hangs up.

Thorin flops onto his back and closes his eyes, silently fuming but not voicing it. He learned a while ago that getting used to yelling to get his frustration out never went down well when his nephews were here, and that it took a long time to get out of the habit. Waking Kili up at seven in the morning when he was twelve isn’t something Thorin is going to forget.

He sits back up and pulls his laptop towards him. He goes through messages, mostly from Dwalin and Dis, and one from Fili with a lot of photos attached. He saves those for later, knowing that he’s going to need something to calm him down once he reads the email from the man Gandalf seems to have invited all the way out here.

Mr Durin

I have recently been informed of an opportunity to reside in your home in Switzerland, though knowing Gandalf, he probably hadn’t talked to you before approaching me. If that’s the case, I apologise on his behalf and would like to assure you that I am not intending to impose on you if you do not wish it. If so, you should probably stop reading now.

However, if you are willing to let me stay in your home for a time, I feel like I need to inform you of why I need a quiet place to stay. Back in 2010, I was in a car accident that resulted in the deaths of both of my parents. I was sat in the back, and suffered minor injuries, but was otherwise okay. I went back to teaching, but in December 2011, I attempted suicide and have been staying at Oak Manor in Cornwall ever since. I have been diagnosed with major depression, anxiety disorder, and PTSD, and am being medicated for it, though it doesn’t help that much, if I’m being honest. I am unable to live alone or go back to teaching.

If you are not comfortable with letting someone intrude on your privacy, inform me, and I will not contact you again. If you are, however, please let me know so we can arrange something.

I hope to hear from you soon, and I wish you a good day.

Sincerely, Bilbo Baggins

P.S. One of your paintings is in my room at Oak Manor. It’s a lovely sight to wake up to.

Thorin reads the email a good few times before he sits back and actually thinks about it. Suicide attempt? Not being able to be alone? Major depression? That all sounds so familiar that his chest tightens at the memory of it. He stands up. He knows that whoever this Bilbo Baggins is that he didn’t mean to bring up those memories, but he can’t help but resent him for his nonchalant tone in his email.

Thorin dials Gandalf’s number.

“You absolute ass,” he says when Gandalf picks up.

“You read his email?” Oh, Gandalf sounds just a little too cheerful.

“I did. Why did you think this was a good idea, after everything… everything we went through?” he asks. “I’m not about to turn a suicidal man away, but why did you think of me, and not your
other friends in, what, Denmark, was it?” Thorin can feel a rant coming on.

“The Netherlands. And I did. If you don’t want to do it-“

“It’s not that, Gandalf. I’ll do it, it’s just... there’s a lot going on right now. It’s Kili’s birthday soon and the boys will be here in July and Dis wants me to do this exhibition in Marseilles, and I don’t know what kind of company I’m going to be,” Thorin says. His exhales and the silence on the other end of the line is a little strange.

“He won’t be any bother. He’s a historian, so all you’ll be subject to is the occasional lecture on Roman poetry and Spartan infrastructure, at the most. And he appreciates art. I believe he went to one of your exhibitions when he was a student, actually,” Gandalf says.

“And he knows how to keep to himself?” Thorin asks tentatively.

“He does. Who knows, maybe you’ll become friends,” Gandalf says, definitely smiling now. Thorin closes his eyes and exhales. Control your breathing, don’t lash out.

“How long for?” he asks.

“A few months. Say, until May? Or before, if Bilbo feels rested enough. But no longer than that, I promise.” Gandalf sounds so earnest that Thorin almost believes him.

“Okay,” Thorin says, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Alright, I’ll do it. Give me a week to get things ready.”

“I’ll come with him, make sure he gets up that mountain alright. He’s not a fan of cars.” Something in his voice changes and Thorin remembers the email. A car accident that resulted in the deaths of both of my parents. No, he wouldn’t be a huge fan of cars in Bilbo’s position either.

“I want to be paid up front,” he says.

“Deal. I’ll be in touch.”

“Goodbye, Gandalf.”

The line goes dead and Thorin tosses his phone onto his bed before dragging his hands down his face. He needs to call Dis, and respond to Bilbo’s email, and talk to Dwalin and vent at him for a good twenty minutes. It’s not that he’s even particularly angry. No, it’s just that Gandalf has the ability to piss him off for no real reason with his impetuousness.

He writes an email to Bilbo later that day.

Mr Baggins,

You were right, Gandalf neglected to inform me of this decision, but I would be happy to have you here as long as you need. My nephews come and stay in the summer and I expect that the youngest will want to be here in May for his birthday, but otherwise, it’s relatively peaceful here, and the view from the balcony is nothing short of breath-taking. I will need a week to restock... well, everything in the house, but you are welcome to come any time after that. I hope that this helps you in your recovery. It certainly helped with mine.

Is there anything you would like me to get before you come here? I expect my sister will make a quick trip from Lyon before you arrive to make sure that this place is “presentable”, which in her mind, is “everything is spotless and there isn’t a speck of dust to be seen”. How she manages with
two hyperactive teenage boys, I’ll never understand. If you need anything specific, I’ll contact her and she can get it for you if I can’t find it in town.

I hope your French is good.

Yours, Thorin Durin

P.S. I think I remember selling one to Oak Manor. It has the Matterhorn in the background. I'm glad you like it.

Bilbo makes his mind up about Switzerland about five minutes after he receives a response from one Thorin Durin. It’s almost unbelievable, really. Bilbo remembers seeing his exhibition back in 2003 that featured Eastern European architecture, all bright colours and bold lines, and remembers feeling exhilarated at the sight of all of it. The Romanov Palace and the Zoloti Vorota and Bran Castle, all in stunningly accurate brush strokes.

It’ll take until actually meeting Thorin Durin to believe that this is really happening. He writes back quickly, explaining that no, he doesn’t need anything specific, and that he has to talk to his therapist about this before he makes a final decision, and that his French is, in fact, quite rusty. Once that’s done, he sends a message to Lindir, explaining everything. He has a week until his next session, but he won’t be going off to Switzerland until everything’s settled, if he’s even allowed to leave.

It’s strangely easy, getting everything sorted. Bilbo continues emailing Thorin about accommodation and where exactly his home is, and little things about his family he doesn’t directly ask about but gets answers for anyway. He’s clearly guarded and unsure of this, and it’s easy to tell, even through email, but Bilbo has always been able to read tone in the words people choose. He tells Lindir this in his last appointment with him, a few days before he leaves.

“Do you think he’s nervous to house you for a while?” Lindir asks.

“I’ve been told he doesn’t interact with people much” Bilbo says, fiddling with the ends of his sleeves. “I think he’d be nervous regardless of who it was.”

“And do you think you’ll be okay there?” Lindir raises an eyebrow, questioning, or maybe disbelieving. Bilbo isn’t sure. He just shrugs.

“I honestly have no idea. But I’ve always wanted to go to Switzerland, so there’s that,” he says. He smiles a little and looks down at the carpet, feeling Lindir’s eyes on him. He knows what’s coming next.

“You are always welcome back here if it doesn’t work out. We’ll hold your place for thirty days before it goes, but if you come back before that, it’ll be like you never left,” Lindir says. Bilbo looks up and meets his gaze.

“I think I’ll be okay,” he says.

“Good. I’ve always believed that people give themselves the best advice,” Lindir says. Bilbo laughs and holds up his right arm, his jumper sleeve sliding down to show the scar.

“And the worst.” Lindir smiles and looks at his notes.
“This is our last session,” he says, tapping his pen against the paper. “Is there anything you’d like to talk about?”

Bilbo thinks for a few seconds, his mind going through multiple things at the same time.

“I think I’d like to talk about the accident,” he says. He has to force the words out, but he knows that he has to do this before he leaves.

“You’ve never talked about that before. Why now?” Lindir asks.

“I’m leaving on Wednesday, I probably won’t be able to talk to a professional about this for a while. Not sure if there’s any psychological professionals where I’m going,” Bilbo says. As always, he tries to diffuse the tension with humour, but at Lindir’s patient expression, his shoulders slump and he looks away. “I remember being so happy when I was in the car with them. We were just coming back from Prim’s house in Trowbridge, after her Christmas party. Me and my mum were just a little bit tipsy, and my dad was completely sober, so he was driving. We were singing along to just… old songs. Wham, and George Michael, that kind of thing. And… I remember wanting to fix my mum’s hair. It was coming out of the hair grip at the back of her head and I was about to fix it for her when my dad hit a patch of black ice.

“Everything after that is a blur, really. We hit a road sign, you know, those ones with the directions on them? My dad died on impact and my mum’s seatbelt cut into her neck, so there was blood everywhere when the ambulances got to us. I… I hit my head on my mum’s seat and got a concussion and my seatbelt cut into my chest. I had a few bruises and a fractured rib, but that was about as bad as it got for me. I was kind of awake when they got to us, and I think I was asking for my mum, but I don’t really remember what they said to me.

“When I woke up the next day, Gandalf was there. He told me that my parents were both dead and that I would be in the hospital for at least two weeks. I had a horrific migraine for the rest of the week so I couldn’t really sleep properly that whole time. I didn’t really get any time to grieve properly, I just threw myself back into my work as soon as I could.” Bilbo scratches his scar absently and Lindir puts his pen down.

“And then you had a suicide attempt a year later,” he says softly. Bilbo nods.

“Everything became overwhelming. I was sat down at home and watching TV alone and when I got up to get a drink, I saw the knife on the draining board. I didn’t even have to think about it, I just did it. I mean, it wasn’t really that deep, so I probably wouldn’t have died even if I didn’t call for help, but I panicked. I feel bad for whoever had to get those blood stains out of the carpet.” Bilbo finishes and exhales, unable to look Lindir in the eye. It doesn’t feel like getting a weight off of his shoulders, it’s more like having the air taken from his lungs for a few seconds.

Lindir sighs and takes off his glasses to clean them on the edge of his shirt.

“Had you ever had any kind of suicidal thoughts or thoughts of harming yourself before?” Lindir asks, and Bilbo feels for a moment like he’s in his first session with him. Lindir had asked that exact question two months ago.

“I had those thoughts but I never acted on them,” Bilbo says honestly. “I think I’ve always been a bit of a melancholic person, I just repressed everything for a really long time. I never let myself actually be depressed.”

“You said that in our first session. You said that you didn’t know how to react to that feeling so you tried to kill yourself,” Lindir says, looking at an earlier page in his notebook.
“It happens.” Bilbo shrugs, and he knows it’s the truth. It happens. Lindir just nods and smiles at him sadly.

“Our time is up for today, Bilbo. You have my email, you can contact me while you’re in Switzerland if you need any help or if you want to come back.” He stands up and Bilbo does too. They shake hands. “I hope it goes well for you.”

“Thank you. And… thank you for everything you’ve done. For helping me,” Bilbo says. He gives Lindir a short smile and leaves.

Chapter End Notes

i write really fast so ill probably update frequently. anyway i have... a very vague idea about where this is going but i plan on making this as cheesy and gay as possible. find me on tumblr @erebcrs
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

cw: past suicide attempt

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bilbo sits opposite Gandalf on a train zipping through France, and for the life of him, he can’t sit still.

He drinks his coffee, watches the landscape change, and chats with Gandalf a little, but he’s too nervous to do anything much more than that. He wants to get up and walk around, but the train is busy and he and Gandalf were lucky to find seats at all.

“How long did you say it would take?” he asks for the third time. Gandalf simply looks up from his tablet, glasses slipping down his nose. He pushes them back up.

“We just passed Dijon, I’d say another three hours,” he says. “Get up, stretch your legs. Are you hungry?”

“Not really. The wifi isn’t connecting on here.” Bilbo nods to his laptop open in front of him. He had meant to email Thorin to tell him they were halfway across France, but he can’t, and he’s not about to ask Gandalf to call him.

“The password is mellon,” Gandalf says, disappearing behind his tablet again. Bilbo looks at him, but types it in and the internet connects half a second later. He thanks Gandalf under his breath and starts typing.

It’s short, the email. Just letting Thorin know they’ll be in Zurich in a few hours, and halfway up the Mont Pèlerin by the late afternoon. He’s not looking forward to the car ride with Gandalf, but it’s the only way to get up there, unless he wants to hike it, and it’s still February, so he doesn’t exactly appreciate the idea of trudging through the Alps. Not that he’s ever been much of an adventurer, not when it comes to mountains and those sorts of things.

He gets a message back twenty minutes later saying that everything’s ready and that Gandalf knows the way up. Bilbo doesn’t respond, just shuts his laptop and puts it back into his bag before looking out of the window once more.

The last time he was in mainland Europe was when he was a student back in the early millennium, taking a trip around France and Spain and Germany with some of his friends in the summer after their second year at university. That was when he had seen Thorin Durin’s exhibition. He remembered going to Marseilles with his friends and discovering the gallery late in the afternoon, going in and buying programs and then walking into the hall with Thorin’s paintings, being described and talked about in detail by a tour guide.

That was in the summer. This is winter, and the countryside looks desolate where it hasn’t had the warmth to grow. It snows more in France than it does in Britain, and this year, it’s been heavy.
Bilbo watches the farmland blanketed in white roll by and feels a little bit like he’s leaving his body, not even thinking about much in particular. He’d never really done that before until the accident. Dissociation, Lindir had called it. Not being able to connect with reality. Well, that sounds about right.

They get to Zurich at four and Gandalf picks up a car from the station, simply gliding over to it without having to look and opening the passenger door for Bilbo. His skin itches from being in a car and he tries to sleep on the way, but it’s difficult when he’s in a car for the first time in over a year. Gandalf understand this and talks to him about nothing in particular, just… things he sees, his past adventured in Switzerland, that one time in his youth when he climbed the Matterhorn with someone called Galadriel. Bilbo can’t ever imagine Gandalf as a young man. It’s like trying to picture Santa before he was Santa.

It’s a two hour drive to the house and Bilbo tries to shut out most of it. He clenches his right hand into a fist over and over against his leg, staring resolutely out of the front window because there’s barely anything else he can do without wanting to claw his own skin off. Gandalf knows this, he knows that Bilbo just can’t be in a car for this long without freaking out, so he takes a shortcut he knows and they’re driving up the mountain before Bilbo can even process it.

It’s stunning, really. He can see the valley and the lake at the bottom, and though they’re not particularly high up, his stomach drops when he looks out of the window. It’s covered in snow and ice and Gandalf slows so they don’t skid. Being early evening in February, it’s getting dark, and the moon rises white in the sky. The house comes into view not long after.

It’s beautiful, there’s absolutely no denying that. It looks like an old farmhouse, and at the same time, like one of those Viking halls with the intricate carvings around the door. There’s a balcony on the first floor overlooking the mountains and a garage that looks like it’s seen much better days. Gandalf parks and Bilbo is out of the car a moment later, looking up in awe.

“Ah, looks like Dis is here,” Gandalf says cheerily, though Bilbo has no idea what that means. There’s a shiny looking Beetle outside the house that looks completely out of place here. Gandalf gestures for Bilbo to go to the door, and Bilbo does once he has his suitcase in tow and his satchel slung over his shoulder.

Gandalf knocks and Bilbo waits tentatively, looking down at the ground. The snow crunched under his boots as he shifted and ran a hand through his hair. Gandalf put a hand on his shoulder and for a moment, he felt like he was thirteen years old and in the hospital with his family around his grandfathers bed. Gandalf had shown up and put his hand on Bilbo’s shoulder then. That was perhaps the earliest memory he had of Gandalf that seemed coherent.

This is completely different.

After a few moments of waiting, the door opens.

Thorin can’t open the door. He gets up and sits back down, body wracked with nerves. Dis looks at him over the rim of her mug, and when she realises he’s staring at a blank wall, she sighs and gets up. He means to thank her for that later, but right now, he listens to her greet Gandalf and a Mister Baggins cheerfully and pinches the bridge of his nose before standing up, walking over to the hallway slowly. His heart is pounding.

“And this is my brother, Thorin,” Dis says, gesturing for Gandalf and Mister Baggins to come into the house. She casts him a momentary look only he sees before smiling again, her features
changing like water. It’s always amazed Thorin how she can do that.

“Gandalf,” he says, nodding to his old friend. “And you must be Mister Baggins. It’s a pleasure.” He steps forward and holds his hand out. Mister Baggins takes it, smiling awkwardly, but Thorin’s eyes are drawn to his right wrist when the sleeve of his jacket pulls up. The sight of the scar is almost too much. It’s barely healed and he can see where the stitches had been still. He looks at Mister Baggins’ face instead.

“Call me Bilbo,” he says. And he is nothing like what Thorin imagined. When Gandalf told him he was a professor, he expected someone older, someone who looked like they had every reason to live and no reason to try to take their own life. No. Bilbo looks like he’s a washed out watercolour painting, the edges blurred and the colours pale where they should have been sharp and bright. He’s short and in his thirties, with curly blond hair and an expression that says he’s just as nervous as Thorin is. He has a suitcase so small it has no business calling itself a suitcase and an ancient looking satchel over his shoulder. Thorin lets go of his hand a couple of seconds too late and shoves his hands into his pockets, glancing at the floor.

There’s an awkward silence and Dis touches his shoulder.

“Soyez poli,” she hisses. Be polite.

“Come in, let me show you your room,” Thorin manages, gesturing for Bilbo’s suitcase. It’s light, and Thorin doubts he really has many clothes in there. He doesn’t blame him. He’s been wearing pyjamas for the last week or so, and it wasn’t until Dis showed up that he put actual clothes on. His jeans feel a little too loose, but then again, he hasn’t been eating much recently.

Bilbo follows him through the house silently, but Thorin can tell he’s desperate to ask questions. Of course he does, he’s a history professor. In Thorin’s experience, historians tend to always, always be brimming with curiosity, not just for history but for everything. It’s actually admirable and Thorin would appreciate the chance to talk, but he knows that despite his curiosity, Bilbo is nervous, and probably tired. It’s a long journey from Cornwall on the train.

“Here. Just put your stuff anywhere,” he manages, opening the door for Bilbo. He almost lingers to watch him put his things away, but he just walks back into the kitchen to see Dis and Gandalf talking in French, laughing about something or other. Thorin can’t be bothered to translate.

Dis looks at him with an eyebrow raised and he just shrugs, sitting down at the table. Bilbo comes back out a moment later with his jacket off and his shirt sleeves rolled up. It’s warm in the house, even Thorin avoids wearing long sleeves here sometimes.

“Does Dwalin have the boys?” Thorin asks his sister to distract himself. She gives him a tired look. “Him and Balin, yeah. With any luck, I’ll come home to a tray of burned cupcakes, not a burned down house. I should probably leave tonight if I want to get to work tomorrow,” she says quietly. Thorin tries to keep his eyes on her, but he doesn’t miss the look Gandalf and Bilbo give each other over his head. Bilbo sits down at the table with the rest of them and runs a hand through his hair, pushing it from his eyes.

“I have an appointment in Bristol tomorrow afternoon, I should leave too. Do either of you need anything?” Gandalf stands, looking more at Bilbo than at Thorin. Thorin doesn’t blame him. He and Gandalf don’t know each other very well, their main communication is down to Dis, who seems to know practically everybody in the world of the arts.

Bilbo declines and stands, walking with Gandalf to the door, hands in his pockets. Thorin trails
after them. He wants to turn back, tell them that he’s too much of a wreck to have anybody staying with him, but even just the thought of the rant he would receive from Dis and Dwalin is too much to actually get the words out. He says goodbye to Gandalf and hugs his sister, promising her he’ll call and think about it, and all too soon, he’s standing in an empty hallway with a stranger who looks at him like a scared deer.

After a few tense seconds, Bilbo is the first to visibly relax. He glances away and smiles shyly.

“I take it you’re about as clueless as I am right now,” he says. To his surprise, Thorin smiles back. Oh, there it is. The moment when he’s telling himself that this is going to be okay. Not… not something he’s used to, but it’ll be alright. He hopes.

“Completely out of my depth,” Thorin says.

“Me too.” Bilbo absently touches his scar, and it’s as if he senses Thorin looking at him because he stops a moment later.

“I, uh, didn’t know what food you liked, so I just bought a little bit of everything. Are you hungry?” Thorin asks, trying to appear polite. He gestures to the kitchen and Bilbo follows him.

“We’ve got… well, it’s mostly ingredients.”

“I can work with that,” Bilbo says. “Let me see.”

And the next hour or so that follows is perhaps the strangest in Thorin’s life. Bilbo seems to throw himself into cooking pasta for the both of them, probably not even having to think about the process. Thorin stays out of the way once Bilbo tells him he doesn’t need help and goes back to sketching as best as he can. He has a printed copy of Fili’s castle photo on the table. It’s really only the preliminary sketch, something Thorin does whenever he starts a new piece.

The food is delicious, and they eat in silence. There’s leftovers and Thorin tells Bilbo he’ll sort them out, and then Thorin’s alone after Bilbo wishes him goodnight, and he has absolutely no idea how he ended up here.

Bilbo can barely sleep. He looks up at the ceiling, listening to quiet music come from somewhere inside of the house. It’s not the music keeping him up, in fact it’s quite nice, it’s just… everything is a little bit too much and he doesn’t know how to process it.

Growing up, Bilbo had never been good with his emotions. Not good with expressing them, or processing them, or… anything to do with them, really. He threw himself into work as soon as he could and ignored the incessant voice in the back of his head telling him he was worthless, he should take that box cutter and slice open his wrists, things like that. He addressed it once or twice in university, baring his soul to the very few people he trusted with it, but it never went further than that – just talking about it.

The last few months have been hell. In and out of therapy and hospitals, Prim always giving him that look whenever he comes over from Swansea to see her, practically falling apart over Christmas because it was his first without his parents. Bilbo has no idea how he managed to ignore everything he had been feeling for a solid year. His ribs healed and he still has the scars on his chest and on his nose, but after all of that… there was nothing. He went back to work like nothing had ever happened and forced himself to forget about it.

Now, he was sleeping in a surprisingly soft bed in Switzerland in the house of an artist he never
expected to meet. It’s been a long day. It’s been a long year. Bilbo tries to sleep in an unfamiliar bed and ends up drifting off around three in the morning.

If he has any bad dreams, he doesn’t remember.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so I clearly have... no idea what I'm doing. Enjoy awkward interactions
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

cw: family death, suicide attempt, actual suicide, you know the drill

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first week is tense.

Bilbo spends a lot of time in his room, either sleeping or reading, just glad that he doesn’t have to make a point to sit where someone can see him so that his absence is reported to the higher ups, or that he can take his medication without being checked for it. He takes his meds like always, and tries to eat more than once a day. It’s calm. It’s nice. Bilbo actually feels rested after a couple of days. He doesn’t have to think about how to keep people off of his back, he just… exists.

Bilbo finds Thorin on the second day. He’s sat in the kitchen again, still drawing, still as silent as ever. He’s wearing pyjamas and his long black hair is tied up into a bun, strands falling into his face. He glances up when Bilbo comes into the kitchen that afternoon and looks away immediately.

“Coffee?” Bilbo asks.

“Please. No milk, one sugar.” Thorin doesn’t even look up. Bilbo tries to ignore that and sets about making coffee for the both of them, pouring milk into his own and stirring sugar in to Thorin’s. He sets the mug on the table and goes to leave, to go back to his room.

“You’re shaking,” Thorin says. He’s looking up, concern in his features, but it looks like he’s trying to mask it. Bilbo walks back over.

“Can I…?” he gestures to the chair and Thorin nods, taking his coffee and blowing on it. Bilbo sits and holds his right hand up. “Post traumatic tremor. Usually caused by head trauma. I was in the back seat during the crash and smacked my head on the passenger seat in front of me. I’ve had it ever since.”

Thorin is silent. Bilbo distracts himself by looking at the tattoos on his arms, coiling in thick, black patterns and disappearing under the sleeves of his t shirt. Of course he has tattoos, Bilbo doesn’t know what else to expect from a man who looks like he used to be in an eighties hair band.

“Is that were you got the scar?” Thorin asks eventually. He gestures to his own nose and Bilbo nods, reaching up instinctively to touch it. It’s faint now, but he knows it’s there.

“You should see the one on my chest,” he says. Thorin raises an eyebrow, but doesn’t say anything. He sips his coffee and sets it back down to go back to his sketching. Bilbo stays sitting, watching him. He’s always liked watching artists draw. They always get this look on their faces of total concentration, and in Thorin’s case, he has his tongue sticking out between his teeth and his eyes narrowed. He probably need glasses, Bilbo thinks.

“Can I ask you something?” Bilbo says at last. He sips his own coffee, finding it a little too rich for
his tastes, but it’s still nice. Thorin looks at him and nods.

“Sure.”

“When you said that this place helped with your recovery… what did you mean? I know it’s none
of my business, I just… well, you know what happened to me,” Bilbo says, and he stammers,
stumbling over his own words and he curses himself.

“You’re right, it’s none of your business,” Thorin says coldly.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

They lapse into silence once again and Bilbo almost wants to slap himself for asking. It was rude
and invasive, and for gods sake, he’s already invading this man’s privacy, why can’t he just shut
up? Bilbo has his journal and his copy of the Aeneid with him, so he cracks the book open and
starts to read.

By the time Bilbo finishes his coffee, Thorin has gone through a good few pages in his sketchbook
and has been letting out a continuous string of cursing under his breath. It’s distracting, but then
again, Bilbo hasn’t been able read for very long for a while. He gets to the description of Aeneas’
shield and that’s about it before he puts his book down and opens his journal. It’s pages and pages
of notes and dates and doodles, mostly stuff from his research into Beowulf and his translations
from Old English. He opens to a new page and writes down the date before his pen hovers above
the paper, suddenly unsure of what to write. He’s never been one for creative writing, so he ends
up just listing the important dates of the reign of Augustus Caesar.

He feels Thorin’s eyes on him by the time he gets to the Battle of Actium and glances up. He’s
looking at Bilbo curiously, head tilted to the side. God, he looks exhausted. Bilbo has no idea what
he gets up to in his mountain hideaway, but it must be tiring. Or maybe he’s like Bilbo and
struggles with sleep most of the time. That seems so much more likely, now that he thinks about it.

“What’re you drawing?” he asks quietly.

“I think it’s called Burg Landshurt,” Thorin says, picking up a printed photo. At Bilbo’s confused
look, he sighs. “My nephew sends me photos of places he’s been and I paint them.”

“You mentioned you have nephews. How old are they?” Bilbo asks.

“Seventeen and fourteen. Fili’s the oldest, he’s the one who sends me photos. He went on a school
trip to Germany recently and ended up sending me about a million photos.” Thorin pushes his hair
out of his face and puts his pen down. It rolls over to Bilbo and he rolls it back without even
thinking about it.

“And the youngest?” he braves, raising an eyebrow.

“Kili. I swear, that boy is going to give his mother a heart attack one of these days,” Thorin says.

“Let me guess. Constantly running around, getting into fights, getting up to your average teenage
shenanigans that are most likely illegal?” Bilbo asks before taking a drink from his mug.


“I grew up in Wiltshire, it’s practically a rite of passage to do at least one illegal thing by the time
you’re fourteen,” Bilbo says.

“You don’t seem the type.”

“Oh believe me, I was the bane of my parents’ existence when I was a teenager. I’d come home at two in the morning with mud everywhere and smelling like liquor and try to act sober, and my dad would hide the paracetamol from me in the mornings so I had to suffer with my hangover,” Bilbo says. He smiles into his coffee, remembering the days when he was so much wilder. He misses it, a little.

“How did you get from that to lecturing in Swansea?” Thorin asks. He leans back in his chair, regarding Bilbo with those intense blue eyes.

“I didn’t change that much. My student years were pretty much the same, only with less chance of getting arrested and trying to write a seven-thousand-word essay in the space of three hours,” Bilbo says. “It’s a miracle I even got my degree, let alone a PhD.”

“Why ancient history?” Thorin asks.

“I like history, and ancient history’s just fun,” Bilbo says honestly. The last person he told that ancient history was ‘fun’ looked at him like he had grown a second head. Thorin wasn’t any different.

“I always thought it was just a bunch of old men shouting at each other,” he says.

“Well, you’re not wrong. What they’re shouting about is fun, though,” Bilbo says, and he grins, looking back down at his notebook.

“My brother really liked history. He used to make us watch the history channel all the time at home,” Thorin says. Something in his face changes and Bilbo recognises the mask of grief. Thorin closes his eyes and turns his face away for a moment, obviously trying to compose himself.

“I take it he’s not around anymore,” Bilbo says softly. Thorin shakes his head.

“No.”

“How long?”

“Why?”

“You don’t have to answer; I was just… never mind.” Bilbo closes his notebook and tucks his pen behind his ear.

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t mention him again,” Thorin says. His voice screams murder and it actually scares Bilbo enough to make him go back to his room, coffee abandoned on the kitchen table. He sits on his bed and runs a hand through his hair. He has always been spectacularly good at pissing people off when he meets them, of course this would be exactly the same. It’s not like he’s got to live with this man for a while. Thanks Gandalf, he thinks to himself. Thanks for having me stay with a man who is of course going to hate me.

Bilbo manages to compose himself enough to go out and get his coffee before going back. Thorin doesn’t even look up at him, but Bilbo can feel his eyes on his back when he leaves the kitchen again. If Thorin had a superpower, it would be laser eyes, because Bilbo is surprised when he gets back to his room and finds himself intact, no laser holes anywhere in his body.
Thorin goes to bed that night with a dead weight in the pit of his stomach. Of course, he can’t sleep, but what else is new? He sits up on his laptop with his headphones in, watching whatever terrible action movie Dwalin kept telling him to watch. It’s mindless and takes no effort to watch, so he watches it and zones out.

There’s a scene where a character puts a gun to his head and Thorin has to stop watching. He shuts his laptop and pushes it away from him in the space of about two seconds. His heart is pounding. That’s not how Frerin did it, no, Frerin bled out in the bath and Thorin and Dis didn’t find him for hours afterwards. The boys had been there and Dwalin had gotten them out of the house until the police and the ambulance showed up to take his body away. Thorin knows that Fili knows what happened, but he’s pretty sure Kili is still oblivious. Dis has never told him otherwise.

Thorin had disappeared after that. Their parents and their grandparents were gone, Dis had the boys to worry about and an ex husband who refused to pay child benefits up until last year, and everyone else was just…

So Thorin disappeared. He recruited Dwalin’s help in building this place, and two months later, he’s alone in the Swiss mountains and it’s blissfully quiet. When Frerin died, he had left his CD player on, the CD from his and Thorin’s road trip across America playing on repeat. Thorin still can’t listen to country music anymore.

It’s been five years and Thorin still isn’t over it. It doesn’t seem like something you would ever get over, though. He saw his baby brothers dead body in a bathtub full of cold water and blood and he had to fight every base instinct in his body not to throw up at the sight. Dis cried, and so did Thorin, once he had five seconds alone after the whole fiasco. It’s one thing to see a dead body in movies, it’s quite another thing to see one in real life.

The funeral had been loud, but the line of Durin was always like that. They were tight clan. Most people didn’t stray as far down south as Newcastle, let alone Switzerland or Marseilles. Frerin had been laid to rest in a Jewish cemetery, like everyone else in their family, one in Aberdeen. He was next to their grandfather. Thorin hadn’t visited since the funeral, and he doubted he ever would, now that he was here.

Thorin puts his laptop away once he calms down and manages to fall into an easy sleep, though if he said he didn’t dream about Frerin, he would be lying.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so disclaimer - I'm not Jewish, everything I know about Jewish burial and mourning comes from online sources and information from Jewish family members I picked up when I was younger. Also, I'm convinced that the Durins are Jewish-Romani, so that's gonna be a thing here. They're also Scottish.

I'm at work all weekend so no updates until around Tuesday-ish. I'm at my grandparents all week with the house to myself so I'll definitely get some writing done while I'm there. Find me on tumblr @erebcrs
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

thorin is an anxious wreck who likes black sabbath and bilbo gets a horrendous migraine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There’s heavy metal playing when Bilbo gets up a week after he arrived. It’s loud enough for him to feel it in his ribs, the power behind the bass and the drums truly remarkable. He buries his face into his pillow. It’s too damn early to be dealing with this, and yet, the music doesn’t cease. In fact, it seems to just get louder.

One thing Bilbo has learned in the last week is just how quickly Thorin’s mood can change. One moment, he’s generally not talkative, and avoids conversation unless it’s about food or if there’s any hot water left in the shower for him. The next… well, Bilbo doesn’t want to call it mania, but it’s pretty similar. He knows what a manic episode looks like, knows what one feels like, and this isn’t it, but it’s pretty similar. He spends hours working on tiny details of what must be a new painting, singing along loudly to whatever much he’s playing. And this morning, it just so happens to be Black Sabbath.

Bilbo forces himself out of bed and wraps his dressing gown around himself. His head his pounding, and it’s not because of the music, though that’s definitely not helping any. The pain is spreading out like white hot lightning from the backs of his eyes. The doctors had told him that he would get headaches and migraines and the like because of the impact of the crash. He hadn’t had one quite like this in a while.

He finds Thorin on the balcony wielding a paintbrush in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Bilbo has no idea where the music is coming from, so he’s going to actually have to talk to Thorin.

“Hey. Hey!” He has to shout to be heard, and when Thorin hears him he startles, jumping and knocking his paint water over. The mason jar hits the floor and shatters and Thorin swears loudly before using his phone to turn the music off.

“Shit, I’m so sorry.” Bilbo rushes forwards despite his throbbing head and bends down to start picking up the shards of glass just as Thorin does.

“No it’s okay. I had the music on way too loud, I didn’t mean to… I’m sorry,” Thorin stammers. He stands and takes the glass from Bilbo’s hands, careful not to cut himself on the edges. He goes into the house and Bilbo follows, unsure of what else to do. His head is killing him and he needs to get some painkillers in him sooner rather than later if he wants to survive the day.

“Those jars only cost a euro each in town so don’t… are you okay? You look a little pale,” Thorin says. For once, he’s not looking at Bilbo with hatred or apathy in his eyes. As much of a relief as that is, Bilbo can’t enjoy it, because the pain in his head just gets worse.

“Migraine,” he says, sitting down at the table. “Do you have any painkillers.”
“Yeah, I’ll get them. You stay here.” Thorin hurries out of the kitchen and Bilbo can’t really protest. He closes his eyes and drops his head into his hands, trying to block out the glaring lights overhead. There’s a soft click a minute or so later and the kitchen goes dark. With any luck, the painkillers Thorin presses into his hands with a glass of cold water will put him to sleep and when he wakes up, he’ll be alright. Knowing him, though, he’ll probably suffer through this cranial torture for a few hours and pass out until three in the morning.

“You should go back to bed,” Thorin says.

“In a minute. Let them kick in,” Bilbo mutters. Thorin says something else but Bilbo doesn’t hear it. He feels a hand on his shoulder and the weight of it is only a little reassuring when he wants to gauge his own frontal lobe out. God, he hates these migraines. Peace and quiet. That’s what he came here for. Peace and quiet, and instead he gets a sodding migraine the same day Thorin decides to break out Black Sabbath’s *Seventh Star.*

The painkillers work to dull the edges of the white hot pain in his head enough for him to open his eyes and sit up straight. Thorin turning out the kitchen light is definitely helping.

“Do you get these a lot?” Thorin asks gently. Bilbo nods and runs a hand through his hair. It’s probably a mess anyway, why not make it even worse?

“Yeah. Got them way before the accident, too. I think that just made them worse,” he says. Thorin gives him an indecipherable look, eyebrows drawn together and his lips pursed like he’s deep in thought. He’s silent for a while and looks down at the table, scratching at the edge with his thumbnail.

“Go get some sleep. I’ll keep the music off,” he says eventually, and stands. Bilbo does too, or tries to. With his movement, the pain behind his eyes lights up and he could swear his optic nerves are being fried by the sheer heat of it. He hisses and squeezes his eyes shut, gripping the edge of the table to keep himself up. He feels Thorin move to his side, but he doesn’t touch Bilbo, and instead just hovers like a concerned bee.

“Need help?” he asks. Bilbo shakes his head, but when he tries to walk away, he accidentally bumps into the wall and curses loudly. Thorin’s hand is at his elbow not a second later and he’s steering Bilbo to his room gently, walking slowly. Bilbo can barely open his eyes, it’s so bad. He’s grateful when he gets to his room, as dark and cool as it is. He feels his way to his bed and collapses into it, mumbling a quiet ‘thanks’ in Thorin’s direction, getting an equally quiet ‘you’re welcome’ back. He gives Thorin a weak thumbs up and hears a small laugh before the door to his bedroom shuts and he’s left alone.

Bilbo drags the covers back over himself and buries his face into his pillow, trying to block out anything and everything that will just make his head hurt so much worse. The painkillers are, fortunately, the kind that can knock out a seven foot tall body builder, so Bilbo quickly floats away, paying no mind to the spiking pain behind his eyes.

Bilbo wakes up to the sound of his bedroom door closing and the smell of coffee filling the room. He breathes it in. It’s that rich French stuff in the kitchen that smells like Starbucks on a good day. When he braves opening his eyes, Bilbo sees a large mug on his bedside table with a piece of paper next to it. His migraine has drastically improved, so Bilbo turned on the lamp and puts on his glasses before picking up the note.

*I heard that caffeine helps with headaches, so maybe this will help once you wake up, if it hasn’t*
gone cold by then. I’m going into town to pick up more painkillers. I’m afraid you took the last ones I had. Text me if you want anything. Thorin.

It’s written in ridiculous cursive on what looks like torn up sketchbook paper, and Bilbo has to read it a few times before the words actually make sense to his sleep addled mind. He’s not sure what makes Thorin think that caffeine helps headaches, but he’s willing to try it and see if he’s right. Bilbo holds his hand over the mug and finds it’s still scalding hot, so he just takes it by the handle and stands. He’s a little wobbly, but it’s really not that bad. He makes his way to the living room and sits down, not missing that Thorin had turned all of the main lights off and left a few lamps on. It’s such a small thing to do, but it’s one that Bilbo notices, and he can’t help but smile at the thought of Thorin going around to turn the lights off. Even the kitchen is dark. Bilbo’s eyes only hurt a little as he sips the hot coffee, but it’s honestly an improvement to this morning.

At that thought, Bilbo checks his watch. It’s late afternoon, practically evening at this point. The sun is setting and he catches a glimpse of the brightness coming from behind the mountains though the door to the balcony. For a moment, he considers just staying in the living room and drinking his coffee and maybe checking his emails once his migraine is bearable enough to look at a screen for a while, but his curiosity gets the better of him and he ventures outside, finding the balcony door unlocked and slightly ajar.

Oh. Oh, he can definitely see why Thorin lives here. The balcony faces north, so you can see the light from the sun when it rises and sets, no doubt giving him fantastic natural light to work with while he paints. There’s a couple of small tables out here, one with a desk easel and a canvas on it, the other home to what looks like a good few hundred euros’ worth of paint, brushes, turpentine, and other artistic paraphernalia. There’s things that look like strange shaped knives Bilbo thinks he’s seen before and a mason jar of clean water.

The canvas itself is what Bilbo wants to look at. It’s getting dark, so he can’t see the exact details, but he sees enough. It’s the castle that Thorin has been drawing for the last few days, the greenery around it looking almost complete with the castle and the sky itself yet to be painted. The printed copy is tucked underneath the easel so it doesn’t blow away. Bilbo sips his coffee and looks at it for a good long while. It seems so distant from the exhibition he saw years ago that he can’t quite wrap his head around the fact that Thorin is the same person who painted those stunningly colourful and bright architectural pieces. Not that Bilbo doubts that this painting will be just as striking, it’s just so… different.

He remembers Thorin saying that his eldest nephew sends him photos to draw and paint. This is one of them, the Burg Landshut castle in Germany. From what little Bilbo can see, the photo is fantastic, the lighting just right as the sun hits the grey stone of the castle. How old did Thorin say Fili was again? He’s a teenager, Bilbo knows that. Any teenager who can take photos like that deserves to have them painted like this.

Bilbo goes back inside and goes into the kitchen, looking for anything he can eat with no effort. He finds a pack of what looks like Swiss off-brand cookies and opens them without even checking the sell by date. Despite Thorin making an effort to go out and restock on food before Bilbo showed up, he recognises a phenomenon more often seen in students, the habit of never actually going food shopping and relying on unhealthy crap from the closest, cheapest store.

Bilbo used to be like that, when he was a broke student living from pay check to pay check. He worked in a bookstore that payed him minimum wage, which, in the nineties and early thousands, was abysmal. He’d lived in a flat with two other people, opposite a musician Bilbo had secretly lusted after for two years before finally getting up the courage to talk to him and having a brief but incredibly energetic summer fling with. Bilbo hasn’t seen him since.
God, he misses his student days. Not that he’s entirely disappointed with how his life turned it, it’s just that… well, things were a lot simpler then. Bilbo knew exactly what he was doing and what he wanted to get done. He had a life ahead of him and a clear if not sparse plan of what he wanted to do with his life. He had been so hopeful back then. Ten years later, and he’s sitting in a practical strangers living room in the arse end of Switzerland eating biscuits that probably went off ages ago, and for some reason, he doesn’t even care that his life is completely different to what he initially imagined.

Bilbo puts the biscuits back where he found them and gets his notebook from his room. He curls up on the sofa and opens it up at the back, where he had drawn a shaky calendar of the year on the last six pages. It’s only early March, and the only thing he’s written in by way of dates are birthdays and holidays, and a date in September, which was when he was thinking about going back to teaching. The way things are going now, he doubts that will happen, at least for a long while. He’s sure that burying himself in work and deadlines and grading without taking time to properly heal from the crash was the reason that he tried to kill himself.

That was two months ago, he reminds himself, and he’s here to finally get over that. Not that that’s something that can be so easily done, but it’s worth a shot, even if Thorin is a confusing, changeable man who plays Black Sabbath at eight in the morning on full blast as if he’s still alone.

Well, Bilbo thinks. It’s not like it could be any worse.

The drive down to Vevey takes about half an hour, and Thorin uses it as a chance to clear his head. He focuses on driving and not crashing into anyone or anything once he hits the main road, and by the time he gets to the town, he feels relatively calm. Vevey isn’t necessarily that busy this time of year, or this time of day, so he gets a decent parking space at the first supermarket he finds and grabs a basket, fully intent on filling it with as much junk as he can get his hands on. Another call from Dis urging him to make his mind up about the exhibition already has put him in a bad mood and he doesn’t feel like getting drunk to hide his feelings the way he usually would, though only when Dwalin is there. He’s the only person Thorin’s met who can out drink Dis.

So, he grabs the first things he sees that look like it’ll give him a heart attack if he keeps up this habit of eating his feelings. Oh, and Bilbo’s painkillers. And two packs of cigarettes. Thorin ends up actually buying fruit, too, if only to avoid looking like a total weirdo who lives on junk. He realises as he comes to the till that he hasn’t had strawberries in years. He remembers eating them with Dis and Frerin. It was always a summer treat, strawberries sprinkled in sugar, sat in the back garden while their dads radio played some oldie and Thrain worked in his shed, the smell of metal work forever singed into his brain. What Thorin wouldn’t give to go back to that house in Scarborough in the summer and relive moments like that, even just for a few hours.

“Monsieur?” The cashier brings him out of his daydreaming and looks at him with concern in her eyes.

“Désolé,” he says, and rushes to put his items on the conveyer belt.

The drive back up is a little more stressful. The house isn’t exactly in a residential area, and in the winter, it gets icy quickly. It’s edging into spring now, but it’ll take a while for it to truly thaw. Thorin makes a mental note to remind himself to get his sturdier boots out for the muddy months, and to ask Bilbo if he wants to help out in the garden at all. Not that he has to, it’s just that Thorin is terrible with plants and manages to kill tomatoes every year.

He still has no idea what to make of Bilbo. He’s quiet and reserved, but he has a feeling that of all
of the facets of his personality, that’s one of the more minor ones. When he had brought up Frerin, he did it politely, and apologised when Thorin told him, no, he didn’t particularly want to talk about his dead brother with someone he barely knew. Still, he seemed nice enough. Thorin still felt guilty about this morning, he really hadn’t realised that the music was so damned loud, or that Bilbo got headaches enough to make him crash into walls when he tried to walk in a straight line.

Thorin let himself wonder what Bilbo had been like before his attempt, or even before the car crash that killed his parents. Looking at him, he clearly used to be something of an eternal fire, constantly burning with passion for his job and the desire to be right. He was obviously stubborn, and a little bit up his own arse, but at least he seemed to be aware of that. He avoided Thorin, and whenever he felt like Thorin was looking at the scar on his wrist, he pulled his sleeve down or just left the room entirely, leaving behind an air of awkwardness.

One thing Thorin did understand about him was that Bilbo was just as lost and lonely as him. When they were in the same room together, Bilbo didn’t make eye contact, or even speak much. Gandalf had filled Thorin in on what Bilbo was like as a person – stubborn and razor sharp, but always alone, even before his parents died. What had happened to him seemed to take away that spark that Gandalf had insisted was there, and even Thorin could see where it was trying to ignite once again.

“Enough with your poetic waxing,” he tells himself through gritted teeth, gripping the steering wheel hard. He focuses on the road. He still isn’t used to driving from the left side of the car, but he had never actually owned a car until he came here. You needed one if you wanted to live in the middle of nowhere up a Swiss mountain.

Thorin stops by the side of the road a mile or so away from the house and gets out of the car. It’s bitterly cold now that the sun had gone down, but the fresh air is a relief to breathe in. He takes a cigarette out of the pack in his jacket pocket and lights it, inhaling the nicotine deep and holding it before letting it out in a series of smoke rings. Taking up smoking had been the bane of Dis’ life when they lived together, though he made sure that she and Frerin never developed the habit. He did it because it was better than drowning himself in alcohol and other vices when he hit a depressive low, and because it calmed him down more than anything else he knew. The nicotine makes his head spin just a little, but he’s used to it by now.

By the time Thorin stubs out his cigarette and flicks the butt away, he has braced himself for the daunting trip back home. He gets behind the wheel of the car and, taking a deep breath, tells himself not to worry all the time, and starts the engine.

Chapter End Notes

this ones longer than the others, mostly because i wanted to explore their internal thoughts at this point in time. im going to try to make my chapters longer anyway. actual plot coming in the next chapter, i promise. also, i changed their location to mont pelerin. find me on tumblr @erebcrs
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

cw: the general stuff. Thorin is emotionally constipated and trying his hardest not to be an ass

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thorin finds Bilbo asleep on the sofa, curled up like a cat and completely dead to the world. He hesitates by the door, carrier bag in hand, not quite sure what to do. He doesn’t want to wake Bilbo, not after the frankly embarrassing morning Thorin had. Carefully, he puts the bags down and takes off his book as quietly as he can, leaving them by the door. He carries the bags to the kitchen and leaves the light off as he puts everything away.

Bilbo is still asleep when Thorin is done, taking up only a small amount of the sofa with how he’s tucked in on himself. Thorin looks at him, taking in his messy hair and the pyjama bottoms that are clearly a good few years old, and the way he had buried his face into one of the more comfortably throw pillows. The journal he was always writing in had fallen to the floor and Thorin bent to pick it up, terrified of waking him. He wouldn’t be able to explain why if asked. Thorin hated that irrational fear that everything he did was going to anger people. He wasn’t sure why that was, though Dis had always had some thoroughly disturbing theories.

Instead of waking him, Thorin just puts the journal on the coffee table and looks for a blanket. The living room isn’t exactly warm around this time of year, and the fire hasn’t been lit for a few days. He finds one on the back of the armchair and gently drapes it over Bilbo, pulling it up over his shoulders. Bilbo shifts a little and Thorin catches sight of his face and the frown marring his features, coppery hair falling before his eyes. Thorin felt the urge to push his hair away, but steps back instead, heading back to the kitchen. He makes his coffee quietly and returns to his room with a hastily put together sandwich. But even alone, in the safe silence of his bedroom, he can’t help the anxiety fluttering in his stomach. Out on the road he had felt it worse, but the nicotine in his cigarettes had helped calm it. Now, he was tempted to light one, but stops himself. He’s become reliant on them before, he can’t go down that road again, not now.

He lays back on his bed and checks his phone. He has a missed call from Dis, and a text from her, but when he opens it, it’s a photo of Fili and Kili at the gallery in Lyon, clearly taken by Fili himself, as Dis is nowhere in sight and Kili is only half in the frame. He wants to be a photographer but he can’t take a decent selfie to save his life. Thorin smiles even though they can’t see him. He’ll be seeing them soon, if they can get up here for the week off they have at the end of April. He’ll need to get something for Kili’s birthday, and let Bilbo know that there are going to be two teenage boys running amok around the house with their apparently inexhaustible reserves of energy…

Thorin sighs and dials Dis’ number, already knowing that it won’t be her picking up. When Fili answers with an enthusiastic ‘hi Uncle Thorin!’, accompanied by his brother, Thorin finds his anxiety listing, and even though it’s only by a little, it makes his smile.

“Shouldn’t you both be in bed? It’s a school night,” he says. He puts them on loudspeaker and
hears the hubbub of the callery around them. It must be some big event for Dis to bring them with her. Thorin remembers something about a charity event, but the details are lost on him, as usual.

“Dwalin’s picking us up soon,” Fili says, and then says something to Kili in French. “We got all of our homework done in mum’s office, anyway. She bought us pizza.”

“Of course she did,” Thorin says. “I hope you’ve caused as much chaos as possible tonight.”

“Nah. We’re saving that for your exhibition. Got anything done for it yet?” Fili asks.

“I’m getting there. Your mother wants me to get twenty done by the end of July. I should probably be painting right now, actually,” Thorin said. He runs a hand through his hair. He still hasn’t even picked a damn theme for his exhibition. Not that there even needs to be a specific theme, it’s just… well, it’s just that it helps with getting things together, painting consistently. Even the use of colour can be dependent on what your theme or topic is. When Thorin did his exhibition on Eastern European architecture, he had used more red paint than any other colour. Even thinking about it now is painful, remembering how much money he had spent on red oils and gouache. But back then he had been a broke artist trying his damndest to make a name for himself in the art world. Now, he didn’t have to worry so much about that.

“Mum says you’ve got someone staying with you,” Fili says after a silence. Thorin nods, then remembers that they’re miles apart. This would be so much easier through Skype.

“I do, yeah,” he says. He looks at his bedroom door as if he can see Bilbo through it, sleeping on the sofa under a blanket Thorin doesn’t remember ever acquiring.

“What’s he like?” Fili asks. Thorin hears Kili saying something quietly, but he doesn’t try to get in on the conversation.

“I don’t know. We haven’t talked a lot. He used to be a history professor, though, so he likes history. And he makes really nice pasta,” he says, remembering the pasta Bilbo had made on his first night here. Fili laughs quietly.

“Mum said he was living in a kind of… *asile*? I don’t know the word in English,” he says. *Asile* translated into *asylum*, and Thorin cringed, not that Fili knew any better.

“Asylum,” he says. “It wasn’t an asylum. Just a place where he could be, I don’t know, looked after? He’s been through a lot.”

“Like Uncle Frerin?” Fili asks. It’s such an innocent question but Thorin feels like he’s been stabbed in the chest when his nephew brings up his brother. Or maybe Fili knew exactly what he was asking without saying it outright. He was such a smart child, really.

“A bit,” Thorin admits. He looks at the door again. “Actually, yeah, like your Uncle Frerin.”

“Will we get to meet him when we come up?” Fili asks.

“Probably, if he’s still here. Should be here for a couple of months,” Thorin says. He tries to think ahead, to June, picturing what it will be like to have actually lived with someone else for that amount of time, knowing that it won’t be anything like when he had roommates and they were all struggling and reckless. They’re both adults now who can’t be around people and prefer the quiet to anything else.

“Are you being nice to him?” Fili asks, and Thorin can *hear* the smirk in his voice, a trait unfortunately inherited from his mother, though it does mean that Fili has a way of winning
arguments without even arguing. Oh, the boy has no idea how much that’s going to help him when he’s older.

“I think so,” Thorin says, and allows himself to laugh at little, exhaling.

“Good. Or mum will hit you over the head with a tea towel,” Fili says.

“I grew up with her, I know. Go on, she won’t appreciate the phone bill if we keep talking,” Thorin says. “And you have school tomorrow. I don’t want you failing.”

“It’s one day, and it’s P.E first. No one cares about P.E,” Fili says.

“Yeah, I know. Still. Is your mum around?” Thorin asks.

“Nah, she’s talking to some old guy with a monocle. Looks like the Monopoly man,” Fili says, laughing quietly. Kili giggles and Fili says something Thorin doesn’t catch. He’s so glad that they’re close. When he was growing up, he and his siblings hadn’t really been allowed to bond over things - Dis was always encouraged to do ‘girly’ things and Frerin and Thorin were told to do the exact opposite. Naturally, all three of them rebelled. Dis became an art director and taught self defense part time at her local community centre, Thorin immersed himself into the more creative side of the art world, and Frerin took off as soon as he was eighteen and never saw his home city again. In a way, Frerin running off and travelling the world so young had made it easier for Dis and Thorin to bond, but without him... Well, he was always their brother, but he was never really there.

Fili and Kili had each other, though, and Dis was always adamant that they would have a better relationship that she did with her own brothers. Thorin was glad of that.

“I’ll call you tomorrow. After school,” Thorin says.

“Yeah, yeah, okay. Say goodbye, Kili,” Fili says, no doubt passing the phone to his brother. Kili says goodbye, even though he barely talked to Thorin, and Fili does the same before hanging up, and Thorin stares at his phone for a good minute. It always leaves a bitter taste in his mouth after he talks to the boys. Most uncles - at least, as far as Thorin knows - are involved in their nieces and nephews lives, and Thorin went and hid in the Swiss alps at the first chance he got. He talks to them a lot, he gives himself that, but… but well, it’s not enough. Part of him wishes that he could be closer to them. That he wasn’t so scared of people that he distanced himself from them as much as he could. That he wasn’t haunted by his brothers death and let it hang over him like a shadow that clouded everything he did.

Of course, he can never say that to them. He can say it to Dis until she’s sick of it, but that’s it. And Thorin wishes that she wasn’t so damned understanding about it all. What he wouldn’t give for her to actually hit up upside the head and tell him to get off his ass and stop moping. It’s been five years already, Frerin would kick your ass if he saw you like this, he can hear her voice as clear as a bell in his head, and unfortunately, he can hear Frerin laughing at him, too, light and unburdened and happy.

But the house has become his sanctuary and even though he has a practical stranger asleep on his sofa, it’s still safe. It’s his, and maybe in a few years, he’ll be able to talk to people like he used to.

A gentle knock at his door brings Thorin out of his ridiculous thoughts and before he can really process it, he says ‘come in’ in a quiet voice. The door opens and Bilbo is standing on the other side of it, looked as worried as he does tired. In the space of about a second, Thorin realises that he’s sat on his unmade bed with sandwich crumbs down his shirt, he’s got dirty laundry on the floor, and he’s wearing mismatched socks, one of which has a hole in them.
“Sorry, I… I heard you come in,” Bilbo says quietly. He has the blanket around his shoulders, clasping it at his throat. His hair's a rat's nest and he looks exhausted.

“I didn’t wake you, did I?” Thorin asks. Bilbo shakes his head and leans against the doorframe.

“No. I wasn’t properly asleep when you got back,” he says. “Mind if I…?” Bilbo gestures to the room and Thorin nods, not quite sure what else to do. He’s never let anyone in this room before, except maybe the couple of times Kili snuck in during the night because he had a nightmare while he was staying here. Bilbo walks over carefully and sits on Thorin’s bed, perched cautiously at the edge.

“I wanted to… I don’t know, apologise? For being a complete hassle, that is,” he says quietly, laughing at himself just a little. It’s such a familiar sound that for a moment, Thorin is angry. He’s not sure if he’s angry at Bilbo or himself, though, and that’s the confusing thing.

“What makes you think you’re a hassle?” he asks. He sits up straight and pulls his legs up, feeling like a kid again, sneaking into his sisters room with Frerin and hiding under the quilt together.

“That’s kind of how it works, isn’t it? You try to kill yourself and then everyone around you realises that you’re too much of a burden to deal with, so everyone keeps their distance,” Bilbo says. He mirrors Thorin and rests his chin on his knee, closing his eyes. He looks so exhausted that Thorin is tempted for a second to tell him to go straight to bed and not wake up until at least ten in the morning.

Instead, he just shakes his head.

“If I’m keeping my distance, it’s because I’m not good at… well, any of this.” Thorin gestures to both himself and Bilbo. “I’m not good with people. That is much more of a burden than you are.”

“That’s a little hard to believe when I broke your mason jar and pissed you off literally the day after we met,” Bilbo says.

“I don’t care about the mason jar. And you didn’t know. Both easily forgivable things,” Thorin says. God, he doesn’t even sound like himself, but then again, when does he ever talk to strangers like this? Never. This is completely uncharted territory for him. Even having someone sat on his bed like they’re damn teenagers is just completely alien to him.

“You know, if you want me to go, you can tell me,” Bilbo says softly. Thorin is almost stunned by the look on his face, entirely too vulnerable and entirely too desperate to be closed off. It’s too much. Normally, in situations like these, people would use touch as comfort. But Thorin has never been good at that. Instead, he just sighs and shakes his head, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Why does everyone think I always want to be alone? If I didn’t want you here, you’d know,” he says. “Trust me, you’d know.”

“What, are you like a poltergeist with people you don’t like? Banging doors and throwing knives?” Bilbo smiles weakly at his own joke, and Thorin finds he can’t help smiling back.

“Not that violent, no,” he says. “But when people invade my personal space, they tend to realise it pretty quickly.”

Bilbo regards him, eyes narrowed in suspicion. The laughter is gone from his face, making him look older, wearier. He has shadows under his eyes not just from today, but from countless sleepless nights. Thorin recognises it as easily as he sees it in himself.
“Am i just completely oblivious or something?” Bilbo says eventually.

“No. I mean… well, no one really comes in here but me. But you’re… you’re not… you’re not invading anything,” Thorin says, stammering over his own words. And he really isn’t, he realises. It’s the first time since Bilbo arrived that he actually feels comfortable with him. Not one hundred percent comfortable, mind you, but… content. Like it’s not so bad to talk to someone after all.

Thorin doesn’t say that, of course. He just shrugs and looks away, letting his hair that’s coming out of its ponytail hide his face. And, god, he feels like such a damn teenager then that it’s almost hilarious. He looks at Bilbo again and smiles weakly. Bilbo smiles back.

“I’m sorry if I made you feel like that,” he says. “You’re not a burden. But I must be the worst person to live with, so I am sorry about that.”

Bilbo laughs quietly. “You’re not too bad. Just… don’t play Black Sabbath that loud, that early.”

“Alright,” Thorin agrees. “How did you know it was Black Sabbath?”

“My old roommate used to play them a lot,” Bilbo says simply.

“I saw them in Manchester in ninety six. My dad was a huge fan, he took all of us with him for the concert. My sister was studying at Newcastle uni then, and she came with us, but she had an assignment due the next day, and-”

Thorin finds it immensely easy, talking about the time Dis almost failed part of her course because they all saw Black Sabbath together. Bilbo listens and laughs at the part where Thorin got punched in the face by a drunk metalhead, and then tells Thorin about his own adventures, gigs he went to with friends as a student, times when he got nothing done in classes and his students would just talk to him about some truly wild things they had done, just general stuff that he’d done over the years. And it’s so easy to talk to him once Thorin just lets himself. Bilbo shuffles back onto the bed properly and leans against the wall, looking at Thorin and smiling gently.

And it goes like that. They don’t talk about anything important, of course, just memories, in the most superficial and irrelevant definition of the word. It doesn’t mean anything really, but when Bilbo excuses himself to go to bed, possibly hours later, Thorin doesn’t know, he feels… relaxed. Not necessarily happy, or entirely comfortable with Bilbo, but it’s a start.

Chapter End Notes

Right. Okay. I'm gonna be updating this one more than A Veil Undone mostly because I got up to chapter 6 on my laptop and wrote this one in google docs. I think (???) it's finally getting somewhere. I'm sorry if this is OOC, I keep meaning to rewatch the films and get a sense of like... how they are... as people. This weekend, probably. Maybe. If I'm not hungover after Friday.
Anyway, I hope you liked it. Find me on tumblr @erebcrs
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

cw: PTSD, nightmares, implied abuse, gore maybe, self loathing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It gets easier after that night, Bilbo finds.

Not effortless, mind you. It’s more like trying to slip into a bath that’s a little too hot for comfort, knowing that it’s going to be awkward at first before either the water cools or your body adjusts to the heat. Only, there’s no bath, and the proverbial heat is more akin to awkwardless between them than snythingekse.

It starts like that every morning. Bilbo is usually the first up, quite early, and then Thorin joins him on the balcony with a cup of coffee and a cigarette, always careful not to let the smoke get in Bilbo’s face. He never eats breakfast, just delves into his painting every morning and only stops to eat at irregular intervals, often forgetting to eat entirely. And Bilbo watches him. He can’t help it, really. With the weather getting warmer, he finds himself on sat on the balcony often while Thorin paints, neither of them talking very much, just listening to the radio or music from Thorin’s phone as they do their own thing. Bilbo manages to get through the first Discworld book in a couple of sittings, which is truly remarkable in his own right, as he hasn’t had the kind of focus for months. He emails Prim every couple of days, sometimes with photos of the view from the balcony, sometimes not, and usually gets responses with photos of Frodo and places they’ve been going to, now that they can go outside without freezing their noses off. At first, he emails Lindir too, at the end of every week. Eventually he stops feeling the need to update him on things and stops altogether, and it’s probably for the better, really.

The evenings are much livelier. Thorin plays the Swiss radio and sings along in French sometimes, or just plays music from his laptop. They still don’t talk very much, but when they do, it’s intriguing, learning more and more and Thorin as the weeks pass by, all information given to Bilbo in bite size chunks Thorin probably doesn’t even realise he’s giving. It’s nice. It’s comfortable. Bilbo wouldn’t actually call them friends at this point, but they have a routine, and they don’t seem to hate each other.

But as with any bath, the water eventually turns cold and uncomfortable, and the nights when they’ve both gone to bed are just that.

Bilbo still dreams of the crash.

It’s not always vivid. Sometimes it’s just a mass of sounds and smells and the agony Bilbo felt in his chest when his ribs broke, the sheer force of which they collided with the road sign, the spray of blood on the windscreen that made the car smell like iron. Those are the dreams he can handle. They’re things that sneak up on his every single day, catching him unawares and trying to throw him off balance. He’s used to it by now.

It’s the images of his parents that he can’t stand.
It’s like when he hallucinated, really. Almost exactly like it, but he’s in a dream and the mind is capable of horrible things when asleep and traumatised. He’ll be in a lecture, talking about the benefits of ancient sources being so flexibly interpreted, and when he looks up his mother is there among them. Only, it’s her after the crash. Her neck is slit at a horrible angle and slowly dripping blood, and her face is bruised from hitting the dashboard. And her hair… it’s a curled mess, and it pains Bilbo in the worst way, knowing that that was his last coherent thought before he woke up in hospital a day later.

His father doesn’t appear much these days, but when he does, he rages and screams and attacks Bilbo, eyes pale and drained of colour, filled with untempered rage. Bilbo usually lets himself get beaten in his nightmares - there’s really no point in fighting back against a dead man. Bungo was hardly ever violent, but Bilbo knew that he had a quiet kind of rage throbbing in his blood when he got politely angry, or used phrases like ‘I’m not mad, I’m just disappointed’. He had never hit either of them, as far as Bilbo remembers, but his anger, when he couldn’t control it, made him slam doors and throw fragile things, leaving Bilbo hiding under his bed in fear as a child, and watching with a sort of detached indifference as he got older.

So, Bilbo dreams of his dead parents. They’re not the dreams that leave him crying into his pillow or trying to muffle his agonised wailing.

No, those are the dreams of his attempt.

Bilbo will never stop feeling guilty for it, ashamed of how he had scared the family he still cared about, ashamed of laying that burden on them barely a year after losing Belladonna and Bungo. That’s the main feeling that permeates Bilbo’s dreams of it. As far as the images go, it’s usually himself, pale and bloody, the echo of himself that succeeded in taking his own life. He tells himself in a voice he’s sure can’t actually be his ‘you should have finished the job, no one would care.’ Other times, it’s bullies from school or more vindictive members of his family, all of them saying the same damn thing.

When Bilbo wakes, he tries to keep quiet, but when you’re sobbing uncontrollably and unsure of what is actually real, your body trembling with the force of it, you tend not to care how loud you’re being. And because of that, Thorin knows.

He comes in sometimes. Not all the time, mind you, just when it’s really bad. The first time, Bilbo had been dazes from his nightmare and not quite sure if Thorin was real or not. But he would feel warm hands on his shoulders and the mattress sinking beside him as Thorin sits down, the only readable emotion on his face that of concern. They don’t talk, not when Bilbo is trying to calm down, and certainly not once he’s done, but the company helps, even if it’s silent company. Thorin keeps his hands on Bilbo’s shoulders, his arms, and it seems he knows that that’s all Bilbo needs to stay tethered. He usually turns the lamp on when he comes in, and it leaves the room illuminated in a soft golden light, and it’s like Thorin knows that the darkness can make these things worse, like sleep paralysis.

Bilbo never knows how long Thorin stays with him. His perception of time is seriously skewed after those dreams, so it could be a few minutes, or it could be hours. He just doesn’t know, and he never says anything to express just how grateful he is for not being alone, but he gets the feeling that Thorin knows. He’ll linger in the doorway when he leaves, looking over his shoulder and giving Bilbo a gentle smile, his features impossibly soft. He’s just as tired as Bilbo is, and no doubt haunted himself, but he’s there, and he always seems to know exactly when Bilbo needs the company to stop himself from going to the kitchen and actually finishing what he started almost three months ago now.
They don’t talk about it in the mornings beyond Thorin asking if he’s alright and if he wants coffee. And that’s enough, really. Bilbo isn’t good at feelings of any kind, so he just takes his coffee and sits with Thorin on the balcony, and reads while Thorin paints, and the days repeat like that.

At the end of March, Thorin has three completed paintings he seems to be happy with, and a few more he paints over almost angrily, muttering to himself. Bilbo is stood at the edge of the balcony, looking over Mont Pelerin with a warm cup of tea in his hands. He hears Thorin swearing under his breath.

“Everything alright?” he asks. Thorin looks at him and then back at the painting, biting his lower lip. His eyebrows are drawn together in concentration and the frown on his face has been there for a good few hours.

“Art block,” Thorin says. “I can’t get this damn tree right.”

“Take a break,” Bilbo says automatically. Thorin just looks at him.

“I have to get twenty of these things done by July,” he says and picks up his brush again, but seems stuck with what to do. Bilbo watches him stare intently at the canvas, and it’s almost hilarious, how focused he looks, only for him to groan in exasperation and all but throw his paintbrush into the jar of blue-ish water. Bilbo huffs a laugh and looks back at the landscape.

“What are you trying to paint, anyway?” he asks. He walks over and stands behind Thorin, still holding his cup of tea, and absently puts a hand on Thorin’s shoulder when he sees that he’s getting genuinely angry. He freezes under Bilbo’s touch, but doesn’t shrug his hand off, just leans back in his chair and folds his arms over his chest.

“My sisters back garden. That tree is a complete hassle,” Thorin says, nodding at it. The photo pinned to the easel shows an old, twisted looking tree with impossibly angled branches and a knotted trunk. No wonder it’s hard to paint.

“Why don’t you get some food? You haven’t eaten today,” Bilbo says. His hand slides off of Thorin’s shoulder and he drains his tea in one. Thorin looks at him over his shoulder. The early afternoon light hits his hair and the silver strands stand out stronger than usual, and Bilbo looks at those instead of at his face.

“I need to go get food from the city anyway. Do you want to come with me?” Thorin asks. He stands up and Bilbo is reminded almost unpleasantly of the sheer height difference between them. Not that he even really minds, it’s just another excuse to be mad at how short he is himself.

He shakes his head without even letting the question process properly. The thought process is something like going into the city equals getting into a car equals chance of crash equals disaster, abort abort. Thorin seems to realise this and shakes his head, looking once again angry at himself.

“Sorry, stupid question,” he says.

“It’s okay,” Bilbo says.

“Do you want anything?” Thorin asks. He looks at the ground, and Bilbo realises just how close they’re standing. He doesn’t back away, just shakes his head and steps aside for Thorin to get past, their arms brushing. He follows Thorin inside to the kitchen and puts his cup in the sink, reminding himself to wash it while Thorin’s out, along with the other dishes piled up to the side.

“If you… if you feel up to it, you should come down to Vevey. One day. Not now, obviously, but
it’s a nice place. I think you’d like it,” Thorin says as he pulls on his jacket. Bilbo leans against the kitchen counter and tries to ignore that Thorin’s jacket is a very worn leather kind that fits him perfectly.

“Do you, now?” he says. Thorin shrugs.

“There’s a giant fork in Lake Geneva,” he says, as if that explains it all. And then he smiles, actually smiles, and Bilbo can’t really do anything but smile back.

“One day,” he agrees. “As long as you buy actual vegetables.” Thorin laughs quietly and shoves his wallet into his pocket. He looks at Bilbo again, and for a moment, Bilbo thinks he’s about to say something. Instead, he just turns away and leaves, closing the door behind him but not locking it.

Bilbo tries not to think about how the house feels a little less lively.

And it continues like that. Bilbo finds himself sinking into their routine, and actually enjoying Thorin’s company more than he originally did. His nightmares don’t really get any better, but eventually, he talks about them, leaving out the nastier details. It helps a little. Thorin sits on his bed with him and wordlessly listens to Bilbo trying to get words out, his voice shaking. There is one night when he can’t really say much, so Thorin just looks at him, and after a few seconds, holds his arm out and Bilbo shifts over to him, leaning his head on his shoulder.

“Don’t tell my sister about this,” Thorin eventually says, softly and cautiously, and it’s enough to make Bilbo laugh despite the fear and shame coursing through him. He’s still shaking, and every noise he hears that is unfamiliar to him makes him flinch for no real reason other than it scares him. He feels a little bit like a child, really, but he can’t do anything about it. Thorin is a living space heater, he realises, and he tucks his legs up under himself. It’s early morning, and through the window, the sun is starting to stream through, hitting the wall in a patch of light that’s almost gold. Bilbo stares at it and tries to gain control of his breathing once again.

They don’t go back to sleep after that. The sun is up, and Bilbo knows that he’s awake for real this time. Thorin gets up first and holds his hand out. For a moment, Bilbo looks at it, unsure what he wants until it clicks, and he lets Thorin pull him to his feet.

Thorin eats breakfast that day. It’s just toast, but it settles Bilbo’s anxiety for some reason. They make eye contact across the table a few times, but neither of them say anything. It seems to be a rule - don’t talk about what happens in the night unless you want to make things weird. Bilbo is happy to oblige, if he’s being totally honest. He isn’t sure he’ll even be able to voice what he’s thinking, what he’s feeling, if it ever comes up with Thorin.

But they get on with the day, and it isn’t really until the afternoon that Thorin talks to him.

“My nephews are coming up at the end of April,” he begins with, turning to look at Bilbo, away from his canvas. “I just… I just thought I should let you know. They can be a bit of a handful.”

Bilbo isn’t sure what to say at first. He closes his book and leaves it on the table he’s been sitting at.

“I’m sure I can handle it,” he says, and to his surprise, Thorin exhales in relief, tension visibly bleeding from his shoulders. “You realise I have the world’s most ridiculous family, yeah? I can deal with a couple of teenage boys.”
“That’s good,” Thorin says. “I mean… well, they’re not *bad* kids, just… well, they don’t run out of energy. Ever. We’ll probably be out of the house a lot anyway, but still…”

“Thorin. Relax. It’s alright. I’m not going to tell you *not* to have your family here,” Bilbo says. It seems like such a ridiculous thing to say, but from what little he knows of Thorin, he knows that he needs the reassurance sometimes, that he’s not in the wrong for doing something perfectly normal. This is one of those times.

“What are they like?” Bilbo asks. He realises he’s never asked before. All he knows is that the oldest likes photography and the youngest is a bit of a hellraiser. Thorin casts a quick glance at the canvas behind him before smiling softly to himself.

“They’re good kids. They both hate school, but I think that’s completely normal. If they had their own way, they’d be on the road and doing whatever it is they do, I think,” Thorin says. He takes the photo from his easel. “They asked about you.”

“They did?” Bilbo asks, actually surprised for once. Thorin nods.

“They wanted to know what you’re like. I told them you’re a crotchety old man who loves silence,” he says, followed by a wry smile, and did he just make a joke? An actual joke? It appears he did, and Bilbo can’t help but laugh.

“No you didn’t,” he says, and Thorin shrugs.

“No, I didn’t. But they’re excited to meet you,” he says.

“Why?”

“Let’s just say I might be better at introducing people normally than Gandalf is,” Thorin says, shrugging.

“I can believe that,” Bilbo says. Silence falls between them again and Thorin looks down, hands between his knees, long hair tied up, and for a moment he looks like he wants to say something else. Bilbo doesn’t expect him to. He’s learned that even at the best of times, Thorin is almost introverted. Not entirely so, but being alone up here for so long must have made it easier to just be alone. And even though Bilbo no longer feels like he’s trespassing, he still gets that awful feeling - like now, looking at Thorin so clearly closed off - that he just doesn’t belong. Like he’s out of place, somehow.

“Coffee?” he says eventually, standing up. Thorin jumps a little, clearly not expecting the sudden sound of the chair scraping against the floor. He nods mutely.


Bilbo goes into the kitchen and braces himself against the table as he waits for the kettle to boil on the stove. It’s one of those old style ones that whistles when it’s done. As Bilbo waits for it to finish, he looks out of the balcony, the door connecting to the kitchen, letting the afternoon sunlight flow in, lighting everything in gentle golds. Thorin is painting again, humming to himself, his leg bouncing up and down. Bilbo watches him. As the kettle boils, Thorin ties up his hair again, this time pulling all of it back from his face. Bilbo has never really found men with long hair particularly attractive, but Thorin… well, let’s just say it works for him, shall we? Before you start thinking about him in terms like *attractive*, Bilbo thinks to himself. He makes the coffee and brings it out to Thorin, leaving it on the table next to his easel. Thorin thanks him quietly and they go back to their business.
Still, Bilbo watches him, half focusing on him, and half on his book, and if he gets butterflies in his stomach for the first time in a long time when Thorin compliments him on the coffee, he doesn’t dwell on it for too long.

Chapter End Notes

not sure what that last bit was, but hey, I /am/ just making this up as I go.
More Fili and Kili in the next chapter! Hopefully it's longer than 3k. Should be up in a couple of days. I hope you enjoyed this! Find me on tumblr @erebcrs
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

cw: talk about suicide, alcohol, minor anxiety

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

March comes and goes with the bizarre swiftness only March can, and April brings with it light showers and delicate morning sunlight coming in through the windows, making things look brighter and softer than they really are. Thorin takes to painting inside to avoid ruining his work, and sets up camp on the kitchen table. It’s already covered in faded paint marks, so he doesn’t bother putting down newspaper or anything. The rain patters on the windows, and some days it almost drowns out the sound of the radio, but the silence works just as well for them too.

It takes Bilbo until halfway until April to realise that this - the mountains, the quiet, the company - is everything he needed. He’s still a long way to normal, but in Oak Manor, he made peace with never quite getting there. Honestly, there are worse things to be. Dead, for example. He doesn’t pull his sleeve down over his scar anymore. In fact, most days he barely notices it, and with the slightly warmer weather creeping in, he wears t shirts more and more. The scar will twinge and ache the way healing wounds do, but still he forgets, and that’s all he can ask for at this point.

He still gets nightmares. They’re a lot fewer and further between, but they still shake Bilbo to his core in the worst possible way. When he manages to get a good night's sleep, it just feels odd, waking up with his alarm and not Thorin’s hand on his shoulder to support him through the aftershocks of it. Mornings like that leave him unsteady on his feet. Two months ago, he could barely sleep for fear of seeing his mother with her beautiful face bruised and death marked. Now, it’s like the nightmares never happened. Five days out of seven, that is.

Thorin asks him about them one night over dinner, eaten on the sofa as he seems to have an entire art supply store on the kitchen table.

“Are they about the crash?” he asks. He says it like he’s talking about the weather, in between bites of spaghetti. Bilbo almost drops his fork.

“Not all the time,” he admits, shrugging. “Sometime’s they’re about…” He holds his right arm up so Thorin can see the scar. “Sometimes it’s my dad just… yelling at me.” He leaves out the part where Bungo strikes him to the ground in a fit of fury all while blaming Bilbo for the crash, calling him selfish for trying to take his own life. Thorin looks back at his food.

“What were they like? Your parents, that is;” he says, just glancing at Bilbo now. He shrugs and puts his bowl on the coffee table. He’s not that hungry anyway. Thorin does the same.

“Totally normal, I guess. My mum was a florist and my dad was a language teacher. German and French, mostly,” Bilbo says.

“Sprichst du auch Deutsch?” Thorin says, and he slips into German so easily it stuns Bilbo for a second.
“Eh, mein Deutsch ist nicht sehr gut,” he says. “My French is much better, trust me. Where did you learn German?” Thorin shrugs and mirrors Bilbo, pulling his long legs up onto the couch and tucking them beneath himself.

“I lived in Germany in the nineties for a few years. And then Italy for a while, but you really don’t want me to speak Italian. I never got the hang of it,” He says. That little self deprecating smile is there, as is the discomfort around his eyes. “Your mother was a florist.”

“Right. Yeah. She owned a shop with my aunt Mirabella. I think she still has it, actually,” Bilbo says. He’s still half stuck on wanting to hear Thorin speak Italian, but he ignores that and talks about Mirabella, grandmother to his nephew, and when Bilbo mentions Frodo, Thorin is immediately intrigued.

“How old is he?” he asks.

“Eighteen months, give or take. We actually have the same birthday. Imagine getting a call from your cousin after spending your thirty first alone and finding out you have a nephew,” Bilbo says. As always, he forgets that most other families don’t work the way the Took-Baggins clan does, and he can see Thorin trying to work out the family tree in his head.

“Big family, things get confusing,” he says before the obvious questions come up.

“You should meet mine. I swear, whenever we all get together, I meet more and more people I’m apparently related to,” Thorin says. “Half of them are Scottish and the rest are from pretty much everywhere else.”

“Sounds like a hassle,” Bilbo says. He knows it’s a hassle. He’s been at the brunt of exactly that for almost thirty three years.

“There’s a reason I celebrate holidays alone. Mostly. Dis and the boys come up for Hanukkah and Yom Kippur usually. It can get about as loud as the usual family gathering when it’s just us four,” Thorin says.

“Sounds like fun,” Bilbo says. He leans his head on the back of the sofa, gazing out of the kitchen window from there, seeing raindrops lashing against the glass.

“Storm tonight,” Thorin says softly. He’s looking at Bilbo instead of the window. “I saw lightning not long ago.”

“I hate storms. I used to be terrified of them when I was a child,” Bilbo says absently. He remembers in horrid detail how convinced he had been that every time the sky opened up and screamed and flash that it was the end of the world.

“You don’t seem like you’re scared of anything,” Thorin says. He’s looking out of the window instead of at Bilbo this time, but that’s probably for the better. Bilbo isn’t quite sure he could survive a statement like that accompanied with eye contact. Not from Thorin.

“I’m scared of everything ,” Bilbo says. He’s only ever said that to Lindir before, but that had been months ago. Things are different now. So, so different. “I tried to kill myself, Thorin. I’m scared of everything.”

Thorin visibly flinches at how bluntly Bilbo puts it, but he doesn’t blame him. Over the last month and a half, he’s been able to piece together what happened to his rarely mentioned younger brother from vague conversations and and implications Thorin makes. He’s half mad at Gandalf for
bringing him here, going on the assumption that Gandalf knew about the third Durin sibling (Bilbo doesn’t actually know his name, he realised only a few days before). He makes a note to yell at Gandalf for it, but he can’t for the life of him be mad at his decision to come here. It’s a little bit selfish, but mostly a very complicated bunch of emotions to feel.

“Can I ask you something?” Thorin asks eventually. Bilbo’s heart stutters for a moment, but it calms when he sees Thorin smile. “Can you drink on your medication?”

For some reason, Bilbo bursts into laughter. Perhaps it’s how serious Thorin had sounded at first, only to come out with a question like that, with a bashful look on his face. Thorin smiles and looks away.

“You know, I actually stopped taking it,” Bilbo says. Thorin raises an eyebrow and Bilbo just shrugs. “I’m still alright, aren’t I?”

“I guess you are,” Thorin says. He stands and takes the bowls with him into the kitchen, and there’s little Bilbo can do but follow, curious as to where this is going. He leans against the frame of the door and folds his arms over his chest while Thorin crouches at one of the cupboards. Bilbo had accidentally opened it during his first week here and found an impressive amount of red wine there, and it seems like Thorin owning bottles from the actual nineties is paying off. He pours them both a glass and hands one to Bilbo, and then gestures to the balcony. The rain is still hammering down, but there’s a sort of roof over it, and Bilbo follows him outside.

Naturally, it’s freezing outside, and Thorin is wearing just a flimsy white t shirt stained at the hem with paint and charcoal. He goes and leans against the balcony, tipping his face up to the sky. There is no moon in the sky but a tiny sliver, so he’s only illuminated by the light coming out from the kitchen. Bilbo watches in silence as Thorin lets the rain fall onto his face and he inhales, his chest swelling only slightly with the action. It’s so… god, it’s such an odd thing to watch, but Bilbo is utterly enraptured by it, unable to look away or even distract himself with the wine. The tattoos are visible through the shirt, and apparently they’re not just on Thorin’s arms. They're all down his back, on the back of his neck, on his chest. Bilbo eventually forces himself to look away and take a tentative sip of his wine. It’s rich and fruity, obviously delicious, and he takes another drink just as Thorin looks at him again.

“When I first came here I could barely breathe,” he says, and oh, there’s that gentleness Bilbo has only heard a couple of times before. “I’d… I’d just lost my brother. Dis’ divorce was being finalised after ten years of fighting with the scumbag. I didn't really fit anywhere. I come from a construction background, so it wasn't too hard to put this place together once Dwalin and I got everything sorted. It's been five years, and I've only ever left Switzerland once in all that time. I can breathe properly out here now.”

“No one’s telling you you have to leave,” Bilbo says quietly, but it feels insufficient. Thorin stays at the edge of the balcony. He wipes the rain off of his face with his hand and wipes it on his jeans.

“I agreed to do an exhibition in Marseilles, starting in August. I have to be there on opening night to, uh… well, welcome people and talk about my work,” Thorin says. He takes a truly impressive gulp of wine at that and grimaces, his mouth pulling into a scowl for a moment before it disappears. “I still have no idea what to do for it, but I'm not letting Von Brandt take my place in the gallery.”

“Who?”

“Smaug Von Brandt. German painter, he likes all that weird body horror stuff. I mean, he's talented, but in person he's awful. He makes you feel like you're staring down a dragon, and that's
on a good day,” Thorin says. He takes a sip of his wine and sets his glass on the table still outside. He gestures for Bilbo to walk over, and Bilbo puts his glass next to Thorin's before joining him at the railing.

“Have you ever seen a storm close in?” Thorin asks. He's looking out at the horizon, completely dark, the stars obscured by heavy black storm clouds. It's still raining quite heavily, the wind picking up and howling in Bilbo’s ears.

“When a storm hits I usually just hide in bed and ignore it,” he says.

“It's better in the day anyway. You can't see anything tonight,” Thorin says. He almost sounds disappointed at that, but he doesn't voice it further. He just… looks. Bilbo can't really do anything but watch him, taking in the lines of his face, the grey in his hair, the smile lines around his eyes. He's striking, really, but it hasn't really hit Bilbo until now. He tries to imagine what Thorin would look like with short hair and his beard gone. Certainly like an entirely different person, he doesn't doubt that.

“What’s his name?” Bilbo asks. It's the only thing he can voice. Thorin seems to understand what he means.

“Frerin Durin,” he says. “He was twenty six. Dis and I found him and we've lived with that ever since. We'll never know why he did it.”

“Sometimes it just happens. There's no reason for it, at all. You can be the happiest person in the world and still kill yourself,” Bilbo offers. Thorin closes his eyes and shakes his head, but there's no sign of anger or irritation in him.

“He wasn't like that. He was depressed. We all knew, we all saw it. None of us did anything to help him. He was only twenty six,” Thorin says. That last part is accompanied with a break in his voice and Bilbo automatically reaches out to touch his arm, like Thorin has done so many times for him before. This is usually the part where the person being comforted snaps and yells and breaks something of their relationship with the other person, but Bilbo has probably seen too many bad movies. Instead, Thorin seems to collapse in on himself like a dying star.

He turns and sits on the ground, resting his head against the railing. After a second of hesitation, Bilbo joins him.

“I can't talk to Dis about it, you know. We both saw him when he died. I'm pretty sure Fili saw him too, now that I think about it, and he was only twelve at the time. I could never imagine seeing a dead body at twelve years old,” Thorin says. He closes his eyes again and pinches the bridge of his nose, grimacing. “Why did you do it?”

Bilbo stares at him. He's been asked that question hundreds of times since the goddamn ambulance took him to the hospital, but still, he has no idea what to say in response. It's one of those questions that could have any answer, but people only want to hear one. *I didn't want to die.

“I didn't see any other way out from what I was feeling,” he says at last. “My parents were gone. I was the only one who survived the crash, so it probably comes down to survivors guilt. I never talked to anyone about it. I threw myself back into my work without ever talking about it and let it just… build up and build up until I looked at a kitchen knife and decided that that was it.”

“But you survived,” Thorin says.

“I didn't cut very deep, and I managed to call for help before I passed out,” Bilbo says. He runs his
hand up and down his right arm, feeling the raised scar tissue with his thumb. He remembers the pain of it - a dull pain, hot and pulsing, like the blood that had run down his arm and between his fingers when he collapsed against the dishwasher in his kitchen. He remembers how the stitches pulled and how the scar itself ached as it healed, and the way the bandages around his arm seemed to tighten every time he moved. The worst part of remembering it all so clearly is remembering what he was thinking as he was bleeding out and losing consciousness. *I don't want to die.*

You can't come back from that.

Bilbo almost jumps when Thorin touches the inside of his arm, but lets him take hold of it and turn it so the scar is facing upwards. He doesn't touch it, just looks at it. It must be one horrible sight, Bilbo realises. It's things like that that make people feel sick the stomach, even with no context for. It's the direction of the scar, he thinks. If it was horizontal, he wouldn't have been hospitalised. Maybe put on antidepressants for a while, but definitely not hospitalised. But no, it was vertical, and everyone and their mother knew what that meant.

Thorin is silent for a long while. He relaxes his grip around Bilbo's arm, but doesn't let go of him, eyes half closed and his lower lip between his teeth. The rain is letting up, but Bilbo knows he's going to have to change if he wants to get any kind of sleep tonight. His hair is sticking to his forehead and the back of his neck.

“I wish I could have helped him,” Thorin says eventually, and Bilbo knows he's talking about his brother.

“Take it from someone who did the same thing, I wish someone had helped me,” he says. To his surprise, Thorin smiles weakly.

“Who called the ambulance?” he asks.

“My neighbour. He heard me shout and came running,” Bilbo says. “Prim put me up for a couple of weeks after that before I ended up at Oak Manor.”

“What was it like there?” Thorin asks.

“Quiet. *Too* quiet. And… lonely. None of us really talked to each other,” Bilbo says.

“People helped you,” Thorin says.

“After I tried to kill myself, though. If I'd actually tried to get help after the crash, I might have been fine. Maybe. I don't know.” Bilbo shrugs. He knows that Thorin has questions, but he doesn't voice them, just lets go of Bilbo's arm.

“I promise I’m not always like this,” he says.

“Like what?”

“*This.*” He gestures to all of himself, but Bilbo isn’t sure if he’s referring to the mood swings and mopeyness, or just himself in general.

“One glass of wine and you’re an emotional wreck. God, you’re worse than me.” Bilbo leans back and gives in, letting the rain fall on his face. It’s cold, but not entirely unpleasant. In the distance, the deep rumble of thunder makes him jump, but that only makes Thorin laugh quietly at the no doubt stunned look on Bilbo’s face when he opens his eyes again. Bilbo glares at him, but he’s never been very good at getting people to shut up like that. Thorin doesn’t say anything and instead gets up and goes to the kitchen, coming back with the wine bottle. He ignores their glasses on the
table and sits back down next to Bilbo.

“Oh, so we’re getting drunk tonight? Lovely,” Bilbo says when Thorin drinks straight from the bottle.

“Something tells me we both need it,” Thorin says. He takes another swig and hands it to Bilbo, who takes it gladly. He feels like a damn teenager again. God, he remembers his friends convincing him to sneak out with them for Halloween one year and all of them getting absolutely hammered in the park. They’d all been underage at that point, but that didn’t stop one of them stealing a bottle of wine from their parents kitchen and spending ten minutes trying to open it with a pocket knife.

Obviously, it’s fifteen years later and Bilbo is in the Swiss alps, of all places, but it’s a close enough comparison. And wine is always somehow much better drunk straight from the bottle, Bilbo finds. As much of a lightweight as he is, he drinks as much as Thorin, feeling himself get slowly dizzier and drunker as the night progresses.

They’re still on the balcony long after they finish the whole bottle between them and Thorin tries to roll it into the kitchen with his foot. The rain gets worse until eventually, they scoot away from the railing and lean against the wall of the house, looking at the occasional flashes of lightning illuminating the clouds and the rain. Bilbo’s head feels like it’s been put through a washer, but in a good way, and he ends up rambling wildly about how inaccurate the modern view of Cleopatra is to an only slightly less inebriated Thorin. He doesn’t complain, just listens with a small smile on his face, and once Bilbo starts talking about Greek art, he starts talking, too.

Somehow, they manage to avoid talking about anything too depressing or dark, which seems to be their repertoire at this point. Bilbo has always been a happy drunk and Thorin, it seems, is a relaxed one. It works out, and it feels like the most natural thing in the world, info dumping about his PhD dissertation and giggling to himself when he recalls nights spent hunched over his laptop with only three weeks until the deadline, trying to finish it and proofread it as fast as possible without sacrificing any of the content. God, he’s glad that’s over.

And then Thorin says something, Bilbo won’t remember what, that reduces him to a puddle of uncontrollable giggling while Thorin laughs too, big and booming and so much livelier than all of him is when he’s sober. Bilbo leans against his shoulder to stop himself from falling over like an idiot, and wow, he’s much drunker than he initially thought. When it gets too cold and wet to stay outside, Thorin holds out his hand and helps Bilbo to his feet, laughing when Bilbo stumbles and he has to catch him. Bilbo is only half aware of the things going on around him, but that’s alright. He steadies himself with a hand on Thorin’s chest and the other clasped around his bicep. He just radiates heat from his core, and as drunk as he is, Bilbo wants to wrap that warmth around him and never let go of it.

The one blessing in this situation is that Thorin apparently can’t walk in a straight line once he has alcohol in him, so they stumble inside, holding each other up. Thorin kicks the door closed and makes it to the hallway before he leans against the wall.

“I’m going to regret this tomorrow,” he says, groaning. Bilbo is still holding onto his arm and pulls him away from the wall towards Thorin’s room, intent for some reason on going there before his own. Thorin follows obediently, dragging his feet but smiling anyway.

“Usually, I’m the one leading people to my bedroom,” he says. He follows Bilbo in and leaves the door open a little, but the room is dark and Bilbo has to use both hands on Thorin to get his bearings properly.
“Yeah, like anyone’s been in here in the last five years. Get into bed, old man,” Bilbo says. He doesn’t know why he says it, he doesn’t even know how old Thorin is, but it sounds perfectly right in the moment. Thorin sits on his bed and almost falls backwards, but steadies himself.

“I didn’t realise you were so bossy,” he says. He actually pouts like a petulant child at that and folds his arms across his chest, glaring at Bilbo. He just can’t take it seriously.

“You have no idea,” Bilbo says. Thorin raises an eyebrow at him, as if daring him to prove the statement, but it freezes Bilbo to the ground and he just stares back, unable to get words out. He’s a happy drunk, but with enough alcohol in his system, he’s also a flirty drunk, and it seems he’s finally stepped into that territory.

Thorin is still looking at him. It’s not expectation on his face, it’s more like… well, curiosity, and Bilbo finds that in itself curious. If he’s not hallucinating, the clock by Thorin’s bed says it’s almost four in the morning. It’s much too late to be entertaining any ideas of doing anything with Thorin in their drunken states. But oh, he’s so tempted.

“Get some sleep,” he says softly. He’s finally able to move, but there’s movement behind him and fingers around his wrist before he can really process it. Thorin is unsteady on his feet, but then again, so is Bilbo.

“Did I say something?” he asks softly. Bilbo shakes his head.

“No. No, you didn’t.” In his head, however, he thinks no, you just looked at me like you wanted me to prove how ‘bossy’ I am, and for a good few seconds, I had some rather unsavoury thoughts about what we could do in a dark room while we’re maybe a little too drunk to know any better.

He doesn’t say any of that, and instead, he pulls away and leaves the room before he does anything he’ll regret in the morning. He already knows he’s going to regret his hangover, he doesn’t need anything extra.

Bilbo manages to fall asleep quickly, thanks to the wine weighing him down quite pleasantly. But the feeling of Thorin’s hand around his wrist seems to be burned into his skin, because when Bilbo wakes with the hangover and nausea combination to end all hangovers and nausea combinations, he could swear, for just a moment, that Thorin is in bed next to him.

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It’s like it never happened.

They go back to their somewhat decent relationship the very next day when they complain about their headaches and spend the whole afternoon in their pyjamas (not the whole day, though, because neither of them managed to drag themselves out of bed until one). They watch crap TV Bilbo can only just translate and eat a frankly ridiculous amount of carbs, both of them falling asleep in the evening for an hour and then deciding to call it quits and go back to bed. Bilbo has to remind himself that his twenties died two and a half years ago, and that Thorin is actually older than him, and neither of them are as spry as they were in their individual youths.

Bilbo isn’t really able to stop thinking about the awkward conversation in Thorin’s bedroom that was followed immediately after by Bilbo leaving and feeling like an idiot for it.

As per the tradition they seem to be developing, they don’t talk about it. In this instance, Bilbo is actually okay with that. Strangely okay with it. It’s probably something to do with not being good at emotions in any way, shape, or form.
Bilbo stops thinking about it. And by the end of April, he doesn’t really get a chance to think about it, or even bring it up, because Thorin is panicking over how close his nephews visit is.

“I know it’s a lot to ask, but would you mind coming to the city with me when I go food shopping? Left up to me I’d probably feed them junk all week, and Dis will absolutely kick my ass if I do that,” Thorin says one day. His eyes are fixed to his painting, holding a paintbrush loosely as he adds some minor detail to it.

“When do you plan on going?” Bilbo asks. He manages to mask the concern in his voice rather well, he thinks.

“Tomorrow. They’ll be here the day after, on Saturday. You don’t have to come if you don’t want to,” Thorin says. From anyone else, it would sound like he’s trying to bait Bilbo into going anyway. Instead, he just sounds genuinely apologetic.

“How long’s the drive?” he asks.

“Twenty minutes. Not long at all, and I can blast the music if that helps,” Thorin says, smiling a little. Bilbo laughs from behind his book.

“No George Michael.”

“Motley Crüe?”

“Deal.”

That's how, twenty four hours later, Bilbo is sat in the passenger seat of Thorin’s car heading down towards Vevey. It's an incredibly sturdy thing, more of an off-roader than a regular car, and that helps Bilbo's nerves somewhat. Thorin drives slowly and carefully, never once taking his eyes off of the road. Bilbo distracts himself with the scenery as best as he can. It's almost exactly the same as it was when Gandalf drove him up here, only brighter, greener, the steadily blooming spring breathing life into the flora and fauna of Mont Pèlerin. Growing up in Wiltshire, where there's only one city and even that is quite small, Bilbo learned to love the countryside, all of the hills and secret rivers and pocket sized forests dotted here and there. The landscape is much gentler there, but that doesn’t make Mont Pèlerin any less beautiful for that.

Thorin stays true to his word and plays Motley Crüe. Over the months, Bilbo has found that he actually quite likes Thorin's tastes in music, as loud and as brash as it is. It makes him wants to go running, or something. Bilbo hates running.

The ride is blissfully short. They park outside a supermarket, but when the get out, Thorin suggests coffee first. Bilbo agrees without question.

The café they go to is really quite nice. Bilbo gets a chance to exercise his rusty French before Thorin tells him gently to find a table for both of them while he waits at the counter for their drinks. It's one of those quiet cafés, so it doesn't take Bilbo long, choosing a table tucked away in the corner by the windows that open out onto the street. There's no music playing, the only sounds the general activity of the machines behind the counter and the patrons talking to each other, ceramic cups clinking on saucers every now and then, the occasional peal of laughter… It's lovely. And it's nice to be out of the house. Bilbo watches Thorin chat to one of the baristas, a blonde girl in her teens with a bright smile. When she goes to serve another customer, Thorin looks for Bilbo, waving when they make eye contact. Bilbo waves back. It’s so normal he pinches himself discreetly. It doesn't quite feel real, the smell of rich coffee and the gentle sounds all around him, and the occasional snatchings of conversations his brain translates automatically. He blames the
surreal feeling to having been sat in a car for the last twenty five minutes.

Thorin brings their tray over and sets it down before taking off his jacket. He seems so perfectly at ease here. Bilbo had heard him speak French to the barista, and again to the girl at the counter, and it sounds as natural as him speaking English.

“How’re you feeling?” Thorin asks. He stirs an ungodly amount of sugar unto his cappuccino, enough to make even Bilbo feel sick, as much of a sweet tooth as he has.


“It is. You should see it in winter, it’s absolutely beautiful. You know, as long as you stay indoors and avoid the snow,” Thorin says.

“Hmm. Sounds like home,” Bilbo says.

“Where are you from again?”

“Wiltshire.”

“Aren't you famous for trains?”

Bilbo laughs and shakes his head. “No, that's Swindon. The rest of us have Stonehenge and local druids who invite everyone to Avebury for the equinoxes. What about you?”

“North Yorkshire. I lost the accent a while back.” Thorin takes a sip of his coffee and grimaces at the heat.

“You can still hear it a bit. No one would mistake you for a southerner,” Bilbo says.

“I thought you were from Bristol, if I'm honest.”

“Okay, that's just insulting.” Bilbo smiles anyway and gets one in return over the rim of Thorin's cup. “I'm curious. Why Switzerland?”

Thorin shrugs. “I could already speak French and I like the mountains. Why not Switzerland?”

“It's a bit out the way.”

“That makes it perfect.”

“You've travelled a lot.”

“That happens when you have buyers from all over. Not so much these days, but I still get invited to go places and uh… mingle, I guess. Not really my scene,” Thorin says.

“Sounds like you picked the wrong career,” Bilbo says.

“No, I don't think I did. I paint and I get paid for it and every now and then, I get to do an exhibition that gives me an ego boost. I like what I do,” Thorin says. He leans on his elbows, holding his coffee in one hand and the other resting on his bicep as he looks at Bilbo.

“Like or love?” Bilbo asks, and Thorin laughs.

“Depends on the day. I never hate it, though. Never have. Not for the last thirty odd years,” he says. He puts his cup down.
“I guess after thirty years it must be hard to find inspiration,” Bilbo says. Thorin shakes his head.

“No. Not if you know where to look.”

“And where are you looking now?” Oh, do shut up, or at least try not to sound like you're flirting with him .

“I'm not too sure,” Thorin says.

They finish their coffee in silence and leave half an hour later to walk back to the supermarket. Bilbo struggles to keep up with Thorin’s long strides, until he gets hold of a shopping trolley and they go into the store, and Thorin seems to look at every item on the shelf in detail. Still, it's nice to be out.

Thorin is obviously trying to hide his ‘concerned uncle’ side the whole time, asking for Bilbo's opinion on every other item, clearly unsure. Bilbo wonders how he managed the times before when Kili and Fili showed up, though apparently before they only stayed for a few days, so Thorin didn't bother going out and getting more food. This time is obviously different, with them staying for a whole week and Bilbo being there.

It doesn't take long to get everything and soon, they’re waiting in the queue, Bilbo leaning against the trolley and Thorin making small talk with the man in front of them. It feels so weirdly normal that Bilbo forgets to be nervous about the drive back up, but that doesn’t mean getting in the car doesn’t reawaken that in him. He takes a few deep breaths and Thorin doesn’t even start the car until Bilbo nods at him, letting him know that he’s okay. He drives slowly again and Bilbo rests his head against the window, watching the scenery once again.

The boys make their appearance early the next morning. Bilbo is up with the dawn, nerves roiling in his stomach for no real reason other than he’s about to meet new people, again. He’s never this nervous about it usually. Once upon a time, he revelled in it. But this isn’t like meeting new students or anything like that. This is Thorin’s family, and from what Bilbo can tell, the only family he actually gives a damn about. He’s just a guest. He can’t screw up at all, though he doesn’t quite know how he’ll manage to screw up.

Getting out of bed and heading towards the kitchen to get himself breakfast, he stops by Thorin’s door, listening to see if he's still sleeping. It was a trick he learned as a child when he woke up before his parents. He waits for a few seconds, and hears Thorin snoring gently, obviously dead to the world. Bilbo moves on and makes himself a bowl of cereal before going back to his room to check his emails.

He has one from Prim. He told her the day before about Fili and Kili coming to stay, and when he opens her message, he sees a lot of question marks. What are their names? How old are they? What are they like? Obviously, Bilbo can’t answer that last question immediately, but he tells her what he can in between mouthfuls of cornflakes.

Thorin wanders into the kitchen just as Bilbo is washing his bowl up. By now, he’s used to seeing Thorin in pyjamas - which for him, is a t shirt and boxers, but Bilbo doesn’t mind. What he’s never used to is seeing Thorin’s bed head, which is always hysterical. This morning, it’s a frizzy mess he’s only bothered to run his fingers through instead of tying up to keep it out of his face. Bilbo looks back at the sink and puts his bowl on the draining board, smiling to himself.

“W’time is it?” Thorin asks. Oh god, he’s still half asleep. Bilbo motions for him to sit down and puts the kettle on the stove.
“Seven-ish. Did you actually get any sleep?” he asks. Thorin is sat at the table with his head in his arms, and groans at the question. That’s all the answer Bilbo needs. Well, he did hear Thorin watching a movie last night when he got up to get a glass of water at two in the morning.

“What time are they getting here again?” Thorin asks. His voice is muffled by the mass of hair covering his face and forearms. Bilbo checks the note on the fridge.

“Nine, I think. It’s a three hour drive, and they have to cross the border and go through all of that… are you okay?” Bilbo asks. Thorin’s face is actually visible now, but he’s grimacing, pressing his fingertips into his temples.

“Headsache,” he mutters. “It’ll go in a sec…” He closes his eyes and his head drops forward a little, but Bilbo sees the rise and fall of his shoulders as he breathes steadily, so he doesn’t let himself panic just yet. The kettle whistles and he takes it off of the stove quickly, so it doesn’t get any louder. He distracts himself by making two cups, coffee for Thorin, green tea for himself, and spends perhaps a little too long stirring sugar into the coffee.

“I hate these headaches,” Thorin says eventually.

“Do you get them a lot?” Bilbo asks. He passes Thorin his coffee and sits down next to him at the table.

“About as often as you get migraines. Feels like I’m getting lobotomised.” Thorin runs a hand through his hair and looks at Bilbo. He looks exhausted. Bilbo almost wants to know why he was up so late, but he has a pretty good idea anyway. He’s been stressed over the exhibition, over what to paint, which has resulted in quite a few horrific headaches and loud arguments with his sister over the phone. Bilbo knows to stay out of the room when either of those things happen, doubly so if they’re happening at the same time. An angry Thorin is a truly terrifying Thorin, and Bilbo hopes to god that he’ll never be on the receiving end of that.

“Maybe you should see a doctor about them,” Bilbo says quietly. Thorin laughs.

“They’ll tell me to cut out caffeine, stress, and salt. Salt, I can live without. The other two? Not so much. Stress is basically my entire job,” he says. “Well, it is when I have to do a damned ‘come back’ exhibition.”

“Were those Dis’ words?”

“Well, I’d never phrase it like that, that’s for sure.”

“She just wants you to show your face in public so people in the art world don’t think you’re dead. You’re a pretty big name around here, if I’m not mistaken.” Bilbo looks into his green tea instead of at Thorin, feeling his intense gaze on him.

“You’ve been talking to her, haven’t you?” Thorin says eventually. Bilbo shrugs and smiles, looking away at the balcony door. He has been talking to Dis, either on Facebook or calling her when Thorin’s asleep or in the zone while painting. It’s mostly so she knows how Thorin’s doing, because apparently he doesn’t call her as much as he says he does. But as it turns out, Dis is a fantastic conversation partner, and studied history in college. Most of the Facebook conversations are about some historical event or another.

“I don’t want to tell you what to do, but she worries about you. Hell, I worry about you, and I barely know you. Take a week off painting while the boys are here so you don’t have a stroke,” Bilbo says. “Or, you know, a few hours a day.”
“I won't have much choice while they're here, you know. They'll be dragging me everywhere. And you too, probably,” Thorin says.

“They don't know me.”

“They won't leave you alone.” Thorin pulls a tin from his hoodie pocket and starts rolling a cigarette with practised ease, still looking at Bilbo. “You worry about me? I thought you came here to get away from that kind of thing.”

“It's different. I'm worried you're going to have an aneurysm, not that I'm going to have another attempt. Completely different,” Bilbo says. Thorin tucks his cigarette behind his ear and puts the tin back in his pocket.

“I'm alright, Bilbo. If I was about to have a psychotic breakdown, you'd hear a lot of Fleetwood Mac and me crying over a tiny mistake on a painting,” he says. Bilbo shakes his head.

“Fleetwood Mac,” he says, as if he can't quite believe Thorin would ever be a fan. “I'll keep an ear out for that, then.”

“How are you, anyway? You know, with the… what was it, major depression? How's that going?” Thorin asks. His tone is unbelievably gentle, as is the look he gives Bilbo, equal parts concerned and curious.

“I've been here since the end of February and you've never asked me that,” Bilbo points out. Not that he's annoyed, because he's not. Just stating a fact. “I'm okay. Not… great. But I probably never will be.”

“Why?” Thorin asks.

“Why what?”

“Why won't you be okay ever again?”

Bilbo opens his mouth to answer, but he can't quite get the right words out. He busies himself with his tea for a few seconds, but that only buys him so much time.

“It just feels that way. I don't know how to explain it, really,” he says. “You know when you have a really bad day and halfway through you feel like it's never going to end? It's like that, but my whole life.”

“Has being here actually helped?” Thorin asks. Now he sounds a touch annoyed. Bilbo hates it.

“It has. I was miserable before. Really miserable. Now… I don't know. It's nice to be around someone who isn't watching my every move to make sure I don't off myself. And it's nice to have a friend I'm not related to,” Bilbo says. It's completely honest, but he's never outright said that Thorin is his friend before. It feels strange in his mouth, but the shy little smile Thorin gives him is worth it.

“Has being here actually helped?” Thorin asks. Now he sounds a touch annoyed. Bilbo hates it.

“It has. I was miserable before. Really miserable. Now… I don't know. It's nice to be around someone who isn't watching my every move to make sure I don't off myself. And it's nice to have a friend I'm not related to,” Bilbo says. It's completely honest, but he's never outright said that Thorin is his friend before. It feels strange in his mouth, but the shy little smile Thorin gives him is worth it.

“I think I can say the same about you, you know. Most of my friends, I'm related to. I'm… well, I'm glad you showed up, as shit as the circumstances were,” Thorin says. His hand twitches where it's resting on the table, and Bilbo’s breath catches in his throat when he moves it and settles it over Bilbo’s, heavy and warm and larger than Bilbo's own. He's got old scars on his knuckles and what looks like a very old and faded tattoo on his middle and index fingers, indecipherable at this angle. Bilbo half consciously twists his hand so its palm-up, pressed gently against Thorin's, fingers curling around his wrist. Thorin does the same and presses his fingers a little against Bilbo's pulse.
point. They eyes meet and *something* passes between them, something Bilbo will think much too hard about for the rest of the day.

Naturally, as these things go, they're interrupted by a loud and enthusiastic knock on the front door and Bilbo yanks his hand away and stands up in one swift movement, not daring to look at Thorin at all.

“They're not meant to be here for another two hours,” Thorin says, standing up too. Oh god, Bilbo forgot he's wearing faded Superman boxers.

“Put some trousers on, I'll get it,” he says. Thorin just nods and mock salutes on his way out of the kitchen, and Bilbo wraps his hoodie around himself, pulling the sleeves down out of habit.

He goes to the door and peers out of the peep hole. It's indeed Dis, accompanied by two teenagers who look way too excited for this time of day. Aren't teenagers meant to be legendary sleepers? Bilbo doesn't know, but he can't help admire them for their enthusiasm as he unlocks and opens the door.

“Bilbo!” Dis says, and before he can do anything, she pulls him into a tight hug, almost knocking him off of his feet.

“Hi,” he manages. “You're early.”

“They woke me up early. Not that I really mind, it's nice watching the sunrise while you're crossing the border,” Dis says. She pushes her way in and the boys follow her, greeting Bilbo happily like he's not a complete stranger to them. He closes the door and watches them as they get themselves settled and their jackets off, praying that Thorin comes back out soon, preferably wearing trousers. He doesn't know how to do this, he realises. Dis chatters to him and the boys at the same time, asking Bilbo how he is while somehow urging Kili to get his shoes off simultaneously. Bilbo gives her easy answers to her questions to avoid looking like a total fool and goes back around to the kitchen, where Fili is already rooting around in the fridge.

Bilbo has seen photos of them on Facebook, of course. Fili, the older one, looks almost nothing like his mother. He's all fair hair and blue eyes, but the shape of his face, especially his nose, is practically a carbon copy of hers. He looks like he's on the knife's edge between teenage awkwardness and starting to grow into his adult self.

Kili, on the other hand, is pretty much exactly how Bilbo pictured Thorin when he was younger. All except the eyes, which are dark brown, like Dis’. Other than that, it could be like stepping back in time.

Bilbo tries not to be resentful when he realises that Fili is taller than him at seventeen, but the feeling passes when Thorin comes out, still in pyjamas but with the addition of pyjama bottoms, and goes over to Dis with a big smile on his face.

“It's good to see you,” he says into her hair, as wild and dark as his.

“Good to see you too. Now make me a cup of coffee, I've been up since half three,” Dis says. She gently pushes Thorin into the kitchen and makes eye contact with Bilbo, rolling her eyes as if to say *he's useless, right?*

Dis follows her brother into the kitchen and suddenly, everyone is talking over each other and there's a little bit too much noise, and Bilbo knows that if he spends too long in the middle of it all, he's going to either have a horrific migraine by the end of the day, or unwittingly snap at people
who have been nothing but good to him. He slips past Kili and puts his hand on Thorin's shoulder, getting his attention without speaking. Thorin looks at him, and Bilbo's heart almost gives out. He's seen Thorin drunk, and angry, and sarcastic, but he's never seen him look this happy. It's effortlessly obvious in his face, the lines around his mouth less pronounced, his eyes lighter, the smile small and genuine.

“Anything I can do?” Bilbo asks. Thorin shakes his head.

“No, I've got this,” he says. He nudges Bilbo and smiles at him. *Have I stepped into a parallel universe*, Bilbo thinks. He hears his name being called and it take a couple of seconds to process that it's Dis’ voice, calling him into the front room.

“I'm just stopping for coffee and then I'll be out of your hair,” she says as she roots around in her bag or something. “Anything you need before I go?”

“No, I think we're fine. How was the drive?” Bilbo asks. He and Dis sit down on the sofa and she ties her hair up. Like Thorin, she has streaks of grey mixed in with the black, and again like her brother, it makes her look dignified, rather than aged.

“Long. I took the day off so when I get home I’m not getting off of the couch unless I need food,” she says. She looks into the kitchen at Fili making sandwiches for himself and his brother, and at Thorin looking for a tray to put everything on. Bilbo almost calls to him to tell him it's on top of the fridge, but Thorin finds it and he keeps his mouth closed.

“Looking forward to a week without teenagers?” Bilbo asks, looking back at her. Dis shrugs.

“First few days is always fun. But I miss them when they're here. They are my kids, after all,” she says. “But Thorin needs to spend more time with them without me hanging over his shoulder, and they need to get out of the house more.”

“There's a lake out here, right? Thorin told me he takes them fishing sometimes,” Bilbo says. There's a photo on the fridge of Kili sat by the lake with a fishing hat on and a rod in his hand, no doubt taken by Fili.

“And he makes them walk the two miles to get there,” Dis says.

“That's barely a stroll.”

“Thorin used to complain about walking that far to school,” Dis says, shrugging.

“I took a bus,” Bilbo says. Dis chuckles and leans back on the sofa. She's clearly exhausted, but Bilbo knows someone who needs a few days to themselves on sight.

“You want your coffee now or to go?” Thorin shouts from the kitchen. Dis tells him to wait a second and looks for something in her bag. She pulls out a thermos and excuses herself politely to take it into the kitchen. Next to Thorin, she's almost the same daunting height, and in casual jeans and a loose t shirt, he can see that her idea of relaxed is much more traditional than her brothers. Lounging on the couch with junk food and bad movies versus blasting rock music and getting angry at paintings? Yeah, Dis is definitely the more traditional one. But strangely enough, Bilbo thinks he prefers Thorin's idea.

Kili is the first of the boys to make his way over to Bilbo. He's carrying two plates, both with sandwiches, looking a little nervous. But he's fourteen and meeting someone new, of course he's nervous. Bilbo smiles at him.
“Kili, right?” he says. Kili nods and sits down on the sofa where Dis just got up from.

“Uncle Thorin said to give this to you,” he says quietly. He hands Bilbo the plate. So he's shy. Good to know.

“Thank you,” Bilbo says. Kili tucks into his food with no preamble and promptly ignores Bilbo, looking around the room like he's getting his bearings. When were they here last? December? Thorin had said something about the four of them getting together for Hanukkah every year.

Bilbo eats his food too while Thorin and Dis chat in the kitchen and Fili comes over and ruffles his brothers hair before smiling politely at Bilbo. He gets the feeling that they're both a little shy, so doesn't press them for anything, just sits quietly and eats his sandwich, which he's happy to do for now.

Eventually, Dis’ coffee is ready and she's ready to leave.

“No breaking anything, no drinking, and I don't want to see you come home without doing any homework. You've both got exams coming up soon,” she says in the gently stern tone only a parent can manage. “Bilbo, Gandalf wants you to call him. Not sure why, it's probably better to just do it sooner rather than later.”

“Thanks.” Bilbo stands and steps aside to let Kili get up to say goodbye to her. She hugs him and he fakes annoyance, and Fili does the same. He's almost taller than her, and almost an adult, if you give it a few months. But they say goodbye to her and Dis leaves the front room with Thorin.

Bilbo doesn't really know how to interact with teenagers. Fresh adults, sure. That was literally his job description for five years. But teenagers? No clue. It feels a little big like his first day as a lecturer all over again when he looks at the boys relaxing into their seats, Kili pulling a book from god knows where and Fili getting out his phone and texting whoever. Bilbo lingers in the doorway until he feels thoroughly awkward and goes into the kitchen, where he sees a pile of plates and cups and cutlery waiting to be washed up.

The front door closes and Dis drives away. Bilbo hears Thorin say something to his nephews but doesn't catch the words, only the fondness in his tone that Bilbo has heard a thousand times before when Thorin talks about his family.

Thorin comes into the kitchen when Bilbo is drying up.

“We're watching Dredd if you're interested,” Thorin says. Bilbo doesn't look away from the bowl he's drying.

“I'll be in in a minute,” he says quietly. Thorin hesitates in getting the bag of popcorn from the cupboard and steps closer to Bilbo.

“Are you okay?” he asks. Bilbo nods.

“I'm just shy. Don't worry about me,” he says. He braves a look at Thorin and immediately wishes he hadn't, because Thorin is giving him that look , the look so few people can master, the look that says I don't believe you and I want you to tell me the truth, but I won't push it, so just come and watch Dredd with us, you might enjoy it .

“You like sweet popcorn, right?” Thorin changes the subject and gets the popcorn down. Bilbo wordlessly hands him two bowls.

“Yeah,” he says.
“They’ve taken over the big sofa, by the way. Hope you don't mind me falling asleep on you,” Thorin says conspiratorially. Bilbo actually manages a quiet laugh.

“You've been doing that since *Waterworld*. I'm used to it,” he says.

“Never thought anyone would say that to me,” Thorin says. He tips the premade popcorn into the bowls and nods at Bilbo before leaving. Bilbo waits for a minute or so before following and sitting on the smaller sofa with Thorin, who is sitting cross legged and shifts to the side to make room for Bilbo, though it's impossible for their legs not to be pressed together.

The movie isn't half bad, and Fili’s sarcastic commentary is actually quite hilarious at times. Kili falls asleep halfway through and doesn't even wake during the louder, violent parts. Thorin falls asleep too, and if Bilbo had the heart to move away when Thorin's head dropped onto his shoulder, he still wouldn't have done it.

When the movie’s done, he carefully gets up, making sure not to wake Thorin, and takes the empty bowls to the kitchen. He makes eye contact with Fili when he comes back in and manages a smile. To his surprise, he gets one in return, much more genuine than the first.

He leaves them to it. His room is quiet and cool, and even though he almost dials Gandalf's number, he decides to do it later, and instead, goes to sleep and hopes that the rest of the week will be as easy as this.

Chapter End Notes

This is 9K of garbage.
Okay so in all honesty I wrote about 75% of this on my phone so I'm sorry if there are typos I didn't pick up while editing.
Also I promise I didn't mean for this to be 50% drunken idiots, 50% sober idiots with crushes on each other. I might switch to Thorin's POV for the next chapter.
Find me on tumblr [here](http://example.com)
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

cw: homophobia, drugs mention, alcohol mention, q slur

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There are many things Thorin has wished for his his life.

There are the realistic things - for financial security, for his family’s happiness, for someone to settle down with eventually in a nice house where they both feel at home. For his nephews to have good lives and for his sister to never been with anyone like her ex husband ever again. These are things that could come true, if they all put in a little effort, and if luck comes their way.

And then there are the unrealistic things - to see Frerin one more time. To get the closure from his mother he never got after he came out. To punch Smaug Von Brandt in the face for sabotaging his last exhibition so badly that Thorin hadn’t been able to paint for a year solid. That last one is probably still possible, but Thorin likes not having a criminal record.

Now, sitting on the sofa and sketching absently while Fili and Bilbo play Scrabble and Kili watches videos on Fili’s phone, Thorin wishes he could preserve time in more than just a photograph, like a honey bee trapped in amber. He wishes he could save the whole image of the lazy Sunday evening before him for a rainy day, down to Fili insisting that you can use French and English in one game of Scrabble and Kili laughing every now and then at something on Fili’s phone. Down to Bilbo making eye contact with him every now and then, and how easily he fits into place here.

Thorin knows the boys are a little wary of him, but he doesn’t blame them. He was wary of Bilbo at first, but he has the advantage of having known him for a couple of months. The boys are much less guarded than Thorin is, though, so by the end of the week, he can see them following the man around and hanging on his every word.

Bilbo leans over to the coffee table from where he’s sitting and turns the radio down just a little, all the while debating with Fili about whether or not one can flip the W into an M to spell malachite. Neither of them seem to be of mind about the idea, and Fili just does it anyway, a smug little grin on his face.

Thorin can't believe how much Fili has grown. It barely seems like yesterday that he was a toddler running around everywhere, an unstoppable force of nature with perpetually skinned knees and a smile that made sunshine look dim. Of course, Thorin is always going to see him that way, but he held Fili mere hours after he was born, and actually cried a little bit at how happy he had been that Dis was finally starting her family. Seventeen years later, and he’s almost a man, his hair a darker blond that Thorin remembers it being, and a sense of humour almost as dry and sharp as his mother's. In three years, Thorin will be forty five, and Fili will be twenty, and if that’s not terrifying, he doesn’t know what is.

Kili is different. He’s still just a kid, though at the same time, years beyond his age. He’s kind and
optimistic, but at the same time, the kind of down to earth adventurer who admires the little things -
birds chirping, fishing in the sunlight, exploring new places and not caring about getting muddy, getting
absorbed into a book that perhaps a fourteen-going-on-fifteen year old shouldn’t be reading, but
understanding and empathising with it anyway. Thorin has always admired that about him, and he
prays that Kili never loses those parts of him to adulthood that make him such a genuinely gentle
soul.

Thorin flips to a clean page in his sketchbook and taps the end of his pencil against his lips. He’s
not bored of landscape art, not really. It’s just... well, there’s only so many mountains and trees
you can draw and paint before you start to feel like you’re in a rut, that’s all. And Thorin hates
being in a rut. He’s not very good at getting out of them, or breaking them before it becomes too
late.

At first, he considers sketching the room itself, sans the people occupying it. He even starts to,
outlining the fireplace in mechanical pencil before he remembers what this place had been like
before anyone else came to stay here. When it was just him. It had been lonely and just a little too
quiet. Now, there’s life and warmth. It’s perhaps a little bit dramatic (Frerin used to tease him,
saying of course you’re dramatic, you’re a Leo!, as if that explained it) but Thorin doesn’t really
care. He hasn’t drawn people in a long time. He could use the challenge, if he’s being honest with
himself.

He starts with Kili. Looking at him half the time is like looking into a mirror of the past. Thorin
remembers being weed-like and awkward at fourteen, not yet his full height or bulk and hoping and
praying that he wouldn’t be stuck like that the rest of his life. Now, he’s six foot two and towers
over almost everyone he meets, and probably a bit of a daunting figure, he reckons.

Kili is easy to draw. He has messy hair desperately in need of a trim and is hunched up, tucked into
the corner of the sofa with his headphones in. He's grown so much too, though in less obvious
ways. Thorin doesn’t dwell too much on his nephews growing up, and just lets himself draw,
listening to the music and the steady, quiet chatter.

It isn’t until Thorin gets onto Bilbo after finishing up the messy sketches of the boys that he
realises that he’s enjoying this much more than he’s enjoyed drawing mountain ranges and castles
and pine trees. It’s a challenge, one that he’s sorely needed, he realises. He glances up at Bilbo
every few seconds, because he wants to get his tipped up nose right, and the way he’s leaning on
one hand, slightly to the side, while he uses the other to skim over the edges of his scrabble letters,
clearly a little lost in thought. Thorin briefly entertains the idea of painting him. He would be blue
and pale gold, he decides, maybe a little silver along the edges, illuminated by the sun. He's not so
much a washed out watercolour these days, more of a work in progress in gouache, the colours bold
but still a little blurry. Thorin has always seen people in terms of how they would be painted. Dis, a
striking image in dark colours, done with nothing but oils and palette knives. Thror much the same,
only more menacing and classical. The first boy Thorin ever loved, green and grey and sea blue, a
watercolour on cartridge paper, pretty but not built to last. The fact that Thorin is starting to see
Bilbo like this now speaks volumes about how much he actually cares about someone he was
prepared to hate forever. Then again, he does have a pretty solid image of Smaug on a canvas.
Nothing but red fire and draconic imagery.

Thorin stops just as he's adding details to Bilbo's hair, careful to get the shine from the overhead
light just right. It hits him like a lightning bolt then, the inspiration he's been waiting for for
months, or perhaps years. He very gingerly closes his sketchbook and tucks his pencil behind his
ear. If he's lucky, he'll remember it's there before it falls out in the shower later. Bilbo and Fili look
at him when he stands up and excuses himself quietly before disappearing into his room on slightly
shaky legs. He calls Dis as soon as the door is closes and sits down heavily on the table, hoping
she'll pick up. He needs her to pick up, otherwise his ideas will go out of the window and that spark will be crushed before it can really grow into anything substantial. As he waits, he pulls the nearest piece of paper towards him and starts to scribble down potential titles.

“This had better be good,” Dis says. She doesn't sound angry, but Thorin knows so much better than to test her wrath.

“I have an idea,” Thorin says. “For the exhibition. I have an idea.”

Dis sighs. She must still be in bed, if the faint sound of the Backstreet Boys is anything to go by. That's how she relaxes on weekends - easy to make Shabbat food, terrible nineties music, and her best pyjamas.

“Alright. Shoot.”

Dis loves the idea. Well… she approves of it, but that's really all Thorin needs to go ahead with his idea. He manages to find a notebook under the pile of crap on his bedside table and writes down everything he tells her, the list of people he could paint, the mediums and the themes and the imagery he could use, all but buzzing with excitement like he hasn't felt since his Eastern European architecture exhibition. It feels like childlike excitement, really, and he can barely stop himself from smiling just thinking about just how much creative freedom he'll actually have once he starts this.

“You won't need as many paintings if you do them really big,” Dis says. “Do maybe ten, and we can cut them down to six or seven for the actual show. The others can go in the program and the gallery can sell them as prints.”

“How do you feel about posing for me?” Thorin asks. Dis laughs disbelievingly.

“I'm not a damned model, Thorin. What would you even paint me as, Jezebel?” she asks.

“I was thinking more along the lines of Delilah, actually,” Thorin says, teasing her.

“You ass. I'll do it, just don't make me a scriptural figure. And get rid of my crows feet,” she says.

“So, twenty year old Dis it is.”

“Thank you, human photoshop. Who else is on your list?”

“You, the boys, mum and dad, Thror, Frerin…” Thorin trails off, tapping his pencil against the last name on the list.

“Would that silence just so happen to mean a Mister Bilbo Baggins?” Dis teases. Oh, Thorin hates her for knowing him so well, but if it wasn't for her, he would be much more depressed and hjn these days.

“He wouldn't go for it,” Thorin says quietly.

“What medium were you thinking for him?” Dis asks. Her voice is gentler, more understanding. Thorin is grateful for that. He smiles to himself and looks at the notes around Bilbo's name.

“Gouache and ink, probably on a flat board canvas. Say, sixty by forty? You remember those picture books we had when we were kids that had paintings of people fishing or reading? Like one
of those,” Thorin says. Dis is silent for a few seconds.

“So, how long have you had a crush on him?” she asks eventually, and Thorin wishes she was teasing. But no, she's one hundred percent serious, and Thorin sees absolutely no point in lying to her. She'll wrangle the truth out of him eventually anyhow.

“Remember I told you about when we got drunk?” he says. He looks at the door, in case Bilbo, or god forbid, one of the boys, is listening in with their ear pressed to the wood. “I think that's when it started.”

“I don't even have the heart to tease you properly,” Dis says.

“I'm weeping with relief,” Thorin says in a deadpan voice.

“I'll admit though, I was kind of hoping this would happen. Eventually. You need someone to keep you grounded,” she says. “Have you said anything about it?”

“Why would I? He's probably straight,” Thorin says. He presses his hand against his forehead and groans. “Oh god, what if he's really straight. You know the guys I'm talking about.”

“Something tells me he's not, and I'll bet you twenty euros that I'm right,” Dis says.

“I hate you.”

“Love you too, big bro. Now get off the phone and don't do anymore art today,” she says, laughter in her voice. Thorin feels like sticking his tongue out at her like they're children again, but given that they're talking on the phone, he won't be able to reap the benefits of it. Instead, he just says goodbye and hangs up. The silence is almost too much to bear, the weight of what he admitted not lifted from his shoulders, but shifted just a little bit, enough to make Thorin actually think about it for maybe ten goddamn seconds. He has a crush. So what? It happens all the time. Maybe not to him, but it does. People get crushes on wait staff and baristas and that one guy at the gym who does weird acrobatic shit on the TRX. Thorin lives a hermit's life, and so he gets a crush on the man who comes to stay with him to get some peace and quiet. God, it's absolutely ridiculous.

Thorin wishes Dis had teased him when he goes back out into the living room. Scrabble is apparently over, and Bilbo and Fili are in the kitchen, talking about brisket of all things, and Kili is stretched out on the sofa with his feet where Thorin had been sitting, and it's too normal. Way too normal. He walks into the kitchen and scoots past Bilbo to get to the fridge, and touches him. It's only on the shoulder, nothing too unsavoury, but Bilbo is warm, and he's wearing a stupid thin t shirt, and he looks at Thorin and smiles kindly. Thorin should be used to this kind of contact by now, but he's not. He's really not. It's like stepping into a storm, bracing yourself for the wind and the violent swirling and the boom of thunder, but no one ever prepares for the rain. You get soaked through in thirty seconds flat and you're left shaking and freezing and stunned still, and all you can do it stand there and wait for the storm to end.

Storms only ever end badly, he thinks.

There's a reason Thorin has avoided relationships into his early forties. Not relationships as a whole, mind you, just long term, the ones that mean more than just sex and coffee the morning after. Thorin has been operating on that basis for decades. There have been, well, flings that almost developed into something of substance, but either one or the both of them were terrified of commitment, so it ended, every time. Thorin remembers being two days shy of his birthday and finding himself crashing on Dwalin’s couch because Thror decided that having a queer for a grandson wasn't something he could tolerate or accept in his house. Thorin isn't as bitter about that
as he used to be. The eighties were rough, especially for people like him. For a long time, no one but his immediate family knew, with the exception of Balin and Dwalin, but Thorin has his own damn Wikipedia page now, and somehow the public manages to find out everything. He wonders what Thror would say now. He was always of the belief that men like Thorin were somehow weaker, somehow lesser, never enough of a man to be like him. Thorin has always known that Thror was… well, one hell of a bigot, and so steeped in toxic masculinity that he could barely look past his view of Thorin's attraction to other men as a hindrance and something that could be fixed. And given that Thorin came out smack bang in the middle of the AIDS Crisis, that just made things a whole lot worse for him.

Thorin had celebrated his eighteenth with Dwalin and Balin with a Star Trek marathon, Chinese food, and perhaps a little too much alcohol between the three of them. He doesn't dwell these days on what it would have been like if he hadn't chosen then to come out, because all that brings is heartache and a painful nostalgia that Thorin just can't deal with.

But Bilbo sometimes looks at him with such incredible softness in his eyes, and Thorin wants to fall to his knees before him because no one has ever looked at him like that.

Well, that's dramatic, Thorin thinks. He smiles to himself and pulls a cookbook down from the shelf above the sink.

“Here,” he says, opening it to the right page, half leaning over Bilbo's shoulder to do it. “Brisket.”

“And here I was thinking you didn’t know how to cook from scratch,” Bilbo teases, nudging him.

Thorin nudges him back, as long as they’re still acting more like teenagers than the seventeen year old in the room rolling his eyes at them. “This takes ages to cook… tomorrow?” Bilbo looks at Fili and then back at the book, his finger resting on the cooking time. Thorin is still standing behind him, but forces himself to look at Fili instead. He's got his glasses pushed up into his hair and a curious look on his face, eyes darting between Bilbo and Thorin, and Thorin can see the cogs working in his head. He’s too damn smart for his own good, but Thorin knows he won’t say anything. He shakes his head minutely when Fili raises an eyebrow at him, while Bilbo just leafs through the recipe book, muttering to himself. Thorin turns away and twirls his pencil between his fingers, still holding onto it.

“Tomorrow,” Fili says. He excuses himself and Thorin is alone with Bilbo in the kitchen, still almost uncomfortable close to him. He steps back, though Bilbo doesn't even seem to notice, looking through the cookbook Thorin had picked up in a thrift store in Scotland a few years ago.

“Do we have any garlic?” Bilbo asks, looking up at him.

“Above your head,” Thorin says without really heading the question. Bilbo looks up and makes a noise like he can’t believe he missed it, smiling a little. He looks so different to how he did when he first came here, and for a second, Thorin lets himself believe that he’s part of the reason. It’s ridiculous, of course, but it makes him feel a little better, and gives him the courage to speak up.

“Bilbo, can I ask a favour?” he says quietly. Bilbo nods, still looking at the cookbook, using the tip of his finger to trace an unfamiliar ingredient.

“Of course,” he says.

“Can I draw you?” Thorin has to actually force the words out, closing his eyes for a second, grateful that Bilbo can’t see him. Well, until he turns and looks at Thorin, leaning back against the counter. He doesn’t look angry, or confused, just curious, head tilted to the side like a bird looking at something they don’t quite understand.
“Why?” he asks.

“No reason,” Thorin lies.

“I thought you were a landscape artist,” Bilbo says.

“I am,” Thorin says. “I’m just bored of landscapes. Time to branch out, I guess. And… well, I had an idea for the exhibition and I need some practice with people before I get started.”

“You didn’t need to ask. I'm… well, I’m flattered, actually. What was the idea?” Bilbo asks. He sounds genuinely curious, eyebrows drawn together, something in his eyes that both intrigues and terrifies Thorin. He stammers for a good three and a half seconds before he can get the words out.

“It's, well, it's about painting personalities, I guess. Using colours and styles and mediums that would sort of reference how certain people are in real life,” he says. Saying it out loud while he can barely string words together without bumbling over them is a feat in itself, and not cringing at how awful it sounds is an entirely different thing altogether. It is a good idea, and he knows it, but he's always hated this part. Getting started. Looking for inspiration.

“And you want to draw me,” Bilbo says, finishing the hanged sentence for him.

“You don't have to be part of the exhibition. I just need practice, that's all. And I'd rather draw people I know, not just random people on the internet,” Thorin says. Bilbo nods, and then shrugs.

“Alright. Practice,” he says, and then smiles. “I'm no Kate Winslet, though.”

“I was thinking you'd keep your clothes on, you know,” Thorin says, perhaps a bit too loud and just at the perfectly wrong time, because that's when Fili walks into the kitchen and stops and stares at them. “We're talking about the exhibition,” Thorin says, as if that explains it all, and for some reason, Bilbo lets out a sudden burst of laughter.

“Right,” Fili says. “Can we go fishing if the weather's good tomorrow? I want to get some photos of the lake for school.”

“Sure. I think we could all do with getting out of the house for a while,” Thorin says. He glances at Bilbo, whose smile has faded and looks like he's deep in thought, head turned to the side. Don't think about how good that angle would be as a pen drawing. Don't think about testing colours to get his hair right. Don't think about the Kate Winslet comment because this isn't damn Titanic and you're not Leonardo DiCaprio.

“Cool. Do you still have that polaroid camera?” Fili asks. Thorin glances at Bilbo again and is met with a look that says go spend some time with him . He's still astonished at how well he can read Bilbo’s facial expressions, but he doesn't dwell on it, and instead just gestures for Fili to follow him.

That's how he ends up in the garage and balancing on a stool to get to one of the higher up shelves. The polaroid is in a shoebox with reams of film Thorin had never had the heart to give away. It belonged to Frerin once upon a time, and he gave it to Thorin before Thorin flew home at the end of their American roadtrip, telling him to keep both the photos and the camera. He hands the box to Fili and gets down as Fili goes to sit down at the shoddy table Thorin doesn't remember ever setting up.

“Wow, the nineties were... bad,” Fili says as he leafs through the pictures. He holds up one of Frerin looking like an N-Sync groupie. Thorin braces himself for the uncomfortable clench in his chest, but it doesn't come. He just sits down opposite Fili and starts to go through the photos,
leaving the camera and boxes of unused film alone for the time being.

“Consider yourself lucky you didn't witness the eighties firsthand. Everything smelled like patchouli and cigarette smoke, and I was living on Dwalin's couch,” Thorin says. “Here's your mum at her engagement party.”

“She looks exactly the same,” Fili says, taking it with a fond smile on his face.

“Yeah, she got the ‘looks young forever’ gene, unlike me. I'm forty and I look like I should be in a retirement home,” Thorin says. It's not bitterness, per say, it's more like he knows it's his own damn fault for not looking after himself.

“Maybe if you got rid of the beard…” Fili suggests, and Thorin is glad he can give his family death glares. Less so that Fili is Dis’ son, and that like her, he has an immunity to them, and simply stares back with a sort of placid innocence.

“Not a word about my beard,” Thorin says.

“Is this nanna?” Fili asks. He passes Thorin a photo of an all too familiar woman, taken literally days before Thorin was kicked out. Thorin knows just how much he and Dis look like her, with her wild dark hair and angular features. Dis was almost a carbon copy of her, before she left home and started being herself, dressing how she wanted and spending more time at bars than actually studying. Yael Durin had died in ‘89 from heart failure.

“Yeah, it is,” Thorin says. He hands it back. His feelings concerning his late mother are a little bit too confusing and intense to deal with, and looking at her lighting Shabbat candles with a small smile on her face brings it all back in a way that's almost too much. “Want to see a bad photo of me?”

Naturally, Fili jumps at that, and grins when Thorin shows him the candid photo of him Frerin took at some party they stumbled across in, where was it, Des Moines? Yeah, Des Moines. Thorin still doesn't believe that Frerin bummed a cigarette from Corey Taylor that night, but in all fairness, he had gotten absolutely smashed, and the photo just proves it. He's laying on some ratty old sofa with a bottle of beer in one hand and a joint in the other, laughing uncontrollably at something the girl literally on top of him is saying.

“How come you’re not this cool anymore?” Fili asks.

“I'm steadily approaching my middle age. It's less weed and shots, more pain medication and having to drag yourself out of bed every day,” Thorin says.

“And living in the middle of nowhere,” Fili says.

“That too. At least I'm not on my own, though,” Thorin says. He feels Fili’s eyes on him, and he realises that he didn't actually think about what he said.

“Is it a permanent thing? ‘Cause Kili’s got this friend, Tauriel. Her foster dad met this guy, Bard, a couple of years ago and him and his kids moved in with them, and now they’re together, and-”

“It's not like that, Fili. He's just here to recuperate, that's all,” Thorin says, cutting him off before he gets into too much detail.

“I'm not an idiot, you know,” Fili says with surprising stubbornness. Just like his mother. Just like his uncle, though Thorin isn’t sure if that means him or Frerin. “I know the difference between looking at someone and looking at someone. You're completely gone on him, aren’t you?”
“Have you been listening in on your mother's phone calls?” Thorin asks, but he knows he’s lost. Every time - and he means every time - he gets questions like this from Fili, he always loses. It’s like when Fili asked why he didn’t have a wife, or what really happened to Frerin to make Thorin disappear into the mountains for five damn years. You don’t argue with him, because if he asks, he already knows, and he just wants his suspicions confirmed from the source.

“I won’t tell him,” Fili says after an uncomfortable silence. He just goes back to the photos in his hands and that’s it, nothing else said. Thorin all but gapes at him. Under any other circumstances he would be sprinting to tell Kili, who can barely keep a secret to save his life. This time, he just shrugs and that’s the end of it. Fuck… this means he’s actually growing up.

Thorin shows Fili how to use the polaroid after that, and then Fili bolts outside to take photos of flowers and the scenery. He supervises for about ten minutes before he decided to go back in and leave Fili too it, telling him to be in before sundown. He won’t go far, and he knows not to even think about heading to the lake yet. They’ll do that tomorrow.

Back in the house, Kili is helping Bilbo cook. Kili, ever the shy one, is clearly still a little apprehensive about an unfamiliar face, but he seems to enjoy slicing potatoes while Bilbo chats aimlessly about when he was in school, not even really paying attention to whatever he’s doing to the chicken he’d defrosted the night before. Thorin brushes past him to get the sage from the spice drawer and hands it to him, saying quietly give that a go . Bilbo cuts himself off mid-word and takes it, thanking Thorin with an indecipherable look on his face.

Thorin is appointed to vegetable duty, which he’s fine with. The carrots and shallots go in a shallow dish with some kind of mustard glaze Bilbo pulled from god knows where and soon, the whole kitchen smells delicious with everything cooking at the same time in Thorin’s tiny little oven. Fili comes back in with a handful of photographs and leaves both them and the camera on the table. Thorin checks his watch. They have a few minutes until sundown, and that gives Thorin a chance to actually find the Shabbat candles he has tucked away somewhere. He finds them in his bedroom of all places and quickly sets them up, just two of them on the kitchen windowsill.

“Do you want me to…” Bilbo asks when Thorin gets out the matches, gesturing away from the kitchen.

“No, it’s okay,” he says. He quickly ties his hair up to avoid burning anything and then it’s time. Fili switches the kitchen light off and he and Kili come to stand either side of Thorin by the windowsill. Bilbo stays a little bit away, which is understandable. Thorin tries not to think about it and focuses instead on remembering his incredibly rusty Hebrew and lighting the candles on the first try. He strikes the match and lights them both, and, after waving his hand over them, covered his eyes. It should be a woman doing this, in theory, but Thorin knows that there can be exceptions. He takes a deep breath and, hoping that it doesn’t come out completely hopeless, starts to recite blessing.

It’s incredible to watch. Bilbo bows his head when Thorin starts to speak, but he can’t keep his eyes closed for very long. He’s got both hands over his eyes and his voice comes out low and steady. Bilbo doesn’t know anywhere near enough about Hebrew to know what he’s saying, but he gets the general gist, and somehow, it’s familiar. He can’t put a name or a date or a place to it, but he’s sure he’s seen this, heard this once before. It pulls at him in a way that isn’t unpleasant. It feels like… well, it feels like warmth blossoming in his chest and spreading through his body. He’s never been a particularly religious person, but that’s probably because he’s never looked at
religion beyond his Catholic background. He remembers something about his mum having Jewish ancestry, but that’s about it. She didn’t talk about it, and he sure as hell can’t ask her now. Maybe that’s why it’s familiar. Bungo went away a lot when Bilbo was a child, and Belladonna had always been about introducing new things to Bilbo. Perhaps she had performed the candle blessing on one of those occasions, though if she did, Bilbo only remembers the fluid musicality of Hebrew and the glow of the candles she had lit.

It’s a short blessing, and it’s over before Bilbo knows it. Thorin lowers his hands once he’s done and the boys stay where they are for a moment, both of them with their eyes closed. A second later, Fili is turning the light back on and they’re going about their normal business, Thorin putting the matches back in the drawer and Fili picking up the polaroid photo’s he had left on the table, taking them over to Thorin. Kili sits up at the table and pulls a piece of paper towards him, as well as snagging one of Thorin’s fancy looking pencils, and starts to doodle. Bilbo hangs at the outskirts of this little family bubble, not sure whether to leave or whether to break the candlelit illusion he’s witnessing right now.

Thorin looks at him and smiles warmly. Bilbo thinks back to how closed off and sullen he had been when they first met, and for the life of him, he can’t think of when that particular mask had shattered, but he’s glad it did, and he’s glad that he got to witness today something so beautiful and intimate, got to see a side of Thorin he never knew existed. And all it took was a visit from his nephews to make things infinitely brighter and livelier.

Bilbo ends up sitting down at the table next to Kili when asked too, and drawing when a pencil and a piece of paper is pushed over to him. The radio comes back on and for some reason, it’s Brigitte Bardot’s siren-like voice that fills the room, alongside Thorin and Fili talking about photography and how to get a decent picture with a polaroid, and Kili talking about a friend of his, who he’s apparently drawing, if her bright orange hair is anything to go by. It all feels a little too surreal, but Bilbo goes with it. It’s like being weightless, but in a good way. It’s contentment and happiness radiating from everyone in the room. Bilbo is used to Sunday lunches with his own family, as chaotic and as nosy and as rude as they are, but this puts an entire new spin on what a Sunday evening could be. Quiet. Relaxed. Bilbo wishes then, almost desperately, that the day never comes that he has to leave. It’s partly Thorin, he knows that, that makes him want to stay. His unusual charm and easy smiles over lunch and how he makes Bilbo’s coffee just right. And it’s the way he makes Bilbo’s nerve catch on fire when they touch. He still thinks about yesterday morning, all but holding Thorin’s hand over the table, realising for the first time just how gentle this man could be. And it’s evident again tonight, performing such a simple blessing over two candles with his nephews by his side.

Thorin asks for his help in setting up a table outside and Bilbo gladly assists, even if just to get some fresh air. It’s a lovely evening, the air warm with a gentle breeze, and the light from the sunset illuminating the sky is vibrant pinks and gold and lilacs. Thorin gets more candles from seemingly out of nowhere and lights them before putting them on the table and telling the boys to get cutlery and mats, they’re still in the same place, Kili, and he gestures for Bilbo to sit before going inside and coming back out with a bottle of wine.
“The food smells delicious,” he says softly, pouring them both a glass. Bilbo doesn’t drink, not yet. He’s pretty sure there’s another ritual involving wine on the Shabbat, but he doesn’t ask.

“Thank you,” Bilbo says. “I… I hope you like it. I improvised most of it, I think.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fantastic,” Thorin says. He seems so strangely… zen, and for the life of him, Bilbo can’t bring himself to care. It’s too much of a beautiful evening, and he’s going to remember this forever, if he doesn’t ever experience this again. The silence stretches between them, and Thorin shifts just a little in his chair, and reaches out to take Bilbo’s hand. It’s not electric when they touch - though that’s always been a damned lie - but comfort, wholeness. Bilbo isn’t a particularly poetic or dramatic person, but he knows an opportunity to be just that when he sees it, and just this once, lets himself think about wholeness and the way Thorin’s skin feels warm against his. There’s none of the tension there was yesterday, just… well, it’s just a simple touch, isn’t it? Perhaps a little more intimate that most, but Bilbo doesn’t care. He meets Thorin’s gaze and finds it imperceptible, but he can’t look away. The very thought just feels so wrong. Instead, he offers a smile and Thorin squeezes his hand as if to reassure him of something, though Bilbo doesn’t know what.

It’s like a barrier breaks between them then. They’d still been reluctant and withdrawn from each other, even in a small way, but with Bilbo’s smile and Thorin’s slight squeeze of his hand, all of that goes. It’s like it never existed. Bilbo isn’t very good at letting other people see his vulnerabilities, but this is different. Oh, this is so, so different. Thorin has told him of his brother and a little of his parents, and let Bilbo into his home and his life, and Bilbo has let him see parts of him no one else ever did, or ever will. When the nightmares come, Thorin is always there to keep them away, sometimes wordlessly helping Bilbo through panic attacks and sometimes just sitting on the edge of his bed and talking to him quietly, distracting him from the nightmares with his own childhood memories.

The timer goes off in the kitchen, and the moment isn’t broken, it’s shattered, and Bilbo hates the damn thing for a good few seconds there as he jumps up and scurries away to switch it off. The food is done, and that means that the boys will be joining them from wherever they are in the house. Bilbo turns and almost drops the plates from the side when he sees Thorin standing behind him, trying to inch closer to the oven in the enclosed space. They weave around each other for a minute or so after that to put things on the table and when the four of them sit down, Bilbo feels that warmth in his chest again when they all go silent, except for Thorin, who closes his eyes and says another blessing, his hand hovering over the challah loaf. After that, it’s cut up and passed around, and when they start to help themselves to the food laid out, Bilbo decides with absolute certainty that if this is what happiness is for him, then he’s going to fight damn hard to keep ahold of it.

Chapter End Notes

I'm legitimately so please with how this turned out, especially the bit with the candle lighting. Just for the record, I'm not Jewish, everything I know is from the internet and from my grandfather, but that's about it. If I've slipped up and made an error, please please please tell me and I will correct it, I want this to be as accurate as possible. Also! Bilbo and Thorin finally admitting their feelings? Holy shit. Anyway, this was actually meant to be longer, but I feel like where I stopped it was good enough. Thank you as always for reading and leaving such lovely comments! You make me want to keep writing this.
(Also, I remade. I'm at gaypippin )
The rain that comes the next morning stops them from leaving the house until the afternoon, though if Bilbo had a choice, he would have avoided going at all. As it is, he finds himself at the edge of a surprisingly large lake in a fold out chair, drinking coffee Thorin had made in a thermos. It’s a lovely day, really, but Bilbo has never liked the rain, or the way it soaks into his clothes and his skin. Thorin just stands, either helping Kili with his line or pointing Fili to anything interesting he can take photos of for school.

Despite the general dampness, the sun is out and shining.

Bilbo eventually has to get up and stretch his legs, and walks up to the edge of the lake where Kili is sat completely placidly, simply watching the water with his rod resting in a holder. His shoes and socks are off and his feet are dangling in the water, kicking out slowly and making ripples in the surface.

“My dad used to go fishing a lot,” Bilbo says. “He took me a few times, but I never got the hang of it. I always ended up just doing my homework instead.”

Kili looks up at him. He appears to have mastered the teenager look that says ‘what the hell are you talking about’, one eyebrow raised and squinting under the brim of his baseball cap.

“You actually did your homework?” he asks at last. Bilbo actually laughs. He gestures to the space next to Kili and he nods, shrugging. Bilbo sits down beside him.

“I didn’t get out much until I hit fifteen,” he says. “Did Thorin teach you to fish?”

“Nah, my mum did. She likes fishing too, she comes with us when she stays here,” Kili says. He looks back at the water and leans back on his hands. “Did your mum go fishing, too?”

Bilbo has to look away for a moment, telling himself he doesn't know, he doesn't know what happened to them. He shrugs.

“She did. My parents had this country house in the south of England with this lake, my dad would go fishing and my mum would join him if she felt like it. That didn't always happen, though,” Bilbo says.

“Do they still have the house?” Kili asks.

“Eh… no, they don't. They died just over a year ago.” Bilbo makes a point of looking away. He can feel the tension between them.

“Sorry,” Kili says quietly.
“It’s alright. I don’t really go around telling people my parents died,” Bilbo says. “I own the country house, though. I’ve been meaning to go back and see how it’s doing.”

“When you leave,” Kili says.

“When I leave.” God, it’s actually difficult to get that out. Bilbo hasn’t wanted to think about leaving since he and Thorin found somewhat even ground between them. The thought of going back to England, back to a miserable, lonely flat with nosey neighbours and terrible heating is just so unattractive. The idea of going to therapy every week, getting a job at whatever university would take him, grading essays and writing up lessons plans… it makes him feel ill just imagining it. He loves teaching, he really does. It’s the only thing he ever really wanted to do in his life, but to Bilbo, he can’t do that now. He can’t throw himself back into work while he still has those horrific nightmares, or while his scar is still pink and freshly healing, and so easy to open up again if he couldn’t control himself.

Obviously, he doesn’t say this. Kili and Fili lost their uncle the way Bilbo tried to off himself, he doesn’t need to open old metaphorical wounds just to explain, I can’t leave while I’m still trying to pull myself back together. He just follows Kili’s example and takes off his shoes and socks to put his feet in the water.

“Is that a tattoo?” Kili asks, pointing at his ankle. It’s barely visible above the water, but teenagers are perceptive, Bilbo has learned.

“Yeah. Don’t get a tattoo on a dare, it’s a very bad idea,” he said.

“What is it?”

“The Libra symbol. It’s my star sign. My roommate at the time got one too.” Bilbo reaches down and touches it. He barely even remembers getting it. It must have been, what, twelve years ago, now? The lines are a little blurry with age, but that doesn’t really matter. No one ever really sees it except him.

“Cool,” Kili says. “Thorin has one for his star sign on his chest, I think.”

“Oh?”

“I don’t know what it is.” Kili shrugs and pulls his hat back down. “Does it hurt?”

“Getting a tattoo? Yeah, it stings a lot. And it hurts while it’s healing. After that, you just forget it’s there,” Bilbo says. He can’t believe he’s having a conversation with a fourteen year old about tattoos, but honestly, he’s done stranger things since being here. Like getting drunk with an internationally known artist on his balcony, drinking wine straight from the bottle like teenagers.

“I don’t think I’ll get any,” Kili says at last. Bilbo smiles.

“It’s your choice in the end. Just be careful what you get if you do,” he says. Kili laughs quietly.

“My mum and Thorin said exactly the same thing to me. I’m fourteen, I’m not gonna start running around doing stupid crap like that,” he says.

“You’re fifteen on Thursday. That’s when things start to get fun,” Bilbo says.

“Were you fun at fifteen?”

“More like a nuisance, but it was fun at the time. It was quite quiet where I grew up, so there
wasn’t really a lot to do except go and sit in fields with your friends and come back at two in the
morning smelling like alcohol. Don’t… don’t do that, you live in a city, it’ll just end badly,” Bilbo
adds. Navigating London while drunk or even just hungover had been a gargantuan task, as had
been staying awake on the train back home.

“Like I said, I’m fourteen. I’m not going to do that,” Kili says. Bilbo expects him to sound
annoyed, but he just sounds amused. He has to be the most relaxed teenager in the world, Bilbo
decides. Any fourteen going on fifteen year old that can sit by a lake quietly and wait for a fish to
bite his line and have a conversation with a boring old man like Bilbo has got to have either the
patience or the personality of a saint. Bilbo could hardly have a conversation with eighteen year
olds just starting university without knowing that he was boring them to death.

Neither of them say anything for a while after that. Bilbo is honestly content just to sit and look at
the water, and at the mountains visible from where they’re sitting. Only a few small ones, but it’s
breathtaking all the same. It’s a completely different view than the one from Thorin’s balcony.
Bilbo looks behind him at Thorin occupying the fold out chair, sketching with a concentrated look
on his face. He’s actually wearing jeans, instead of just sweatpants or pyjama bottoms, and ancient
looking biker boots that must be at least ten years old. He notices Bilbo looking at him and smiles,
wavering with a pencil in his hand. Bilbo waves back, getting Kili’s attention too, who just looks at
him strangely. Neither of them say anything about it, and Bilbo looks back on the water. He would
be lying if he said he couldn’t feel Thorin’s eyes on his back.

It starts raining again an hour later. Not just a drizzle, no. It’s a bloody downpour. Bilbo shoots up
at the first sound of thunder in the distance and has his shoes on before anyone else can even react
to it. Thorin looks up when he walks over, one pencil between his teeth and another in his hand as
he adds some detail to whatever it is he’s drawing.

“I think it’s going to rain,” Bilbo says, just before another clap of thunder comes, this time much
closer. He flinches and wraps his arms around himself.

“Start heading back, I’ll get the boys sorted,” Thorin says. He stands and leaves his open
sketchbook on the chair to get his keys out of his pocket. Bilbo takes them, but he’s looking at the
book instead, seeing the definite shapes of two people sat next to each other, one wearing a
baseball cap over unruly black hair, the other in a t shirt. Bilbo’s t shirt. He doesn’t get to ask,
however, because Thorin closes up the sketchbook and hands it to Bilbo at the first sign of rain.

“We’ll meet you back there,” he says and touches Bilbo’s shoulder for a second before turning to
the boys. “Alright, time to pack up! I won’t send you back to your mother with colds because I let
you stay out in a storm.”

Bilbo is already walking away. It’s a slight downhill trek back to the house, so he has to be careful
not to slip once it really starts to hammer down. He hugs the sketchbook to his chest in hopes that
it’ll stay dry, but he’s only halfway back when the rain decides to just get heavier until he is
completely drenched, his hair stuck to his face and his clothes unfortunately sodden. He regrets
ever owning canvas shoes, he decides once he sees the house. He’ll definitely have to throw them
out. A flash of lightning brightens up the sky not far from him and he stumbles, flinching once
again, almost dropping Thorin’s sketchbook. He half runs to get to the safety of the house and
fumbles with the keys for a good few seconds, only just realising how cold he is. His hands are
shaking by the time he gets inside. He puts the sketchbook on the table by the door and sets about
getting his shoes and socks off.

Thorin and the boys get back not long after, once Bilbo is using a towel to dry the rainwater from
his hair. He knows he’s going to need a shower before he gets sick, but he can wait until Fili and
Kili have been sorted out first. Like him, they’re all absolutely soaked to the bone, and the only one who looks even remotely grumpy about it is Thorin, walking stiffly in wet jeans and trying to get his shoes off. He has to sit on the ground like a child while Fili and Kili disappear to use the two showers in the house first, while Bilbo and Thorin are left in the hallway, Thorin still on the ground even after he’s discarded his boots. Out of sympathy, Bilbo sits next to him with the towel.

“I wasn’t expecting that,” Thorin says. “Are you alright?”

“Fine. I must say, I’ve been drier,” Bilbo says. Thorin laughs and leans his head back against the wall, his hair still tied up somehow. Bilbo wishes he could see what happens when rainwater dries and no doubt turns it into an absolute wreck, but he knows that Thorin’s going to stop anyone from witnessing that by jumping in the shower as soon as he can.

“You’re really scared of storms, aren’t you?” Thorin says. He turns his head to look at Bilbo.

“Terrified.” Thunder sounds again and Bilbo flinched once more, closing his eyes and turning his head away from Thorin. A moment later, he feels his hand on his arm.

“You’re alright,” Thorin says gently. Bilbo nods, eyes still closed, but thunder comes again and he wants to hide in his room and ignore it until it passes. Thorin’s hand tightens around his arm, but it’s a reassurance, like when he does the same to keep Bilbo from his nightmares.

One of the showers shuts off and Thorin sighs.

“Kili will be in there forever. You can use mine, the hot water lasts longer,” he says. He manages to stand and pulls Bilbo to his feet. The thunder keeps coming, so Thorin holds onto his arm while they walk to Thorin’s room, passing Fili in the hallway wearing pyjamas. He looks less like a drowned rat and more cosy and warm and about to make himself a big mug of hot chocolate.

Then, they’re in Thorin’s room and Bilbo is being directed to the bathroom attached to it. There are wet clothes piled in the washing basket, but it’s blissfully warm inside, and when Thorin closes the door, Bilbo immediately strips down and leaves his clothes in the basket too.

The hot water feels like a blessing on his cold skin. Bilbo just stands there for a good few minutes under the stream of water, letting it chase away the chill that had been developing through him. It takes a while for his hands to warm up, but washing his hair with Thorin’s fancy looking shampoo helps, so he spends a while running his fingers through the suds with the water flow hitting a spot between his shoulderblades. It’s so… nice, and Bilbo almost forgets that there’s a storm going on. Almost. The sound of thunder still breaks through the sound of the water, but the water dulls it. Bilbo is shaking when he comes out eventually and wraps a towel around himself, and then it hits him that he has no dry clothes in immediate reach. He doesn’t actually mind walking out into Thorin’s room with just a towel on, he’s seen Thorin half naked plenty of times, but he really doesn’t want to risk going back to his own room and being seen in just a towel by two teenage boys. No, that’s just crossing a line.

There’s a knock on the bathroom door.

“Do you want to borrow some clothes?” Thorin asks in a quiet voice. Oh, you are a saint, Thorin Durin, Bilbo thinks.

“Uh, yes please.” Bilbo braves walking over to the door and opens it just a little to look at Thorin, undressed but thankfully still wearing boxers. Bilbo forgets he has tattoos on his legs too, a huge curling dragon on his right thigh and what looks like a forest around his left ankle. Thorin hands him a folded set of pyjama bottoms and an old t shirt and Bilbo disappears back into the bathroom.
The clothes, obviously, are too big on him, but they’re warm and comfortable, and honestly that’s all Bilbo cares about. He changes quickly and towel dries his hair as best as he can before stepping out. Thorin is sat on the edge of his bed, still in his boxers, flicking through his damp sketchbook. Bilbo comes and sits beside him.

“Shower’s free,” he says. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Just some blurry drawings. It’s nothing,” Thorin says. He shuts the book and puts it on his bed behind him, twisting so Bilbo can see his back. A huge double headed raven takes up most of the space between his shoulderblades and his hips, beautifully detailed and sporting hints of colour like that on a raven's wing when the sun catches it. Bilbo almost, almost, reaches out to touch it, but holds back, not wanting to cross any of the boundaries Thorin had so wordlessly set up between them. He didn’t mind touch, but anything even close to intimate made him recoil and shut down.

“Put it on the radiator,” Bilbo says.

“Sorry?”

“It’s what my mum used to do when our books got wet. Put them on the radiator for the night.” Bilbo rubs his arm nervously, looking away until Thorin laughs.

“You come out with the weirdest advice, you know that, right?” he says. He’s smiling gently, no kind of unkindness in his eyes. Bilbo remembers the first time they met. All he had been able to read in Thorin was apprehension and reluctance. Now, he’s sat on Thorin’s bed, wearing his clothes, while Thorin is almost naked after running from the storm lashing the windows with a vengeance.

“Fili made hot chocolate, you should grab some before they drink it all,” Thorin says. He stands and walks away towards the bathroom. “Save me some, if you can.”

“Alright, your highness,” Bilbo teases. Thorin just laughs again and disappears into the bathroom.

Bilbo flops back onto Thorin’s bed and closes his eyes for a moment. It’s quiet in here, despite the sound of the rain and the thunder outside. Bilbo runs a hand over the sheets, worn but soft, much like the clothes he’s wearing. They smell clean. Thorin changed them only a day or so ago, that’s probably why. Bilbo closes his eyes and tells himself he’ll just be a minute, he’ll be gone before Thorin gets out of the shower. He curls up on the bed and pushes the sketchbook away before burying his face in one of the pillows, realising it smells like Thorin’s shampoo. He’s drifting off before he can stop himself, suddenly overcome with exhaustion, but at least he can’t hear the storm while he sleeps.

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Maybe the car doesn’t swerve. Bilbo has gone through this scenario a million and one times in his head over the last year. Maybe the car doesn’t swerve. Maybe Bungo sees the ice and slows, skirting around it as much as he can on the motorway. Maybe they don’t crash into the sign and maybe they get home safe. Bilbo sleeps in his old room and wakes up with a hangover, and this time, his father doesn’t hide the paracetamol from him. He cooks breakfast for his parents and drinks sweet, hot tea and spends the day lounging in his pyjamas. They celebrate New Year’s at Mirabella’s house and the man from Prim’s party is there, and Bilbo snogs him at the countdown, and the morning after particularly shameless things happen in the bathroom together, they never see each other again.
He can live with that. Normalcy. Joking to his students when university starts again about the dangers of drinking too much around gorgeous strangers. Pleasant chit chat with his co workers over morning coffee and an evening brandy. Grading essays and kindly suggesting where to fix things, not so kindly telling certain students that they need to get their arses in gear if they actually want to get this degree. Admiring paintings of mountains and Eastern European architecture and the American West without ever being able to put a personality to the name ‘Thorin Durin’.

But the car swerved. They hit the sign. None of those things happened, and Bilbo woke up in a hospital bed a day later with a throbbing migraine and an old family friend looking down at him with sorrow in his eyes that’s completely new to Bilbo.

Bilbo sees Thorin in the car this time. Short hair and a neater beard, but still strikingly handsome. Belladonna is still in the front with Bungo, but she’s talking to Thorin. Her hair looks different. Her dress was blue, wasn’t it? Not a rich plum purple.

They pass a sign that says ‘Royal Wootton Bassett’. They hadn’t gotten that far in the drive, had they? Bilbo is sure that they didn’t.

There’s no snow.

It’s a wet winter. The windscreen wipers are on and George Michael is playing. Thorin looks at Bilbo and smiles in a way Bilbo has never seen before. Did they just come from a Christmas party? It seems unlikely that Thorin would ever go to a Christmas party, so maybe it’s something else. Bilbo doesn’t know. Maybe it was just dinner.

And then Thorin takes Bilbo’s hand and brings it to his mouth, kissing his knuckles gently, eyes falling shut for a few seconds.

“Thorin,” he manages.

“Thank you for tonight,” Thorin says quietly. “Though I think Prim immediately handing me a child to look after was a little strange.”

“It means she trusts you,” Bilbo says before he can think. He barely even recognises his own voice. Thorin is still holding his hand, leaning over to him from the other side of the car. It’s a small car, so he doesn’t have to lean very far.

“I’m glad she does,” he says. He links their fingers together. Bilbo doesn’t have to think hard about what’s going on. Somehow, by some miracle, Bungo and Belladonna are alive, and he’s with Thorin, and they’re driving away from a family dinner to go back home.

The sound of the car engine doesn’t make Bilbo flinch, and neither does the crash of thunder overhead. It feels much too close, but he feels much too safe.

Something’s wrong.

He turns his head and Thorin presses a kiss to his temple, lingering and soft, as Bilbo looks ahead. There’s got to be some ice. That’s the only way this will end, he knows it. Ice, or a large amount of water, or a random badger that Bungo will absolutely swerve to miss. Something that will send them into a road sign.

This shouldn’t be happening. It’s so fundamentally wrong that Bilbo feels sick. This isn’t right. He shouldn’t be able to hear his mother talking to Thorin so clearly, or George Michael on the radio, or Bungo saying something about Thorin’s painting, something about a mural...
It’s too... god, Bilbo believes in miracles in small doses, but nothing like this.

He squeezes Thorin’s hand. He knows that this is the only time he will ever be able to. He wonders if he kisses Thorin, it will feel like it would in real life.

He knows he’s dreaming. That’s definitely the worst part.

Thorin is tipsy. That’s obvious. Bilbo has seen it before, on the balcony, when the first and the strongest of Thorin’s walls came tumbling down like a hurricane had hit them at full force. When he became so much warmer and more open, willing to actually talk to Bilbo.

Bilbo wants the dream to stop, or at least turn into a nightmare.

It’s a deer that does it. A young doe. She runs out into the middle of the road and stops, staring, very much a deer in the headlights when she realises the car speeding towards her. Bungo swears loudly and swerves, and Thorin grabs Bilbo’s arm tight, tighter than Bilbo ever realised he could hold something.

He closes his eyes. He hits the back of the passenger seat, like he had before. Blood streams down his face from the cut on his nose and he’s dizzy, watching blood spray onto the windscreen, not doubting for a second who it’s from.

He forces himself to turn to look at Thorin, though he knows he has severe whiplash. Thorin is leaning against the window, his nose bloody and broken, a trail of red coming from the corner of his mouth. Bilbo reaches for him, whispering his name hoarsely, and Thorin answers, saying his name back. His voice sounds broken, and it breaks Bilbo’s heart in so many ways. He never should have been in the car, or in the dream, or even in Bilbo’s life. He says Thorin’s name again and again. He’s watching him die. His hand is still in Bilbo’s, but his grip is failing, his fingers growing cold. He repeats Thorin’s name over and over, getting quieter each time until he’s just mouthing it. He still feels the press of Thorin’s lips against his temple.

And then Thorin’s voice rings clear as a bell, and it’s not coming from the Thorin in the car. It’s steady and gentle, and there’s pressure on Bilbo’s shoulder. He’s sure it’s a paramedic... how long has he been watching Thorin die? How long has he been holding the hand of a dead man? How long has he been feeling the frontal lobe trauma rip through his head?

He doesn’t know. It feels like forever. Thorin stops saying his name, and Bilbo’s left in the silence.

- He forces himself awake slowly. At first, all Bilbo knows is that he’s not in the car. He didn’t just relive the worst thing that had ever happened to him. He’s safe. He’s warm.

And it’s dark.

Bilbo opens his eyes and sees that the sky outside is black, and the only light on in the room is the lamp by the bed. He stares at it. He’s sure that the lamp in his room is an Ikea model, not the vintage one he’s looking at, emitting a warm golden glow. And his window is on the other side of the room...

He groans and rolls over onto his back.

“Evening.”

It’s Thorin, naturally, stretched out on the bed like a very large black cat, his laptop resting on his
stomach. Bilbo looks at him.

“Evening,” he says. “What… what time is it?”

“Nine-ish. You fell asleep,” Thorin says.

“I can see that.” Bilbo pushes himself up into a sitting position and rubs his eyes. “The boys…?”

“In bed with a movie. We had sandwiches for dinner, there’s plenty left if you want any,” Thorin says. He barely looks away from his laptop, and Bilbo realises he has his headphones in. Well, one of them.

“I’m not hungry,” Bilbo says. It’s a blatant lie, but he doesn’t really want to get off of the bed just yet. It’s impossibly comfortable, and Thorin’s here. What else could he want? He wonders if he can convince Thorin to go make him some sandwiches, or if he’ll just fall back asleep if left alone for a few minutes. “What are you watching?”

“The first Mad Max movie. Dwalin keeps sending me links to movies he thinks I need to watch,” Thorin says. Bilbo shifts over and Thorin sits up a little so Bilbo can see the laptop screen. He takes the headphones out and turns the volume down so he doesn’t wake the boys, if they’re even asleep. “Ever seen it?”

“Yeah, ages ago. First film came out the year after I was born, actually,” Bilbo says. He leans on Thorin’s shoulder. It’s really the only way to watch comfortably.


“Forty one in July. I was watching this with my dad when I was a kid,” Thorin says. It’s easy to imagine Thorin as a child - much like Kili, but with blue eyes and a different nose.

“I watched the Bond films with my dad,” Bilbo says quietly. “I think I’ve seen all of them by now.”

“Goldfinger is the best one.” Thorin says it like it’s an indisputable fact.

“No way, it’s Dr No, no doubt about it,” Bilbo says. He remembers getting into this argument with Bungo at least three times a year. Bungo thought that Goldfinger was the best Bond film, too, until Bilbo and Belladonna both insisted it was Dr No.

“Dis used to have a crush on Sean Connery as James Bond,” Thorin says. He smiles to himself, like it’s funny. Bilbo comes so damn close to saying ‘me too’, but holds it in. Sean Connery was perhaps his first celebrity crush until his teens, and then a whole bunch of complicated feelings came after that, realising that he had no interest in girls.

“Let me guess - you fancied Miss Moneypenny, didn’t you?” he teases. Thorin raises an eyebrow at him, huffing a laugh.

“Nah. Roger Moore. Nice try, though,” he says. He turns back to the movie, leaving Bilbo staring at him, wide eyed, not quite sure what to do with that information. Thorin seems so unfazed by saying it, but if Bilbo knows anything about it, it’s that his sense of humour is dry and unexpected, and this is an example of it.

“Roger Moore, huh?” he manages.
“M-hmm. Had a poster of him on my wall when I was a teenager. Nice sight to wake up to every morning, if I’m being honest,” Thorin says.

“I had an Indiana Jones poster. Raiders of the Lost Ark, not The Last Crusade,” Bilbo admits. It should be embarrassing, but it’s not, now that he has the image of sixteen year old Thorin mooning over Roger Moore. “Though I think everyone had a thing for Harrison Ford back then.”

“I’d take Han Solo over Indie, if I’m being honest,” Thorin says. They’re not even watching the movie anymore, as much as Bilbo won’t admit that Mel Gibson holds the same place in his heart as Sean Connery does.

“They didn’t have any Star Wars posters when I got that one,” Bilbo says.

“Shame.”

“They didn’t have any of Roger Moore, either.”

“Again, shame. Imagine the action you’d get with Roger Moore and Harrison Ford on the same wall,” Thorin says. Bilbo elbows him in the ribs before he can stop himself, and Thorin half laughs, half grunts in pain.

“You’re disgusting,” Bilbo says, but he’s laughing too.

“I get it, you’re a Connery guy. Oh man, remind me to never watch his films with you and Dis at the same time,” Thorin says, still laughing.

“Oh, now I want to do that,” Bilbo says. “You might be the only one paying attention to the film, though.”

“That’s what I’m worried about. I like my movies with a healthy string of verbal commentary,” Thorin says. He closes his laptop and puts it on his bedside table. They weren’t even watching the film, anyway. Bilbo lays back down on the bed. He’s hungry and still tired, but it’s so damn warm this close to Thorin, the human radiator. He’s wearing a vest covered in flecks of paint, and it shows a good deal of his chest. Bilbo turns on his side and looks at the visible tattoos along his collarbones and shoulders, down his arms. He finds the one Kili was talking about peeking out of the collar of his vest.

“Heh. We match,” Bilbo says quietly. He touches the curling Leo symbol gently and feels Thorin tense up at the contact, only to relax and look at Bilbo, something in his eyes impossible to figure out. “I have one on my ankle,” he says when Thorin gives him a confused look.

“Oh. Right. You don’t have any more, do you?” Thorin asks. Bilbo is still touching his chest, but he’s warm and solid under his skin. He doesn’t think he can actually stop.

“Afraid not. I’m a professor, I don’t do tattoos,” he says. He remembers Thorin in the car, fading away, his skin impossibly cold where Bilbo was holding his hand. He shakes it away.

“Well, if you ever want another one, let me know. Dwalin’s a tattoo artist,” Thorin says.

“Really? I thought he was a builder,” Bilbo says.

“Nah. Tattoo artist. Did most of mine, actually,” Thorin says. Bilbo moves his hand from Thorin’s chest to his bicep, where geometric patterns cascade down his arm, matching the images on the other side. It takes a couple of seconds to realise the pattern. They look like runes, but Bilbo doubts that they are. His fingers trace the inside of Thorin’s bicep, where he knows the skin is sensitive,
and hears his breath hitch just a little bit.

“I’ll be honest, I got mine on a dare,” Bilbo says.

“ Fucking hell.”

“Yeah. Stupid thing to do, I know.”

“Well, at least you weren’t drunk.”

“Well…”

“You’re kidding.” Thorin turns on his side too, and Bilbo is almost hilariously reminded of sleepovers when he was a kid, laying like this in his twin bed with a friend and whispering so that his parents didn’t hear them.

“I wish I was,” Bilbo says. “I did a lot of stupid things in my twenties.”

“Is the tattoo the stupidest, or were you completely insane?” Thorin asks. Bilbo cracks up for some reason, but it feels good to laugh like this after the nightmare he had. He’d rather Thorin alive and unreachable than dead in a car seconds after kissing Bilbo in a way that could only be seen as romantic.

“Nah, the tattoo was the worst. That, and that one time we stole a shopping trolley and ended up crashing it into a river. While I was in it,” Bilbo says.

“Wow. Never would have pegged you as a trolley thief,” Thorin says.

“Never would have pegged you for a stoner, but Fili showed me the pictures,” Bilbo retorts without a second of hesitation. Thorin’s eyes widen in shock, but the smile never really leaves his face.

“The traitor,” he says in a mock horror voice. “It was only pot, you know. No hard drugs. Well… maybe once, but that’s besides the point.”

“And now you’re an old man who lives like a hermit in the Swiss mountains,” Bilbo says.

“Not a hermit.”

“You live in a house halfway up a mountain.”

“You’re not a hermit if someone lives with you.”

“Two people can be hermits.” Bilbo would be able to see where this is going from a hundred miles away, and for the life of him, he can’t bring himself to stop.

“No, they can’t. Nice try though. I used to be a hermit before you came along,” Thorin says. His fingertips brush Bilbo’s arm for the slightest second.

“Glad to have changed things for you,” Bilbo says.

“Hmm. I’m glad you did.” Thorin closes his eyes and rests his hand on Bilbo’s arm. They’re lead down, facing each other, in a dark room at night. There’s so many scenarios playing in Bilbo’s head, but he refuses to entertain around ninety eight percent of them. The other two percent are just harmless fantasy.

“Thorin,” he says quietly. Thorin hums in acknowledgement, telling him to go on. “I don’t want to leave.”
If Bilbo has a top ten of hardest things to say, that’s up there with ‘I’m actually gay’, said to his best friend when she tried to kiss him when they were teenagers, and ‘no offense, Aunt Lobelia, but the reason I’m not listening is because I don’t actually give a fuck about your racist attitude’, said when he was roped into helping plan Prim’s twenty first birthday. Prim still thinks it’s hilarious that he actually said that to her after putting up with a twenty minute rant about foreign food.

Thorin doesn’t open his eyes. His hand tightens around Bilbo’s arm just a little and his eyebrows draw together like he’s thinking. Bilbo’s heart is doing somersaults. Maybe he should have kissed Thorin in the dream, even if only to know what it was like.

“Then don’t,” Thorin says at last. “You don’t have to leave.” He opens his eyes and looks at Bilbo.

“I can’t stay here forever, you know,” Bilbo says. “I still have a job. Technically.”

“Do you actually want to go back to that job, Bilbo?” Thorin asks, gently, firmly. He’s got this knowing look in his eye that Bilbo has never seen before. His throat feels like it’s closing up, making it hard to breathe, to speak.

“I… I don’t know,” he manages. “It’s only been four months, I can barely get in the shower these days, let alone lecture a room full of young adults on a daily basis.”

“So stay. As long as you need. Stay.” Thorin moves his hand to touch the side of Bilbo’s face. Oh, that is not fair that Thorin is the first one to do that out of the two of them. Bilbo closes his eyes and feels Thorin’s fingers, calloused skin, trace the line of his jaw. It isn’t until he feels them against his lips that he realises he’s been holding his breath and lets it out in a long exhale. Thorin’s fingers don’t move away.

“Why are you doing this for me?” he asks.

“I know a lost soul when I see one. And I couldn’t bear the thought of turning you away, not after… Thorin trails off. Bilbo knows what he means. He seems to be getting better at that, it seems. Understanding Thorin, what he says and what he doesn’t say, and everything else left in between.

“You’d get bored of me,” Bilbo says.

“It’s been two months, I think I would’ve gotten bored already. That hasn’t happened,” Thorin says. Oh, did Thorin get closer? Their legs are touching, and Bilbo tries not to think about how ridiculous this whole thing is. For god’s sake, he’s still groggy from his nap.

“I’m a boring person,” Bilbo says.

“You’re actually quite a nice person to be around, you know,” Thorin says. He brushes his thumb over Bilbo’s cheek. The intimacy of it all is just killing Bilbo. He can’t remember it ever being this easy.

“I bet you twenty euros that you get sick of me by June,” he says with a shaky laugh. Thorin rests his hand against Bilbo’s neck this time. The hot weight of it is almost too much, but Bilbo endures.

“I bet you twenty I won’t,” Thorin says.

“Oh, god, I hope you like being twenty euros short.”

“I’m an internationally well known painter, I don’t care if I win the bet or not.” Thorin smiles and Bilbo thinks that this is it, this is the point of no return, because he’s sure that Thorin is about to kiss him. There’s that tell tale vibe between them now, two months of gradually going from two people who hate each other to two people who are comfortable being half naked around each other
culminating in the split second before the Big Damn Kiss, making Bilbo’s skin feel electric.

Looking back on it, Bilbo will know that it wasn’t his fault that it didn’t happen that night. It wasn’t even Kili’s. He didn’t know, so he just walked right into the room, yawning and looking absolutely shattered, telling Thorin he can’t find his headphones. Thorin disappears with him and Bilbo should take that chance to go back to his room, but he doesn’t. Instead, he just gets under the covers and wraps them around himself. Oh, of course the bed smells like Thorin. Clean linen and Thorin. What a wonderful combination.

Bilbo is half asleep when Thorin comes back. He doesn’t really notice him until the mattress sinks behind him and a tentative arm wraps around his waist. It’s nice, really. It’s comfortable, and Thorin is pleasantly warm and solid against Bilbo’s back.

Part of Bilbo tells him he’s going to regret this in the morning, but in his half asleep state, he touches Thorin’s arm that’s wrapped around him and trails his fingers down until he gets to Thorin’s hand, taking it into his own and bringing it close to his chest. Thorin hums behind him and Bilbo thinks, just before falling off to sleep, that this is absolutely the closest he will ever get to Thorin, and if there are walls that will never quite come down, then so be it.

Luckily, he doesn’t dream at all.

Chapter End Notes

heres 6.5k of awkward gay and not kissing. next chapter will follow on the morning after. i almost made The Thing happen but like... i needed more angst anyway i hope you liked it, thank you for supporting this fic, ur all stars find me on tumblr @gaypippin
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

cw: violence/self harm kind of, reference to corporal punishment in schools

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Bilbo wakes with an alarm that isn’t him in a bed that isn’t his with an arm wrapped around his waist that can’t physically be his. He wakes and almost panics because of all of that, until he remembers the night before, and promptly wishes to be relocated to the furthest hole and never come back out.

Thorin is still asleep, if the snoring is anything to go by. It’s almost loud enough to drown out the alarm, but the incessant ringing threatens to give Bilbo a migraine, and so he groans and disentangles himself from Thorin to lean over him and switch it off. Somehow, Thorin manages to sleep through that, but rolls onto his front with a groan. Bilbo half sits up to look at him, his sleep addled mind not taking in much besides just how curly Thorin’s hair is, and tell tale mumbling of someone who is in the slow process of waking up, but doesn’t want to be.

He doesn’t want to think about last night, but he does anyone. Thorin teasing him about Harrison Ford and being this close to kissing him after touching his face, only for them to be interrupted. If Bilbo was in his right state of mind, he would be pissed. And he was, just a little, but he couldn’t be properly mad with a child who didn’t know. There would be other chances like the one he almost grabbed last night.

But do you actually want to get involved, a small voice asks of him. Bilbo lays back down and looks at Thorin, reaching out to gently push his hair from his face. When he sleeps, the lines of his face are softer. He looks less like a man carved from stone, though Bilbo isn’t poetic enough to come up with another comparison. He echoes what Thorin did last night and brushes his cheek with his thumb, fingertips feeling the roughness of his beard.

“Are you awake?” he whispers. He waits, and to his surprise, Thorin nods slowly. His eyes remain shut.

“What time is it?” he whispers back groggily.

“Seven, I think. Your alarm woke me up,” Bilbo says. He’s still touching Thorin’s face, but that’s only fair, he thinks. “Go back to sleep.”

“No.” This time, Thorin opens his eyes and smiles. He reaches to Bilbo under the quilt and touches his waist, impossibly warm fingers touching the strip of skin where Bilbo’s borrowed shirt had ridden up in the night. He doesn’t have the heart to pull it down, now that Thorin is moving closer and trailing his hand around to the small of Bilbo’s back. “Twenty minutes, then I’ll get the boys up.”

“Let them sleep in, they’re probably exhausted from yesterday,” Bilbo manages.
“Kili was. And I’m afraid we were interrupted,” Thorin says. He’s still barely awake, but he manages to sound completely in control and awake, his thumb rubbing circles against the skin of Bilbo’s back. “If you… well, that is if you want…”

“Thorin.”

“Hmm?”

“You’re not kissing me with morning breath like that.”

Thorin laughs, turning his face towards the pillow so Bilbo can only see his eyes, the rest covered by his hair. Bilbo is glad he’s still touching his back, though. It’s an intimacy he’s had with Thorin for a while, he thinks, just one that they’ve never really touched upon. And now they’re in Thorin’s bed at seven in the morning and Bilbo wants so much to kiss him. He could, realises. He could close the gap between them and kiss Thorin like it’s nothing. He doesn’t actually know where that will take them, but that’s the fun of it, is it not?

He just brushes Thorin’s hair from his face again.

“I have to go to Marseilles today,” Thorin says softly.

“I know,” Bilbo says. They’d talked about it the day before. Thorin doesn’t have his paintings done, but he’s going in to look at the gallery and perhaps yell about one of his old paintings still being there.

“Are you alright to look after the boys today? I’ll be back late,” Thorin says.

“I’ll be fine. I’ll bore them to sleep with a lecture on Tiberius,” Bilbo says, smiling. He touches Thorin’s chest and feels his heart beating. Part of him wishes he could go with him, if only to see the gallery, but being sat in a car for five hours? No thanks. He’s happy here.

“I need a shower,” Thorin says, groaning. Bilbo dares to move closer, running a hand down Thorin’s arm to his hand.

“Go get in the shower, I’ll make breakfast,” he says.

“And lunch?”

“We’ve got to have sandwich things left. You can do that yourself, lazy.” Bilbo squeezes his hand. “Go on, shower.” He has to physically push Thorin away, otherwise he’ll be wrapped around him, stopping him from going off to Marseilles in a five hour drive just to look at some walls.

Thorin half falls out of bed with a groan and Bilbo watches, still wrapped up in the blankets, as he strips his vest off on the way to the bathroom, balling it up in his hand.

Well, at least he’s nice to look at, a voice in his head says, and for once, Bilbo actually agrees with it.

He has to drag himself out of bed while Thorin’s in the shower. Granted, he’s starving, and in dire need of his own pyjamas, but the clothes he’s wearing are so comfortable that he doesn’t even entertain that thought as he walks into the kitchen and looks for breakfast food. They have bread and eggs, and some of those frozen potato things that Thorin seems to buy in bulk. They are delicious, though, so he doesn’t blame him. He puts perhaps too many in the oven and whisks eggs with milk, adding salt and pepper and a dash of thyme.

As much energy as it takes, Bilbo has always used cooking as a stress or anxiety reliever. He gets to violently crush and mix things while also getting something to eat at the end of it. He’s not an
expressive person, or an extrovert, unless he’s really pushed (thanks, Lobelia), but cooking makes him express feelings he didn’t even know he had.

Today, frustration is one of them. Why can’t it just be simple? Why couldn’t they have met like normal people at the cinema or through mutual friends at a party or at the store? Bilbo believes heartily in simplicity, and simplicity in relationships is going on dates, kissing on a doorstep, and having awkward sex together for the first time. It’s happened before, and while those particular relationships never lasted longer than a few months, a year at most, it’s still what Bilbo is used to. God, how long has it been? Four years since he felt like this? Four years, a car crash, and suicide attempt later, and he’s making breakfast for a man he almost kissed last night, only to wake up with and flirt with him the morning after until he quite literally pushed Thorin out of bed.

At least it’s interesting.

Thorin comes out dressed in an actual shirt and tie. Well, the tie is untied and his hair is wet, but it’s pulled back and tied up neatly, not a stray curl in sight. And the jeans take away from the professional image. But he looks good, and Bilbo tries not to think about it as he puts the toast on and pours eggs into a pan with hot butter.

“Remind me to actually cook for you one of these days,” Thorin says, coming up behind him.

“I’d rather not get food poisoning,” Bilbo retorts, getting a laugh. “Go butter your toast, this is almost done.”

Thorin does as he’s told, rolling his shirt sleeves up to do so. Bilbo takes his plate from him when he’s done and scrapes the scrambled eggs out onto the toast before handing it back.

“You’re not eating?” Thorin asks.

“Hm? Oh, in a minute. I’m waiting for these to be done,” Bilbo says, checking the potato things. He still doesn’t really know what they’re called. Thorin was in the shower for a long time, so they should be done any minute. “Sit down, eat. You’re going to be sat in the car for a while.”

Thorin does as he’s told. He takes off his hopeless tie and leaves it on the table while he eats, practically inhaling his food. Bilbo takes the potato things out of the oven and puts them all in a shallow bowl, placing them on the table. There’s enough in there for all four of them, which will make it so much easier when Fili and Kili wake up. Bilbo plates his own food and sits beside Thorin, and eats much slower, as famished as he is. Thorin gets up when he’s done, pinching one of the potato things and eating it with his hand while he leaves his plate in the sink and gets out his thermos, putting the kettle on the stove. He pulls out a mug - one for Bilbo - and makes his coffee first, stirring in the perfect amount of sugar and milk.

It’s all calm and quiet on the surface, but inside, Bilbo is a burning ball of fear and anticipation. Not just because of last night, no. It’s the irrational fear of Thorin being in a car for five hours to and from Marseilles in one day. He wishes he could voice it, but he doesn’t. His dream yesterday makes him keep his mouth shut. He doesn’t want to deal with that worry when he was so content this morning to stay in bed with Thorin next to him.

“Will you be back for dinner?” Bilbo asks as he washes the plates and Thorin dries.

“I don’t know. If I’m not back by eight, I’ll grab something in Vevey,” Thorin says.

“When do you start working on the paintings?” Bilbo hands him the pan to dry and Thorin wipes the inside with his cloth.
“The weekend. I’ve still got some final sketches to do before I do anything big.” Thorin leaves the pan on the side while he dries glasses and puts them back, effortlessly reaching the cupboard Bilbo has to stand on his toes to reach.

“You haven’t drawn me yet,” Bilbo says. He keeps his face turned away so Thorin doesn’t see the blush creeping up his face.

“I have, actually. You just weren’t paying attention,” Thorin says. He puts his hand on Bilbo’s and takes away the sponge he was using to clean the crockery. “You know, it’s going to be a long day.”

“I’m sure we’ll both manage,” Bilbo says. It’s that rising tension again, he can feel it, but he knows it’s going to fall flat the moment he hears a door open from inside the house. The tension deflates pathetically and Thorin closes his eyes for a moment, his thumb rubbing gently against Bilbo’s hand before he lets go and gets his tie.

“Here, you’re hopeless,” Bilbo says before he can stop himself. Thorin is already struggling with trying to get the initial part of it right, so he lets Bilbo take over and tie it slowly. He keeps an eye out over Thorin’s shoulder, but they’re alright. He smooths down Thorin’s tie and his hand lingers on his chest, eyes focused on his throat, visible where Thorin hasn’t done up the top button of his shirt.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Thorin says gently. He takes Bilbo’s hand and brings it to his mouth, kissing his knuckles like he had in the dream. Bilbo’s knees almost give out then because of how much better it is to experience it in real life.

“Later,” he says. “Go, the sooner you leave, the sooner you can get back.”

“It’s a two and a half hour meeting,” Thorin says.

“If I know you, you’ll get it done in an hour. Go,” Bilbo says. He touches Thorin’s jaw, allowing himself that for a moment before Thorin steps away to make his sandwiches and get all of his things together.

He leaves ten minutes later and Bilbo feels like he should kiss him goodbye, before he remembers just how archaic an idea that is. Besides, Thorin had said that they’d talk about it later. Bilbo can live with that. He’s sure he will be able to maintain some semblance of albeit frustrated sanity for one day, and he knows that in the next twenty four hours, he will be kissing Thorin. Probably.

God, that’s terrifying. Aren’t these things meant to be spontaneous? Or is this what it’s like to be delving into a romantic relationship with someone while you’re in your thirties? Well, Thorin’s in his forties, but that doesn’t mean anything, really. An eight year age gap would have made Bilbo blanch in his twenties, but now, it doesn’t even seem that important.

Bilbo doesn’t get to think about it for very long, though, because not two minutes after Thorin leaves and the sound of his car disappears down the road, Fili appears out of nowhere, rubbing his eyes and yawning.

“What’s for breakfast?” he asks.

“Eggs and toast.” Bilbo’s voice sounds like it’s not even coming from him, but then again, he still feels the warmth of Thorin’s skin under his fingers from last night and this morning, how his heart had felt when Bilbo had finished his tie.

“Kili’s just getting up,” Fili says. He grabs the clean pan and goes to the oven, putting it down and scraping butter into it. “Are you alright?”
“Hm? Oh, yeah. Just… I don’t feel too good,” Bilbo says. He lets Fili do his own thing and cook for himself and his brother while he sits at the table and snags a few potato things, alternating between eating them and sipping his cooling coffee. It tastes perfect, exactly the way Bilbo likes it. That’s almost enough to make him want to dramatically drop his head into his hands and lament about how unfair it was that the man he was absolutely infatuated with (was there any other accurate for for it?) had to be as emotionally stunted and awkward as himself. If Bilbo was more or less clueless, Thorin was just entirely lost.

Kili walks in when the smell of scrambled eggs gets stronger and Fili makes a plate for him without even having to ask. Bilbo watches them talk in French, Fili ruffling his little brothers hair at some point with a fond smile on his face, Kili half asleep on his feet but still managing to stick his tongue out to tease Fili. They sit down at the table together and Fili makes sure that Kili isn’t about to knock his glass of water over. It’s… well, it’s strange to watch, when siblings interact like you’re not an intruder. Bilbo was an only child, and having numerous cousins wasn’t the same as having a brother or sister.

It has never hit him until then just how lonely he’s been. Having family the way he does, being close to Prim and Drogo, being named godfather to their child, showing up for birthdays and holidays a few times a year, doesn’t mean he’s got company like this, family like this.

When the boys leave, Bilbo will be left alone with Thorin and they’ll have to talk about things where they won’t be interrupted. That’s a lot more terrifying than he was prepared for.

But Bilbo focuses on the boys and encourages them to wash their plates and dry up, promising them that he’ll tell them about the really cool, murderous people in history, to quote Fili word for word. He insists that they brush their teeth first, and when they come back, he’s already flicking through his journal to find his notes on Caligula and Nero.

They listen intently while he rambles and forgets to leave out the truly awful things that the emperors did, though the younger generation is so desensitised to that, so he supposes it doesn’t really matter. Fili spends the time doodling, and if Bilbo isn’t mistaken, actually writing things down. Well. Way to make him feel like he’s back in a lecture hall.

But it’s fun, really. Kili gets into it and asks question upon question about why Caligula did what he did, why Nero was so unnecessarily cruel. Bilbo ends up giving him a quick overview of all twelve caesars so that some of his ramblings makes sense, and when Kili asks what he can read to know more about them, Bilbo’s heart grows about three sizes. He’s been teaching since he was twenty one, but he doesn’t think he’s ever actually done this. Made someone want to read heavy books about ancient figures at fourteen years old.

He’s touched, and when he lets Kili borrow his copy of Suetonius, he feels a bit in shock. Kili disappears into his room with a very enthusiastic “thank you!” and Bilbo just sits down next to Fili on the sofa, his journal in his hands.

“Scrabble?” Fili asked, barely looking up from his own notebook. Bilbo peeked at it. The page he was writing on was half written down notes and half doodles, and very good ones at that. He nodded.

“Right. Scrabble.”

The drive is long and arduous, and by the time Thorin makes it to Marseilles, he’s ready to devour every single sandwich he had brought with him.
He parks as close to the gallery as he could and lets himself have ten minutes to eat. He has another fifteen minutes until the meeting, which gives him time to check up on Bilbo and make sure the boys aren’t driving him completely up the wall.

But as he’s unlocking his phone and going to his contacts, he stops. Would it even be a good idea? They’re probably busy, or maybe Bilbo’s gone back to sleep, or something. Thorin knows he’s making excuses, but in all honesty, he doesn’t think he’ll be able to hold a conversation with Bilbo over the phone without saying something stupid. Or saying something that he’s definitely going to regret for the rest of his life. He almost calls Dis, but this is her week off, and anyway, she’ll just tease him until he cries, and he would rather not go into his meeting with red eyes and a snotty nose. The Marseilles gallery hasn’t seen him for almost a decade, he needs this exhibition.

Instead, he just sends Bilbo a text. **Got to Marseilles, about to go in. Wish me luck.**

He sends it and gets out. The Musée d’Art Contemporain is an extremely modern building, similar to the Tate Modern in a way with its blocky shape and pale exterior that makes it look more warehouse than gallery. *That’s what you get when you do modern art, Thorin*, he thinks to himself. He slings his satchel over his shoulder and braces himself before walking in.

It’s familiar, at least. He walks through the foyer, looking up at the industrial looking stairs. He knows exactly where he’s going and finds himself outside of the director’s office. Just before he knocks, he looks at his phone and sees a text from Bilbo. **Go kick artist ass, or whatever it is you’re doing today. I’ll make sure there’s some of the pasta bake left for when you get back.**

It makes Thorin smile and settles the rising anxiety inside of him. He lets himself picture Bilbo playing Scrabble with Fili, or laying on the sofa reading, or singing along quietly to the radio while he makes himself something to eat or drink. To think that Thorin had enjoyed total silence and loneliness before he came along. To think that they hadn’t even really gotten along at first. This morning, Thorin woke up with Bilbo not five inches from his face, his fingers in his hair, the whole room lit with that warm golden glow that Thorin knows to be half imagination, half the sunrise streaming through the open curtains.

But it was such a wonderful way to wake up. And it was a wonderful way to fall asleep, too, wrapped around Bilbo.

He doesn’t get to think that much about it after that, because he knocks on the door and it opens. He’s invited in and does a quick scan of the room, and like he did six years ago, he freezes on the spot when he makes eye contact with Smaug Von Brandt and has to resist the urge to punch something very solid and breakable.

It’s the longest meeting Thorin has ever sat through. He scoots his chair as far from Von Brandt as he can get away with and gives his answers in polite, albeit clipped French and has to count down from ten and then back up again whenever Von Brandt opens his mouth. His voice is as deep and as gravelly as ever, with something almost animalistic in how it rumbles. Thorin doesn’t look at him unless he absolutely has to, but he feels Smaug’s eyes on him. Sharp and clever, and a blue so pale they’re almost white. No one should have eyes like that, he thinks.

The art director of the gallery seems to be completely in the dark about what had transpired here six years ago. Then again, it hadn’t been big news. Sabotaged art and torn up canvases the night before the exhibition opened. Thorin had known the moment he saw his destroyed work that it had been Von Brandt. It was a gut feeling, and Dis knew too. Smaug had been looking at them from across the room, the tiniest smirk on his face enough to set Thorin off. Dis had to physically hold
him back and force himself outside before he broke Von Brandt’s nose.

Part of him wishes she was here, even if only to keep him calm. She was good at that. She always had been. She’d be able to navigate the meeting and handle all of the complicated stuff Thorin barely knows anything about like a pro, given that she is one. Thorin hasn’t even asked what the hell Smaug is doing here, but he’s smart enough to piece it together in his head, at least. Smaug is doing a small exhibition of his own, given the demand for his work to be displayed, and while Thorin will be still be the main event, he’s going to have to share metaphorical screen-time with Von Brandt.

God, he wants to hit something. Some one.

He suffers through it for two hours before he can’t take it anymore. He agrees to sharing the gallery with Von Brandt and signs everything he needs to sign and is about to leave when he’s asked to show his preliminary sketches. He closes his eyes for a second, forcing himself not to groan, and hands his sketchbook to the art director.

He sits as she goes through his hastily drawn and coloured sketches, some inked, some not. He’s got about six of dis, trying to figure out how to capture her confidence and femininity as well as a hint of her weaknesses. She’s the matriarch of their family, and a mother, and the only one who can ever kick any kind of sense into Thorin these days, except for Bilbo, perhaps.

Speaking of…

It doesn’t hit him that the fineliner doodle of Bilbo asleep next to him is on the last filled page in the book until the director gets to it. He watches her reaction, and the slightly confused look on her face is enough, really. It’s an odd little doodle, because Thorin had let his imagination get a little too wild, and he’d added flowers and a couple of fantasy looking patterns to his clothes, and the barest hint of a pointed ear poking out from his messy hair.

He thinks it’s nice, but it’s not how he sees Bilbo. Bilbo isn’t some kind of delicate Persephone-like figure that should be wreathed in flowers in a sunlit field, if Thorin was going to go for a fantasy approach for him. No, he’d be an adventurer. Muddy boots and a travel journal and a rough hewn walking stick just to complete the image. Maybe a couple of delicate and pale wildflowers pressed into a journal, but the rest of him would be gold and green, his hair a splash of muted red.

Oh, he’s been staring at the director for a solid minute. Time to say something.

“That’s just an illustration,” he says.

“Is this going to focus on just your family?” the director asks, looking at him with a hardness in her eyes. She’s not someone to mess with, he can already tell.

“For the most part, yes,” Thorin says. “And one or two friends.”

“It’s an extremely personal topic,” the director says. Thorin tries to read the plaque on her desk, but for the life of him, he has no idea what it says. He should have brought his glasses with him.

“I’m an extremely personal artist,” Thorin says. The director looks at him, and he feels like he’s in school again. He remembers having this extremely strict Scottish teacher who shouted at you if you so much as looked at her wrong. Thorin had been on the receiving end of a cane multiple times while at school, and a lot of the time it was because of her. The backs of his thighs sting just thinking about it. He’s sure he still has a scar from that one particularly nasty caning back when he was fifteen.
“Very well. I expect ten pieces ready by July 31st. The exhibition starts August 20th, I hope to see your artwork on these walls then,” she says, handing the now closed sketchbook back to him. Thorin stands, but she’s still looking at him. “And I hope that you manage to impress me.”

“I’ll do my best, ma’am,” he says, and leaves.

He is, unfortunately, followed by Smaug Von Brandt.

“May I buy you a coffee?” he asks Thorin, striding towards him while Thorin’s checking his phone. Bilbo has sent him some photos, but he doesn’t even get a chance to open them. Instead, he had to put his phone back in his bag and draws himself up to his full height. He can be quite intimidating if he does he right, he knows. It’s how he got out of so many bar fights while in the States.

“I have to get going,” he says. “My nephews are staying and I can’t be gone long.”

“As yes. Dis’ children. How are they?” Smaug asks. His curiosity is completely false.

“Fine,” Thorin says. He’s not about to tell this slimebag any details about his family.

“I understand it’s a long drive back to your place. It’s in Switzerland, is it not?” Von Brand just gets closer, and Thorin resists the very strong urge to deck him right then and there.

“I understand it’s a long drive back to your place. It’s in Switzerland, is it not?” Von Brand just gets closer, and Thorin resists the very strong urge to deck him right then and there.

“Near Vevey. Which is why I need to get going. Canvases don’t paint themselves, you know,” he says coldly.

“No, of course they don’t. I understand. It would be a shame if your art didn’t live up to its full potential. Your last exhibition was very cutting, you know,” Smaug says. It takes literally all of Thorin’s limited willpower not to rugby tackle him, so instead he just lets his features grow cold and closed off, knowing the effect that that look could have on people.

“Don’t pretend you weren’t involved in that,” he says. Dis has always said that when he’s angry, really angry, his voice gets soft and low, almost like a whisper. To Thorin it just sounds normal.

“I won’t. Just watch your back this time, I’d hate for an unfortunate incident like that to become something of a tradition for us,” Smaug says. He smiles dryly and walks past Thorin, deliberately bumping into him like they’re fucking teenagers at school. Thorin closes his eyes and breathes deeply, listening to footsteps fading away until they’re gone. He wishes Dwalin were here, all of a sudden, because he knows that Dwalin will let Thorin take a swing at him, and they’ll end up sparring for a good hour, something Thorin is desperately in need of.

Instead, he silently leaves the gallery and gets into his car.

It isn’t until he gets out into the middle of nowhere a couple of hours later that Thorin stops the car by the side of a road and get out. All he can see is an old stone wall and a couple of sheep behind a wire fence. One of them looks at him with blank eyes and he stares back as he paces, figuring out how best to get his anger out of his system.

Eventually, it comes to a boil like a pot on a stove, and he explodes, swinging out at the stone wall with a loud cry and hitting it as hard as he can. His hand bounces off, but he doesn’t hear any crack that would tell him his knuckles are broken. No, it’s just a lot of blood and maybe a small fracture somewhere. The pain in his hand helps, like his fury is leaving him as his blood drips between his fingers and into the sodden grass. The stark redness of it actually calms him. It’s a unique colour the brain is wired to react to, but Thorin doesn’t panic. It just makes him feel less like he’s floating on a barge of condensed fury and the desire to scream, and more like he needs to either get home or
get to a hospital to get his hand looked at.

He uses a water bottle from the back of the car and wash the blood off and tears a strip from his shirt to wrap it. He’s broken his knuckles before, and this feels nothing like it. He can move his fingers, each one of them. He tests it by touching each finger to his thumb over and over until it actually starts to hurt.

Thorin gets back in the car and sits for a good long while, staring at the sheep and the grass and the rain than has started fallings. At least the mood is right.

Eventually, he pulls himself together enough to get his phone out of his bag and dial Dis’ number. It takes him a second or so to respond when she picks up.

“I have bad news,” he says, and then proceeds to tell her everything.

Bilbo kept putting off calling Gandalf. He has been for the last few days. Part of him just doesn’t want to talk to him at all, or even acknowledge that Gandalf is the reason he came here in the first place. He doesn’t want to tie this place to a man that flits in and out of people's lives like a happy go lucky sprite. He’d rather think of Thorin when he thinks of this place in the future - Thorin and Fili and Kili, and Dis. This mad and wonderful family that seems to have taken Bilbo in from the get go.

But Bilbo has a habit of picking up calls without checking who the caller is.

“Hello,” he says cheerily.

“Well, it’s good to hear your voice, Bilbo,” Gandalf says on the other end, and Bilbo almost throws his phone across the room.

“Oh god, what do you want?” he says instead.

“Just to check up on you. How are things?” Gandalf asks.

“Fine. Thorin’s gone to Marseilles today, so I’m with his nephews,” Bilbo says. At their mention, Fili looks up from where he’s grating cheese for dinner, but Bilbo waves him off.

“Good to hear you’re getting along with them. I had a feeling that family would be good for you,” Gandalf says, and he sounds way too proud of himself.

“No you didn’t. You just wanted a project. I’m fine, I’m not going back to Oak Manor anytime soon, you don’t need to worry at all,” Bilbo says. “Oh, and Thorin’s got his exhibition stuff sorted, I think. He’s got a project in mind.”

“That’s good to hear. Listen, Bilbo-,”

Oh no.

“As an old family friend, I feel like I need to tell you that your parents house is going on the market soon. Prim has been overseeing it, but she thought it was best not to tell you yet,” Gandalf says. Bilbo tries his very hardest not to fall against the counter and instead sits down at the table. Selling the house? Why… why would Prim be involved in that? She lives there, sure, but Bilbo owns it. It’s in his name.
“How long has this been happening?” he asks quietly.

“How long has this been happening?” he asks quietly.

“About two months. I’m so sorry, Bilbo,” Gandalf says. He sounds genuine, about as genuine as he can sound, in Bilbo’s experience. “Prim needs you there to sign some things. You’ll be getting seventy percent of the profit, as it’s in your name.”

“Hang on - why did you know about this before I did?” Bilbo asks.

“I’ve been helping find buyers,” Gandalf says.

“I own the bloody house, why wasn’t I told first?” he demands. He sees Fili visibly flinch and feels awful, but he’s mad. He’s angry. He’s angry and he needs to step out of the room so as not to startle the teenage boy, and ends up on the balcony, closing the door behind him.

“You know that it’s better to move on than to hold on, Bilbo. Prim and her family are moving out and you’re in Switzerland. I doubt you’d want the place to go to the Sackville branch of your family,” Gandalf says. Bilbo pinches the bridge of his nose, feeling a headache coming on.

“I don’t. Don’t even let them anywhere near the place,” he says. “When do I need to go over?”

“Within the next couple of months. Really only when a final buyer is found, and that might be a while,” Gandalf says.

“Alright. I want to see the place first,” Bilbo says. *That means leaving Switzerland for a few days. Leaving this house. Leaving Thorin.* He doesn’t want to think about that.


“I will.” Bilbo looks out over the mountains and sees headlights nearing the house. His heart flutters a little. It’s only seven thirty, so he’s early back. And when the car gets closer, it’s definitely Thorin’s. “Look, I have to go. I’ll… I’ll call you about looking at the house, alright?”

“Bilbo-”

“Goodbye, Gandalf.”

He hangs up and slips his phone into his back pocket and watches Thorin pull up and get out of the car. He looks exhausted, even from this distance, but Bilbo has long since learned how his shoulders droop and his gait is slower when he’s tired.

He waves at Thorin from the balcony and gets a tentative wave back, and an actual smile. It’s then that Bilbo sees the white cloth wrapped around his hand and panics a little bit. He leaves the balcony and walks back into the kitchen as the front door opens. Fili gives Bilbo a questioning look, and Bilbo just shrugs while he listens to Thorin kick his shoes off in the hallway and drop his bag heavily. Something’s wrong.

That *something* becomes only partially obvious when Thorin comes into the room and Bilbo sees that the cloth around his hand is stained with dried blood. He moves without thinking and he’s by Thorin’s side in a second, taking his hand and peeling the torn strip of shirt away from his skin.

“Bathroom. Now,” he orders, pushing Thorin by the shoulder towards his room. He’s easily guided, but Bilbo puts that down to sheer exhaustion. He’s driven for ten hours today, no doubt he’s tired.

Thorin sits on the edge of the closed toilet while Bilbo looks for antiseptic he knows he saw last
night. He stand on his toes to get it from the bathroom cabinet, and the cotton balls and bandage wedges between bottles of stockpiled shower gel.

He doesn’t ask what happened. That can come later. Right now, Bilbo just uses a damp flannel to gently wash the blood from Thorin’s hand, telling himself to soak it in salt later. A trick he learned from his mother when he got blood on his shirt after getting beat up by bigger kids. Who knew he would be thinking about the same trick twenty years later.

Thorin hisses when Bilbo cleans the wounds on his knuckles. Nothing’s broken, otherwise he wouldn’t have been able to drive home. When did he even do this? In France or Switzerland? Bilbo doesn’t know, and he’s not sure he actually wants to know. Thorin just stares at the wall blankly, the vacant look on his face too much. Bilbo carefully wraps the bandage around his hand, and when he’s done, touches Thorin’s face, making him look at him.

“What happened?” he asks. Thorin just looks at him and visibly swallows. For a second, Bilbo thinks he’s about to cry. Instead, he just turns his head away.

“Smaug Von Brandt was at the meeting. He made some shitty comments about how my last exhibition was sabotaged and threatened to do it again. I punched a wall and scared some sheep on the way home,” he says. His voice is entirely closed off. Bilbo hates it. He hates it. He feels like he’s back in those first few weeks of being here and Thorin is wearing that solid granite mask again, refusing to let anyone in unless he knows that they’re willing to chip away at him. Bilbo has been doing that for two months. He’s not about to start again.

“Look at me, Thorin,” he says. “Look at me.”

Thorin does, but he looks reluctant. Bilbo cups his jaw with one hand.

“You need sleep. You look like you’re about to keel over if I push you too hard,” he says. Thorin keeps his eyes locked on Bilbo’s, but Bilbo suspects it’s to keep himself grounded instead of any desire to look at him. It’s a technique Bilbo learned in Oak Manor. Eye contact can either make or break a panic attack, and Thorin is shaking. Bilbo won’t be surprised if he started breaking down right then and there.

“I need food,” Thorin says.

“Food, then sleep. Okay?” Bilbo takes his uninjured hand. Thorin just nods. “Come on, the food’s almost done anyway.”

They eat in relative silence. Kili asks questions about Suetonius and Bilbo answers them as best as he can while still keeping an eye on Thorin as he eats his pasta in small bites. Fili is silent as usual. He’s so quiet, it’s actually unnerving. Bilbo still feels bad about making him flinch earlier, but he doesn’t think he’ll be able to voice it. Instead, he just nods and smiles at Fili when he takes the plates to the sink and starts to wash up.

It’s an hour of reading or drawing or whatever in the front room before Thorin tells the boys to go to bed in that soft voice he only uses for them, and then he and Thorin are alone in the hallway and the tension is just this side of too much.

Nothing happens. Bilbo is starting to feel like a balloon blown up and deflated too many times, but he answers Thorin’s wordless question and follows him into his bedroom. It’s dark. It’s private. Thorin strips down to his boxers and his undershirt, and Bilbo to his t shirt and briefs, and they get into the bed together without speaking at all. Bilbo’s heart threatens to beat out of his chest when Thorin turns on his side to face him, his hair loose and thick, the grey strands visible even in the
near pitch black.

Nothing happens in the night. They look at each other until Bilbo falls asleep, suddenly overcome with fatigue, and he feels Thorin gently touch his face before slipping away. It’s silent. Intimate. Bilbo thinks that it shouldn’t be this easy.

-

The thing about mornings, especially when you wake up before your alarm, is that you always feel like you have all the time in the world. The twenty minutes before your alarm goes off are perhaps the greatest twenty minutes you ever get. The time you have between getting ready for work and actually leaving let you play stupid games on your phone or eat that extra slice of toast that makes you feel just a little bit better and ready for the day.

Bilbo has always loved mornings. The sound of birds and the slight chill in the air and the mist that would roll down the hill towards his parents house when he was a child. Even when the mornings are dark, he appreciates them. They’re one of the more peaceful parts of life once you get older. Ten minutes to enjoy your garden or the view you get of your town or city from your bedroom window or read a few pages of that book on your coffee table.

Mornings are easy. They’re simple.

Perhaps that’s why it’s so easy when Bilbo wakes up the next morning to see Thorin already awake and laying on his back, looking up at the ceiling. The sky is still a little dark outside, but that just means that they’re the sole awoken people in the house. Bilbo blinks the sleep from his eyes and reaches out to touch Thorin’s arm, finding his skin warm in a way you only get after sleep. He’s downright toasty.

Thorin looks at him. He still looks tired, and Bilbo wonders just how much sleep he got. Probably not enough. He doesn’t ask. He doesn’t even speak. Thorin just turns back on his side and under the blanket, touches Bilbo’s waist much the same way he had the morning before. Bilbo echoes his own actions from yesterday and brushes loose strands of hair from Thorin’s face. Oh, you beautiful man, he thinks.

Or maybe he says it, because Thorin smiles that gentle smile, and Bilbo is gone.

It’s easy. It’s like drawing breath. It’s like pulling your socks on at the start of the day.

Bilbo is the one to close the gap, because he doesn’t doubt that Thorin is too scared to do it. He presses himself against Thorin and kisses the corner of his mouth ever so softly, treading water, bracing himself for whatever comes next. He has forgotten what it’s like to kiss a man with a full beard. It’s pleasantly scratchy. He pulls away long enough to see that Thorin has closed his eyes, lips parted.

That’s enough.

God, that’s all Bilbo needs, because not a second later, they’re really kissing.

It’s soft, nothing heated or passionate. Bilbo half crawls on top of Thorin and sighs against his lips when he feels a warm hand against the small of his back, underneath his t shirt. He takes Thorin’s face in his hands and makes a slow job of it, little gasps and sighs escaping both of them, the actual sound of kissing much more pleasant than Bilbo remembers. One of Thorin’s hands runs through his hair and Bilbo melts, tilting his head to the side and curling one hand around the back of Thorin’s neck.
They have exactly one hour and twelve minutes before Thorin’s alarm clock wakes up the boys.

One hour and twelve minutes of just this.

Bilbo never realised it could be so simple, and thanks the mornings for the blessing.

Chapter End Notes

HERE IT IS! This chapter straight up murdered me, it was soooo hard to write. I hope that the end paid off. We're still a long way to go in terms of plot, but at least we're finally getting somewhere.
Hope you enjoyed!
Find me on tumblr at gaypippin

PS: I made a pinterest board for this au! find it here. beware: could be a lil spoilery
The last time Thorin had anything close to this, it ended messy and with at least three broken glasses. Thorin doesn’t like thinking about him, even now. He’d rather just avoid it.

But it’s hard to forget when his lips are tingling and Bilbo is all but draped over him, smiling at Thorin with a truly dopey look on his face. They’ve still got awhile until they have to get up and being real, functioning adults. Thorin is half lost in the slight weight of Bilbo on top of him and the hazy feeling in his chest that bursts with light each time Bilbo kisses him. He doesn’t push for anything more, they just kiss, over and over, and Thorin is okay with that.

Thorin is man enough to admit when he’s weak. He knows the things that make him weak - his siblings, both the living and the dead, his nephews, his cousins, a bottle of good red wine, the sound of Hebrew song echoing in a Synagogue.

Those are the things that make him happy, and Thor had instilled into that happiness, real happiness, was akin to letting your true self show, and that was weakness. Even now, Thorin has issues with letting himself feel happiness. He’s forty one in July and he can still barely let himself acknowledge his feelings.

But Bilbo…

Bilbo undoes all of that just by touching him.

Thorin slides his hand up Bilbo’s back and finds his skin impossibly warm to the touch all over. He closes his eyes and Bilbo kisses him again. If Thorin wasn't in the same position, he would have accused Bilbo of being desperate. As it is, Thorin has been resisting the urge to flip him over and ravish him for the last five minutes. Baby steps, he thinks.

“Good morning,” he whispers when they finally stop. Bilbo laughs and rests his forehead against Thorin’s collarbone. His hair is wonderfully soft when Thorin runs a hand through it.

“Morning,” Bilbo says. “Feel better?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you should kiss me again,” Thorin says when Bilbo looks up. He gets a rather exaggerated eye roll and a playful slap on the shoulder for that, but it’s worth it to see Bilbo’s smile. Though, he does get a kiss pressed to the corner of his jaw before Bilbo sits up, and Thorin sits up with him, so they’re looking at each other and tangled in the blankets.

“Your hair looks ridiculous,” Bilbo says. He’s laughing quietly and reaches out to card his fingers through Thorin’s hair, moving to straddle his lap and lean in again. But he doesn’t kiss Thorin, just stays close.
“I’m thinking about cutting it,” Thorin says, because it’s the least ridiculous thing he can think to say. Bilbo’s thumbs are tracing the lines of Thorin’s face, along his cheeks and up to his temples, and then back down to his jaw.

“Why?” he asks.

“Because I’m sick of washing paint out of it,” Thorin says honestly. “And it’s just getting annoying. I might just buzz it all off while you’re not looking.”

“Keep the beard,” Bilbo says. He smiles and kisses Thorin’s nose. “It suits you.”

“You know, I think I should have asked you to dinner before we kissed,” Thorin says. He closes his eyes as Bilbo lightly drags his nails over Thorin’s beard, making him shiver.

“Then ask me.”

“Dinner? Next week, on me, in Vevey?” Thorin asks. Bilbo smiles and kisses him on the cheek.

“I’d love to,” he says, his breath tickling Thorin’s ear. But then he pulls away and he’s gone, off the bed and looking for his discarded jeans on the floor. Thorin turns on his side and watches him pull them on.

“Where are you going?” he asks.

“To put some pyjamas on, and then come back here. I’ll be back in a minute,” Bilbo says. He leaves the room, opening and closing the door quietly, and Thorin is on his own.

He lays out on his back and touches his lips, still tingling from where Bilbo had been kissing him for the last ten minutes. His lips had been soft and he was warm all over and, shit, Thorin doesn’t remember ever wanted to grab someone and kiss them silly the way he knows he’s going to do when Bilbo comes back in. It feels like he’s wearing rose tinted goggles, but he doesn’t care. He woke up this morning the way he had the day before - next to someone who he knows feels the same way as he does - and was granted a kiss that made him feel like he was Icarus soaring towards the sun. It all feels a bit like a fairytale, but he can’t help it. The sunlight is coming in through the window like it’s blessing the room and Thorin watches the dust particles sway and turn.

It all feels too good to be true.

The problem Thorin has always had is that he’s never quite sure whether he should make the most of things or remain realistic and pessimistic in the face of things going his way. There’s no way Bilbo will want to stay, not really. He had said that he didn’t want to leave, but Thorin knows that one day, he will. One day, one day soon, he will up and leave, and they will never see each other again.

It’s like a summer fling, only Thorin is now nearing middle age and has learned over and over not to take things for granted.

Bilbo comes back in pyjamas and gets back into bed, looking at Thorin with some kind of reservation in his eyes. Thorin reaches for him like he has a thousand times in his dreams and Bilbo gravitates towards him, kissing him like they’re sixteen, not well into adulthood. Though, people tend to kiss like that when they’re totally infatuated.

Thorin actually does flip them over, but when Bilbo wraps his legs around his waist, he knows he’s going to have to control himself. Hands on the sides of his face, nails biting into his skin just a
little, Bilbo’s little sounds driving him just that side of wild. They’re being quiet (they have to be, Thorin doesn’t want to mortally wound Fili and Kili’s young minds), but it’s enough. Thorin manages to keep his hips still for the most part, but it’s been a long time without this kind of touch, so if Bilbo makes him feel like he’s got the damn sun in his gut, then so be it. It happens.

Bilbo moves his hand down and up the back of Thorin’s shirt, pushing it up and pressing his hand against the small of his back. Thorin has always been overly sensitive there, so when Bilbo digs his fingers in, he groans and buries his face in Bilbo’s neck, his beard scratching against sensitive skin. In turn, Bilbo lets out a soft noise and scratches his nails against the skin there, renewing that zing up Thorin’s spine.

“Careful,” Bilbo whispers.

“You be careful,” Thorin whispers back. He leans away and Bilbo chases after him, but he lays back when Thorin is too far away. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” Bilbo says. “Are you?”

“Never been better,” Thorin says. He moves his hand down to Bilbo’s thigh and traces a gentle pattern with his fingers through the thin fabric of his pyjamas. “Maybe we should…?” He gestures to the bed, but not in that sense, hoping Bilbo gets what he means. Luckily, he does, and he sits up as Thorin sits back, pulling one leg up and tucking the other one beneath him while Bilbo runs a hand through his hair, messy from Thorin’s attention.

“You realise this means that it’ll be harder for me to leave,” he says slowly.

“You said not forty eight hours ago that you didn’t want to leave,” Thorin says.

“I know. But realistically… I don’t know. I have no idea what to do now,” Bilbo says. He draws his legs up and Thorin sees him closing up, getting further away, when his hands were on Thorin’s bare skin literally only a minute ago.

“You don’t have to do anything. I won’t… I won’t make you do this, not if you don’t want to,” Thorin says. He hates himself for saying it, and there’s a little voice in the back of his head telling to, for once in his life, to just be selfish and grab this chance with both hands to never let it go.

To his surprise, Bilbo just laughs.

“What makes you think I don’t want to do this?” he asks. “Jesus, Thorin. I wouldn’t have kissed you if I had no interest in… well, anything like this. With you.”

“We’re going to have to have an adult conversation about this, you know,” Thorin says. Bilbo just groans.

“I hate being an adult. Can’t we just wing it and see what happens?” he says.

“That works too.”

“Great, no adult conversation.”

“Bilbo…”

“I know, I know, last time I didn’t deal with my feelings properly, I ended up being institutionalised,” Bilbo says. He uncurls from his position and leans forward, taking one of Thorin’s hands loosely in his own. “Maybe I’m just sick of talking things out.”
“Can I say something?” Thorin asks. He links their fingers together and squeezes Bilbo’s hand. Bilbo nods. “Relationships… in general… I don’t really know how to navigate it all. So… I’m going to give you a chance to walk away before I inevitably fuck up.”

“Five minutes after I felt your morning glory against my leg and you’re telling me you can’t do relationships because you’re a hermit who lives in the Swiss mountains,” Bilbo says. “You’re doing a very poor job of selling yourself here.”

“Aren’t all artists meant to be self loathing?” Thorin says.

“I guess. But you’re not really that self loathing,” Bilbo says. He turns Thorin’s hand and touches his palm with his thumb, gently moving it in slow circles.

“Are you going to read my palm?” Thorin whispers, hunching over like a child hiding in a fort with a friend, pretending they’re hiding from the big bad parents. Apparently playing along, Bilbo pulls Thorin’s hand towards him and looks intently at the lines in his palm, eyebrows drawn together in mock concentration.

“The lines are telling me something,” he says, glancing up at Thorin through his eyelashes, and the back down again. Thorin leans forward, finding himself genuinely curious as to what Bilbo isn’t seeing. His mother had come from Romani roots as well as Jewish, and her family had shunned stereotypes while at the same time, been the most superstitious people Thorin had ever met.

“They’re telling me you’re an idiot,” Bilbo says dramatically, and Thorin bursts into laughter, pulling his hand back.

“You’d be a terrible fortune teller,” he says.

“Well, I’m not a psychic, so that might be why,” Bilbo says. “So. Adult conversation.”

“Adult conversation.”

“How do we make this work, when we’re living in the same place?” Bilbo asks.

“Wing it?” Thorin suggests, which earns him a gentle slap on the arm. “I’m starting to see why you wanted to wing it, actually.”

“It might just be easier that way,” Bilbo says, shrugging.

“Probably.”

“Do… do we tell people?”

“If we tell Dis, she’s going to tease us both about it forever, so just bear that in mind,” Thorin says. He finds his hair band around his wrist and ties his hair back quickly, even if just to get it out of his face.

“I can live with that. My family is awful with things like that. I didn’t come out until my twenties, and by then, they were all adamant that it was just something I experimented with at uni instead of actually knowing since I was thirteen,” Bilbo says. “They’re just really passive aggressive about it now. Teasing is probably the easiest thing for me to live with.”

“Dwalin will make a blood oath to protect you from literally any kind of danger,” Thorin says.

“Is this the one with the mohawk?”
“He used to have a mohawk. Not anymore.”

“Right, he’s in his fifties. Good to know.” Bilbo scoots back to lean against the headboard.

“Fili knows,” Thorin says softly. “He figured it out on his own.”

“Of course he did.” Bilbo smiles, easy and bright. Thorin looks at the clock. They don’t have long until the boys get up, but that’s okay. Thorin has things to do and coffee to drink.

“Keep it between us for now?” he says. Bilbo nods.

“Yeah. Until we’ve sorted things out, I guess,” Thorin says. “You know people are coming up for Kilis birthday tomorrow?”

“I remember. I’m actually kind of excited to meet your family,” Bilbo says.

“They’re nothing like me, you know. Well, you’ve met Dis, actually, so you should have an idea of what the rest of them are like,” Thorin says. He’s excited for tomorrow, but the selfish part of him is absolutely dreading it, dreading the noise and lack of privacy, and his family acting like he didn’t run away from them all the way to Switzerland for no reason.

But he’s excited for Kili, and that’s all that matters. That’s all that should matter.

“How’s your hand?” Bilbo asks out of the blue, gesturing to Thorin.

“Hm? Oh, it just hurts a little. I need to clean it,” Thorin says. The bandage is coming loose, so he carefully unties it, unravelling it and discarding it when it’s done. His knuckles are scraped and bloody, but they’re really not that bad. Thorin has had worse. Much worse.

“Coffee?” Bilbo says. He’s got this little smile on his face, equal parts contentment and disappointment. Their morning… activities, are done and they have to get to adulting so that they’re not still in bed when Fili and Kili get up.

“Please. But…,” Thorin leans forward and takes Bilbo's chin between his thumb and forefinger, tilting his head up and kissing him slow. Thorin pulls away and Bilbo's eyes are closed, his lips parted, and the look his his face would have been hilarious if Thorin wasn't completely gone on him, as Fili had said.

“Coffee,” he says, and stands. Bilbo follows.

“Right. Coffee.”

Coffee makes everything better, Bilbo thinks, even when you're dying for some kind of physical contact with someone who is literally right there. Thorin touches him briefly, to move him around the kitchen or get his attention or just in passing, their hands brushing and Thorin, at one point, resting his hand between Bilbo's shoulder blades and trailing down his spine, making Bilbo shudder.

Bilbo spends most of the day with Kili and his newfound love of Suetonius. It feels a little bit like teaching again, except he’s only talking to one person, and he’s an almost fifteen year old who actually enjoys reading someone as dry and as gossipy as Suetonius. Bilbo hopes he never loses that enthusiasm, even in the small ways, when he starts taking notes on what Bilbo talks about like he’s in a lecture hall. He guesses that Kili will be going on to higher education, though, so it’s nice
that he seems to have an idea of what he wants to do. Ancient History wasn’t the best subject when Bilbo was at sixth form, but he persisted still, and now he’s got a hard won PhD and experience as a lecturer in a university that has a good reputation for Ancient History as a subject.

Kili asks for help with some of his other homework too, and Bilbo is happy to help. He’s never been too good with numbers, but it’s maths designed for teenagers, so he manages, and Thorin checks it over anyway when he takes a break from painting. He’s started in full swing now, lugging a huge canvas from his garage to the balcony with Fili’s help while Bilbo and Kili talk about Augustus’ Second Constitutional Settlement.

That night, when the boys go to bed, Thorin and Bilbo go into the garage where Thorin has been stashing birthday decorations for weeks, apparently, and put them up in the darkness, tripping and swearing every now and then, Bilbo actually falling off of the step ladder he stood on to help hang up the banner that says ‘HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!!’

“It’s not that hard,” Thorin whispers, struggling to contain his laughter.

“Easy for you to say, you’re ridiculously tall,” Bilbo says. He gets back up and successfully pins the banner up on his side before getting down and trying to kick the foot stool away quickly, only to make it squeak against the wooden floor.

“I think we’re done,” Thorin says, stepping back and looking at the tacky decorations. Apparently, Kili loves them, and is once again proving to be the strangest teenager Bilbo has ever met. He enjoys boring writers, actually does his homework, and likes terrible nineties birthday decorations. Still, Bilbo can’t fault him for any of that. He just wishes he had been that optimistic when he was fifteen.

“Dis is bringing the cake, right?” Bilbo asks.


“Right. Who else is coming?” Bilbo asks.

“Dwalin and Balin, and probably a few cousins in the area. Bofur will definitely be coming,” Thorin says.

“Bofur’s the musician,” Bilbo says, trying to remember Thorin’s crash course on his family he got the other day.

“Owns a music shop in Germany. He’s actually Irish, though,” Thorin says while he packs up the balloons they didn’t blow up.

“Your family is really confusing,” Bilbo says.

“Yeah, I know. And loud, so brace yourself for that,” Thorin says. He kicks the boxes under the coffee table and stretches his arms above his head, making a weird grunting sound. Still, he’s wearing an old t shirt that’s a bit too short and a good few inches of his stomach are bared, and Bilbo doesn’t even stop himself from staring. Of course he has a tattoo on his hipbone, though Bilbo can’t quite make out what it is.

“What time will they be here?” Bilbo asks.

“Early. Dis is leaving around five with Tauriel and they’ll be staying the rest of the week,” Thorin says. “I have no idea where they’re going to sleep.”
“Tauriel can take my room, I’ll sleep on the couch,” Bilbo says.

“No, absolutely not. Tauriel and Kili will want to go camping one night, if I know anything about them at all. Dis will be adamantly on supervising,” Thorin says. He sits down on the sofa and Bilbo joins him, though keeps his distance.

“They’re fifteen, what’s the worst they can do?” Bilbo says. He knows exactly what the worst they could do is, and in his opinion, it’s not even that big of a deal. But then again, he’s not a parent, so what does he know about keeping kids safe?

“Make a bonfire and summon demons,” Thorin says, completely deadpan. Bilbo rolls his eyes.

“Well, I’m sure they’ll be careful about it,” he says. “Come on, we both have to be up early tomorrow.” He stands and holds his hand out for Thorin. He takes it and Bilbo pulls him up, but he isn’t expecting hands to close around his hips and pull him close, or for Thorin to kiss him without warning. After a long day of not touching, it’s welcome, but it takes Bilbo by surprise.

He wraps his arms around Thorin’s neck and has to stand on his toes to reach him properly. He curses his height, but it doesn’t last for long, because Thorin is lifting him effortlessly, like he’s made of paper, not flesh and bone.

“Height advantage isn’t fair,” Bilbo murmurs.

“Don’t care. Do you want to-?” The question hangs in the air, but Bilbo smiles and kisses Thorin again before he’s set back down on his feet. He takes Thorin’s hand and pulls him towards the hallway and to his room. Thorin’s room, being bigger and having a much nicer bed, that is. The door closes behind them and Thorin backs him against the nearest wall and kisses him deep. Bilbo has never been one for being cornered and literally backed against walls during things like this, but with Thorin, it’s… well, it’s Thorin. Bilbo doesn’t feel uncomfortable, he just feels his skin burning where Thorin touches him, and his heart pounding like he’s a man dying for air.

They’re both to blame for how handsy it gets. Bilbo does it on autopilot, caught up in Thorin’s hands sliding down the back of his pyjama pants and his lips on Bilbo’s neck. He’s hypersensitive all over, and when he feels teeth, well, he’s just gone.

The sound he lets out is loud and they both freeze, Thorin still with his face buried in the curve of Bilbo’s neck, Bilbo still digging his nails into Thorin’s back. Bilbo listens intently for any indication that the boys heard them, but it doesn’t come, and Thorin pulls away reluctantly.

“Maybe we should wait until…” he says.

“Yeah. Probably.” Bilbo reaches up and brushes his hands down Thorin’s shoulders, down his chest. Up close, he’s lovely and broad, exactly Bilbo’s type. Looking back on it, every man he’s ever been with has fit a certain mold - tall and broad and muscular, usually with a beard, and usually the gentle giant type. Thorin fits that to a T, and Bilbo doesn’t know what else he expected.

“I can’t promise anything,” Thorin whispers.

“Neither can I.”

“Hm. Good to know.” Thorin steps back and Bilbo goes with him, following him to the bed like it’s the most natural thing in the world. It’s almost scary, how easy all of this feels. But Bilbo has always found that once you get past the initial start of something, with the conversation about what to do and all that, if it works, it tends to flow. If you click, you don’t need to spend hours discussing exactly what your relationship is going to be.
Besides, Bilbo *really* does like kissing.

“If I start losing sleep because of you, there’s going to be hell to pay,” he whispers, pressing his forehead against Thorin’s.

“Understood.” Thorin smiles, and in the darkness, it makes him look completely different. Bilbo remembers not even being sure if his face was capable of it in a genuine sense when they met, given that he was all hard angles beneath the beard. Now, he just looks like there’s no more tension inside of him, and he’s just existing, not trying so hard to do anything else.

“I left my phone cable in my room,” Bilbo says, sighing as he climbs off of Thorin. Climbing makes him sound like a tree, but Bilbo very vividly remembers whispering to Prim a few years back *I’m going to climb that man like a tree*, though for the life of him, he can’t actually remember the context. “Don’t fall asleep without me.”

“No promises,” Thorin says, laying back. Bilbo leaves and grabs his charger as quickly as possible, but he knows that Thorin is exhausted, so he isn’t surprised to see him stretched out on the bed with his eyes closed and his chest rising and falling slowly, the sound of early sleep filling the room.

Bilbo plugs his phone in quietly and gets into bed next to Thorin, careful not to wake him as he moves close enough to rest his head against his chest. Well, Thorin isn’t completely asleep yet, but it’s close enough. He moves and wraps his arm around Bilbo’s shoulders, but that’s it before he actually does fall away.

Bilbo is awake for a while, simply watching Thorin breathe. He’s never been put off by the idea of *moving too fast*. Things happen the way they happen, and Bilbo isn’t the kind of person to interfere with that, not that he holds much light to the idea of fate. He wonders what Belladonna would say if she was alive. She’d probably warn him against rushing, but at the same time, give him her blessing. She’d have loved Thorin, he thinks. Bungo being Bungo would have been a little reserved, and no doubt would have made comments about Thorin’s career choices, but he would grow to like him over time. Probably. Anyone who could get the garden shed standing right would have Bungo’s approval, if Bilbo was being totally honest.

Bungo had been… well, weird about it, when Bilbo came out. They hadn’t actually talked for a month, no matter how many times Bilbo tried. It had been like having part of himself cut off, until Belladonna forced Bungo to actually talk to him. Bilbo had sat through the gruelling questions every wary parent asks. *How long have you been gay? Is it something I did? Have you tried not being gay?* It was a nightmare. A horrible, painful, uncomfortable nightmare Bilbo walked away from only to feel like he had achieved nothing. But things got easier after that. It was slow, but it got easier.

The years passed and Bungo seemed to accept it. Bilbo was never sure, but the one boyfriend Bungo met, who Bilbo was only with for four months, had apparently thoroughly charmed Bungo into letting go of his beliefs somewhat and actually realising that that was just how it was.

Bilbo puts his hand on Thorin’s chest and feels his heart beating steady, a rhythm matching Bilbo’s. He feels himself drifting and closes his eyes. The room is warm, and so is the man beside him, and Bilbo forgets that not even six months ago, he was bleeding out on his kitchen floor because he didn’t want to stay alive.

Not that he’s healed. He’s a long way from that, but this helps, he finds. Comfort and intimacy and someone who understands. You can’t be healed from your demons because you meet someone who you fall completely head over heels for, but… well, it helps. It makes you feel wanted, like
you matter, that there’s at least one soul in this world that would hurt from you trying again and again to end it all.

Bilbo wraps his arm around Thorin’s chest, slinging a leg over his thighs, and falls asleep. And if he wakes up in the early morning to find himself in bed, alone, then that’s okay, because there’s always another day for that.

Chapter End Notes

Aight this is a filler chapter bc im back at college and the first few weeks are literally impossible to slack off from so the next update might be a while...
Kilis birthday next! im excited to write tauriel i love her so much.
also, i found thorins look for this fic and its here and i’d like to personally thank richard armitage for being so embarrassing, i love him
my tumblr is here, and the pinterest board for this fic is here
thank you for reading and for your lovely comments, they really make my day!
“You did what?”

“Dis, keep your voice down! My kitchen door is very thin, you know.”

Thorin glances at the closed door, in case anyone, Dwalin in particular, decides to burst in at the first sign of gossip. Dis is practically bouncing up and down, a silly grin on her face, but Thorin knows she’s just excited. It’s cute, but he’d never say that out loud.

“Oh my god, this is amazing,” she says. “Have you had sex yet?”

“No! It happened… yesterday… wow.” He hasn’t had a chance to sit down and think about just how quickly it seems to be going, time moves slower out here. He had woken up for the third day in a row early this morning and saw Bilbo fast asleep, curled up at his side. It felt so natural that Thorin didn’t even want to get out of bed. Instead, he had just kissed Bilbo on the cheek and got up to answer the door.

Now, he’s in the kitchen with his sister and trying furiously not to blush bright red.

“Right. Keep it in your pants until the kids are gone. Good idea,” Dis says. She’s still bursting at the seams with excitement, but she’s trying to calm down. “This is so exciting!”

“Why is it exciting for you?” Thorin says.

“Because you’re happier now than before he showed up. That’s what’s exciting in my life. I need to get laid,” Dis says, leaning against the counter with her arms over her chest.

“You’ve had four days to yourself.”

“You have at my expense. Four days of bliss.” He snorts. “Four days to myself doesn’t really cut it when I could have gone out and pulled. And I’m thirty nine, Thorin. No one wants to sleep with a thirty nine year old mother with stretch marks and a cesarean scar.” Dis shrugs and goes to the fridge, pushing past Thorin to get there.

“Alright, who did you meet?” he asks. Dis gives him a look, half playful, have stubborn. He knows she’s going to tell him, but he’s going to have to wait. She crouches down at the bottom of the fridge where Thorin keeps his junk food and grabs an unhealthy amount of chocolate. Not that he really cares, just that if Dis is going for chocolate before alcohol, then whoever she’s met, they’re going to be dreamy in her eyes.

“We met at Fili’s last parent’s evening and we’ve gone on two dates,” she says. She tosses Thorin a chocolate bar and opens her own, going to sit at the table. She has to readjust her dress, given that it’s one of those vintage fifties things. Thorin sits down beside her. “They’re a geologist at the
university and we went to a science museum on our first date.”

“Lovely. Name?”

“Not telling.”

“Oh come on, it’s not like I’m going to know them.”

“Still, no. I want to keep it secret for now,” Dis says. “Even Fili doesn’t know, and you know he knows everything.”

“You’ve been doing a good job of keeping it secret,” Thorin says.

“How do you think I got around so much in school? If dad knew, he would have flayed me alive,” Dis says. She shrugs again. “He gets it from me.”

“Frerin and I covered for you, you know. A lot,” Thorin says.

“Yeah, yeah, but I never got into trouble,” Dis says.

“You’re welcome.”

Dis just rolls her eyes and munches on her chocolate, while Thorin leaves his on the side. On the other side of the kitchen door, the birthday party is in full swing, and Kili and Tauriel are no doubt causing chaos everywhere they step. Thorin has never met her before, so when he saw her, he didn’t expect a tall girl with strikingly red hair to walk in the door, shy and withdrawn until she saw Kili. If they stay friends, they’re going to be a nightmare as adults, Thorin just knows. He can already see the bar fights and camping trips.

What had been truly hilarious was Dwalin clapping eyes on Bilbo and just knowing without even having to ask or say hello to Thorin. He’s like that. He looks like a grunt, with the dwindling mohawk and tattoos everywhere, but he’s as sharp as any knife and perhaps the only match for Dis in a drinking match. Thorin can imagine Dwalin talking to Bilbo and making a million innuendos a minute just to see his reaction and figure out exactly what’s going on. He knows he’s going to have to tell Dwalin at some point, but for now, that can wait.

“It’s almost cake time,” Thorin says. Dis crumples her chocolate wrapper up and springs to her feet, heels clicking on the tiles. She has it all done and ready before Thorin can really do anything, and he’s charged with just going out and whispering to Balin that it’s time, so he can dim the lights and get the camera.

It’s a lovely moment, Kili being frozen to the spot when the lights go off, and his face breaking out into a grin when he sees Dis carrying in the cake. Thorin leans against the kitchen door and watches, singing along with everyone else. It’s the first year that this many people have crowded in his living room, but part of him… well, part of him is embracing it, along with the growing glow in his gut at the sight of the people he loves all in one room. Kili blows the candles out and Dwalin ruffles his hair fondly, like he’s six years old again.

After that, Dis shoves a paper plate with cake on it into his hands, and he ends up in conversation with Dwalin about things they haven’t managed to talk about recently.

“I had this kid come into the studio the other day and he asked for some girls name on his arm. Turns out, he was eighteen and he’d been seeing this girl for a month,” Dwalin says, gesturing wildly and unnecessarily with his hands as he talks. “Oh, and this old man came in. He was in his seventies, at least, and when he rolled his shirt sleeve up, he had a white supremacist tattoo on his
“What did you do?” Thorin asks. Being a tattoo artist, Dwalin must have gotten a lot of people like that.

“Turned him away. I said I wasn’t going to tattoo someone with a swastika on their arm,” Dwalin says, shrugging. Thorin nods. “When am I going to see you in the studio again? You haven’t had a tattoo for five years.”

“When I finish the exhibition. It’ll probably be my last one, I’m actually running out of room,” Thorin says.

“That’s what cover ups are for. Did Dis bake this?” Dwalin looks at the cake with a strange look on his face. “It’s uncharacteristically good.”

“I think Tauriel did.”

“Remind me to pay her to make cupcakes for Ori’s birthday,” Dwalin says. He proceeds to shove the rest of his slice into his mouth and makes a ridiculous noise that has Thorin laughing and almost choking on crumbs.

“Are you staying the night?” he asks, half laughing and half coughing. Dwalin shakes his head.

“No, we’re here for the cake. Balin has a meeting in the morning anyway. We’ll just give you guys your space. Speaking of…”

“Oh no.”

“Yeah. Dis told me. Honestly, have you met your sister? Don’t tell her anything unless you want it broadcasted all over the world. Balin and Bofur know, too,” Dwalin says. Thorin’s gut clenches uncomfortably and he tries not to look at Bilbo talking to Balin, both of them seemingly excited over something. Oh, well, he looks at him anyway and catches Bilbo’s eye, and gets a shy wave in his direction.

“Of course they do,” Thorin says, waving back. He looks at Dwalin. “Don’t make a big deal out of it, please. It’s been going on for less than forty eight hours and he’s only meant to be here for a couple of months.”

“Jesus, you may as well have just stepped into one of those terrible romance novels you get at Poundland. He was only meant to rest and recover, but what happened when the broody artist opened up will warm your heart,” Dwalin says in his best narrator voice, if they ever let a Glaswegian like Dwalin narrate terrible romance novels.

“I hate you,” Thorin says, and punctuates it by finishing his cake. Dwalin just smirks.

“Well, just looking at him, I can tell he’s better than the last one,” he says.

“He’s been here since February, he’s already better than the last one,” Thorin says.

“Do you want me to hold off on the protective best friend speech for now?” Dwalin asks, this time with a hint of sympathy in his eyes. Thorin is almost embarrassingly relieved to see it.

“That, that’d be great. Thanks. Just… be nice. I don’t want you lot to scare him off,” he says. He looks at Bilbo again, still talking to Balin, and Thorin isn’t even surprised. Balin is one of those people who can hold a conversation about anything, given his interest in everything. Thorin
doesn’t doubt that he knows enough about history to hold Bilbo’s attention.

“If he’s been putting up with you, I doubt we’ll do any damage. Is there any more cake left?”

Dwalin disappears into the kitchen and Thorin stays where he is, just watching. It’s only a small group of people, but it’s loud. Nice and loud. Just what this place needs, really. Bofur is teaching Kili and Tauriel some drinking song while Fili is walking around and taking photos of everyone. Thorin doesn’t doubt he’ll get the usual monthly email from Fili consisting of about eighty pictures.

Eventually, inevitably, he’s drawn over to Bilbo once Balin excuses himself. They stand together in silence, simply watching, Thorin’s shoulder brushing his. Bilbo glances at him and smiles, and the butterflies (oh, for god’s sake, Thorin, butterflies?) in his stomach make him feel like he’s a teenager again. Chance would be a fine thing. He tries to imagine meeting Bilbo when they were both younger, and then decides that it’s better they met like this. They’re both a bit of a mess, but at least they’re adults with some idea of what they’re doing.

Only some, though. Thorin won’t kid himself into believing he has his life sorted, and he doubts Bilbo will do the same.

“Did you shave?” Bilbo asks, his voice low. Thorin’s hand immediately goes to his beard. He’d trimmed it that morning and it still feels weird, like he’s exposed.

“Dis texted me and told me not to look like the guy from Castaway when she showed up,” he says. “I didn’t want to get rid of all of it.”

“I’m glad you didn’t,” Bilbo says, with that little smile at the corner of his mouth that makes Thorin want to kiss him. He wonders how that will go down in a room full of his family, plus Tauriel. He supposes that it depends on how it happens. A kiss on the cheek, anyone can miss, and if Thorin timed it just right, no one would even see. A quick peck before going into the kitchen to get a drink, that would raise attention. And obviously, just sweeping Bilbo off of his feet in the middle of a room and kissing him silly is out of the question.

He’s saved from his own thoughts by Bofur walking over with that constant smile on his face, and Thorin is swept into another conversation with a cousin he hasn’t seen in years.

It passes delightfully quickly, and before Thorin even realises, he’s saying goodbye to Dwalin and Balin and Bofur, and then it’s him, three teenagers, his sister, and the man who he isn’t quite sure what to call just yet.

Full house.

“You have a good day?” he asks Kili as he grabs a can of coke from the fridge. He hands one to his nephew and gets a thank you.

“Yeah! Me and Tauriel are gonna go to the lake tomorrow, is that okay? I want to teach her how to fish,” Kili says. Tauriel looks up from the table at the mention of her name and Thorin smiles at her, getting a shy one back.

“Yeah, sure. Did you ask your mother?” Thorin says.

“Not yet.”

“Go ask her, I’m not in charge while she’s here.” Thorin pops the can open. “Also, if you want to go camping halfway up a mountain, you need an adult with you.”
“Can you come?” Kili asks.

“I’m not sure if my back will be able to take it, kid,” Thorin says.

“Come on, it’ll be fun! And I know you’ve got loads of camping stuff in the garage, I saw it in there the other day,” Kili says. He’s using that voice that in the past has gotten him out of so much trouble with Thorin, and probably Dis, too, when he was younger. It won’t work on her now, that’s bloody certain.

“I’ll think about it,” Thorin says.

“Awesome. I’m gonna show Tauriel the balcony.” Kili bounds off, his energy seemingly endless now that his best friend is with him, and Thorin just watches him go and take her hand to show her outside.

He’s left on his own for the first time that day and immediately disappears to his room to shower. The hot water is relief on his muscles after standing all day, and he thinks to himself, maybe I need to sit the next birthday out, before he remembers that his birthday is actually the next one. Now that he’s opened up his home to the extended family, they’re going to want to come up for that too. But he might just be able to get away with not celebrating his forty first, given that it’s not even really important to him anymore. He just wants to paint and maybe watch some TV and go to bed early.

He wonders if Bilbo will still be here then. That would make things a little different from the last four years of spending the day alone with a bottle of whiskey and a bad movie.

He washes the product from his hair and gets out of the shower, wrapping a towel around himself. He goes to go back into his room, but he hears a quiet noise from the other side of the door and freezes with his hand on the handle. Thorin listens, and realises it’s the sound of clothes being dropped to the floor and other being pulled on.

He steps out into his bedroom and sees Bilbo in pyjamas, folding up his jeans and putting them on the bed. Bilbo turns to look at him.

“Oh,” he says. “Hello.”

“It’s only five,” Thorin says, gesturing to his pyjama pants. Bilbo just shrugs.

“Long day. Dis is asleep on the couch, bless her,” he says. Thorin smiles at the thought. He remembers Dis coming in in the early hours of the morning and crashing in her bed still in the clothes she wore dancing.

“Where’s she sleeping?” Bilbo asks. Thorin has to remind himself that he’s stood there with a towel around his waist and literally nothing else, and looks around for pyjamas.

“Well… she knows about us, so that kind of changes things,” he says as he roots around for sweat pants. He waits for a reaction from Bilbo, but he doesn’t get one. “I think she’s going to be in your room with Tauriel.”

“You told her?” Bilbo asks.

“She figured it out and I told her the truth. There’s… there’s no point in lying to Dis,” Thorin says. He pulls on his pants and looks at Bilbo. He expects to see anger, or disappointment, but instead he gets that indecipherable look on Bilbo’s face, the one Thorin isn’t sure if it’s one thing or another.
“At least that’s out of the way. Now go put a shirt on,” Bilbo says at last. He tosses Thorin a bundle of fabric that turns out to be his Metallica concert shirt. “I found it in one of your drawers.”

“If Dis sees me wearing this, she’s going to demand I give it to her because she left hers with her ex husband,” Thorin says, but he pulls it on anyway. His hair is still wet, so he runs a hand through it and looks for a hair band on his dresser. For a moment, he remembers the clippers slowly gathering dust in his bathroom cabinet, and it’s decided, just like that.

“Excuse me,” he says quietly. He goes into the bathroom and doesn’t even bother closing the door properly. He just roots around for the box and finds his clippers, barely used, and plugs them in. He has scissors in the drawer and he grabs them before he does anything else.

“Oh, Thorin?” Bilbo says from the doorway.

“Yeah?”

“What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?”

“It looks like you’re about to shave your hair off.” Bilbo leans against the frame, but he doesn’t try to stop him. Just watches cautiously.

“I told you it was getting annoying,” Thorin says. He bends over the sink so his hair is falling forward and grabs it in one hand, using the scissors with the other. He has to take a breath to steady his hands before he starts cutting.

It takes him about three minutes to cut it and shave it to a length that he knows he can work with. Bilbo’s expression goes from worried to shocked, from what Thorin sees in the mirror, but he doesn’t try to stop him at all. Just watches. By the time Thorin is done, the sink is full of hair and his head feels about ten pounds lighter.

“You’re cleaning that up,” Bilbo says after a moment of silence. He walks over as Thorin unplugs the clippers and shoves them unceremoniously back into their box, making a note to clean them out later, but right now, Bilbo is wrapping his arms around his waist from behind and pressing his face between Thorin’s shoulder blades. “You look good, though.”

“And here’s to not touching those clippers for another five years,” Thorin says. He looks at his reflection, barely recognising himself. He’s got about an inch of hair left, when before, it had been almost hilariously long. He has one hand covering Bilbo’s and raises the other to touch what’s left of his hair. He’s forgotten how weird it feels to have short hair. He’s going to have to even out his beard so he doesn’t look like an idiot, but at that moment, he really cannot be bothered. Instead, he just turns and takes Bilbo’s hands in his.

“Better or worse than before?” he asks.

“Better. Might take some getting used to,” Bilbo says. “Come on, I’m hungry.”

“You’re always hungry.”

“That’s besides the point.”

“There’s cake left. Unless they’ve eaten it all,” Thorin says. Bilbo doesn’t move away, in fact, he just steps closer, looking at Thorin with a strange expression. “What?”
“You look younger,” Bilbo says softly. He reaches up to take his face in his hand, and Thorin melts into the touch, closing his eyes and leaning into Bilbo’s warm palm. Thorin wonders how old he actually looks, if the weariness of his years really shows on his face. “What’s this from?” Bilbo touches a scar that cuts into Thorin’s hairline. It’s old and faded, but still there.

“My grandfather. He wasn’t the nicest person to be around when he got angry,” he says. It doesn’t hurt anymore. It’s been twenty four years since it happened, almost exactly, given a couple of months.

“I’m sorry,” Bilbo says. He breathes it, actually. He has to stand on his toes to run his hand over the newly shaved hair. Thorin bends down a little and hooks his arms under Bilbo’s knees, and stands and hoists him up, getting a startled yelp in return. Bilbo digs his fingers into Thorin’s shoulders to stop himself from failing and Thorin just laughs.

“Put me down, you oaf,” Bilbo says, though he’s smiling. “Before your back gives out.”

“I’m only forty!”

“You told your nephew your back couldn’t handle camping.”

“Have you ever been camping?” Thorin puts him down and backs him out of the bathroom. “It’s a long night in the cold and when you wake up you’re covered in a million bruises.”

“You are the world’s worst uncle,” Bilbo says.

“Dis is going with them, anyway. She takes them camping a lot, she’s more used to it than I am,” Thorin says.

“You should go with them anyway,” Bilbo says. “Spend some time with them before they go back to school.”

“I know, I know. I’ll go camping and you and Fili can decide once and for all who’s better at Scrabble,” Thorin says.

“It’s him, he speaks two languages fluently,” Bilbo says. Thorin just laughs and brushes Bilbo’s hair from his face.

“Still hungry?” he asks.

“Stupid question,” Bilbo says. Thorin just hums and leans down to kiss him. It’s quick and to the point, but it lifts Thorin’s spirits after a day of absolutely no physical contact. Bilbo pulls away.

“Food, before I pass out.”

Dis laughs herself silly when she wakes and sees Thorin cooking soup.

“He couldn’t find a hair band,” Bilbo explains from the arm of the sofa while Dis dissolves into slightly tipsy giggles. They had had a little bit of alcohol during the later stages of the party, and it seems she still has it in her system.

“Please tell me you’re not keeping it that short,” she says. Thorin sticks his tongue out at her and Dis just grins.

“No, I’m just going to leave it to grow again for five years,” he says. “Do you want chicken or
“Tomato. Where are the kids?” Dis asks, looking around. Her hair is coming out of its braid. *Bilbo is fading out and all he can think is that his mother's hair is now completely ruined.* He forces himself to forget the image and stands to go into the kitchen, grabbing the bottle of wine on the side and two glasses left there. He supposes it doesn’t really matter who drank from them first.

“In their room. Tauriel bought one of those portable DVD player things, so they’re watching a movie,” Thorin says. Bilbo watches him while he pours wine and hands a glass to Dis, who takes it with a nod.

“Time for the adults to drink and be merry, then,” she says.

“Not too merry. I’m too old to bounce back after a hangover,” Thorin says. He walks over and sets Dis’ soup down on the coffee table, with a plate of buttered bread. He comes back a minute later with the rest of the soup. They all sit on the floor around the coffee table with their soup and wine and eat in relative silence. When Dis is done, she takes her hair out of its braid and runs her fingers through it, combing through the hairspray and the tangles. It puts Bilbo more at ease, for some reason.

She leans her head back against the sofa and looks at Bilbo, eyes narrowed. He looks her up and down. She has a Magen David on a fine chain around her neck and one of those fancy charm bracelets on her left wrist. Her hair is a dark, rich brown with only a hint of grey at the temples, and she looks exhausted. Bilbo almost tells her to go to bed, but the look in her eyes as they make eye contact tells him it’s really not a good idea. She leans forward.

“If he hurts you,” she says in a flat voice, “you have my permission to deck him as hard as you can. Alright?”

Bilbo exhales, the sudden fear in his chest deflating.

“Okay,” he says. She points at Thorin.

“As for you, *ne pas détruire ce,*” she says. Bilbo looks at Thorin, still eating his chicken soup, and sees him frozen with his spoon halfway to his mouth. He nods and drops his spoon back into his bowl.

“I take it I’m sleeping in your bedroom?” Dis looks at Bilbo, an eyebrow raised. He nods.

“Yeah. Yeah, I mean… I can get my stuff out of there, if you want,” he says, scrambling to his feet with his empty soup bowl. Dis follows with her own. He takes it from her.

“Do it tomorrow. As soon as I’m out of this dress, I’m going to crash and sleep for about twelve hours,” Dis says. Bilbo quickly puts the bowls in the sink. “Need any help?”

“Hm? Oh, god, no, go get some sleep. You look like you’re about to keel over,” Bilbo says, turning on the tap. Dis leans against the counter and just stares at him, her eyes wide and deep brown, identical to her younger son’s.

“Good night, Bilbo,” she says. She pushes herself away from the counter and walks off, humming a little tune.

“Good night,” he says after her. While the sink fills with hot water, he watches her stop and kiss Thorin on the top of his head, hugging him from behind. He says something that makes her smile, and she kisses him again before walking out of the front room and down the hall, whistling,
surprisingly chipper for a woman slightly drunk.

Thorin puts on the radio and closes the living room door. Bilbo has done the washing up and left it all to dry, save for Thorin’s bowl, which can be done in the morning. Thorin is a little more distracting when he takes Bilbo’s hand and pulls him into the living room, the gentle smile on his face giving him away as to what he wants to do. Bilbo hasn’t danced in ages.

The song is slow, luckily, and so they don’t do much else but sway, Bilbo’s arms around Thorin’s neck and Thorin’s hands on his back, pressing them close together.

“I wanted to dance with you earlier,” Thorin says softly, moving one hand down a little.

“Why didn’t you?” Bilbo asks. There had been dancing earlier, but to much livelier music.

“I wanted this for myself. I’m selfish like that, you know,” Thorin says. He takes Bilbo’s hand and spins him slowly under his arm before bringing him back in, this time in a more traditional stance. Their fingers are linked together and Bilbo’s free hand is on Thorin’s shoulder, and the hand on his waist is impossibly warm.

“Hmm. So am I,” Bilbo says.

“Selfish? No, you’re not selfish,” Thorin says. His smile makes Bilbo’s chest ache in a pleasant way. It’s just for him, he knows that. Just for him. No one has smiled at him like that in years.

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” he says.

“I know.” Thorin leans down and kisses him, slow and sweet. His arm wraps around Bilbo’s waist and pulls him close. They’ve stopped swaying, and Bilbo is glad for it, because he knows dancing and kissing don’t go particularly well together, like mixing Red Bull and alcohol. He just devotes his energy to kissing Thorin back, remembering this, feeling a soft kind of glow burn in his chest.

He pulls away first.

“Thorin, there’s some things we need to talk about,” he says. Thorin’s eyes are closed.

“Tomorrow,” he says. “Please, tomorrow.”
It takes a lot of effort, but Bilbo agrees.

What he has to say can wait until tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

eh idk what this is and i dont really have anything to say about it? next chapter will have plot, also thorin shaved his hair because i couldnt be bothered to write about long hair anymore.
college is kicking my ass already so please bear with me over the next few weeks.
thank you as always for supporting this fic and leaving some wonderful comments.
they really do make my day whenever i read them
tumblr: here
pinterest board for this fic: here
Bilbo doesn’t get a chance to properly talk to Thorin for the rest of the week.

As it turns out, Dis is an avid outdoorswoman, and uses the weather as an excuse to get them all out of the house to the lake, now that the weather is decidedly less wet. As a whole, all of them spend more time outdoors than in, and by Saturday, Bilbo is absolutely exhausted and ready to drop.

Dis comes into Thorin’s room about an hour before she’s meant to leave. She leans against the doorway, the sleeves of her flannel shirt rolled up to her elbows. Like Thorin, she has tattoos on her arms, though not as many, and they’re not as dark. She watches Bilbo on his laptop for a few seconds until he pushes it away.

“You look shattered,” she says.

“I feel it,” Bilbo says. He crosses his legs on the bed and Dis joins him, sitting beside him. “But it’s been fun having you here, so I won’t say it wasn’t worth it.”

“You’re not really into all that outdoorsy stuff, are you?” Dis asks. She smiles at him knowingly. Bilbo shakes his head.

“Not always. I mean, hiking’s fun, but camping… not so much,” he says.

“Yeah, it’s not for everyone. What were you looking at?” Dis gestures to his laptop, still open on the travel website. Bilbo hesitates before grabbing it and pushing the screen back. “You’re looking at flights? Are you leaving?”

“What? No, no, there’s just some… things I have to sort out back in England. My parents old house is being sold, so… “ Bilbo trails off, shrugging. He exits the travel website and puts his laptop to sleep. Dis just watches him.

“That sucks. When do you need to go?” she asks.

“Soon, I think. In the next couple of weeks. I haven’t told Thorin yet,” Bilbo says. He hangs his head, unable to look at her. He knows how protective she is of her brother, she had made it absolutely clear to Bilbo once she was sober how important he was to her. Bilbo doesn’t doubt that she’s not above criminal acts to make a point.

“He’ll be okay, you know. It’s only a couple of days,” Dis says.

“I know. I’m not worried about that. I’m more worried about me surviving the drive to the airport,” Bilbo says.

“Right. Because of the accident,” Dis says.

“Yeah.”

“It’s an hour in the car, I think you’ll be okay.” Dis squeezes his arm and gives him a kind smile that reaches her eyes. “Do you think you’ll ever go back for good?”
“To England? Well, I guess that depends on what happens here. I won’t really have anywhere stable once the house gets sold, but I have a lot of family in Wiltshire. I don’t know, Dis. Would you ever go back?” Bilbo asks, looking at her.

“Probably not. Home is wherever my boys are, and Yorkshire isn’t really special. I’m happy in Lyon,” Dis says. She looks at her hands clasped between her knees. “Are you happy here? With Thorin, that is. I know he can be a bit of a handful sometimes.”

“Only when I wake up to blaring Metallica,” Bilbo says. Dis laughs and shakes her head. “I am happy here. And he’s not that bad. It’s… quiet most of the time, and I don’t have to worry about doing something stupid. I’ve done plenty enough of that on my own.”

“Well, you have my blessing. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen him look at anyone like that. Decades, really,” Dis says. She stands and pushes her hair from her face. She has a long drive ahead, Bilbo knows. Crossing a border is never enjoyable, and when you have three teenagers in your car (and Bilbo knows they had way too much caffeine in the last couple of days), you end up wanting to claw your own eyes out.

“Try to get some sleep when you can, you look exhausted,” Bilbo says, standing up too. Like her brother, she’s tall, taller than Bilbo is, and he’s seen the definition in her biceps. She may be unassuming, but she isn’t a woman to be messed with.

“Hmm. I might drop them all off at Dwalin’s and crash on the sofa,” she says.

“What time do you have to be at work tomorrow?” Bilbo asks.

“Eurgh. Nine.” Dis rubs the bridge of her nose with a grimace, but she’s smiling a second later. She opens her arms out and gives Bilbo a look that says this is happening whether you like it or not, so Bilbo just mock-rolls his eyes and hugs her, getting a tight squeeze in response.

“There’s sandwiches in the kitchen for the drive,” Bilbo says into her hair.

“You’re an angel,” Dis says, and pulls away. “Call me if you need anything. I need to go round up the kids and make sure they’re packed.”

“Need any help?”

“Hmm? Oh, no, I’ve got it. I’ll just put on my scary mum voice and hope for the best,” Dis says. She winks at him and then she’s gone, her voice carrying through the house as she calls Kili, Fili, and Tauriel to attention. Bilbo lingers at the doorway and only catches glimpses of them in the boys room, throwing things into their bags, he assumes.

He goes into the living room and finds Thorin collecting plates that had been used for toast and empty mugs of what was coffee about two hours ago. Bilbo takes the precariously balancing cups from his hands and takes them to the kitchen, where he dumps them unceremoniously into the sink, jumping when Thorin comes up behind him.

“Are you alright?” he murmurs, one hand on Bilbo’s waist, the other on his shoulder, giving him space to move away if he needs to. Bilbo doesn’t need to, nor does he want to.

“I’m fine. Just washing up mugs,” he says. He turns the tap on and starts to wash them out, watching the water turn an odd brown-ish colour while Thorin leans in close. Bilbo feels the warmth of him at his back and smiles to himself, leaning back just a little.

“Dinner in Vevey tomorrow?” Thorin asks. He rests his chin on top of Bilbo’s head and both of his
hands go to his hips in a slow, sliding movement. Bilbo almost drops the mug he’s holding.

“Hmm. Sounds lovely. I’m afraid I won’t look very smart, though, I only own jeans right now,” he said. He turns his head and is met with a gentle kiss on the cheek, Thorin’s beard scratching at his skin.

“I don’t really care how you look,” Thorin says. There’s the sound of oncoming footsteps and he sighs. “Brace yourself.”

Bilbo looks over his shoulder when Thorin pulls away just as Tauriel and Kili slide across the kitchen tiles in their socks, shrieking in delight, Tauriel’s long red hair a tangled mess. Bilbo had thought she was just shy when he first met her, but now that she’s opened up more around her friends, she’s wild and fun, and teases Kili to her hearts delight. Even now, she grabs his arm and pulls him onto the floor with her when she slips and catches herself with her free hand, wincing but otherwise unhurt.

“No running inside,” Thorin chastises them, but he’s not mad. Bilbo catches the fond look on his face before it slips away when he goes to dry up the newly washed mugs. They wash up and tidy the living room while the kids pack (Dis had packed the night before, being the most responsible adult in a three mile radius), and before they know it, they’re ready to leave.

“Alright, you two look after each other and don’t do anything stupid. Thorin, I want your paintings done by early July. I’m not even kidding, I will have your head if I don’t get them.” Dis points at her brother, her face set in a serious expression. Thorin just nods. “Bilbo, if you need any help with the... the thing, let me know.” She hugs them both, and Fili and Kili hug their uncle, Kili being lifted off of his feet like he’s five, not fifteen. Thorin ruffles Fili’s hair and does the same to Tauriel, making her laugh.

“Have a safe trip,” he says when Dis manages to get them walking in the direction of the car, and then he closes the door, and it’s silent.

They stand in the hallway, listening to the car being turned on and driving away, and it isn’t until they’re definitely alone that Thorin seems to remember what Dis had said.

“What thing was she talking about?” he asks. Bilbo’s stomach suddenly feels very weighed down and awkward, so he takes Thorin’s hand and leads him towards the living room, where they both sit down, Thorin like a regular human being, and Bilbo with his legs pulled up.

“My parents house is being sold,” he says. “I need to go back soon to sort things out.”

“Back to England,” Thorin says. His expression in completely blank, which Bilbo finds is much easier to deal with than any emotional reaction.

“Yeah. I’m not really looking forward to it, if I’m honest. I have too much nosy family who will want me to stay and others who would like nothing better than to go back. It’s a bit of a conundrum, really,” Bilbo says. He shrugs and leans his head back against the couch, closing his eyes. He’s already stressed thinking about it, and thinking about his family just makes it worse. At least he’ll get to see Prim...

“Was it the house where you grew up or...?” Thorin asks.

“Yeah. I haven’t been there in ages,” Bilbo says. He opens his eyes to look at Thorin and smiles weakly. “It’s completely different now that Prim lives there. They turned my old room into a nursery.”
“Is your Indiana Jones poster still in there?”

“I got rid of that when I left home, I wouldn’t want to subject Frodo to that.” Bilbo nudges him with his foot and gets nudged back.

“When do you need to go?” Thorin asks. His voice is nothing but gentle. Part of Bilbo hates it, but the other half of him wants to wrap that voice around himself like a cloak to keep him warm and safe.

“I don’t know. Whenever it gets bought, I guess, but that could be any day now. And I want to see it again before they start moving everything,” Bilbo says. He runs a hand through his hair and looks away. He’s been trying not to think about it, really. Bilbo has never been too good with change, and learning that the house he grew up in is being sold is almost too much for him to handle.

But he can handle it. He has to. And it’s not like he never thought about it before, it’s just that the market hasn’t been great the last few years, and it involves a lot of paperwork and actually talking to a solicitor and all of that… Well, he’s glad that Prim is going over it. She’s got a steady head, and the sensibility to deal with all of that, work part time, and raise a child, all at once, though Bilbo knows that she’s allowed to take Frodo into the office when she needs to. That must make things so much easier.

“Look at flights from Geneva. Spend some time with your family. I’ll be here when you get back,” Thorin says. He touches Bilbo’s hand and links their fingers together, Bilbo staring at them and the ink stains on Thorin’s fingertips.

“I don’t really want to go, if I’m honest. Means I’m getting better,” Bilbo says.

“You don’t want to get better?” Thorin asks.

“I do, it’s just that… getting better means moving on, and getting my life back. I’m not sure I want my old life back,” Bilbo admits. He’s been thinking it in the back of his head for months, now. He will always love being a teacher, and he will always love his field and the endless amounts of information he still has yet to learn, but… but something about it seems just so unappealing to him that he wants to ignore recovery and stay in this weird limbo between okay and falling apart forever.

“You don’t have to rush it, you know,” Thorin says. “Take your time. Recovery isn’t… it’s not linear. It’s not going to be point A to point B in a matter of months. I lost my brother five years ago and some days I can’t go anywhere near my own bathtub because I’m scared he’s in there.”

“You’re starting to sound like Lindir,” Bilbo says. Thorin smiles and looks down. It’s a rather charming look on him, bashfulness.

“I think I’ve been in and out of therapy enough to sound like a therapist when I need to,” he says. He lets go of Bilbo’s hand, only to stand and take his wrists, pulling him up from the couch.

“That’s probably enough depressing talk for today,” Bilbo says, looping his arms around Thorin’s neck, having to stand on his tiptoes.

“Hm. What should we do?” Thorin asks, glancing around.

“What do people usually do when they’re alone together?” Bilbo asks, because he isn’t sure he even remembers how to do this. Thorin’s hands slide down his back and pull him close, and he’s happy to stay like this, really, but he knows how bored he gets with things staying still.
“Take their time, I guess,” Thorin says.

“Don’t you have paintings to do?” Bilbo says, leaning back a little. Thorin gives him a look that says please don’t remind me, and Bilbo sees the lines around his eyes and the shadows beneath them. God, he must be exhausted. “Alright, maybe you should get some sleep. You look tired.”

“Join me?” Thorin asks. He steps back and takes Bilbo’s hand, pulling him towards his bedroom, not even trying, but Bilbo goes with him.

“I’m not tired, though,” he says.

“Yes, you are,” Thorin says. He closes the door behind them and Bilbo actually relaxes, not realising how tense he had been before. Thorin takes Bilbo’s face in his hands and leans down to kiss him, once, twice, and again and again until they’re both entirely swept up and distracted by it.

Bilbo grips Thorin’s shoulders and they stumble backwards towards the bed, which seems to be their central point these days, not that Bilbo even really minds. The backs of his legs hit the edge and he climbs backwards onto it, breaking away from Thorin so he doesn’t slip and do any damage. Thorin follows immediately after, holding himself up on his elbows so he doesn’t crush Bilbo with his bulk. But, Bilbo pulls him down anyway.

With no one else around, they’re allowed to make noise, and what wonderful noises Thorin makes when Bilbo drags his nails up the bare skin of his back, following the curve of his spine. He gasps against Bilbo’s cheek and makes a sound that’s something between a whimper and a moan, completely uncharacteristic for someone who looks the way he does. Bilbo grins and turns his head so Thorin’s beard scratches against his jaw and his lips meet his neck.

“Thorin.” Bilbo breathes his name and goes to tangle his fingers in his hair, forgetting that it’s all shaved off. Instead, he rakes his nails over Thorin’s scalp and gets another one of those delightful moans. He pulls Thorin back up and pushes him onto his back.

“I didn’t know you liked to be on top,” Thorin teases breathlessly. Bilbo shrugs.

“It’s a recent development,” he says. He, too, is breathless, and when he speaks, it sounds like he’s just run a mile.

“Uuhh. I like it.” Thorin runs his hands along Bilbo’s thighs and looks up at him, an eyebrow raised as if daring him to do something bold. Bilbo has never been good at that. He’s a lot more old school.

He puts his hands on top of Thorin’s. He doesn’t guide them anywhere, just touches them and looks at Thorin laying on his back, his face flushed and shirt rumpled.

“You look good,” Bilbo says. Thorin looks confused for a seconds.

“What, ravished by yourself? I didn’t know that was ever a good look,” he says. Bilbo rolls his eyes and then off of Thorin, laying down next to him. It’s much more comfortable that way, he finds, and he assumes it’s because he’s no spring chicken anymore.

“So. Dinner in Vevey. Where are we going?” Bilbo asks.

“A restaurant, hopefully. There’s a nice place on the edge of the lake I think you might like,” Thorin says. “They do really nice wine there, too.”

“Hm. I’m sold already,” Bilbo says.
“Good, because it’s the only place in Vevey I actually know about,” Thorin says. He looks at the ceiling and closes his eyes, hands folded over his stomach. “I haven’t been on a date for seven years, though, you should just be aware of that.”

I can’t remember the last time I was on a date,” Bilbo says. “It was a long time ago, that’s for sure. And I think we went to a pub at two in the afternoon.”

“Sounds grim.”

“It wasn’t that bad. I’m just not a huge fan of beer.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Thorin opens his eyes and looks at Bilbo. It’s getting late and Bilbo is actually tired, but he doesn’t want to go to sleep just yet. He wants to stay here, where it’s calm and quiet, and spend time with Thorin before they both drop off to sleep.

“How’s the painting going? You wouldn’t let anyone see it,” he says.

“Because that’s how I work. You’re allowed to see it when it’s done,” Thorin says. He stretches his arms up. “But it’s going good. I’m doing Dis’ one first.”

“That explains this.” Bilbo takes Thorin’s hand and turns it so it’s palm-up, showing the ink and paint stains, purple and red and black. Bilbo isn’t sure about the colours for Dis, but Thorin has known her his whole life, so who is Bilbo to question it?

“Occupational hazard, I’m afraid,” Thorin says.

“So that’s why all of your clothes have paint on them,” Bilbo says. Thorin hums. He stares at Bilbo. “What?”

“What?”

“You’re staring.”

“No I’m not.”

“You are, Thorin.”

“Sorry. I feel like I’ve barely had a chance to be with you this week,” Thorin says.

“You haven’t. But your family were entertaining, so I guess it’s worth it,” Bilbo says. “And they’re gone now…”

“Are we fifteen years old at a sleepover or something?” Thorin said, but he’s teasing, Bilbo knows. It’s sweet. It’s weird, that anyone would tease him like that, especially considering Bilbo hasn’t been in this situation for what feels like an age, but it’s sweet nonetheless.

“Well, I’m going to make a cup of tea because I’m an adult in my thirties. Want anything?” Bilbo stands and turns, looking at Thorin still sprawled out on his back.

“Nope. Go get your tea, Mister Adult,” he says. Bilbo kicks him playfully and leaves the room.

In the kitchen, Bilbo straightens things out while the kettle boils on the stove. He notices things that the kids left behind - a couple of pencils on the kitchen table, a mug of cold green tea on the counter, a pile of drawings either already stuck to the fridge or waiting to be. Bilbo leafs through them. They’re quite good, as far as drawings by teenagers go, some by Fili, some by Tauriel. Bilbo sticks the rest of them on the fridge and looks at them, feeling a strange sense of comfort looking at...
the hasty sketches of the mountains or the lake.

He realises then how much he doesn’t want to leave at all. He’s realised it before, just not with this kind of intensity, the need to stay, the need to thoroughly carve out a space from himself here, not just for Thorin, but for himself. The kettle whistles and Bilbo pours his tea, but he feels like he’s doing everything on autopilot, not even thinking about it as he pours in milk and sugar. He stirs and takes the teabag out.

He stares at the milk swirling and mixing with the tea.

It’s a little like dissociation, he thinks. He feels untethered from his body and his mind while he stirs much longer than he needs to. The house seems to settle around him like it’s finally wrapping itself around him and saying you’re here, why do you need to be anywhere else?

I don’t, Bilbo thinks.

I really, really don’t.

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Dinner in Vevey ends up being a slow drive down to the city and finding the first fast food place they can that looks appealing. Bilbo is right - he doesn’t look very smart, but Thorin appreciates the effort he took to look good regardless. He actually ironed a t shirt.

“Well, the views nice,” Bilbo says. They’re sat on a bench facing the lake, and the sun is setting directly in front of them. Thorin can’t help but agree.

“So is mine,” he says. He mentally punches himself, because that’s the most cliche thing he could have said, but Bilbo just laughs and shakes his head. It’s quite astonishing to watch, really. He’s... relaxed. Actually relaxed. The lines around his eyes are from smiling, not frowning, and he’s eating his chips with his fingers, wiping them on his jeans. Not that Thorin isn’t doing the same, it’s just odd seeing Bilbo do it.

Then again, eating chips doesn’t have quite the same feel to it when you’re using one of those silly little forks that give your tongue splinters.

Thorin takes both of their empty boxes when they’re done and looks for the closest bin to put them in. Turning back, he sees Bilbo staring out at the lake, the wind ruffling his hair just so, the sleeves of his hoodie rolled up to his elbows. From a distance, even Thorin can see him running his fingers up and down his scar while he stares out at the water. Thorincatalogues the whole scene as something he should draw one day, making a mental note of the colours and the lighting, the way Bilbo’s hair looks more gold than red, and the troubled look on his face. Thorin wishes his had his sketchbook with him, but this is meant to be a date.

He tries to imagine how he would see him if they didn’t know each other. If he was just walking down this street and seeing Bilbo sat on the bench and lost in his own thoughts. He’s sure he would feel the same, struck by the softness of it all, but he wouldn’t know the story behind it. He wouldn’t know what Bilbo was doing with his hand. He would construct it all his head, but Thorin knows he would never get it completely right.

He walks back over and sits down. Bilbo looks up.

“Does it hurt?” Thorin asks gently.

“What? My scar?” Bilbo shrugs and shakes his head. “No, not really. I was just thinking about the
last time I was at the coast."

"You know that's a lake, right?" Thorin says. Bilbo gives him a look.

"That's not the point. I was alone, back in Cardiff. It was a couple of weeks before my attempt. It was freezing cold. I got coffee from the Costa down the road from my place, and I just walked. For about three hours, I just walked along the shore and didn't get home until gone midnight," he says.

"Why?" Thorin has no idea why Bilbo is telling him about this.

"I was depressed and lonely," Bilbo says. "There's not really much to it apart from that."

"Most people don't go out in the middle of winter like that," Thorin says.

"Like I said. Depressed and lonely. You do weird shit when you're depressed," Bilbo says. He puts his hands in his pockets and leans back, looking at the lake again.

"I used to be pretty much nocturnal when Frerin died, I think I know a thing or two about weird shit," Thorin says.

"You're still nocturnal. You were up in the middle of the night for the last few nights," Bilbo says with a smile. He looks around to check that they're alone, and takes Thorin's hand in his. They may be in Switzerland, but Thorin knows how risky it is for the two of them to be open here, or anywhere in this part of this world. But this is enough. Thorin squeezes his hand and gets one in return.

They take a slow walk back to the car when they decide to go back. Vevey is always beautiful at night, and as they drive away, Thorin looks at it in the wing mirror, a dwindling mass of golden light and quiet existence. It's one of the quieter cities he's been to, and at this time in his life, it's ideal. He reaches across the gearbox and takes Bilbo's hand, not taking his eyes off of the road to see his face. He doesn't need to. He just feels Bilbo link their fingers together and squeeze before letting go so Thorin can change the gear.

Back at the house, it's uncharacteristically quiet. Thorin hangs up his jacket and they leave their shoes in the hallway and just go straight to bed, because Thorin is tired and Bilbo doesn't have the energy to do much else.

Thorin kisses him and wraps his arm around Bilbo's waist, sliding his hand up the back of his shirt. Thorin had forgotten long ago how warm people could be like this, how intimate it was to share this space with another, how good you could feel to wake up next to the person you fell asleep with. They don't really do much before they both fall asleep, and when Thorin dreams, it's golden haze and warmth like summer sun on the back of his head, and the quiet laughter of a slowly healing historian.

Chapter End Notes

im so sorry this took so long... im on holiday in nyc right now so i dont have much free time to actually sit down and write much, but ive been planning the next few chapters of this + my nanowrimo (which is gonna be To The Ocean), and doing college work. this holiday is well needed and ill be updating more afterwards, i hope. thank you for supporting this fic, im so grateful to all of you for encouraging me to
keep writing

find me on tumblr!
There’s a lot to be said about falling.

One, it happens fast. It’s a rollercoaster ride of adrenaline and fear, and before you know it, you’ve hit the ground, hard.

Two, no one ever tells you how normal it feels. The fear is normal, the panic is normal, the swooping in your stomach is as normal as butterflies when that someone special at the Starbucks down the road smiles at you on a miserable morning.

Three, when it’s metaphorical, the same rules apply.

Bilbo doesn’t recognise it as falling at first. He puts it down to having not done anything like this in years, and his unfamiliarity with intimacy and closeness. The butterflies in his stomach when Thorin comes up behind him and drapes himself over Bilbo like a very large, bearded cat, the sparks of fear when he wakes up that fade when he notices Thorin asleep next to him, or hears him singing in the kitchen, completely off key.

He doesn’t really realise what’s happened until he’s saying goodbye to Thorin at Geneva International, once he’s dropped his suitcase off. He’s only going back to England for a week, but it’s… emotional, to say the least.

“Fly safe,” Thorin says. “Call me when you land.”

“I will. Don’t get too lonely without me,” Bilbo said. He almost reaches out for Thorin, but he doesn’t have to, because Thorin reaches out for him, pulling him into a tight hug. Bilbo doesn’t want to let go, but he has to, only for Thorin to kiss him, short and sweet, but it leaves Bilbo reeling anyway. He’s always been scared of doing these things in public, and while he knows he’s in safe hands, he’s still nervous with Thorin pulls away, brushing his thumb along Bilbo’s cheek ever so gently. A lasting effect of growing up in England, he supposes. He knows same gender couples where he grew up too scared to even hold each others hands in public, let alone kiss in an international airport.

“Come on, let me go,” Bilbo says, smiling.

“I’m going to miss you,” Thorin says.

“I’m only going for a week. Trust me, it’ll fly by, and you’ll actually get some work done without me distracting you,” Bilbo says. He squeezes Thorin’s arm and gets a reluctant smile in return.

“I’ll pick you up next week. Just let me know when you’ve checked in,” he says. Bilbo shifts his grip on his backpack. He’s already checked in, he just needs to go through security and wait.

“See you next week,” he says, and walks away.

Security is as breezy as usual, and Bilbo just waits patiently in one of those uncomfortable chairs at his gate, alternating between using the airport wi-fi and staring at the board, watching his flight move up the rows. He’s forgotten how dull and mindless airports are, but relishes in it. It’s monotonous and easy, and he’s never been scared of flying, not like with cars. Cars, he’s always
been scared of, even before the accident. But flying is easy, and he remembers how amazing airports had been to him as a child. He vividly remembers his father having to carry him when he was younger so he didn’t go running off and disappear while exploring every nook and cranny of the airport his six year old self could find.

Bilbo boards the plane with a Sudoku book and spends the hour and a half flight listening to music and completing the puzzles. But the thing is, Bilbo has always been good at Sudoku, and because he doesn’t have to think about it, he can think about other things.

Like Thorin.

Bilbo knows he’s going to be okay away from… well, he doesn’t want to call it home, but it’s as good as, if he’s being honest. He’s been there for four months. He hasn’t been back to the UK in all of that time, and now he’s going back to the house he grew up in. He know’s that it’s completely different now that Prim and Drogo have been living there for the last five years, and that his old room now belongs to a toddler, but Prim kept the kitchen the same (apart from the oven which had been there when Bilbo’s parents moved in in the seventies), and Bilbo’s old height chart is still there on his old bedroom doorframe, along with Frodo’s. He guesses they’ll have to start again, now that they’re moving, but Frodo is only a year and a half old, so they’re not exactly losing much.

But Bilbo isn’t sure if he’s ready to say goodbye to it. He’s always seen it as a safe haven of sorts, somewhere he could go when life as an adult gets rough. That’s the thing no one tells you about losing your parents - once you’re gone, you’re untethered. Late night calls with his mother had been the only thing to get Bilbo through university, along with the promise of somewhere to stay for the holidays. He’s put off moving on for a year and a half, and though the chance is staring him right in the face, it doesn’t feel right.

Which brings him back to Thorin.

He remembers feeling like an unwanted nuisance the first time they had bet. Maybe it was their drunken conversation on the balcony, or the nights Thorin would stay up with him, staying with Bilbo through his nightmares and keeping him grounded. Maybe it was the smaller things - Thorin making him coffee in the mornings without having to ask, letting Bilbo sit outside on the balcony with him while he painted, the two of them taking turns making dinner in some kind of unspoken agreement. Bilbo doesn’t know, nor does he really care. He’s progressed in his recovery more in the Swiss mountains that he could have ever hoped to at Oak Manor. In a way, he has moved on in some aspects. He’s letting another person in, letting them see him at his most vulnerable while learning about a whole new person at the same time. Before Thorin, Bilbo had more or less resigned himself to being alone and in between healing and falling apart for the rest of his life. He knows for a fact that falling for someone doesn’t heal all wounds, and that it’s a culmination of a lot of things - time, space, relapses and progress, and figuring out how to work through his emotions. But, he also knows that it helps.

Falling for someone, even someone who lives a hermits life in the mountains, is only a small piece of it.

Bilbo looks out of the plane window and sees a patchwork of fields as they start their descent into Gatwick. It makes him smile. It seems appropriate that the first thing he sees of home is a tiny fraction of its farmland, and that’s really what he loves about the UK. If you get the place right, you can spend weeks without seeing another soul, save for the occasional rogue sheep or enthusiastic hiker. That’s the beauty of a country where only 2.5% of the land is built on - the rest of natural and untouched.
They land and Bilbo goes through customs and gets his luggage. Prim is waiting for him with an infant in her arms, and Bilbo hugs her, genuinely glad to see her after all of this time.

“Come on, I’ve got food in the car. And Frodo’s going to drop off at any second, bless him,” Prim says. Bilbo looks at his nephew, half asleep and looking at him with huge blue eyes, curled in against his mother’s chest.

“Lead the way,” he says at last.

The drive back to Wiltshire is… quiet. Bilbo sits in the front while Frodo sleeps in the back, completely undisturbed by the music Prim plays, or their conversation while they eat sandwiches she brought with her.

“What’s Switzerland like?” she asks with a mouthful of cheese and pickle. Bilbo shrugs.

“It’s nice,” he says. “But most of what I’ve seen of it is the countryside. You’d like it out there, there’s plenty of dangerous hiking trails halfway up the mountains Drogo would do, no problem.”

“He’s the adventurer, not me. Anyway, I bet you’re glad to be back,” Prim says, glancing at him before looking back at the road.

“Yeah. I missed the smell of manure and grass,” Bilbo says dryly. “You know I’m only here for a week.”

“You’re not going to be fretting over the house for a week, though, are you? I booked some time off so we can do some stuff together. You know, see some of the more tolerable family, go to that tea place in Malborough, finally use my National Trust membership…” Prim shrugs, but smiles. Bilbo has missed her, and talking through Facebook is not even close to seeing her in person.

“This is why you’re my favourite,” he says.

“I know, I know. Don’t let it get to my head,” Prim says. “How’s your broody artist roommate?”

Bilbo almost chokes on his water, and coughs as quietly as he can so he doesn’t wake Frodo in the back seat. He hasn’t told Prim about Thorin yet, he was hoping to do it today, but to hear her call Thorin his roommate is nothing short of hilarious, and mortifying.

“Fine. He’s fine. He’s busy working on some stuff for his exhibition in August,” he manages. Prim gives him a look he recognises all too well.

“No more late night conversations or getting drunk on balconies?” she asks.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Bilbo says innocently, but he knows he’s lost. Prim just rolls her eyes.

“Alright, don’t tell me. But we’re talking about this eventually, and you have to rub this in Lobelia’s face, it’ll be hysterical,” she says. “You know how much she likes to pretend she’s upper class when she actually has the same terrible accent as the rest of us.”

“Oh, god, you didn’t tell me we’d be seeing them.” Bilbo sighs.

“We don’t have to. Honestly, I think just spending the day at Avebury or something instead of seeing them will piss them off more than actually having lunch with them,” Prim says. “That’s much more satisfying.”
“This is a family of sadists.”

“Yeah, and you’re one of us. Coffee?”

They get back to Trowbridge just as Frodo is waking up and yawning in the back seat, in that cute way toddlers do. Bilbo grabs his suitcase and the bag of food Prim brought, which is pretty much just crumpled up clingfilm and an empty thermos by now, and makes his way towards the house.

Outside, it’s almost exactly as he remembers it. An old red brick house, two storeys with ivy climbing up the walls. The front garden is as neat as always, with pots of flowers and trimmed grass, and hanging baskets on either side of the door, meticulously looked after by both Prim and Drogo. Bilbo stares up at it for a moment before Prim passes him and touches his shoulder. She gives him a warm smile and he follows her, though not before checking that the door is still painted that vibrant green Bungo chose all those years ago when he and Belladonna first moved in.

It’ll be just them for a while, apparently, which Bilbo is happy with. He’s related by blood to Drogo, but they’ve never really been too chummy, it’s Prim that Bilbo has been friends with since they were children. They’re the same age and they went to the same school, and Bilbo is almost ninety percent sure that they might be very distantly related on his mothers side, which would make for some very interesting discussions about… well, close marriages in his family tree. Not that he even particularly cares all that much, it’s just that he’d like to know exactly who he’s related to.

But Prim has always been family regardless, and Bilbo feels actually at home when he walks in and sees the exact same fading wallpaper going up the walls. Prim puts Frodo down and he toddles into the living room, and Bilbo watches as he goes towards the nearest pile of soft toys before grabbing a worn looking teddy and promptly sitting down on the floor. It’s delightfully adorable when he chews on the teddys ear and looks at Bilbo with those huge blue eyes. Bilbo is still holding onto his suitcase and the bag of rubbish, until Prim appears out of nowhere and walks over to Frodo, clapping once and holding her arms out. Frodo gets to his feet and holds his arms up, and Prim lifts him, cuddling him close.

“Just put your stuff anywhere,” she says, gesturing to the hallway. “You’re staying in the spare room, that alright?”

“That’s fine.” Bilbo is a little stunned by everything, if he’s being honest. There are things about the house that are unique to Prim and her little family - the brightly coloured childrens toys and the photos of Frodo and the little nick nacks around the house, in the kitchen and the spare room when Bilbo lugs his suitcase up there. It’s all a mix of his parents and of Prim and Drogo’s lives, old and new, and he has to sit down for a couple of minutes just to process it all. He hadn’t noticed all of that the last time he was here, just before he went to Oak Manor, but back then he had no idea this place was ever going to be sold. Now, he has to take a few minutes to let it all sink in around him.

The wallpaper in the hallway will probably go. The door will be repainted. The kitchen cabinets will be replaced, and everything old and worn and potentially dangerous will be removed and refitted with modern appliances.

Bilbo has never been too attached to things, but this house is the one thing in this world he still has that has always been a fixed point. And while he doesn’t blame Prim and Drogo for wanting to sell the place, he wishes that they had talked to him before making any actual decisions.

Prim knocks on his door.
“Get some sleep, you look absolutely shattered,” she says. “Oh, we’re having Chinese tonight, that okay?”

“Sounds great. Is there anything I can do…?”

“God, no. Get some sleep before I knock you out with that New York snowglobe,” Prim says, shaking her head. Bilbo just holds his hands up in surrender and she leaves the room, closing the door behind her. Bilbo gets up to turn out the light and is about to get into bed before he realises he’d forgotten to call Thorin.

Well, he can get settled into bed and talk on the phone at the same time.

He has to call Thorin twice, but when Thorin picks up, Bilbo lets out a shaky breath.

“Sorry,” he says. “I forgot to call.”

“It’s okay. Is everything alright over there?” Thorin asks.

“Yeah, everything’s fine. Prim just sent me to bed, apparently I look too tired to be of any use, but at least she put it nicely. How’re you?” Bilbo burrows himself under the covers. They smell like the kind of fabric softner you can only get over here. What he wouldn’t give to be able to bring a box of Persil back with him…

“A bit lonely, actually. It’s quiet,” Thorin says. Bilbo can hear the smile in his voice and closes his eyes, imagining what it must be like there. Thorin in that ancient Metallica t shirt and jeans, a paintbrush tucked behind his ear while he uses a much smaller one to add minute details to Dis’ face, partially shrouded in shadow.

“Miss me?” Bilbo smiles into the pillow when he hears Thorin laugh softly and feels all at once like an out of date flirt and a lovesick fifteen year old.

“I do. You make coffee better than I do,” Thorin says. There’s a muffled shuffling and the sound of a door closing. “How’s Prim?”

“I think she’s tired, too. She’s downstairs with Frodo now, I can hear music. I think it’s from a kids cartoon,” Bilbo says.

“A week of kids cartoons and dealing with family. Sounds fun,” Thorin says.

“It’s not that bad. At least I get a bed to myself.”

“You say that like this house only has one bedroom and we still hate each other.”

“You know what I mean. You’re a furnace when you sleep, you know. As charming as that is, I like being able to sleep with my shirt on.” Thorin huffs, but Bilbo knows he doesn’t take it as an insult.

“Let me know how it goes with the house. Now try and get some sleep,” Thorin says. His voice is ridiculously gentle, and it makes Bilbo’s stomach flutter, but he doesn’t care. He just smiles to no one and nods, though Thorin can’t see him.

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

Bilbo hangs up and shoves his phone under his pillow, closing his eyes and burrowing further.
under the blankets. But he tosses and turns, and finds that he can’t get to sleep as quickly as he has hoped. It isn’t until he manages to block out the noise from downstairs and imagine terrible singing nearby that he manages to drift off, perhaps even convincing himself of a heavy weight beside him, and a phantom arm looping over his shoulders.

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Bilbo manages to sleep into the next morning, and when he wakes, he finds the house empty with a note from Prim telling him she had to pop into the office, and that Drogo is helping supervise a parent-child get together at the local community centre. That’s all fine, Bilbo thinks, because he has the place to himself for a couple of hours, and enough British change in his wallet to get a bus into Swindon.

But he takes the morning slowly. He showers and makes himself tea and toast, and sits in the back garden as he eats. Of course, it’s as beautiful as ever, a lovingly looked after chaotic mess of flowers and grass and a vegetable patch in the corner, opposite a shed that has been falling apart for as long as Bilbo can remember. There are little garden ornaments by the back door Bilbo remembers making for his parents at school, and about halfway through his cup of tea, a stray cat slinks in through a gap in the fence and nudges Bilbo’s hand when he offers it before meowing loudly for food.

“Aren’t you lovely,” he says, scratching behind its ears. The cat just stares at him until he sighs and goes into the kitchen to look for anything edible for cats.

Once the cat is fed and he leaves a little bowl of water out for it, he goes out and tries to figure out if it’s left or right to the bus stop that goes to Swindon. He’s pretty sure it’s left, and walks that way. The bus gets there only a few minutes after he does and he boards, hit with just how familiar these buses are. It takes almost an hour to get into Swindon, but the scenery is so worth it. Wiltshire’s trademark seems to be soft hills and sheep and cows, and Bilbo has actually missed it, despite how much he loves the Swiss landscape. He leans his head against the window and watches it roll by, and does the same with the little villages they pass through on their way.

Swindon is as grey and as bleak as ever, but Bilbo heads straight towards Queens Park and finds the spot he and his parents would go at the weekends with a lunchbox each and a couple of books to keep them company. It’s bittersweet as he sits there and soaks it in. It’s the first time he’s been here since long before Belladonna and Bungo died. Bilbo didn’t use to believe in dwelling on the past, but that’s the only thing he’s really been doing for the last year, so he indulges himself this time. He leans back against the tree and closes his eyes, thinking about when he was here last time, a good five years ago.

It feels like a dream, trying to recall what they’d eaten and why they were there. It had been summer, and Bilbo had a few weeks off before having to get ready to go back to university. He’s sure he fell asleep using his blazer as a pillow while Belladonna read and Bungo wrote, and they both left him to it. He almost wants to fall asleep where he is, but he stays awake, watching a squirrel run up a tree, and birds peck at the ground.

Bilbo wanders through the town centre for a while. It’s changed so much since the last time he was there (what is with the fountain at the crossroads, he thinks to himself), but the people are the same. Somehow, Swindon has managed to maintain its status as an industrial town while becoming a hub of second class retail, and it’s obvious in its residents. Though, Bilbo went to school and college here, so he’s technically one of them, though he grew up outside of the town proper. He almost considers paying his old school a visit when he remembers the awful hill he had to climb every morning, and decides against it quite firmly. There’s no point in going back there, it’ll only
dredge up bad memories of pretentious teachers and cruel comments only teenagers are capable of.

He gets a text from Prim a while later, asking where he is, and he tells her he’s on the bus back as he walks to the station. At least that’s exactly the same, as grimy as it always has been. He gets on the bus and sits right at the back, settling in for the long ride.

He gets back an hour later and finds Prim and Drogo in the kitchen sat at the table, Prim shuffling through paperwork and Drogo on his laptop. He’s always been a bit of an outsider in the family, though not the way Bilbo is. He’s tall and broad and looks more like a Swedish nature explorer than a lawyer from the West Country.

“Here, go through these. There’s a couple of contracts you’ll need to sign if you actually want us to do this, but otherwise there’s not a lot for you to do,” Prim says, handing him a wad of paper. Bilbo sits down and pulls on his glasses. “Sorry we didn’t tell you about this before, it’s just…”

“I get it,” Bilbo says, looking at her. She smiles apologetically. “I’m not mad, but why the hell did I have to hear about this through Gandalf of all people?”

“He’s helping us find buyers,” Drogo says, barely looking up from his laptop. “He said something about this place being good real estate, and that he could get us double the profit than anyone else could.”

“You actually believed him,” Bilbo says, completely deadpan. Drogo shrugs.

“He’s done it before. The house is in good hands, don’t worry so much,” he says. Bilbo wants to say something scathing to that, but he holds his tongue and sets about reading the documents.

It’s all financial stuff and itinerary. Bilbo really only skims over the part about bills (he’s not paying them, and he knows that Prim and Drogo are fine, in terms of money), but the itinerary is all stuff in storage, some of it his. It’s just old furniture and valuables, nothing of any actual importance. Everything belonging to his parents was either sold or Prim kept it, so it’s not like she’s going to sell any of it, but Bilbo can’t help thinking about that as he reads over the storage contract that’s probably going to have to be changed. He’s alright with that, it’s not like that particular storage place is even that expensive, and it’s all there for a reason.

“Do you want any of the furniture for your new place?” he asks. Prim and Drogo look at each other, do that thing couples do after they’ve been together for a while where they communicate without words, and Prim shrugs.

“What about that coffee table?” she says, looking at Bilbo.

“You can have all of it as far as I’m concerned,” he says.

“Are you sure?”

“Well, within reason. Not the glory box, or the chairs, though, but you can have anything else.”

“Well, that makes furnishing easier. We were going to spend all of our savings at Ikea. We’re selling this place more or less furnished, so…” Prim runs a hand through her hair, exhaling.

“You should have said,” Bilbo says, putting the documents down. He’s done with them, anyway.

“It never occurred to me. But thank you, you just saved us a lot of money,” Prim says. She leans across the table and touches his hand, squeezing gently. Bilbo is struck with such a strong wave of affection for her that he stares at her hand on his, the gold band around her ring finger inscribed
with intricate patterns, and the chipped blue paint on her nails. Prim turns his hand so that his scar is visible and she looks at it, the smile fading from her face and being replaced by a frown.

“I didn’t think it would heal so quickly,” she says, brushing her thumb along it. It makes Bilbo shudder, but he doesn’t pull his hand away.

“It’s been six months, you know,” he says.

“You’ve come a long way in six months,” Prim says. She squeezes his hand again and lets go to take the documents back. Bilbo puts his hands under the table and rubs at his scar as Prim puts everything back into a folder, nice and neat. “Mind coming with me to the agents tomorrow? You have to sign some things and that’s it, really. You’ll probably need to be here for when someone actually buys it, too, but that won’t be for another couple of months, probably.”

“Sure. I’ve got nothing else to do anyway,” Bilbo says.

“Oh, bad news, by the way. There’s some family gathering in Malborough and I may have let it slip that you’re in the country…” Prim says, pointedly looking away. Bilbo doesn’t even have it in him to be angry. He just sighs.

“Oh, you know… the usual people. Mirabella, Lobelia, Eglantine and Saradoc…”

“What was that second one again?”

“Oh, it’s not my fault! You know what I’m like when I get talking to Mirabella, I can’t stop,” Prim says, the despair in her voice almost hilariously real.

“I’ll go, but if plates start smashing, I’m going back to Switzerland,” Bilbo says, smiling at her.

“Okay, okay, I get it. Tell them about who you’re staying with and maybe Lobelia will shut the hell up for once, eh?” Prim kicks him playfully under the table and he kicks her back, but stops before they delve into a game of footsie and accidentally kick Drogo in the knee.

“Where’s Frodo?” Bilbo asks.

“He’s upstairs, I put him to bed not long ago. Actually, do you mind checking on him while I make us some tea? Just pop your head around the door and see if he’s still asleep,” Prim says, standing and taking the folder with her. She puts it into one of the drawers in the kitchen and goes to fill the kettle. Bilbo does the same and quietly heads upstairs towards Frodo’s room (your old room, he thinks to himself). The boy is asleep, curled in on himself in his cot, his black hair a curly mess. Bilbo feels as if his heart has grown three sizes when he sees his little nephew, so small and young, and happy. He watches Frodo from the doorway for a minute, and realises that, even here, in the house he will probably never see again once it’s sold, he’s happy. He’s content. He puts it down to being around bearable family and in a familiar place.

He goes back downstairs. Drogo is gone, back to work, according to Prim, and the two of them sit at the table again and actually talk. They’ve always trusted each other, so when they’re alone, it’s easy for the words to come, especially for Bilbo. He tells her about Thorin and his nephews, and about Dis, and their wild and wonderful family, and Prim tells him about Frodo growing up and the new neighbours that moved in that seem to only ever leave the house for five minutes at a time.

It feels so normal that Bilbo almost forgets about Thorin, and Switzerland, and the smell of oil paints. But when he goes to bed that night, he can only think about Thorin, wondering what he’s
doing. It’s ridiculous, Bilbo knows, but at night he feels untethered without that comforting weight beside him. He texts Thorin, telling him to get some sleep because he knows that otherwise, Thorin will stay up into the early hours of the morning painting. He gets a smiley face back and smiles to himself before locking his phone and turning over on his side, closing his eyes and hoping that he’ll get a decent amount of sleep tonight.

Chapter End Notes

my GOD this chapter pissed me off so much. have some second rate garbage while i go shove my brain through a shredder.

okay so i got some weird comments on the last chapter and i just wanna clarify that thorins nervousness abt holding bilbos hand in public wasn't... a comment on the swiss attitude to lgbt ppl, its just that its written from the perspective of a gay man from yorkshire who was disowned when he came out... as a lesbian from the uk, i can say that holding hands with your same gender partner here is honestly terrifying, and that absolutely will be the same in other countries. i dont want to be rude about this, but i know how scary it is to hold your partners hand in public when you're the same gender.

anyway, thank you for supporting this fic as always, and im on half term next week, so i miyiiight be able to update sooner than i did for this chapter.

i love you guys <3
Thorin wishes he doesn’t know how oil paint tastes, but he’s put too many paintbrushes in his mouth to forget. Now, he tries to chase the taste away with coffee and sticks the paintbrush in question behind his ear. At least now, he doesn’t have to worry so much about washing paint out of his hair. It’s the little things in life, really. Including the fact that this is the earliest he’s been awake for years. It feels strange, to say the least, but he’s glad for it. The sun is still rising and he’s adding the final touches to his first painting going into the exhibition. He plans to do nothing for the rest of the day once he’s done, but in all honesty, its not as appealing a thought as it once was.

It’s only been a few days, but Thorin feels Bilbo’s absence keenly. It’s not so bad that he has trouble sleeping without him, but he misses waking up to heavy warmth by his side, and damn does Bilbo make some fantastic coffee. Thorin will never understand how they can both use the same things in coffee and Bilbo’s always tastes better, and just that much sweeter, the way that Thorin likes it.

He sits back and wraps his hands around his coffee. The air is still chilly, and so the warmth from his mug feels nice on his cold hands. The balcony is silent, like the rest of the house, and that’s what leaves Thorin unsettled. With Bilbo around, even if it was quiet, there was always something going on, some kind of movement that settled Thorin’s nerves. Bilbo was perhaps one of the most unobtrusive people Thorin has ever met, but something about him keeps things calm and level. Thorin had no idea how he does it, but he misses it.

He needs a break. He looks at the painting, seeing that it’ll only take about an hour until he’s done. He loves Dis, but if he has to look at her face for another day, he might throw this damn painting off of the balcony. Instead, Thorin just sips his coffee and heads inside, figuring that it’s the right time to make himself some breakfast.

He makes eggs and toast, occasionally sipping his coffee as he scrambles and butters and serves up. He almost automatically makes another plate, but reminds himself that it’s just him for another three days, and then Bilbo will be back, brightening up the place once more. Thorin almost wants to just sleep until he has to drive to Geneva to pick him up, but he has work to do. Then again, he’s been working solidly for the last few days, it’s okay for him to take a break. He knows himself well enough to know that with the kind of motivation he has going for him right now, up to and including kissing Bilbo senseless against this very kitchen table, he’ll get the work done, no problem.

It takes an hour to finish Dis’ painting. It’ll be dry enough in a few days for him to move it into the garage with the rest of his used and unused canvases, but until then, he’ll have to deal with his sister staring at him everywhere he goes. But still, it’s immensely satisfying to get a big project done. Thorin jumps in the shower and lets himself waste time in there, singing badly to the song stuck in his head and reminding himself once again that he has a buzzcut, he doesn’t need to spend ages washing his hair anymore. Oh, it’s such a good feeling, that. He hums and rubs at the stubble on his head. He’s still not quite used to it, but it’s honestly so much easier to work with. And if he lets himself be vain for a few seconds, he’s big enough to admit that he looks better. Older, perhaps, but better.

Coming out of the bathroom, Thorin sits on the bed and looks around. He never thought that he would miss having someone around, and he never thought he would see his room as empty without
proof of someone else living here. Bilbo had left some of his books and clothes, and his watch, sitting on the bedside table. Thorin picks it up. It’s old, a good few decades, with a strap that’s definitely been replaced a couple of times. It must have belonged to Bilbo’s father, he thinks, given the age and the quality of it. Thorin turns it over and sees a worn engraving in the back. *Wherever you go, go with all of your heart - Love, Belladonna*. Thorin brushes his thumb over the engraved words and smiles to himself. Part of him wishes that he had met them, but he doesn’t dwell on it. He puts the watch down and gets dressed.

Without Bilbo there to distract him while he’s taking a break from working, Thorin gets bored easily. He has nothing to watch on his laptop, nothing to tidy, not really a lot to do. He wanders about and makes himself breakfast, but that only lasts about twenty minutes before he’s preoccupied with nothing at all once again. And it isn’t until he rifles through his wardrobe for his old sketchbooks that he finds an old pair of running shoes and makes up his mind.

Thorin hasn’t gone running in years. He doubts he’ll even make it very far, but it’s better than staying indoors and doing nothing for the rest of the day. He leaves the house in sweatpants and a t-shirt, with a hoodie tied around his waist and a water bottle in his hand. He already knows the route he’ll take, and when he starts off slow, it’s oddly satisfying. He runs up the hill by his house and it hurts, but the sting in his lungs makes him want to keep going. For a good ten minutes as he slowly jogs down hill behind his house and back around, he tells himself that he’ll do five laps before going back, but he loses track of time. It becomes methodical. It used to be like this, before he stopped caring and no longer went running. That feels like forever ago, when it has only bee a few years. Now, it’s like trying to get into old jeans that are a bit too small. It’s uncomfortable and makes you feel terrible, but you get there eventually.

Thorin stops when he feels like his legs are about to fall off and sits down on the grass overlooking the mountain. It’s a different view than the one from the balcony. It’s much more open and vivid, and with the sun high and beaming, it illuminates bright green grass and the wildflowers that grow up here. They’re a myriad of colours, yellow and white and pink, and Thorin is struck by how little he sees things like this. He tries not to think with the artistic part of his mind, but he can’t help but think of ways to get the colours he sees by mixing paints, or layering dry pastels over each other. He smiles to himself and drains his water bottle to soothe his burning throat. But despite the ache in his legs and the way his lungs seem to be panicking all on their own, he feels *good*. The last time he went running was about four years ago, probably longer, and he remembers getting in and putting his trainers right at the back of the wardrobe, and subsequently forgetting that they were there.

Eventually, Thorin picks himself back up and walks the twelve meters back home. He needs another shower after this, but instead, he gets the old sketchbooks from the wardrobe like he had originally planned and sits down at the kitchen table to look through them.

The oldest in the pile is one from when he was around twenty five. The binding is dust and the paper is old and dry, but he looks through anyway and tries to find sketches of his brother. He figures that if he doesn’t get Frerin’s painting done, he’ll never do it. And it hurts, seeing his face sketched out in charcoal and graphite and pen, but if there’s anything Thorin has learned it’s that healing hurts. It’s been years since they put Frerin in the ground, and it will always hurt, but there will come a time when he will have to finally move on and get it into his head that nothing can bring back the people he’s lost.

It’s a morbid thought, but it helps with coming up with a colour scheme for the portrait.

Thorin doesn’t let himself do much work beyond a very vague sketch in the back of one of his more recent sketchbooks. It’s not very detailed, just the shape of a face and curling hair, and eyes
with no iris’ or pupils. It’s enough, he thinks. This one is going to take a while to do, so he might as well pace himself.

Thorin goes into his garage later in the afternoon and sifts through the boxes there, looking for an old set of paintbrushes. He hasn’t seen them in months, but he needs them for Frerin’s portrait if he wants it to be as detailed as he sees it in his head. But as he looks, he finds things in the boxes that distract him - an old notebook full of bad poetry from when he was a teenager, one of Dis’ band shirts, a wallet with a £20 note in it. Thorin finds the brushes and sticks them in his back pocket before texting Dis, telling her he found her Metallica tour t shirt, and that she didn’t leave it with her ex husband. He gets multiple smiley faces in response and a promise that she’ll pick it up the next time she comes up, in about a month or so to help put his paintings in a van for transportation.

By the time Thorin goes to bed that night, he’s oddly content with the lack of productivity. He’s always flitted between two extremes - immersing himself in his work for weeks at a time, or procrastinating until he gets stress headaches over it all. It’s nice to find a balance after all these years, even if he can feel the encroaching anxiety over the exhibition already. But it’ll be okay, he knows that. There’s nothing to worry about. And if Smaug wants to ruin it this time, Thorin won’t be holding back on punching him in the face. Anything to get the smug look off of that face.

Just as he settling down, he gets a text from Bilbo. I have to go to a family party tomorrow, what I wouldn’t give to be somewhere with less people and more mountains. How are you?

Thorin smiles and silently wishes that this week will be over sooner rather than later, still not too keen on being alone. It’s funny, how much he wished to be alone all these years, and the moment he starts to find some kind of kinship with Bilbo, he wants nothing more than to hold onto him for as long as he can, and damn the consequences of his efforts.

I’m okay. I finished Dis’ painting today, so I’m taking a break. Don’t lash out at the party, I’d hate for you to come back with a black eye or something . He sends it and puts his phone by his side before grabbing his laptop. He might as well keep watching that movie he stopped the other day. He has about an hour of it to go. That’ll send him to sleep.

My family is too passive aggressive for that. I’ll come back in one piece, though probably with a cluster headache and a bad mood. Sorry in advance. The thought of Bilbo dealing with family he clearly just wants to be away from strikes an uncomfortable chord with Thorin. At Frerin’s funeral, the passive aggressiveness from estranged family members had left Thorin with a bad taste in his mouth, and the only person he properly talked to there was Dis and Dwalin. The boys had been staying at a friends house back in Lyon, and so they were kept away from the awkwardness of it all. Thorin is still glad of that. Fili was old enough to know what was going on, but Kili wasn’t, and even now, Thorin dreads to think what family drama would have been brought up if they had both been there.

It’s okay. Just get in and get out, and you can vent all you want when you come back. I love a good venting session . Thorin plays the movie from the last point and waits for a response. It takes a while, and he’d drifting off when his phone beeps again.

I miss you . I can’t wait to come home, as much as I love Prim. It’ll be nice to see you again. And the mountains. I’m going to bed, but I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Goodnight.

Thorin doesn’t respond. Instead, he just shuts his laptop down and curls up with the blankets pulled tight around him. It’s the first time in a long time he’s gone to bed happy with the day, and while the only thing that would make it better is on an island up north for the rest of the week, he knows that soon, that will be properly rectified.
Unfortunately for Bilbo, Frodo is at playgroup during the party, and Drogo is helping supervise with the other parents. So it’s just Prim and himself at the party, holding a glass of wine each and enduring the agonising small talk as much as they can. It’s very British, all this thinly veiled contempt and delicately put snide comments, but Bilbo can endure this for one day. It’s a lovely afternoon, letting him wear short sleeves, and the smell of the flowers in Eglantine’s garden never fails to put him in a much better mood. Still, as much as he’s used to not hiding his scar, it’s uncomfortable right now. He holds his glass with his left hand and keeps the other in his pocket, shielding it from prying eyes that would look at him in pity if they saw. That’s the absolute last thing he wants to deal with right now, and he’ll endure forced smiles if he has to so he doesn’t have to talk to anybody.

But Prim draws a crowd. Everyone wants to know about Frodo and if he’s doing okay, is he healthy, is he making friends at playgroup? Prim talks about him at length, clearly happy to praise her son for as long as possible. It’s sweet, and Bilbo is so glad that she has the family that she always wanted. He smiles as she talks about Frodo and the fact that he is an unstoppable machine some days, and a broody mess on others. They don’t even look at Bilbo, something he is extremely grateful for. His patience was already worn thin just by being here, and they’re not allowed anywhere near the food just yet.

When they’re finally alone, Bilbo excuses himself and leaves to find the loo. It’s overwhelming, being around so many people after such a long time in relative solitude, and he needs a few minutes to recollect his thoughts. He locks himself in and sits down on the closed toilet seat, dropping his head into his hands and breathing through his nose. It’s not even close to a panic attack, but he’s overwhelmed. All of the noise and the people, it’s too much right now. He knows he can tell Prim and she’ll leave with him, but he doesn’t want to do that to her. He might not get along great with his family, but she has little bad blood with them, and this is the first time in a while that she’s seen them. Bilbo is happy just to sit here for a few minutes so he can effectively brace himself for going back out there.

As he calms down, he entertains the thought of bringing Thorin to one of these ridiculous gatherings one day. It would no doubt result in a lot of shady glances and a false comments, but it would be funny, he has to admit that much. One thing he’s glad of is that he and Thorin, while wildly different in their personalities, have a similar sense of humour, and even when it’s just them, it makes complaining about their families much more bearable and somewhat hilarious at times. Unleashing Thorin around Bilbo’s family would probably not be a good idea, but it’s still a laughable one. It makes him smile through the nervousness in his chest.

When Bilbo goes back out, the food has been unveiled and he breathes a sigh of relief. Prim sidles up to him with two paper plates in hand and gives him a knowing look.

“Eat as much as we can and then go?” she suggests.

“Oh yeah, definitely,” Bilbo says, and they make their way to the food table.

The food is annoyingly wonderful and Bilbo and Prim sit on a bench together in a quiet spot in the garden, eating in silence. She looks tired. She was up late at night with Frodo and stayed up with held close, sitting in an armchair in the living room and just talking to him for hours. Bilbo had offered to help, but in all honesty, his ability to deal with children was minimal. Prim just insisted that she was okay and told him to go back to bed.
The food seems to invigorate her, and Bilbo is still pretty sure that they must be at least distantly related, because they share a love for food that borders on the embarrassing. When they’re done, Prim folds up her paper plate.

“Do you need a lift to the airport on Saturday?” she asks.

“If you can get the time off,” Bilbo says. Prim just shrugs.

“I have a bunch of holiday saved up, don’t worry about it,” she says. She pats his knee affectionately and he folds his plate up too. He’s full, and doubts that he’ll be eating anything much for the rest of the day. That’s okay.

“I’m not sure I miss this lot, really,” Bilbo admits after a few seconds of silence. Prim looks at him, not stunned, but curious. Bilbo continues. “Too much animosity. Can’t say I’ll miss that when I go back…” He cuts himself off when he almost says it, but Prim steps in for him.

“When you go back home. I know, and you’re lucky. I live in the same county as them. And the same country. I’m not telling Lobelia my address when we move. She has my number, that’s plenty of information for her to have,” she says. She crosses her legs and itches at a bug bite on her ankle. “Do you miss him?”

“Thorin?”

“Mhm.”

“Yes, I really do. It feels strange, not waking up to Metallica every other day,” Bilbo says, smiling dryly, remembering the first time that had happened. Prim just laughs.

“I wouldn’t do that to you, you know that. But it must be nice, living in Switzerland with a very tall, handsome artist halfway up a mountain,” she says, waggling her eyebrows at him. Bilbo laughs.

“How do you know he’s tall?” he says.

“Wild speculation,” Prim says.

“You want to ask me something,” Bilbo says, sighing.

“What are you going to do, later on down the line? Are you going to go back to teaching?” Prim asks. Her voice is suddenly serious, full of concern. Bilbo half appreciates it, half just wants this conversation to be over.

“I want to,” he says honestly. “I want to go back to teaching. Believe me, I do, but it’s hard even just getting up some days. I’m so unbelievably lucky to have this chance to recover away from everything, but that doesn’t mean it’s going to be over quickly.”

“I have an idea, if you don’t mind,” Prim says, turning her body so she’s facing him. Bilbo just nods. “Where are you at in your recovery right now? Like, in percentages.”

“Uh… forty? Maybe?” Bilbo says.

“Get to sixty and start thinking seriously about getting a teaching job somewhere. Even if it’s just part time, it might help. After the crash, you just threw yourself back into work without taking a break. It’s good that you’re taking a few months to get yourself sorted this time, but you can’t hide in the mountains forever,” Prim says.
“I was thinking about taking the whole year, actually. Officially, I’m taking a sabbatical from work anyway,” Bilbo says. He shrugs and leans back against the bench, looking up at the sky. The clouds are thin and wispy, so the sun beams down on them almost unimpeded.

“So go back in the New Year. Like I said, you can’t stay in the mountains forever,” Prim says.

“I wasn’t planning on it. I do miss teaching, you know. As much as I hated grading bad essays and teaching Latin to eighteen year olds, I really do miss it,” Bilbo says earnestly. “And being with Thorin, being halfway up a mountain, I’m getting the kind of peace and quiet and solitude I need to get over everything that’s happened to me.”

“And affection,” Prim says, smiling slyly.

“Excuse me?”

“I’m not an idiot, you know. I know what’s going on with Durin, you really don’t hide it very well. Every time you talk about him, your whole face lights up,” Prim says. She shrugs. “I’m glad you have him. The way you talk about him, he sounds wonderful.”

“He really is,” Bilbo says. He clasps his hands between his knees and smiles, thinking about Thorin on the mainland, probably sketching aimlessly or getting colour palettes sorted for his next piece. God, he wishes he was back there. It’s so much easier to think in place where the mountain air is crisp and clean and you don’t have to worry about getting papers graded on time. It’s such a relief, really.

“I still want to meet him, one day. I want to see if he’s worthy,” Prim says. The seriousness in her voice is gone, and she just smiles a toothy smile at him before punching him in the arm “Come on, I want to go home.”

They leave without getting much attention and get back to Prim’s place not long after. Because Drogo and Frodo are still out, Prim just curls up on the couch and puts on bad TV, and Bilbo joins her, pouring them both a glass of wine at her request. Bilbo meanders upstairs when his first glass is drained and leaves Prim to it, needing a few minutes to himself after spending the last couple of hours at a ridiculous family gathering, and ends up laying on his back in bed, reading one of the books he picked up at Waterstones earlier in the week. He keeps telling himself to invest in a Kindle, and while he’s not a snob who insists on only ever using ‘real books’, there’s something about doing things the traditional way that appeals to him, and back problems be damned, even if he carries eight books back to Switzerland with him, not including the ones he knows he’ll pick up at the airport.

He doesn’t hear from Thorin that day, which he’s fine with. He’ll be back home (and it really is home now, isn’t it?) in a few days, and he’ll be able to talk about everything that’s been building up in his head with no outlet while he’s been here. Bilbo settles down to read and gets swept up in a fantasy story about great adventures, and part him is glad that he’s finally got a real adventure of his own.

Chapter End Notes

GOD FUCKING CHRIST im so sorry, college and work have been absolutely kicking my ass for the last two months and i swear ive had maybe three days in total to properly breathe and get my writing shit in gear. i wrote a short dragon age fic recently
but it took until i was rereading nothing gold can stay to actually start writing this fic again.

after the last chapter i just hit some serious writers block. also, thank you to everyone who sided with me in that frankly quite hilarious argument. you're amazing and i love you.

thank you again for supporting me while writing this fic and i love you all for encouraging me to keep going

find me on tumblr here!
Chapter 18

Bilbo admits, he is somewhat sad to say goodbye to Prim at the airport. She brings Frodo and Drogo along, and the car ride is mostly just listening to oldies and eating packed sandwiches. Bilbo is still reeling in part from the family gathering, so he’s silent, content just to let Prim and Drogo talk about colour schemes for their new house and what they’re going to get from Ikea when they get the chance. While they do that, he watches the landscape go by and takes it all in. This was home for a long time, he remembers. It’s not anymore, but that’s okay with him. Home changes depending on where you are in your life. That’s always been true of him. He traded Wiltshire for Wales, and Wales for uncertainty, and then wound up in Switzerland somehow. It makes him smile.

But at the airport, when he hugs Prim goodbye after checking in his luggage and heads towards security, it hurts. They’re really the only family he has left that he truly gives a damn about, and he knows that it’ll be a while before he sees them again. But he looks over his shoulder and sees Frodo waving his tiny hand at him, and his heart warms, telling him that he doesn’t need to worry, about them or himself. It’s a huge relief, knowing that Prim, his best friend and confidant, is in good hands (mostly her own), and that she’s doing well for herself. Part of Bilbo is a little bit jealous of her life. She has a family, someone who loves her dearly, a beautiful son who is probably going to grow up to be an absolute nightmare, given all of the energy he has in him.

As Bilbo boards the plane, he relaxes properly, perhaps for the first time since he got to England. He hadn’t even told Prim that much of importance, but it feels like a huge weight off of his chest to have been given something to think about - does he even want to go back to teaching? It’s a bit of a strange thought, but he was a teacher for ten years, for gods sake, it wasn’t just something he could up and leave at the drop of a hat. And his circumstances now are different. He’s taking a break from it to recuperate, but he can’t go a week without giving someone (namely Thorin) a lecture on something to do with the Athenian constitution, or the fall of the Roman Empire. He will always be a teacher at heart.

The flight… well, it flies by, and before he knows it, he’s going through customs and picking his luggage up. He follows the signs to the exit, and he’s met with the sight of a crowd of people waiting to pick others up. He looks for Thorin, craning his neck to scan the crowd as he walks around, dragging his suitcase behind him. It isn’t until Bilbo hears his name being called that he sees him, and he smiles, relief settling in his gut. Thorin makes his way towards him and they meet in the middle, and before Bilbo can think of anything to say, he’s being swept up in a bear hug, and he lets go of his suitcase to hug him back.

“Welcome back,” Thorin says into his hair.

“Hm. Good to be back. Miss me?” Bilbo pulls away and looks Thorin up and down. He looks exactly the same as when Bilbo left, but it’s been a week, and he’s honestly just so glad to see him again.

“You have no idea. Come on, let’s get back before I make a fool of myself in a public airport.” Thorin said. He grabs Bilbo’s suitcase and steers it out of the foyer, his other hand taking Bilbo’s, leading him away. Bilbo can’t stop smiling for the life of him, and he doesn’t even care. In the car, he leans back in the passenger seat and laughs, and he doesn’t really know why. Thorin gives him a strange look and turns down the Motorhead song coming from the CD player.
“You okay?” he asks.

“Yeah,” Bilbo says. “Yeah, I’m okay. I’m not hysterical or anything.”

“Was it that stressful?” Thorin asks.

“At times. We’ll talk about it later, I just want to go home,” Bilbo says. Even just calling it home in front of Thorin makes his heart flutter ridiculously, but he just gets a kind smile in return and an understanding nod before they’re off.

One thing they’re both good at is enjoying each other’s silence, which Bilbo is immensely grateful for as they drive through Geneva and then the Swiss countryside, the sight of it growing more and more familiar to Bilbo. Thorin hums to the music and taps his fingers against the wheel, but he doesn’t say anything, not yet, not until they pass a sign that says they’re not far from Vevey at all. It’s a relief, until Thorin pulls up on the side of the road and unbuckled his seatbelt.

“What are you doing?” Bilbo asks. Thorin just looks at him and then, without warning, leans across the space between them and kisses Bilbo, hard.

Oh, trust Thorin to know exactly what Bilbo needs right then and there. Bilbo pulls away just to unfasten his own seatbelt, and while he does that, Thorin moves his seat as far back as it can go. After that’s all sorted, they’re on each other again, and Bilbo wonders why he ever left. Oh, right, to see Prim and the house. That’s why. Thorin shakes those thoughts away when he groans and one hand digs into the back of Bilbo’s thigh.

Bilbo loses track of time, but at least he has a fantastic excuse. Thorin is as warm and as solid as he remembers, and when he runs a hand down Thorin’s chest, he gets an appreciative groan in return before Thorin pulls away and looks up at him through his eyelashes. Bilbo gives him a look, and he gets a half hearted shrug in response.

“I did say I missed you,” Thorin says innocently. He reaches up and takes Bilbo’s face in his hands.

“So you decided to do that in your car in the middle of nowhere,” Bilbo says. Still, he leans into the touch and closes his eyes.

“What can I say, I’m adventurous.”

“Says the man who has only been out of the country twice in five years.” Still, Bilbo leans down and kisses him again, and it’s short and sweet. “What if someone sees us?”

“I wouldn’t worry about it. We’ll get beeped, but I don’t really think anyone will care,” Thorin says. He looked up at Bilbo with those ridiculous blue eyes and smiles tentatively, like he’s still being careful, not that he has any reason to be, as far as Bilbo is concerned. But he knows that Thorin is a cautious person, and so he waits.

“Was it really that bad?” Thorin asks.

“No. Well, some parts were, but most of it was really nice. I got to see my childhood home and spend some time with family. Oh, and we all went to Stonehenge yesterday,” Bilbo says. He’s still got his hands on Thorin’s chest and feels his heart beating. It’s not as fast as it was. It’s slow, steady.

“Sounds great. Sorry, can you, uh…” Thorin says, looking down.
“Oh. Right. Sorry.” Bilbo climbs off of him and settles in the passenger seat, but he still reaches out and takes Thorin’s hand.

“Prim figured it out, by the way,” he said, linking their fingers together. “Well, she figures everything out. I think she knew about me before I even came out to her, there’s no way I could have lied to her face.”

“It sounds like she and Dis would get along swimmingly,” Thorin says.

“Yeah, I plan on getting them in a room together and just seeing what happens. It’d be interesting, to say the least,” Bilbo says.

“I’m just glad you’re back. It’s been too quiet without you. It’s weird,” Thorin says. He squeezes Bilbo’s hand and smiles softly, and Bilbo sees the tiredness in his eyes then. Well, he did just finish a major painting not two days ago, so he doesn’t really blame him for the fatigue. What does concern him is the fact that Thorin is awfully quiet right now, instead of making awkward small talk or falling into conversation with Bilbo so easily that it’s a wonder they ever clashed to begin with.

“What’s wrong?” Bilbo asks. Thorin takes a deep and ragged breath.

“Nothing. I’m just tired, that’s all. I didn’t get a lot of sleep last night,” he says, and Bilbo is perhaps ninety percent sure that Thorin is lying to his face. He narrows his eyes, but he doesn’t say anything, just looks away and out of the passenger window. They’re closer to sea level, so the landscape is much gentler, and this far from the city, all that Bilbo can see is empty fields, some growing with crop, others just full of wildflowers and trees. It’s beautiful. He isn’t an artist, but he can see the beauty and appeal of this country, and while Thorin chose Switzerland, of all places.

“Can we talk about it? When we… when we get home, that is,” Thorin says. His hands are on the steering wheel, his knuckles white. Bilbo has no idea what’s going on, and it scares him a little. “If I start talking now I won’t be able to drive us back.”

Bilbo doesn’t voice his concern, but he’s sure as hell scared of what Thorin is going to say to him. His mind starts to go at a million miles a minute, running through every possible scenario as Thorin drives away, stepping on the gas so that they almost breach the limit on this particular stretch of road. Bilbo doesn’t mind it - in fact, he’s pretty sure he’s gotten over his aversion to cars - but it’s the silence that unnerves him. There’s no music. There’s no small talk. No Thorin singing along to whatever is playing on the radio, or comments about the weather. It’s just silent.

Dis would have messaged him if something happened to the boys, and Fili would have if something had happened to her. Screw it, Thorin wouldn’t have been able to keep that to himself, so Bilbo rules that out pretty sharpish. They’re all okay. They’re perfectly healthy. There’s nothing to worry about. Well, there is, but the Durin family is doing okay.

It must be something to do with the exhibition. That’s really the only thing Bilbo can think of, something going wrong with the exhibition, or one of his paintings. He’s never seen Thorin this nervous. His jaw is set tight and his eyes are fixed solely on the road ahead, and Bilbo almost reaches out to him, not sure what he could even say. He knows that this must be bad, or at least mildly inconvenient if Thorin is acting like this.

When they get back to the house, Bilbo allows himself about thirty seconds of relief to be back and take his shoes off before he finds Thorin in (their?) bedroom and sits down on the bed next to him. He puts his hand on Thorin’s shoulder and watches as he turns his phone over and over in his hands.
“Von Brandt called. Apparently, he wants to meet with me to talk about the exhibition, and when I told him I was busy, he insisted on coming up here, and then hung up. I don’t... I don’t know what to do,” he says shakily. Bilbo watches him for a moment before taking the phone from Thorin’s hands and putting it on the bedside table.

“Pretend you’re not home when he shows up,” he says, only half serious. Thorin laughs, a nervous laugh but a laugh all the same, and shakes his head.

“That won’t work, but I appreciate the suggestion. No, I think I just have to get it over and done with and deal with him,” he says. He wrings his hands together and doesn’t look at Bilbo at all, just closes his eyes and exhales.

“I’ll be here. And trust me, I will attempt to rugby tackle someone for you. Keyword here is attempt,” Bilbo says. Thorin laughs and shakes his head in disbelief.

“I’d like to see that, actually. He’s taller than me and had the guts to slash my paintings the opening night of an exhibition,” he says. There’s something so sad about the crack in his voice when he mentions that particular debacle, but Bilbo understands, he thinks. Thorin had told him about it not long ago, and over the months, Bilbo had put it together from bits and pieces told to him over time. He takes Thorin’s hand and scoots closer.

“Is there anything I can do?” he asks. Thorin shakes his head.

“Not about this, no. Just leave it be for now, I just thought you should know. And, well, brace yourself for him to grace us with his demonic presence,” he says. There’s no humour in his voice this time around. Bilbo sighs and wraps his arm around his broad shoulders, the other settling near the crook of his elbow. Thorin leans into him.

“Put the work you’ve done in the garage and lock the door so he can’t get in,” Bilbo says. He rests his head against Thorin’s shoulder and closes his eyes. While he has absolutely no idea how long this will last, or even if it’ll be sustainable in the long run, he can try and make things easier for the both of them now. Falling into quiet, simple intimacy was easy, but Bilbo knows how stressful this is for Thorin, and he wants to help - he really does, and he knows that he will start throwing punches if need be.

For now, though, Thorin just stands and pulls Bilbo up with him.

“Dinner?” he says, holding both of his hands in his own. The look in his eyes is enough to make Bilbo weak, but he smiles.

“Don’t mind if I do,” he says.

- It’s wine and pasta, sat together on the balcony with the radio on softly, but Thorin knows that he couldn’t ask for a better way to spend the evening. He needs this. Simple pleasures, he tells himself. He’s allowed to indulge in simple pleasures every now and then. Frerin had told him that once, before he came out of his shell and stopped being so nervous about every damn thing. Thorin vividly remembers them sitting in a stationary car somewhere in the Utah desert and just... looking. That was Thorin’s favourite art piece, the arches and buttes carved from aeons of erosion, sketched out with a pen in the back of his sketchbook.

As Thorin sips his wine, he looks at Bilbo, finished with his food and fiddling with his fork as he looks out from the balcony and at the mountains beyond. He seems different now that he’s back
from bright and cheery England, and it's like a whole different layer of him has been revealed. Thorin feels very much the outsider in his own home when he puts his fork down and pushes his plate to the side, but that doesn't stop him from reaching over the table to take Bilbo's hand in his own. They're good at the kind of profound silence that tells them everything they both need to know, which makes it so easy for Thorin to let go and stand up to take their plates into the kitchen. Bilbo doesn't follow, but instead, watches from his seat on the balcony, Thorin feeling his eyes on his back as he washes the dishes. Well, it's a poor attempt, mostly because he finds that he would rather take the wine being shared between them inside so that they can finish it somewhere less open. They're alone way out here, but Thorin is still shy, for whatever reason.

Bilbo follows him silently and Thorin puts the bottle of wine on the coffee table, along with his own wine glass. Bilbo stays standing, nursing an almost empty glass of rich red, simply staring while Thorin sits down and sinks into the soft leather of his favourite couch.

“You're staring,” he says as he fills his glass once again.

“I missed you,” Bilbo says, and it's so quiet Thorin barely hears it, but ultimately he does, and he looks up. He curses his artist mind then for automatically painting the scene in soft, muted colours, but when Bilbo comes over and perches on the arm of the sofa, he stops caring.

“You make it sound like it's been months, not a week,” he says. “Not that I mind the sentiment, that is.”

“Hm. Maybe it's the wine. Red does things to me, you know. As long as you never get spirits in me, though, we should be okay,” Bilbo says. He drains his wine and puts it on the coffee table by Thorin’s.

“There goes my plans for body shots,” Thorin says, making Bilbo laugh.

“Oh, now I have to hear your experience with those,” he says. But he leans in, and Thorin can't help pulling him in and off of the arm of the chair, onto his lap. Now that they're alone, they don't have to be as careful, so when they kiss, Thorin doesn't hold back at all.

“Another time,” he mumbles before going in for more.

Bilbo straddles his legs and melts into him, draping his arms over his shoulders and digging his fingers into the leather of the sofa as he presses close, kissing Thorin slowly and thoroughly, apparently refusing to rush in any way. Thorin is happy to oblige and slips his hands up under his shirt, feeling warm skin and the bumps of his spine, pushing the fabric so he can press his palms flat to Bilbo’s hips. Thorin has never done this so slowly, so lazily, and for the first time, he lets himself take his sweet time getting things going. It’s not like they can actually do anything, considering Thorin feels extremely awkward about buying… well, supplies. It’ll probably be okay, for now.

Bilbo pulls away and leans down to mouth at his neck. Thorin lets out a shuddering breath and closes his eyes again, bringing his hand up to grip Bilbo’s hair, not tight, just feeling soft curls to ground himself before he makes a fool of himself so quickly. The room is full of the sounds of the radio and their breathing growing gradually more and more laboured. Thorin feels teeth against the edge of his jaw and groans, unable to stop himself from doing so. Bilbo laughs softly in his ear.

“Are you okay?” he asks. Thorin still has his eyes closed, and he nods, unable to form coherent words. “Do you want to keep going?” He nods again and braces opening his eyes only to see Bilbo peering down at him, eyes half lidded and his mouth parted. Thorin knows that Bilbo can’t take away his troubles with his hands and lips melting them away one at a time, but Thorin also knows
the benefits of compartmentalisation, and letting yourself enjoy things like this even when you feel like you’re spiralling.

Things don’t get much further than that. Eventually, Bilbo stands and pulls Thorin up, and takes his hand to lead him away.

“Let’s go to bed, old man,” he says gently, and that’s all Thorin needs before going with him.

Chapter End Notes

oh my god. so, i know this is a reaaaaly late update, but honestly, the few months have been depression hell, and i’ve been focusing on getting my second book finished and doing college work, so this was put on the back burner for a while. ill update when i can, but theyre gonna be slow until my exams are over and i finally leave education in june. please bear with me for now, i havent abandoned this fic thank you as always for supporting me and for encouraging me to keep this fic going, it means a lot to me love you guys!
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Von Brandt doesn’t show his face, and Bilbo almost lets himself forget about that particular threat hanging over their heads. Almost. He’s not fool enough to forget completely, but still, it’s hard to think about when things are going… well, fine really.

More than fine, both for himself and Thorin.

It’s been weeks since Bilbo got back from England, and he’s grateful to be somewhere quiet once again - properly quiet, not like the quiet buzz that surrounded Wiltshire towns. He stands at the balcony on his first night back and just takes in the isolation and silence around him as Thorin sits curled in the armchair, sketching aimlessly. It’s peaceful, and Bilbo relishes it.

A few days later, he and Thorin go walking. They go to the lake where they went fishing with the boys and eat sandwiches packed into Thorin’s backpack. It’s a little chilly, from being in the mountains, but it’s warm too. They lean against each other, just enjoying each others company. Bilbo knows that it’s the first day without painting that Thorin has had in a while, and Bilbo is just glad to spend some time with him.

“We should go camping soon,” Thorin said. Bilbo looks at him, an eyebrow raised.

“Why?” he asks.

“Just because. It’ll be fun, though my back probably won’t thank me at all. I always get this crick in my neck, it feels like a trapped nerve,” Thorin says. He rubs his neck and frowns. Bilbo smiles and sits up straight to touch his neck, rubbing his thumb against the place he knows Thorin sometimes gets tension. He watches Thorin close his eyes and sigh, and lean into the touch ever so slightly. “That feels good.”

“Hm. If we go camping, I’ll do this for you if you get that crick again,” Bilbo says. He slides his hand down Thorin’s back and smiling as he shudders against the contact with his spine. One thing he’s realised the last few weeks is how sensitive and touched starved they both are, both by choice, though with different circumstances. Thorin’s back was especially sensitive, and Bilbo often spent mornings running his fingers over his spine and shoulder blades, making Thorin sigh and move to get even closer.

“How long until you finish your paintings?” Bilbo asked quietly. Thorin shrugs.

“A few days. I’m still finishing the last one,” he says. “Once I finish that, I’m not touching a paintbrush for the rest of my life.”

Bilbo laughs, shaking his head.

“I give it a week,” he says. Thorin just frowns and takes a drink from his water bottle.

“I’ll try to get it done tomorrow. I can break out the good kosher wine to celebrate,” he says, a little hopeful. Bilbo nods.

“Sounds good. Then you can show me your paintings,” he says, nudging Thorin playfully. He gets one in return, right in the ribs.
“Not a chance. You’ll have to wait until the exhibition, like everybody else does,” Thorin says. Bilbo chokes on his water, and has to cough to clear his lungs for an embarrassing amount of time before he can get out any coherent words.

“You… you want me to come?” he asks, touching his throat. Thorin looks at him strangely.

“That’s the stupidest thing you’ve ever asked,” he says. “Of course I want you to come. You… you’re important to me.”

“Very smooth, Thorin. Alright. Do I have to wear a tuxedo or can I get away with jeans?” Bilbo asks. He struggles to contain his smile, and Thorin does the same.

“As long as they’re kind of smart, you should be okay. Like hell am I wearing a tux, even at my own exhibition,” he says. He screws the lid back onto his water bottle. “Are you going to be okay on the way there? It’s a long journey.”

Bilbo shrugs. “Worst comes to worst, I’ll take some sleeping pills and sleep the whole way there in the backseat,” he says. He looks at the lake, not sure if he can look Thorin in the eye after saying something like that. It’s gone noon, and they’ll have to go back soon, before the sun even starts to set. Bilbo finds that it gets dark quickly here.

Thorin touches his hand and links their fingers, smiling gently. It constantly amazes Bilbo just how… easy this is. To talk to Thorin about these things and get nothing but compassion and support in return. He tries to do the same, but all too often, the words get caught in his throat and he remains silent instead.

But Thorin never complains, and instead, he is a constant beacon of support for Bilbo, and stands strong enough on his own without needing that kind of support returned.

Bilbo knows, deep down, that Thorin sees something of his brother in their situation. Obviously, things are much different. The context is completely different. But, Frerin didn’t survive, and Bilbo did, and he likes to think he knows Thorin well enough by now to know that he’s guilty about what happened. He blames himself. He thinks of his brother and beats himself up over the fact that he couldn’t save him. But Bilbo has learned, after living through that, after talking to so many people who have survived, after talking to people who have lost others the way he tried to go, he knows that some people just can’t be saved. It’s a thought he has yet to vocalise, but he holds it inside of him, because sometimes the truth, as hard and as blunt and as painful as it can be, sometimes, it’s better to hear that than any kind of falsified sympathy or little white lies.

They head back an hour or so later, and Thorin stays outside while Bilbo goes inside to have a smoke, not that Bilbo minds the smell much. He was a teenager in the nineties, he’s downright immune to it by now. But, he goes inside, and makes them both a drink, mindlessly stirring sugar into Thorin’s coffee. He stirs too long, staring out of the kitchen window, because he doesn’t notice Thorin coming up behind him and putting a hand on the one holding the spoon, stopping him from stirring.

“What’s wrong?” he asked quietly. Bilbo sets the spoon down and turns to face Thorin, his back against the counter. Thorin is close - so close - and Bilbo tilts his head back slightly to look at him properly. There’s concern in his eyes, and if that isn’t hard to look at, Bilbo doesn’t know what is.

“Nothing. Just distracted,” Bilbo says. Well, it’s not a lie…

“Mind if I distract you more?” Thorin says.
Well. If that isn’t somehow the funniest thing Thorin has said to him in the last months, Bilbo doesn’t know what is.

He starts laughing, and can’t stop, because that is by far one of the worst pickup lines he has ever heard.

“You’re an idiot,” he manages through the laughter. He can’t stop smiling as Thorin presses him against the kitchen counter and kisses him, on the nose, on the cheek, on the forehead, before kissing him properly. The scratch of his beard is oddly pleasant, and Bilbo slides his hands up Thorin’s shirt, rumpling the fabric slightly to get to his neck. Thorin is ticklish there. Bilbo revels in the fact as Thorin chuckles and pulls away, just to kiss him again, boxing him in against the counter.

Bilbo has the sense to stop Thorin and move the mugs safely away before he’s lifted onto the counter and Thorin settles in between his legs. He runs his fingers through Bilbo’s hair and kisses along his jaw, pulling his head back gently. It doesn’t quite hit Bilbo what’s happening until one of Thorin’s hands ends up on his thigh, and he groans when Thorin’s teeth graze against his neck.

“Too fast?” Thorin whispered.

“No,” Bilbo whispers back. He runs his fingers over Thorin’s beard and cups the back of his neck to pull him in, kissing him that much harder. It’s not like they haven’t done this, but that isn’t so say he never experiences it. Thorin pressing his chest against his and moaning when Bilbo slides his hand up the back of his shirt before dragging his nails down. Thorin, being as touch starved as he is, is incredibly sensitive, especially along his back. Bilbo repeats his actions until Thorin buries his face in the crook of his neck and breathes heavily. He smiles and turns his face to look at him.

“Are you okay?” he asks quietly. Thorin nods and runs his fingers through Bilbo’s hair again.

“Just splendid… it feels good when you do that,” he says. Bilbo gently runs his fingers down his spine again and watches as Thorin’s eyes flutter shut and he arches his torso slightly. It’s beautiful, really. Thorin is beautiful. Bilbo cups his face and brings him in again, but this time, it’s quick and chaste before he jumps off of the counter and grabs Thorin’s hand to pull him into the living room. Thorin gets the hint and sits down on the sofa, and they remain silent while Bilbo straddles him and runs his hands over Thorin’s broad shoulders.

“This is nice,” Thorin says. He puts his hands on Bilbo’s waist and simply stares. Bilbo simply stares back. It’s a lovely sight, Thorin slightly flustered and smiling up at him, wide blue eyes with those smile lines, his hair growing out a little, his shirt rumpled. Bilbo just takes it all in. It’s June. Six months ago, he couldn’t have imagined this, and here he is, still broken, still messed up, still unsure of everything going on around him, but this is something he has absolute clarity about. No, love doesn’t fix anything, but it sure as shit gives you something to keep living for when you feel like everything dear to you is gone.

“You’re warm,” Bilbo says. He wraps his arms around Thorin’s shoulders and leans against him. Thorin just returns the motion and tightens his arms around Bilbo’s waist. “Very warm.”

“Glad to appease you, he who always has cold feet,” Thorin teases. Bilbo harrumphs, but Thorin just laughs and slides one hand down to his backside and along his thigh. “I’m joking, I don’t really mind.”

“You better not. I don’t say anything about your snoring,” Bilbo says. He kisses away Thorin’s
false frown until Thorin is grinning and kissing him back.

In theory, Bilbo is happy to just sit there in Thorin’s lap, kissing him for god knows how long, but reality is rarely ever that fair, and seems to enjoy messing with people in the worst kind of ways.

They’re interrupted rather rudely by a brisk knock at the front door.

In any other house, say, one in Vevey, he wouldn’t have thought twice about it. He briefly thinks back to hearing Avon calling, more often than he would like to dwell on. But he knows it’s not Avon, and he knows that there’s really only one person who would drop by without giving them a heads up.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Thorin says. He throws his head back and groans as Bilbo slides off of his lap and stands, staring down the hallway at the door.

“Should we just pretend we’re not in?” he asks.

“The balcony door is open, and my car’s in the drive. That’s… he picked the worst possible timing. Shit.” Thorin stands too and gently pushes past Bilbo to walk down the hall. His shoulders are tense, and he looks like he wants to punch something, a far cry from the infinitely gentle look he was giving Bilbo not three minutes ago on the sofa.

Bilbo hangs back and leans against the wall, arms folded over his chest, and watches as Thorin braces himself before unlocking and opening the front door, and stepping aside to let in none other than Smaug Von Brandt.

Chapter End Notes

IM STILL ALIVE
okay im sorry this one is short. my exams finish on the 20th, and i just bought meself a new laptop so once thats all done, I hope I'll be updating soon. I've been getting a lot of kudos on this recently, and I promise, i was never going to drop this project. I've had a lot of time to think about how it ends, and I have an ending in mind. I'd say theres maybe 10 more chapters left?????? give or take. Depends how much I write in the next one honestly.
Thank you as always for supporting this fic even if I dont update for months at a time. Your comments and support mean so much to me, and I love you all (find me on tumblr @oakhenshield)
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thorin doesn't take his eyes off of Von Brandt as they enter the living room and Smaug sits down on the very couch cushion that had very previously been occupied. It takes a pointed look of impatience for Thorin to sit down in the armchair, looking into the face of a man he still has a burning desire to punch.

Bilbo, at least, is a distraction.

He hovers, hands hidden nervously in his pockets (and Thorin knows that only something he does when he's nervous) as he looks between the two of them. He makes eye contact with Thorin and smiles weakly.

"Would you like a drink?" Bilbo asks. It doesn't seem like Von Brandt even noticed him until then, and he blinks in a bland kind of surprise, pale eyes going to Bilbo's face and instantly analysing him on sight. It makes Thorin's skin crawl. He was the man who almost destroyed his career to further his own, making it impossible for Thorin to draw anything, just the year before Frerin died.

"Earl Grey, if you have it," Smaug says with a particularly sly grin. It's clearly not lost on Bilbo, who smiles back just as sly, narrowing his eyes suspiciously at Von Brandt as he leaves the room and goes to make the tea. Thorin almost wishes that they didn't have any Earl Grey, just to annoy him. Thorin can see Bilbo filling the kettle again and putting it on the stove over Von Brandt's shoulder, and that's enough of a comfort really.

"What brings you to Switzerland? Looking for a Swiss lamb to use in ritual sacrifice?" Thorin says. He hears Bilbo snort with controlled laugher, which makes Von Brandt flinch uncomfortably. Some sadistic part of Thorin enjoys that.

"It's just a formality, Durin. All I want is to clear the air before this exhibition. I'd hate for things to end badly once again," Von Brandt says. His voice is clipped, direct. He's pissed off. Thorin has heard that voice many, many times over the years.

"What, can't control bring a box cutter to the gallery? Or was it a pen knife?" Thorin says.

"Box cutter. And I don't intend on sabotaging your exhibition this time. I simply want to observe how people react to your comeback. You and I have always been rivals in this world of the finer arts, and of the two of us, you have always been a favourite, whereas I found myself early on in a niche. Forgive me for seeing competition in you," Von Brandt says. Thorin puts his hand in his lap, behind the ankle resting on his knee, so that he won't see his tight fist, his knuckles turning white from the strain.

"See, this is why I never go to those galas or parties or whatever that you rich artists and buyers put on, because you all talk like that and act like you're entitled to anything and everything because your art is different," he says. It's the truth. Growing up the way he did, in a very working class family in the English north, It's uncomfortable in the company of the elite art buyers and collectors. They pick up his accent and the way he wears his shirts and the way he talks and instantly, he's not one of them, and they often have to be reminded that yes, he is the man behind the Eastern European collection from the early two thousands, and yes, that pine forest painting
they have hanging over their fireplace is one that he spent hours on.

Von Brandt was born into money, and Thorin hates how easy it is to tell, especially through the eyes of someone who grew up with not a lot, and worked hard his entire adult life to get to where he is now.

"Who's being antagonistic now?" Von Brandt says.

"I'm not the one who slashed up a years worth of work with a box cutter," Thorin says. Bilbo comes in with Von Brandt's tea in one hand, and Thorin's coffee in the other. He then very purposefully half sits on the arm of Thorin's chair, looking at Von Brandt with a fierce protectiveness in his eyes. "You can't be forgiven for something like that, Von Brandt."

"Injuring somebody's pride isn't a sin."

"Neither is punching you in the face and getting you the hell out of my house. At least, not in my religion."

Von Brandt sighs. "Would you at least let me explain why I came here?"

Thorin glances at Bilbo, whose gaze is surprisingly steady and somewhat murderous, though Thorin gets the feeling that only he can see that, because Von Brandt doesn't seem to react to the intensity of his gaze when he makes eye contact with him.

"Fine," Thorin says.

"You know as well as I do how hard it is to get anywhere in our world. I'm not going to touch your work this time around, because this is your comeback. I can understand that this exhibition is important to you. I just wanted you to know that," Von Brandt says. He sips his tea and makes a surprised face, like he didn't expect it to be as good as it no doubt is.

"How touching. Couldn't you have said that over the phone?"

"I believe doing these things face to face is more genuine," Von Brandt says.

"So you found my address somehow, came up here without telling me when, and now you're acting like I should be perfectly civil with you after you almost destroyed my career. I can be a forgiving person, but there's things that I can't ignore," Thorin says. He feels Bilbo's hand on his shoulder and glances up, seeing him frowning at him. He tilts his head to the side, and Bilbo shakes his head. Don't aggravate him, was what that look meant.

Thorin sighs.

"Fine. As long as you don't touch my art, I can be civil with you. Deal?" He says. Von Brandt drains his cup and sets it on the coffee table, directly on top of one of Thorin's sketchbooks. He bristles at that, but Bilbo squeezes his shoulder and drops his hand away before standing and taking the mug into the kitchen.

"Deal. I look forward to seeing your work, Thorin." Von Brandt stands and Thorin does too. They shake hands and the hard, almost cruel squeeze from Von Brandt is not lost on Thorin before they part and Thorin follows him to the front door. But, Bilbo comes to his side and takes over, leaving Thorin in the hallway while Bilbo shows Von Brandt out. Obviously, Thorin didn't know Bilbo before he ended up here, but he can imagine that he was good with people like this, having been a university professor dealing with hormonal and stressed young adults on a daily basis.
The front door closes behind Von Brandt and Thorin's shoulders relax. He hadn't even realised how tense he was before then.

Bilbo walks over and looks at him with concern in his eyes. There are no words. There doesn't need to be. Bilbo pulls Thorin out of the hallway and into the living room, sitting Thorin on the sofa. He wraps his arms around Thorin's shoulders and runs his fingers over his scalp, resting his cheek against the top of his head. Thorin presses his face into Bilbo's chest and listens to his heartbeat, slow, calm, grounding. It's what he needs after that, and he's so grateful to Bilbo for just knowing that it hurts. It hurts that this is the first time someone has been able to read him so easily and subtly, and it hurts that Bilbo is the first person to treat him as gently as he does.

Thorin has believed for years that what Von Brandt did was a minor glitch. He's been angry ever since, yes, but he's never let himself think that what happened was traumatic in any way.

Somehow, that changes, as Bilbo runs his fingers along the back of Thorin's neck and whispers to him, words that Thorin doesn't quite catch. That exhibition had left him so angry and upset and uninspired that he didn't pick up a pencil, let alone a paintbrush, for a year, and soon after, Frerin had killed himself.

It had been one thing after another, and it took him five years to feel strong enough to get his work out there again.

It's a long while before Bilbo lets him go and Thorin sits, rubbing the back of his head. He feels oddly sheepish for some reason, though he knows he has no reason to be. Bilbo is here, and as far as Thorin knows, he's not going anywhere anytime soon. He just curls up on the couch and leans his head against the cushions, looking at Thorin with a tiny smile on his face. He reaches out and Thorin takes his hand.

"Are you alright?" He asks in a small voice. Thorin nods and mirrors him, holding his hand lightly. That tiny amount of skin contact is his tether, he realizes, because the thought of either of them letting go just yet is terrifying.

"Snobby bastard." Thorin runs his free hand over his face and shakes his head.

"I can see why you hate him so much," Bilbo says. "Even I wanted to hit him. I had no idea the art world was so intense."

"You have no idea. I've seen fist fights in galleries over much less, believe it or not. It's all about competition, who can be the best. It's ridiculous.. Von Brandt has always taken it way too far," Thorin says. Bilbo smiles sympathetically and looks away, as if he's deep in thought. Knowing him, he probably is. Thorin doesn't try to get his attention, just watches him. It's what Thorin needs, he thinks, to just sit here quietly while they both process what just happened.

Obviously, Bilbo has other ideas. As he always does.

He stands and his hand slips from Thorin's grip as he walks away towards the bedroom (It's still strange to Thorin to call it theirs) and disappears, and Thorin stares after him, unsure if he's meant to follow or not.

But, Bilbo comes back a moment later with that journal of his, the one he's always scribbling into when he's restless or reading academic texts. He sits down by Thorin and opens it to the back page, where a crudely drawn calendar is, and thrusts the journal towards Thorin.

"There's two months until the exhibition officially starts. Well, just under, but still. You've finished
your work and Dwalins helping you take them to the gallery in a few weeks. No matter what Von Brandt does, you were still their first choice, and that's probably pissing him off more than anything right now," he says. He uses that voice Thorin has only heard when he's trying to keep him calm, or to convince Thorin to do something he doesn't want to do, and it makes him melt in all sorts of ways. Bilbo's eyes crinkle at the edges when he smiles, and he puts the journal on the coffee table before leaning against Thorin.

"You can relax for a while," he says. His breath tickles Thorin's ear and he looks at him, taking in the faint freckles on his cheeks and the smile lines around his eyes and the slightly haphazard arrangement of his shirt collar. Thorin reaches out to fix it and his fingers brush against Bilbo's throat, his skin warm and soft. He knows it's incredible, just how quickly Bilbo can calm him down and make him see reason again, but at the same time, he's grateful for it.

He wraps his arm around Bilbo's shoulders and pulls him in, kissing at his temple.

"Thank you," he says softly, nuzzling into his hair. It was ridiculously soft.

"What for?"

"For being here. I probably would still be a miserable twat if you hadn't shown up. At least, more miserable than I am now," Thorin says. He closes his eyes and breathes in, smelling plain soap and clean skin, letting it take him briefly. Oh, he thinks, this is what it feels like.

Whatever it is, Thorin doesn't dwell. He doesn't think that he can, even with the gentleness that comes with Bilbo being at his side, because it's been so long since he saw somebody like this and wanted them to stay. It's a thing that has a name, but he refuses, and leaves it nameless for now, just to give himself time to think about it.

"You'd have gotten to where you are now without me," Bilbo mumbles.

"Nah. Well, maybe, but it would have taken longer," Thorin says. He looks at Bilbo and frowns. "You would have gotten to where you are now without me, though. I'm surprised you're still here, sometimes."

Bilbo looks at him like he's lost his mind and sits up straight, eyebrows drawn together. The scar on his forehead is much more visible when he does that. Thorin reaches over and runs his thumb along the lines on his forehead until Bilbo's expression relaxes and he looks years younger.

"Where else would I want to be?" he says after a while.

Thorin is momentarily floored by the weight of a statement like that and just blinks, staring, unable to think of any kind of response to that. It's not often he's stunned beyond words, but these last few months, Bilbo has constantly been surprising him, in more ways than one. He wonders what he, five months ago, would say if someone told him that the odd, traumatized professor who would be coming to stay with him would make him feel like this, like he's floating, like he's content, like he's...loved.

"Not in the Swiss mountains, I guess," he manages at last. Bilbo laughs and shakes his head.

"No, this is where I want to be," he says.

Bilbo kisses him, softly, sweetly, and Thorin forgets about everything beyond their bodies being as close as they are on this worn out little couch.

Eventually, they pull apart, and Thorin is much calmer than he had been when they first sat down
and started talking. He makes his way out of the living room and towards the balcony, where he takes his pack of cigarettes from his pocket and lights one up, breathing the nicotine deep to steady the nerves that still linger under his skin. It helps, and when he's done and he flicks the butt away, he can go back inside and see Bilbo reading, curled up in the armchair, and not think about how Von Brandt had invaded this space not even an hour ago.

"Why don't we go out for dinner tonight?" Thorin asks gently. He walks over and watches as Bilbo looks up from his book. He bends the corner of the page, something that is both endearing and infinitely irritating to Thorin, who prefers his books pristine, and sets it aside.

"At least let me pay," he says. Thorin shrugs.

"We'll split it. We can go a little earlier if you want," he says. Bilbo nods and stands, brushing invisible dirt from his jeans. "The sunset looks nice over Lake Geneva."

"Oh, aren't you a romantic. We'll go in an hour? I need a shower first," Bilbo says. Thorin lets him go and stands in the living room, looking around, a little dazed. Even now, it feels as if he's been underwater for years, and this is the first time he's broken the surface for air, breathing it in deep, greedy gulps to fill his lungs with much needed air. It's a relief, knowing that somehow, Von Brandt wanted to clear things up, even if his sick, twisted mind went about it in such a weird way. He knows he can't let his guard down, obviously, but he can breathe again, knowing that his work is probably safe, and than Von Brandt is calling something of a truce between them, at least for now.

Smiling, Thorin goes to his room and looks in his wardrobe, thinking that he might need to change to go out for dinner, because he doesn't want to go in paint stained jeans and an ancient Rolling Stones shit that has far too many holes to be considered even casual.

Yeah, he thinks to himself, pulling on a short sleeved button down. Things are finally looking up.

Chapter End Notes

hoooo boy. i finished my exams today and decided to post this chapter a little early. it's mostly filler, next chapter will be plot, and probably much longer. things are gonna get a little dark soon, so keep that in mind. im sorry in advance lmao.
anyway, thanks so much for your messages from the last chapter, and thank you to everyone who wished me luck on my exams, i think they went as well as they could.
as always, you can find me on tumblr at @oakhenshield, feel free to ask me any questions about this fanfic!
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Naturally, things go wrong, namely in the form of a phone call from Prim. Bilbo knows what it's about before he even picks up.

"Hey, listen" she begins, but Bilbo beats her to the punch, heart racing uncomfortably.

"The house sold," he says. It's early morning, and he's still in bed, Thorin mostly asleep beside him. There's a tense silence on Prim's end that is more telling than anything, really.

"Kind of. We got an offer that we're not going to turn down, but I wanted to let you know before it becomes official," Prim says slowly. Bilbo sits up and runs a hand through his sleep mussed hair. It feels like getting a punch in the face, somehow. *What a way to wake up*, he thinks.

"Right," is all he can say. It's all his tired brain can provide him with, really. He hears Prim exhale shakily, as if she's bracing herself to deliver even more bad (or just upsetting) news. It takes him a moment or two to realise that thats probably exactly what's about to happen. Before she can say anything, Bilbo tells her to give him a minute, and he gets out of bed, careful not to wake Thorin, picking the phone back up to head through to the balcony.

"Can I speak now?" Prim asks.

"Yeah." Bilbo sits on one of the seats and looks out at the mountains. The sunrise is just starting to change the colour of the mountaintops, making what remains of the snow gleam like fire.

"They want to move in by next month. Gives you time to come and say your goodbyes, if you want to. And... and get some things left in the attic. We never touched any of that stuff," Prim says. She sounds as upset as he feels in his gut, but Belladonna and Bungo had treated her like a daughter, and she had been devastated when they died, just as much as Bilbo was. He can imagine her pinching the bridge of her nose, pushing her glasses up slightly, in a fight to contain tears she still refuses to shed.

"Bilbo?" Prim asks, and he realises that he's been silent for far too long.

"Yeah," he says. "Yeah, okay. When's good for you?"

"Whenever. Well, the sooner the better, but whenever you can, I guess. We've got our new place sorted. Are you sure you don't want a bigger cut of what they're paying? We're not exactly struggling, and we don't have to buy as much furniture as we thought we would, considering you're letting us have the old furniture..." Prim trails off and there's a painful silence before she sighs. "I'm sorry, Bilbo. I know this is difficult, everything changing for all of us right now."

"It's fine. It's nothing new with this family, is it? Any idea who's buying the place?" Bilbo asks. His eyes sting, but he refuses to acknowledge it to the point of tears. It's far too early for tears.

"No one we're related to, don't worry. Brothers, I think. One's called Boromir, I can't remember the other one. But they seem nice enough, and they were talking about redoing the garden and making it look a little more traditional. The place is going to be in good hands," Prim says. Bilbo nods, but then realises that she can't see him.
"Good. Like you'd sell it to a developer," he says, keeping the tremor out of his voice for the most part.

"If I did, you would have my permission to come over here and punch me in the face. Anyway, I just thought I should let you know. Do you want to come and say goodbye to the place?" Prim asks, a little unsure.

"Yeah, I think that's probably a good idea. I... can I get back to you on that, actually? I need to... think about some things. I mean, I'm going to come and say goodbye, but I just..." He's unable to articulate his words, and it's absolutely infuriating, but then again, it's early, and this in information he should have been allowed to brace himself for.

"I understand. Let me know when you're coming. You might be able to meet Boromir and his brother, actually. I think you'd like them. At least, university-days Bilbo would," Prim says.

"I'll hold you to that. I'll call you tomorrow, alright?" Bilbo says. Prim hums in agreement, and the silence on her end is broken by the unmistakable sound of Frodo erupting into peals of laughter, no doubt being tickled by his father.

"See ya." Thats as much of a goodbye as Bilbo ever gets from Prim, and the line goes dead. He sits there, staring at his phone, for a good long while, at the photo of Frodo that is his lockscreen, and has been for the last few months. He feels somewhat detached from it all, the whole idea of his childhood home being sold at last, even if it is to two young brothers that Prim seems to be quite pleased with. He knows it's selfish, but part of him wishes that he hadn't let Prim go on with the sale. He has never been very good at letting go and moving on, the last year testament to that fact, but instead, he just holds on and holds on until it slips through his grip and it's gone forever. Friends, family, flings, it's all fleeting.

He puts his phone on the table and drops his head into his hands. The sun warms the back of his neck once it finally comes up over the mountains, and he lets it soak in that this is really happening – his childhood home will be gone in a month. He doesn't blame Prim, or the boys buying the place, or even himself or his parents. There's no one to blame for the hole in his chest that had so recently healed, just to be torn open again, the edges feathered and bleeding with force that it hurts to breathe once he starts to think too hard about it.

Oh god, it hurts so much once it sinks in, and it takes every ounce of Bilbo's strength not to break down on the balcony. He can't burden Thorin with this. he can't let Thorin see him so messed up and fragile that even the gentlest of touches could shatter him completely. He hates just how brittle this makes him, and how quickly it messes with his head.

It's too much. He's too tired. He's too broken already to deal with another blow like this, especially this early in the morning. It's a blip, he knows that, a blip he will look back on in a few years time with nostalgia only slightly tinged with pain, but now, it's raw and agonising, and he wants the world to stop turning, just for a few minutes.

After a very long while, Bilbo goes back into the house and finds Thorin still asleep in bed. He clammers onto the mattress and under the sheets, and buries himself against Thorin, the solid warmth of him calming him somewhat. Of everything in his life, this is the one thing he has left that he wants desperately to hold onto, the quiet kind of affection and love that he needs to heal him, body and soul, and the love he has for Thorin that makes the other man melt, all impressions of the cold, distant man he had been so early on in their relationship gone with how he smiles over his coffee and absently plays with Bilbo's hair when they watch movies on his laptop in bed.

Thorin shifts and turns, and wraps Bilbo up tight in one arm.
"Where'd you go?" he mumbles, still half asleep. The sound of his voice calms the storm in Bilbo somewhat, but that just makes him feel even worse. Guilty, somehow, though he knows that none of this is his fault. Or anyones, really.

"Just needed some air," he lies. Thorin seems to accept it, because he sighs contentedly and pulls Bilbo even closer to press a kiss to his forehead. His beard scratches.

Thorin falls asleep soon after, but Bilbo remains awake, tracing his tattoos oh so gently so as not to wake him. He waits until it's a more reasonable hour, and Thorin gets out of bed, yawning and stretching, his joints clicking. But Bilbo doesn't have the energy to move from beneath the warm blankets, and even when Thorin tries to coax him out, he stubbornly refuses.

He's brought coffee and toast, which he eats, though he barely tastes anything, and the coffee is perfect, yes, but he barely registers it before it's gone, and he needs something to do with his hands. He manages to drag himself into the shower, but quickly after, he collapses into bed in his underwear and buries his face into the pillows, finally letting himself cry. It hurts, and he knows that he can't keep all of it silent, because Thorin comes in and pulls him close, whispering to him that it'll be okay, that he's safe, he's alright here.

It hurts to let it go, but Bilbo lets go. He lets go of everything he's been holding in and refusing to feel these last months. It always happens like this, he thinks, when he stops crying and rubs his eyes like a small child. He bottles things up and keeps them in, and at the smallest sign of discomfort or pain, it comes shooting out like a volcano that has been under too much pressure for far too long.

Thorin stays with him through it, and doesn't leave except to get him a glass of water, coming back quickly and tentatively touching his arm as if to comfort him. It works. Bilbo is ashamed, but it works, and he is soon tired enough to sleep.

When he dreams, he dreams of being alone.

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It's late by the time he wakes up. Late enough that, even in June, the sun is gone and the moon is out, though only a pale sliver once he dresses and finds Thorin on the balcony. By the looks of his ashtray, he's been chain smoking, but Bilbo really can't blame him, not after the stunt he pulled earlier. Thorin looks at him and smiles weakly, but there's pain in his eyes that makes the guilt weigh like a heavy stone in his gut.

"I'm sorry," is the first thing out of his mouth, and Thorin looks, if anything, surprised. He motions for Bilbo to sit down and he does, wrapping Thorin's hoodie around himself as if it will protect him from the onslaught of questions he's bracing himself for.

They don't come. All that comes is Thorin's quiet sigh and an arm around his shoulders, pulling him in.

"I'm just glad you're up and walking now," he says softly. Bilbo closes his eyes and breathes in the smell of smoke and coffee. It's comforting, despite how much it reminds him of his student days. "What happened?"

Bilbo knows that he isn't quite at the point of articulation, so he just shakes his head and leans against Thorin, letting himself be selfish enough to bask in his heat and the solid lines of his body, the comforting weight of his arm around his shoulders. It's simultaneously too much and not enough. Bilbo leans into the touch like a man starving, but he's so unused to it outside of these
walls that it scares him.

"Was it to do with the call this morning?"

Bilbo nods.

"...was it Prim? About the house?"

Bilbo nods again, closing his eyes.

"I thought so. I'm sorry, Bilbo."

He shakes his head and buries his face into Thorin's shoulder. He's not... he's not good with vulnerability, but Thorin makes it easier. He's rough and coarse and rude and brash, but he's also just as broken as Bilbo is, and it's less like unlocking part of himself to reveal it to Thorin, but more akin to looking into a mirror. Their fractures are the same, though caused by different circumstances. The sympathy they offer each other isn't fabricated, but genuine, because it all comes down to one horrific shared experience, miles away, years apart, but it brought them together like this.

It's too much, and he feels like crying again, but he refuses this time. He just takes a deep breath and sits up straight, rubbing his eyes.

"It's just a house," he says quietly.

"Take it from somebody who never really got to say goodbye to his childhood home, it's never just a house. Did Prim ask you to visit?" Thorin asks. Bilbo nods.

"Yeah. She wants me to meet the buyers, too, so there's that. Apparently they're brothers," he says. It's all coming back to him, the information Prim had relayed to him during the call that he forgot as soon as she hung up on him. It fills him with a tiny bit of hope – Prim has always been a good judge of character, and she has taken this sale seriously, knowing that the house is an old, rickety thing that needs a lot of care, and the lives that were spent there need to be remembered so that the charm of the place makes sense.

An idea comes to him. A selfish idea, but an idea nonetheless.

"Do you want to come with me?" he asks. He doesn't look at Thorin, just looks at his hands, twisting his fingers together out of sheer nerves. He knows it's not a stunningly profound question by any means, but it's hard to ask nonetheless.

"Do you want me to come?" Thorin asks. His voice is gentle, in a way Bilbo has never heard before. He braves looking up, and the look on Thorin's face is infinitely tender and cautious, and a tad worried, his eyebrows drawn together and making him look older.

"I... yes. If you want. You don't have to," he says, stammering. Thorin just laughs gently and nods.

"No, I want to. I'll come with you. It's not like I have anything else to do," he says, gesturing to the oddly clean balcony, void of any half-complete paintings or even any artists tools. The only thing in front of Thorin is his sketchbook, which is closed, the page held by a fineliner pen that pokes out of the side.

"Well, that's reassuring. Prim wants me to meet the buyers, so at least I won't alone in that. I'm not sure if I could handle that alone," Bilbo says. He feels Thorins eyes on him, intent and searching,
but refuses to look up. Just being out here is painful enough with how much he feels like an exposed nerve. Almost hilariously, he recalls just how severe his nightmares were for a long time here. They never stopped, and he highly doubts they ever will, but they're much less severe.

It's a familiar pattern, he thinks, as he follows Thorin inside and watches him put together sandwiches for the both of them, humming to the radio and flitting around the kitchen. After the crash, his nightmares were horrendous, but he would hide them, and lie to his students, his friends, his family, about the shadows under his eyes, claiming a lack of sleep brought on by stress or loud neighbors.

Naturally, it was all a lie, and he regrets it now, because now he has a scar, no job, no hope of every being normal again. The only good thing in his life these days, he thinks, is Thorin, and when he slides a plate with his frankly incredible sandwiches in front of him, he sees Thorin smile, and part of his heart thaws. He can't ruin this. No matter how awful he's feeling, no matter how shitty it feels to wake up at night and clawing at the sheets, no matter how often he looks at his antidepressants and tells himself, *I don't need these*, before hiding them and refusing to take them, he has to at least remember that if anyone in this world would miss him, it's Thorin.

When they go to bed, long past midnight, Bilbo takes a moment to look at himself in the bathroom mirror. He barely recognises himself from who he was in Oak Manor. He's visibly healthier, though he could do with a haircut soon before it reaches true mullet stage, and somehow, even now, his eyes are brighter, his face less aged, even the scar has faded. It's truly jarring, when your reflection is somebody you don't recognise, or even feel like. He feels awful, even when he curls up against Thorin that night, but he knows - he *knows* - that letting it out sometimes is healthier than any other option he has.

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They fly to the UK a week later, and Thorin is floored by how little he recognises the place.

Naturally, it's green and lush, and the typical smell of grass and manure that reaches even the airport brings back a plethora of memories, but he's been so long away that it takes a good few minutes to re-orient himself once they get off the plane and are surrounded by Gatwick employees, the accents far too familiar and yet, so distant he has to remind himself that he doesn't sound Swiss, and that his passport is British, even after all these years.

They get their baggage and go through customs, and before Thorin knows it, he's shaking hands with one Primula Baggins, a woman around Bilbo's age with glossy black hair and a toddler at her hip, looking at Thorin cautiously with perhaps the biggest blue eyes he has ever seen.

"Come on, come on, you need to check into your hotel soon, don't you? It's not too far to drive. Have you ever been to Wiltshire, Thorin?" Prim asks, while simultaneously hitching Frodo up her hip, getting out her car keys, and handing Bilbo what looks like a backpack full of food.

"I did an art show in Lydiard House once, when I was starting out. That's in Wiltshire, right?" he asks. He opens the car door for her and watches as she straps Frodo in, making cooing baby noises to get him to calm down. He's on the verge of tears, Thorin can tell, and he volunteers to keep Frodo company in the backseat, while Bilbo takes shotgun, apparently happy chatting away to Prim and catching up with her. He's clearly exhausted, but he smiles nonetheless and repeatedly reassures Prim that yes, he's perfectly fine, there's nothing to worry about.

Not ten minutes into the drive, Thorin has an index finger clenched tight in Frodo's tiny hand, and he's happy to eat his tuna sandwich one handed and only take part in the conversation sparingly. He makes faces at Frodo and gets shy giggles in return, and by the time Frodo falls asleep, he's
quite enchanted. He's always loved children, as awkward as he is with his nephews, and it's nice knowing that Frodo seems to like him.

By the time they reach Trowbridge, it's starting to get dark, and Prim drops them at the hotel and tells them to get some rest through the open window. They're going to the house the day after, apparently, and Thorin's okay with that. He says goodbye and waves as she drives past, and then he and Bilbo are alone.

"Tired?" he asks gently as they walk into the hotel lobby.

"Very. Come on," Bilbo says. He leads the way to the reception and they're handed the key to their room, with a very obviously faked and clearly uncomfortable smile from the receptionist. Thorin bristles, but says nothing, and just takes it with a smile just as artificial and follows Bilbo to the elevator.

They're silent on the way up, and when they get into the room, but as soon as the door clicks shut, Bilbo drops his satchel and lets go of his suitcase, and just flops face first into the bed, groaning loudly. Thorin smiles to himself and kicks his shoes off to go and sit beside him. He recognises this too well, the sign of a man too tired and frustrated to do much but let it wash over him and put him in a bad mood.

He runs his fingers through Bilbo's hair.

"Feeling alright?" He asks. Bilbo nods, his face still pressed into the duvet, but he looks up and frowns.

"Just peachy. Is it too late to go back to Switzerland?" he asks, only half serious. Thorin nods apologetically and takes his chin between thumb and forefinger, tilting his face up to kiss him on the forehead. Younger Thorin would be scratching his head at the sight of such familiar affection, but he's old and, hopefully, wise enough now to embrace silly little things like this.

"Yeah, it is. It'll be over in a few days, anyway. And did I hear Prim say something about a family party in some park?" Thorin teases. Bilbo smacks him lightly on the shoulder and rolls onto his back. He kicks his shoes off and sheds his jacket, and hugs a pillow tightly, looking very much the moody teenager on a bad day.

"Sorry," he mumbles. Thorin sighs and lays down beside him, mirroring his position, sans pillow.

"It's alright. It's... it's a lot. I get it," he says. He's so unused to seeing Bilbo so wholly fragile these days that it hurts to see him look away, hiding half of his face behind a pillow as if it will stop Thorin seeing how tired he is, or how much he wants the world to stop spinning for just five goddamn seconds.

They lay there for a while, and Bilbo actually manages to fall asleep, leaving Thorin to get up and leave the hotel room to go smoke outside. He needs it after spending a couple of hours on a plane, which he's always hated with a passion, but it's cheaper than going by train, and far quicker. He smokes quickly and texts Dis, telling her that they landed safe and they're at the hotel, before going back inside.

Bilbo is in the shower, and Thorin takes the time to unpack. By the time they're both done, Thorin is thoroughly exhausted, but then again, travelling tires him out something fierce, and he just wants to lay down and sleep until midday.

As always, Bilbo distracts.
Thorin has grown used to sleeping next to another person, and Bilbo is delightfully warm and amenable to being the little spoon, which makes everything that much better and somehow, much more comfortable. What he isn't used to is a frustrated Bilbo who can't sleep and won't stop moving. It takes until Thorin gets somewhat headbutted in the nose before he sighs and turns over, clicking on a lamp.

"Sorry," Bilbo says, rubbing his eyes.

"Alright, what's wrong with you?" he asks. Bilbo frowns.

"What's wrong with me? The hell do you mean?" he asks.

"You know what I mean. Talk to me. Please," Thorin says. He hears the pleading tone in his voice, but he knows it's simply because he cares, because he hates seeing Bilbo so mixed up in his feelings, and doing such a bad job at hiding it.

"I'm just tired," he says. Thorin raises an eyebrow, and Bilbo sighs. "It's just... this is a lot to deal with in just a week, alright? I have no idea how to feel about any of this right now. That, and I'm not a fan of hotels."

"Yeah, hotel beds aren't great. But, you need to tell me about these things. If you're angry, or upset, I want to know," Thorin says. Bilbo laughs dryly.

"Says mister emotionally constipated," he says. It hurts, a little, but Thorin knows how true that statement is. The only reason he's so open about it now is because it's easy with Bilbo, it's easy to talk to him, and usually easy to get the truth out of him with a little bit of pressure.

_Usually_, he thinks to himself.

But, if he's honest, he really doesn't blame Bilbo for being as stubborn as he is then and there. It's a hard thing to talk about. It's a hard thing to even live with, guilt and shame, and the crushing, continuous feeling of dread weighing you down.

"I just want to know you're alright," he says quietly.

"I'll be fine. You don't have to worry so much about me, Thorin, I'm tougher than I look," Bilbo says, trying for a smile, though it's weak and transparent.

"Yeah, I know. But I'm allowed to worry about you. You're..." Thorin almost says _my boyfriend_, but at the last minute, he decides that that sounds way too much like they're in secondary school and hiding behind the bike sheds to get a few quick kisses in during their lunch break. "You're important to me."

Bilbo seems to cotton on, and laughs, and the tension in Thorin's shoulders seeps away. This is what he wants, he realises, to be able to make Bilbo laugh even when they're both stressed out and exhausted and barely holding it together in this shitty Premier Inn hotel room in the middle of Wiltshire, of all places. It lifts his anxiety and seems to life Bilbo's, too.

"Alright, permission granted to worry. Can't promise I'll get to sleep anytime soon, though," Bilbo says. He runs a hand through his already disheveled hair and looks around the room, squinting in the dark. It reminds Thorin of all those times he found Bilbo trying to stifle his fear and agony after waking up from what must be some pretty horrific nightmares, except this time, he's not so much falling apart than using staples and wire to hold himself together – enough for a week, but not enough forever.
Eventually, that dam is going to break, and Thorin swears he will be there when it does, because he can't lose anyone else, not again, never again.

Instead of falling asleep, they sit up in bed and just talk for what feels like hours. It's not about anything important, just trading childhood memories like football cards, talking about Marseilles, speculating just how drunk they're going to get once they make it back to Switzerland and need to blow off some serious steam.

They're asleep by three in the morning, and Thorin buries his face in the soft mess of Bilbo's hair, not caring how much it tickles. His hand is held loosely and they're pressed close, and when Thorin dares to peek through half lidded eyelids, he sees Bilbo look so much more relaxed, like nothing in the world could shatter the facade he's built so well for himself.

Chapter End Notes

TAKE UR MEDS KIDS
not but in all seriousness, this chapter was.... oddly cathartic for my own depression. like the rest of his fic, really. i think i wrote most of this in one sitting. also, boromir and faramir! i wanted actual characters from the series to be buying the house, so i decided on our favourite brothers. they're probably like students or some shit like that. at least, faramir is.

anyway, thanks for reading, and thank you for your comments. i have nothing to do until august so i might be able to finish this by then also, those of you who have read my over hill and under tree fix-it fanfic (id link but i really cant be bothered right now), would you be interested in a sequel? let me know in the comments!

as always, you can find me on tumblr at @oakhenshield

thanks for reading!!!
The brothers, Boromir and Faramir, turn out to be delightfully charming, and Bilbo's anxiety is eased somewhat when he spends an afternoon with them at the house, drinking tea at the old table that has been there for decades.

Boromir is five years older, and a self defense instructor, whereas Faramir is a student just finishing up his post-graduate Linguistics degree in Bristol. Bilbo talks to the latter at length about language, finding that he's fluent in Welsh, for some reason, and is also doing a teaching degree. He seems a little shy, but Bilbo likes him, and likes his brother, who is boisterous and seems to be perfectly happy with Frodo tugging at his hand and trying to pull him towards the toys scattered around the living room.

But then Bilbo hears about their father, and their real reason for buying the house fills him with the sick kind of sympathy that only ever comes from being able to relate to the death of a parent. The boys lost their mother young, and in their father's aging years, they've been trying to look after him, and they want this house to that their father has a good place to live, rather than shoving him in a home and being done with it.

"He's a stubborn ass," Faramir says, once Boromir is out of earshot and playing with Frodo. "But he's our dad, we can't just leave him in a home. And we can deal with his outbursts and all that."


"This place used to belong to your folks, right? Primula told me what happened to them," he says. He says it tentatively, like he's giving Bilbo a chance to shut down that particular conversation before it happens. Bilbo just shrugs.

"I'd rather the place go to someone who cares about it than leave it sitting here and gathering dust while I'm away in Switzerland," he says. Glancing at Thorin, he sees him smile slightly over the rim of his mug, which contains very strong, very sweet coffee. He's been quiet since coming here, looking around at everything, and Bilbo knows it's because he's trying to glean some kind of recognition from the ancient kitchen counters and cupboards, the faded red carpet on the stairs, the magnolia tree in the back garden. All of it is effortlessly familiar to Bilbo, of course, but to Thorin, this is uncharted territory. Not only is he meeting Bilbo's family, he's sat in his childhood home, drinking coffee, and it's... normal. Perfectly normal.

"You know, we're probably not going to change too much about it. Some fresh coats of paint, maybe new carpeting, but that's it, really," Faramir says, looking around. He has an odd charm about him, but that may be due to the academic in Bilbo automatically wanting to connect with other academics.

"We're keeping the magnolia tree!" Boromir calls from the living room, where Frodo is currently doodling all over his arms, his face scrunched up in concentration.

"We're keeping the magnolia tree," Faramir says, sipping his tea with a thoroughly impressive eye roll.

The afternoon passes peacefully, and Bilbo gets the courage to show Thorin the whole of the
house, though his hands tremble the whole time, seeing the height markers on the side of Frodo’s door, and the family photos on the wall along the stairs, and the old Welsh dresser in the living room that houses numerous photo albums and family knick-knacks. Bilbo doesn’t look inside, he doesn’t think he can deal with that, but Thorin distracts him by asking to see the garden.

Back in the day, it was his father’s pride and joy. Yes, including the magnolia tree, which now stands tall and proud, and blooming in the early summer weather, and Bilbo fondly remembers it being planted when he was around nine or ten, the thing barely a small shrub that took years to bloom properly.

He leads Thorin towards the ancient metal bench at the end of the garden and they sit down.

“Nice place,” Thorin says after a while. Bilbo laughs softly.

“Yeah. It is,” he says.

They sit in comfortable silence for a long while, the afternoon sun illuminating the garden in glorious gold, hitting the wild daisies and slightly long grass and the vegetable patch that Prim meticulously keeps, growing some frankly impressive carrots and potatoes. There’s an ancient oak tree just behind the garden shed that Bilbo can remember climbing as a child, and it absolutely dwarfs the magnolia. It’s taller than the house, even, and it’s only because it’s private property and because they’re not close to any other houses that it’s even still there.

It’ll look beautiful when autumn comes, he thinks, looking up at the vivid green leaves and the weathered bark, the twisted branches that cover their heads and gives them shade from the summer sun beaming down from overhead. Bilbo is hit with an almost painful nostalgia for his childhood, summer parties held in this very back garden, lazy afternoons sat on this very bench with his mother while Bilbo did homework and she read whatever paperback hit she was reading at the time. Bilbo remembers it all with a pained fondness, and he can almost see it, the ghosts of the past lingering in this garden, his mother when she was younger, long black hair tied up and a smile on her face, and Bungo with his trademark awkwardness as he tries to converse with people he’s never met before. And Bilbo among them, wild and energetic as a child, and much shyer as a teenager, flitting between family and friends and trying to find people who weren’t agonizing to talk to.

He exhales shakily and twists his hands together, staring at the magnolia.

To his surprise, Thorin gets out his phone and snaps a few pictures of the garden from a few different angles. It’s obvious what he wants to do with those photos, and Bilbo just smiles, watching him as he deletes some and retakes them until he’s happy with them, and sits back down.

“I thought you agreed not to do any painting for a while,” Bilbo says quietly. Thorin shrugs.

“I can have a hobby, you know,” he says. “And Dis wanted to see what it’s like here.”

“Right. Of course,” Bilbo says. He kicks Thorin in the ankle and gets an elbow in his ribs in return, making him laugh. It feels odd, knowing that the day before, the week before, he was a mess, barely holding himself together, but getting out of the hotel room and coming here, seeing green landscape and hills the likes of which can only be found on this godforsaken isle, has put him in a much better mood.

He misses it. He misses the countryside he grew up in, and this little town, and going to Prim’s for afternoon tea every Saturday, before he got his job at the university. Naturally, he misses his parents, but he’s found that over the last year and a half, the ache has dulled somewhat. It’s not
gone – it will never be gone – but it’s less intense, and more like an old wound than a fresh cut.

“Must be pretty here at sunset,” Thorin says absently. Bilbo nods and slots his fingers through the bench slats like he did when he was much younger.

“My old bedroom is there,” he says, pointing to a window facing the back garden. “It faces west, I think, so I’d get a beautiful view of the sunset if I was in my room at the time.”

“Do you think they’ll put their father in that room?” Thorin asks. Bilbo shrugs.

“I don’t know. I would, if… well, you know. It’s a nice view,” he says. A huge part of him hopes that Boromir and Faramir don’t lose their father too soon, they’re so young anyway that it would just be a critical blow for them. Faramir is barely out of university, and Boromir is the kind of optimistic yet grounded person who looks at the glass half full, so to speak, though knows when to fill it himself. It’s admirable, seeing two young brothers as obviously close as they are, though they no doubt have lives and personalities of their own. And it’s admirable that they’re willing to care for an ailing father who seems to be quite brash and grim, from what Bilbo has heard during the last couple of hours, sat at the table with them.

“My old man had a metalworking shed in the back garden. When I was younger, I used to sit in there and watch him while he left the door open, so all the smoke and fumes went outside. We’d be in there for hours, and when the sun came in when it was setting, all of the metal looked so beautiful,” Thorin says. He frowns a little, then shakes his head, looking down.

“Sounds lovely,” Bilbo says. He knows it’s hard for Thorin to open up about his family, for obvious reasons, but he’s always stunned when he does talk about them by the clarity with which he describes his memories. But then again, an artist’s mind works with sensation, feeling, creative instinct. He has a way with description that always floors Bilbo when he’s witness to it.

“Prim said there were things in the attic?” Thorin asks gently, suggesting a change in the subject. Bilbo nods. He knows full well just how much there is stored up there – even more photo albums, even more knick-knacks, even more memories he isn’t too sure he’s ready to face just yet.

“Yeah. We’re not going up there today, though,” he manages somewhat weakly. Thorin seems to understand and relaxes, leaning against the back of the bench and tilting his head back, closing his eyes. In his ridiculous leather jacket and ridiculous Henley and jeans and goddamn biker boots, he looks good, his jacket draped over the arm of the bench and the sleeves of his shirt pushed up his forearms, slightly open at the collar. Bilbo has never seen him this put together, and yet this relaxed, at the same time. But it’s… it’s nice.

Bilbo values his privacy, and he knows for a fact that Thorin does too, but despite everyone crowded into the house, he knows that they’ll leave them out here without prying, as they’re the family that can actually keep their noses out of other peoples business. So, Bilbo takes Thorin’s hand and links their fingers before bringing them to his mouth, kissing Thorin’s knuckles ever so gently.

“Thank you for coming here,” he says quietly, not daring to look at Thorin, not sure if he can handle it.

“Thank you for asking me. I like it here,” Thorin says. He lets go of Bilbo’s hand and wraps his arm around his shoulders, shifting so they’re hip to hip, thighs pressed together. He’s so ridiculously warm that Bilbo wants to be selfish and just sap that warmth from him, hold it inside of himself so keep a piece of Thorin with him.
“You’re welcome to back out of going to that family thing. Trust me to show up the week of Esmeralda’s birthday. It’s going to be absolute hell,” Bilbo says. Thorin laughs fondly. It’s uncharacteristic to see him in such a good mood, but Bilbo is relishing it, his easy smiles, his effortless affection, his laughter at the smallest thing. *You’ve both changed so much, but it’s he’s doing so much better than you.*

“It’ll be fun. You got to meet my family, now I get to meet yours,” Thorin says. Bilbo just groans.

“My family isn’t as fun as yours. It’s less… communing in the Alps for a child's birthday and getting drunk on champagne and eating lots of cake, and more having very West Country gatherings and trying to be passive aggressive to each other enough to start a full on brawl in someone's garden,” Bilbo says. Thorin just huffs another laugh. Happiness is a good look on him, Bilbo decides and vows to make him smile like that more often, if he can.

“Sounds delightful. I’ll be sure to show as many of my tattoos as possible,” Thorin says, and Bilbo gets why he’s looking forward to it. *This is the man you chose, this is the man who gets you, this is the man you’ve fallen so head over heels for that it hurts to look at him sometimes.*

They sit together in companionable silence until, inevitably, the evening chill sets in, even during such a warm June day. Inside, Frodo has gone to bed, and Prim is sat in her favourite armchair, just staring up at the ceiling, while Boromir and Faramir chat to Drogo about the area, and, oddly enough, their hiking trips from the past.

Naturally, Bilbo and Thorin go into the living room and join Prim.

“I feel like getting really, really drunk,” Prim says after a while.

“Seconded,” Bilbo says.

“The resemblance is striking,” Thorin says dryly, looking between them. “Are you sure you aren’t blood related?”

“If we are, our families would have a lot of uncomfortable questions to answer,” Prim says. She sits up and stretches. “Drogo!”

He comes in with a slightly wary look, but agrees to look after Frodo while the three go out. To their surprise, the brothers ask if they can join, and before they know it, they’re walking down the road towards the pub that Bilbo remembers very vividly. The smell of beer and cigarette smoke, the sound of rowdy Wiltshire men and women having a good time, the dark golden lights that make you feel oddly lethargic and at peace.

Thorin stays outside to smoke, and Bilbo and Prim order while the brothers grab them a table. Prim nudges him playfully, that trademark smirk on her face so very telling of what’s going through her head.

“You didn’t say he was so tall,” she says, almost in a whisper.

“I also didn’t mention the tattoos or the leather jacket. Didn’t seem to matter,” Bilbo says. He takes half of their drinks, and Prim takes the other, and they take them back to the table, setting them out. Prim very obviously puts Thorin’s next to his, and winks at him.

“Well, I approve of him,” she says. Bilbo flushes red, but Faramir just snickers, and Boromir doesn’t seem to have noticed at all.

It's a lovely evening, oddly enough. Their little quintet seems to get along like a house on fire, and
the conversation flows from one topic to another seamlessly, no doubt aided by the alcohol in their systems. Under the table, Thorin keeps his leg pressed up against Bilbo’s, and, oh, he fits in so well here, doesn’t he? He’s the right side of tipsy and becoming more and more subtly affectionate, leaning in and whispering every now and then, and Bilbo doesn’t remember what he says, but he knows that it’s a good thing they were whispered.

Faramir is the one who remains mostly sober, and Bilbo suspects that growing up with someone like Boromir has instilled that in him. His eyes are intense, and he plays with the coaster laid out on the table, frowning slightly. When Boromir states that he recognizes Thorin’s name, he googles him and gives a loud, surprised hoot, hissing, 'you have your own Wikipedia page?', which just makes Thorin laugh and shake it off, something he wouldn’t have been able to do three months ago.

Bilbo stares back at Faramir, who gestures to the door, and Bilbo joins him, excusing himself on the pretense of getting some fresh air. Though, it definitely feels as if he needs it when he stands and sways slightly.

Outside, Faramir leans against the wall of the building and breathes deep, closing his eyes for a few seconds. Something about his profile, his build, suggests to Bilbo some Scandinavian blood, as he’s so damn tall and blond, but he doesn’t dwell too much on it.

“You feeling alright?” Faramir asks out of the blue. Bilbo raises an eyebrow, but shrugs, mirroring him and silently thanking the wall for being so blessedly cool against his back.


“I get the feeling you’re not usually that quiet when there’s alcohol abound. You kept staring into your glass instead of actually talking,” he says.

“This place brings up a lot of memories. I haven’t… I haven’t been myself for a long while, you see, so whatever Prim’s said about me is probably a little outdated,” Bilbo manages. He’s shocking coherent, though he may not be as drunk as he initially thought. It’s a comforting realization.

“Yeah. I heard about what happened,” Faramir says.

“You’ll have to be a little more specific,” Bilbo says.

“I heard about the crash, and it’s not too hard to put together the rest of it all. I’m… sorry.” He says it carefully, as if weighing the worth of his apology. Bilbo smiles. It aches, but it’s touching, and he’s grateful. He says as much, and gets a relieved look from Faramir in response.

“You’re welcome to visit, once we buy the house. We’d hate to take it away from you forever, you know. I think my brother is going to end up babysitting for Frodo a lot anyway,” Faramir says gently. Bilbo arches an eyebrow at him. It takes him a few seconds to process what he just said.

“No,” he says, surprising both Faramir and himself. “Lingering will only make it worse. I think… as much as it hurts, I have to let this place go. It’s not my parents house anymore, hasn’t been for almost two years. Do what you want with it, once you buy it, it’s yours.”

It takes Faramir a long, painful moment to respond.

“It doesn’t get easier, you know. Losing a parent. The pain fades, but it never really goes away. But… I hope it gets better for you. You deserve that, at the very least,” he says. Bilbo is about to ask about his own mother, but decides against it. They just exchange a smile and go back inside.
It’s late by the time they leave. Sinfully late. Prim walks back and Boromir and Faramir get a taxi, leaving Bilbo and Thorin standing outside the pub together in silence, watching Prim retreating down the road. She has the constitution of an ox, and so appears totally sober, though Bilbo knows that the world must be spinning slightly for her. He entertains the thought of calling Drogo to pick her up, but it’s not even five minutes back to the house, so he leaves her to it, and he and Thorin get a taxi back to their hotel.

Bilbo isn’t entirely sure what possesses him to approach Thorin the way he does when they both discard of their jackets and shoes, but when Thorin sits on the bed and looks at him with that ridiculously soft expression, something in him breaks.

He walks over and proceeds to straddle him, resting his hands on his shoulders while Thorin’s hands go to his waist, one sliding up the back of his shirt. His fingers are so warm and gentle that it takes Bilbo a few seconds to brace himself, and then Thorin is on his back, and they’re kissing, and that’s all he needs to know.

It’s been such a long time for him, for them both, and they take it slow to refamiliarize themselves with certain mechanics of it all. He isn’t sure how, but Bilbo ends up on his back, and Thorin’s shirt is coming off, and, oh, he’s glorious, those stunning tattoos across his broad chest, and he’s solid and so, so, warm, and he wants nothing but to be blanketed in that warmth and the intimacy that comes from being this close to another person. Thorin’s mouth is hot and wet on his own, and then his neck, and then his collarbones and – when did his shirt come off? Thorin stares at the fading scars on his chest before leaning down to graze his lips over them, and his beard scratches at Bilbo’s skin, and he really can’t help the noises he makes after that.

They move together a little awkwardly. Of course they do, they’ve been shying away from this for a long time, but here and now, Bilbo wants, needs, more of that friction that he and Thorin are giving each other. They switch their positions again, and this time, they’re on their sides, facing each other. Their jeans and underwear and pushed down to about mid-thigh, and that’s really all they need. There will be time for other things another time. They just… they need the contact, Bilbo knows, and he gives it freely, wanting so bad for Thorin to feel as good as he does with a large, warm hand around him, the other cradling the back of his head as they kiss slowly.

Thorin comes apart first, letting out such wonderful noises that Bilbo pulls away to watch him. His eyes are half lidded and his mouth open, lips red and kiss-swollen, and his face is flushed, and it’s perhaps the most beautiful Bilbo has ever seen a person look in his entire life. Nothing – really, nothing – could have prepared him for seeing Thorin like this, but he’s so glad that it’s so shocking, because it brings to light another layer of Thorin he hasn’t seen before. This is how he looks when you make him feel good, this is because of you, Bilbo says to himself. His movements are unceasing, because he wants Thorin to enjoy this, and he knows that they’re too drunk to draw it out much longer, but he’s okay with it. He’s more than okay with it.

Thorin makes a choked noise and buries his face into the pillow, hips bucking against Bilbo’s hand, and he himself tightens his grip, and Bilbo isn’t prepared for just how much of a relief it is when he reaches his peak, too. It’s been so long that it’s almost refreshing, and the fact that Thorin is looking at him with those stupid blue eyes, his face a mask of pleasure, it’s too much. They keep it up, though slower, until it becomes too much for them, physically, though they by no means break the physical contact between them. Thorin kisses him like he wants to devour him, and Bilbo knows that he would let him. It’s sloppy and drunk, but it’s one of those things that Bilbo knows he’ll file away for later, when he needs to be reminded that he’s cared for, he’s loved.

Bilbo whispers it without thinking, as if it’s the most natural thing in the world. The words fall from his lips and he finds he can’t stop saying them, moving to press his chest against Thorin’s and
repeating it like a mantra as he kisses his neck, his chest, both of them still basking in that satiated afterglow.

And, as if by some incredible miracle, Thorin says it back. His voice is low and lovely in Bilbo’s ear, and his hands on his shoulders, his hair, over his chest and his waist and his back, they only solidify what shifts between them then and there. It’s like that final barrier is being torn down and replaces with crystal clear glass, letting them see each other with total clarity. And there’s a door, which can be opened on either side, letting each other in whenever they need it, whenever they want.

*I love you. I love you I love you I love you I love you.* Bilbo’s mind is full of those words. He’s never said it like this before, so sure and so simultaneously desperate that it almost hurts with the relief that it brings. And Thorin repeats it back with just as much conviction. Bilbo knows, in some deep, dark part of his brain, that this is it. There isn’t going to be anybody in this world who makes him feel the way Thorin does, no one will ever be able to make him feel so safe and open, no one will ever be able to feel so much like home as Thorin does. Bilbo keeps those thoughts to himself, though, because he isn’t sure he can articulate them the way they deserve. But Thorin seems to get it. He holds Bilbo close and runs his fingers down the length of his spine after they kick the rest of their clothes off, leaving them naked under the sheets, pressed together. Bilbo slides his leg up and down Thorin’s lazily and watches him fall asleep.

He stays awake for what feels like hours, simply watching him.

*I love you.*

Thorin sleeps peacefully, like nothing in the world could ever hurt either of them again. For those short moments, Bilbo entertains that possibility as a reality.

*I love you so much.*

Bilbo drifts and sleeps lightly, because he wants to remember all of this. It’s the kind of messy situation that comes from intoxication, but he relishes in it. It’s new, and it’s exciting, and it’s grounding.

*I owe you so much. I love you.*

Bilbo wakes first the next morning and sees Thorin still beside him. It wasn’t a dream. It was real. It was all real, going by their nakedness and the heavy, satisfied feeling in Bilbo’s gut. He smiles and shifts to kiss at the sharp angle of Thorin’s jaw, the only place he can reach from where he is. Thorin shifts, by doesn’t wake, and Bilbo is relieved.

“I love you,” he whispers, and for once in his life, the world stops spinning, and just lets him *be.*

Chapter End Notes

**HOOOO BOY. i like to call this chapter the calm before the storm. im so sorry in advance**

hey so, good news! im updating to the ocean soon (well, once i finish this), so if any of you wanted more than one chapter of that, then you're getting it. i wrote out the whole plot today. im very pleased with it. only a few more chapters left of this fic!!! it's scary. i wrote three books in a year and
yet this is terrifying to me. but thank you to everyone who has supported this fic, it means a lot to me. you're all so lovely, and your comments mean so much to me find me on tumblr @oakhenshield, i love you guys <3
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

cw: parent death, shitty attitude to suicide, past suicide attempt, etc.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

What Thorin remembers about that night rattles around in his head for the next few days.

They don’t talk about it. Thorin isn’t too sure why, but they just don’t talk about it, opting instead to act as if nothing happened, though, it’s much easier to stay close to Bilbo now that they’ve gone ahead and done that particular physical activity. Thorin remembers how warm Bilbo is at his side when there are no clothes to separate them, and how his voice broke when he told Thorin he loved him. He hasn’t heard it since, though he knows that that’s mainly because Bilbo is shy with these matters. The morning after, Bilbo excused himself and scurried off to the bathroom before Thorin could even really wake up properly.

Thorin wants to talk about it. He has a burning desire inside of his to discuss it, but he can’t very well bring it up at the birthday party he was somehow invited to, though only through Prim.

It’s a… very different affair to what he imagined. He doesn’t quite understand why so many people are wearing white, or why everyone has had at least three glasses of bubbly by noon, or why there’s shrill, high-pitched laugh every now and then that seems to be coming from either the same person or the same injured cat. He’s being stared at by multiple people – then again, he has his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and no one else here seems to have a spot of ink on them. But it’s refreshing, being at a party where no one knows who the hell he is.

“Told you it was boring,” Bilbo whispers to him. He hands Thorin a slice of cake on a napkin and sits beside him in one of the flimsy garden chairs they’re all scattered about in. “Though, my Aunt Mirabella makes some pretty good cake.”

“That’s your mothers sister, right?” Thorin asks. He knows he has no hope whatsoever of keeping up with the Baggins clan, as there’s so many of them, but it’s interesting, to say the least. He watches them, some watching him too, others pretending not to be staring at such a large, and menacing intruder on their family gathering.

“Yeah. She’s over there, with… uh… shit. I can’t remember his name,” Bilbo says. So, even he forgets the extent of his family. Somehow, that’s a reassurance.

“Something ridiculous like Filibert or Bingo?” Thorin suggests, and Bilbo laughs.

“Probably. Though, I can’t exactly talk,” he says.

“Is that Lobelia?” Thorin asks, seeing the woman most likely responsible for the laughter-slash-dying-cat noises. She looks like she’s the one capable of making those noises. And if Bilbo’s sigh is anything to go by, Thorin guessed correctly.

“Don’t look at her, or she’ll want to come and talk to you. Please, for my sake?” Bilbo says. He’s
teasing, but the look he gives Thorin is... well, nothing short of fond and affectionate, and Thorin knows it’s a joke and that he shouldn’t take it seriously, his mind very (un)helpfully supplies the words, I’d do anything for you.

“Might be too late,” Thorin says quietly, because Lobelia is walking over, and really, why in the hell would anyone wear heels like that on the grass in a country where everything is bumpy and refuses to stay flat. It’s more impressive than anything, he thinks. He remembers seeing Dis try to do the same thing, once, which only resulted in a sprained ankle and a vow from her never to wear heels again.

“Eat your cake, I’ll do the talking,” Bilbo hisses, like they're in some kind of ridiculous spy movie, and they're partners working on a case. Thorin dutifully shoves half of the cake into his mouth and is just grateful that it's the perfect kind of cake – light and fluffy vanilla sponge with plain icing and blackberry jam cementing it together. Lobelia approaches them with a smile that’s definitely fake, and Thorin sees Bilbo put on that face he puts on when he’s dealing with something unpleasant.

“Oh, Bilbo, it’s been ages! You’re looking well, Switzerland has been kind to you,” she says. Thorin almost chokes on his cake, because yes, Switzerland has been kind to him, though a small, prideful part of him knows that it’s not just the country. Lobelia shoots him an unreadable look.

“And you must be Thorin. It’s nice to meet you, Prim’s told me a lot in the last hour.”

“Oh?” Thorin raises an eyebrow, about to shove the rest of the cake into his mouth.

“I hear you’re an artist? I must say, you certainly don’t look the type. You look more like a biker,” she says, then bursts into peals of laughter that hurt Thorin’s ears to listen to. He cringes and lowers his cake, missing it already.

“I had a motorbike back in the nineties. Used to ride it through Berlin and draw the buildings. I think I sold it to pay rent, I can’t really remember,” Thorin says, keeping his expression as blank as possible. He finishes his cake while Lobelia turns on Bilbo.

“Never knew you had a type,” she says coldly.

“Evidently I do,” Bilbo says, just as cold. Everything about his expression is warning her not to press the issue, but Thorin gets a distinct feeling that that is not going to happen, at all.

“Well, you know, people tend to go a little off the rails when they suffer a tragedy. Case in point,” she says, gesturing to Bilbo’s arm, her face twisting spitefully. Thorin wants to defend him, but Bilbo beats her to the punch, holding up his right arm and showing her, very clearly, the scar going down it, halfway down his forearm.

“Oh, this? Yes, I tried to kill myself. And I was institutionalised for two months because of it, and ended up in Switzerland, somehow, with Mister Durin here. I guess you could say I went a little off the rails after losing my parents in a car crash while I was in the back seat and survived,” he says, more than matching her coldness. Instead of looking at Lobelia, Thorin’s eyes are drawn to the scar. He’s since learned to ignore it, or just forget that it’s there, but there’s something... off about it. It takes him a few seconds to notice the raised red scratches around it, a result of short nails being dragged over skin repeatedly. He swallows the bile rising in his throat and turns his eyes away as Bilbo lowers his arm.

“You’re unbelievably selfish, you know,” Lobelia says. Thorin’s gut drops and he goes to stand, but Bilbo’s hand holds him back. “Doing that to yourself, to your family. What would your parents think of you trying to off yourself like that? Do you even know the pain you caused this family
when we found out you were in the hospital because you slashed your wrist? Do you have any idea how stressful it was to-.”

“Lobelia!” comes a voice to the side. For some reason, Thorin expects Prim, but instead, he sees a woman in her fifties marching over, looking strikingly familiar, and it takes a few seconds for him to realise that Bilbo greatly resembles her. “Perhaps you should go and see what Lotho’s up to, hm?”

“Mira-.”

“Off you pop, there you go, I’ll talk to you later,” Mirabella says sternly, physically turning Lobelia away with a glass of white wine in her hand. Her hair is black and sporadically streaked with grey, and cut short around her shoulders, but her face is young, the slightly upturned nose so very familiar that it’s almost uncanny when she turns her eyes on the two of them sat together on the bench. “I’m so sorry, Bilbo. Come on, come sit with us, I promise it won’t be as painful as dealing with her.”

Thorin watches Bilbo nod silently and let himself be led by his aunt towards a small table away from the main bulk of the party, inhabited by a good-natured looking man around her age, a teenage boy, and, oddly enough, Prim, who waves at them with an apologetic smile on her face.

“Hey. I could hear her from over there,” she says as they sit down. Instinctively, Thorin takes Bilbo’s hand for a moment, squeezing before letting go. He knows Bilbo hates being treated like he’s made of glass, but that whole display has put a distant, blank look on his face that reminds him painfully of when he gets the really bad nightmares. But, he shakes himself out of it rather quickly and runs a trembling hand through his hair.

“Thanks, Mira,” he says. She smiles and nods, then turns to look at Thorin.

“You must be Thorin. It’s lovely to meet you, dear, though I’m sorry you had to witness that. Or that she even talked to you. Stay here for the rest of the afternoon, and you two can come over for dinner, right, Gorbadoc?” Mirabella says cheerfully. Thorin realizes that the man beside her is her husband, and he smiles. Something about him is familiar too, and side by side with Prim, it’s obvious.

Thorin isn’t sure he wants to think too hard about that, lest his brain explodes from the effort it takes to understand the family (though he gets a text a few minutes later that reads Prim’s her step-daughter, as of about six years ago.)

Sitting with this tiny portion of the family is strangely pleasant, even if he does get benevolently judgmental looks from Mirabella, like she’s sizing him up with those clever grey eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses. He doesn’t mind – answers their questions, eats even more delicious cake, drinks a glass or two of rather strong rosé wine. All that, with the warm weather and light conversation, makes for a mostly perfect afternoon.

Mostly.

Thorin can’t keep his mind too far off the scratches down Bilbo’s arm. He wants to get him somewhere private and far away, so that he can ask very firmly, but gently, can you please talk to me instead of doing this? He watches for any cues to suggest that Bilbo is shattering, but there are none, and he talks, and laughs, and jokes with his family, passing more than a few inside jokes between himself and Prim, and Thorin is reminded just how close they are – almost cousins, more like siblings, really, with how trusting they are of each other. It reminds him a little of him and Dis.
After a while, Thorin strikes up a conversation with the teenager who clearly wants nothing than to whip out his phone and plug his headphones, but is holding back because his mother is just over there and he’d rather not piss her off. He’s got a nose ring and is wearing worn looking Doc Martens. Thorin chats with him about music and movies, and manages to get him to smile a few times when he mentions the classic rock bands he’s seen in his day. Thorin never catches his name, but when he finally leaves with Bilbo, Mirabella, and Gorbacod, bidding goodbye to everyone and getting a knowing wink from Prim, who stays behind to help clean up.

As it turns out, having dinner with Bilbo’s aunt and uncle is not as daunting as it had sounded much earlier.

They have a pot of earl grey, first, and it’s lovely.

“So, you’re an artist?” Gorbacod asks, lighting a pipe of all things. He nods when Thorin pulls out a pack of cigarettes, and he lights one, grateful for the nicotine after the frankly stressful day he’s had. By his side, Bilbo is silently stirring sugar into his tea, looking around the living room with a nostalgic look on his face.

“Yeah. Usually, landscapes and architecture,” Thorin says. He’s a little distracted, trying to see if the scratches have gone down on Bilbo’s arm. Gorbacod chuckles around his pipe.

“I’ve seen some of your work. You’re rather talented, young man. I used to be a street artist, people paid me to do portraits of them or their children, and after that, I worked in a local gallery. I know talent when I see it,” he says. Thorin raises an eyebrow, though his face heats up from the praise. He’s used to getting money in return for his art, not words like that from another artist, when he’s usually met with spite, pride, and overly pretentious mannerisms.

“He’s got a whole box upstairs of drawings of our family,” Bilbo says, clearly only half paying attention. Gorbacod smiles fondly at him. Thorin gets the feeling their families were close before Mirabella married him, going by the way Bilbo sits curled up in the armchair, legs tucked beneath him as he drinks his tea, infinitely more relaxed than he had been earlier.

“I can show you, if you like,” Gorbacod says. Thorin nods, and he finds himself being led upstairs by Bilbo, while Gorbacod goes and helps his wife cook, still smoking his pipe.

The house is small and clearly old, with narrow, rickety stairs and low ceilings, and the distinct smell that old houses have. It reminds Thorin so much of his old home that it’s almost painful, but he dutifully follows Bilbo into the spare room, but instead of finding old drawings, the door is shut and he’s pressed up against the wall, being kissed with a surprising amount of force.

“It’s been a long day,” Bilbo says as an explanation when he pulls away. He’s gripping Thorin’s shoulders hard, and Thorin is this close to being completely overwhelmed by everything going on around him. He’s not used to interacting with this many people in one day, and though he bears it for Bilbo’s sake, and because the Brandybuck’s downstairs are some of the nicest people Thorin has ever met, he wants to stay for dinner at least.

“That it has,” Thorin says. He takes Bilbo’s wrists and kisses his knuckles before lowering his hands. “But I feel weird doing this in someone else’s house.”

“Oh, and a hotel is any different?” Bilbo teases. He flicks on the light and begins to rummage around the neatly organize storage boxes, looking for the drawings.

“That’s… that’s slightly different,” Thorin manages. Bilbo smirks over his shoulder before pulling out a thin box held together with elastic bands and tape. Really, he hadn’t expected anything else
They go back downstairs without incident, and this time, they’re alone in the living room, and Bilbo opens the box while Mirabella sings in the kitchen and Gorbadoc sings along, their voices both a little off-key but working together harmoniously. It seems as if this entire house is forcing him to relive childhood memories he didn’t even realise he had, because he remembers Yael and Thrain singing together like that when they thought that the kids were all out, or when they were too drunk to stop themselves, happy and in love and warm behind four solid walls.

Thorin shakes the memory off like dust and it crumbles to nothing in the back of his head. Bilbo is flicking through the drawings, eyebrows drawn together in concentration, obviously looking for certain portraits in particular. Thorin doesn’t have to think too hard to realise who he’s looking for in that box.

“Belladonna Took, when she was about eighteen, I think,” Bilbo says as he hands an *very* old sketch to him. Well, it’s not that old, but the paper is yellowed with age, and the colours faded. But, it’s unmistakably Belladonna, looking very much like her son with those grey eyes and tipped up nose, the slight smile at the corner of her mouth, the tilt of her eyebrows. It’s lightly coloured, giving her the same black hair as her sister, only curlier, longer, and there are freckles dotted over her nose.

“And this is my father, Bungo. I think Gorbadoc drew that after their wedding,” Bilbo says, passing him another. It seems Bilbo looks like his parents in equal measure, because Bungo’s portrait is also lightly coloured, though not as old, and the odd red-blond of his hair is the same as Bilbo’s as is the set of his mouth and the shape of his jaw. Thorin holds them both up, side by side, and he can see very easily how Bilbo looks like them, where he takes after one in one way, and the other in another.

“Most families have photo albums,” Thorin manages. His voice feels thick in his throat for whatever reason. He realizes he’s never seen Belladonna’s face before, or Bungo’s, and it feels like he’s betrayed Bilbo somehow by never asking, never looking hard enough, never wondering how much he looks like his parents, or what they even looked like.

“Oh, there’s loads of them in the attic back at the house. That’s what we’re doing tomorrow, by the way,” Bilbo says, then his expression changes to one of acute horror. He tries to hide the drawing at the bottom of the pile, but Thorin takes it from his hand before he can, careful not to rip the dry paper. He smirks and Bilbo sighs.

“You’ve seen photos of me in the eighties, this is only fair,” he says teasingly, though that guilt still weighs heavy in the pit of his stomach. Bilbo laughs at him, and Thorin distracts himself by looking at the portrait in his hands.

Of course, it’s *nothing* like the photos of him in the eighties. Of course it isn’t. It’s just a simple pencil sketch of Bilbo, his chin in his hand as he looks at something, or somewhat, frowning slightly. He’s clearly a teenager, because he’s thinner, and his hair is shorter, and there are no shadows under his eyes to hint at agonized, sleepless nights, and no scar just left of the bridge of his nose to suggest anything bad has ever happened to him.

“I think sixteen year old me would be horrified to see me now,” Bilbo says. Thorin hadn’t noticed him leaning over his shoulder, but then, his cheek is pressed against Thorin’s arm, and that’s all that matters. Almost on instinct, he puts his arm around Bilbo’s shoulders and pulls him close.

There’s a conversational silence, saying everything they can’t say out loud. *No, I don’t even know if you should think about things like that,* Thorin says with his squeeze of Bilbo’s shoulders, rubbing his thumb in soft, small circles. *But you know that I do,* Bilbo says with his weak sigh and
They spend around twenty minutes going through the portraits (and Gorbadoc is *insanely* talented, Thorin decides when Bilbo compares them to photos on the mantelpiece) before being called into the kitchen like teenagers, and sitting down together. Thorin is momentarily grateful that neither of them suggest a prayer over food, which is an odd feeling, but he says one in his mind before helping himself to pesto pasta and garlic bread.

It's a lovely affair, really. Mirabella is kind and funny, and no one flinches when she mentions her late sister, because she does it to bring up *good* memories of running the florists with her. Gorbadoc is quiet, but with some prompting, he tells Thorin and Bilbo about their plan to go on a walking holiday around Wiltshire, and it sounds so delightful the way they describe it all that Thorin almost wants to go with them.

It ends with a small glass of port each and a slice of cheesecake Mirabella proudly announces she made herself, and it’s delicious. Thorin is decidedly relaxed by the end of the evening, and he almost expects a quiet, calm walk back to the hotel. But, Mirabella asks an odd request of Bilbo when she thinks that Thorin is out of earshot.

“You don’t have to, dear, but I’m going tonight, and I wanted to extend an invitation to you. I just... since you’re here, I thought that we could talk, and visit her grave,” Mirabella says softly. Thorin watches out of the corner of his eye, not daring to look and give away the less than private nature of such a critical conversation.

“Alright,” Bilbo agrees after a long pause, but Thorin can hear the weight of his words. He keeps washing up and stares straight ahead into the garden. It’s not entirely dark yet, so he can see the greenhouse bursting with vegetables and fruits and flowers, and the beds overflowing with even *more* flowers, and herb bushes, and an old sundial in the centre of it all. It’s pretty, and a little wild, but it’s not enough of a distraction.

“We’ll stop by the shop, you can pick whatever you want to take,” Mirabella says. Thorin dares a quick glance then, and sees her taking Bilbo’s face in his hands and making him bend down to kiss him on the forehead. “We’ll leave when you’re ready.”

Bilbo just nods silently and walks back over to Thorin, where he picks up the tea towel and begins to dry the plates, putting them away almost as if in a trance. Thorin has to nudge him with his elbow to get his attention.

“I heard,” he whispers. “Are you going to be okay?”

Bilbo nods. “I’ll be fine. No need to worry about me, Thorin, just go back to the hotel. I’ll get a taxi or something when I’m done.”

“Call me when you’re on your way back,” Thorin says. Bilbo rolls his eyes, but smiles up at him fondly anyway as they finish the washing up. He stands on his toes to kiss Thorin on the cheek before disappearing into the living room. Thorin hears him saying goodbye to Gorbadoc and pulling on his jacket, while he leans heavily on his forearms against the sink, still trying to quell the storm beginning to turn so harshly in his head, his chest. He’s met a lot of people today, and had a lot to drink. But, when the door clicks shut and leaves just Thorin and Gorbadoc in this new and unfamiliar house, he feels guilty about the relief that washes over him.

Eventually, Thorin makes his way back into the living room and finds Gorbadoc tapping a mechanical pencil against a blank page from a sketchbook. He looks at Thorin with a clever gleam in his eye, and Thorin knows what he’s asking before the words even come out of his mouth.
Somehow, that relaxes him, as does the scratch of a pencil on paper, and the radio is on very quietly, and he feels like he’s powering down a little, something well needed after such a long day.

The shop is almost exactly as Bilbo remembers. It’s tiny and cramped, and there’s not much to it beyond an explosion of flowers, a tiny counter, and a small array of packaging materials behind it. But by god, is it familiar.

Bilbo vividly recalls spending hours here in his teenage years, helping behind the counter and learning to wrap and arrange flowers for birthdays, anniversaries, apologies, and all the rest. In fact, he bought the flowers he gave Prim after Frodo was born from here. His mother tried to refuse to let him pay, but he paid regardless, winking at her before leaving and heading towards Prim’s flat with a small bouquet of white and yellow flowers.

It seems a lifetime ago, now. Bilbo is told to pick the flowers to lay on his own mothers grave, and he’s drawn to the bright and lively sunflowers, always a favourite of hers. She’d always bring sunflowers home in the summer, making the kitchen that much more warm and open. Bilbo’s throat closes up as he slowly, carefully, arranges the sunflowers into a presentable bouquet and wraps it in green paper (it was her favourite colour), tying it with simple twine. It hardly feels like he’s doing it, his hands weightless and his eyes unfocused, though the bouquet doesn’t immediately fall apart when he picks it up, so that’s a good sign. He watches, somewhat detached, as Mirabella does the same, though she wraps gladiolus flowers instead. Strength of character, Bilbo’s mind supplies somewhat sadly. Belladonna and Mirabella were always steadfast and strong, never faltering, never wavering, the strongest people Bilbo ever knew. It hurts to see even the tiniest flicker of pain on Mirabella’s face as she ties off the bouquet. Upon leaving the shop, Bilbo offers her his arm, and she takes it with a sad little smile.

There are no words as they walk to the cemetery. There doesn’t have to be. There has always been a closeness between them, seeing as Bilbo spent so much time with Mirabella during his childhood. She cares, and in turn, so does he, in his own slightly skewed way. He realizes then that he didn’t have to cut everyone off when he went to Oak Manor, but he did anyway, and it’s agony recognizing that he cut off the people in his life who could have helped him deal with it with a bit of good old fashioned Baggins honesty and just… dealing, the way that they do.

But things didn’t go that way, did they? Gandalf showed up, told Bilbo about some artist hiding in the Alps, and here he is, almost six months later, back in England and about to visit his mothers grave for the first time since the funeral. He slaps himself for nothing bringing anything for his father, but he decides he’ll do that tomorrow. Bungo wouldn’t mind much, he always said he hated superstitious tosh like that.

The gate to the cemetery creaks slightly, but they go in, and it’s eerily silent, like every ghost is holding its breath while the living pass through, ready to pay their respects in the dead of night, even if the sun hasn’t quite gone all the way down yet. Bilbo has never really believed much in ghosts, but here and now, he can feel them watching him, and the thought somehow calms him. It’s like the whispers of the dead are giving him the strength to see his mother, to visit the stone marking where she is laid to rest for eternity, and it’s enough to give him more clarity to push forward, bravely, a little breathlessly, until he’s reading her name in large block letters.

BELLADONNA ESMÉ BAGGINS, née TOOK. His breath hitches ever so slightly, but Mirabella squeezes his arm and smiles at him.

He stands back and lets her lay down her flowers first. She kneels and brushes weeds and dirt from the otherwise pale headstone, cut from almost opalescent marble, and whispers something that
Bilbo doesn’t even want to hear. Belladonna had been the best friend to her younger sister – best friend, confidant, partner in crime. He can’t even imagine the pain of losing someone that close and that connected to you. Yes, he lost his parents, but this is… the two sisters had been inseparable from their earliest childhoods. The pain and emptiness is unfathomable.

When Mirabella steps back, she puts her hand on Bilbo’s shoulder and squeezes. To his surprise, she walks towards the gate, silently telling him she’ll be waiting when he wants to leave. Always so considerate, even now. Bilbo nods and smiles at her in lieu of thanks.

Facing Belladonna’s headstone, Bilbo takes a deep breath and kneels down.

The earth is cold beneath his knees, but he hardly notices that as he lays down the sunflowers beside Mirabella’s carnations, the sun and moon together in flower form. Belladonna would have enjoyed that kind of symbolism, he thinks, and the thought just brings him a spark of joy, rather than an onslaught of grief.

“I miss you,” is the first thing he says. “I miss both of you, but mum… God, I just want to talk to you one more time. Me and dad always said what we needed to say, but me and you never quite managed that, did we? You were always a little cryptic like that.”

Bilbo pauses and reaches out to tear out the weeds Mirabella didn’t quite get.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry you never saw me do better things with my life. I’m sorry I tried to kill myself. I’m sorry you’ll never get to meet Thorin, or see Frodo grow up, or run the store with Aunt Mira again. You both deserved so much better. You were going to go to Italy last summer. You would have gone somewhere like Norway or Greece this year, knowing you. But you died in that car, and I’m the only one left, aren’t I? It just seems cruel that you’re gone and I’m still here to carry the weight of losing you for the rest of my life.”

There are tears on his face he quickly wipes away, but it feels… good, like coming out of a particularly grueling therapy session feeling empty and cleansed, all the bad stuff inside of him coming out, giving him catharsis, steadily, but somehow brutally, punching it out of him with the utmost care.

“You know, the last conversation we had was about you wanting me to get married before you die. That seems a little ironic, don’t you think? You were so sure that it was going to happen, you even wanted to track down that guy who was staring at me at the party. It seems so ridiculous now. I mean, I know you were talking about Italy after that, but the last thing you said to me was I know these things. You wanted so much for me to be happy, and look at me now. I can’t… it feels like I need to open my scar, but I can’t do it. I can’t do that again. I can’t do it to the people that I love.

“Lobelia was right today. I am selfish. I was only thinking about myself when I tried to top myself, about how much I couldn’t deal with the pain of losing you, and everyone else was just moving on. They hurt, I know, but everyone moved on and kept going. I got stuck in the crash and I let it all fester for a year. I just wanted it all to stop. I just wanted the pain to end.”

He stops there, his voice breaking with the effort it takes to hold back his tears. He stays there and lets a few tears fall, and remains silent for a good few minutes, listening to his own breathing and the rustle of grass and trees and flowers around him, such a familiar sound, always.

Eventually, he braves looking up and reaching out to touch his mother’s name.

“I love you,” he says. “I’ll keep you alive in me. I promise.”
okay this was meant to be a lot sadder (somehow) but the rest of what this chapter was meant to be is going into the next one, bc i felt like the cemetery scene was a good place to leave it for now.
i stg my head exploded while trying to understand how the baggins/took/brandybuck/etc families are related. to avoid any accidental incest with prim and drogo, i made prim mirabellas step daughter. idk if that helped but the canon family ties are a little Shifty
aaaanyway, this chapter killed me and a LOT of stuff is gonna be shoved into the next chapter.
i love you all, thanks for reading, and thanks for sticking by me.
find me on tumblr @oakhenshield!
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

(im so sorry)
cw: suicide attempt, self harm, hospitals

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s a promise hard to keep, and Bilbo knows it, but he holds it in his chest on the walk back from the cemetery, on the walk to the hotel, and laying awake late into the night. He knows that if there’s any kind of afterlife, Belladonna would be smiling at him, and perhaps laughing at such a weird thing to say to a grave, though all in good nature. She was always like that.

The promise remains in his heart the next day when he makes the fated trip to the attic of his childhood home to sort through all of the brick-a-brack his parents left behind, through boxes of photo albums and memorabilia from their lives together. The attic itself is small and cramped and a little cold, but there’s enough space for Bilbo and Thorin to sit together and go through the boxes, and, occasionally, pour over photos from the seventies, eighties, nineties.

It should hurt. Bilbo knows it should hurt, but it doesn’t. It’s almost like going to visit his mothers grave the day before is finally allowing him to think about his parents and consider happier times, rather than wallowing in the pain of losing them so violently.

Thorin remains quieter than usual up in the attic, but then again, there’s not much reason to talk while Bilbo sorts everything he wants Prim to keep for now, everything he’s putting in storage, and everything he’s taking back to Switzerland with him. It feels odd, putting his parents wedding album into the pile that will be accompanying him back to Switzerland like he’s taking these things home. He is, in a way. The house on the sloping incline of Mont Pelerin is home, and the old whistling kettle, the sun rising over the mountains, the heavy weight of someone asleep beside him, all of that is home, too. He relishes in the thought of having an actual home to go back to, which is something he’s never truly had, not since he moved away and began to live alone.

Thorin’s hands ghost over his as he passes him tacky objects and miscellanea from his parents travels abroad. He’s oddly quiet, but Bilbo doesn’t say anything, just makes a small comment over something and getting a response just as reluctant from Thorin, who seems sad, looking around at all of these physical memories. Bilbo suspects that this place reminds him of his own childhood home. When he asks, Thorin confirms his suspicions.

“Looks a lot like this place, just… greyer,” he says, looking around. He reaches into the box beside him and frowns. “What’s…”

“Oh no, no, give that here, now,” Bilbo demands, recognizing it at once. He reaches over, but Thorin holds it out of his reach, the look on his face letting Bilbo know that he knows exactly what that journal is. Seventeen-year-old Bilbo went to great lengths to hide it, and thirty-four year old Bilbo is going to do the same, come hell or high water.

“What, is it sad poetry and the lamenting of a lonely teenager?” Thorin teases. When Bilbo opens
it, he leans in over his shoulder until Bilbo shrugs him away, half smiling. His own handwriting is familiar to him, as is the first entry he wrote in this particular journal. *I want to tell my family that I don’t want to be set up with anyone they think is suitable for me,* it reads, and he almost laughs. He wonders if his seventeen-year-old self would even believe the scene taking place in the attic now. Bilbo, in his thirties, a degree or two to his name, with dead parents and a reclusive boyfriend. He doubts that he would. But then again, at seventeen, he doubted that he would ever leave drab old Wiltshire and see was much of the world as he did.

“More or less,” he says eventually, to answer Thorin’s teasing question. He flips forward a few pages, and a photo falls out, because of course it does. He holds it up and almost immediately, he wants to throw it away out of instinct. But he keeps his hand steady and stares at the two figures in the photo, himself, and a boy he barely remembers the name of now, sat together on a bench, Bilbo’s head on the boys shoulder. It’s dark in the photo, but he recognizes it far too well. He remembers this, because Prim had taken the photo and slyly handed it to him a few days later with a wink and a word of warning about being careful.

“Good god, I that’s going in the fire as soon as possible,” Bilbo says, placing it to the side. Thorin smiles fondly.

“You realise I have a lot of pictures of us on my phone,” he says.

“That’s different. Those weren’t taken in the nineties by your meddling best friend,” Bilbo says, shooing him away. Thorin just laughs.

“You’d be surprised how many of those I’m the subject of, courtesy of Dwalin,” he says.

“Remind me to ask him about those, I need more blackmail material on you than slightly compromising selfies,” Bilbo says dryly. He picks up the journal by the spine and shakes it, in case there are other photos in there. There aren’t, and he slips the one that Prim took back inside the pages, where he will probably forget about it for a good few weeks.

They get back to work, and it isn’t until they’re called down to lunch that Bilbo realizes how long they spent up there.

It’s just them in the house, Prim at work, and Drogo at daycare with Frodo. Thorin makes them sandwiches while Bilbo sets a box on the table, to sort through his fathers collection of vintage books. Bilbo knows that he should just put them into storage and be done with it, but he looks through them anyway and finds what he’s looking for.

“Have you ever read this?” he asks when Thorin comes back with two plates. He sits down opposite him and takes the book from Bilbo’s hand.

*Anna Karenina?* Yeah, it took me a year to finish. It’s so dull,” Thorin says, then promptly proceeds to bite into his sandwich, putting the book down.

“I liked it. It’s dramatic, you know? Completely unrealistic, but dramatic. I like stories like that,” Bilbo says. He touches the old, worn cover reverently. He remembers sneaking this book away to read it in his late teens, wanting something a little more substantial to the usual crap he had to read at school. It had been a drag, yes, but it was good, a classic, Bungo always said. “Or, you know, complete bullshit wrapped in flowery words and the setting of imperial Russia.”

Thorin snorts and finishes his sandwich in one giant bite. Bilbo follows his example and stares out of the window once he’s done, looking at the lavender bush that reached the windowsill. It’s in full bloom, this time in the year, vivid purple and flourishing. Bilbo watches it sway in the gentle
breeze for perhaps a moment too long, because he’s interrupted with a hand placed tentatively over his, and a concerned look from Thorin.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“You know, you don’t have to ask if I’m okay whenever I zone out,” Bilbo says sharply. He regrets it immediately because Thorin’s face falls and he pulls his hand away. The warmth of it lingers on Bilbo’s skin until it fades moments later, and he curses himself. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, that was rude. I’m fine.”

“Are you, though?” Thorin asks. Almost on instinct, Bilbo hides his right hand, feeling the scar and the scratches burn like beacons on his skin. But he knows he’s caught, because Thorin is giving him that look. He swallows thickly. It’s a very deer in the headlights feeling, being looked at like that, knowing that he has no way out of this particular conversation.

“It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing, Bilbo. Let me see.” Thorin holds his hand out and Bilbo feels like a small, cornered child when he moves his arm for Thorin to see. He takes his wrist gently and brushes his thumb along the scar, over the scratches that are fading, but still, undeniably there. They’re angry and red still. Bilbo doesn’t know what in the hell possessed him to do it, but it was like an itch. Not a physical one, but… something else. An itch to hurt. An itch to open his skin up to get some kind of release.

“Why didn’t you talk to me?” Thorin asks after a long while. He lowers his hand, still cradling Bilbo’s to the table, and looks at him with those stupid blue eyes, full of concern and care. It hurts, it grates, but Bilbo can’t bring himself to look at Thorin too long, or even pull his hand away.

“It’s hard to talk about,” he says. It’s the truth, at least, though not quite the truth he wants to say. I didn’t want you to worry. I didn’t want it to ruin whatever picturesque thing we have going on here. I didn’t want you to be mad at me.

I didn’t want to acknowledge that I screwed up.

“You know I’ll never think less of you for this, right?” Thorin says. Bilbo’s gut clenches and he has to close his eyes. Of course Thorin fucking Durin would say something like that. Of course he has to be so damn understanding. Part of Bilbo wants him to yell, to get righteously furious at him. It’s what he deserves, anyway, in his own mind. No one shouted at him when he came to in the hospital after his attempt. It’s been almost seven months and he still feels like he’s under huge pressure, desperate for something to set him off, like opening a bottle of champagne.

“I know,” he says in a quiet voice.

“Talk to me. Please.”

“I can’t.” Bilbo yanks his hand away and stands, turning away and walking towards the sink. It overlooks the garden and he leans against it, his heart pounding and the urge to scratch again so strong that he physically has to lean on his hands so as not to do it. He stares at the lavender bush below the window, watching it sway while he listens to Thorin move towards him, slowly, oh so slowly. Bilbo just breathes. That feeling is in his gut again, that horrendous, empty feeling that drove him to commit suicide in the first place, even if he failed.

That knife on the draining board is far too close, he thinks, but he keeps staring at it. His mind goes blank and he focuses on the sharp edge, catching the light as if to tease him. It would be so
easy, says a sinister voice in the back of his head. He tries to push it down, but it’s stubborn. *It would take no time at all.*

But when his hand reaches automatically for the knife, hands clasp tight on his shoulders and he’s pulled back, crying out in shock. He and Thorin stagger back into the wall and the force of it knocks Bilbo out of his fuzzy headspace, forcing him oh so carelessly to acknowledge what just happened.

It’s like something inside of him breaks when the weight of it all hits him, what he considered doing, what he’s been thinking about for a long time, but hasn’t had the guts to really address it, or even admit to himself that it’s real. He falls to the ground and curls up, and pulls at his hair, hard, the pain sharp enough to cut through the shock he’s steadily going into as the agony just makes him crumble. Bilbo feels gentle hands on his arms, a quiet voice whispering to him, and he clings to it like a lifeline. It’s all he has, sat in this all too familiar kitchen, to keep him alive.

Bilbo doesn’t cry. He can’t. There’s no need for tears, he finds, because he’s all dried up. All the nightmares, the flashbacks, the nights alone in his dingy Cardiff flat where he finally gave in, it’s all gone. He’s run out of tears to shed. He can’t even cry in pity for himself, not because he has none (he has it in boatloads), but because he’s so *tired.*

He’s numb. His fingers relax in his hair, but he’s shaking, his vision blurry, his stomach twisting in painful knots. He isn’t sure if it’s guilt or fear or dread, or a combination of the three, but it's nauseating. He can hardly breathe still, but the hand trailing up and down his back helps, as does the deep, calming voice in his ear.

Bilbo isn’t sure how long it takes for him to come back to himself and *truly* realise the horror of what just happened, but he’s almost hysterical when he does. Thorin has to physically hold his arms down by his sides and restrain him to stop him from lashing out and going for the knife again. The tears come, but from desperation this time, desperation to end the pain and the heartache and the clawing need in his chest to feel that stinging pressure and then hot flow of blood against his skin. He needs it, he needs it, *he needs it.*

*I just want it to be over.*

- 

Thorin can’t stop shaking.

He’s been pacing for what feels like hours, waiting for the psychiatric nurse to tell him that the evaluation is done and he can see Bilbo, really see that he’s alright, that he’s safe. The walls around him are too sterile and clinical, and it smells like every other hospital on the planet. He feels sick. He’s been awake for far too long. Outside, the sky is pitch black, but sunrise isn’t too far off. He’s been here for too long. He just wants to go *home.*

But, he needs to be there, at least for now. He had put himself down as Bilbo’s next of kin, though only because he couldn’t remember Prim’s number with how his brain felt like a storm. His phone keeps buzzing, Prim asking him for updates, to which he answers with the same. *Nothing yet. Nothing yet. Fucking nothing yet.*

Despite all of that, he remains surprisingly calm. Nausea and anxiety that had been choking him from the inside out is gone, and Thorin manages to make the short trip to get snacks and coffee without any kind of incident, just grateful for the reprieve. He goes out for a smoke a couple of times, which eases his nerves too. Just… it’s the waiting that’s slowly driving him insane. The waiting and the not knowing, and the need and desperation just to know what’s happening.
Then again, it doesn’t take much of a genius to figure out what happens next.

Oak Manor. Bilbo is going to go back to Oak Manor, absolutely no doubt about it. The thought is enough to make Thorin feel ill, but he knows it’s for the best. He can’t… he can’t stay like this, barely teetering on the edge of a knife, refusing to take his meds, lashing out at himself and trying to hide it. It breaks Thorin’s heart, but he knows it’s the truth.

It’s a long time before Thorin is allowed into the inpatient ward, and only because it’s the beginning of visiting hours. He walks in slowly, hands in his pockets, exhausted but desperate to see Bilbo, who is laying on his side, but wide awake, if the trembling of his shoulders is anything to go by.

He looks so small and vulnerable. Guilt rises in Thorin in the worst possible way, similar to that awful gut feeling he had when they buried Frerin far too young. *I could have helped you*, he thinks, though he isn’t sure if that’s directed to his brother, dead, or Bilbo, alive, but only just.

“Hey,” he manages. He sits down in the chair by the bed, and Bilbo barely shifts, just pulls the blankets over his head. “We don’t have to talk, but… I’m here. I’m not anywhere anytime soon.”

Bilbo just groans and burrows even further under the scratchy hospital blankets. Thorin swallows the lump of something hard in his throat and reaches out to touch Bilbo’s back. It had always seemed to work when he had his nightmares or flashbacks, and it had calmed him down in the kitchen. Thorin finds that even now, it loosens the tension in his shoulders, and after a while, Bilbo turns over onto his other side and stares at Thorin, everything below his eyes covered with the blanket.

Thorin touches his cheek and runs his fingers through his hair.

“Hey,” he says again.

“Hey,” Bilbo says. His voice is raw and scratchy. Thorin isn’t at all surprised.

“Comfortable?”

“No at all. I hate hospital beds,” Bilbo says. Thorin smiles. At least he’s still complaining, if he ever stopped, then that would be worrying. As it is, he manages to smile back, albeit weakly.

“Yeah, I know. It’s just for a few days, to keep an eye on you, and then you’ll be discharged,” Thorin says. He’s still running his fingers through Bilbo’s hair, dragging his nails along his scalp. Bilbo closes his eyes and leans into the touch, closing his eyes and frowning.

“What happens after?” he asks in a small voice.

“I think you know.”

Bilbo doesn’t say anything about that, doesn’t open his eyes, doesn’t give any kind of reaction beyond a very brief, blink-and-you-miss-it pained grimace. It hurts Thorin to see, but there’s little he can do in this situation. He is so completely out of his depth that all he can do is just be there and offer a shoulder to lean on.

He thinks he should be angry, really, but the anger never comes. It’s not like when Frerin died. Bilbo is alive, his heart is beating, his blood is flowing, even if he’s a bundle of tangled up and confused nerves trying just to survive in here. Thorin understand, he can sympathise, and the worst part of it all is that where he *should* be furious, he just wants to help. He just wants Bilbo to get the help he needs, instead of running away from his problems, instead of refusing to take medication
and pretending that he’s fine without it.

After a long moment of silence, Thorin takes Bilbo’s hand and rests his head against the bed, closing his eyes and just breathing for a while. He’s exhausted, but he knows he won’t be able to sleep. Drogo had said he would pick Thorin up around noon so that he can go back to the hotel and get some rest, bring some clothes for Bilbo, that kind of thing. But that’s hours away, and Thorin knows he needs to stay with Bilbo for now, offering that silent comfort he’s always willing to give.

“I love you,” he whispers against Bilbo’s hand. It twitches in his own and moves to cradle the back of his head tentatively, the touch light and fragile. Thorin breathes slowly, steadily, so that he doesn’t cry or panic. “I love you so much. I can’t lose you.”

He hears Bilbo sigh shakily and tighten his grip on Thorin’s hair. He still doesn’t look up when he hears crying, because he can’t face it. He just can’t bring himself to do it, because it would hurt too much, he knows.

“I’m sorry,” Bilbo gasps. “I don’t want to be like this. I don’t want to do this to the people I care about. I just…"

“I know.” Thorin raises his head and leans forward to kiss him on the forehead. “I know, love.”

“How can you still be here after everything you’ve been through?” Bilbo asks. His cheeks are stained with tears and his eyes are red, but he looks at Thorin resolutely and clenches his jaw. “Just… how?”

“Because you’re alive. I can’t leave you to be alone,” Thorin says.

“I don’t deserve you.”

I knew you’d break my damn heart, Thorin thinks. His eyes sting with tears, but he blinks them away. He can’t cry here. He’s too raw and vulnerable as it is, and Bilbo even more so. It’s too painful to even think about, hurting him in any way.

“Even if that was true, I’m not going anywhere. I promise,” Thorin says at last. He takes Bilbo’s hand and kisses his knuckles, closing his eyes.

Bilbo is silent, and he remains so until he falls asleep. Thorin rests his head against the bed again and just watches him, his chest rising and falling, a reminder that he’s alive. He dares to think what would have happened had he not been watching Bilbo’s every move like a hawk from the moment he saw the scratches. He’d probably be in a much worse condition, his wrist wrapped in bandages and already on his way back to Oak Manor.

Thorin manages to sleep for a couple of hours, and only wakes when a hand lands on his shoulder. He shakes himself awake and glances up, and sees Gandalf stood beside him, sympathy written all over his face. Thorin isn’t even surprised to see him, if he’s being honest, because the man is everywhere. He’s the one who convinced Thorin to take in this lonely, broken man, who helped persuade him to do the exhibition, who made his life so much better the last few months.

Thorin stretches and his back twists and pulls uncomfortably with the awkward position he’d fallen asleep in. Gandalf remains silent and Thorin follows him out into the hallway, though not before glancing at Bilbo, still deeply asleep and curled in on himself.

“How is he?” Gandalf asks. Thorin shrugs and slumps into one of the plastic benches, dropping his head into his hands.
“Could be better,” he says. “The doctor was saying he should go back into an inpatient facility.”

“I can ensure things at Oak Manor run smoothly” Gandalf says. He sits next to him, and when Thorin looks, that irritating smile is gracing his aged features. “You have nothing to worry about.”

“When your boyfriend tries to kill himself right in front of you because you mentioned the scratches on his arms, you tend to worry, Gandalf. Forgive me for not entirely trusting your judgement,” Thorin snaps. He hasn’t the energy to regret it, or the desire to. He’s scared shitless, and he has no idea how to even start coping with any of this. It’s too much. For the last few months, it’s all seemed far away and distant, because Bilbo rarely talked about it, and whenever he did, he was vague.

“At least allow me to take care of the fiddly bits for you. There’s no need for you to be more anxious than necessary,” Gandalf says. Thorin doesn’t have it in him to protest, so he just nods, and looks at the ground. It’s silent for a long time.

At last, Gandalf stands and turns to Thorin.

“I believe you could do with a coffee. Come on, it’s on me.”

Thorin follows him like a lost child, because there’s really nothing else he can do but wait.

Chapter End Notes

IM SO SORRY
the pacing for this is rly janky and weird but i just needed to get this damn chapter out if any of you are feeling like this, please, please talk to somebody. don't let it fester. nothing good ever comes out of suicide, it just leaves people hurting and wondering why, and i'm speaking from experience. please look after yourselves and understand that you're loved and valued, and that recovery is possible for everybody. i love you all, and i want you to know that you are worth so much
as always, you can find me @oakhenshield
thank you for reading and supporting this fic. only a few chapters left! i promise, this is a happy ending
Oak Manor is exactly how Bilbo remembers it.

He isn’t sure if that’s meant to be reassuring or devastating. The off-white exterior, the Victorian architecture, the gaudy carpets, the mismatched, wooden furniture. All of it is exactly the same. Even the receptionist is the same kindly, older woman who smiles sweetly when he walks in, making him feel horribly sick. The place is so familiar that he can barely look around. All of the memories from back before, when he still had his stitches and was barely holding himself together, they come flooding back. He manages to remain resolute to go through paperwork and get himself checked in, but when he’s led into a room – not his old one, he notices, staring at the wall where Thorin’s painting would be.

Thorin goes with him, back to Oak Manor. He’s quiet, but he’s steady and strong, and remains by his side. Bilbo is grateful, but he’s silent too, unable to voice it. He isn’t sure he can trust his own voice, even when they’re alone for a while before Thorin has to leave. They sit side by side on Bilbo’s bed, the door only a little ajar, neither of them saying anything. Bilbo stares at his hands twisting in his lap. He bounces his leg until Thorin reaches over and puts his hand on his knee.

“I wish I could stay with you,” he whispers. He presses his forehead against Bilbo’s temple, his breath against his cheek, intimate in a way that makes Bilbo ache in the deepest parts of himself, ache for some kind of normality in his life.

“Go home and worry about the exhibition. I’ll be fine here,” he says. Thorin tightens his hand on Bilbo’s knee.

“I know, I just…”

“I know.”

Bilbo leans in and nestles his head under Thorin’s chin. It’s become something of a habit to him, since coming back to the UK. Thorin’s beard is scratchy, even on the top of his head, and his arm comes around his shoulders to pull him in. Bilbo closes his eyes and breathes in deep.

“When’s your flight?” he asks quietly. Thorin hesitates for a long, pained moment.

“Wednesday. I’ll try to see you tomorrow, but it’ll have to be quick. I fly out early,” he says. Bilbo nods.

“That’s okay. Just… go home. You need to look after yourself instead of worrying about me,” he says. Thorin huffs, but remains silent. He’s angry, Bilbo can tell, but he doesn’t voice it. It’s worrying if he’s being honest. He has no way to reach Thorin where they both are, divided by his actions and even more by Thorin’s refusal to just yell at him for being such an idiot. Bilbo wants him to yell, to get righteously angry, but he doesn’t. It’s horribly infuriating.

“I’ll worry until you come back home with me,” Thorin says after a long, painful silence. Bilbo closes his eyes and has to breathe for a few seconds to still his beating heart,

“You old sap,” he manages. Thorin chuckles lightly and squeezes his arm around his shoulders before letting go. Bilbo knows he’s leaving soon. It hurts, but he knows he has to accept it. When
Thorin stands, he does the same. Bilbo has never felt so small and weak standing beside him as he does then, so he avoids looking up until Thorin’s hand comes to his cheek, as infinitely gentle as always.

“I love you,” Thorin says. He says it like it’s hard to say, but Bilbo knows he means it. It makes his heart flutter weakly. Thorin pulls him into his arms and runs a hand through his hair. “Come back to me.”

“I will. I love you.” At first, Bilbo thinks he’ll have to pull it out of himself with claws, but it comes out like smoke, drifting up into the air, gentle and pale. Easy. As easy as it can be, anyway.

He wants to stay in that moment for as long as possible. Thorin smells good, earthy aftershave and clean clothes, and his hands on Bilbo’s waist seem like the only thing keeping him grounded in that moment. He wants to cling to Thorin and never let go, he wants to make it up to him, he wants to go home. Home is a flight and a short drive away.

But Bilbo knows he needs to be here. As stifling as this old house is, he needs to get better, if not for his sake, then for Thorin’s. For Dis, for the boys. For Prim and Drogo and Frodo. For his parents. If he doesn’t try to get better, what use is he? That’s been the thing that has always scared him, whenever he feels like the world is falling to shit – how can he be of any use to anybody if he’s unable to be of use to himself? It’s unhealthy, he knows that, but once you get a thought like that in your head it’s very hard to get it out again.

Thorin lets go far too soon for his liking, but Bilbo lets him go. He has to. He steps back while Thorin pulls on his jacket and runs a hand through his hair, still short and scrubby, but getting longer.

“Call me when you get home,” Bilbo says quietly. Thorin nods. His eyes are too far away, and his face is unreadable. It reminds Bilbo painfully of when they first met all those months ago, when Thorin’s stony façade was in full force, and Bilbo had to chip away at it bit by bit, every day, to get through to him. Except, this was different. This wasn’t Thorin relying on years of isolation to protect himself. This was Thorin deliberately refusing to let Bilbo see how this was really affecting him, putting up those walls temporarily to give himself some peace of mind. Bilbo can’t blame him at all. If their places were reversed, he was sure he would do the exact same.

Thorin leaves after pressing a kiss to Bilbo’s forehead, and Bilbo is alone in a painfully familiar place. He stands there for a good long while, unsure what to do with himself now that there is nothing for him to do, besides sit and wait for therapy and try to get through each day until he’s discharged.

So, he does what he does best when he’s entirely too overwhelmed. He crawls under the blankets and, after a fitful half an hour, falls asleep.

-“It’s been a long time.” Lindir’s gaze is as benign and gentle as ever. That’s something to take comfort in, Bilbo supposes. He had always liked Lindir, and he’s always enjoyed these therapy sessions. They’re gently cathartic. Lindir never forced him to address things he wasn’t ready to talk about.

“Old habits, you know,” Bilbo says. He has his sleeves pulled down over his hands, despite the early summer warmth. The windows behind Lindir are wide and open to let in the fresh Cornwall air. Bilbo welcomes it.
“Why don’t you talk about your time in Switzerland? I’d love to hear about that,” Lindir says. He crosses his legs at the knee and leans back, setting his pen down. That’s a good sign. He actually wants to hear about it then.

Bilbo shrugs. “I… I don’t really know what to say about it,” he says honestly. “It was nothing I expected. Not at all.”

“Spending the last few months with a world-renowned artist sounds like something out of this world, I must admit. I spoke to him before he left. He’s very…”

“Tall?”

Lindir laughs. “Yes. Tall. And very concerned about you, I might add. Why don’t you tell me about that?”

Bilbo shrugs again. “We became quite close while I was in Switzerland. Very close. We’re, uh, together. I’m not even sure how it happened, but it did. Honestly, if you told me before I left that I would fall for the man I was being shipped off to stay with in Switzerland, of all places, I’d probably think you’re crazy.”

“I can see how you would think that. It does sound, for lack of a better word, bonkers. He was telling me that before you came back, you had been doing much better, even if you weren’t taking your medication. It seems Switzerland was good for you until now,” Lindir says. He picks up his pen again and clicks it. Oh no, Bilbo thinks, knowing what that means. He swallows the lump in his throat and adjusts in his seat. The worn leather is pleasantly comfortable, as it always was. “So, what happened?”

Bilbo doesn’t even have to think about the answer.

“My parents’ house was sold,” he says instantly. Lindir nods and writes that down. “Obviously, after what happened to them, it was incredibly difficult for me to go home. I went back in April, and obviously, a week or so ago, I came back to say goodbye and meet the buyers. I think that it was so difficult because it’s still raw, losing my parents the way I did.”

It’s easier than he thought to get the words out, but they still leave a funny taste in his mouth as he says them, unsure if that’s the whole story. It is, but he knows there's more to it. Lobelia calling him selfish for the whole world to hear, visiting his mothers grave with Mirabella, seeing those drawings and the photos and his old journal. The scratches on his wrist have faded, but he knows that they’re part of what set him off.

“That’s entirely understandable, Bilbo,” Lindir says kindly, while his pen scratches at the notebook resting on his knee. “It’s not easy, what you’ve been through. And to go through all of that and still be here is a remarkable feat, even if you have some setbacks in your recovery.”

“I talked to Prim about that, you know. She said to think of it like percentages. Right now, I’d say I’m on about twenty-five percent. Before Prim told me the house was sold, I was a solid sixty. I got knocked down because I was reminded that I have a lot of things to deal with,” Bilbo says. It comes out so easy, even if it hurts. Like pulling out a splinter, or getting a bone re-set.

“That’s a very practical way of looking at things,” Lindir says. “Would zero be wanting to take your own life again?”

“I guess so. One hundred is impossible for me, I think, but ninety-nine is better than nothing,” Bilbo says. He flinches when Lindir says take your own life. He knows its
just psychiatric professionalism but saying ‘suicide’ just seems so much easier.

“You’re right. If it makes you more comfortable, we can use that system to measure your progress while you’re here,” Lindir says. He writes something down in his notebook, then puts his pen between the pages and slowly closes it. Bilbo nods.

“I’d like that. It makes it easier to compartmentalize things,” he says honestly.

“Good. Have you started to take your medication again?” Lindir asks, a curious tilt to his head. He has always reminded Bilbo of some kind of bird, and the resemblance is more striking when he does that. Bilbo nods.

“It’s… it’ll be a while before I get used to them again,” he admits. “I stopped taking them because I thought that I was doing okay. And I was. Nightmares and migraines aside, I was starting to feel more like my old self in Switzerland.” It’s the truth. Thinking back on his time there, on how free and genuinely happy he felt when he had a cup of tea on the balcony every morning, when he and Thorin would cook together, when they steadily began to open up to each other once again, he felt more like his old self before the accident. Thorin himself was something of a grainy balm for Bilbo’s wounds, literal and physical, soothing but still tough.

“When you go back, will you continue to take your medication?”

Bilbo hears the accusation in his voice, but smiles, knowing it’s well deserved.

“Yes, I will. I’ve learned my lesson,” he says.

“Excellent. The medication is there to help you. We can’t force you to take it, it’s your choice at the end of the day, but a choice that could really help with your progress, should you make it,” Lindir says. He sets his notebook aside. “This is just a pre-emptive meeting, to gauge the situation, so is there anything else you would like to talk about before I see you for your first therapy session on Thursday?”

Bilbo has to think about that. He tugs at the sleeves of his jumper and looks around the room, taking in the simplistic charcoal art and the dark wood and leather furniture, perhaps the most comfortable therapists’ office Bilbo has ever been in. He has always been able to breathe easy in here.

“I can’t think of anything right now,” he says. Lindir nods.

“Alright. Think on it, and we can talk about it in a few days.” It’s a dismissal, one Bilbo knows almost too well, so he gets up and goes to leave. Lindir stops him before he can even open the door. “For the record, Bilbo, I think you’re doing much better than you believe. You did well today.”

Bilbo nods, his throat suddenly dry, and gets out as soon as he can before he can start crying. The last time he cried in front of Lindir was six months ago during his very first session with him, when he spilled everything that had happened to him, all of it raw and violent held inside of his chest like a spiky ball of pain. Coughing it up had felt bloody and awful. It’s less painful now, but the tears are there, threatening to come as soon as he lets his weak walls down for all the world to see what a mess he is.

He goes to the common room and watches an hour of mindless television before dinner, and after, he goes back to his room. He almost walks to his room from before he went to Switzerland and is surprised to find it occupied by a young man with headphones in, reading some worn out
paperback. Bilbo doesn’t linger, not wanting to pry, but seeing the man’s scar-added arms and Thorin’s painting of the Alps in the same room is almost too much for him to bear.

Back in his room, he calls Thorin. He doesn’t care about the long-distance call charges, he just needs to hear his voice. Thorin picks up after the third ring. He sounds half asleep when he says hello, and what Bilbo wouldn’t give to see him in person, to hear him, to spend all day under the blankets with him.

“Hi,” he breathes. “Sorry, I just… I had a therapy session with Lindir.”

“How’d it go?” Thorin asks. Bilbo flops down onto his back and signs, dragging a hand down his face.

“Better than I thought. No tears. We both agreed you’re very tall,” he says, trying for humour, but Thorin doesn’t laugh. He lets out a breathy noise and Bilbo frowns. “Are you okay?”


“It’s fine. I’ll let you go. I just needed to hear your voice,” Bilbo says. I haven’t been this honest in just one day for years, he thinks. He almost laughs at himself for that, but doesn’t, because he can hear Thorin smiling on the other end. Something about that calms him. He’d give anything to see that smile.

“Alright. I love you,” Thorin says. Bilbo will never get used to that, but he says it back just as earnestly and hangs up. Laying on his back in a pristinely made bed, in a room with bare walls, save for a beautiful watercolour of the Cornish coast, Bilbo feels almost like he’s leaving his body. Dissociation, Lindir called it months ago. Bilbo is only vaguely aware of himself as he stares at the painting and imagines going down to the beach to breathe in the sea air. Maybe the salt will cleanse him of the bad thoughts and feelings and leave him shiny, new, and scrubbed clean. He has always felt better after spending a day at the beach.

He lays like that for a long time, imagining the rushing waves and white foam crashing against fatal rocks, dedicated surfers catching the rolling walls of the ocean, tourists walking the coast and just enjoying a view they might not get at home. It’s not Switzerland, with the beautiful iron-grey mountains and vast natural feels full of wildflowers and small, delicate trees, but it’s good enough for now.

Yes, definitely good enough for now.

Chapter End Notes

HNNNN IM SORRY LIFE JUST GOT IN THE WAY FOR A WHILE
Yeah I. had a really bad few months with my mental health and just. life in general. I'm okay now, I guess, but it's still a bit hard to sit down and actually write something. I'm in Cornwall right now so maybe I'll get some inspiration to finally finish this fucker. Anyway, thank you all for continuing to read this fic, it means so much to me. I've really poured a lot of myself into it for the sake of catharsis, so knowing that people like this story makes me feel much less alone in my mental health and the things I've been through. I love all of you so much. You're amazing <3
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

I know it's a short one, but I was suddenly inspired by the new year to finish this chapter and post it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Lake Geneva is lonely at night. Even in the more touristy season, it’s secluded when Thorin goes there one night, driving down from Mont Pelerin to get some headspace. At first, he just planned on driving the mountain roads until he was exhausted, but something brought him down to Vevey and to the waterfront where he and Bilbo ate junk food and held hands, just staring out at the water together. It leaves a bitter taste in his mouth when he remembers it, but it’s a memory edged with gold that he knows he will hold close to him for a long time.

The moon lights the tips of tiny waves that beat against the lake banks and the wind is fresh when coming off the water, cold on Thorin’s face. He just keeps his face turned towards the water and breathes, quiet, though he is anything but peaceful. His mind twists like a tornado. He’s home – he should be okay, but he’s not. How can he be okay with the love of his life is half a continent away and locked into a psychiatric home?

Thorin feels horribly guilty about this whole thing. He feels like he’s let Bilbo down somehow, by making sure he was somewhere safe, where he could be looked after by professionals. As much as Thorin wants him here, he knows that it was the right choice to make, and he knows that Bilbo will get better help there than he could get here. They already know him there, and Bilbo himself had brought it up, after Thorin had talked to Gandalf about it. It seems that Oak Manor is exactly where Bilbo needs to be right now.

It hurts. Of course it hurts. Thorin flew back and found his home empty and painfully still and silent without Bilbo there, humming or making tea or reading something out on the balcony. Being the only life there, Thorin is reminded of his empty skeleton days before Bilbo came into his life, a wounded mess, a washed out watercolour, a man trying to hold himself together so that he didn’t fall apart again. Thorin fell for him quick and irreversibly, and here he was, months later, trying not to want him back as much as he does.

But he does. He wants Bilbo home. He wants to know that he’s okay, that he’s safe. Thorin knows that psychiatric help isn’t a definite cure, and people who seek it still hurt themselves or kill themselves once they’ve been discharged and deemed okay. People, Thorin has learned over the years, are remarkably good at lying to people so that they can do what they want. Nobody had expected Frerin to kill himself. Nobody knew how depressed he was until they found his journals in his room, filled to the brim with disturbing, terrifying thoughts he had in his head. But on the outside, he was fine. He put on a façade so well that when they found him dead in the bathtub, every single one of them thought that it had to be a joke. Somebody as happy and as carefree as Frerin wouldn’t slit their wrists and bleed out in a tub. Right?

Wrong.
They learned that the hard way.

Thorin refuses to make that mistake again. He can’t lose anybody like that again. Losing his brother was enough, and it nearly broke him. He cut himself off from his family and his only respite was a man who was at risk of killing himself every fucking day. The world is cruel and unusual, Thorin has always known that, but sending him Bilbo during the worst time of his life, after losing his parents so violently and trying to kill himself, it seemed like a sick joke at the beginning. Thorin watched him intently, looking for any signs, and all he could see was the way Bilbo would tug his sleeve down to cover his scar, and those horrific nightmares that made him shaky and vulnerable and weak.

Thorin drops his head into his hands and lets out a long, low groan. He’s lost, he knows it. He has no idea what he can do to fix this, or even try to move on from it. He wants Bilbo home.

It seems like an age ago, when they came down to Vevey together and ate their junk food dinner on one of these benches, but Thorin clings to it, because if he has nothing to hold on to, he’ll go mad with the waiting. He needs to remember why he feels so much pain nestled into the hollow of his chest. Why this debacle hurts the way it does, because he fell in love with a man who thought too much on things that were best left forgotten, sometimes.

Bilbo can’t forget. He never will. Just as Thorin will never forget the sight of his baby brother lying dead in a bathtub, wearing nothing but a pair of black boxers, his skin pale and cold, and his eyes wide open towards the ceiling, unseeing. His arms had been scarlet to the elbow and the razor blade he used had fallen to the tiles, leaving a red smear on the white ceramic.

Those details will stay with Thorin forever. The smell of iron and death, and just how heavy and cold Frerin was when he dragged him out of the bath before holding him close and begging him to not be dead. Even just remembering it is agony.

Thorin has never, will never, understand the appeal of suicide. He’s been depressed and lonely, so much so that he has considered just being a hermit for the rest of his life so he doesn’t have to deal with anybody ever again. But never has he considered taking his own life. Perhaps its because he knows how painful it is for those left behind when they find somebody they love dead by their own hand. Maybe he’s just scared of death.

All Thorin knows in that moment is that he is lost. Not irrevocably, not eternally, he’s just been led off of his path and stumbled into the wilderness for a while, no direction and only the shadows to accompany him.

And that’s okay, he thinks. Anybody not lost after something like this would have his utmost respect.

It’s long past midnight by the time he goes home, taking the dark roads back up Mont Pelerin. His house is there, as it always is, and his bed is as soft as usual, but cold. Empty, lonely, and cold. He wants Bilbo by his side, but he’s on an island hours away, in a house that isn’t home, and… and he’s with his family, at least. Prim is a short drive away, and so is Mirabella. Thorin knows Bilbo is in good hands, but he’s selfish enough sometimes to be jealous that he can’t look after the man he loves so much.

He stays up late that night. He tries sleeping, but the bed is cold. He tries drawing, but his mind is too full and static. He tries just sitting there, but he can’t stop tapping his feet, his fingers, against any surface he can find. Thorin groans and paces to quell his restlessness, but there’s far too much energy to expel just through walking around his seemingly cramped home. He needs a heartbeat. He needs something wild and fast and potentially dangerous. He needs to run, out in the Swiss
mountains at one in the morning, when the roads are dark and cold and treacherous. He needs the adrenaline to exhaust him, and the tired muscles to kickstart him into normal life in the morning.

Thorin goes out and runs. He runs and runs and runs, following the road up and down and around and back by his home, uphill, downhill, his smoker's lungs screaming at him in protest and his weak muscles straining with the effort, but he doesn’t care. The first twenty or so minutes are hell, but once Thorin gets into the swing of it, he’s flying. He barely feels the sting in his throat and lungs, nor the pressure in his legs and hips threatening to rip open his muscle tissue if he doesn’t slow down. All Thorin feels is the wind in his face and the drive pushing his forward, ever forward. Ever forward. His mindset, and his sisters, ever since Frerin died. Ever forward. Pushing through everything and getting on with your life. Learning from the bad things, no matter how much it hurts, and growing, learning, healing, wrapping that pain around you like a cloak of innocence and experience because that’s all you can do when faced with the worst. Find a way to survive, and throw yourself back into the fray, come whatever may.

Hope, Thorin thinks as he slows on a dark, empty road. In the dark, it’s unfamiliar, but he knows exactly where he is.

Hope. The thing that used to drive him. A hope for a long, happy life. Hope for love. Hope for health. Hope for his family to, one day, come back together instead of remaining the mess that it became when it fractures with Thorin coming out, Thror, Thrain, and Yael’s untimely deaths. Hope that Fili and Kili will live long and happy and safe. Hope that Dis will know how loved she is. Hope that Bilbo will heal and come home, here, in the mountains Thorin knows he loves so much.

Hope.

Hope that Thorin will be able to look at his loved ones and decide that they’re enough. Everyone he has left – Dis, Fili and Kili, Bilbo, his cousins, Dwalin and Balin – they’re just that. They’re all he has. Fuck the art and the exhibitions, fuck the photos of his past, fucking being dragged down by the dead, like concrete strapped to his ankles, weighing him down in the dark, murky water. He needs to let go. He needs to do what he needs to do. Live. For once in his life, be selfish, and live for nobody but himself.

Thorin laughs. He throws his head back and laughs. His head spins and his vision is black and spotty from pushing himself too hard along mountain roads. But he laughs. The whole situation is ludicrous, but he laughs and doubles over and falls on his ass in cold, damp grass, howling uncontrollably. His chest feels light. His laughter is real. Maybe not entirely sane, but it’s real. It bubbles up like freshly opened champagne and the bittersweetness of it lingers, fizzling out, but the taste stays on his tongue. For the first time in years, Thorin can laugh about everything that’s happened and not feel like a monster. He can run in the middle of the night to vent his frustration and just sit on the side of the road and look down at Lake Geneva and the glowing patchwork that is Vevey and just laugh until his throat catches and he has to stop, leaving him in slightly delirious silence.

And he just sits there. Thorin sits there and breathes. His sweat cools him down and his heart slows, his muscles stop screaming, his head levels and his rational thoughts come back to him at last.

He’s sat by the side of the mountain road in the middle of the night, with his phone on half-battery and no way to get home except to walk all the way back.

Thorin is a mess, but this is a new level of messiness. He laughs again and runs a hand over his scrub brush hair.
It’s a long while before Thorin picks himself back up. He starts walking, then jogging, and then he’s running again, but this time, Thorin embraces the ache and the stuttering heartbeat. It’s close to early dawn when he gets back almost an hour and a half later, having alternated between running and walking and stopping entirely. He’s far too old to be doing this so late, but when Thorin finally closes the door behind him, he doesn’t go to bed. He pulls out his phone instead and blanches at the fifteen percent battery life, but ignores it to open a text.

*When you come home, I don’t want to leave for at least three months. Unless we absolutely have to. I miss you already. Take care of yourself. I love you.*

He flops down onto the sofa, suddenly too tired to move once he’s horizontal and somewhere vaguely comfortable. He closes his eyes and drifts, only to be awoken again by a text alert. The sun is pale in the low, low sky. It’s not even five in the morning.

*Take care of yourself, too. I love you. See you soon.*

Thorin smiles. He kisses his phone, just glad to have a message from Bilbo with his mind so hazy with sleep and his body aching from exertion.

He falls asleep again, and he doesn’t wake until gone noon.

Chapter End Notes

**HAPPY NEW YEAR, YALL, I HOPE 2018 IS GOOD TO YOU**

Anyway I have no excuse for the wait in updates. Depression sucks.

I love you guys. This fic finishes up soon. The final chapters will be longer, I promise. Hopefully I'll finish it before summer. Thanks as always for reading and encouraging me to write this fic. I hope it's as cathartic to you as it is for me. Bless you all
Chapter 27

It’s so mind-numbingly boring at Oak Manor that Bilbo seriously reconsiders his very responsible, adult decision to check himself in. He’s allowed a few books and his phone, but no pens, no headphones, and no cables aside from the hilariously short one he uses for his phone. Even then…

He’s not allowed to do much, like when he first came here in January. Reading, talking, eating, sleeping, going to therapy. It’s monotonous and dull. Even daily texts and the occasional call from Thorin and Prim don’t help much. He wants to wake up to the smell of Swiss coffee and toast, or at least to the smell of Thorin’s clean skin and soap. It smells like dust here. It wasn’t so bad the first time around. Now it’s just excruciating. He wants to go walking with Thorin, to try and sing along to Swiss pop music on the radio, to spend his nights in the living room with his back to Thorin’s chest as they talk for hours.

But obviously, Bilbo can’t do any of that. He’d agreed to go back to Oak Manor, signed himself in, giving the professionals permission to take away his autonomy until they think he can be released without trying to kill himself again.

It’s a necessary evil that leaves a bitter taste in his mouth. He says as much to Lindir.

“It’s not uncommon, to be in your situation,” Lindir offers gently. If Bilbo enjoys anything at Oak Manor this time around, it’s his twice-weekly sessions with Lindir. It’s familiar. “Relapse’s happen. It’s not ideal, but it’s a natural part of any healing and recovery process.”

“I know ,” Bilbo said, frustrated. “But that doesn’t make it easier to live with, especially after what I put Thorin through. What kind of person does that make me, trying to kill myself in front of somebody I love?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps in retrospect, somebody who needed more help than he was willing to vocalise,” Lindir says. “And presently, somebody more concerned with the well-being of others rather than his own.” Bilbo frowns, looking away. Lindir’s office has a wide bay window open to the hills of Cornwall. They’re close enough to the sea to get harsh winds, but not too close for patients to disappear suspiciously over the cliffs.

“Maybe,” Bilbo says. “I’m just worried.” Lindir puts his pen down. Bilbo recognises that look too well, even if it’s been four months since he’s seen it. Only four months. In truth, it feels like a lifetime. A lifetime since he hopped onto that train with Gandalf, truly not knowing what to expect once he reached Switzerland. He hadn’t even come close to expecting what happened - falling in love with a reclusive hermit with as much horrific baggage as him.

“Tell me why you’re worried,” Lindir says. Without his pen in hand, it’s easy to open up.

“Thorin found his brother when Frerin slit his wrists in a bathtub. His sister was with him, and her
eldest, Fili. I went for a knife right in front of Thorin and he had to use physical force to stop me from trying to kill myself. Again,” Bilbo says bluntly. He hasn’t been able to stop thinking about it. He never saw the look on Thorin’s face, but he remembers how tight Thorin clung to him and how his voice trembled as he talked Bilbo down. “I love him. I can’t forgive myself for what I did.”

“Perhaps forgiveness isn’t the answer here,” Lindir suggests gently.

“What else is there?” Bilbo asks.

“Progress and recovery. Going home and moving on. Getting on with your life as best as you can. Forgiveness isn’t the answer to everything. It’s not the only way to… alone, if you will,” Lindir says. He shifts in his seat and flicks back through his notebook. “But I know that it’s important to you. Have you talked to Thorin about it?”

“No. I can’t ask him for anything after what I’ve done,” Bilbo admits. He slumps in his chair. The soft old cushions threaten to swallow him. He will never understand how Lindir manages to look so graceful and put together in these chairs when Bilbo feels completely swamped by them all the time.

“Do you plan on going back to Switzerland?” Lindir asks, changing the subject effortlessly. Bilbo breathes a sigh of relief.

“Eventually. If… if Thorin will have me. It did wonders for me, in terms of my recovery. It wasn’t until I had to go back to England that I started thinking about… about…” Bilbo trails off. He doesn’t need to spell it out for Lindir. He coughs and straightens up. “I’m happier there. Even before Thorin and I… something in the water, I suppose. It’s a lovely country.”

Lindir smiles. He has a timeless look to him, but his smile makes him seem younger.

“Do you think if you went back you would be happier?” he asks.

“Absolutely. England doesn’t hold much for me besides all five relatives I still talk to,” Bilbo says dryly. “If my parents were alive, or if I hadn’t tried to kill myself, I would probably still be teaching in Swansea. Not here. Not in Switzerland.”

“Hypotheticals get us nowhere, Bilbo. You plan on returning to Switzerland, regardless. What will you do there?” Lindir asks. Bilbo shakes his head.

“I don’t know. Teach, maybe, if I can stomach the idea of driving to Vevey every morning. I have a TESOL degree, I could do it if I wasn’t so scared of cars,” he says. Just the drive down to Oak Manor had set him on edge, though Thorin had talked enough to distract him somewhat, and they listened to mindless radio channels to fill the silence. “I don’t know. Sometimes it feels almost like I’m never going to get better, so why bother thinking about it?”

“Well, I’ve heard spite is a good motivator,” Lindir says dryly, only half serious.

“So is not wanting to burden your loved ones,” Bilbo says.

“What makes you think you’re a burden to any of them?” Lindir tips his head to the side, such an innocuous gesture, but one Bilbo knows means that’s bullshit and you know it. He swallows and tugs at the sleeves of his cardigan. He can’t bear to look at the fading scratches around his scar, despite the early summer warmth.

“What else could I be?” Bilbo says. “Since my parents died, I’ve done nothing but hurt the people I love. They lost my mum and dad as much as I did, but none of them tried to commit suicide.”
“None of them were in the car with you, though, were they? None of them experienced that trauma first hand the way you did,” Lindir says. Bilbo sees him glance at his watch - their time is almost up. He suddenly doesn’t want to leave.

“It’s not an excuse for the things I did,” Bilbo says.

“Maybe not. But it makes your circumstances much more understandable. No one can rightfully expect you to be okay after what you went through, nor can they expect you to be the same after. To do so is unrealistic and, frankly, quite unfair to you and your mental wellbeing. After everything, I’d say you’re entitled to your trauma,” Lindir says. He closes his notebook. His way of saying that they’re out of time for the day. But before Bilbo can say or do anything else, Lindir continues on. “This place is likely not the answer for you, Bilbo. You’re unhappy, and while you’re clearly making progress, things aren’t the same as they were when you were here before. I’ll do my research before our next session, but hopefully, we can discuss alternative options for you.”

“You’re… kicking me out?” Bilbo asks, bewildered. This wasn’t how he imagined today playing out. But it’s a strange kind of relief that settles in his chest at the thought of being away from this place.

“No. Not yet, at least. We’ll talk more about it on Tuesday. For now, though, I hope you have a good weekend. Think about what I said,” Lindir says. That’s Bilbo’s cue to leave, and he leaves, quietly closing the door behind him as he steps out into the hall.

He exhales. He runs his fingers through his hair. Looking at his hand, Bilbo sees it trembling. *Post-traumatic tremor*, he hears his voice in his head, from way back when, when he explained it to Thorin. He clenches his hand into a fist and walks away from Lindir’s office, half giddy, half stunned. Whatever those options are, Bilbo is desperate to get out of this place. It had been fine before, but everything has changed. He’s not the same person as he was when Gandalf came gallivanting in and more or less pushed him out of the door and onto the train into the heart of Switzerland.

Bilbo returns to his room and sits heavily on his bed, dropping his head into his hands. It’s a lot to take in. It’s been three weeks since he came back. But Lindir is probably right. Probably. Bilbo is too close to the situation, he thinks with a wry smile. He trusts Lindir’s judgment, though, and has learned that sometimes he has to be patient. He can wait four days to hear about these options. As long as they don’t involve staying here for far too long, he’s game.

Bilbo is halfway through an Ian McEwan paperback when he gets a knock at the door. It’s a nurse, probably about to scold him for closing his door when he’s required to leave it open during the day. He looks up, sat on his bed, and folds the page at the corner.

“There’s a visitor for you, Mister Baggins,” she says. Bilbo frowns.

“Did they say who they were?” he asks.

“She said she’s family,” the nurse says. Bilbo frowns deeper. Prim would have told him if she was visiting if she even had the time for it. She’s apologised profusely for not being able to visit before, until Bilbo told her it was fine, he was fine, she didn’t need to worry about him.

So, Bilbo follows the nurse through the building and towards the main reception area. He expects to see Prim, alone, maybe laden down with snacks and a few more paperbacks for him, knowing how fast he reads. But it’s not Prim.
“Dis?” Bilbo asks in disbelief. At hearing her name, Dis turns her head to look at him, and she smiles. “What are you doing here?”

“Am I not allowed to come visiting?” Dis asks, feigning insult. Despite himself, Bilbo laughs and embraces her, the weight in his chest lifting somewhat when she hugs him tight. “It’s good to see you, Bilbo.”

“You, too. How are you? How are the kids?” Bilbo asks. He looks at the nurse, who gestures to one of the rooms by the foyer where people can visit and talk in private. He and Dis go inside and sit down on one of the ugly old floral couches.

“I’m fine, we’re all fine. The boys are finishing school in a few days, and I’m sending them to Thorin’s for a couple of weeks,” Dis says. She fixes Bilbo with a hard glare. He leans back, a chill going up along his spine. He’s seen that look from Thorin. “What I actually want to know is what the fuck happened.”

Bilbo sighs. He’s oddly relieved to not quite be on the receiving end of her anger. He’s heard plenty of horror stories from Thorin.

“I almost had another attempt, and I checked myself back in here,” Bilbo says, summarising it as succinctly as he possibly can. Dis’s gaze doesn’t waver. “What did Thorin tell you?”

“Not much. Just that he had to pry the knife out of your hand.” Dis says. Bilbo closes his eyes. He forgot about that. Or maybe he just didn’t register it at the time, being as he was somewhat preoccupied with literally trying to kill himself. “What happened, Bilbo?”

Dis takes his hands in hers, and when Bilbo opens his eyes, she’s looking at him with the same intensity with which she looks at her brother, her dark brown eyes full of concern and sympathy. Bilbo doesn’t know what else he expected, in truth. Anger? Yes. Hatred? After everything, quite possibly. But there’s none of that there. Dis is looking at him like he’s her brother, her hands clasping his, and it’s all Bilbo can do not to break then and there.

“The anxiety got worse when I went back to England to say goodbye to the house,” Bilbo says, squeezing her hands. “After I visited my mums grave, I guess it all just got worse. Look.” Bilbo lets go of her hands and pulls up his sleeves, showing Dis the scratches around his scar. She flinches but looks on. She’s thinking of Frerin, Bilbo knows. The way she touches the scar, the way her face twists into something longing and sad, he knows she’s thinking of Frerin. Perhaps it’s cruel to show her like this, but she’s strong. She’s raised two wonderful children, and has seemingly never faltered once, not when her brother died, not when her husband left, not when Thorin disappeared and became a recluse. Bilbo admires that in her. He wishes he had her strength.

“I don’t want to be here, Dis. I don’t want to always be hiding away from what I did to myself. There’s no one to blame but me.”

Dis closes her eyes. She shakes her head. Her hair is pulled back tight, but strands fall out by her ears and at the back of her neck. It reminds Bilbo of Thorin. He pulls her in and hugs her tight, tighter than they had hugged in the foyer. In private, he almost feels content, with Dis here, as unexpected as her arrival was.

“Don’t you dare ever do that to us again,” Dis says into Bilbo’s shoulder, sniffing. “Don’t you dare ever do that to yourself again. We all love you, Bilbo. We all want you to get better.”

Bilbo’s eyes sting, but he doesn’t cry. He’s already vulnerable here. He’s not going to cry, not here.

“I’m trying,” he gasps. Dis squeezes him so tight he swears his ribs creak.
“That’s all we ask,” she says, and lets go to wipe discreetly at her eyes. “Thorin wanted to come, but he’s got the boys this weekend. I didn’t think it would be a good idea to bring them… here.” For the first time, Dis looks sheepish, glancing around the room, avoiding Bilbo’s eye. He smiles.

“No, that’s probably for the best,” he says. He would never ask the boys to come here. He’d rather they never suffered what they did when Frerin died. “Do they know what happened?”

“Fili does. Doesn’t miss a trick, that one, he figured it out on his own. Kili’s probably figured it out, too, but he hasn’t said anything. He just wanted to know if you had any other history books for him to read,” Dis says, smiling fondly. It makes Bilbo’s heart ache, witnessing how close and loving this family is. It’s almost enough to make him bitter. Almost. He loves this family far too much for that, though.

“He can help himself to the books I have at Thorin’s. God knows I have little use for them these days,” he says. He looks away from Dis. “How is he, anyway? Thorin, that is. I talk to him but he doesn’t say much.”

“Yeah, it’s easier for him to talk about his feelings face to face,” Dis says, sighing. “He’s okay. He’s working hard on the exhibition, going to Marseilles every other weekend to make sure it’s all stored correctly, all that jazz. I think he just wants it to be over and done with. Can’t say I blame him. Von Brandt is a world-class asshole and there’s no way he’s going to make this easy for any of us, come time for the actual exhibition.”

“I met him. He seems… fucking awful,” Bilbo says blandly, making Dis laugh.

“Understatement. He’s the worst person I’ve ever had the displeasure to work with. I’d happily punch him in the face,” she says. “Speaking of…”

Wait, what? Bilbo thinks, momentarily thinking Dis is about to punch him. But instead, she just pulls an envelope out of her pocket and hands it over. The paper is thick and heavy, clearly professional grade, with his name written on it in a familiar curling hand.

“Your invitation to the exhibition opening. You’re going anyway, if I have to drag you there myself, but I thought I’d extend the invitation anyway,” Dis says. Bilbo finds himself laughing, shaking his head. He opens the envelope and finds an equally fancy looking invitation that’s even gilded at the edges. The exhibition is in almost exactly a month. Bilbo refuses to still be here by then.

“I fully intend on going, don’t worry,” Bilbo says, putting the invitation back in the envelope. Will he even be able to see Thorin before then? God, he hopes so. He misses him so much it hurts. Thorin’s voice over the phone is always impossibly gentle and kind, just like him. Bilbo wants to bury his face in Thorin’s neck and breathe him deeply, and never leave.

Obviously, he doesn’t say this to Dis.

“Good. I’ve seen some of the paintings, you know. They’re beautiful,” Dis says.

“I can’t wait to see them,” Bilbo says. “It’ll be strange, though. I went to one of his exhibitions in the early two-thousands, the eastern European architecture one. Back then I never would have thought that any of this would happen. Especially meeting Thorin and…”

“I know,” Dis says kindly. Bilbo will never be good at voicing his emotions, will he? Oh well. Nobody’s perfect. “Any chance they’ll let you out for a few hours to get lunch?”

Bilbo sighs, shoulders slumping.
“Probably not, no. But there’s a canteen if you feel like coffee and cake,” he says. Dis’ eyes light up and she nods, looking younger just by smiling so openly.

“Sounds lovely. Lead on.”

The coffee is tepid and the cake a little dry, but it’s a nice afternoon, regardless. Bilbo hears all about Dis’ new boyfriend, who she has yet to introduce to the boys, though they know all about him by now. A scientist, apparently. Dis seems happy to talk, so she fills the silence, catching Bilbo up on the boys exams and her own goings on, what Balin and Dwalin have been up to. Renovating Dwalin’s tattoo studio, apparently.

Bilbo gets an idea then that he doesn’t voice, but holds close to his chest until Dis bids him farewell with a long, tight hug, telling him to take care of himself, and to call if he needs anything, okay? Bilbo promises he will and sees her off. Once she’s gone, things feel decidedly less bright and hopeful, and his back pocket is weighed down with the invitation. With the Durin family around, it’s easy to forget anything bad can happen to him. When they’re gone…

Bilbo goes back to his room and leaves his door open for once. He sits on his bed and puts the invitation on the bedside table, where it stares at him almost accusingly. He can’t check himself out, but he’s sure he can convince Lindir to make an exception for him. He’d estimated himself at around forty percent at the start of the session, which was surprising even for him. But he’s doing well, slowly regaining his rationality instead of wallowing in his guilt and pain. Well, for the most part. It’s harder than he remembers to truly deal with his feelings like a normal, healthy person. Before the accident, he would maybe vent his frustrations over the phone to Prim, or by being particularly brutal when marking essays and projects. When he’s frustrated here, he deals with it by waiting until his sessions with Lindir. Perhaps not the best strategy, but it’s something. He’s not bottling it up anymore.

Bilbo wakes the next morning with a text from Thorin. Did Dis give you the invitation? He asks. Bilbo rolls over in bed and burrows under the blankets, already typing out a reply. She threatened to drag me there herself regardless of what happens here. I’ll be there, I promise. How are you doing?

He waits and blinks sleep from his eyes. It’s so early the sun has barely risen, but Thorin has always been an early riser, as long as Bilbo has known him. He exits the messaging app and stares at his background, a blurry picture he took of Thorin as he read something on his Kindle, brow furrowed, lips pursed, glasses perched on the end of his nose like an old man. It’s one of Bilbo’s favourite pictures of him. His chest aches. It’s too early for this.

The boys have me up at an ungodly hour and I’m bruised from camping. I’m great. How are you? Bilbo smiles. Well, that’s certainly something to wake up to, the mental image of Thorin in a tent, groaning like a senior citizen about his back and his bruised shoulders.

I’m alright. It was nice seeing Dis. Lindir thinks I’d make more progress away from here, we’re going to discuss it on Monday. Hopefully, that means I can come home. Bilbo sends it off and chews at his thumbnail, suddenly nervous. That tiny, terrified part of his brain is asking if Thorin would even want him back, if it’s a good idea to call the house on the mountain home when he’s only been there a few months. He only intended on staying until April, May at the latest, and yet…

Here’s hoping. I miss you. You can’t get back soon enough. Bilbo grins wide and sleepy and buries his face into his pillow like a besotted teenager. He gets another message. Signal’s cutting out, we’re hiking up to the summit today. I’ll message you when we get back to the house. I love you.

I love you too. Be careful.
Even just that simple message leaves Bilbo feeling that much better, and he thinks, sometimes it really is that simple. He’s an avid hater of the idea that love fixes all problems, but he’ll subscribe to the idea that it helps. It really does. Bilbo loves his family, but Thorin has quickly become his main motivator in getting better. He doesn’t think he could ever forgive himself for what he did, but perhaps Thorin can. Perhaps he can soothe the pain in Bilbo’s chest every time he thinks about it.

It’s another hour before Bilbo gets out of bed and gets dressed.

“Right,” he says to himself as he pulls on his cardigan. “Time to go and be a real adult.”

- Mont Pelerin might just be Thorin’s favourite place in the world, or at least a close second to the comfort of his bed.

The crisp, cool air feels good on his face and the crackle of the cook fire eases the tension in his shoulders as he fries eggs for him and the boys. They’re all tired and hungry, but they’re camped on the edge of the forest that covers most of the mountain and looking out at Lake Geneva, illuminated by the setting sun. Thorin has a tin of watercolours and he can’t wait to paint what he sees before him, eggs be damned.

In all honesty, Dis sending the boys up for a long camping weekend was a brilliant idea. Thorin hasn’t had fun with Fili and Kili like this in years, and it’s refreshing enough to make him smile wistfully at the nature around him. The boys, of course, take it in their stride and set up their tent like pros, chatting about something Thorin doesn’t really follow along with. Some event back at home. He’s too busy making sure the eggs don’t burn in the pan to bother translating their conversation.

They eat, and after, Thorin paints quietly while the boys explore. Fili takes the torch and assures Thorin they’ll be careful, and Thorin lets them go, trusting them implicitly. The quiet calms him, as does the easy, familiar motion of a paintbrush in his hand.

Fili and Kili return mostly unharmed, save a few scrapes from the branches, and wolf down the snacks that they brought with them. Thorin is content to let them sit and talk, until Kili yawns and stretches and announces he’s going to bed. Thorin hugs him tight. Of all the people in the world, of all the people around him, he gives his affection more freely with the boys. It’s easy with them, he thinks. They’re mostly unharmed by the tragedies in their family. They want for nothing. Dis showers them with so much love that they don’t squirm away or play it off when Thorin hugs them like this, even if it’s over something small like going to bed. It warms his heart. It helps him breathe easier when they’re here. And without Bilbo, it’s a blessing, really.

Fili sits next to Thorin and goes through the photos on his camera. Thorin watches him. He looks so much like Frerin it’s astounding. He has Dis in him too, in his smile and the shape of his brow, his father in his grey eyes, but Frerin’s golden hair and tall, thin frame. He looks like Frerin, and sometimes he acts like him, but Fili is his own person. Thorin tries not to be, but he’s grateful for that. Where Frerin was pale gold and smoky black shadows, Fili is deep and rich, old gold, reminding Thorin of autumn.

“Any plans for the summer?” Thorin asks. Fili shrugs.

“Not much. Most of my friends are going on holiday, and Kili’s going away with Tauriel’s family for a week. I’ll probably just help mum out at the gallery,” he says. Thorin doesn’t miss the way his shoulders slump. Kili is a firecracker, shy but eager to meet new people. But Fili… he’s a
thoughtful soul. He’s quiet, withdrawn. He loves his camera and his sketchbooks as much as Thorin does.

“You’re welcome to stay here if you want,” Thorin offers gently.

“I don’t think you’ll want me here when Bilbo comes back,” Fili says. He looks at Thorin. He’s far too smart for his own good, but then again, he’s almost an adult. “Speaking of…”

“I don’t know when he’s coming back, Fili,” Thorin sighs. He leans back on his hands, staring up at the sky. So many stars, even this close to the city. It’s beautiful out here.

“Is he coming back?” Fili asks carefully. He glances at Thorin. It doesn’t hurt. It’s something Thorin has been asking himself for weeks now. He sighs again.

“I don’t know.”

“Do you love him?”

“I…” It’s an obvious answer. Thorin knows he loves Bilbo, heart and soul. He knows no one has ever, or will ever, make him feel the way Bilbo does. It strikes him in the chest like a lightning strike. Fulgurite, Thorin thinks absently. A natural phenomenon, sand struck by lightning and frozen into shape by the heat and force of it. His heart has turned to fulgurite. It aches. It’s permanent. “I do love him. A lot. Perhaps more than I should. And I’ll always have room for him here, no matter what happens. But it’s difficult. After what happened to him, it’s hard not to think about Frerin.”

Fili visibly flinches. Thorin still doesn’t know if how much Fili saw when they found Frerin in the bathtub, and he isn’t sure how to ask. He doesn’t want to, in truth. Something like that changes people so irrevocably it’s hard to imagine life before it.

“I like Bilbo,” Fili says after a long silence. Thorin smiles.

“Me too. I want him to come back,” he says. He breathes deep. “Fuck, I hope he comes back.”

Fili laughs, but his smile falters after a moment. “When I asked mum about Frerin a while ago, she said that he didn’t get the help he needed. No one knew he was gonna…” he trails off. Thorin is glad for that. “Anyway. She said that if he’d told somebody, it might not have happened. He might still be around.”

“Maybe. But he was unhappy for a long time. Frerin was never the kind of person to want to tell people things. Dis and I never knew how he was feeling until after he died, when we found his journals. Some people don’t want to be helped,” Thorin says. He looks down at his hands, flecks of orange and red on his fingers, faded tattoos on his knuckles. He feels Fili shift beside him, but he doesn’t look up.

“I saw him,” Fili says. Thorin’s gut drops and he closes his eyes, shaking his head. “I saw him when you opened the door. Only for a second, but…”

“I know,” Thorin says. He reaches out and puts his arm around Fili’s shoulders, pulling him close. “I know.” Fili shudders, but he doesn’t cry. Thorin doesn’t expect him to. He’s never been an emotive person. Emotional, yes, but not outwardly so. He just shakes and balls his fists and squeezes his eyes shut for a few minutes, working through his feelings, trying to process that trauma. He’s likely never said anything to his mother about it, or, god forbid, to Kili. Thorin pulls him in for a real hug and holds on tight until Fili disentangles himself minutes later, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand, sniffling and clenching his jaw. He doesn’t look at Thorin.
They sit there in silence until Fili says a quiet goodnight and slips into the tent, leaving Thorin alone. Alone, to think far too much about what just happened. Fili’s been living with that image in his head for years, not speaking a word of it to anybody, as befits a scared, shocked child. Thorin has been living with that image in his mind ever since he found Frerin. He can’t even imagine what it’s been doing to Fili all these years.

Thorin spends far too long sat by the fire. He waits until it dies down to nothing but faintly glowing embers before clambering into the tent and curling up in his sleeping bag, hearing the boys snoring softly. Usually, it lulls him to sleep when they go camping, but he hears the hitch of Fili’s breathing and his snuffles in the dark, and it keeps him up.

The next morning, after only a few hours of restless sleep, they head back down the mountain. It’s a quiet hike, Thorin falling back while Fili and Kili walk on ahead, chatting or singing or just walking side by side in silence. It’s the silence Thorin hates the most, as it allows him to think too long and too hard. And when the boys go home, he’ll be alone with his thoughts. For one wildly insane, selfish moment, he considers just living in the wilderness, leaving the house behind and never telling anybody where he’s going, never give any hint as to where he is. If he’s going to be alone, he’s going to do it right.

But the thought disappears as soon as it comes. No, Thorin thinks, picking up the pace to catch up with the boys. No, I can’t do that. I have responsibilities. I have things to do. I have a family.

“Are you talking to yourself?” Kili asks. Thorin is jolted from his thoughts.

“Probably,” he says. He runs a hand over his hair. It’s long enough to start to curl now. “Probably nothing interesting. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Kili says, and that’s all he says. He hikes his backpack up his shoulders and just keeps plodding on, looking around in that endlessly curious way children do. He’s sixteen next year, and almost an adult, like Fili, but to Thorin he will always be that chubby, hyperactive toddler sporting a mess of black curls, running around the back garden and catching moths in jars, collecting pretty crystals that Thorin now knows sit on his desk at home. Labradorite and quartz, obsidian and amethyst. Always the explorer, Thorin thinks, looking at him as he wanders slightly off the path to look at an old oak tree.

They get back to the house in the late afternoon and Fili and Kili both just straight in the shower, the latter hijacking Thorin’s own bathroom while Thorin goes about making them some tea. While it brews, he switches his phone back on and waits for his messages to come in - a few from Dis, one from Dwalin, and… three missed calls from Bilbo. Thorin frowns. He waits a moment, reading over his texts before he returns the call. Bilbo picks up on the third ring.

“Are you okay?” Thorin asks, his stomach twisting in knots. Every time he misses a call from Bilbo, he descends into a state of detached anxiety. He knows that, logically, he’s fine, and he’s in a place where he’s more or less constantly monitored. But there’s a part of his brain that always worries.

“I’m fine! I’m fine, sorry, I forgot you were hiking. How was it?” Bilbo says on the other end. His voice is somewhat drowned out by the wind. He must be outside.

“It was good. We had a good time. What’s up?” Thorin says. He removes the tea bags from the mugs and puts his phone down, setting it on loudspeaker so he can move around and talk at the same time.

“I talked to Lindir this morning,” Bilbo says. He sounds calm. Relaxed. It eases the knots in Thorin’s stomach.
“I thought you only saw him on Thursdays and Mondays?” Thorin asks.

“I do. But he called me in about two hours ago before he left for the weekend. He said it might be better if I come back to Switzerland,” Bilbo says slowly, carefully. Thorin can picture him sitting on one of the low stone walls he saw around Oak Manor, a thermos of tea by his side, wrapped up in one of his old cardigans. The wind will be pushing his hair in all sorts of directions, tangling the curls and making him squint a little. The image is heartwarming, to say the least. “On the condition that I go to therapy in Vevey.”

“Okay,” Thorin says. He exhales a sigh of relief and leans against the counter. “What did you say?”

“I said I’d be okay with that, driving and all. But it might take a while. Legalities and all, sorting out a new visa, that kind of thing. I can’t just… move to Switzerland without notice, and I’ve only been here for three weeks,” Bilbo says.

“So…” Thorin trails off, wanting Bilbo to continue.

“So, it means I’ll be here for a little longer, but once I’m discharged and in the clear, I should be good to go. I can finally come home,” Bilbo says softly. Thorin smiles. The house has been far too empty without Bilbo in it. He still can’t believe he sided with his own grief and loneliness all these years, instead of reaching out and finding people to get close to. “Thorin?”

“Sorry. Internally monologuing. That’s great, I can look around for a therapist in the city,” Thorin says. His mind is already going at a million miles a minute, planning and preparing, and he finds his current sketchbook on the kitchen table. He starts scribbling things down - look for a therapist, make sure Bilbo takes his medication, book a holiday to France.

“That’d be fantastic. I plan on coming back before the exhibition, anyway,” Bilbo says. His voice grows impossibly soft and gentle, and he sighs. “I wish you were here, Thorin. It’s so beautiful. It looks like it could be one of your paintings.”

“Send me a picture,” Thorin says. Bilbo laughs.

“Later. I need to go, it’s getting cold,” he says. There’s a bit of shuffling on the other end. “I’ll call you when I can and update you on any developments. With a bit of luck, I’ll be home by the end of the month.”

“We deserve some luck right about now,” Thorin says quietly. He turns and sees Fili drying off his hair with a towel, and hands him his mug of tea. “I have to go. Teenagers to look after, you know, it’s not an easy business.”

Bilbo laughs, and Fili scowls, but it’s soon replaced by a knowing smile. He wanders off into the living room.

“No, I don’t suppose it is. Take care of yourself, Thorin,” Bilbo says.

“You too. I love you.”

“I love you too. I’ll send you that picture.”

Bilbo hangs up. Not a minute later, a message comes through from him. When Thorin opens it up, he sees a patchwork of farmland and a village in the distance, all from the top of the hill Bilbo is at. Oak Manor is on the side of a large hill, a beautiful Edwardian house surrounded by gardens and open fields. But this is the view that Thorin prefers to a house that looks straight out of Downton
Abbey. It looks exactly like something he would paint.

Kili comes in and grabs his tea, and joins his brother on the sofa, where they’ve already started some superhero movie with snacks that came from god knows where. Thorin turns to leave, but he meets Fili’s eye first. Fili nods at him and smiles conspiratorially. Thorin thinks of their conversation last night, and the way Fili shook and trembled as he worked through his emotions. Thorin smiles back and slips into his bedroom to let the boys watch their movie in peace.

He doesn’t get much research done. He sees the boys eat something substantial and go to bed at a reasonable time and checks with Dis when she’s picking them up, and what that’s all done and he’s got a sandwich in him, he returns to his bedroom with his sketchbook and props it up on his knees, his phone by his side, headphones in his ears.

Since finishing the exhibition work, Thorin hasn’t found much time to just aimlessly sketch. It’s always been therapeutic for him, not even having to think too much about the shapes he’s creating and the image forming on the page. He draws flowers and trees, returning to his roots, in a way, with nature drawing. It had been bland and boring to him a few months ago. It’s refreshing now. He doesn’t think too hard, he doesn’t dwell on his conversation with Fili, he tries not to get too excited about Bilbo maybe coming home. He shapes the curve of the Matterhorn and surrounds it with pines, not entirely accurate, but pretty nonetheless. He even draws some figures, vaguely fantasy-esque in appearance, walking through the woods, holding lanterns before them. He pauses. Frerin always said he could have been an illustrator.

Dis picks up the boys the next morning, and without them, the house is silent. Too much so. Thorin puts on some music and cleans up, does his washing, makes his bed like a real adult. He goes into Vevey and picks up some groceries, and when he comes home, he just wants to sit down and relax for five minutes without anybody trying to reach him.

He’s granted his wish, and he naps on the sofa, only to wake at an ungodly hour with early morning light, pale and cold, filtering in through the open balcony. It seems he wakes up like this every other day, alone and slightly disoriented, rarely in his own bed. He’s gotten in the habit of falling asleep on the sofa and leaving the balcony door open. The cold air calms him, makes him feel like he’s been cleansed, in a way. It’s the same kind of catharsis as standing under a hot shower or swimming in the sea at night.

Thorin makes his coffee and closes the balcony door, shutting himself inside his home and busying himself with washing, tidying, things he doesn’t even need to do, really. Anything to make his mind blank and focused on the menial tasks at hand. But his anxiety rears its ugly head the whole weekend, and come Monday, he hasn’t heard anything from anybody. Nothing from Dis, or Fili, or Bilbo. Not even Dwalin, who keeps sending Thorin pictures of the studio’s refurbishment, with not-so-subtle hints at coming back down and getting some more ink. Thorin has some space on his back he’s been meaning to fill in for a few years now, maybe he’ll take up the offer…

He waits until Wednesday to hear more from Bilbo than just a handful of texts. He gets a call as he’s sat by the lake in Vevey, eating a cheap crepe smothered in peanut butter. The sun is going down, the streets quiet, the waterfront almost empty. Tourist season will come soon and Vevey will be flooded with holidaymakers looking for a bite-size piece of Switzerland to swallow before going back home.

Thorin is jerked out of his inner monologue by Bilbo’s ringtone - *Whole Lotta Love*, as it happens - and fumbles to answer it with one hand, while holding onto his crepe with the other. He manages well enough, with minimal damage.

“Hey,” he says breathlessly.
“I didn’t interrupt you, did I?” Bilbo asks, a distinct teasing edge to his voice. Thorin’s cheeks flush. He smiles.

“Just me and my crepe. How are you?” he asks.

“I’m good! I’m great. Sorry for the radio silence, the signal isn’t great in the fields. They’re finally letting me out long enough to go for walks on my own,” Bilbo says. Thorin exhales in relief. He puts his crepe to the side.

“How’d it go with Lindir?” he asks.

“That’s what I’m calling you about. We agreed I should come back as soon as I can, as long as I take my medication and see a therapist. I feel like we discussed this already,” Bilbo says.

“We did. But… it’s really happening?” Thorin asks, somewhat hopeful, and much more hopeless, so suddenly scared he curls in on himself, eyes fixed on the water before him.

“Yes,” Bilbo says. Thorin chokes on his relief. “In a couple of weeks.”

“God…”

“I know. It’s a lot,” Bilbo says, so gently.

“Do you want me to pick you up?” Thorin asks. The crepe doesn’t matter anymore. He’s already planning the trip to the airport, even England, if need be. But Bilbo laughs softly and Thorin’s worries drift away at the sound. He’s heard dry chuckles and half-laughs since leaving England, but he hasn’t heard Bilbo actually laugh since they had dinner at Mirabella and Gorbodoc’s house. He forgot how much he loved it.

“I could do with a ride,” Bilbo says. The ridiculousness of it all hits Thorin and he leans back, stretches out, tipping his head up to the sky. He grins wide and happy, for what feels like the first time in years.

“You have me,” Thorin says.

“I know. I’ll be home soon. And I estimate we’ll have maybe three days of peace before your sister rains hell on both of us to get to Marseilles,” Bilbo says.

“Probably. But a lot can be done in three days,” Thorin says.

“Easy, tiger. I’m delicate, remember?”

“You’re anything but delicate. This whole ordeal proves that.”

“It has been kind of an ordeal, hasn’t it? God, Thorin, I can’t even say how sorry I am about all this. You don’t… you don’t deserve any of it,” Bilbo says. His voice cracks and Thorin feels as if his heart does the same. He knows that guilt, he’s felt that guilt, he’s lived with it for five long, agonising years. It’s only recently that it’s started to melt away. “I never wanted to fuck things up this badly.”

“You didn’t fuck anything up, Bilbo. I knew what you were going through before I even met you, I would never expect you to be perfect,” Thorin says. Bilbo exhales raggedly. Thorin can picture him pinching the bridge of his nose, ruffling his own hair, eyes fixed on the floor in that dull way he does. Thorin hates that look. He’s miles away, though, and he can’t pull Bilbo close and ease his sorrows.
“God, you’re perfect, you know that right?” Bilbo says. He sounds like he’s on the verge of tears. Thorin’s chest aches for him. “How did I deserve you?”

“A mess of bad luck. But… I’m glad you’re coming home. To me. We should go away somewhere, maybe… if you want to, that is. Your choice,” Thorin says. He stammers like a nervous teenager. He can’t stop smiling like one, either, butterflies in his stomach be damned. It’s a good feeling.

“You know, there’s a village in Italy I’ve wanted to see for a while,” Bilbo says. There’s an edge of sadness there, but Thorin doesn’t pry. It’s not the time. It’s not the place.

“We’ll talk about it when you’re home,” Thorin says.

“Alright. I should go. I think they’re trying to put a curfew on me, let’s not see how strictly they want to enforce it,” Bilbo says. Thorin knows he’s trying to lighten the mood, but it doesn’t quite work. He just smiles to himself and nods.

“Alright. I need to head back, anyway,” he says. Bilbo sighs.

“This is such a mess.”

“We’ll fix it.”

“You don’t know that.”

“No. But I’m all for effort if you are.”

“You know I am, Thorin. It’s just… messy.” Bilbo is probably frowning. Thorin wishes he was there to kiss it away.

“So am I. We’re quite a fit, aren’t we?” he says.

“Like a damn puzzle,” Bilbo says. “A messy, fucked up, broken puzzle.”

“I’ll drink to that. Goodnight, Bilbo.”

“Night, Thorin.” Bilbo pauses. He’s probably got his thumbnail between his teeth. “I love you.”

“Love you too.”

The line cuts and Thorin is left listening to nothing but the gentle push and pull of Lake Geneva against the banks of Vevey. He sits a moment, taking it in, letting it all settle in his mind. Bilbo is coming home. Home. All the way back to Switzerland, with Thorin, where he belongs. It’s almost too good to be true. He knows it’s a lot, but he’s willing to put in the effort. He wants this to work. He can’t lose anybody else, not again, not after what he’s seen. It will be seared into his memory forever, the look of pure self-loathing and hopelessness when Bilbo first went for the knife. But other things, he will remember too. His voice. His hazel eyes. The warmth of his skin. All good things, and none of them yet corrupted in his mind. He hopes they never will be.

Time will tell, he thinks, and walks off, back towards his car. He has a house to prepare, after all.
probably two more chapters left, hopefully i'll finish this before the end of this century.
if i don't just make up your own ending.
a few updates: im preparing to go to university in winchester come september, so after
that, i doubt ill have much time to write fic. i want to work on to the ocean, but i might
just write the whole thing first and drop a chapter every week or so for the Drama of it
all. my anxiety and depression have become a lot better to handle which makes writing
sooooo much easier for me!
also you can tell i struggle with thorins pov lmao
anyway, find me on tumblr @oakhenshield. love you all, mwah
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

"Airports see more sincere kisses than wedding halls. The walls of hospitals have heard more prayers than the walls of churches."

Chapter Notes

cw: messy writing, blowjobs, handjobs, the usual

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Time, Bilbo finds, is relative.

Now, he’s never been a left-brained person. He functions on a mental system of one part creative improvisation, three parts screaming inside and hoping for the best. It’s served him well, even if he’s always been prone to the odd strange adventure, and has never quite fit in, no matter where he goes. That kind of mental outlook has made it so that the world turns infinitely and never seems to stop, time flying by so fast yet feeling like a lifetime. His initial stay in Switzerland is testament to that, he thinks. It was only a few months, yet it felt like a lifetime, and upon returning to England, he was disoriented by everything around him. At the time, it had gone by in a blink, despite everything that happened.

In Oak Manor, counting the days until his departure, after getting the all clear from Lindir and sorting out his long-term visa and residency permit, is excruciatingly slow. Time is like molasses those last few days, viscous and sickly sweet. Bilbo can’t focus on reading, and food tastes like dust, his anxiety boiling up in his gut. His body aches for the burn of walking around the gentle mountain and for brisk mountain winds in his hair and against his skin. He will not miss England. He will miss Prim, and Mira, and Drogo and Frodo and Gorbodoc, the handful of people he cares about on this accursed island. He can count on one hand with fingers to spare the bad things that have happened to him in Switzerland; he’s lost count for England by now.

But still, Bilbo takes the time to hike out along the ground on his last day and just sits quietly at the crest of the hill. It’s early morning, the sun is warm, and the world is still turning, by some divine miracle. The world turns. Bilbo is still breathing. He’s going home.

None of it feels quite real to him. It’s like somebody has been repeatedly pressing the randomise button on his life whenever he gets far too comfortable. That would certainly explain things, he thinks. Bilbo misses when his life was boring, and on days like this he can appreciate the tiny little bite sized pieces he can get of it.

But when things were dull and scheduled and rehearsed, Bilbo had missed the colour and adventure he had once sought out. He’s never been able to find a good balance before, but it was easy in Switzerland. He was surrounded by beautiful mountains, a stone's throw from a gorgeous city, in the company of a man so broken and yet so bright that his light seeps through the cracks and makes them seem obsolete in comparison. He bleeds colour and beauty, and Bilbo is so in love
it hurts. His head, his heart, his entire being is so irrevocably changed by Thorin that he almost dreads the idea of their bond tearing, like frayed rope, should things be tense and awkward when he returns. He can’t ever imagine losing Thorin now. It’s only been, what, five months since he first went to Switzerland? But that’s more than enough time to fall, and to fall hard.

The reality of it all doesn’t fully hit Bilbo until he’s walking back down to the building. The low sun is reflecting off of the small windows and illuminates the soft golden brick where it’s nestled in a more level area of the hill. His breath catches in his throat. Hopefully, this will be the last time he will ever see Oak Manor like this, but it strikes him so deeply that he has to stop and take it in. He’d lived here for almost two months, only earlier this year, and these last few weeks have reminded him of just how lucky he is to be able to afford mental healthcare like this. He silently thanks his parents for being so good with their money. The handful of days he spent as an NHS inpatient had been hellish, and it’s only because of Gandalf and his parents wealth that he was able to come here.

He’s luckier than most, he knows. And he’s luckier than he ever thought he was. He’s loved. He’s safe. And if he puts the effort in, he’ll be okay, he thinks. Maybe. Recovery isn’t linear and it’s something he hasn’t realised until recently, and he has to put in the effort himself. Medication and therapy can only go so far. Bilbo has met people who refuse to be helped, no matter how many chances they get, and it truly breaks his heart thinking that not only have they given up on themselves, but that the system will quickly give up on them. There’s not much you can do for somebody who refuses to try.

Bilbo takes his phone out and snaps a picture. He doesn’t send it to Thorin. Bilbo will be flying back out at a sinfully early hour tomorrow morning. He isn’t sure what he could say to Thorin, after everything. It will be easier once they’re together, in the flesh. Bilbo can only say so much through a few lines of text, and even hearing Thorin’s voice on the phone isn’t quite the same as hearing it in person. The day can’t go by quick enough, but Bilbo has a late, last session with Lindir and he intends on making the most of it.

Bilbo packs his meagre belongings into his suitcase and makes his bed the way Belladonna taught him. Corners tucked in tight, pillows flat, the top of the cover folded slightly at the top. He leaves his suitcase by the bed and sits out in the common room, journal on his lap and pen tapping against his lips. He’s been doodling for a few days, but he’s not much of an artist, and he’ll be asking Thorin about it soon enough anyway. The geometric patterns are off-centre and asymmetrical, but he knows in his mind exactly what he’s trying to draw.

The idea came to him when he was talking to Dis, about Dwalin renovating his tattoo studio. He knows that some people tattoo over their scars to hide the past and to forget, and the idea appeals to him in a way he can’t explain. It will be years before he will be able to safely get it, but he’s not one for leaving things until the last minute. Besides. It gives him plenty of time to settle, to recover, to be ready for something like that. He doesn’t know if he can go back to teaching full time the way he did before. He doesn’t know how therapy in Switzerland will go. He doesn’t know what the future holds for him and Thorin. But he’s ready for it all. He’s ready to get back to the peaceful life the months before gave him, and he’s ready to figure things out from there.

Lindir welcomes him into his office with a peaceful smile.

“Hopefully this time, this will be our last session,” he says as he sits down. Bilbo smiles, laughs. He manages to sit without being swallowed up by the armchair. “How are you feeling?”

“That’s better than any other alternative. You’ve made a remarkable amount of progress these last few weeks. How are your nightmares?” Lindir asks. He hasn’t got his pen or his notebook on his lap. Bilbo knows then that this is his last chance to unload everything he’s carried in England before he starts again on the mainland. He exhales raggedly.

“They’re… nightmarish. Not as frequent, but still pretty bad. I still see the same things. My mum when she died, my dad shouting at me, my first attempt. All that good stuff, you know?” Bilbo says. He twists the hem of his shirt nervously. “But they’re nowhere near as bad as they were the first time around. And I don’t have panic attacks when I wake up anymore.”

“That’s good. Very good. And your panic attacks? Low mood? How has that been?”

“Much easier to handle. I can get dressed without panicking too much, and I don’t think I’m as depressed as I was. I think I’ve always been the type of person who needs a kick up the arse to actually get myself into gear,” Bilbo says.

“That would explain a lot of things,” Lindir says.

“What can I say, I’m stubborn,” Bilbo says dryly. “But I think I got that when Dis visited me - Thorin’s sister. She gave me the invitation to his exhibition in a few weeks time. I wanted to go home before then, and I’m getting what I want. It feels kind of weird.”

“Weird how?” Lindir frowns.

“I’ve been waiting for everything to blow up in my face since I went to Switzerland. When Thorin and I first… you know… I was waiting for it to go badly, or for me to fuck it all up somehow. Even when I did, Thorin’s still there for me. I don’t really know why,” Bilbo says.

“Did you ever consider he’s standing beside you because he loves you?” Lindir asks.

“I know he does. Not a reason to stand by somebody when they’ve put you through a lot of pain, though, is it?”

“Perhaps not. But love makes people do unexpected things. And you’ve done nothing wrong,” Lindir says. Bilbo opens his mouth to protest, but Lindir holds up his hand. “You have suffered a lot, Bilbo. Anyone who can stay standing after what you’ve been through, no matter how often you stumble, is incredibly brave. When you were here before, I was hopeful that Switzerland would be good for you. It was, and you only relapsed when you came back to say goodbye to your childhood home. Something like that - addressing what remains of your parents and the trauma you suffered when you lost them - was bound to have a big impact on you, either positive or negative. You can’t blame yourself for something that is a normal human reaction when it comes to reliving a traumatic experience.”

Bilbo can’t think of anything to say to that. He’s never quite been shut down like that in his life, and never so eloquently, but the fact that Lindir had done it relieved him somewhat. If anyone was going to look him in the eye and tell him the truth of it all, he’s glad it’s Lindir. No one else could put it so well and strike such realisation into Bilbo in so few words.

But Bilbo doesn’t break. He grits his teeth, as he always has.

“I love my family,” he says slowly, carefully, weighing every word. “I love them so much, they’ve sacrificed so much of their time for me over the last couple of years and I’ll never be able to repay them. I love them, but there’s nothing else for me in England. My parents died here. I tried to kill myself here - twice. I’ve never been happier than I am in Switzerland, with Thorin, with his
family. I don’t feel guilty about that anymore.”

“You shouldn’t. They make you happy. That’s all that should matter,” Lindir says.

“I know,” Bilbo says.

“Is there anything in particular you’d like to talk about?” Lindir asks. Bilbo shrugs. It feels suddenly like the last time he was here, before he went to Switzerland. He’d talked about the crash for the first time. This time, he’s been more open with Lindir, knowing he needs to tell the truth of what happened and what’s going through his mind. He’s never been good at outright honesty. But it’s helped. By god, has it helped these last few months.

“I’m thinking about covering up my scar with a tattoo,” he says at last. It’s the only thing he can think of to say, and to his surprise, Lindir smiles. Not one of his usual, peaceful smiles, but a genuine smile, showing teeth and a dimple on the left side of his face. It’s strangely endearing. Bilbo briefly wonders what his story is, then decides he doesn’t want to know. He’s leaving this life behind, Lindir included.

“There’s a lot of interesting psychology behind that,” Lindir says at last, still smiling.

“I know,” Bilbo says. “But I don’t want to look at it anymore. That’s the only reason, really. There’s no other reason, and I’d rather get another tattoo than look at it longer than I have to. It’s ugly. It’s a reminder of everything I’ve been through. I just want it to disappear.”

“It’s a healthy way of moving on. I think it’s a good idea for you,” Lindir says. He leans over to the table by his chair and for a second, Bilbo is scared he’s going to pick up that damn notebook. Instead, Lindir just picks up his coffee and takes a sip. Bilbo hadn’t even noticed the mug was there. “I’ve been in contact with some therapists in Vevey. One of them is a friend of mine, she said she would be happy to accommodate you, and I could transfer my notes to her. Her name’s Arwen.”

“That… that would be fantastic,” Bilbo says.

“See how you get along with her, first, obviously. But I think you would do well with her. She has a very patient approach to helping her clients, and she’s very affordable,” Lindir says.

“Thank you. I wouldn’t have known where to start looking, if I’m honest. And I know the drive there and back is going to be difficult, but it’s all part of the process, isn’t it?” Bilbo says. He pulls his sleeves down over his hands, then remembers it’s one of Thorin’s old jumpers that shrank in the wash. It’s still too long for Bilbo, but he loves it. The deep green threaded with gold and blue and red reminds him of home. A fitting thing to wear on his last day, he thinks.

“It is.” Lindir hesitates, nursing his coffee. “Where do you see yourself in a year, Bilbo?”

Bilbo shakes his head.

“I don’t know. Alive, hopefully. Maybe not quite thriving. Still in Switzerland. Maybe thinking about going back to teaching, once I’ve pulled myself together,” Bilbo says. It’s not all positive when he looks ahead and thinks months, years from now, but that’s just how life is, he supposes. Good things and bad things in a disgusting chaotic mess. He has a little bit of an epiphany in that chair, though. His life is never going to be easy, not after what happened. He’ll probably try again at some point down the line in some way or another, or he’ll develop a bad habit he’ll struggle to quit, maybe he’ll descend into full on agoraphobia or obsessive compulsivity. Something. Anything could happen.
It’s not beautiful, it’s not meaningful, and it’s not some kind of spiritual experience. This pain - the grief, the shame, the guilt - it just hurts. And it’s hurt for so long Bilbo realises he’s forgotten how to be a person, with hopes and wants, outside of his own recovery. But he has a chance now for redemption and he’s going to take it, come whatever may.

“I think I’d like to go back to teaching,” Bilbo says after a long pause. “Maybe not in a university capacity, not yet, but on a part time basis. I have a TEFL degree, I could teach English anywhere. Just not right now, you know?”

“I know. Right now, the most important thing is patience. Go to the exhibition, enjoy your time with Thorin, work things out in your own time. It won’t be instantaneous and it might be gruelling, but you’ll get there if you put in the work,” Lindir says.

“And I intend to,” Bilbo says.

“Good. I’m glad to hear it, Bilbo. This hasn’t been easy, but from what I can tell, you’re not one to let life get in the way of what you truly want,” Lindir says. He drinks more coffee, looks away, crosses his legs. “Is there anything else you’d like to discuss today? It’s your last session. I’d like to end this on a good note.”

Bilbo shrugs. He doesn’t feel… empty, per se. More like he’s finally cleansed himself of everything rancid and infected deep inside of him. He vaguely remembers Belladonna going in for a hysterectomy, and, while the metaphor is disgusting in his head, he almost feels like a draining seroma post-surgery.

“I think… I think I’m going to be okay. That’s all I can hope for, after everything,” Bilbo says simply. Lindir nods like he’s said something profound, not something incredibly simple and realistic.

“And if you’re ever back in Cornwall…”

“Don’t come back?” Bilbo suggests, and Lindir laughs.

“With any luck I’ll never see you again, at least not in this room, under these circumstances.”

“God I hope so.” They both laugh, and Bilbo feels considerably lighter than he did upon walking in. There’s peace in finality. Even if he will be going to yet another therapist in Vevey, he’s confident that his time with Lindir was not wasted, nor did he ever take the piss, to put it oh so elegantly. “So I guess this is it.”

“If you have nothing else to discuss here, I’m happy to end our last session early. I hear you leave very early tomorrow morning.” It’s more of a politely phrased question.

“My flight is at ten, I leave at seven. Up at about six, the earliest I’ve woken up in months,” Bilbo says. He fiddles with the jumper sleeves. If he buries his face in the collar, it almost smells like Thorin still, his fancy French cologne far too expensive for Bilbo to think about. It matches the colours of the jumper, he thinks.

“A long day ahead, then,” Lindir says.

“Yeah, I want to get a decent nights sleep in me before I head home,” Bilbo says.

“Home?”

“It’s home. Not England, but the house. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.”
Lindir nods.

“Well, that’s good to hear, Bilbo. Truly. I wish you the best,” he says. He stands and Bilbo follows. They shake hands. “Look after yourself, will you?”

“I will. Thank you, Lindir. For everything.”

It’s over as easy as that. Bilbo walks out of the room and back through the house, his chest less constricted, his breathing easier. That guilt is still there in the pit of his stomach, but it will never truly go away, he knows that. Instead of dwelling, Bilbo just goes back to his bedroom and sits on the bed, looking around, unsure of what to do. It’s early. His things are packed. His passport is ready, his documents organised, his carry on book resting on his bedside table. There’s little for him to do now except to wait.

Bilbo is not good at waiting, but wait he does, and morning comes after a restless sleep. Prim picks him up after a long drive from her new house and she hugs him tight when she sees him, burying her face into his shoulder. Bilbo has seen her only a couple of times since being admitted, but he’s glad she didn’t take too much time away from her family just to see him. She had made a point of taking the day off work to pick him up and drive him to the airport, though, and Bilbo can’t think of a better way to say goodbye.

It’s not forever. Good god, he hopes it’s not forever. Prim is easy to talk to, her voice and her music helping Bilbo calm down as they drive away from Oak Manor. Cars will never be easy for him, not anymore, but things have changed. He’s not itching to claw his own skin off as he’s strapped into the passenger seat, drinking coffee from Prim’s thermos. His carry on bag is nestled between his feet, his phone charged and his documents ready. Bilbo watches Oak Manor disappear into the background and hopes it’s the last time he will ever see it. He made no friends there - not that he wanted to. He’d left with no goodbyes. That’s truly the best he can hope for in his situation. Clean cut departures and a new life on the horizon. In truth, he’d thought he would be there much longer, or at least transferred somewhere else for the foreseeable future. But no, Bilbo is finally going home after waiting for so long.

“Any plans for when you get back?” Prim asks. They’re nearing the airport. Bilbo’s flight is only in two and a half hours, but he has plenty of time.


“I’ll have to come and see you some time. Not just for the coffee,” Prim says.

“Sure, not just for the coffee.”

“Shut it, you. I’m a mother, it’s my lifeforce.” Prim glances at her phone, giving the directions to the airport. “Seriously though, think I could visit one day?”

“It’s not my house. You’d have to take it up with Thorin, though I doubt he’d say no. He’s not much of a recluse these days,” Bilbo says. He looks out of the window. There is no rain. Something about British rain has always soured his mood.

“And that’s thanks to…?”

“Yes, it’s entirely my doing,” Bilbo says. He rolls his eyes. “He has a family, you know. A sister, two nephews, about a thousand cousins. He had help.”

“Sounds like our family, to be honest. I bet they’re fun,” Prim says.

“They are. Well, the ones I’ve met. Kili’s birthday party was loud,” Bilbo says. He remembers it
vividly, he and Thorin gravitating towards each other, Kili and Tauriel never leaving each others sides, Thorin’s cousins walking around like they were there all the time and at least ten conversations going on at once, all between fourteen people, maximum. It’s something Bilbo will never forget. The memory makes him smile. “They’re a good family. They care about each other.”

“Sounds nice. I wonder what that’s like,” Prim says.

“I know. Our family has never been too great, has it? Why do you think I ran off as soon as I could?” Bilbo asks.

“Oh, yeah, no, I totally get it. We moved several counties over, remember? We’re in a new town and no one knows where we are except dad and Mira. And you, obviously. It’s a nice little protective bubble, no unwelcome visitors, no cousins to avoid on the streets,” Prim says. She sighs wistfully. For a second, she looks so much like Mirabella that Bilbo has to remind himself that they’re not blood related. She has similar dark, curly hair, though hers is shorter and held back at the temples with clips, and her eyes are lighter, her nose straighter and stronger. There’s a tiny bump on the bridge from when she broke it, though, and Bilbo remembers the day. They were thirteen and in school, playing rounders in PE. Prim was hit so hard that her nose broke and she had to get it surgically fixed.

Bilbo falls silent and stares out of the window.

They get to the airport all too soon and Prim refuses to go until he’s all checked in and ready to board. It’s quick and effortless, and Bilbo has his suitcase checked and tagged and taken away within about ten minutes. Prim hangs back and gets herself an overpriced lunch to eat on the road, and soon, they have to say goodbye.

Bilbo hugs her tight, and she hugs back tighter, threatening to break his ribs with the sheer force of her strength.

“Let me know when you’re home,” she says into his neck. Bilbo squeezes her extra tight at that. He smiles and lets go, reluctant but glad for the strength to follow through.

“Same to you. Give Frodo a kiss from me,” he says.

“I’d say the same about Thorin, but…” Prim shrugs and waves her overprices Upper Crust sandwich as she steps back. Bilbo laughs.

“Yeah, no, let’s not go there,” he says.

“Get your ass through security before I hug you again,” Prim says.

“Alright, alright, I’m going. I’m gone. Love you, Prim,” Bilbo calls as he walks away.

“Love you too!”

Just like that, she’s gone, and Bilbo is alone in the airport, easily finding his way to security and taking his time to get through. Shoes, phone, bag, it’s all scanned and given the all clear, and then he’s sat in an uncomfortable seat, watching a screen and waiting for his gate to be announced. It seems to take forever and Bilbo plays with his phone, twirling it in his hand and checking the time what feels like every five seconds. This has always been his least favourite part of travelling.

Like in Oak Manor, time slows to a steady drip in the airport waiting area. Bilbo keeps an eye on the screen and waits as patiently as he can. Only a couple of hours and then you’re home, he thinks. He imagines Thorin driving to Geneva International and sitting, waiting, as close to the
baggage claim as he can. He’ll probably have his sketchbook, knowing him, though Bilbo doubts he’d even get much done. When Thorin is stressed, he either can’t draw or he draws too much. The thought is enough to make Bilbo worry, and then, he can’t really take it much longer.

He calls Thorin. He gets his voicemail. This is Thorin Durin, please leave a message.

“Hey,” Bilbo says softly. “You’re probably driving right now, but I’m at the airport and I’ll be boarding soon. I’ll text you when I’m on the plane. Drive safe and I’ll see you in Geneva, okay? I love you.”

Bilbo hangs up and lets his phone rest on his knee. He looks up at the screen. Still no gate. His phone pings and he looks back down, sees a text from Thorin.

I’m driving at the moment. I’ll be in Geneva before you, I’ll see you there. Love you.

It’s enough to make Bilbo’s chest swarm with butterflies. It feels like far too long since he’s seen Thorin in the flesh. Phone calls don’t really cut it when you’re head over heels and a sea and several countries away from each other. Bilbo is ready for home, and all it entails. Even Thorin’s snoring.

His gate is called and Bilbo makes his way down. He boards and sits by the window, sends Thorin a text, and settles in. There’s little else he can do. Time is still slow and Bilbo closes his eyes, leaning against the wall of the plane and not even moving as it begins to take off. It’s only an hour and a half or so. Bilbo dozes through it, unable to truly sleep and too tired to stay entirely conscious. The passenger beside him is an old man doing his crossword and drinking wine from one of those tiny plastic plane cups, at the fine time of ten-thirty in the morning, but Bilbo doesn’t have it in him to judge. He watches through half-closed eyes as the man finishes his crossword and breaks out a battered old paperback, his wire rimmed glasses perched on the end of his nose. Bilbo’s eyes slide out of focus and he watches the man the rest of the flight, unable to let his mind truly settle on anything else.

Bilbo jolts when the plane lands. He looks out of the window and grips the arm rests, seeing the typical block grey surroundings of an airport. But, it’s unmistakably Switzerland, going by the rise of mountains Bilbo sees from the window, snow capped and gleaming in the early summer sun. He grins and sighs, sinking back into his seat, ignoring the look he gets from the man beside him. Bilbo hides it well, but the joy at simply just being in Switzerland bubbles up and makes him smile uncontrollably. He covers his mouth with his hand as he waits for the captain to tell them to get off, and waits for most others to get off before he leaves, hiking his satchel up his shoulder and finding his phone in his bag. There’s a text from Thorin from an hour ago, saying he’ll be waiting in the foyer, and Bilbo can’t get through customs fast enough. He’s restless in the queue and impatient as his documents are looked over, but once that’s all done, he all but sprints to the baggage claim, finding his suitcase as quickly as he can and hightailing it out in record time. He’s breathless once he gets to the waiting area and looks around, trying to spot any sign of Thorin - tall, dark, hopeless Thorin, probably wearing his paint stained jeans and a generous beard, tapping his foot against the linoleum and waiting. Bilbo’s gut drops at the thought of Thorin not coming, or leaving because the flight took too long, but that familiar voice calls out before the anxiety inducing dread can truly take root, and his heart feels like it’s beating again for the first time in months.

“Bilbo.” Thorin is there, walking towards him, towering over the people around him as he smiles. Bilbo is rooted to the spot and lets go of his suitcase, praying no one will steal it now it’s not secure in his grip. Thorin politely pushes past a group of tourists and approaches Bilbo. He is wearing those damned jeans, and his Metallica t-shirt, and his leather combat boots that are likely
older than both of his nephews. His hair has grown out some and his beard is thick, dark, speckled with grey.

He’s lovely. Bilbo can’t help himself.

It’s a miracle Thorin is as strong as he is, because he manages to lift Bilbo as they kiss for the first time in what feels like forever, only they’re half giggling into it, too. Bilbo can’t find it in him to care about the people around them, not when Thorin’s beard scratches his face and his cologne smells so good and he’s here, and Bilbo is almost home.

Eventually, Thorin sets him down and pulls him into a long overdue bear hug, encompassing him entirely in his arms. Bilbo presses his face to Thorin’s chest and digs his fingers into his back and holds him there. A hand strokes his hair and tilts his face back, and Bilbo grins when he looks up at Thorin’s face.

“Hey,” he says. Thorin cups his face and leans down, kissing him again.

“Hey yourself,” Thorin all but whispers against his lips. He pulls away. “Flight okay?”

“Yeah. It was great. Can we go?” Bilbo asks. Thorin nods silently and takes Bilbo’s suitcase before he can protest. His arm comes around Bilbo’s shoulders and squeezes him tight. Bilbo fights the flush in his cheeks when Thorin drops a kiss to the top of his head, but in truth he really doesn’t care who sees them. He’s waited this long. He’s not about to be ashamed or reserved now, not when Thorin is here, all tall and wonderful beside him. Butterflies pick up like a hurricane in his stomach when they step out and head towards the car park. It’s the first time in a long time since Bilbo has genuinely looked forward to a car ride. Seeing Switzerland, the countryside, the mountains and the hills and the tiny shoebox villages, next to Thorin at last, it’ll be a balm on his soul. A well needed balm.

Like the polite, charming man he sometimes is, Thorin opens the car door for him and takes care of his luggage. Bilbo hides his smile behind his hand as Thorin starts the car, heavy metal coming from the speakers. He doesn’t recognise the band and he doesn’t care. It’s so Thorin that he can’t care.

“You okay?” Thorin asks. He reaches over and takes Bilbo’s hand. Oh, his skin is so warm, his palm wonderfully calloused, stained with ink. Bilbo grips Thorin’s hand and brings it up to kiss his knuckles.

“I’m great, Thorin,” he says. “Really. I’m just happy to be back.” Bilbo nuzzles against Thorin’s hand, public displays of affection be damned. Thorin shifts and takes Bilbo’s face in his hands. They should be getting a move on, but with Thorin staring at him so intently, brows furrowed and lips parted, it’s hard to pull away. It’s hard to say no.

“I’m just so happy to see you,” Thorin says. He leans forward and presses his forehead to Bilbo’s, closing his eyes. Bilbo shudders. He grips the front of Thorin’s shirt and breathes as evenly as he can, but it’s a struggle when Thorin’s hands move down to his neck and softly stroke the soft skin at the corner of his jaw. Thorin is shaking, Bilbo realises. He closes the gap and pulls Thorin into a tight hug. The song changes. Bilbo knows this one, an old Led Zeppelin ballad he hasn’t heard in an age. The opening guitar riff falls over them, ascending and descending slowly. Bilbo scrapes his nails along Thorin’s scalp and holds him tight, Thorin’s face pressing against his collarbone. So little warmth I’ve felt before … It’s a song that makes him think of summer - the Swiss summer sun shines through the windshield and warms their skin. People are around them, but it’s no matter. It is the summer of my smiles… Bilbo isn’t sure who is the one giving comfort and who is recieving it here, but perhaps it’s both of them. That mutual give and take they have had for months
that makes Bilbo fall in love over and over again. That close contact, skin to skin, layers of thin fabric irrelevant in their intimacy, even here, so public. Thorin has the gear stick digging into his thigh and Bilbo is pressed awkwardly against his seat.

_But I know, that I love you so…_

Bilbo exhales when Thorin pulls away. It feels like forever, but the song trails off steadily as they pull apart. Thorin seems reluctant still and threads his fingers in Bilbo’s hair. It’s grown out and Bilbo is in desperate need of a haircut, but Thorin smiles and twists a lock around his finger before letting it go. He leans back into his seat and puts one hand on the steering wheel. The other rests on his thigh. They sit in silence for a moment.

“McDonalds for lunch?” Thorin asks, breaking it. Bilbo laughs, looking away, shaking his head. It’s so mundane and he loves Thorin for it, so much it almost hurts.

“Yeah. Sounds perfect.”

Thorin doesn’t think he will ever see anything as beautiful as the look on Bilbo’s face when they pull up to the house at long last. Delight falls short, happiness isn’t strong enough, joy is close, but _beautiful_ is the only thing Thorin can coherently stick with. He’s all summer now where he used to be early spring. Washed out watercolours aren’t accurate anymore. He’s a radiant oil on canvas. That strange red-blond hue to his hair is illuminated by the early evening sun and Thorin’s hands seem to act on their own. He pulls Bilbo in and just stares at the house for a while. It’s been so empty without Bilbo, even with Fili and Kili spending time. It hasn’t felt like home since he came back alone, having no other choice than to leave the love of his life behind.

But he’s back. Thorin’s bed won’t be empty tonight and he will wake up and be able to make two cups of coffee instead of one, two plates of toast instead of one, brush his teeth in the bathroom while Bilbo gets dressed and uses Thorin’s deodorant instead of his own.

“Are we going to go in or just stare at it?” Bilbo mock-whispers. He looks up and he’s smiling, making Thorin’s gut plummet in the best way. He’s learned that Bilbo is the master of the fake doe eyed stare, a tiny smile betraying his humour.

“Smart arse.” Thorin lets go of him and goes and unlocks the door, dragging Bilbo’s suitcase behind him. The house is warm and welcoming. Thorin doesn’t think he’s ever loved a place more than he does in that moment when the door clicks shut and they’re alone in their own little bubble once again.

Thorin makes them both coffee while Bilbo unpacks. The quiet should be unnerving, but instead it isn’t empty. Thorin listens to Bilbo humming and putting things away as if it’s the most normal thing in the world, as if they haven’t been playing this by ear for months now. It leaves a warm feeling in his chest and he physically has to press his hand to his sternum for a moment to check his heart is still beating. It’s like Bilbo has taken part of the sun and put it where Thorin’s heart should be. It leaves him giddy and breathless.

Arms come around him from behind and Thorin jumps, yelping, only to get laughter in return.


“Yeah. Living room or bedroom? Dealers choice, I can make some toast too,” Thorin says. Bilbo shrugs.
“Bedroom. I missed your bed far too much,” Bilbo says. He steps away and Thorin follows easily, like a moth to a flame. Bilbo fits back into his life so easily it’s a wonder how he ever functioned before.

Bilbo flops back onto the bed with a relieved sigh while Thorin sets the coffee on the bedside table. His shirt rides up and shows the pale skin of his stomach, the faint hair that trains down from his naval. Thorin lays down with him and puts his hand on Bilbo’s stomach under his shirt. The room is infinitely warmer than it had been this morning. The coffee smells stronger for two cups.

“What happens now?” Bilbo asks.

“I don’t know. It doesn’t feel real, does it?” Thorin says. He moves his other arm to cradle Bilbo’s head and kisses him again. He rubs his beard against Bilbo’s jaw, loving how he laughs when it tickles. “I guess we just do what feels right. It’s worked for us so far.”

“Can’t argue with that. Come here.” Bilbo pulls Thorin on top of him and kisses him soundly. Thorin goes so easily, kissing back, relishing the heat of Bilbo’s body beneath him. He thinks back to that night in the hotel when they were tipsy enough to let their walls down and finally, finally touch each other. He remembers Bilbo’s hand around him, warm and soft, taking him apart in the most exquisite way. He wants that again, but at Bilbo’s pace. It’s been a long day for them both and an even longer year for Bilbo. Thorin isn’t about to force him to do anything, even though it’s been so long.

But it seems Bilbo has the same desire, because he slides his hands up Thorin’s back and pulls off his t-shirt. He throws it somewhere - Thorin doesn’t care - and sits up. Thorin takes off Bilbo’s shirt for him and descends on him, kissing his neck and scraping his nails along Bilbo’s sides, making him sigh and lean into the touch.

“I don’t… I don’t have any…” Thorin manages, suddenly remembering. Bilbo hums his disapproval. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. Next time,” Bilbo says. He kisses Thorin again. “We should take it slow. It’s… been a while.”

“Not too slow,” Thorin says. He noses at Bilbo’s neck and slides a hand along his thigh. The fabric of his jeans feels far too thick to him then and there. Bilbo wraps his arms around Thorin’s shoulders and pulls them both further up the bed, where they can lay down comfortably.

“Not too slow, no,” Bilbo murmurs. They’re finally alone in their own little bubble, alone, together, with nothing to disrupt them. Thorin gets his jeans off quickly and noses his way down Bilbo’s chest and stomach as he fumbles with the button. Bilbo makes tiny aborted noises above him that only get louder once Thorin gets his jeans and boxers down and gets down to business.

Bilbo is wonderfully sensitive and the noises he makes are delicious. His hips twitch and he grabs Thorin’s hair, overwhelmed, but Thorin wants to give him everything, he wants Bilbo to feel good, and goddamn, if he doesn’t deserve it.

Bilbo pulls him up once again and switches their positions. Thorin tries to protest, but Bilbo just slides his hand into the front of Thorin’s boxers, effectively shutting him up. The movements are awkward at first, but they figure things out, and Thorin is the first to finish, shuddering when that bright pressure bursts and he exhales raggedly. He fumbles for Bilbo and his heart blooms when Bilbo gasps out Thorin’s name and buries his face against his neck, breathing heavily, hips stuttering. Thorin does what he can to get him through it, and they’re both breathless despite the lack of any real exertion.
Thorin pulls the blanket over them both. He’s hungry and they have to eat at some point tonight, but his head feels as if it’s full of cotton wool. Bilbo melts against him. That’s all Thorin wants. He wrapps him up in his arms and when Bilbo reaches to pet his beard, Thorin takes him wrist and looks at the scar properly for the first time since the airport.

“You’re terrible at this post sex cuddling thing, “Bilbo mutters. But he doesn’t pull his arm away. He lets Thorin feel the thick scar tissue with his thumb, inspecting it like he’s looking for any other attempt. But there are no scratches, or scabs. The skin is clear and healing well. Thorin smiles and lets go of Bilbo’s hand, where it rests against his chest.

“I’m so proud of you,” Thorin says. Bilbo looks away. Thorin can’t tell if the flush on his cheeks is embarrassment or something else. “You’ve come so far, Bilbo. Look at me.” Bilbo only glances up, frowning. “You should be proud of yourself.”

“For not going through with several suicide attempts?” Bilbo says dryly. Thorin doesn’t want to upset him. He needs Bilbo to know how strong he is.

“For not giving up. It’s hard, and… I know how bad things were when you first came here. Look at you now,” Thorin says. Bilbo’s frown softens but doesn’t completely fade. Thorin sighs. “I have something for you. Wait here.”

Bilbo protests, but Thorin just gets out of bed and leaves the room. He’d been saving this for later, perhaps in a week or at the exhibition, maybe over a candlelit dinner in Marseilles, but now seems as good a time as any. He’s done his research, talked to Prim, even probed Bilbo a few times with vague questions to pull this all together. But the brown envelope in the kitchen drawer holds everything he’s put together and he can only hope and pray that it goes down well.

Bilbo is wearing Thorin’s t shirt when Thorin walks in and only raises an eyebrow at him. Thorin sits down and hands Bilbo the envelope.

“I was going to wait, but… I wanted to take you somewhere after the exhibition opens. You said your parents were going to go here before the crash. I didn’t know them, but I’d like to go here with you to honour them. If you want. It’s your choice entirely,” Thorin says as he gets comfortable. Bilbo pulls the papers out and they fall into his lap, train tickets and a folded map and flyers from all over southern Italy. He sorts through them with a look of disbelief. Thorin braces himself for the rebuttal, for the anger, for the tears, but they never come. Bilbo drops everything, stunned, looking utterly speechless for far too long for comfort.

“Thorin…”

“I’m sorry,” Thorin says immediately. Bilbo shakes his head, a smile breaking out on his face.

“No. No, Thorin, this is wonderful, ” he says. He picks up the map Thorin has printed out and drawn out the planned route - Naples, Pompeii, Salerno, Potenza, and finally, Anzi, the tiny Italian village that Belladonna and Bungo had planned to visit last summer. Accommodation and transport has been fixed and confirmed. All that’s left is for Bilbo to agree. “It’s wonderful. You’re wonderful.” Bilbo smothers Thorin in a tight hug and sniffles, holding back tears of a different kind to what Thorin had expected.

“I thought you’d find it insulting,” Thorin admits.

“You didn’t even know my parents and you want to honour them like this. Thorin Durin, you are the biggest, stupidest, most incredible man I’ve ever met. I don’t deserve you,” Bilbo says. The papers crinkle between them, but Thorin doesn’t care. He grins, a stupid-happy grin he hasn’t
experienced in years. “My parents would have loved you so much.”

“Is that a yes?” Thorin asks.

“Yes! Come here, look at me.” Bilbo takes Thorin’s face in his hands. “I love you. Nothing like this will ever be an insult to me, especially if it’s for my parents memory. It’s never going to stop hurting, but… this is amazing. I can’t think of a better way to really face this once and for all.”

Thorin sighs in relief.

“Kind of makes me feel bad about something I want to ask you, though,” Bilbo says.

“Ask away. I’m yours.” Thorin gathers up the papers and slips them back into the envelope. Bilbo watches him. Thorin isn’t arrogant enough to call the look on Bilbo’s face dreamy, but he’s close. Very close.

“Later. Get here, I want my cuddles. Let’s talk about Italy,” Bilbo says. He holds his arms out and Thorin falls into them. Their coffee is still steaming hot on the bedside table. The window is open, letting in clean mountain air. Bilbo breathes deep and nuzzles Thorin’s cheek. “I missed you so much. I missed this. The mountains. The coffee. You. I don’t want to sleep alone ever again, Thorin. It’s horrible.”

“Hm. I know. I never realised how lonely it was until you were gone,” Thorin says. He rubs small circles into Bilbo’s hip with his thumb.

“I’m back. And I going to try not to let you down again. I promise,” Bilbo says. Thorin looks up at him.

“You could never let me down. You saved me, Bilbo. Without you, I don’t know how long I would have lasted on my own. I’d lost all my passion for anything and when you came, it was like seeing the sun for the first time in years. This place has never been more alive than with you in it,” he says. Bilbo turns away.

“Jesus, you’re a sap” he says, wiping his eyes with one hand. “You’re making me cry.”

“It’s true, Bilbo. You saved my life. You saved my art. You saved everything I care about. All I want is to make you happy the way you’ve made me happy. I want you to come to the exhibition and meet my family properly. You’re my family now, you know? And I’m never going to love anybody like you,” Thorin says. He squeezes Bilbo and closes his eyes. His eyes burn, but he doesn’t want to cry, because then Bilbo will cry, and it’ll leave them both snotty, snivelling messes. He’s trying to be romantic, and tears just ruin the vibe.

He thinks about the first time they met. Bilbo, awkward and unsure, standing in the living room with a tiny suitcase behind him, escorted there by Gandalf, so clearly doubtful that Thorin had pitied him. The shaking hands when he made coffee or tea. The horrific nightmares Thorin helped him through. The night on the balcony, the week with the boys, grocery shopping in Vevey, making dinner together, staying up late at night and talking about nothing important. I don’t want to leave, Bilbo had said. Thorin was pressed up against him, his arm around Bilbo’s waist from behind. They’d had that conversation before, but never like that. So stay with me, Thorin had said. You don’t have to leave.

“Stay with me,” Thorin repeats. Bilbo curls up and wipes his tears on his shirt.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he whispers. “Trust me.”
That’s all Thorin needs to hear.

Chapter End Notes

WHOOOO BOY PENULTIMATE CHAPTER. It's been a wild ride and I know this fic isn't perfect (i don't have a beta reader lol), but it means a lot to me and it's been so helpful to my own mental state these last two years. I'm older and wiser now since when I first started writing it, and I'm honestly so so so so so so grateful to everyone who has been following, whether from the start, from the middle, or from very recently. I love all of you SO MUCH, you're the real reason I write this fic. Find me on tumblr @oakhenshield

this is the song from the car scene, its my favourite song of all time
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

i have no excuse for being LITERALLY a year late and how choppy and weird this chapter is im so sorry please enjoy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bilbo has never been particularly fond of cars.

They’re loud and big, a ton of metal just waiting for their drivers to make even the slightest of wrong moves before spinning out of control and crashing into the nearest solid surface. Rationally, Bilbo knows that cars are relatively safe in the right hands. They don’t give licenses to bad drivers.

But anything can happen, and he has never been one to chill the hell out once his anxieties are ignited.

But Thorin is a good driver and he understands Bilbo’s fears. His car is old, but sturdy and reliable, and Thorin spends time checking the engine and wheels every month to make sure everything is in working order. Bilbo expects to be a nervous wreck for such a long drive to Marseilles, but the day before they leave, Thorin checks everything. It takes hours, but it eases Bilbo’s worries. It’s a six hour drive. Bilbo doesn’t want to spend the whole time catatonic, not when the exhibition is so important for Thorin.

He gears himself up for the ride in the week leading up to it. He takes his meds, avoids sharp things, talks about his feelings. Thorin has the patience of angels, Bilbo learns, and listens when he rambles and struggles to find his words.

It’s not perfect. The nightmares still come and leave Bilbo a shaking mess, but they don’t pack the same punch as they used to before. He struggles to get out of bed some days, and can’t achieve it at all on others. Thorin doesn’t press him for anything he can’t give, though, and does what he can to help. He takes up the responsibility of making coffee each morning and herbal tea each night, always handing it to Bilbo with a kiss on the forehead or the temple. It doesn’t always work to cheer him up, but it’s a start.

Thorin is excited. In the days leading up to their departure, his excitement is contagious, if not slightly annoying in how restless Thorin becomes. He double checks everything with the gallery every day and can’t sit still for too long without getting agitated.

“You’re cutting those onions into dust, my love,” Bilbo says. They’re standing side by side, prepping dinner together, and Thorin is barely focused on dicing the onions for the brisket in the slow cooker. He looks down and swears. He clears up the mess and scrapes the onions into the slow cooker, but he’s still distracted. Bilbo stops him when he goes to put the chopping board in the sink. “Here, let me.”

“I can do it,” Thorin says, grumbling.

“Just let me do it. Finish up the potatoes for me, okay?” Bilbo says, pushing past him to the sink. He scrubs the board and dries it, and all the while Thorin preps the potatoes and slides them into the oven. The kitchen is hot from the oven and the sun coming through the windows, illuminating the place with warm light. Summer is well and truly here, and the warmth and brightness has made him feel like his soul is no longer in tatters. It’s still cool up in the mountains, but it’s perfect.
“Are you nervous about Monday?” Bilbo asks as he puts the chopping board away. Thorin checks the brisket and shrugs.

“It’s my comeback. I don’t really know how to feel,” he says. He puts the lid back on the slow cooker and turns to look at Bilbo, leaning against the counter. “I’m just glad I won’t be alone this time.”

“Fili and Kili are coming, aren’t they?” Bilbo asks. He switches places with Thorin, who takes to the washing up. It’s become habit now to let Thorin deal with washing the knives, and a suggestion by Arwen to cook together so Bilbo is constantly supervised.

“And Tauriel. I swear, they’ll be in their thirties before they start doing things separately,” Thorin says, but Bilbo knows he’s as fond of Tauriel as he is of his own nephews. She’s a little firecracker, just as much as Kili is, and she spends enough time with the family to be part of it.

“They’re close. It’s sweet,” Bilbo says. “I haven’t been to Marseilles in years. It’ll be nice to see it again, and to see your family. And your paintings. Which you still haven’t let me see.”

“Come on, even Dwalin hasn’t seen any of them. You can wait like everybody else,” Thorin says. He dries the knives, but he smiles as he turns his face away.

“Mean.”

“Love you too.”

Bilbo stands on his toes and kisses Thorin on the cheek. With the food cooking and the utensils cleaned and dried, there’s little for them to do. It’s Friday, and Thorin will light the Shabbat candles at sunset, but there are still a couple of hours to go until then. They’re more or less packed for a week in Marseille, ready to go at a stupidly early hour tomorrow morning. Bilbo is almost dreading it, but it’s for Thorin’s sake. After everything, he won’t let Thorin down, and he’s sworn to himself he won’t complain once on the road.

Despite their organisation, Bilbo goes to the bedroom and double checks everything in his suitcase. Clothes, plenty of socks and underwear, shoes for the exhibition that aren’t made of canvas and rubber. His wash bag is waiting in the bathroom and his books are in his satchel, ready for the long drive. Thorin has given in and agreed to wear a suit, and it’s waiting in its bag, hanging on the kitchen door, perfectly ironed and cleaned. Walking back in, Bilbo brushes his fingers over the lapels through the open zipper. He can’t wait to see Thorin in it, though he isn’t sure his heart will be able to handle it.

“Did you pack your meds?” Thorin asks.

“Yeah. Plus extra. You don’t need to worry so much,” Bilbo says. Thorin sits at the table and grabs his phone, frowning.

“Dis keeps telling me about the ticket sales for the exhibition. Opening night is sold out completely, it’s mostly buyers and collectors,” Thorin says. Bilbo comes up behind him and wraps his arms around Thorin’s shoulders. Where his hair is growing out, it curls, especially at the back of his neck. It tickles his cheek.

“Are you going to sell any of the paintings?” Bilbo asks. Thorin covers his hand with his own and scrolls through his emails with the other.

“It’d be nice to have some money. Not sure how I feel about people owning paintings of my family, though. Good thing I made copies,” Thorin says. Bilbo laughs and kisses the back of
Thorin’s neck, smiling. “The copies are better, too.”

“Is that what you were doing while I was away?” Bilbo asks.

“Mhm. I needed something to do to keep my mind off of everything. They’re in storage in Vevey,” Thorin says. He turns his head. “I’ve already marked the ones I don’t want sold, anyway. And Von Brandt promised not to fuck with anything. Hopefully he keeps that promise.”

“If you get arrested for beating him up, I’ll say he started it,” Bilbo says.

“I appreciate that. But I’m not going to beat anybody up. And I’m not going to get arrested. I’ll just talk to the people at the exhibition when it opens and then slink off with some champagne,” Thorin says.

“Good thing I can drink on my medication, then. I’ll join you,” Bilbo says. He stands and smooths out Thorin’s shirt, running his hands along those broad shoulders. Thorin leans back against his touch.

“What a pair we are, a couple of mountain hermits,” Thorin mutters.

“Off to explore the big, wide world together,” Bilbo says. He sits next to Thorin and puts a hand over his, making him set down his phone and lock it. “I’m excited. I’ve been to exhibitions before, but never an opening night. It sounds fun.”

“If people start asking you about my personal life, just say you’ve never met me before,” Thorin says. Bilbo rolls his eyes.

“No, I’ll tell them the truth, if you want. How else are you going to explain your fellow reclusive roommate you keep disappearing with?” he says. Thorin smiles and squeezes Bilbo’s hands. He’s so much softer, gentler than he was when they first met, Bilbo thinks. Those hard edges are still there, and they always will be, but they don’t threaten to cut anymore if you get too close. And with the exhibition coming it, it almost feels like they’re coming full circle. Bilbo remembers when Thorin was still doubting the exhibition in the cold early months of this arrangement. It’s in two days, and Thorin seems calm, not like the agitated man he’s been for the last week. Bilbo leans back and watches Thorin check his messages one last time before putting his phone in his pocket. He looks at Bilbo.

“Think about it this way. When we come back, we can go to Italy. Just me, you, and a series of increasingly old and less populated cities and villages,” he says. “And I intend on sleeping late every day.”

“Like you don’t do that anyway,” Bilbo says.

“It’s different when you’re on holiday. You’re expected to be lazy,” Thorin says.

“My body clock won’t let me get up any later than eight in the morning, I’m afraid.” Bilbo gets up and kisses Thorin on the forehead. “I smell potatoes. I’ll go check.”

The potatoes are crisping nicely, and as Bilbo turns them, he hears Thorin leave the table and tidy up, putting away his laptop and his new sketchbook. After all this time, Bilbo still loves watching Thorin work. He draws more these days, and while Bilbo doesn’t usually see what he draws, what he’s seen is beautiful. He almost wants to ask if they can put some of the drawings on the walls, but he knows Thorin will be reluctant if he ever brings it up. Maybe one day, if they move somewhere else, or redo the decorating…
Bilbo freezes, halfway through flipping the potatoes, thinking perhaps too long about that possibility. It’s been four months and he’s already thinking about their future. But not every relationship is cookie cutter and slow going. They’ve taken things slow, yes, but only four months in, Bilbo knows deep down that no one else will ever make him feel the way Thorin does. They fit together so well it’s as if they were made for each other. They’ve both been wandering this world, connected by very fine threads through Gandalf and the exhibition Bilbo saw as a student, and it’s only through misfortune that they ended up here, together, under the same roof, living together and loving like it’s the easiest thing in the world. Bilbo almost wishes they’d met when they were younger and less wounded, but at the same time he doubts that things would have worked out the way they have. Thorin had been wild, Bilbo a boring professor slowly and steadily working himself into a dead end job he had no passion for. He wants to go back to teaching one day, but he isn’t sure when he will be ready. If he will be ready.

Bilbo sighs and slides the potatoes back into the oven. Thorin is the love of his life. Thinking about it like that makes him feel all giddy and fuzzy inside, but he schools his expression when he walks into the living room to see Thorin straightening a pile of books on the coffee table. At the boys request, he finally has a TV with a DVD player for when they come over. There’s truly nothing quite like watching Swiss telenovelas until gone midnight with a glass of wine and a French dictionary on your lap. It’s Bilbo’s new guilty pleasure, and while Thorin loves to tease him about it, he translates bits and pieces so flawlessly it’s almost like he’s seen these reruns before. Not that he will ever admit it.

“Dinner’s almost ready,” Bilbo says. He leans against the door frame and watches Thorin tidy up things that aren’t even messy. He’s a nervous cleaner. “You don’t have to make everything perfectly symmetrical, you know. The house will survive without it for a few days.”

“Sorry. I’m getting nervous,” Thorin says. He stands straight and puts his hands on his hips, looking around. He looks so handsome in the low light, his hair finally growing out and his clothes fitting right, no longer hanging off of him like they had been before. That striking profile is as beautiful as when Bilbo first saw him. He walks over and pulls Thorin close by the front of his shirt.

“You, my dear,” he says, pressing close, “need to relax. You’re going to be perfectly fine. People are going to love your work, you’re going to make some money, and Von Brandt will have to get through me, Dwalin, and you sister before he can sabotage any of your hard work. I promise.”

“I’d like to see that fight. Dis volunteers as a self defense instructor,” Thorin says.

“I know. But nothing’s going to happen, understood? It’s going to be very boring and Fili, Kili, and Tauriel are going to be the only fun part of the whole show,” Bilbo says. Thorin smiles and his eyes crinkle at the edges fondly. “And after the show, we’re going to go back to the hotel, drinking way too much wine, and fall asleep at about three in the morning.”

“Just drinking wine?” Thorin says, leaning down and sliding his hands far down Bilbo’s back, all the way down to his backside. Bilbo yelps.

“Down, boy,” he says. “And yes, just drinking wine. At least after the opening. I’m all yours as soon as that’s all over.” If you’d told Bilbo a year ago he’d be having this exact conversation with a man like Thorin, he’d have laughed in your face.

“Alright, alright, I’ll stop.” Thorin returns his hands to a more respectable place. “I can’t wait to show you Marseilles. Dinner on the docks, a trip to the Notre-Dame de la Garde, a few nights in a beautiful hotel… our room has a balcony, I think it looks out over the water.”
“Sounds romantic. You’re bringing your water colours aren’t you?”

“Hello, my name is Thorin Durin, nice to meet you.”

Bilbo half-slaps Thorin’s shoulder and turns away, grinning.

“I still have to work, you know. If this goes well, I might get another show offer,” Thorin says, pulling him back in. “I’ll be able to show you off to even more people.”

“What happened to pretending I don’t know you?” Bilbo says.

“Sometimes I like to pretend I don’t know myself, Bilbo, I was talking out of my ass.”

“Nothing new there, then. So, what, I’m your boyfriend or your roommate? Because you’ll have to explain me somehow if I’m showing up with you, and I’m far too short to be related to you,” Bilbo says. Thorin hums, thinking, teasing the hem of Bilbo’s shirt.

“Boyfriend sounds a little strange considering we’re nearing middle age. Partner?” Thorin suggests, frowning. Bilbo nods.

“Partner. Subtle enough,” he says. “Enough to piss off certain people if we stand too close to each other for too long, hm?”

“Couldn’t agree more. Devious little shit,” Thorin says. Bilbo pushes him away, but he laughs anyway, not remembering the last time he felt this at ease. Even Thorin calling him a devious little shit ignites something in him he’s never had.

“Devious little shit,” Bilbo repeats, shaking his head in disbelief. “You’re the one who threatened to punch Von Brandt’s lights out, you know!” Thorin follows him through the house towards the kitchen. He doesn’t feel too good about leaving food unattended when Thorin is being his usual strangely charming self. He’s gotten carried away before, and left things to burn without meaning to. But Thorin is handsy and distracting in all the right ways, and Bilbo can’t always deny him, not even if he wanted to.

He tries not to think about that when he checks the potatoes and finds them browning perfectly. Thorin insists on waiting to eat until after sunset, and Bilbo obliges, covering the potatoes in foil and leaving them to the side. It’s not long until sunset, and Bilbo sits back while Thorin lays the table and checks the candles in their twin silver holders. Bilbo has never, will never, be religious, but it brings him no small amount of joy to see Thorin have faith. After everything, his faith is strong enough to make even a cynic like Bilbo reconsider every time he sees the reverence with which Thorin recites Hebrew and carries out certain millennia old rituals with ease.

Thorin doesn’t drink much over dinner, on account of driving for almost six hours tomorrow and having to cross an international border. As always, they listen to a French radio station and eat mostly in silence, but Bilbo honestly can’t think of a better way to spend almost every evening. He’s sure it will get boring after a while, but he’s also sure they’ll figure out a fresher routine when the time comes, and he looks forward to it.

As Thorin washes up (another part of their routine, Bilbo cooks, Thorin cleans), Bilbo clears off the table and generally neatens things up. The anticipation for the next few days is tangible, anxiety coming off of Thorin in waves. Bilbo will never truly understand how hard it can be in the arts world, nor will he understand the fear Thorin feels as they get closer and closer to the opening night. Bilbo has had some terrifying experiences as a professor - getting licensed and passed in the first place, his first ever lecture with the title of Professor, almost getting into a blowout fight with
a colleague over the Byzantines. He’s had some truly horrifying experiences in his life in general, including the car crash that started this mess. But for Thorin, this is his entire life. This is his career. This is all he’s ever known outside of his family. And for this show to have so much of Thorin’s heart and soul put into it, it hurts to see him scared.

Bilbo lays in bed while Thorin showers, going through old reviews for Thorin’s last exhibitions on his phone. He goes all the way back to 2002, to the opening of his Eastern European Architecture exhibition, and sees nothing but praise from the majority of the critics who saw it. They praised Thorin’s use of gold leaf and lighting, and the bright, bold, almost graphic art style line work. Some critics slam his choice in content, but what do they know? Probably more than him, Bilbo thinks, smiling to himself, but he remembers how much he had loved that exhibition when he saw it for himself. Back then, the world knew very little about Thorin Durin. He’d allowed only a handful of interviews and avoided journalists at his own shows to avoid the public eye, but between 2003 and 2007, he’d sat down and talked to a total of three journalists to allow some insight into his life. No one was surprised when he said he was gay, apparently, but most people had been shocked to learn that he had no formal training, left school at fifteen, and spent his early twenties living in various European countries and learning his craft through years of trial and error.

Thorin comes to bed damp and half naked, and Bilbo puts his phone back on charge to turn and snuggle close to him. He’s warm and encompasses Bilbo entirely when he nuzzles his nose against his hair and spoons him from behind. A very good spoon, Bilbo thinks, but he stays silent. This time tomorrow, they’ll be going to sleep in Marseilles. At least it isn’t Paris. Bilbo hates Paris.

He wakes groggy and drinks the coffee Thorin thrusts into his hands, half awake as he packs up everything and lugs it to the car. It’s quiet when they set off, the sun low in the sky and illuminating the mountains around them. Bilbo rests his head against the window and watches the landscape go by. They pass through Vevey and soon, they’re driving through the country, so beautiful that Bilbo can imagine it on one of Thorin’s canvases. He wonders if Thorin will go back to landscapes, or if he will stick with figure drawing for a while. He’s so talented he could do both if he wanted, but Bilbo understands the rut he was in. After teaching the same things to the same people for so long, Bilbo’s rut had escalated, and after the crash, it just got worse and worse. He never managed to break it until it was too late.

He’s glad Thorin is doing this. He was a broken, angry man when they met, but seeing the joy he takes in his work when he has the inspiration is nothing short of incredible. That week when the boys stayed with them will forever be ingrained into Bilbo’s mind, when he saw Thorin finally find his muse and open up more. Bilbo knows his relationship with Thorin will always be tied to Thorin’s artwork - it was his first impression of Thorin all those years ago, and he will never forget seeing those stunning paintings as a young man. The first time they really talked, Thorin had been aimlessly sketching trees. The first time they kissed, Thorin had just showed the gallery his plans for the show. In England, Thorin had sat down and let Gorbadoc draw him, adding him to the reams of family sketches, permanently welcoming him to the massive clan. Bilbo has never cared about art as much as he does now, and it’s not just for Thorin’s sake. Watching him work, learning more about the technical side of the craft, has made him appreciate it much more. He’s excited to see Thorin’s work up in a gallery, and to hear what people have to say about it.

But he’s also tired. He’ll be glad when this is over and they can make their way to Italy for a few weeks. Thorin’s stress bleeds out of him, casting a black cloud that is incredibly contagious. Thorin needs a break from this work as much as Bilbo needs a break from the second hand stress and nerves. He’s tired of watching Thorin panic late at night and have to check with the gallery twice a day to make sure his paintings are safe. He’s tired of Thorin arguing with Dis over the phone about god knows what in rapid fire French. He’s tired of Thorin laying awake and not sleeping because he’s so scared of what a failed come back could mean for him and his family. As
far as Bilbo understands, Dis gets a sizeable cut of the buyers and collectors money, and that has let her house and feed and clothe her and her children. Thorin himself is set up for life, but he can’t support the rest of his family if this goes south.

But mostly, Bilbo is tired of the lingering barrier that remains between them. It shatters every now and then - nights when Thorin can actually sleep for a solid six hours, when they go for long walks out into the mountains and the fields, when they make love and can’t think of anything but each other. Bilbo knows in his heart that once Thorin does his due as a modern artist and opens up the exhibition, that barrier will be gone. And if it goes well, Thorin won’t stress out about supporting his sister, either. He likely doesn’t even need to, but Thorin is stubborn, and deep down, a family man. If he can, he likely will continue to support Dis and the boys as long as he lives.

They stop for lunch in a little town just outside of Avignon. When Thorin goes outside for a cigarette, Bilbo calls Dis, finally being in the same country as her.

“Hey! How’s the drive?” Dis asks as a way of greeting.

“It’s fine. We’ll be there in a couple of hours, we’ve just stopped for lunch. We’re in… Noves? I think. I’m not sure,” Bilbo says. He plays with his fork, having finished his slice of lemon cheesecake in record time. He almost wants another, but he knows that stress eating will never be a good idea, especially not for him.

“Okay, good. I was wondering where the hell you were. We’re in the same hotel. Want me to check you guys in? I can meet you for coffee around the corner if you want,” Dis says.

“No, it’s okay. It’s a long drive. I think we’re going to need some rest once we get to the hotel,” Bilbo says. A waitress comes over and takes his plate away. He quickly orders two more cups of coffee to tide them both over for the rest of the ride. “Are the kids okay?”

“They’re fine. I’ve got Kili and Tauriel on a snack run and Fili’s exploring the hotel. I don’t know why I agreed to bring three teenagers with me,” Dis says, sighing. Bilbo can imagine her rubbing the bridge of her nose, pushing her glasses up into her hair. “At least they’re having fun. I’m going to have a coronary.”

“It’s only a few days. Then you can go back home and do the exact same thing with other artists,” Bilbo says dryly. The waitress brings their coffee and Bilbo thanks her.

“Oh, joy. Where’s Thorin?”

“Smoking. He’s stressed.”

“Oh, yeah, I should have warned you about that. It gets worse when he has to do shows and general public appearances. You’ll be kissing an ashtray the next week, I’m afraid,” Dis says, sounding the exact opposite of apologetic. Bilbo almost loves her for that.

“Yeah, I expected that. He seems to be doing alright, all things considered. Hasn’t gotten angry at anything.” Bilbo says. He sees Thorin pacing outside the front of the cafe, cigarette in hand, clearly restless. “Yet.”

“How are you doing? It’s a long drive,” Dis asks. The concern in her voice is deeply touching, especially considering who she is. Not a woman to show her emotions so easily.

“I’m alright. Thorin’s been playing Led Zeppelin and I’ve got a copy of Stranger in a Strange Land. Plenty of distractions,” Bilbo says. Thorin comes back inside and heads to the bathroom, nodding at Bilbo as he goes. “But he’s really nervous. He doesn’t say it, but he’s terrified. His
paintings are okay, right?”

“Oh, yeah, don’t worry. Top security. He’s a high profile modern artist or some bullshit like that, the gallery isn’t going to let his paintings get sabotaged again. As for quality, they’re better than anything I’ve seen from him in years,” Dis says. She pauses, then chuckles softly. Bilbo can picture her shaking her head. “I’m really proud of him, you know.”

“You should be. I am too,” Bilbo says.

“God, you should have seen him before you showed up. You really changed him, Bilbo. For the better,” Dis says.

“He’s still a grumpy hermit who hates people.”

“That will literally never change, ever. But as long as he’s willing to sometimes leave his ivory tower, I’m happy. Can’t change a man who loves his solitude”

“All you can do is join him.”

“You’re a braver man than most, Bilbo Baggins. I love my brother, but…” Dis sighs again.

“I know. He’s a lot to deal with sometimes. But it’s worth it. He makes me happy, and… I think I make him happy, too. The grumpiness is endearing,” Bilbo says. Thorin comes out and sits down, visibly surprised at the fresh cup of coffee. Bilbo smiles at him when Thorin mouths a ‘thank you’.

“I should go. See you in a few hours?”

“See you soon, Baggins.” Dis hangs up and Bilbo puts his phone away. His coffee is hot and he stirs sugar into it, staring out of the window. Thorin still radiates a certain level of stress Bilbo isn’t quite sure how to deal with. Thorin has punched walls and split his knuckles when stressed, Bilbo recalls when he came back from a meeting at the gallery with a bloodied fist. Von Brandt had been there and had threatened him, and Thorin stopped in the middle of nowhere and busted his hand against an old stone wall, with no other outlet for his anger and the pressure building up inside of him.

They’re back on the road twenty minutes later, refreshed and fed, and Thorin had scored another slice of lemon cheesecake for them both to share once they get to Marseille. There is no music this time, just open windows to allow the fresh air and sunshine in, and Thorin half singing under his breath while Bilbo reads. The motions of the car - turning, braking, accelerating - jolt him from his concentration every now and again, but Thorin is gentle and checks in on him frequently. Slowly, the distance dwindles between them and the city, and before long, they’re passing into the city limits and slowly making their way towards the hotel. Thorin is right - it’s right on the waterfront, looking out over the French sliver of the Mediterranean. Just seeing the ocean when they drive up to the hotel fills Bilbo with a freshness he hasn’t felt in a long time. He has always loved the sea. To see it again, the clear sky above and the sun beating down on the turquoise waves, makes him smile and want to go down to the sea. He imagines the cold salt water enveloping him, cleansing him of every impurity he has.

Thoughts of the sea are dashed when they’re shown to their room, though, and Bilbo collapses face first into the ridiculously plush king sized bed in the centre of the room. Thorin chuckles as he opens the balcony doors to air the room a bit.

“Tired?” he asks.

“Exhausted.” Bilbo turns on one side when Thorin sits down with him. “Want to nap?”
“As much as I’d love to, I actually need to go and see Dis. Feel free to sleep while I’m gone,” Thorin says. He strokes Bilbo’s hair back from his face.

“Hm. I think I’ll come with you instead,” Bilbo says, though every inch of him wants to just close his eyes and sleep until the next morning. He reluctantly sits and smooths down his hair. Thorin takes his chin between a thumb and forefinger, making Bilbo look up at him. Those blue eyes, pale and bright, are full of a warmth Bilbo will never adjust to, not truly. It seems so contradictory that such a pale colour can be capable of being warm.

“Thank you for coming with me, Bilbo,” Thorin says quietly.

“Wouldn’t dream of leaving you to do this alone,” Bilbo says. He hums as Thorin leans in and kisses the tip of his nose.

“When I agreed to do this exhibition, I never expected I would have a plus one that wasn’t my sister. This is much better,” Thorin says. He peppers Bilbo’s face with kisses, making him giggle like a five year old as he tries to get closer, grinning and trying to kiss Thorin at the same time. Thorin gives in and kisses Bilbo deeply, pressing him back against the pristine sheets and climbing on top of him. Bilbo pushes Thorin’s jacket from his shoulders and tosses it to the side before sliding his hands up under his shirt, feeling the shifting of muscles in his back under his impossibly warm skin. He wants more, but vaguely remembers that Dis is somewhere in the same hotel, waiting for them to appear at last. It’s easy to push that thought to the back of his mind, though, when Thorin hitches one of Bilbo’s legs up around his hip and bothers the sensitive skin of his neck with his teeth and tongue. If he’s trying to mark Bilbo as his own for the exhibition, Bilbo has no cause for complaint.

“Thorin…” he breathes, his voice ragged. There’s something ringing on the other side of the room and he vaguely registers it as Thorin’s phone. “Thorin. I think that’s your sister.”

Thorin just groans and continues. Bilbo is tempted to just ignore the ringing once it picks up again after going to voicemail, with Thorin’s delicious weight on top of him, but it gets so annoying that he physically has to push Thorin away.

“Answer now, neck later,” he says. Thorin grumbles, but goes obediently and gets off the bed to answer his phone. Bilbo watches. His shirt is rumpled and he feels as if he’s going to need a cold shower if he’s going to talk to Dis any time soon, but by the way Thorin sighs and his shoulders relax when Dis talks to him, it seems as if that’s not necessary. Thorin hangs up not a minute later and goes back to Bilbo.

“She’s taking the kids to the gallery, we’ve got a few hours to ourselves,” he says. He barely gives Bilbo a chance to respond before descending upon him once more.

He just can’t find it in himself to think about anything else.

It’s much later when they finally leave the hotel room to meet Dis and the kids to go to dinner. It’s quite a nice affair, Bilbo admits to himself as they sit in a small restaurant together and talk about nothing too important, carefully avoiding any talk of the exhibition. Kili and Tauriel bombard Bilbo with questions about history and he talks to them about it happily, answering their questions as best as he can after so long not teaching or even researching. It’s… nice. Really. He ends up drawing out a map of the Roman provinces on a napkin, which Kili has even more questions about between mouthfuls of his pasta. After dessert and a round of drinks, which Fili eagerly partakes in, they go for a walk around the city as a group.

Marseilles is beautiful at night. It’s lit up with golden light and the Old Port is full of tourists and
locals enjoying the mild weather. In the distance, high above the city, the Notre Dame de la Garde is a shining white beacon under the clear skies, drawing Bilbo’s eye every five minutes. Thorin keeps him distracted, though, by pointing out old buildings and lesser known landmarks that catch his own eye. He’s happier here, Bilbo notices. Perhaps it’s because he’s with his family, or because he’s had a change of scenery, but his smile hardly leaves his face all the way back to the hotel, even when they get back to their room and close the door securely behind them.

Tomorrow, it starts all over again. While Thorin showers, Bilbo makes himself a cup of tea and sits out on the balcony, happily wrapped up in his robe and pyjamas and looking out over Marseilles. He sees the lights flickering on the ocean in the distance and hears the same nothing noise every city has late at night. The tea is herbal, chamomile, and sweetened as Bilbo drinks it slowly. He can imagine his parents sat in their living room, old armchairs worn pale with age but still comfortable, sipping their cups of tea while they read together in silence. Every now and then, they would join hands across the gap between their chairs, look at each other, and smile. One of them would get up and make them both a sandwich, or turn on the radio, or call one of their old friends.

They had something like that back home. It wasn’t as polished or as deeply ingrained, but it was their system, their little moments of peace. Sitting in the living room with a bottle of wine while watching Swiss and French dramas, laughing at the ridiculousness of it all, settling into bed together laughably early, even though they’re both old men.

Thorin comes out of the shower and slips into his own pyjamas. His hair sticks up in awkward spikes, clumped together with water, and Bilbo wants to smooth it down and rub a towel over it for him. The domesticity of it all hits him and he has to put his cup down so that he didn’t let it slip through his fingers. He’s wanted something like this for the longest time, without realising, and now he has it.

“Nervous?” Bilbo asks. He sits beside Thorin on the bed, their thighs pressing together, mutually bleeding warmth into each other. Thorin tips his head back and closes his eyes. His profile has always been striking, but Bilbo takes a second to admire it once more.

“A little. But… it’s not too bad. I don’t think. I might just be overthinking it,” Thorin says. His voice is low and gravelly from tiredness. He looks a too long blink away from falling asleep then and there.

“Maybe. If it all goes to shit, we just leave and go to Italy early, hm?” Bilbo said. He leans against Thorin, finding him warm, smelling like hotel soap and shampoo.

“And risk Dis’ wrath when she tracks us down? No thanks,” Thorin says. He runs a hand through his hair and rolls his ankles until they crack. “I’m… actually excited, you know.”

“I can tell.”

“I never thought I’d get to share this with somebody else. Someone like you,” Thorin says. He brushes Bilbo’s hair from his face and his fingers linger against his cheek, thumb brushing soft skin. He’s a furnace in human skin, and Bilbo leans into the touch.

They lay there in silence for a while, the hustle and bustle of Marseilles’ night life coming through the open balcony doors. Bilbo will have to get up and close them eventually, but Thorin is warm and the bed is luxuriously comfortable.

Thorin takes his hand away from Bilbo’s face and trails his fingers up and down his arm. It makes Bilbo shiver, but he relishes the touch, leans in and kisses the sharp edge of Thorin’s jaw. It’s quiet and peaceful. Like it is in the house in Switzerland. Like home.
Thorin falls asleep first and Bilbo takes a moment to look at how peaceful his face is before he gets up and closes the balcony doors. Back in bed, Thorin nuzzles against him and spoons up against his back, affectionate even in his sleep. Bilbo links their fingers together against his stomach and pushes back, wanting to get as close as possible. Somehow, it’s not too warm, it’s not uncomfortable. It’s just… right.

The next morning, Thorin sleeps late. Bilbo lets him as he checks his suit in its bag and checks his phone. There’s no new messages. He ends up curling up in bed again with his brand new copy of *Flowers for Algernon*, and happily loses himself in Daniel Keyes’ sci-fi classic for a while.

They take the day slowly. Breakfast in the hotel, buttery croissants and thick white toast, all of which is delicious and makes Bilbo feel a little better about everything going on around him. Dis is nowhere to be seen, and Thorin follows suit pretty quickly, meeting her at the gallery while Bilbo sorts of chaperones the trio of rowdy teenagers exploring the hotel. They’re good kids, and Fili mostly keeps an eye on them, so Bilbo doesn’t have to do much beyond check in on them every now and then and make sure they haven’t broken anything expensive or decorative, or both.

When the time comes, Bilbo gets dressed, and he’s just sliding his tie around his neck when Thorin comes back. He looks a little nervous, but Bilbo knows its normal. He just smiles over his shoulder and goes back to doing his tie. Thorin gets changed and Bilbo does his tie for him before smoothing it down against his chest and pulling him down to kiss him. Thorin melts when Bilbo rakes his fingernails against his scalp, and swallows Bilbo into a bear hug, burying his face against his neck and holding on tight.

“You’re gonna be okay,” Bilbo whispers, rubbing his hand up and down Thorin’s back. “I’m so proud of you.”

Thorin pulls away and kisses Bilbo again, before he checks his phone and sighs.

“You can’t pretend to know how daunting this is, bearing your soul to the world the way Thorin is doing tonight. His work is his family, Bilbo knows, even though he hasn’t even seen the paintings. He’s seen the preliminary sketches over Thorin’s shoulder, and the works in progress, mostly blocks of colour to be layered upon again and again until a coherent form takes its place. But he’s never seen the finished works.

“Now or never.” He takes Thorin’s hand.
Still, he can’t help but jump at every shadow, or flinch each time somebody gets a little too close to the paintings. He’s proud of his work, and he’s not ashamed to admit it when Bilbo comes up to him and discreetly leans against him, telling Thorin quietly that he’s proud of him. A few people watch, curious, but Thorin just smiles and presses a kiss to Bilbo’s hair, riding too high on his admittedly teetering success to care what anybody thinks of him in that moment. Not even the stern, regal gaze of his grandfather, the largest portrait in the room, can make him falter now. He wreathed Thror in blue and flecks of gold inlay, in the lights of his eyes and the lines of his face. He was always the iron fisted ruler of the family, up until the day he died. It made sense to Thorin he would be the commandeering presence of the room, the centre of the family, the king of a dynasty.

The other paintings are a tad more inviting. Where Thror is mighty in his majesty, Thrain is warm, fatherly, smiling at something not on the canvas, though Thorin hopes that placing the equally warm portrait of his mother next to her husband makes it clear what the twin scenes are meant to represent. He misses them, he realises as he pulls Bilbo close, arm around his waist. Despite everything, he misses his parents, and he knows there’s little he wouldn’t give to know they’re watching him, to know that they’re proud.

He’d organised the layout deliberately. The dead on one wall together, bright but dark in their own respects, some more kindly done than the others. Frerin’s is all gold and sunlight, how Thorin remembers him, holding a sunhat against his head while he laughs, bright, happy, how Thorin remembers him. His painting is popular, though everybody frowns when they see the plaque explaining he died young, Thorin Durin’s nobody brother, a man who was always smiling and laughing while nobody knew what was going on inside.

On the neighbouring wall is Thorin’s living family. Dis in royal purples, smiling cheekily, her hair a curly mane, just how Thorin remembers it when she would wake up late on the weekends, back in the eighties. She’s younger in the painting, and he knows Dis noticed when she saw it, but that’s how he’s always seen her. Bright, powerful, one of the most important people in the world to him. There’s a suggestion of a golden halo around her head, and when Dis makes eye contact with him, she’s smiling, eyes soft and grateful. Flanking her portrait are her boys, the ones Thorin struggled with the most, though once he finished them he knew he did them justice, Kili a wild teenage boy, Fili a much calmer, more thoughtful one. They are so alike and so different, even as they walk around the room and take in the portraits of the family staring down at them, their great-grandfathers stern gaze capturing Kili’s attention for a long moment before Fili pulls him away to look at their own pictures, Tauriel following, the three of them an odd group in this sea of adults.

Bilbo tugs on his hand and Thorin looks at him. They’ve both had some champagne, but where it relaxed Thorin’s nerves, it makes Bilbo’s face flush a pretty red. It’s cute. Thorin has to remind himself he’s in public so he doesn’t kiss him, but the temptation is… well, tempting, to say the least.

“Was he always that intimidating?” Bilbo asks, gesturing to Thror. Thorin snorts. Bilbo doesn’t even know the half of it, does he? He couldn’t. But he’s too happy to be upset about his late grandfather tonight.

“Always. Every time he shouted, he scared the shit out of me. Even as I got older,” he says. Bilbo leans further against him, and Thorin lets him.

“Sounds terrifying.”

“He was. Still is,” Thorin says. He meets his grandfathers gilded, painted eyes. “Have you seen all of them yet?”
Bilbo shakes his head. “No. I was hoping for the personal tour, if I’m honest,” he said, smiling up at Thorin like it’s the most innocent request in the world. Maybe it is, and Thorin is just being prickly. But, he softens when Bilbo tugs at his hand again. The gallery is quiet, the critics having seen what they wanted to see, and the buyers in a corner, discussing which pieces they want to buy. A few aren’t for sale, naturally - Frerin, the boys, Dis. And tucked into a corner, inconspicuous, small enough to be shadowed by the larger portraits but still bright enough to be noticed, a painting of Bilbo.

Thorin hopes he hasn’t noticed it yet. He briefly wonders if he can take it down before he notices it, but he knows it’s too late. The painting is there, small, green, but seemingly taking up all space on its lonely wall simply by the commanding subject alone.

It was last minute. There was another one, before everything went to shit in England, but once he returned to Switzerland Thorin shoved to the back of the garage, angry and heartbroken, not wanting to look at it again. It was a much brighter image, and idealised, naive. He still remembers how he thought of Bilbo the first time they met, like he was a washed out watercolour on thin, flimsy paper. Over time, Thorin saw him differently - light gouache, then bold pastels, then rich oil colours. After his half-cocked attempt, though, Thorin’s perception changed. It’s always been changing, he realises, and thats why painting Bilbo was so hard for the longest time. He’s many things - a kind man, an intelligent man, and before, a lonely man. His loneliness those first few weeks was almost impossible to handle, until that night on the balcony, when they finally let their walls down over a bottle of wine and an approaching storm. Sometimes, Thorin’s heart aches for Bilbo, for everything he’s suffered. He deserves better, every step of the way.

Thorin holds him a little tighter, selfish, as they take a slow circuit around the room, Thorin explaining symbolism once he finds his voice through the thickness at his throat. Nobody seems to be watching them, but he’s careful where he puts his hand on Bilbo’s back, right at the gentle inward curve of his spine.

Bilbo is sharp, and Thorin knows that. He sees the imagery and lets Thorin explain it anyway. Thorin’s hands start to shake, but Bilbo takes one and squeezes, understanding more than anybody. Of course he understands, Thorin thinks in a moment of mutual silence. Of course he understands you, you gigantic idiot. He’s wonderful, and you don’t deserve him, and you never want to let go of him.

Bilbo looks the longest at Frerin. He tilts his head to the side like a curious bird, eyes narrowed. The yellow seems dull in comparison to the memory of the sunlight Thorin tried to depict. Frerin, in the drivers seat of their rented convertable, singing along to some Black Sabbath song as they sped down Route 66 together, younger, more naive, so much freer right down to their souls. The image on canvas is a poor copy of Thorin’s memory of his brother, but it’s enough, he thinks, enough that somebody else might look at it and wonder who this golden boy was, who he might have been, what he meant to the people around him. It’s the only thing Thorin can do to honour him these days.

Bilbo says nothing. Thorin loves him for that, for knowing that Frerin is still a difficult thing to discuss, no matter how much Thorin loves him. It’s like Bilbo’s parents - they can exist in memory, they can be remembered, honoured, and loved, still, but to talk about it is to open up wounds that have yet to properly heal.

They move on, slowly, taking their time. They have all the time in the world. Thorin will have to talk to the buyers and hear what the critics think, but for the most part, they just enjoy each others company, talking quietly like it’s just the two of them. Thorin wants to be back in Switzerland, where they can talk openly while snuggled together on the couch, or under the blankets, where
they both feel safe and loved. They’ll be home soon, Thorin knows, and then they’ll take the train south into Italy for a truly well deserved break for both of them. Thorin’s wrist hurts still from holding a brush for hours a day for the last few months, and he wants to just sleep and eat and make love until he feels truly rested.

Bilbo’s breath audibly catches when they get to the last painting. He lets go of Thorin’s hand and moves closer, while Thorin feels as though his heart is about to beat out of his chest, the thrum of blood in his ears near deafening.

The painting is A3 sized, a flat board canvas laid out landscape style. He deliberately painted it so the sunlit figure was framed by the wildflowers that grew on the mountains of Switzerland. Bilbo is sat in the grass, dressed in a white t-shirt and black shorts, comfortable and simple. One leg is drawn up to his chest, and the other stretched out in front of him. It’s a clear day in the painting, but Thorin only allowed himself a small amount of sky, the wildflowers taking up the foreground, with mountains faint and grey-lilac in the back. He’d agonised over the folds in Bilbo’s clothes and the unique red colour of his hair, struck into gold by the early summer sunlight. There’s no significant symbolism, just the green and gold and red, the bright colours and softness Bilbo brings to his life, the light and shadows, the flowers, the beauty of the world around them Thorin had ignored for so long.

Thorin knows he’s looking at Bilbo with the softest, most embarrassing look an adult human man could muster, but he doesn’t care. His chest hurts. He watches Bilbo’s face, at first a strange expression as he analyses his own image, and then the look softens into something fond and… happy. He looks at Thorin, grey eyes wide and wet, like he’s about to start crying.

“You actually put me in your exhibition,” he says, his voice cracking. Thorin nods dumbly. The room is quiet. He doesn’t care to listen out for the others around him speaking, or the other bodies filling the room. The boys are probably at the next show, looking at Von Brandt’s work, or outside with Tauriel, taking pictures of the evening sun or running off to get snacks at the closest corner shop. It’s quiet without them.

“You’re family,” Thorin says, like it’s the simplest explanation there is. And it is. His hands are still shaking. He looks at his work, this tribute to the man he loves hanging on a wall, when Thorin sometimes wants to scream to the world how much he loves Bilbo with his entire heart and soul. He wants everybody to know how wonderful he is, how kind, how smart, how brave. But this is all he can do without looking completely insane. It’s all he can do, and it’s not enough, it will never be enough, he knows that there’s nothing in this world that can encapsulate just how different things are now that Bilbo is in his life. Maybe they’re still in the middle of the honeymoon period, maybe this is the best it will ever be. He doesn’t care. He just doesn’t care. His nerves have left him flayed and raw, and seeing the look on Bilbo’s face is a balm on his psychic wounds.

“And… this is how you see me?” Bilbo asks. He doesn’t believe it, that much is obvious. Thorin wants so badly for Bilbo to see himself the way Thorin sees him, bright and lively and beautiful.

“You’re beautiful,” Thorin says softly. Bilbo turns away, his cheeks red. “You changed my life. I was so lonely before I met you. I… I had no one like you, I’ve never met anybody like you. You changed everything for me, you know. I was miserable, and I didn’t even realise it until you came along and made me realise what it was I was missing.”

“And what’s that?” Bilbo’s voice is fragile, cracking a little. He keeps his eyes on the painting, hands clenching at his sides. Thorin moves in close and presses his cheek to his hair, breathing in the smell of mandarin shampoo Bilbo uses. His hair is soft, and he’s warm against Thorin’s chest.

“Love.”
Bilbo makes a weird noise, but Thorin smiles.

“I had my family. I had my art. I had my home. But my home was so cold and empty, and I was too much of an idiot to realise I couldn’t survive living on my own in the long run. The thought of losing you now… it scares me. Sometimes, I wonder what it is you see in me. Why you stayed with me after everything. You’re too good for me, Bilbo. You deserve more than I can give you, but I’m too selfish to let you go. Not now, not after everything that’s happened,” he says. His hands find Bilbo’s waist. He kisses the shell of his ear. The room is quiet, and he doesn’t know if anybody is watching. He doesn’t care.

Bilbo chuckles quietly, disbelievingly. He shakes his head. He turns and reaches up, settling his hands on Thorin’s shoulders. He looks like he’s about to cry any moment.

“I’m selfish too,” he says, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. Maybe it is. “And you’re stuck with me, idiot. I’m not going anywhere. None of my boyfriends have ever put me in an exhibition before.”

Thorin lets himself laugh, relief flooding his chest. He knocks his forehead against Bilbo’s and closes his eyes, smiling at his own ridiculousness.

“Theyir loss,” he says. Bilbo laughs again, then stands on his toes to kiss him.

It’s short and sweet, but it leaves Thorin feeling like he’s burning on the inside, like wildfire is consuming his soul and replacing it with a sweetly charred husk of a thing, like he’s empty and full at the same time. Like he’s how he’s meant to be.

They linger like that, just holding each other in the quiet of the gallery. It’s getting late. Even the Von Brandt critics are leaving, and Thorin has yet to see hide nor hair of the man, relieved to have been left alone this time. Maybe he got the message. He tries not to think too hard about it as Bilbo rests his head against Thorin’s chest and clings to him like he’s a lifeline. There’s no room for pain here, he realises. With the eyes of his family, both the living and the dead, on his back, his grief is a bittersweet thing. It’s claws have retracted somewhat, and he can breathe. He doesn’t have to live his life for the dead anymore. This man in his arms - this living, breathing man, who curls into a tiny ball when he sleeps, who hums when he stirs sugar into his coffee, who made Thorin realise that he can carry his grief without being weighed down by it - is the most important person in the world in that moment. He’s alive, and he’s not going anywhere, no matter how much Thorin worries.

Eventually, they have to disentangle. Bilbo casts one last look at the painting, something undeniably tender in his eyes that Thorin wants to see again and again, before he takes Thorin’s hand and leads them out of the gallery. It’s closing, and the buyers are waiting. Thorin doesn’t want his happy little bubble to burst, but when he looks at Bilbo, he’s gently urged on with a quick kiss to the cheek, leaving him flushed red and praying it’ll be hidden by the darkness outside.

The buyers are interested in the paintings of Dwalin, Balin, and Thror. Thorin isn’t too surprised, really. While on a personal level, his painting of Bilbo is his magnum opus of the exhibition, on a professional level, his technical skill shines the brightest in his depiction of his grandfather. He tries to imagine it in some private gallery, or on the walls of a private school, or in someone’s house. Somehow, it’s funny, imagining that stern gaze following strangers day in, day out. Thror would have hated that.

It’s all over and done with, quickly and quietly, and then Thorin is stood outside the gallery in silence. He reaches automatically for cigarettes that aren’t there. He’ll have one once he gets back to the hotel, if he’s not too dead on his feet. God, he hopes he won’t be.
Bilbo is by his side before Thorin even notices he was gone before. He takes Thorin’s hand. It’s quiet, just the two of them. Bilbo tells him that the others went ahead and back to the hotel. They’re going to stop and get pizza or something. Thorin isn’t sure he cares. It’s over. The rest of the shows are going to go on without him, and he’s glad that he doesn’t have to bother with people for a while after this is all over and done with.

They walk hand in hand, vaguely towards the direction of the hotel on the waterfront. It’s quiet, strangely quiet for Marseilles, and Thorin breathes the city air - sea salt and car fumes and the faintest hint of iconic southern French garrigue. His heart flutters in his chest each time he realises Bilbo’s fingers are laced with his own, and he can’t help the dopey smile on his face. He knows he looks stupid. He knows he needs to tone it down. He knows he should probably let go of Bilbo’s hand and call a cab and go back to the hotel and get some sleep.

Somehow, they make it back to the hotel. Neither of them are hungry, so they just go straight to their room and undress each other, each movement careful and slow, until they slide into bed together and just lay there for a while. Bilbo’s eyes are tired but bright, and he takes Thorin’s face in his hands to kiss him, slowly at first, but the fire grows until they’re breathless. Once they’re done, Bilbo tucks himself tight against Thorin’s chest, head under his chin, fingertips tracing the pattern of ink across his chest. It’s quiet, that kind of long past midnight silence only achievable in moments like this. It’s liminal. Otherworldly.

“What happens now?” Bilbo asks, his voice barely a whisper. Thorin hums.

“Critics reviews come out in a few days, and the buyers get the paintings after the exhibition closes,” he says, too sleepy to think much. He’s this close to just drifting off, and the hypnotising sensation of warm fingertips along his chest isn’t doing his wakefulness any favours. “Hopefully, we’ll be in Italy before anybody wants to ask me any questions.”

Bilbo chuckles, then yawns, just as sleepy as Thorin is.

“You know Italy has wi-fi,” he mumbles into Thorin’s shoulder.

“Shush, you.”

“Alright, alright. No shop talk, huh?” Bilbo says. He props himself up. In the darkness, the soft curve of his shoulder is endlessly inviting. He’s been greedy the last few hours, touching Bilbo as much as he wants, as much as he’s allowed. He slides his hand along his shoulder and around to the warm, bare skin of his back. “You did well, though. I’m proud of you.” Thorin closes his eyes just before Bilbo kisses him softly, sweetly.

“Different to the Eastern European exhibition?” he asks, eyes still closed, but he hears Bilbo laugh and only looks when he feels that familiar weight nestle back against his chest. He holds Bilbo close, breathing in the smell of him.

“Different. I didn’t know you then, though I remember wondering what you were like. I may have had a purely aesthetic crush just because of your art,” Bilbo says. He yawns. “Maybe I’m just talking out of my ass. It’s been a long day.”

“Go to sleep, then. Long day tomorrow.”

Bilbo just hums, only the slightest bit displeased at the notion of the long drive back to Switzerland, back to their little haven where they can relax a few days before another trip takes down back down the mountain. Bilbo has been better about cars, and better about everything, really. It makes Thorin proud. Prouder than he ever thought possible. Prouder than he is of himself.
for somehow pulling this whole thing off, despite the limited amount of time and the frankly ridiculous shenanigans Bilbo managed to get them both into. Both fun and painful shenanigans. Thorin would take both over and over again in a heartbeat, if it meant he would end up here, holding Bilbo close, still riding the high of finally opening another exhibition after all these years.

But this is what it’s all been leading to, isn’t it? It’s wonderfully anticlimactic, nothing too concerning happening on open night, and Von Brandt not making a single appearance in Thorin’s part of the gallery. Maybe when he was younger, he would have itched for a fight right there in the middle of the gallery, but he’s older, calmer, definitely much more exhausted, right down to the bone. The kind of tiredness that comes with age and wear, like a good leather jacket frayed at the elbows and cuffs. Still good, still functional, but needing a little more TLC than before.

Good god, go to sleep before you start comparing yourself to various articles of clothing, he thinks to himself. He curls around Bilbo’s back, holding him flush to his chest. He thinks of golden light, the breeze from the mountains that comes in when Bilbo opens the balcony doors in the mornings, the crushing loneliness he never wants to feel again now that he knows how it is to be loved again. Bilbo pulls his arm closer around his waist and links their fingers together, making a happy little noise that makes Thorin smile to himself, just as he drifts off.

For the first time in a long time, his dreams don’t trouble him.

The week after the exhibition is slow and lazy, both of them taking things slow, even the drive back to Switzerland. They refuse to wear anything but pyjamas, and allow themselves some indulgences they rarely get to enjoy. Bilbo loves Thorin’s rustic deep soaker bath, and loves that it can fit both of them, back to chest, while the radio plays and they talk quietly over a bottle of wine. The laziness does wonders for Bilbo’s inner indulgent, and he soaks in the attention as much as he can. He’s happy, knowing Thorin isn’t stressing about the exhibition anymore, and he’s happy knowing that they’ve returned to their blissful little bubble of dual calmness and contentment. Like cats basking in patches of sunlight.

The promise of Italy grows closer, until they’re packing their bags and double checking they have their passports and all appropriate paperwork. Most of the trip will be by trains and buses, the occasional taxi, and likely an ungodly amount of walking. They pack light - summer clothes and travel essentials, Thorin spending over an hour debating which watercolour palette he should take, the Kuretaki or Windsor and Newton set. Bilbo leaves him to it. After moving back here properly (it’s still odd to think of himself as actually living here), he’d restocked on some books, and has been making his way through the Discworld series bit by bit. He packs Moving Pictures and Reaper Man, and finishes up his reread of Eric the night before they leave, sprawled out on the sofa with his legs over Thorin’s lap.

But he’s nervous. He’s excited, but nervous. This was the trip his parents planned to take, the trip they were talking about when they crashed on the side of the M4. He knows, logically, that it’s going to be a wonderful holiday, but the bittersweet feeling of grief over following the path his parents wanted to take sets him on edge.

Thorin can sense it. He traces absent patterns into the exposed skin of Bilbo’s leg while he reads something on his phone. Neither of them are paying too much attention to the TV, the volume turned all the way down so the Swiss soap stars are just nothing noise. Their nightly rituals have become routine, dinner, drinks, and an hour or two of snuggling on the sofa while tuning out Swiss soap operas, only playing because sometimes it’s easier than music. Sometimes they talk.
Sometimes they read to each other. Sometimes they actually watch TV and Bilbo only half manages to keep up with what’s being said.

He likes their rituals. He doesn’t know how half of them came into being, but he finds them oddly therapeutic. In his sessions with Arwen, she suggests he finds comfort in them because they require structure and routine. He isn’t sure about that, but whatever they’re doing, it works. Now that he can breathe better and he doesn’t constantly want to tear open his scar again, thanks to a change in antidepressants and regular therapy, he embraces the subtle changes in their lives together. They settle, and they adjust accordingly as they go.

Bilbo puts his book down and sits up straight, crossing his legs and leaning against Thorin’s shoulder. He’s become more affectionate since switching to his new medication, and while he isn’t entirely sure if that’s a good thing, he tries not to let it bother him too much. Frankly, Thorin is quite affectionate, too. Bilbo isn’t sure if he really qualifies as a bear or not by gay standards, but his habit of grumpy morning snuggles sure reminds Bilbo of a bear, even as he laughs and tries to get out from under him to make a cup of morning coffee.

You’re okay, he tells himself. It’s part of Arwen’s homework for him, reminding himself regularly of the positive things in his life. You have Thorin. You have Prim. You have this place. You’re okay, and you’re safe, the only way to go is forward.

Thorin kisses the top of his head.

“You should get some sleep,” he whispers. “Long drive to Geneva tomorrow.”
Bilbo hums. It’s only an hour, and he’s been better about cars recently, but it’s still… it’s still a lot to deal with. And Thorin is so, so good about it. He knows what music to play and when to talk to distract Bilbo from his own thoughts. He knows how to help without even having to ask if he needs to give it. Bilbo loves him so much for that.

He goes to bed easy, and falls asleep just as Thorin joins him. He wakes alone, bars of sunlight streaming through the blinds and into his eyes, across his face. He blinks himself awake, warm under heavy blankets and still sleep addled, watching for a moment as dust motes float through the sunlight and in between shadows, dancing across his vision. For a moment, he’s stuck in that space between waking and sleeping. He snuggles into the blankets, the smell of Thorin lulling him back to semi-sleep. His sweet, woody cologne, the smell of clean skin, the mandarin shampoo they share. It’s dreamlike, serene. But try as he might, idyllic mornings are hard to hold on to for an indefinite amount of time, and he ends up blinking the sleep from his eyes eventually, and stretches himself awake.

The early morning sun shines from a perfectly clear sky, and they load up the car in between bites of toast and passing a thermos of coffee back and forth. They have one suitcase between them, and two backpacks with the tourist essentials to get them through the various cities they’re going to pass through. The historian in Bilbo is excited, even though he’s been to Pompeii several times already. He’s excited to see old, mountainous countryside and quaint Italian villages and the seamless combination of old and new architecture in some of the more ancient cities. He’s excited to sit on a train and watch the world go by, while Thorin sketches or reads, whatever he’s in the mood for. He’s excited to get a break and to spend some time away from Switzerland, no matter how much he adores the little house in the mountains.

As they drive away, Bilbo watches the house in the wing mirror. He knows they’re coming back, and he knows that it’s only a week or so away, but there’s a nostalgic twist in his gut, accompanied by the introductory chords of Electric Light Orchestra’s Turn to Stone coming softly from the stereo, reminding him vividly of the late eighties, when he was a young teenager, taping his
favourite songs on the radio onto cassette tapes instead of pouring over his maths homework.

He looks at Thorin as they head down the mountain. He’s singing along quietly. He knows the song well. It’s times like these he wonders what Thorin was like before, when he was a teenager watching *Star Trek* and listening to Def Leppard and Black Sabbath, both bands Bilbo knows he’s been listening to since he was much younger. How wild he was, if he was wild. If he was always so creative, and kind, and loving, or if he grew into it later in life. If, if they met as teenagers, Bilbo, in his slightly chaotic school uniform and second-hand brown tweed jacket and huge eighties aviator glasses, would be intimidated by how tall and weedy Thorin is in every photo of him from the ages of sixteen to nineteen. If he would have looked at Thorin and been intrigued, or if he would have just walked away, far too uncomfortable in his own skin to even *consider* anything.

If, in his twenties, he would have looked at Thorin, living in Germany with a biker jacket and motorbike and a huge chip on his shoulder, and if he would have stopped and talked to him. If they could have had something earlier, or if they were meant to have this time in their lives to share with each other.

Bilbo doesn’t believe in fate, or much of a higher power, but whatever made the universe decide to bring them together when they were both at their lowest and most desperate, Bilbo is grateful for it. Even the petty fights, the nightmares, the awkward spaces between them they haven’t quite figured out how to fix and smooth out, he’s grateful for it all. And he always will be.

He hasn’t felt so alive in years as he does with Thorin. Hasn’t felt this loved, this needed, this free in so long that it’s amazing just how long he went without it. Bilbo thinks it might be the opposite of not knowing what he had until it was gone - he didn’t know what he was longing for until it came to him in the form of a very tall tattooed artist hiding away in Switzerland, half coerced by Gandalf into letting Bilbo stay with him to recover.

Love doesn’t fix everything. Most of the time, it doesn’t fix a thing. It’s messy and inconvenient, often times confusing. Sometimes, it makes things so much worse in a world where half the time, people think they have a right to dictate who should love who and how things should be done.

Love doesn’t fix everything, but goddamn does it give you a reason to keep living. A year ago, Bilbo doesn’t think he ever going have imagined this life for himself, living with somebody he loves with his entire heart and soul, both of them about to go on a well needed holiday, just the two of them, ready to drink wine and eat Italian food and wander through ruins to their hearts content.

They pass Vevey and drive out into the countryside, Lake Geneva to their left. The song changes and Thorin skips it, skips it again, until he settles on Fleetwood Mac's *The Chain*, smiling to himself and then at Bilbo. He rolls the windows down and sings along loudly, his voice deep and careless. Bilbo joins in. He barely even cares about the road, or the hulking metal beast of a car that they’re in, or the anxiety that had wrapped its hand around his throat last night and early this morning. Instead of fearful, he’d excited. When Thorin takes his hand and kisses his knuckles just as John McVie’s bassline comes in, Bilbo laughs and bats him away.

Bilbo has never been fond of cars, but for moments like this, speeding through the countryside with the music blaring, feeling like a teenager all over again, it might be worth it.

So, so, worth it.

Chapter End Notes
so this is the end. its been several years. ive changed a lot, left school, worked, gone back to school, and now im so much happier in my own life, so finishing this during a high point for me seemed like the right thing to do. the world sucks sometimes, but the only thing we can do as individuals is to keep on going and try to make life better for ourselves and for the people we love.

mental health is tricky. a lot of my own experiences have gone into this fic, and if anybody reading this feels like they need help, please, please, please reach out to somebody. anybody. i promise you that there is always somebody out there who can help you work through your feelings and come out the other side alive and coping in healthy, productive ways. if you need to call anybody or whatever, please refer to this global directory

thank you to everybody who has supported me over the last few years by reading and supporting and enjoying this fic. ive grown so much as a writer, and hopefully i can continue to bring you good bagginshield fics once i have the time and energy. i love writing them, and i rly rly hope i can do another big fic like this again sometime soon. i love you all, so so so so so so much. and if you guys want, i have an epilogue planned and 2 months until i move to norway for 5 months to do plenty of writing in.

thank you, a hundred thousand times. plant your trees, yall

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