Bed, Breakfast and Blood
by jeza_red

Summary

Bilbo Baggins set out to open his own B&B in the marvelous place up North. He bought a gorgeous Georgian mansion with a beautiful view and a lot of potential.

What he didn't expect to get in the deal were surprisingly pleasant neighbors. Really, they are lovely, kind, generous people.

All sans the vampire living in his basement. Well, maybe. Because as of late he's quite a decent fellow.

Notes

As always, I am not native to English and there will probably be some gramm errors, hopefully not many:)

Enjoy!
Snowed In.

Bilbo’s first opinion of Erebor was that the mansion certainly needed dusting. Extensive dusting. And quite a lot of laundering – that thought came when he tried to pull the curtains shielding high windows in the hall apart and got a face-full of dust for his trouble.

The building was in a generally good shape, considering that it stood abandoned for the last sixty years – apart from the unbelievable amount of dust gathered on every surface the rest seemed to be in order: the roofing was sound, walls and ceilings free of mold, pipes were not leaking all over the place when filled back with water. Only one electric socket required repair. Bathtubs and sinks were not marked by limescale, tiles on the walls and floors were mostly un-cracked. Most of the lightbulbs on the ground floor was working! The place seemed perfectly preserved, as if just waiting for someone to come and bring it back to life.

It managed to calm Bilbo Baggins down in a way – as the situation that led to him standing in the front hall of the impressive abode was stressful and unpleasant on almost every front, it was a relief to know that at least something was working in his favour.

Funeral of uncle Isengrim and following disputes about his inheritance that stretched unpleasantly for months – thanks to his aunt Lobelia and her greedy husband – took a toll on Bilbo, leaving him very exhausted and simply sad. He loved his uncle and squabbling over his Last Will filled him with distaste. If not for the old friend of his mother, an elderly gentleman who turned out to be a retired lawyer and decided to help Bilbo free of charge, red tape would strangle them all.

And, more importantly, Bilbo would never have enough funds to buy this perfect place and start working on his own little project.

Well, maybe ‘little’ was not a good word for it, because the estate was, to tell the truth, huge – especially for a single man who's spent half of his life in a three bedroom flat in the centre of Bree with his parents, and the other half, sans last five years, sharing a small townhouse with a group of rather rowdy students. The building itself was a massive Georgian mansion, two floors and cellars sprawling underneath them, a big attic and a conservatory. There were twelve bedrooms, two sitting rooms, miles upon miles of corridors decked in dark wood and musty rugs. And last, but not least, twelve acres of land that surrounded the whole deal.

Erebor stood proudly on top of a hill that gently slopped into a picturesque valley on the bottom of which rested a town called Ironhill. Behind her back mountain range composed of ragged lines and steep walls climbed up to the sky, harsh and wild, yet impressive all the same. The land had to look beautiful in the summer, Bilbo suspected, but now, in the midst of October, it was beyond description. He felt as if someone has ripped him out of the boring, grey reality and thrown into a fairy tale. The snow came early this year and already everything was covered in a thick layer of white softness that glistered in the sun. Frost covered trees and shrubs, making them look like delicate sculptures made by some skilled artist rather than Mother Nature.

It took one day, no, one moment for Bilbo Baggins to fall in love with this place.

Actually, it was just one look; after he stepped out of the car and stretched his legs, after he turned around to take a look down the driveway, down the hill… the sun was slowly inching behind the mountains, its last surviving rays reflecting on the snow and covering the landscape in a golden halo. The raw beauty of it stole his breath and Bilbo Baggins knew, deep in his heart, that there was no way back, that he will stay in this marvellous place until the end of his days.
“The estate was well taken care of since her last owner passed away,” Mister Balin, solicitor responsible for Erebor, told him after all the papers has been signed and the keys exchanged hands. “People from Ironhill take pride in it and hated to see it fall into disuse. Luckily, you’ve shown up, Mister Baggins.”

And indeed, save for copious amounts if dust, Erebor didn’t look abandoned. It looked… expectant.

Bilbo has sworn that he will not disappoint her. For his own use he adapted a small set of rooms that in the past was probably some sort of servant’s annex. It suited him quite well and was a bit more ‘modern’ than the rest of the house that was splendidly preserved in its austerity and historical accuracy. People were ready to pay good money to spend their time in the grand rooms such as those and Bilbo wanted to leave them to it.

He was happy with his little suite of decently sized bedroom, quaint little bathroom and something that was probably a walk-in pantry that was converted into a small office. One of the best things about it was that the annex connected to the rest of the house via its own small staircase (that Bilbo liked to pretend to be a secret passage) and through the big kitchen that fully answered his passion for cooking.

The house lacked *some* comforts, of course. Central heating was ancient and he was told that power lines tended to be moody during the spells of bad weather. Also, there was no TV reception ("Mountains", Mr Balin explained with an apologetic smile) and there was only one phone as the landline was not to be trusted either. Thank goodness it was possible to pull the internet cables from Ironhill, but that would have to wait until spring at best.

But these small things were not enough to chase off a Baggins – they were stubborn lot and, truth to be told, liked simplicity. Bilbo never felt good when surrounded by crowds of people and preferred silence and peace over the bustling town centre any day.

With that in mind, he went about the business of making the mansion liveable again in a calm and organised manner. He catalogued all the things that needed fixing, made notes on every room and possible use of every piece of old furniture, he scribbled numbers and prices from numerous catalogues he’s brought with him. All was going quite well for the first week.

Until the snowstorm that cut him off from the world.

* * *

It took three days before Bilbo started to panic. He was prepared for harsh winter, of course he was, and his pantry was quite well stocked, thank you; there was also enough wood stacked in the back of the house to last him three winters if necessary (and he wondered who was the good soul that’s chopped it all into manageable bits), but… he was running out of tea fast.

He’s finished the last bottle of milk on the second day and from then on his anxiety stared to grow.
Snow drifts outside were almost four feet tall, the driveway was indistinguishable – so was the road down the hill, for that matter. His hatchback didn’t have a chance of getting out of the shed and walking two miles in the freezing cold didn’t sound appealing at all. Bilbo was sure that if the snow stays at some point he will be forced to brave this possibility… but that also made him think of other possible implications.

What if the snow stays till spring? How will he get the renovation crew into Erebor? How will he make it ready for the start of the summer? He will lose time and money and, in the worst case scenario, will lose the whole season!

Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea to move in yet? Maybe he should have waited until spring – maybe he should have asked more questions and wasn’t so eager to leave Bree and his quarrelling family behind?

Also, the feeling of isolation made it difficult for Bilbo to settle down. The mansion loomed over him, grand and silent, save for some occasional rustle or creak; it was suddenly… less comfortable and more… distressing. Bilbo was not the kind of person who believed in ghosts or other such nonsense, he was a Baggins, and they were known for their healthy scepticism in the face of anything that as much as smelled of mystery. Bilbo was not afraid of the dark, but he was afraid of the roof breaking under the weight of snow or the sparks form the chimney somehow causing fire when he wasn’t looking. He also felt a healthy dose of respect for any hungry predator that may stumble upon him during his short ventures for firewood.

On the fifth day of the snow-in Bilbo’s weakening nerves caused the biggest calamity imaginable – two weeks after moving into the mansion he has run out of his favourite tea.

*  

Bilbo Baggins, if anything, was an organised person and the trip to Ironhill was planned to the last detail two days before the date he set for it. He’s made sure that his winter clothes are dry and accounted for, the battery of his flashlight is fully charged and his backpack is ready. He’s made a list of the products necessary for survival – the way uphill will be a lot harder than downhill and he didn’t want to overstuff the bag. All that was left was waiting.

And so he waited. With a cup of steaming chamomile and a book, reclining in the old armchair in front of the brightly lit fireplace Bilbo Baggins was quite content.

Until, that is, the doorbell rang.

After swallowing his heart back into the chest (and dealing with the chamomile he’s spilled all over his left knee, thank you very much) Bilbo spared a moment to wonder what in the goodness was going on, who would show up on his doorstep at this hour and in this kind of weather, before he got up and rushed to find out. Walk from the kitchen to the foyer took a while during which the doorbell didn’t stop chiming, its soft sounds echoing in the otherwise silent stillness of the house.

When he came to the door, Bilbo didn’t open it right away. He was smart enough to be wary, as his mother taught him when he was still very young, and decided to listen instead. There was a little visor in the door, but it was covered in frost and useless, but the wooden barrier wasn’t thick enough to keep the noises from the outside completely and Bilbo could hear two voices – somewhat muffled, but distinguishable.
“What if he’s not in?” One asked.

“No, he has to be, the car is in the shed.” The other replied.

“Of course it is, there’s no point in taking it out in this snow. Maybe he went out?”

“And where would he go? We’ve met no one on the way from the town, brother. No one has seen him in a week.”

“But there’s no lights!”

“Maybe power went out again? Look, there’s smoke coming out of the chimney. He’s in.”

“Maybe he’s sleeping?”

“The he’s better wake up, because I don’t fancy trekking down the hill with all this stuff on my back. Climbing one way was hard enough.”

Stuff? What did they bring? Bilbo wondered, trying to see through the cloudy visor without much success. The voices seemed young and their specific accent put them firmly in the area of Ironhill.

Curious now more than anything, Bilbo decided to be brave and opened the door a crack.

What he saw were two figures swathed in coats, their faces obscured by scarfs and hats pulled so low that he could barely see their eyes. In the evening gloom they would be hardly distinguishable from the junipers growing next to the porch, if not for the way they both jumped and turned to him.

“Hello?” Bilbo asked, trying to sound stern and ‘we want no problems here’. “Who’s there?”

“You must be Mister Boggins!” The taller of the strangers exclaimed loudly and instantly pushed his face close to the door. “So you haven’t left!”

“Boggins,” Bilbo corrected. “And who are you if I may ask?”

“Oh, of course!” The shape moved back to stand next to his companion and they both did a strange little bow-move before answering. “Kili, and this is my brother Fili!”

“Oakenshield,” added the other… Fili-shape, with a bit more restraint in his voice. “We came from Ironhill.”

As he suspected, then.

“I was not expecting anyone,” Bilbo edged a bit closer to the door, opening it a few millimetres wider, intrigued. It was a long walk in the snow and these two were covered in it from feet to waist.

“Oh, we know!” Shape called Kili swayed excitedly. “It’s hard to get uphill at the best of times, you see, and now it’s nearly impossible.”

Well, that he knew.

“My brother wanted to say that folks in town are aware of your, well, situation,” shape called Fili explained patiently. “We were sent to check on you, Mister Baggins, to make sure that the newest member of our community didn’t manage to get himself lost in the snow and didn’t die of hunger.”

“Yes!” Kili exclaimed happily as if it was one big adventure. “And we brought food!”
“Food?” Bilbo was somewhat floored by that last part and not a small bit touched by it.

“Bombur, the big guy that runs the grocery store, said he hasn’t seen you in over a week so he packed some things he thought you may need in the meanwhile.” Fili-shape pointed at the backpacks attached to their backs. “Sweet fellow that he is, he’s made sure that you will have enough to eat till the thaw.”

“Yeah, his care and consideration almost broke my back.” Kili-shape grumbled until the hit over the head silenced him.

That was… remarkably nice. Bilbo, indeed, remembered the rotund owner of the grocery store, his impressive red beard was hard to forget, same as his love of pastries that he shared with Bilbo on his first shopping trip. They’ve spend a good hour arguing the superiority of apples over pecans when it came to pie fillings and Bilbo left the store pleasantly surprised that he’s already managed to find a friend.

That was the decisive factor in his decision to open the door fully and face his guests properly.

“Well, I can’t keep you on the porch if that’s the case,” he smiled kindly at the two shivering figures. “But I warn you, if you came here to kill me and steal my possessions, you've wasted your time as I left the silvers in Bree.”

That bit sounded more humorous than was intended and both shapes laughed loudly and freely before pulling their hats off and scarves down to reveal two matching smiles.

They were both young, barely out of boyhood, by the look of them, even if they both somewhat towered over Bilbo. They were like night and day, one dark-haired and the other blond, but something in their faces made it obvious that they are family. Also, both seemed unbelievably friendly.

So friendly in fact, that Bilbo felt no qualms about gesturing for them to get inside.

“Come on, then,” he stepped back holding the door open. “I can offer you something warm to drink after climbing all the way here. Do hurry up,” he rushed when the boys seemed to freeze on the doorstep with unsure expressions crossing their faces. “You’re letting the cold in, get in.”

That did the job and soon enough Bilbo had two dripping, shivering guests ridding themselves of their soaked jackets and boots and looking around the hall in wonder.

“I never thought that I would live to see the inside of this place,” Kili said quite seriously, nodding his thanks when Bilbo offered to hold his coat so the boy could fight with his shoelaces unhindered. “I mean, I always wanted to see it from the inside when I was a kid, you know.” He explained somewhat sheepishly at the questioning took he was given. “Do you have ghosts?”

The matter-of-fact question caused Bilbo to crack a smile and shake his head.

“Don’t mind him, Mister Baggins,” said Fili. “Some of us never grow up.”

“Hey!”

*
If he had more time to think on it, Bilbo would be surprised at how fast he’s warmed up to the brothers. They were young and lively, entertaining and polite to a fault. However, when he finally seated them down in the kitchen and stoked the fire, and they started to unpack their backpacks, he was ready to hug them both.

They brought tea! And milk!

Granted, the milk was half-frozen and needed thawing, but Bilbo was so happy that he didn’t even think before offering his guests generous helpings of hot chocolate from his dwindling stock. Couple of minutes later he was rewarded with appreciative moans as they downed the liquid without as much as blowing on it to cool it down. He winced, but when there was no complains he set about making a proper pot of tea.

Bombur was quickly becoming his favourite person in the world, as the box of tea was followed by a couple of loaves of fresh bread, a jar of cherry preserve, jar of honey, butter and a tin of biscuits. There were three different kinds of cheese, a large piece of ham, pork sausages and even carefully packaged tomatoes and eggs! The man had to remember what Bilbo bought from him a week ago and filled in the gaps with what he thought would be appreciated. My, he even remembered to pack a dozen cans of tomato soup Bilbo preferred!

Oh, it was such a nice gesture.

“I will have to thank him as soon as possible,” Bilbo prattled while putting everything away. “Do you happen to know how much I am supposed to pay for these? It’s so terribly kind of him. Oh, these shortbread cookies are my favourite too! How did he know?”

“Bombur didn’t tell us, Mister Baggins,” Fili answered him over the rim of the mug full of hot properly milky tea. “You will have to settle it with him when you go down, I’m afraid. But he’s a lovely fellow, I am sure he can wait for the road to clear a bit.”

“Hates to see folk hungry, that one,” Kili added with a smile. “Make a friend of him and you won’t ever have to worry about lacking quality food, Mister Baggins.”

And speaking about food.

“And, where’s my head,” Bilbo turned form the cupboard and measured his guests with a look. They were both draped in blankets and nursing steaming mugs. Bilbo even found some old slippers to lend out as their socks were currently drying by the stove next to the coats. They looked so young like that, Bilbo thought, with their long hair mussed and noses still red from the cold. “You have to be hungry, boys, I’m sure that I can whip out a bowl of soup that will warm you up.”

They shared a long look at that and Bilbo waited. He was familiar with the way some siblings communicated without speaking – he’s seen it happen between his younger cousins a lot, - and waited for the decision. After all he was as strange to them as they were to him. He didn’t have to wait long, tough, because not a moment later he was rewarded with two hopeful looks accompanied by cheerful smiles.

“If you insist, Mister Baggins,” Kili shrugged under the blanket. “All that climbing was exhausting to tell you the truth and I am afraid that if you don’t feed us, we will have to take matters into our own hands.”

His voice was teasing, but there was something in his dark eyes that made Bilbo’s hand hesitate over the pan he was about to pick up. A glint of something serious and cold… that lasted until a broad hand smacked the lad on the head and his brother sighed in exasperation. “You will stop eying those
biscuits, Kili, or I will tell Bombur to sit on you.”

“Oh, okay, okay,” grumbled Kili and Bilbo couldn’t help but laugh at his sullen expression. He opened the mentioned tin and without hesitation placed it on the counter between the brothers.

“Here you go,” he encouraged them with a gesture. “I hope it will tide you over until the soup is ready.”

“Oh no, we couldn’t possibly…” Fili tried to protest, but Kili was already dipping the pastry in his tea so it was pretty useless. “You greedy monster! I swear, I’m ashamed to be related to you!”

Bilbo smiled at the bickering duo and went back to opening cans and rummaging through his spice cabinet.

Little did he know what feeding these two strays would bring on his head in the nearest future.
“Oh, you can’t possibly think of going back now!” Bilbo stared in disbelief at the youths occupying his kitchen table. Calmly, they stared back, maybe a bit confused by his sudden distress so he rushed to clarify. “It’s late and absolutely freezing outside!”

That little outburst made them smile instead of reconsider, though. “It’s okay, Mister Baggins,” Fili waved the worries away. “We grew up in this place and spent every winter buried in the snow up to the eyeballs!”

“Ironhillers are impervious to the cold!” Kili proclaimed proudly.

However, Bilbo was not convinced. He was a caring person by nature and these two rascals someway managed to steal their way into his good graces with nothing else than their smiles and a couple of hours of chatter. “But what if you get lost or… or something?” He fretted. “No, no, I can’t allow you! There are enough beds in this old place for you to spend the night and go back tomorrow.”

Yes, that was a good idea, perfect, actually. He could not think about all the dangers that waited on the boys outside – even if it wasn’t that late yet, barely a quarter past nine, it was still cold and dark and windy, and the road downhill was winding and unsure. It was smarter to wait till the morning.

But the boys were shaking their heads at the idea.

“We would love to stay, really,” promised Kili sincerely. “But both of us have morning classes to attend to and our uncle will box our ears if we turn up late.”

Oh, of course. They did say they were attending local college and if there was one thing Bilbo would not begrudge anyone, it was proper education. Even so, it still didn’t sit well with him to just let them go like that…

“But… I will walk you, then.” He decided in a moment of inspiration. It was a silly idea and he knew it a second later when he turned to put their empty bowls in the sink, but once voiced, Bilbo couldn’t back out. Even if the thought of braving that cold by himself was an extremely unpleasant one. “I will walk you to the town and then…”

“Mister Baggins, don’t be ridiculous,” Fili cut him off quite rudely, but with such amount of amused exasperation that Bilbo could not scold him for it. It took the lad three steps to stand in front of the older man who, to his own annoyance, had to raise his head to keep the eye contact.

Now, it needs to be mentioned that Bilbo Baggins was not good with conflicts of any kind. He liked to think he’s being rational and reasonable, but in the end he suspected that his spine is just too soft to withstand the amount of stress that dealing with opinions different than his own brought about. Even if his ‘opponent’ was over a decade younger and quite friendly and reasonable in his disagreement.

“If anyone runs the danger of getting lost, it’s you, Mister Baggins. I and my brother, we know this area like the back of our hands, we will be quite safe.” There was a hand on his forearm, gentle and friendly; everything about the young man in front of him spoke of kindness and trustworthiness and Bilbo could feel the fight draining out of him when confronted with a pair of honest blue eyes.

It made sense, of course it did, why was he even protesting, he didn’t know… Or maybe he did. Maybe he was a bit more selfish in his reasoning: the boys were a good company for these few short hours they shared with him and Bilbo could already feel the loneliness that would close on him after
they’re gone. It was silly and immature, but apparently he needed human interaction more than he needed tea!

What a dreadful thought.

In the end Bilbo let them go without protest, but not without many warnings and a promise to call him when they get back home – he gave them his number and also made them call their home to make sure that someone on the other side knows to expect them. Kili made faces when on the phone, but was serious enough when he reassured the person on the other end (his uncle, judging by the low decidedly manly voice in the receiver) and promised to be careful on the way.

Bilbo was still nervous as he watched them pull their winter gear back on, but at least now – with a clear plan in motion – he could cope better.

“Don’t worry, Mister Boggins, we will come over soon!” Promised Kili, patting his arm in a friendly manner. His hat was already sitting on his head, low enough to shade his brown eyes and that, together with bulky coat and massive winter boots, made him look like some sort of a silly dwarf. “Your soup was great and sorry for the biscuits, I really meant to leave something for later.”

“Baggins,” Bilbo corrected quietly, watching from his doorstep as the brothers stumbled down the driveway and disappeared in the darkness, their position marked only by the weak glare of a borrowed flashlight. He stood there until his toes started to curl from cold and only then closed the door and went back to the kitchen; to clean up the dishes and take proper stock of the goods that Fili and Kili brought him.

While driving halfway across the country Bilbo didn’t expect to meet with such warm welcome and genuine care from his new neighbours. He’s met maybe three local people since buying Erebor and properly talked with two of them – Bombur and Mister Balin, - yet they were worried about him and seen to it that he was safe in the storm.

What a pleasant surprise, he thought to himself snuggling under warm blankets in his comfortable bed. These Ironhillers are really lovely people.

*

“What do you think, then?”

Snow creaked under their feet as they made their way downhill at a fast march, hands joined and steps matched. The flashlight has been safely tucked away into one of the backpacks as soon as the daunting shape of Erebor disappeared from view.

“He’s nice.”

“Mhm. He seems to be genuine.” A beat and then, “Cute, too.”

“Kili!”

“Don’t bite my head off, you have to admit that the whole ‘tiny bloke in a knitted cardigan’ thing is pretty attractive in a totally non-exciting, homely way. A bit like dear Ori, don’t you think?” Another beat. “Oh come now, I can watch without touching.”
“I hope so. We need access to the house so play nice.”

“It won’t be hard, he is soft and hopelessly proper.”

“Being respectable is not a curse, you know? Try sometimes, you may like it.”

“Nah, I like it well enough on others, until they run the risk of being dreadfully boring.”

“Nonetheless, keep him happy and he will allow us back. Now we just have to figure out the way to get the others in as well.”

The moon shone briefly from behind the clouds, thin and sickly pale, casting a silvery glow over their loose hair and glistering eyes for a few moments until it quickly hid back as if afraid of what it saw.

“You are sure it’s there, aren’t you?”

“Kili…” a sigh.

“I am just making sure! You... you are older and you know how it looks. I…”

“I am sure, it’s somewhere in the mansion, just waiting to be found. Mister Baggins is a godsend and we have to grab the opportunity he presents with both hands.” One silent snigger later another exasperated sigh erupted from the blond. “Not in this way, you beast!”

“I didn’t say a word, just agreed with you. This Baggins seems easy enough; you talked him around without trouble.”

“Yes, he is pretty susceptible to suggestion…”

“Yeah, and also pretty pretty.”

“Kili, I swear!”

“Oh, come on! He even made canned soup taste good; if that’s not a skill I don’t know what is! I call dibs!”

“Soup, eh? I wonder what you will have to say about it when the time comes.”

“…er, what?”

“You hold my hair, I hold yours?”

“Oh… eugh, shit!”

“Told you to lay off the biscuits, didn’t I?”

“Oh eugh!”

*

For the next three days Bilbo wavered between marvelling at his new neighbours (mostly during breakfast when hot milky tea helped him to unglue his eyelids and live) and trying not to think how
lonely and empty the house seemed without any company (mostly during dinner, when he didn’t have anyone to smile at while thinking of a particularly good bit of a dialog). He could hardly help it, he was an intellectual kind and thinking was what he did best after all. Also, the mansion didn’t give much opportunity for distraction at the moment – when everything has been accounted for and planned out, with no way to make those plans reality, it was simply frustrating to be stuck inside all day with nothing else, but a plain sheet of paper staring at him accusingly from the hold of his old typewriter.

So he sought distractions outside. Bilbo’s mother always said that nothing cleared the mind as well as a bit of physical exertion and even though her son wasn’t into any sort of those bothersome ‘activities’ like jogging or biking, he wasn’t stranger to a bit of hauling and pushing. On the second day after his unexpected visit, Bilbo ventured outside.

It took him most of the morning to clear the snow off the driveway and the porch. Shrubs and a few old spruces growing around the house managed to keep most of the snow drift away, and Bilbo was thankful, otherwise he wouldn’t be able to put the shovel away before dinner. He’s made sure that his car didn’t freeze to death in the shed (yes, he was one of those people that cared about their possessions maybe a bit more than it was healthy and his Minty was surely a well-loved machine).

After lunch he dared to shovel a bit around the road, but quickly gave up the idea as the drifts were simply too big. He was already sweaty and out of breath and he wasn’t even out of the gate yet! How did the boys manage to brave this barrier was beyond him.

He spent the evening in front of the fireplace, trying to coax his stiff fingers back to life and, for all the tiredness and aching muscles, Bilbo was feeling much better.

Next day started early with an influx of inspiration that had him spending hours in his little office beating at the keys, powered by milky tea and a stray apple he’s found in the cupboard. After finishing something that had a potential to be polished into a pretty decent chapter, Bilbo decided that it’s time to celebrate and went out to build a snowman.

It was quite an impressive affair, close to eight feet in size, sculpted with care and adorned with pinecones unearthed during the shovelling the day before. The snowman sported a startlingly smug smile that had to be blamed on a pair of suspiciously lowered eyebrows – and no matter how much Bilbo fiddled with two thin twigs it refused to change. Admitting defeat, the amateur sculptor decided to stretch his legs a bit and set out for a short walk around the estate.

It was quite a lovely day all around – the sky was clear and blue, the sun shone brightly and the landscape in every direction was simply breath-taking. Bilbo grieved the fact that the box containing his camera hasn’t arrived yet – and, judging by the way he was stuck on the hill, may not arrive for a number of days. Hopefully, he will have many more days like this to take photographs and marvel at the world.

Maybe he could get a dog? This kind of setting called for a dog. And not one of those miniature flat-faced rats city dwellers preferred to keep – no, this scenery needed something that went at least past its owner’s knees and knew how to run and tumble and fetch sticks. Maybe a German Shepherd? Or a Pointer, they were good outdoorsy dogs. It would surely feel nice to have a big, alert creature keeping an eye on the happenings in and around the mansion.

With these thoughts filling his head, Bilbo spent quite a delightful afternoon with his inherent cup of tea and a rough draft of the tenth chapter of his novel. He mumbled to himself, murmured dialogs to check out their flow and excessively used green gel pen to mark all the changes and additions to the text. It was going well.
It was going so well, in fact, that an interruption was almost expected.

And so it happened.

The doorbell rang.

This time Bilbo took it with less panic and no stained fabrics. In fact, he took it with a quiet sort of anticipation as he dashed to the foyer, pulling his cardigan on and switching the lights on the way. That same anticipation made him throw caution to the wind and open the door without care… before it died a swift and painless death at the sight that awaited on the other side.

The man was… big. Not only tall, though that was certainly one of his main characteristics; he was also incredibly wide and, in some strange sense, solid. Like a piece of rock that fell off from the ridges behind the mansion to stand on Bilbo’s doorstep. Well, a living piece of rock with bald, tattooed head, thick, disapproving eyebrows and a pair of dark, glaring eyes.

Oh, did the man glare.

“Good evening…?” Bilbo desperately tried to make it not sound like a question.

“Dwalin,” impressive beard moved and a voice resembling poured gravel rolled from underneath. “At yer service.”

The sound Bilbo has made, on the contrary, could be easy to find in a nest of mice.

“Er, yes, at yours,” he cleared his throat couple of times while the mountain of a man stood on his doorstep as if he belonged to the landscape. “Was I, eh, expecting you?”

The rescue, surprisingly, came from behind the man’s back, in a form of a young voice yelling with glee: “Uncle Dwalin, don’t scare Mister Boggins! He shares his cookies!”

As strange as the message was, Bilbo felt instantly better when two smiling faces appeared on both sides of the man called Dwalin. Kili and Fili, hatless heads of tangled hair and eyes filled with mischief, rounded on him with armfuls of bags and boxes.

“We brought more food!” Kili exclaimed happily. “And some of your stuff came in delivery so we got that too!”

“Delivery? How…?”

Bilbo tried to peek around the trio on his porch and, sure enough, his eyes found a car parked on the driveway – a massive, battered 4x4. Some sort of Range Rover or Ford, he couldn’t see well in the dark, but it certainly looked powerful enough to get through the blockage.

“Sure we can… my ass,” Fili was certainly less enthusiastic than his brother, but his eyes shone with mirth as he pushed his way to the door and handed Bilbo one of the parcels. “Boys from TNT took one look at the road uphill and turned tail after leaving all your things at the post office. One of my friends works there and he asked us if we could get them delivered with the food, so here we are… Can we come in?”

The last question had Bilbo almost stumbling over his own feet to let the trio in and herd them in the direction of the warm kitchen, all the way fussing with the bags and boxes and taking their coats that this time were blessedly dry, and trying to find words of thanks for yet another unexpected favour.

“That’s okay,” Kili waved him off easily. “We knew that if there’s a car able to get us here, it has to
be uncle’s old mule, so we jumped on the bed long enough until he agreed to drive us.”

“You… what?” Bilbo was sure that something escaped him in this conversation.

A powerful sigh from the mountain-called-Dwalin turned his attention from the chattering teen. “I wish the little fool was jokin’,” the man grumbled. “Couldn’t shut up ‘bout the place, these two, and it looks that the snow will hold. Seemed a decent thing to check on ye, Master Baggins.”

“Oh, no, none of that, please,” Bilbo set left his package on the kitchen table and offered his hand for a handshake… and then watched it disappear in a clutch of a giant, freezing paw. “Call me Bilbo, please. I don’t know how to thank you, Mister Dwalin, and your boys…”

The handshake was strong and short, business-like. “Dwalin.” This was a man used to short sentences and no beating around the bush, Bilbo decided. And the width of his shoulders straining the checkered flannel shirt suggested that he was also perfectly able to apply his own beating when occasion demanded it.

“Well, then, okay. Fili, Kili, how about you get these bags on the counter and I will go about making some tea?” When the boys went along with his request, he turned to their uncle and waved him to the table. “Do you drink tea? I’m afraid I have no coffee.”

The man grunted something that Bilbo decided to take as ‘yes’ (because, who in their right mind refused a cup of tea on a cold winter evening?) and set about filling the kettle when he was intercepted by a grinning Fili. “Uncle really prefers hot chocolate,” the blond whispered. “But he will never admit it, because he’s too hard-core.”

He could hardly understand how a simple cup of hot chocolate could get in the way of being ‘hard-core’ for a man such as Dwalin. Maybe it was a local thing?

“Well, then, let me see what good Bombur decided to send with you this time.”

Bilbo set about unpacking the goods as the brothers joined their uncle at the table, each with their own cup of steaming chocolate and a box of shortbread cookies between them. It was a very strange picture for sure, but in some small way it made Bilbo feel better. Even if Uncle Dwalin was not overly talkative and his nephews mostly chewed with their mouths open, and the last box of hot chocolate was almost empty. It was still very nice.

Mostly.

*

“You don’t have a TV? Why?”

It was.

“No internet? What is wrong with you?!?”

Really.

“So what do you do in the evenings, stare into fireplace?”

“I have a radio. It works… most of the time.”
“Oh my God, this is just awful!”

*

“You are a writer?”

“What do you write?”

Uh Oh.

“Romance books?!” Kili’s delighted exclamation had to be heard in the attic. “Like, harlequins?”

Bilbo was trying to keep the embarrassed blush down; he was used to the reactions most people displayed at discovering his main profession, and the questions they couldn’t get to ask fast enough, but he’s never had anyone question him with such… enthusiasm, before.

“No, Kili, I write adventure stories.”

The most surprising question, though, came from behind the thick beard: “Hrm, something I might’ve read?” Mister Dwalin didn’t quite look like the reading type, but Bilbo was far from judging anyone by their appearance.

*

“B&B, hm? Good idea if I ever heard one. The place will do good with people.”

For some reason these words and a single nod of approval from the man felt nicer than they’ve had right to feel. It’s not as if Bilbo was asking anyone’s permission to do what he wanted, but it was suddenly important that someone local … approves.

“Uncle is the local woodsman,” Kili informed him while messily chewing on a cookie. “He stalks the forests behind the estate and… ouch!”

The boy was obviously used to getting hit on the head by his brother and uncle, Bilbo thought, otherwise he would take more care with what came out of his mouth. Not that it wasn’t amusing.

“I run a sawmill in the valley,” Mister Dwalin corrected with a stern expression. “Family business, and the woods around fall under it. When Balin said someone finally bought the house, I saw it that you’ll have something to put in the fireplace.”

“Oh… oh, so it was you! I’m sorry, that was very thoughtful of you. May I know how much it…”

“Nothing.”

“But…”

“Enough that folks live here again. Every house needs an owner and Erebor missed… life.”
When the time came for them to go, Bilbo was trying to put on a brave face as the thought of being alone again came back with vengeance. He thanked Mister Dwalin profusely and offered his thanks to the boys, and they had to be related, because all of them waved him off with a ‘decent thing to do’ excuse. Fili and Kili dashed to the door, eyes darting everywhere, doubtlessly curious about the lonely, mysterious house on a hill. Maybe they looked out for the ghosts?

“Thank you for visiting,” Bilbo followed with their uncle at more sedate pace. “And sorry to keep you this late.”

“Nah,” Dwalin grunted in usual gruff manner and his dark eyes shone with something that could be called amusement if one was brave enough to throw words around. “Tell you the truth, Baggins, I’ve been curious too. Haven’t seen the place in ages.”

Oh, so it was some king of local curiosity, then. Not surprising, considering.

“Well, it’s not much yet,” Bilbo admitted with a shine on his own. “There’s a lot to do yet, but I plan to make it ready for summer and then… you will be surprised, that I can promise you. That is, if I manage to get some crews up the hill before April.”

“Crews? Ye planning to rebuild?”

And, just like that, the glaring was back. Bilbo couldn’t deny fast enough.

“No, no, of course not! It’s just that the place needs… refreshing. There’s painting, new carpets and furniture to sort out. Someone has to see to the window frames, some has to be resealed. It’s just… it’s an old home and it needs some love.” He finished with a hopeful smile.

He waited patiently for the man to pull his boots on. Boys were already outside and, judging by the sounds coming from there, they’ve discovered his snowman.

“Tell ya what, Baggins,” Dwalin rose to his impressive twenty feet to tower over poor Bilbo, as some important decision went down in his mind. “Ye don’t need to look far, I can ask ‘round. There’s enough folk that can help ya with these things.”

“Oh no, I would hate to…”

Never has he seen a “Shut up and listen,” glared with such authority. “I can even lend out these two fools to help ya dust and move furniture if ya want to. It’ll do them good to be outta the house for a while. And I’ll ask after these windows of yours, there’s someone who’ll know how to fix ‘em.”

“Oh, I would hate to…”

But…”

“Tha’s settled then, good. Evening.”

“Do…”Bilbo was left in the doorway with his mouth open in protest and no knowledge of where did the situation turned in this direction. “Good evening,” he whispered to the back lights of the car.
that was leaving his driveway.

He had to revise his opinion on the Ironhillers, it seemed.

They were still lovely people. Just… lovely in a very forceful way.

*

“Put the heating on, will ya?”

All Kili got for his trouble was a slap on the fingers when he tried to reach from the backseat and fiddle with the buttons. It didn’t really hurt, but he’s made a big production of blowing on his hand anyway. Dwalin just rolled his eyes and adjusted the controls accordingly.

“I knew it was a good idea to bring you along,” Fili, curled tightly on the passenger seat, admitted with a small smile. “Mister Baggins didn’t stand a chance.”

“It’s only because he is big as a bear,” Kili teased. “And scares people into submission. Also, the accent never fails.”

“I got you a way in, you twit, be grateful!” Dwalin snapped back, but is voice was tainted with fondness. “If I left it to the two of you we would never get there.”

“Oy, I can roll them like a pro, you know!”

“And yet you’d rather waste time playing idiots.”

“That’s the guise he got hooked on; a safe bet, really,” Fili shrugged without shame. “Why change a good thing? He is kind to the ‘boys’ and won’t suspect anything is amiss when ‘they’ ask for a tour of the ‘mysterious mansion’.”

“If all goes well you’ll get more than a tour. You might have to search the place from top to bottom so use your time wisely.”

“Will you get Nori?” Kili asked, leaning over the passenger seat, one arm thrown over Fili’s shoulders. “He knows where to look for precious; he may find some clues…”

Dwalin chewed at the answer for a bit and the brothers weren’t surprised. Their ‘uncles’ relationship was very strained and only thing that helped to make their interactions somewhat civil was distance. A lot of it.

In the meanwhile Fili snuggled into Kili’s arm and didn’t protest when its owner leaned in to steal a kiss. “I’m hungry,” Kili whispered close to his lips. “Do we have to eat with him? It’s nasty…”

“I know, but it’s a part of the game, they feel better when we seem like them.”

“And what about me feeling better?”

“Next time just stick to the tea and it should be alright, he’s already caught.”

“That he is… hm, do you think it would be okay then to…”
“No!”

Cornered by two exasperated faces Kili raised his hands in surrender and flopped back against the backseat.

“You leave him be, brat, he’s not local!” Dwalin ordered loudly.

“That’s the point!”

“Kili!”

“Fine!”
Snow storm

Chapter Notes

I am back! After a week back home I bring a new chapter to the table - it's short, but hopefully will be filling enough;) Also, I hope it will raise some questions you will want answered at some point:D

Also, I lied in to comments - the Arekstone WILL be in this story - but, well, only for a minute and no more after that:) A cameo, if you'd like.

Saying that, have a good read and tell me what you like about this story and where do you think it's all going;)

On a bright Thursday morning Bilbo was surprised to find that sometime during the night his snowman has managed to grow a thick, bushy beard of juniper needles and a pair of rather impressive eyebrows. He had his suspicions as to the possible culprits behind that small miracle – especially since the beard had a very distinctive shape and the snowman’s head has been smoothed and polished almost to perfection – but, as there was no one to share them with and his sculpture seemed happy enough (if still a bit suspicious) with the new developments, he refrained from commenting.

However, never one to let opportunity pass him by, Bilbo documented the deed thoroughly; very happy indeed that one of the boxes delivered to him last evening contained his camera.

And speaking of deliveries, he’s spent most of the morning and a fair bit of the afternoon sorting through the parcels and possessions – that thankfully survived the journey undamaged – and checking them off from various lists. He put away his spare coats and jumpers, books he couldn’t take with him in Minty found their place on the shelves in his bedroom. Bilbo decided that a few of them will look good on the tea table in a spacious living room on the first floor that he’s adopted into his suite. One could spend only so much time in the bedroom and the novelty of owning more than four rooms at a time finally started to get to Bilbo. There was no reason not to spend each week on a different floor after all! The fireplace in the living room was much bigger and its windows showed the valley in all its wintery beauty: all in all, sitting there with a cup of tea and a thick woollen blanket draped over his knees has finally brought home the fact that Bilbo Baggins is not in Shire anymore. What a lovely feeling it was.

There were few envelopes stuffed between the parcels that came to Ironhill via central Post Office – letters concerning his acquisition of Erebor and selling of his flat in Bree. There was one letter from his Aunt Lobelia that ended up in the fireplace before curiosity had a chance to force Bilbo into opening it. Small number of letters took it upon them to offer him insurance – even though he’s already had one of those – and one tried to coax him into getting a TV License.

That one resulted in a lengthy conversation on the phone during which Bilbo swore up and down that no, he doesn’t have a TV set, neither does he own a computer or a smartphone, thank you, he doesn’t need a License and if anyone needs to make sure, they are of course welcome to visit, good afternoon and thank you!

One thing that caused Bilbo’s eyebrows to raise was a small, grey box that arrived from Hobbiton
bearing the name of his Uncle’s lawyer. Inside it was a curious thing – a key of very unusual angular design. It was big and heavy, made entirely of metal with an intricate pattern engraved into it. There was a note to go along – written in a law-speech, with many big words and, of course, a ‘Hereby’ – explaining that since Bilbo Baggins was the only acknowledged heir of the late Isengrim Took, he was now an owner to all of the deceased’s possessions; including the key.

There was no explanation, however, as to what it was supposed to open.

Bilbo spent a good long while looking over the object, turning it over in the light from the fireplace and wondering what it could be used for. It was really massive; there was no way that it would fit into any lock in Uncle Grimm’s old house. Maybe some sort of a chest? It would look exactly like a prop from a period drama, if not for the… well, the thing had weight – and not only in the sense of heaviness of the metal it was made of. This key had a presence shared by all genuinely old things.

Maybe it was an antique? Bilbo’s uncle used to pick up some odd looking, interesting trinkets from time to time; it might have been one of them. However strange, it was intriguing and Bilbo decided that as far as mementos went, the key reflected his beloved Uncle quite neatly: harsh and peculiar, yet complex, doing his own thing when the rest of the world followed the same worn, stiff rules.

Yes, it was a nice thought, Bilbo decided, stuffing the key into the pocket of his favourite cardigan – he would keep it close for now, until he can think of a better place for it.

The rest of the day was spent on reinforcing order amongst his belongings and taking photographs of literally everything around. Bilbo promised Mr. Grey, his mother’s lawyer friend, that he will send him some pictures of the place as soon as possible. The old man has been a great help during the whole distasteful process, his calm and kind demeanour alone being something that Bilbo was incredibly grateful for. More than legal advice during those few awful months he needed someone to lean on and Mr. Grey offered him exactly that. They’ve spend long evenings drinking tea and reminiscing about Bilbo’s mother, Belladonna, remembering her incredible will to live life to its fullest and a mile-wide streak of mischief that’s made her quite famous in the Shire. The older man was such a pleasant person to be around that, however improper it might have seemed, Bilbo started to think of him more like a part of his family than just an acquaintance.

Indeed, without him, Bilbo surely wouldn’t be where he was now! For it was Mr. Grey who listened patiently to his plans and hopes, and promised to keep an ear open for anything that would help his young friend. And his ears were pretty good indeed if he’s managed to hear about this amazing place standing unclaimed on top of the hill way up North.

Bilbo could not think of a way to thank the older man. Yet. As of now his only plan was to invite Mr. Grey to Erebor when it’s finally ready for the guests; to show him how well his timid plans turned out.

But that was a long way from now. Now he had to make sure that his plans don’t freeze to death under all that snow.

After careful consideration Bilbo decided that Mr. Dwalin’s offer had some merit. Fili and Kili were both young and energetic and even if they were not prepared to do any serious repairs, they could surely help with the dusting and moving old furniture around. It would be awfully nice to have some company while doing the choirs, Bilbo concluded. He could pay them small pocket money, as the boys’ uncle suggested, and maybe feed them from time to time – oh, it would be great to cook for more than one person again!

Integrating into the community was an important thing for a person in his place – his business will be successful only if the locals are friendly and accepting, - though the man didn’t worry overmuch
about that aspect of the whole venture. As he was already shown, the Ironhillers were friendly and open, even if a bit forceful in their helpfulness.

But then again, Erebor was apparently some local treasure that they wanted to see restored and functional – if nothing else, this one thing endeared them to Bilbo immensely. He loved this old, big house and was glad that others did too.

All in all the day was busy, but pleasant. Bilbo spend maybe a bit more time than it was necessary in the kitchen, preparing rather extravagant tea – well, taking into account his humble resources – spaghetti Bolognese with chickpeas and bacon salad. He’s even baked half a dozen of scones with raisins and some small pastries filled with strawberry jam. Baking always made him feel better about life in general. It was more than a hobby, it was his safety net – it were soft memories of his mother baking pies his father never failed to compliment. Bilbo still remembered how it was to be shorter than kitchen’s counters and how it felt when father boosted him up on his hip to stir some harmless ingredients.

The smell of a hot oven never failed to send him into nostalgic mood.

But, as usual, life didn’t allow Bilbo Baggins to forget it was there – this time it brought him back to present with the sound of a phone ringing.

“Hey, Mister Boggins!” exclaimed a young voice as soon as Bilbo brought the receiver to his ear.

It was Kili.

There was a short scuffle on the other side and the voice in the receiver changed, though not much.

“Give me that! Go away you wild thing… Oh, hello Mister Baggins!” Fili greeted him a bit more politely.

Bilbo could only smile at the antics. “Hello, Fili,” he spoke calmly. “How can I help you?”

“You, not really. It’s us who will help you!”

“Oh?” Bilbo had a feeling he knew where this was going. “What kind of help you have in mind?”

“Well, uncle mentioned that you probably have a lot of stuff to do in the house before it’s ready for people. And since you have only one pair of hands we thought to offer you ours!”

Oh, to be young again, Bilbo thought as his eyes misted suspiciously.

“But what about your school?” he felt compelled to ask.

“It’s okay, we talked it over with Kili and agreed that we can spare a few evenings in a week.”

“Well, only if your uncle agrees…”

“Mister Baggins,” the voice in the receiver tuned calm and beseeching. “We are used to helping at the sawmill during summer. Now we’re just bored and uncle wants us out of his hair for a bit. Not to mention he is a cheapskate. Whatever job you need doing me and Kili can do it for half the price.”

And who could say not to that? Bilbo suspected that if Fili ever leaves Ironhill he will be welcomed by the retail indistry with open arms.

“Alright,” he sighed, pretending to be put out for the appearances’ sake. “I’ll see about that. We will have to prepare schedule first. Two days a week for now, no more.”
“Three.”

“Two. You still have to study!”

“No we don’t, we’re smart,” there was a chuckle and a shushing sound and Bilbo couldn’t help, but snort at the bold statement. “Well, at least I am.”

“Hey!” protested Kili, but Fili spoke over him. “We will come over on Monday, is that okay?”

“Quite. I am not in a hurry to go anywhere, you know,” Bilbo chuckled a little at his own joke. “Come over for dinner and tell your uncle he can come too. I need to discuss everything with someone adult.”

“That’s settled then! Great. Oy, Kili, let go!”

They were so entertaining and energetic, these boys.

“Mister B!” the voice changed again and it was Kili. “Be careful, Mister B, they were talking about a storm in the forecast so stay inside and keep yourself warm!”

“I will. Thank you, Kili, that’s very nice of you” Bilbo thanked kindly.

“Well, ah…” the embarrassment was almost audible in the receiver. “Well, make sure that you do! Who will let us in on Monday if you’re all frozen next to Uncle Frosty?”

“Next to… what?”

“The snowman, silly!”

Oh.

Oh!

Oh, that was precious, it was.

“You’re sweet, boys,” Bilbo could not help, but say. “I will stay safe if you do too. See you on Monday.”

“Se’ya, Mister B!”

Click.

Bilbo couldn’t help it, he started to laugh softly. He wasn’t that old yet to feel comfortable in the role of an old aunt, but it was fun nonetheless to tease the boys like that. They acted like every teenager since the dawn of time and he couldn’t not take advantage of that.

It was Thursday and the guests were arriving on Monday – that left Bilbo a lot of time to prepare.

*

Later he will think of the way the week was so pleasant and peaceful. He will suspect that it was all just one stretched out calm before the storm – literally and metaphorically at the same time.

The snow storm Kili warned him of came at night, blowing freezing wind at the windows and
pushing around piles of snow big enough to bury a car in a matter of minutes. Bilbo slept when it fell on Erebor – he fell asleep on the couch in front of the fireplace in the living room while trying to read a dreadfully boring crime novel. He woke up with a start when the layer of snow covering the roof slid down and crashed into the winter garden with a loud thump!

Everything was dark, save for the low fire in the fireplace that was burning weakly without food. Bilbo clearly remembered that the light was on the last time he was awake and an awful thought came over him – oh no, the power lines! Balin warned him of that happening, didn’t he?

He marched to the light switch on the far wall, finding it mostly by touch, and lo and behold – flipping it up and down didn’t change a thing. The lights were out.

Oh bother!

He remembered that there were some candles in the cupboard in the pantry, but getting there was another matter entirely. Whole house was dark and, if Bilbo was to be honest with himself, a bit on the scary side. But then again, there was no way that he would stay in the living room for the rest of the night – one look at the wristwatch told him it’s not even midnight yet. For one thing, he was hungry and in need of a bath. He could warm up a pot of water on the stove and bathe quickly. He also needed to check if the phone line was undamaged.

But walking with naught but touch to guide him was out of question. Bilbo was a sensible man and his mind presented him a dozen of ways it could all go terribly wrong if he tripped in the wrong place. No, the main stairwell was too wide and unknown to even try it. He didn’t feel like ending up stranded in the corridors too. Thankfully, there was a small stairway lading straight to the kitchen where his torch resided – and it was narrow enough that he could touch both walls while descending. Truth to be told, it was so narrow that falling down would be an accomplishment.

Later he will think that this was the moment he dared his fate to contradict him.

Because the stairwell was narrow, alright, but it was also completely dark - Bilbo couldn’t see the end of his own nose. He pushed both arms to the sides and, using the walls as support, carefully made his way down.

What he forgot to count into the equation was the fact that he had no idea how many stairs were in a single run before the staircase turned. It wasn’t really that surprising when his foot slammed on the last of them expecting it to be lower and Bilbo’s whole body fell forward like a very ungraceful marionette. Well, the worse that could happen would be meeting the wall, he concluded in despair.

He was right.

It was only when the wall someway gave way that he panicked.

The crash was deafening in the still silence of the house. Bilbo’s left side shot up with pain as he scrambled on the cold stone floor, his hands trying to find purchase amongst bits of wood and plaster, his brain reeling and trying to find an answer to what the hell just happened?!

After a moment of scrambling and taking stock of his body, the man concluded that nothing is thankfully broken and his brain is not oozing out of his ears. And that he has completely no idea where he’s landed.

Oh bother, it was a great moment to show him that the mansion did have secret passages! Marvellous, truly! Now he was trapped in the dark, goodness knows where, without any light and means of escape. It was as bad as it could get and suddenly Kili’s question about ghosts made so
much sense!

Bilbo wasn’t prone to useless panicking, but this time the situation was truly bad and he could think of nothing that would get him out of it. He guessed he could wait the night through and see if there’s a window or something in the dark well he fell into. If he was just under the stairs getting out wouldn’t be that hard – the wood around him was old and weak, he will surely manage to break out.

Trying to think positively Bilbo dusted off his cardigan and carefully tried to stand up and feel the walls. There was no ceiling close enough to reach and the walls around him were made of cold stone, but not freezing. He shuddered a few times when his hand came upon a cobweb, but he carried on bravely – or at least tried to. It could be so much easier if he had a bit of light – not much, just a small candle or something, anything.

Later he will think that his guardian angel hated him with passion.

Because, as his eyes adjusted to the surrounding darkness, Bilbo noticed that in one corner of the – space – the gloom was… less. He could see a tiny crack of pale light close to the floor.

Hope surged in his heart and he fell to his knees to investigate the find – and indeed, there was a crack in the wall, a millimetre wide, but big enough for the light to seep through it from the other side. Bilbo put his hands on the wall and, with surprise, discovered that he’s touching wood. Old and damp, but wood nonetheless. Further investigation told him that he’s found himself a door; he could feel the rusty metal of the hinges and thick nailheads. After a moment he also managed to find something that could be a handle – before someone had the idea to break off a large chunk of it. Thankfully the rest was still big enough to hold onto.

Bilbo whispered a little prayer to the Lord and carefully put some pressure on the handle. It didn’t turn.

He put a bit more. Still nothing.

Desperate now, he leaned on the door and twisted his wrist sharply, putting as much force on the old metal as he thought was safe. A little hiss escaped his lips when the sharp edge cut through his palm.

Bilbo hoped that he won’t get tetanus on top of everything else.

Just as he was about to pull away, defeated, the handle moved. It was just a millimetre, but it was a movement. With more fiddling (after swapping hands, of course) the handle started to turn. Old mechanism creaked ominously, the sound seemingly louder in the darkness, but Bilbo could care less, it was moving!

Soon enough he felt the door budge in the sills. Inch after inch he pushed it forward, the hinges squeaking like a bunch of scared piglets, until he was able to squeeze his head through the created gap and take a careful peek inside.

After a time spent in total darkness the light blinded Bilbo; it took almost a minute of steady blinking before he was able to see anything in the room, and by then he was again nervous and tense.

He didn’t know that room. It was medium size, stark and bare. The walls and the floor were all made of stone, there were no windows or other doors and Bilbo could swear that he didn’t have this room on any copy of the mansion’s plan. There were three bits of furniture in there: an old wooden chair covered in dust and cobwebs, a mirror hanging on the wall opposite door that has gone cloudy with age and a table standing in the middle of the floor.
And the table was what drew Bilbo’s attention from the first moment, as it was the source of the gentle glow that made him aware of the door in the first place.

Or rather, it wasn’t the table per se, but the… stone?

Bilbo slowly crept closer to see the thing better and yes, it was a stone – but unlike any he’s ever seen. It was a size of his fist, smooth and round, polished to perfection. And it... glowed.

Bilbo wasn’t sure how long he stared at the thing, but it had to be minutes before he could even think of making out its colour. It was the strangest thing, because at the first sight it seemed translucent, but a closer look revealed a bluish centre, yet after a moment it seemed silverish, however, the glow it exuded was golden and warm…

It was so strange! He’s never seen any mineral doing anything like that! Fascinating!

With a pull of curiosity and delight Bilbo reached for the stone, carefully, as if afraid it will disappear if he moves too fast. All his problems seemed to fall away at the sight of the thing; his fall and the precautionous situation he was still in was forgotten. Even the pain in his side and the cut on his hand that for all he knew could be infected with some nasty germs. Everything fell to the background and the only thing left was the warm glow of the stone and a desire to possess it.

His hands closed on the smooth surface and it was warm, so warm and soothing, so pleasant to the touch. Bilbo could swear that he felt something akin to gentle pulsing at the tips of his fingertips and raised the treasure to his face, to peer closer into its depth.

Later he will think that it had to be some kind of magic (and he will be right) that drew him to the stone and made him blind to everything else. That made him blind to the other presence in the room.

Because the moment his eyes settled on the stone, a creaking sound behind his back pulled his attention back, making him jump. The sound that escaped his throat was pretty embarrassing as Bilbo whirled around, heart thumping in his chest and hair at the back of his neck standing at attention.

It was impossible; he was alone in the house! He was being stupid, there was no one there!

Oh…

Oh, but there was.

Few times in his life Bilbo Baggins was so terrified that he lost the ability to speak.

In this moment he couldn’t even breathe and his heart stopped for one awful moment when his eyes fell on the… person… standing behind him. Directly between him and the door.

In the moving shadows caused by Bilbo’s fingers on the stone, the figure in front of him seemed beyond scary. It was a man, tall and broad, covered in rags that at some point could have been clothes. Long white hair fell on his shoulders in tangled strands and shadowed his face that was thin and haggard, most of it hidden behind a matted silver beard.

But all that was not important, because the most striking feature of the figure was impossible to miss. It was a pair of eyes of the colour and intensity Bilbo has never seen before. They were not just blue – they were almost navy, so dark and yet full of an unearthly glow that made them stand out against the ashen skin.

Bilbo swallowed slowly, feeling tiny trails of sweat between his shoulder blades and wetting his forehead. He stood transfixed and as much as he wanted to, he couldn’t move a muscle. His mouth
was dry and unresponsive and his fingers, clenched on the stone, felt numb.

The man *stared* – without a word, without a twitch, as if he was made of marble instead of living flesh. He didn’t even seem to breathe.

Later he will think that it should have been the first clue.

But at the moment he could only stare back, it would seem, unable to do anything else.

Until something in his head clicked and flared with pain. And a soft whisper found its way to his ears.

*Let go.*

It was all that was needed for Bilbo’s muscles to loosen and he could only stare in shock when his fingers unclenched on the stone. He tried to make them stop, but without success. The stone slipped from his loose hold and crashed against the floor. Like a delicate glass trinket it shattered into hundreds of pieces and the glow it produced went out like a blown out candle.

The last thing Bilbo registered before the darkness took over was an unearthly glow of the blue eyes right in front of his face.

A second later he shouted when bony fingers gripped his shoulders; sharp nails bit painfully into his skin and then…

And then there was a low growl next to his ear and biting of completely different sort.
Chapter Summary

Yes, I went there, and some angst will happen. Because there are Durins and where are Durins the angst follows;) There is not a lot happening in this chapter, but I just loved messing with Bilbo's head a bit, apologiesXD
Also, ignore the chaptercount, because I am me and thus unable to get things done in one go>_>_ Ah well, more reading for you I guess:)
Also, as I am ESL, things may sometimes get a bit skeevy grammar-vise, sorry>_>

Bilbo hated passing out with passion other people reserved for rainy days and politicians. Cursed with low blood pressure (and rich University Nightlife) he experienced that doubtful pleasure more times in his life than he would have preferred. The act itself wasn’t that bad – it was the waking up that was the problem.

It was the feeling of confusion and weakness weighting him down as he clawed his way to consciousness. For the moment he didn’t know where he was and what time it could be, his muscles didn’t want to listen to the signals from the brain. Opening one blurry eye took entirely too much effort and it didn’t exactly explain the situation – even if it brought Bilbo a small measure of relief because the pillow under his head was familiar and the quilted blanket tucked around him belonged to his mother.

Conclusion was simple: Bilbo Baggins woke up in his own bed. Taking into account the raging headache and dryness in his mouth, the case seemed simple: he was hung over.


Even if there was no one to see the state he was in, Bilbo rolled over with a miserable moan. How pathetic was that? Drinking on your own in an empty house in the middle of winter?

Trying not to move too quickly he unraveled the blanket enough to stick his head out and search for the alarm clock that should be standing on the low backless chair currently serving as a bedside table. Should, seemed to be the key word in this situation, as the alarm clock was nowhere to be seen. Instead, there was something much better standing on the chair – a glass of water. As fast as his aching body allowed, Bilbo threw himself in the direction of the holy drink. He gulped it down as if the glass contained a portion of liquid life.

Unfortunately, even properly watered, his throat ached and he was still thirsty. That meant only one thing – he will have to roll out of bed and brave the way to the kitchen in search of liquids and sustenance. Maybe some painkillers. Hopefully, the headache and tiredness weren’t the symptoms of flu or something similar, there were too many things that had to be done for him to go down with anything.

The first surprise of the day came when Bilbo forced his numb and aching legs off the bed… only to have his feet knock over a mug of water standing there. One startled yelp and a moment of confusion later the man was staring at the array of cups and glasses set in a neat row on the floor by the bed. There were nine, all full of water – sans the one that got knocked over and spilled all over the bedside carpet.
What was he doing last night? The insight was obviously correct, because he downed two more glasses almost without breathing, but goodness… What was he drinking the night before? Salty water?

After some fumbling with the fresh clothes (he went to bed in his jeans and a t-shirt, not the best combination possible... and where did he leave his cardigan?) and a short search for his slippers, Bilbo was finally ready to start his clumsy and dizzy journey towards the kitchen. He visited bathroom on the way to splash some water on his face and brush his teeth. The mirror above the sink was old and cloudy, its silver lining rusting off the glass, and at least Bilbo didn’t have to see how pathetic he looked on top of how crappy he felt. In normal circumstances he could take a shower, but today his rumbling stomach brought him back on the course.

In the kitchen, however, a second surprise waited on him.

Every single cupboard was open.

Oh goodness, how desperately was he looking for these cups yesterday?

“You are tumbling downhill, Bilbo Baggins,” he muttered to himself while closing the cabinets. “You’re too old for this kind of frivolity.”

Well, at thirty nine he wasn’t exactly an elderly person, but he hoped that the Uni Experience was just that – an experience that came and went, leaving him with some nice memories and enough knowledge to avoid this kind of situations permanently.

The house was cold when Bilbo tumbled out of bed; cold enough to force him into a scratchy turtleneck and two undershirts, but the kitchen was quick to warm up as soon as he stocked the fire in the stove. Porridge with jam seemed like a sensible option on a morning like this, together with a mug of strong tea with lemon and cherry syrup (he desperately tried to save milk). As expected, a hearty meal brought back some stability and calmed Bilbo’s stomach sufficiently, forcing him to stop dwelling on how miserable he is and start doing something useful.

Stepping outside was like crashing through the wardrobe into Narnia.

Bilbo spent good twenty minutes just standing on the porch and taking in the view.

It was sublime.

And depressing at the same time.

A layer of snow, over a meter deep, covered his driveway. The driveway Bilbo cleaned out the day before. Not to mention the banks that formed on both sides of the gate – those were almost taller than him.

Thankfully, neither the fence nor the mansion seemed to suffer any damage during the storm. The windows were still in, the roof was still on, and the junipers on both sides of the porch looked like they’re in their element. Uncle Frosty was the one causality left by the storm – the wind toppled him down and falling snow did the rest, leaving just one lonely stick marking his resting place in a sea of white fluff.

Bilbo mourned the snowman for a few silent seconds before he set about - yet again - clearing out the driveway. However, barely a few shovels of snow later the nausea and headache came back with vengeance and he was forced to retreat inside. Disgusted and weary, he armed himself with a cup of mint tea and departed to his room for a bit of rest. At least that was the plan until the muse decided to get in the way and demand that he sits down and writes now.
Well, this way he wouldn’t be completely useless, Bilbo reasoned and dutifully locked himself in his little office with a typewriter… that sported another surprise.

“asucbgrAOSN3678…..;’”’”….bcjsb(aa uigs iwebf,, . . . . . . A, B, C, D, E,f,g,h.I.J.k.L.m,N.x 123456789,10,11,12,13,… Far over THE MISTYM OUNTAI NS cold”

Bilbo stared at the piece of paper halfway stuck between the rolls and the lines of letters, numbers, punctuation marks and random words that covered it.

How drunk was he exactly last night? How much did he drink that he didn’t remember sitting in his chair and trying to decimate his typewriter?

With a heavy sigh and a sip of lukewarm tea, Bilbo decided to tackle one thing at a time – he pulled the wasted paper out of the machine and settled down with a new, clean sheet and a head full of snappy dialog and lively descriptions.

*

The headache did lessen up as the day progressed and Bilbo forced more food and liquids into his tired body. He kept the fire in the stove throughout the day and by the afternoon he’s had enough hot water for a good, long soak in the bathtub he dreamed about since waking up cold and miserable. Never one to deny himself small pleasures in life (because what was the point in that, really), he spiced the bath with some nice smelling salt and got in.

It was, as expected, heaven.

…right until a loud sound pierced through the calm silence of the mansion almost causing its owner to drown.

Bilbo’s first reaction was to cover his ears and get out of the tub as fast as possible – two things that didn’t really go well together when one was wet and slippery and still a tad unstable on their feet. After righting himself and spitting out the water, then trying to towel off and pull a bathrobe on simultaneously, he was able to finally leave the bathroom. By that time Bilbo’s mind caught up with the facts and came to the conclusion that the power was back, finally.

He’s had a foggy recollection of it going out sometime last night, but couldn’t really remember when.

The noise reaching his ears had to be the radio from the sitting room that he didn’t bother switching off before going to bed. Judging by the loudness of the thing it seemed that he’s had quite a party. Of all the inane, foolish and thoughtless things to force him out of the bath…!

Bilbo stomped through the kitchen and the cold hall, up the stairs and into the sitting room, all the time mocked by the stupid mechanism that taunted him with a sound of some awful newest hit. Angry and defeated, he went to the radio and pushed the OFF button a bit more forcefully than was strictly necessary. Blessed silence that fell after that was, well, divine.

And Bilbo was freezing his balls off, so to speak, and wasting a tub full of perfectly good bathwater. Mission completed, he turned around and stomped back towards the staircase… until his eyes fell on the couch in front of the fireplace – to be more accurate, on the objects that were resting on it.

His cardigan. His alarm clock. Two books he didn’t remember taking upstairs.
A plate of his scones sat proudly on top of everything.

What… how… why? The *alarm clock*? What the…

Never one to black out so thoroughly under the influence of alcohol, Bilbo was flabbergasted as he stared at his possessions sitting innocently in the last place he expected to find them. This day turned strange and stranger in bounds and leaps.

Later, Bilbo will think that with his life being so boring it was no wonder he thought that a few small things like that were enough to push him out of his comfort zone. He didn’t yet know how mind-numbing panic felt, after all.

But right now he was busy with gathering his possessions into a pile to carry them downstairs, where they belonged. The blazer was crumpled and creased, and it was completely unacceptable. Bilbo attempted to straighten it and… almost dropped it in shock.

There, on the collar of his second-favourite blue cardigan, was a stain. Quite big, quite red and flaking under his probing fingers; and to his experienced eyes it could only be one thing.

His cardigan was covered in dust, little rips and *bloodstains*!

But it was impossible. He was fine, no wounds, no cuts… well, there was that small one on his palm, but it wasn’t even that deep, barely a scratch; it couldn’t possibly bleed that much. As far as paper cuts went it was pretty impressive, but all in all…

*It wasn’t a paper cut* – sudden thought fired up in Bilbo’s mind. He didn’t remember cutting himself. Truth to be told, he didn’t…

Cradling the cardigan in his trembling hands Bilbo looked around the room, trying to find a possible answer to the way his memory went fuzzy when he started to think of the previous night. The last thing he remembered clearly has been the phonecall; talking to Kili and Fili, setting up a date for their visit. Then he decided to spend the evening in the sitting room, with a book and a cup of tea. Bilbo didn’t remember when he decided to drink. He didn’t remember drinking either…

Come to think of it, he didn’t really *have* strong alcohol in this house.

What… then why was his mind so bent on this thought? Why was his body so weak when he woke up? What was going on?

As if on cue, his eyes stopped on a narrow doorway half-hidden in the corner of the room, and before Bilbo knew it his feet were leading him in that direction.

The door led…to a stairwell, didn’t it? Servant’s stairwell leading to the kitchen. He knew it, of course he knew it, he… he didn’t even think to use it when he was rushing upstairs. He didn’t even consider it – even if that way was shorter and safer in his bathrobe-clothed state.

The door was closed and Bilbo shifted form foot to foot, wringing his hands on the stained cardigan. There was something in his head bent on talking him out of reaching for it, something that insisted he goes away and forgets about the stairs. There was a silent voice in his head telling him that nothing good awaited him on the other side of the door.

And yet… Bilbo Baggins wasn’t a coward; he would not be intimidated by his own mind in his own house! If he was going crazy – then he will deal with it. If someone was playing tricks on him, they will regret it!
Thus determined, he grabbed the handle and gave it a sharp twist.

The door didn’t move. It was locked. And he didn’t remember locking it. Was there even a right key in the box he was given? What was going on?!

“It’s not safe to go there now.”

Bilbo shrieked even as he jumped and twisted around in one move. His back hit the door and his memory threw a strong feeling on déjà vu at him. Holding the blazer to his chest, Bilbo gaped at the man standing in his sitting room, a few steps away from him. A man he didn’t ever hear coming!

He was… big; tall and wide-shouldered. Bilbo’s frantic mind noted the strangest of details in a speck of a moment – that the man was barefoot, for one. That his hair was long and dark, with a few threads of silver that started at the temples adding a kind of regal look to his appearance – it was reinforced by his face and its even features: straight nose and strong chin, thick eyebrows that currently inched slowly towards each other. And thin lips that bowed in something that could be called a smirk.

“Come now,” the man spoke in a deep, gravelly voice. “It’s unmanly to screech so.”

Wh… what? What?! “Who are you?!” Bilbo certainly did not screech, even though his heart jumped to his throat and didn’t seem ready to go back down yet. He was clad in a bathrobe and armed with a cardigan, if the stranger turned violent there was no way to stop him. “How did you get in here?! What…” “Silence.”

Bilbo’s mouth snapped shut mid-word on its own accord and he panicked. He didn’t intend to listen! He wouldn’t! But, in some strange way, he was given no choice in the matter – this stranger’s voice had such commanding presence that not doing what he ordered was impossible!

What was going on? What was happening to him? Why couldn’t he move from the spot or open his mouth? Why couldn’t he do anything when the man finally decided to move and that move carried him in Bilbo’s direction? He could just stand in place like a lifeless doll, heart thundering in his chest and mind awashed with fear. He could only stare like a petrified rat at a predator that came close enough to reach him.

And reach he did, with one big hand that wandered to Bilbo’s neck.

The short man flinched when he felt cold fingers touching him, lifting his chin up and pushing it to the side. He swallowed heavily, because the situation was quickly escalating into something he didn’t have any idea how to deal with. The stranger was not hurting him, he didn’t seem crazy or violent, he just… stared. And, in some mysterious way, stopped Bilbo from moving with that stare alone. Maybe it was because his eyes were so deeply set and so very blue…

So very blue.

Bilbo tensed when that same cold hand moved lower, pulling the collar of his robe out of the way to bare the side of his neck and that blue gaze fixed on naked skin.

Blue.
"You…” he could only gasp as the memories of the night before came back in a rush of fear and shock. “It was…”

It was impossible! Completely impossible because this man was decades younger than the pale ghost Bilbo encountered in the hidden room under the stairs! This man had to be a son, or a grandson of that one – that’s why they shared facial features and those unearthly eyes! There was no other explanation! There was…

But his brain seemed to choose exactly this moment to stop believing in bullshit. It decided to remind him in vivid detail how his body froze back then too, how one word from that… creature… made him drop the crystal on the floor. How it felt to have him so close and his teeth…

“You bit me…” Bilbo whispered before he’s managed to think it through. Oh Lord, he did! It hurt, he remembered pain! And the blood on his cardigan, and the way he was so weak and miserable, and… and… A seed of hysteria seemed to take root in his chest. “You bit me!”

“Yes,” the stranger answered without any remorse whatsoever. He didn’t even raise his eyes to look at his captive’s face, instead opting to study the side of his neck where the bite wound should be present. “My apologies.”

“But… why?” Bilbo managed to push through the choking fear. “Why would you… even…”

In response the man finally looked up at his face and flashed a quick little smile – well, more of a smirk to be precise; where the lips part slightly and just for a second, but that second is enough to show off his startlingly white teeth.

Startlingly white, sharp teeth.

Oh Lord…

“I required, ah, sustenance.”

It was not happening…

“You were the closest being present. Apologies.”

It was not happening!

“You should not be up yet, little one.”

“Ah… nope.”

Well, at least they agreed on one thing.

Bilbo might have hated passing out with passion, but sometimes it was the lesser of two evils.

*

Kili suffered. His stomach hurt something awful and there had to be something wrong with the bed that made sleeping in it completely bereft of comfort. He tossed and turned trying to find a comfortable position, but his attempts were failing.
“Stop wiggling, you brat!” came a soft rebuff from behind him, sleepy, but annoyed.

“I can’t,” he whined without opening his eyes. “It hurts!”

A sigh.

“I told you to watch out around pastries, didn’t I? You know they make you sick!”

“But I like cookies…” Kili answered in a tiny, miserable voice. “Especially when Bombur bakes them… I miss cookies, Fili.”

Another soft sigh and a strong arm that reached from behind, gently gripping his aching middle and pulling him back. Kili snuggled into the soft body, soaking in the comfort of the embrace with every cell. He whimpered pathetically when a hand rested on his stomach and started to massage it gently.

“You have to take better care of yourself,” Fili whispered into his hair. “I won’t always be there to help you, you know? As you are, you would be easy pickings to any hunter out there.”

Kili curled into an even smaller ball, but not because of the reprimand – it was because of the care and fear that he could hear in his beloved’s voice; fear that he’s caused. That he was always somewhat causing; with his inexperience, with his thoughtlessness. If they weren’t what they were, Fili would be greying at the temples because of him, Kili was sure.

“But I like to make him happy,” he whispered back. “Bombur is kind to us and I like to make him happy.”

“He won’t be happy when he discovers that,” this time there was a clear warning in his beloved’s voice. “And neither will be Dwalin, for that matter. You have to start thinking ahead, little Kili.”

Hm, yes it was quite apparent.

“I won’t always be here,” Fili repeated in an even softer voice and when Kili seized his hand, squeezing it tightly, he kissed the nape of his neck soothingly. “I won’t. You have to start thinking about it.”

“No!” there was no arguing with this tone. “No, Fili, no. When you’re not here it will mean that I’m not here…”

“Kili, stop!”

“No!” He twisted under the covers, facing his beloved and framing his face with trembling hands, pulling him closer; so close that their lips brushed when he spoke. “You will not go where I can’t follow, promise me that!”

“Kili…” Fili’s voice was resigned and so full of tenderness it was heartbreaking.

“Promise!” Kili whined desperately. “Mother and Father are gone; you’re the only one I have left. If you’re not here… “

“Dwalin and Dori will take care of…”

“They will die before any harm comes to us and you know it! They will all die for us and you… you know… it… all of them…”

“Oh, little Kili.” He was pulled into a fierce embrace that he curled into like a small child seeking protection from the darkness. It was quite ironic, because their kind and the darkness were quite well
acquainted after all. Soft, gentle kisses were pressed to his temple and brow as Fili whispered some calming nonsense over and over again. “Oh Kili, don’t think of it.”

“I can’t stop, Fee, that’s the problem,” he mumbled. “I hate it, Fee… I hate that they do it. I…”

“No one will die, Kili, no one, we won’t let them.” Fili promised. “We will scour the mansion from top to bottom and find that damned map. And then we will be free and safe, I promise you!”

Kili didn’t answer. He wanted to believe in that promise, but there was a part of him that didn’t allow it. A part of him that made him remember what they were and what dangers waited on them every time they’ve left their home.

A part that could be only silenced with a breath-taking kiss and delicate touch of his beloved.

*

When Bilbo woke up he was in his own bed.

As soon as he turned his head to the side in search of the alarm clock a feeling of déjà vu smacked him between the eyes so hard that he almost gasped. With a startled yelp Bilbo sprung up on the bed; blankets fell off his chest to reveal the lack of a proper nightshirt – he was wearing his stripped robe instead.

His trembling hands went to his neck in a snap, checking for the…

The left side of his throat was tender to the touch and Bilbo could feel that the skin was warm and uneven. Like a healing cut.

Or a bite.

*Oh goodness…*

“Hmm.”

He almost jumped out of his skin at the sound, twisting to the side with another yelp.

The man from the… earlier… was in his bedroom.

In his bedroom!

Sitting in his armchair by the window, with one of Bilbo’s books lying open on his lap, and with the same blank expression painted all over his face.

Bilbo froze like a deer in the headlights when the stranger (*who bit his neck hard enough to make him bleed!* careful she closed the book and turned back to him, saying a propos of nothing, “You do that a lot.” His brows inched a bit closer, as if he couldn’t understand something. “Shriek and swoon. Is it common in the males of this time?”

Bilbo, unable to find his voice, could only gape.

The stranger released a drawn out sigh and then, between one heartbeat and the next, he was leaning over the shorter man, inches away from his face.
And Bilbo didn’t disappoint – he shrieked at the top of his lungs and scrambled back, tangling himself in the sheets and falling off the bed in an ungraceful heap. Before he's even managed to take a second breath, the man was back in the armchair, book in his hands and a blank expression marred by the faintest of smirks.

“Yes,” he said. “That.”
Colder nights

“It will… take a while,” Fili said with his eyes widening and smile freezing on his youthful face.

Bilbo, who was standing behind the boy, chuckled at that.

The room they were surveying was a double bedroom on the second floor Bilbo deemed safe enough for the boys to start with. It was a good size and had only one window; furniture-wise there was hardly anything to worry about – an old bed and a rickety chair.

It was a surprise when on Monday morning Bilbo opened the door and stood in awe of Mister Dwalin’s monster of a car that had a snow plough attached to its front and by some miracle has had managed to force its way through the drifts.

“Trying to get the services up here, but it will take a while,” the big man said in lieu of greeting.

“They’ve enough to do downhill for now, but they should’ve clear the way by the end of the week.”

Bilbo was overjoyed hearing the good news. He will be able to finally escape…

“Have you lost your mind?!”

…his accidental exile and get some shopping done.

His supplies were sparse already and he was a bit relieved when his guests declined his invitation to lunch explaining that they’ve already had theirs. Thankfully, the youngest of the trio came up with an easy solution to his problem by suggesting that Bilbo simply gives them the shopping list and they will get his shopping done and delivered when they’re back in two days’ time.

Bilbo was more and more appreciative of the youngsters.

Back to the matter at hand, there wasn’t really that much to be done in the house. He ‘hired’ both brothers to help him with cleaning before a real renovation could take place – dusting and vacuuming and peeling the old wallpaper off. If they’ve turned out well, he could task them with painting and sanding the floorboards.

Earlier, with the boys’ uncle they’ve decided these were simple enough jobs that Kili and Fili could perform with no trouble. Mister Dwalin has also offered renting some of the tools and, further down the line, supplying Bilbo with materials and any wooden elements that needed replacing. The sooner Bilbo prepared an invoice and they’ve got to measuring everything, the sooner his new home will be ready.

It would seem that befriending these two rapscallions was a lucky shot! Bilbo was not a builder or a renovation specialist, everything he knew was passed to him by his father while Dwalin seemed to know what he was talking about; in the end far it was from Bilbo to ignore good advice when it came his way. It was also something of a joint decision to start from the top of the mansion and move down - this way the mess will be somewhat contained.

The matter of payment for the boys has been settled quickly and to the satisfaction of all present and then Bilbo was left with his two helpers and a plan to make.
And that lead to matters at hand – that is, to Bilbo stifling chuckles that tried to get out of his chest at the sight of the blond youth covered in dust. Fili attempted to open the curtains to let some afternoon light into the room and he pulled them apart before Bilbo could warn him not to… the curtain rod was wobbly and the screws holding it in place let go when the fabric was tugged, sending the whole business crashing to the floor, causing a cloud of dust that settled over the startled blond.

Kili, however, had no reservations before bursting out with laughter so loud it almost choked him.

“Kili, don’t tease your brother,” Bilbo, as the only adult in the room, tried to stall the argument he felt in his bones was coming. “Fili, are you alright?” His brow creased in worry. “You didn’t get hit, did you?”

“No, Mister B, I’m fine.”

Well, as long as ‘fine’ was spoken it such forced cheer Bilbo guessed it was not that bad. Teenagers were a touchy lot, so he curbed his mothering instincts and turned to the other brother…

“Kili, don’t…!”

Who decided to jump on the old bed – only to land in his own cloud of dust that rose from the antique mattress he crashed onto.

Five minutes later, surrounded by laughing and teasing and even more dust, Bilbo was wondering if asking these two for help was really such a good idea. It suddenly didn’t seem so strange that uncle Dwalin wanted these two out of his hair for a while.

*

“I think it will be best if we get all the furniture downstairs and put it into one room or something,” Fili proposed two hours later when they were sitting on the stairs, covered from head to feet in dust and cobwebs, but proud. First order of the day – storing all curtains and smaller carpets in the conservatory – has been accomplished. Now they thawed and rested, each tired and aching, but in good spirits. “Some of it is still in good state, I think. Give it a bit of sanding and a new coat and it’ll be like new.”

“We can get those into conservatory too,” Bilbo suggested. “I can work on them a little. There’s enough space and light.”

And if he could contain most of the mess to one room, he would try.

“ Carpets and curtains have to go, though,” Kili proclaimed, hunched over his brother’s hair, picking bits if webs from it. “No rescue for them, full of holes. You have moths, Mister B, so better burn it all.”

Well, that was a bit of a downer, he hoped to save at least some fabrics. His bank account was still more or less full, but Bilbo would rather save it for later – in case more troubles like this decided to crop out.

“Don’t worry about it,” Kili picked up on the worried expression and was quick to reassure his ‘employer’. “Uncle’s boyfriend runs a textile business downhill. We can bring you some catalogues and bother him into giving you some discounts.”
So, Mister Dwalin had a boyfriend. It wasn’t exactly a pity… because Bilbo wasn’t *really* interested. He hardly knew the man!

But he was *a bit* disappointed – because who knows, he could get interested somewhere along the line… oh, bother it! He was too awkward anyway, for such a man to take interest in him. No, Dwalin seemed to be cut from different cloth than Bilbo Baggins.

“I’m sure we won’t have to,” Fili waved his brother away. “Haggle with him hard enough and he will be happy as a clam to sweeten the deal. Dori loves a good bargaining so you have to stay strong, but it usually pays off in the end.” It might have been a trick of light, but Bilbo could swear that the boy winked at him. “Hm, actually, he knows one or two things about decorating and such… he may give you some advice, if you’re looking for it.”

Bilbo nodded absentmindedly and promised to think about it. He’s already had a quite precise idea as to what he wanted Erebor to look – running more in the direction of traditional-cosy atmosphere; all the same he wouldn’t dare to snub any additional advice. Especially when it came from an experienced source. And led to a discount…

Those two were a treasure to have around, all things considered, Bilbo decided.

He got up from the step and stretched with a small groan when his spine tried to protest – and completely missed an appreciative look on Kili’s face. It may be because as soon as it appeared, Fili slapped his brother in the back of the head.

“Well, that’s it for now I guess,” when he turned to the boys they were both a picture of slightly bruised innocence. “What do you think about a little snack?”

“Oh no, Mister B!” Kili protested instantly and it might have been an illusion, but Bilbo thought the youth paled a bit.

Fili, as always, was there to rescue his flailing sibling. “Thank you, Mister Baggins, but we have to decline. Dori prepared our lunch today and his meals are… filling.”

“And they fill you for a while,” Kili grimaced.

“Maybe some hot chocolate, then?”

At that, the brunet perked up surprisingly quickly.

“Well, if you insist.”

“Well, of course I do,” Bilbo smiled at his helpers, leading them to the kitchen. “It would not do if my employees starved themselves to exhaustion, would it now?”

“That would be tragic, indeed,” Kili made a big production out of a dramatic shiver and turned his big, brown eyes at the older man. “You would have to bury our handsome corpses in the basement and then you’d have two very handsome ghosts haunting your hotel.”

“B&B,” Bilbo corrected with a small chuckle. “And I don’t know, a Haunted House may be a good business venue. Don’t you think, Fili?”

“You would have to prepare for a lot of shrieking, though, when some of the young visiting ladies discover that one of the ghosts looks like a shaggy werewolf,” the blonde answered with a smirk directed at his younger brother.
“But his younger brother would soothe their nerves in a blink.” Kili winked back.

“You brat!”

“You do that a lot. Shriek and swoon. Is it common in the males of this time?”

The stranger released a drawn out sigh and then, between one heartbeat and the next, he was leaning over him, inches enough from his face.

“Is it ready yet?”

Bilbo shook his head and went back to spooning the chocolate powder into three mugs. He looked back to see both brothers perched at his table, looking at him curiously.

“Almost, give me a moment.”

He poured a bit of the milk in each mug and stirred it until the powder dissolved into a paste. A pinch of salt went into each portion along with a pinch of cinnamon and finely ground coriander. After a second of thought, Bilbo decided to put a drop of vanilla oil into the boys’ mugs. It was how his mother made her hot chocolate and he had a feeling that Fili and Kili will like it; he preferred his drink with more spice to it, but they were too young to fully appreciate the complexity of flavours. Or so Bilbo suspected – and his ‘kitchen sense’, as his father called it, rarely failed him.

Humming a bit to himself, Bilbo carefully stirred more milk into the mixture.

“What are you doing with that chocolate?”

…And almost jumped out of his skin when a curious voice sounded right next to his ear. Fili, who was looking curiously over his shoulder, smiled widely seeing his host’s panicked reaction and skilfully ducked when a dripping spoon was shoved into his face.

“Don’t do that!” Bilbo snapped at the boy. And then instantly regretted his flight of temper and added in a softer tone. “Goodness, Fili, you almost gave me a heart attack!”

“I’m sorry,” Fili said meekly, lightly touching his shoulder. “I just wanted to see why chocolate tasted so good when you make it.”

“Well, have more care next time,” Bilbo patted his hand in forgiveness. “I could’ve spilled hot water on myself… or on you for that matter, and then we would have a problem. Go and sit with your brother, it’s almost ready.”

“I apologise, Mister Baggins.”

“You bit me!”

“Yes. Apologies.”

“Hey, Mister B, what’s there?”
Bilbo set two steaming mugs on the table in front of the boys and looked over his shoulder to where Kili was pointing. A narrow door half-hidden behind a cupboard.

“Oh, it’s a...


“…servant’s staircase, I think. It leads to the sitting room. I imagine it was used by the people so they didn’t have to run with food all over the place.” Bilbo shrugged and blew gently on the chocolate in his mug. The spicy aroma tickled his nose and a layer of soft froth parted invitingly. “Back in the day the sitting room was probably a dining room or something like that.”

“You will go make yourself decent and then we will talk.”

“I was hungry, you were there. Apologies.”

“But it’s all rotten now,” he shook his head when a wave of dizziness passed through it. It would seem that he overworked himself a bit. “And it’s rather dangerous.”

“Uncle knows a guy who can make you a new staircase,” Fili informed with a small smile.

Bilbo smiled back, amused. “I don’t doubt it.” These three seemed to know anyone even remotely useful in the whole Ironhill. “But it will have to wait, for now we have to focus on the bedrooms.”

“Talking about staircases…” Kili chimed in wiggling his eyebrows in a supposedly charming manner. “Can we see the basement?”

“Basement? Goodness, whatever for?” Bilbo’s inquiry was met with an incredulous stare.

“Isn’t it obvious? To search for the ghosts!” Kili exclaimed with great zeal. “I will not believe you have no ghosts in Erebor until I see it with my own eyes!”

But… that statement made very little sense and while Bilbo was busy trying to deconstruct it, Fili took it on himself to translate his brother into speech accessible to simple humans.

“He means: to show off in front of other lads from Ironhill.”

“Yeah…”Kili nodded vigorously, eyes wide and earnest. Obviously, hot chocolate was a bit too sweet for this one. “Please, Mister B, can we? Can we?”

Bilbo sighed and shook his head at the antics. It was a while since he was forced to deal with young children – and whatever his cousins were usually up to hardly prepared him to deal with these two bucks. Confronted with their boundless energy, he started to feel old.

“I will think on it,” he promised on the way to the sink where he deposited his empty cup. “But it hasn’t been cleared out yet, and I wouldn’t want you to fall through the floor or something like that. It may be dangerous.”
“Well, we can clear it out, me and Kili.” This time Fili made himself very visible as he went to stand next to Bilbo with his own mug. Swift as a ferret, he grabbed Bilbo’s cup before the man managed to put it down and pushed his hand away. “I can wash them, no problem.”

“Oh, but…” Eh, he was too polite for his own good.

Fili just smiled cheekily and pushed the man towards the table with a sure hand.

“You are more than kind to us,” he said. “Sit down and rest for a bit.”

Well, yes, that did sound nice…

“I will call your uncle, then,” Bilbo decided instead. “So he can get you back.”

It was quite late, after all – even taking into account winter time when at six in the evening darkness was almost complete.

“Oh, I wouldn’t.”

Reaching for the phone, he spun around to see both brothers looking at him with strange expressions on their faces. Fili looked a bit red around the ears while Kili’s face went downright pale.

“Why?” he asked simply.

In response Kili mumbled something incomprehensible into his chocolate and refused to meet his eyes, so he turned to Fili, who suddenly found washing two cups to be a thoroughly absorbing activity. His mumbled answer, however, was a bit easier to understand. “Uncle doesn’t really have home to himself all that often. And his boyfriend lives with his brother, so… yeah.”

What?

Oh.

Oh!

Bilbo blushed against his will when the meaning of the message became clear and his hand left the receiver as if it was scalding hot.

“Let’s pretend we never discussed that, okay?”

Fili’s idea seemed plausible.

*

In the end Bilbo was bullied into letting the boys walk home alone. Grudgingly, he started to admit that his fears might have been a bit over the top, but worrying about others was a hard habit to shake. He still hovered worriedly as the brothers donned their jackets and winter boots. There was a thought in the back of his mind telling him that maybe he could invite Fili and Kili to spend the night next time? There were enough rooms…

But the central heating was still not sorted out and all the bedrooms sans his were cold – and it wouldn’t do to get under Dwalin’s skin by making his nephews sick.
“Have a good day tomorrow and please tell your uncle to bring all the receipts from Mister Bombur’s store. I can pay him back for the gas too.”

“Leave it, Mister B,” Kili snorted in amusement. “Don’t even mention paying for the gas or uncle will get all huffy and proud at ya.”

“I can get pretty huffy myself,” Bilbo stated proudly which in turn got him a snigger from Fili.

“For such a small guy… strangely, I don’t doubt it.”

Bilbo tried not to worry about the boys – especially when he peered outside and the cold air caused his nose to sting. It was a very dark and very unpleasant evening.

“Stay safe and call me when you get home, okay?” he requested at last when the brothers were all set to go. “I want to know you got there safely and…”

The words ended in a gasp as Bilbo was engulfed in a rib-breaking embrace. Kili hugged him hard, in a way younger children often did, completely inconsiderate to the other’s need for breathing, almost lifting him off the floor.

“Mister B, you’re so cute that I just can’t!” the youth exclaimed right into his ear. “Almost like a mom!”

“Oy! Leave our employer alone, you leech!”

“No! This is my Bilbo, find yourself another!”

Crushed and jostled from side to side, Bilbo started to laugh.

He laughed long and hard as the brothers joined him and then stepped back, a bit embarrassed by the whole act. He laughed like he didn’t laugh in a long while, with genuine joy in his voice; he had to rub his eyes a bit so the joyous tears that threatened to spill would stay hidden. It would not do to embarrass his employees even more.

He stammered the last goodbyes and closed the door, leaning on it for a moment and trying to catch his breath. It would be alright, Bilbo thought, they would be safe and in two days’ time they would be back and he would smile again. The hug was so unexpected it caught him off guard, but it was warm and genuine, and Bilbo wanted to treasure the memory of it. It has been so long since anyone hugged him like that.

He straightened up, checked the lock and turned to the hall, smiling and happy…

“Have you lost your mind?!”

…and the rush of memories caused him to stumble.

“What do you want from me?”

“Information.”
Bilbo whipped around with a whimper, his back to the wall, heart in his throat.

What’s just happened?!

He rushed into the kitchen and the sight of three freshly washed mugs on the counter calmed him down a bit. It meant that the boys were here, that it happened. That today happened as he remembered it.

But then what were those other things he remembered just now?

The fall off the stairs and waking up in the darkness, and the monster with those unearthly blue eyes… and running. Being so afraid and running away from him, from the strange man that invaded his bedroom. Running from the safety of his bed and his home and… ending up in the shed, in his car.

A car he couldn’t drive anywhere because the battery has died in the cold. But he could still close the doors and hide in it. Sit in it for hours – dressed only in his bathrobe, cold and scared. So scared.

Because the man was right there – standing in front of the car, his eyes glistering in the darkness. Silent and unmoving. For hours.

Until he was suddenly next to the door Bilbo was leaning on, face close to the glass and marred with emotion that was hard to read.

“Are you going to sit there till you freeze?”

He wanted… he did say “yes”.

And then…

And then he tried to run. Use the opposite door and escape into the night, into the cold…

…in his bathrobe.

“Have you lost your mind?!”

He was hauled back by an iron-hard arm around his waist and carried like a disobedient child back into the house at an impossible speed.

It was…

It was two days ago. What’s happened after that?

He’s lost two days!

No. No, he didn’t. He just… didn’t remember about it, did he? He’s spent the weekend like usual – writing and shovelling snow and taking pictures.

“What is going on?” Bilbo whimpered, leaning over the sink and clutching at his aching head. He felt nauseous all of a sudden. “Who are you?”

Was he going crazy?

“Why are you doing… what are you doing to me?!” he almost shouted.
A gravelly voice behind his back answered.

“I apologise.”

Bilbo whirled around pressing both hands to his mouth to stifle a scream.

“You do that a lot.”

The monster… the man was standing behind him. In his kitchen. Comfortable as you please.

“I didn’t mean to terrify you so,” he spoke calmly. “It wasn’t my intention in the slightest. I decided to make you forget it for a while so your fear could settle.” And the expression on his face said quite clearly that he didn’t deem the task accomplished.

What…? Made him forget? How could he…

Confusion was running in the background of Bilbo’s mind like an unending static that muffled all reasonable thoughts, leaving him floundering for answers; however, the forefront of his mind was taken over by one thing alone.

“Don’t… don’t do it again!” he whispered. And then demanded. “Don’t do it again! How can you just… don’t mess with my head!”

“There was no mess involved,” the man’s face reflected something that could be read as hurt pride. “I was very precise in my doings.”

“That’s not the problem at all!” Bilbo could swear his sanity was evaporating. “Just… just don’t do it, please!”

When the man looked him over, he wanted to hide, to crawl into one of the cabinets and disappear for a while. The only thing holding him back was the fact that the man didn’t move yet, staying on the other side of the kitchen. Although, judging by his stunt in the bedroom, if he decided to move Bilbo had slim chances of escaping. Still, his basic inbuilt ‘fight or flight’ response told him to stay as still as possible and wait for the stranger to make his decision.

“I will consider it,” the man said in the end. “Yet, as long as you’re in this state, you can hardly entertain guests.”

These words made something click in Bilbo’s frantic mind. “You…” It was so audacious that he couldn’t leave it alone. “You did it so I wouldn’t tell anyone…?”

Wouldn’t call for help. Wouldn’t leave with the boys.

“So you wouldn’t raise suspicions, yes,” was the stoic answer. And then the man had to read Bilbo’s thoughts because his eyebrows went up and he made a slow step forward. “You consider me a monster, is that right?”

By the time the last word was spoken his posture went out of focus and when it came back, he was standing in front of the shorter man whose arms went up in a protective instinct – he grabbed them halfway up, however, and slowly brought down. His hands were big enough to engulf two thin wrists with a lot of room to spare and close proximity forced the Bilbo to tilt his head high in order to
keep the eye contact.

Bilbo could feel his heart thumping in his chest, hell, in his wrists – that were trapped in the vice-like clasp of two giant, cold paws. He wondered why isn’t he dead yet; the scare he’s got when the Stranger (it was better than the… other option) moved would be enough to give a heart attack to an elephant! And yet his pulse was evening out and his breathing came back to normal with surprising speed. It was not natural, because Bilbo knew his own body enough to know how much of a wuss he is.

“What do people from your time do to the monsters, boy?”

“Well…”

They shoot them in the head – he didn’t dare to say it out loud. But then, he didn’t have to. Stranger nodded once, but his expression didn’t betray any unhappiness or amusement at the notion. As if he didn’t care.

“Are you willing to risk the townspeople burning Erebor to the ground because of my presence?”

Well, it was a bit medieval, but… not completely out of the realm of possibility.

“No,” he answered in tiny voice. “I…”

“They will not know anything, is that clear?”

“I… yes.”

Who would believe him anyway? The Ironhillers spoke teasingly about ghosts and haunted basements, but who would believe him that the mansion housed a vampi… ngh! No! It was ridiculous! He was a rational person and he could not let himself believe in…

The man leaned closer to peek at his throat and Bilbo’s body was not interested in any kind of defence. Once again, it just stood there when one of his hands was freed so his sweater could be pushed to the side.

“You’ve healed without scars, that’s good.”

“Could you please stop doing this?” he asked, desperate. “I won’t run again, I promise, you can stop doing this…!”

The answer he’s got was a puzzled stare, but the Stranger let him go and moved back a step. Bilbo cold move and he used the chance to press both hands to his face, led by a childish urge to hide.

“I have to make sure…” the man started to speak, but was brought short by a tiny, strangled sound from behind those small hands.

“It scares me!”

“…does it?”

“Of course it does!” Bilbo blurted out. How could he not see how scary it was? How invasive? He acted as if the whole thing was perfectly normal! “It’s my head! You just can’t ruffle through it like that…”

Just when he was starting to lose the last shreds of courage that kept him from breaking down in tears, the Stranger made a startled sound and stepped back even more. Bilbo cautiously peered
between his fingers to see his face softening for a tiny moment before it smoothed out into an impenetrable mask of calm indifference. He didn’t know how to take it, as a victory or a signal to run.

“Sit down, then, and let us talk.”

This time it wasn’t an order, Bilbo could refuse. But he didn’t.

*

“Little Bilbo smells like apple tarts,” Kili proclaimed loudly as they’ve made their way across the frozen landscape. When the expected punch in the arm didn’t come he looked worriedly to his partner. “Fili? What is it?”

“I wouldn’t… no matter,” the blond waved him away, his face pensive.

“Oh, if that was supposed to calm me down, then try again! Out with it, now!”

He stopped in the middle of the path with hands resting on his hips and waited.

“It’s just… It was strange for a moment,” Fili floundered a bit, brushing his hair with a nervous gesture. “I couldn’t roll him about the basement. It felt as if I... just couldn’t do it.”

That was something Kili didn’t expect.

“What?” he exclaimed. “But you’re the best! And it worked the last time…”

“It might have been a fluke,” Fili admitted. “I don’t know, it just felt… strange.”

“Well, look at that, Mister Baggins has some unexpected depths.”

“Oh yes, about that.”

The thwack to the head was strong enough to send him sprawling onto the snow.

“You’re a bottomless pit!” Fili hissed, falling on the prone figure and rubbing more snow into his face. “That was a dick move!”

“Hey stop! He liked it!” Kili spluttered weakly, clawing at his assailant. “He laughed… ungh!”

“He is not from Ironhill!”

“Stop it… and you’re repeating yourself!”

“Because it needs repeating!”

A short tussle later they were both laying in the snow, exhausted and wet, breathing hard. Kili’s hands were locked on Fili’s wrists and stopped the blonde from pulling on his hair. The cold didn’t bother them that much and with their jackets unzipped, they lay chest to chest, listening to the other’s breathing for a long while.

“You just can’t… bring him in,” Fili spoke at last. He pulled at the brown tangled mess and his
piercing glare almost made Kili whimper. “He is not a good material and he will not fit with the family.”

“He is kind, smart and cute,” Kili contradicted. “And he plans to stay in the mansion. He will have to know at some point.”

“Then someone will talk to him. Preferably Balin, not you.”

“But by then he may not want to! He will think we tricked him and won’t want to.”

“Oh, Kili,” Fili sighed and brought their foreheads together. “We are tricking him, love.”

“I know! But if we work on him a little…”

Before Kili could finish, fingers in his hair clenched painfully and a stern, angry, “No,” was whispered close to his lips.

“But…”

“No,” Fili’s voice turned dark. “Not against their will. Never against their will! Did you forget already?”

Kili paled and tried to shake his head, “I didn’t mean it like that,” he whispered, aghast.

“Good,” Fili pulled them even closer as his eyes softened with relief. “Good.”

The kiss was gentle, meant to comfort and reassure. It ended with murmured promises of love and forgiveness.

“You have to watch yourself, love,” Fili insisted. “The beast is easy to excite and I fear that the novelty of having an outsider here is getting to you.”

“I can stand it,” Kili protested.

“He is small, weak and alone in that big house on the hill, effectively trapped.”

“I know.”

“And he trusts us not to harm him.”

“I know…”

“Do you?”

Pale blue eyes searched the brown ones for any trace of weakness. There was worry in them, concern and love visible so clearly that Kili’s will finally crumbled. He closed his eyes and admitted quietly, “He’s not from here.”

“That doesn’t mean he’s a free game.”

“We need him.”

“Yes, we do.”

“And he’s kind.”

“Yes, he is.”
“And we can’t…”

“Go on.”

“We… I will not harm him.”

It was an old game to them, almost like a prayer some people decided to speak before they went to
sleep. For their kind there was no prayers and no easy sleep, but this was something Fili’s father
drilled into all their heads as soon as they’ve woke up to the new world.

*Don’t harm them needlessly.*

*Don’t let the beast rule your mind.*

*Don’t kill them if you can help it.*

And the most important of all:

*Don’t bring trouble to your people.*

Humans were weak and harmless, and taking advantage of that fact was the shortest road to loosing
whatever shreds of self-control their kind has possessed. It was a short road to ending up like… the
Other Kind – and no one wanted that.

“We will find the map and we will leave him alone,” Fili tried to reassure his beloved. “And when
Balin talks to him, we will hope for the best. Okay?”

“Okay.”

They breathed together for a while, covered in snow that didn’t melt on their skin, surrounded by soft
darkness. Their mouths wandered close and brushed against each other…

Then the sound of footsteps tore through the silence of the night.

From the top of a nearby three they’ve watched a man stealing his way alongside the overgrown
hedge that braced the road uphill. He was dressed in grey jacket and walked hunched; in his hands
they could see a hunting rifle.

“It’s just Bard,” Fili sighed, relieved.

Kili was still breathing hard into his ear. “That kid needs a hobby!” he hissed.

“This is his hobby, love.”

“He needs a new one, then!”

“Should I mention it to his grandmother next time I see her in town?”

“Please do. It’s not safe to stalk around in the dark like that. He will fall into a ditch and freeze to
death and what will we tell her then?”

Since there was no danger present, both men left the tree and reassumed their travel downhill,
leaving the young townsman to his hunt.
Okay this chapter... took me ages=_= Writer's block got me and I can do nothing about itT____T

But I had to get this one out of the way. Sorry it's so short. I just had to get that whole wretched conversation out and establish that Thorin is a very mercurial vampire and Bilbo is a very stubborn little fella and that Bard is in deep shit XD

Hopefully, from this point on it will be easier to get them all to cooperate.

Tea was an incredible thing. It has always managed to calm Bilbo down even during the most stressful of times. The sole motion of cradling a warm cup in his hands and breathing in the scent of freshly brewed leaves was such a soothing experience; it helped to ground racing thoughts and quietened the mind when the situation threatened to overwhelm it.

And yet the magic potion wasn’t enough to calm him down this time.

But then again, Bilbo didn’t suspect that when people from Twinings set about opening their company they’ve spared a thought of how their magical brew would fare against a vampire. No, that probably wasn’t at the forefront of their minds. And who could blame them?

That being said, the motion of preparing it gave Bilbo enough time to calm down a bit and forced him to stop the tremors in his hands, least he spills hot water all over himself. When he sat at the table he was as calm and collected as one could be in this situation – he still wouldn’t be able to recite his phone number, but shaking and whimpering was out of the picture for now.

The... vampire took place at the opposite side of the table, seemingly comfortable with the setting – or at least not displeased with it, as his face was unchangingly blank.

His clothes were different – Bilbo realised with surprise. When he first saw him – if the memory was truly real – in that basement (he didn’t want to think about it too much) he was clothed in dusty rags, old and ripped. As if he got between two angry cats – with very big claws. Now, however, he was clad in dark blue shirt and dark trousers; both articles looked pristine, but had a specific cut to them that put them firmly in the past century or even further. The stitching was also specific; I looked as if... it was made by hand? Subtle embroidery around the collar surely looked too detailed to be made by a machine.

All in all the Stranger – with his long hair pulled back into some sort of a clasp, neat beard and these clothes, - looked as if he stepped out of a romance novel or a period drama of some sort.

Or a gothic story.

He was also barefoot, which was a bit strange. And wore quite a lot of jewellery: a thick silver chain on his neck, disappearing under the collar, three hefty rings on his hands and a silver stud in each ear. Well, that blew the notion of silver bullets out of the window.
Or maybe it was against werewolves? Bilbo wasn’t sure anymore.

“We’ve already made introductions, but I presume that you may not remember them,” the vampire said in that deep, unimpressed voice. Not waiting for Bilbo to deny or agree he continued with a little bow, “Thorin is the name I go by.”

“Er… nice to meet you,” Bilbo bowed back awkwardly. “Bilbo…”

“Baggins, yes, I remember.”

“Well, that makes you the lucky one.”

A hand flew to cover his mouth so fast that Bilbo effectively slapped himself in the face. Why did he even say that? He was too smart to talk back to a vampire of all things!

And there went his hard-won peace of mind. He was about to bolt when a strong hand he could not see moving grabbed his wrist. Two pairs of eyes met, one grey and the other viciously blue, and some sort of connection flared to life in Bilbo’s brain. He was prepared to fight it, he was prepared for a cold demanding voice to once again slip alongside his thoughts… but it wasn’t like that this time. This time it was a gentle touch grounding him in reality, nothing more. The vampire… Thorin didn’t push himself into his mind; instead he spoke out loud, slowly, calmly.

“I will not hurt you, Bilbo Baggins.”

And his voice carried the weight of a promise.

“How… you bit me,” Bilbo pointed out. He would not let this one go!

His hand was not released, but he didn’t think to struggle yet as the grip was neither forceful nor painful.

“There was a little mechanical device by your bed,” the vampire said. “It tells time of the day and the date, am I right?”

What? The little mechanical… His alarm clock! His alarm clock that went missing and… oh.

“Yes, it does. It’s a clock and it does,” he rambled, a bit thrown and a bit miffed by the change of subject. “It can also tell you what the weather will be like, but not here, mountains distort the signal and…”

“If the… clock is correct, then I was trapped in that room for close to hundred years.”

“What…?”

Fingers holding his wrist twitched and Bilbo’s mouth snapped shut.

“I cannot be killed by time, little one, but it can weaken me. When you’ve found me, I was in a awakened state and my body needed nourishment, and it acted on instinct before I could stop it. For that I apologise. It will not happen again.”

“Not happen… as in… acting on instinct part or the… whole package?” He’s lost his mind, for sure, to ask questions like that.

“The whole. It won’t happen again.” Thorin’s eyes never left his. “But the faster you leve, the safer it will be for all involved.”
Well, as of now there were only two involved and...

Wait!


“Leave Erebor. To wherever you came from.”

The short answer caused him to splutter with outrage. “I think not!” he pulled his hand back to safety and stood from the chair. “This is my home!”

To which the vampire frowned and answered simply, “You will find that it’s my home.”

“Maybe it was, but it isn’t anymore. I bought it, completely legally and I… I can show you the paperwork! I live here!”

“Mister Baggins.” It were just two words, just one thing, his name, but the tone of voice they were spoken with was displeased and chiding; as if he was a child that needed to be reminded that his elders knew better and that he shouldn’t argue with them. Something in his chest clenched at that tone.

It was Lobelia all over again! Trying – and succeeding – to barter his mother’s house from him; trying to lay her greedy hands on his inheritance! On something that for all intents and purposes was his!

Some part of Bella Took had to survive in her son, because the anger that awakened in his heart was entirely alien to Bilbo, yet he embraced it as it ate away his doubt and fear to burn even brighter.

It was his house! His future!

“No!” he said loudly.

On the other side of the table the vampire stared at him in surprise. “What did you say?” he snarled.

“I said no! I have no intention of moving out. I’ve bought this house fair and square, I’ve put a lot of work into making it liveable again and more is still to come. I am not leaving!”

In a blink of an eye the vampire was standing. “Erebor belongs to me!” he roared and it was the most terrifying thing Bilbo has ever experienced.

And yet he felt no qualms about yelling back.

“Not anymore!” Well, it was a harsh statement more than it was a yell, but no one was there to judge him. Feeling suicidally bold, Bilbo added: “I will be staying, thank you!”

Because what else could he do? It was that simple. There was nowhere for him to go now. Bree was a dead end where nothing waited on him.

As soon as that thought entered his mind, rallying him up for a fight, the vampire… stepped back.

“You’re not from Iron Hill,” he said, surprised.

“No. Although I have no idea how is that important right now?”

“They’ve sold Erebor to you.”
“Yes, we’ve established *that* already,” Bilbo was close to snapping. He was not made to endure such emotional rollercoasters!

“An outsider…”

The vampire seemed to deflate at that. Something in his face changed, thought Bilbo couldn’t say what exactly before the expression on it went back to blankness. But his posture seemed to shrink a bit; gone were the imposing aura and dangerous air. Suddenly he once more looked just like a man – with unusual eyes, yes, but just a man.

“A lot has changed in my absence…” Thorin whispered to no one in particular before looking at the shorter man with somewhat shrewd eyes. “And you may be of use to me yet.”

“Oh no!” Bilbo, quite understandably, wanted nothing to do with it. “I want nothing to do with whatever…”

“You said you’re not leaving,” the vampire cut him off. “Well, neither am I. And we both know which one of us is more persuasive.”

Which one of them can make the other move and talk and *forget things* on a whim. Yes, that was something Bilbo didn’t take into account when he set out for this argument.

“You wouldn’t… This house is all I have!” he exclaimed desperately. “You can’t just make me leave!”

“I won’t, if you let me use you.

This time Bilbo who took a step back almost without thinking.

“I don’t… think I even want to know what you’re talking about.”

His face had to give away the direction his thoughts have taken because Thorin’s eyes widened for a speck of a second and then a corner of his mouth twitched upwards.

“I mean to task you with something.”

“And what is that ‘something’ exactly?”

“Gathering information.” He stepped to the side, circling the table. Bilbo, whose adrenaline induced courage started to abate, stepped the other way, trying to keep the piece of furniture between them. Thorin might have smiled at the move, it was hard to tell. “A family lived here,” he said calmly. “My family. The line of Durin owned this hill and the village in the valley.”

“A town, actually.” Bilbo’s clarification was ignored.

“Iron Hill grew on the mines my family owned. They protected its people and gave them work. And now you’re telling me they’re gone.”

“I told you nothing of the sort!”

He would remember! With his memories of their first unfortunate encounter re-emerging, he was sure that they didn’t have enough time to discuss locals yet!

“Your presence does it for you,” the vampire said, righting Bilbo’s chair as he passed by it. “If even one Durin was left alive it would be them in Erebor. It would never be sold to an outsider like you.”
“I’ll have you know that I’m a perfectly respectable person!”

He might have as well be talking to the walls, for the way his words had no impact on the creature that kept stalking him like some sort of a predator that couldn’t decide if it was hungry enough to pounce, or not.

“This house…” The vampire kept talking. “Almost two hundred years ago Dain the Second build it for his eldest daughter on the ashes of the home that stood here before. For five hundred years now Durins owned this valley and the hill and it never belonged to anyone else. And now their legacy is pawned off to the first choice that shows up with enough money!”

Oh, when put like that… Grudgingly, Bilbo had to concede that the situation was a bit more complicated than he thought at first. Still, he could not be expected to do anything about something that’s already happened!

“I want to know how my line met its end,” Thorin whispered into his ear. “And you will find this information for me.”

This time Bilbo did not scream. This time his heart only jumped high enough to settle in his throat and he was proud of himself in spite of fear. He was getting better at this game.

“Could you stop doing this…! It’s extremely aggravating!” Bilbo demanded, swirling around to stand toe to toe with the creature that loomed over him like an overgrown hedge. An overgrown hedge with a pair of ice-blue eyes and bushy eyebrows. “How am I even supposed to…? How am I supposed to do it? I barely know the locals!”

“You can talk, can you not?” The vampire countered. “You can ask questions and get answers.’

“Well, so can you! We both know which of us is more persuasive!”

Too late Bilbo remembered that it might not have been exactly smart to remind the vampire of said fact. Thankfully, Thorin didn’t take the bait – yet the amused shine in his eyes said that he was aware of it.

“You can move among the people of this time with ease, for one thing,” he said instead. “You are new here, as you said, so they shouldn’t mind your questions. Furthermore, if you are set on staying, be useful at least.”

Bilbo had to bite his tongue very hard to stop the protests and exclamations that wanted to escape him at being treated in such callous way. The gall of this wretched creature! If he was even half a foot taller, he fancied that he would punch that infuriating face straight in the nose!

“Okay,” instead he breathed in and out, trying to loosen his tightly clenched fists. “Okay, I will try to… to help you.” All in all he wasn’t asked to preform any impossible feat; asking few questions here and there was easily doable. There was another thing, though. “But…” he licked his lips, searching for words. “But if you are to stay here… if we are going to live here together, there have to be some ground rules!”

One dark brow inched up.

“Ground rules?” Oh, the vampire was not amused.

“Yes, I mean… we just can’t keep bumping into each other and I would like to avoid…” You. “…unnecessary stress as much as possible. And I will not allow to turn this place into a… a coven! No more of your kind can come!”
“Rest easy, Mister Baggins, there’s no more of ‘my kind’ than what you already have here.” Thorin stated. “However, if you want rules, we will have rules. First…”

“Now wait a moment, you just can’t decide on your…”

“This is my home and I will have access to every room as I see fit. Two, you are not to step into the basement for any reason without my permission. “

“I told you to wait…”

“Three, you will not search for me nor will you try to kill me.”

“I would never… ah!”

With every word the vampire was moving closer and closer and soon Bilbo found himself backed up against the counter, hands flailing for a moment before they settled on the edge of the sink; he had to bend his neck uncomfortably to look up, not for the first time in the last twenty four hours cursing his meagre height.

“You will also not search for anyone who could help you kill me; neither will you tell anyone of my existence or even hint at it. Are we clear?” Thorin demanded, leaning even closer.

“You… are awfully presumptuous!” Bilbo tried to catch his breath and stop his eyes from roaming. It was hard to look the creature in the eye. It was also eerily cold to stand so close to him. “I would… I would thank you to give me some time to think about my terms.”

“You… Bilbo swallowed again under the heavy stare of those blue eyes. He was hyperaware of the closeness they were sharing and the way his heart wanted to crawl out of his chest and hide in one of the kitchen drawers. None the less he forced his mouth to work as he considered the ‘terms’ he’s been given. “You will not do this thing… you will leave my head alone, you hear? I will accept the deal as long as you promise, no, swear that you’ll not force me to do or think things against my will.”

It was a tricky thing to ask for – especially when Thorin had no reason to hold on to his promise. He could break it any number of times and make Bilbo forget about it and it was a terrifying thought… and yet, someway, Bilbo knew that the vampire wouldn’t do that. It was a strange surety that he couldn’t shake off – that if he’s just managed to get that promise, it would never be broken.

“You leave my head alone, I will do what you want me to do, and we can ignore each other from there.”

“It’s a lot to ask for,” Thorin stated calmly.

“Is it?” Bilbo countered. “How can I trust you to keep your end of the bargain and not kill me in my sleep, then? You promised that you won’t hurt me, but…”

“Am I to trust you on your word alone?”
“We will have to try, won’t we? What harm can I be to you?”

*Look at us,* he wanted to shout hysterically. Look at me and tell me what I can do to hurt you when your very presence makes my skin crawl! Even if you were a normal human, you could break me in half without breaking sweat! You scare me enough as it is, without the mind tricks!

It was a quite desperate way of presenting his point of view, but it seemed to work.

“As you wish. We have a deal.”

“Oh, good, then we can…”

Bilbo started when a heavy hand landed on top of his head. It was cold and hard, but also strangely careful as it slipped down, cupping his face. Then something in his head snapped and words escaped him completely. Not only words, but sight and hearing went along, leaving him gasping and disoriented for a long moment. It didn’t hurt… not exactly. It was just extremely disconcerting and strange.

“What… what wazzit… what did you…?” Bilbo tried to ask. “Oh goodness… tell me you didn’t… didn’t… scramble my brain… I need it!”

“I didn’t,” was a calm answer. “I merely closed your mind.”

“What…?”

“My power scares you, which was never my intention, yet using it became a habit to me, one that is hard to break. Now, however, your thoughts are behind a wall and I can’t touch them. Does that satisfy you, Mister Baggins?”

“Eh? Yeah… yeah, completely. I will just…”

Huh, what was he doing sitting on the floor? He felt strange. And giddy. And strange.

“I feel strange,” he felt it necessary to point out.

“Yes, it will pass after a good night’s sleep.” Was there amusement in that voice? There was. Oh god, there was!

It was so embarrassing.

“Do you require help in getting back to your bed?”

So embarrassing!

“No, absolutely nope! I will just… sit here for a while. You can go and do… whatever you do. Stalk some dark corridor or something.”

There were hands under his arms, strong hands, lifting him up like he weighted nothing, supporting him when his knees turned into jelly.

“Please… please don’t bite me anymore,” Bilbo requested politely. “I don’t like it.”

He really didn’t.

“I really don’t…”
“I gave you my word, Mister Baggins, that I will not harm you.”

“Oh, that’s very good.”

In that case… bed seemed like a marvellous idea.

*

Bard was not exactly thrilled with his hunt, but he admitted quietly that it could’ve been worse. He set out for a deer, but two fat quails were noting to scoff at either.

Snow crunched under his boots as the young man trudged alongside the road leading him downhill. His grandmother will probably scold him for venturing outside on such a dark night. It was cold, windy and miserable – but it was a good weather for a hunt, challenging; and Bard liked a challenge. He was the best shot in Ironhill so far, and he dreamed of becoming even better before he’ll reach seventeen.

One exceptionally strong gust of wind almost blew the hood off his head, and the young man huddled deeper into his thick jacket, walking faster. He could think of nothing else than a warm bed waiting on him at home and a cup of hot milk with butter and honey his nan used to make him after every hunt – no matter how cross she was with her grandson. That’s why he loved her above all else, that old gentle woman, for she loved him enough to make sure every time that he came back from his nightly business in one piece.

Bard was a young boy still, raised in Ironhill, priding himself on knowing all the trails and pathways in the valley and around it. Indeed, he knew them so well that even in near complete darkness he didn’t need to pay that much attention to where he was going, relying on his instinct to lead him home.

It was a stupid mistake, a childish one, really. But Bard didn’t get to know it before something heavy and cold slammed into his back, sending him sprawling into the snow. He opened his mouth to gasp for breath, but it was already too late, no sound came out of it save for a small, pained keen.

Chapter End Notes

And before people start burning houses and crying in outrage, please listen! Thorin is not an asshole for assholishness sake! He just woke up from a nap that took him a century, to a stranger living in his home and a completely new world! Of course he
won't be all fluffy bunnies and trust and butterflies! I am trying to make him believable here, ppl :]
Colder nights 3

Chapter Notes

A long time to wait, and the chapter is relatively short - I APOLOGIZE. Though I have a lot to shovel in (no punXD) and don't want to go on the off tangent trips too often. Thank you all for your wonderful reviews and I promise, Bard is okay... relatively speaking>_>
The next chapter will come in faster, I promise:D

Bilbo discovered with no small amount of surprise that living with a vampire housemate wasn’t all that different from living without him.

It was a strange thing to consider – especially taking into account those few terror filled days, but after the ‘deal’ was struck between them, Bilbo’s life more or less went back to normal. Meaning – to the normal rhythm of boredom and loneliness interrupted thrice a week by two cheerful boys and their stoic uncle.

It’s not that he could forget about Thorin – because his brain was not damaged and the vampire himself made it quite hard to do so.

The vampire – Bilbo tried to think of him as Thorin or the housemate, in an attempt to make him less scary. It was much easier to go to sleep every evening believing that his housemate is just this quirky chap that likes to stay up late, not a creature of the darkness that stalks his house when he’s asleep.

They weren’t bumping into each other all that often, well, practically not at all, and Bilbo couldn’t decide if he was all that happy about it. After all, the danger you knew… and so on. It was somewhat disconcerting to be presented with traces of another person sharing his living space without seeing the person himself. Misplaced books with pieces of twine he didn’t dare to remove stuck between the pages. Mugs missing and then mysteriously finding their way into the cupboard. Sitting room’s fireplace full of warm ashes on every other morning. Little, unexciting things, and yet they kept him in a state of constant watchfulness all the same. Was it intentional? Maybe Thorin tried to lull him into a false sense of security?

He didn’t step into the basement nor did he dare to venture on that damned staircase. Partly because of fear and partly because he didn’t have the keys; they just disappeared from his keychain one day and he didn’t dare to question it. Maybe it was better this way.

Not that he would go there if he could…

Curiosity was a strange and powerful thing, but Bilbo doubted that he has eight more lives to spare.

* 

“No, no, I’m doing… fine.” With the phone held snuggly in the crook of his neck Bilbo pulled the fifth cardigan out of his wardrobe and eyed it critically. “No, really, the place is great. Very inspiring, you know? And the views…”
Blue cardigan went back on the hanger and the next was pulled out, this one a warm maroon colour with little wooden buttons. It was a present from Bilbo’s cousin, Primula, and one of his favourites. It was worn, though, and looked a bit shabby…

“Yeah, you have to visit,” he spoke into the receiver with honest enthusiasm. “When the season starts, you have to come! Ironhill is beautiful and the locals are lovely, extremely nice people.”

Maroon cardigan landed on the bed and Bilbo eyed the row of hangers critically. There had to be something he could wear!

“Hm? I am currently writing the chase scene. It’s going well… Listen, I’ve had an idea knocking around my head for a while now. What if…”

Maybe he could wear the turtleneck? No, it was scratchy.

“…and what if the prince is not a good guy? Like, I say let’s make him a real asshole, this kind of tortured soul that lost his faith in humanity and needs some love to rekindle it? People like this sort of thing. I already have a plot for him…”

Or maybe the black one? No, it was too serious.

Oh for goodness sake, he was not going on a date! He was going shopping! What was he even doing?

“…his kingdom ravaged by some beast and his people living in exile…”

Bilbo reached for the dark green cardigan when a sound of a car horn startled him into almost dropping the phone on the floor.

“Oh, that’s my ride,” he spoke hurriedly, grabbing a hanger at random. “I will call you tomorrow, is that okay?” A dark blue woolly; well, could’ve been worse. “Yes, I will send you the draft as soon as I can.” Damn those buttons! “You know I am not overly fond of the internet, I will keep to what I know, thank you. Now I really have to go, Elrond, talk to you later. Cheers.”

Half-trapped in the cardigan, Bilbo dropped the phone on the bed and attempted to free himself from the hold of the deceptively soft garment. As he did the buttons, something poked him in the side.

“Huh, what are you doing here?” he wondered aloud, pulling the heavy key out of the pocket. It was that antique from Uncle Isengrim. “I forgot about you completely!”

Another long honk echoed throughout the house and Bilbo started; he chucked the key into the top drawer of his dresser and chased out of the room, finishing the buttons on the go.

Familiar beat up Ford waited on the driveway when Bilbo all but fell out of the front door, tripping on the doorstep and almost ending up with his face in the junipers. That would surely teach him not to walk and zip his jacket up at the same time.

When he finally got to the car Dwalin was looking at him with his own brand of stoic amusement that revealed itself mainly through the way his eyebrows arched just a tiny little bit. He could be smiling, but the thick moustache made it impossible to tell for certain.

“Thank you for coming,” Bilbo shook the man’s hand and pointed in the direction of the shed standing in the mansion’s shadow. “It’s in there. If you can drive to the door…”

As he’s told his editor, living in seclusion had its merits, but there was also an arm-long list of
drawbacks. One of them being that help of any kind was rarely at hand. For example, Bilbo never saw a reason to buy a rectifier while he lived in the city – whenever his battery died all he had to do was to knock on the closest neighbour’s door and voila.

In Ironhill he started to see sense in being prepared for the most unexpected situations.

Well, the most unexpected *probable* situations – he would never in thousand years think of acquiring an anti-vampire kit for any reason.

“Hmm,” the tall man drawled when Bilbo opened the gate to the shed and his light green Toyota came into view. It wasn’t a flattering sound, more of a… thoughtful one. “A tiny little thing, isn’t it? Sure yer want to risk it going downhill? Worst of the snow has been cleared, but it can still end up hangin’ on a drift.”

Bilbo bit his lip nervously, eying the trusty hatchback. It wasn’t *that* small, really, and it got him uphill without problem before. True, it hardly compared to Dwalin’s monster of a car, but surely it wasn’t that bad.

“Well, we won’t know until we try,” he stated with a small shrug. “It may just do the job. And if I get stuck… well, you’re here.”

Reanimating the car was a quick enough task, but actually getting it out of the shed took a while due to the snow packed gravel stopping the wheels every few feet. Installing the snow chains took another while and a lot of swearing from both men, but Bilbo was adamant that they finish the job. He almost froze his fingers off (because it was still better than ruining his nice knitted gloves) and once or twice he’d managed to trap them under the chains (because he was a clumsy sod), but if that was the price of mobility and independence, so be it.

He would be the first person to admit that his neighbours were kind and helpful, but relying on those qualities started to feel uncomfortable as of late – Bilbo didn’t want to come off as that hopeless case that needed a minder all the time. He was also convinced that is was a high time to start blending into the local culture, for meeting new people and expanding his contact list.

And a search for answers.

He promised to fulfil his end of the deal thinking it will be easy enough. Of course his first choices to question were Fili and Kili, who already proved to be a well of information on the town and its inhabitants. Surprisingly, in this instance they just looked at one another and shrugged, stating that no one really knew what happened to the last of the Durins, that it was a long time ago and why was he interested anyway, did he find any ghosts? Dwalin scratched his head a bit, looking into the distance and basically told him the same thing.

That was when Bilbo started to realise that the task may not be as easy to complete as he’s first thought.

But he was not about to give up, no way. He was a writer and if he knew one thing it was how to research things. Uncovering the final fate of some lost lineage in the place of its origin could not be harder than a week of camping in the forest outside of Bree with minimum supplies just to get the feel of the struggle for his second novel. Surely.

*
He might have been mistaken.

Bilbo’s first stop after entering the town was at Mister Bombur’s store; he had to thank the man for his kind consideration and stock up the pantry before another wave of bad weather cut him off again. The store was a pleasant place, Bilbo decided, quaint and inviting, with rows of wooden shelves full of high quality products – he was especially tempted by the cabinet stacked with home-made preserves Bombur’s wife was apparently famous for. Bilbo didn’t need much encouragement to pick a few jars of different jams and marmalades, followed by a bottle of raspberry syrup and a pot of home-made chutney. He was a big believer in supporting local initiatives.

“Great choice,” Bombur praised, bagging a jar of gooseberry jam for him. “It’s a traditional local recipe; I can assure you’ve never tasted anything like it!”

The man was a pleasant partner for conversation and, more importantly, a native Ironhiller; it was no hardship to talk to him about the history of the place and Bilbo soon found himself asking about the mansion and its late owners.

“The thing is, Mister Baggins, no one really knows,” Bombur told him with a bit of regret. “They were a great family, anyone can tell you that. It was Dain Durin that discovered the mines and got people to settle in Iron Hill, as it was called back then. They mined iron, silver and there was even some gold in there. There’s even a legend about a mine full of jewels! They were good people too, took care of their workers, generation after generation. But the family was dwindling before the First World War and no one really knows what happened to them afterwards, one year they’ve just left and never came back.”

Well, it was an answer, Bilbo thought, but he also suspected that it wouldn’t be enough to satisfy Thorin. After all, if his family disappeared one day, he would not be pleased to hear that no one knew what’s happened to them. Well, he could be if Sackville-Bagginess were involved, but otherwise…

“I have to admit, it’s quite an enigma to ponder,” Bombur mused, bagging a dozen buns with sunflower seeds sprinkled over their golden skin. “Is it for your book, Mister Baggins?”

“Oh no,” Bilbo waved his hands around, frantically searching for an excuse. He had a deal with Thorin, true, but he also doubted that the answer of ‘It’s not me, the age old vampire living in my home is interested, is all,’ would gain him any sympathisers. In the end he settled for: “It’s for the business, you see. My plan is to keep Erebor as authentic as possible, so I thought it would be nice to include some of its history? People like this kind of thing.”

“That’s a splendid idea, that is!” the big man exclaimed. “Erebor is as much an Ironhiller as any of us here, you know! If you want to hear about it you’d do best to ask Óin, he is the curator in the Museum of the Valley, he can tell you some good stories. It’s just by the library, opposite Town Hall; they should have some historical records and photographs. You know, there was some digging west of the town a few years back? Archaeologists were all over the place, found some pots and pans and other sensible things, if you get my meaning.”

Bilbo understood perfectly.

From that point on the conversation turned to apple pies and, since it was winter, gingerbread cookies, while other customers came and went; each greeting the owner of the store cheerfully before taking a double look at Bilbo who felt compelled to introduce himself. Walking out of the store almost two hours later he was acquainted with about twelve people, most of whom were pleasant and seemed genuinely interested in his plans for Erebor. Some of them even mentioned that they have knew of him from Fili and Kili, and that apparently earned him some sort of credit in their eyes.
All in all, it was a pleasant evening.

On his way back Bilbo drove by the museum – only to discover that it was closed until the end of November due to refurbishment. He did not allow himself to feel disappointment, though, he was planning to stay in Erebor for a long while, there was no reason to rush. As much as he wanted to figure out the mystery surrounding the disappearance of Durins and have the vampire off his back, Bilbo was a Baggins, and Bagginess never rushed into things without a proper plan backing them up.

Fairly satisfied with the resolution, he drove home. Minty handled harsh conditions with relative ease, being a fairly light car, and soon enough Bilbo was patting her on the hood after he unloaded the shopping. Yes, he was one of those people.

It took two trips to get everything inside, thought, and as the sun has already set, freezing air and sharp wind made both of them very unpleasant. For a few moments Bilbo stood in the hallway, stomping his feet and patting his arms to warm himself a bit; his fingers were red and swollen from the cold, and no amount of blowing on them seemed to help. Hot tea was in order! Maybe he could make some hot porridge for dinner? That would give him a chance to try that beautiful plum marmalade from Bombur’s stock. Or maybe the cherry one? Or strawberry? Or he could just settle for scones and try all of them one after another…

Bilbo’s inner struggle was stopped short when he pushed open the door to the kitchen.

“Oh dear,” he whispered instinctually when his eyes fell on the vampire sitting at his table with a book cradled in one wide hand. “Good evening,” he choked out when their eyes met, because good manners were his default setting.

The vampire blinked and inclined his head; the bow was miniscule, but someway still managing to convey politeness. “Good evening,” he answered in that deep, rich voice, returning to his lecture.

Bilbo stood in the doorway for a moment longer, unsure what to do with this situation. In the end he shrugged mentally and ventured in. It’s not like he was expecting Thorin to help him with the bags, was it? And their Contract – as he took to calling it – didn’t forbid him from entering his own kitchen, for goodness sake! They could stay in the same room for a while, could they? More importantly, the shopping won’t put itself away.

Still, at first it was fairly awkward. As much as he tried, Bilbo couldn’t keep the vampire in his line of sight all the time; and no matter how much he’d told himself he’s being silly, he couldn’t get rid of the feeling of being watched whenever his back was turned. It made for some truly uncomfortable quarter of an hour. To make matters even worse – whenever he turned his head to glance at the dark man, Thorin was in the same place, immersed in the book, in the exact same position, (*he didn’t even seem to breathe*), in an outright mockery of Bilbo’s entirely natural concern about the state of his neck.

Regardless, a person could stay in the state of toe-curling suspense only for so long, so after another ten minutes have passed, Bilbo finally managed to bully himself into calming down and getting on with the program.

It would seem that at some point during his absence Thorin has stacked wood in the stove… and then probably forgot about it, because now only a few embers glowed weakly underneath a pile of ash. Bilbo coaxed them back to life and soon enough the kitchen was growing pleasantly warm again.

Also, the porridge won.
It could be said that Bilbo was very good at bulling himself. A master of the craft, to be honest. He was so good in fact, that in the process of gathering ingredients and choosing the right copper pot for boiling milk, he almost forgot about the presence behind his back. It was only the sound of a page being turned that reminded him about the very real vampire occupying his kitchen. Oh, how stupid! How could he just forget about a vampire?

Moreover, how could he forget about his manners?

“Would you…” Bilbo turned away from the counter and waited on Thorin to lift his head again and look at him. When that happened, he had to clear his throat (because, these eyes) before he asked in what he hoped was a neutral tone of voice. “I am making porridge for dinner, would you like some?”

You’re losing nothing by being polite, his father used to tell him, only gaining moral high ground.

Thorin took a moment to process his words, eyes never moving form Bilbo’s face, before he presented him with how a neutral tone should sound like. “I don’t consume human food.”

Bilbo had to admit that he was expecting that answer – what, with the blood drinking and all, - but it never hurt to make sure. Well, at least his pantry was safe, if nothing else.

“But I would not be opposed to a cup of tea.”

He considered if it’s worth getting annoyed over. Probably not. Bilbo was pretty sure that he would do everything to keep his blood-drinking housemate happy – as long as it keeps him healthy and in one peace. And wasn’t he about to make a cup of tea for himself, anyway?

With that in mind, he set the kettle on the stove and rummaged through his tea collection. It was something he was quite proud of, actually, as he thought to be a bit of a connoisseur when it came to tea; doubtlessly, thanks to his father’s influence. Here were a few problems in the world that a good cuppa wasn’t able to make a bit better, and choosing a blend appropriate for the occasion was a worthy skill in the eyes of any Baggins worth their salt.

“What kind would you prefer?” Bilbo asked absently, reaching for his favourite evening blend - English Breakfast. Because he was contradictory like that.

The answer he’s got from the vampire was rather unexpected.

“The one with hot water and milk, if you please.”

Was it sarcasm? Amusement? It was hard to tell; especially that Thorin’s pale face, again, didn’t betray anything.

“No, I mean…” Bilbo searched for words, bemused. “I have black Assam, Oolong, and Ceylon. Green with quince and without. I also have a honeybush tea, and vanilla-toffee flavoured one - very nice on cold days, that; and mint with ginger and lemon, that’s for colds… well, I guess you wouldn’t need that one… Let’s see, blackcurrant with elderflower,” he kept counting out, climbing on his toes to see the contents of the cupboard better. “Russian Caravan, white with rose petals, some berry blends, and… well, you get the idea.” He turned around, smiling sheepishly at the blank slate of his housemate’s face. “What would you like?”

“Black.” was all Thorin had to say to that. It could be a trick of light, but his eyebrows seemed to be half-a-millimetre higher than before. “I will leave the rest to you.”

He was pretty sure that he’s scored a point somewhere in this whole debate and it made him a bit proud of himself.
Black. Yes, well…

After a few moments of panicked flailing Bilbo decided that there was only one tea he could serve his unusual housemate. Russian Caravan was strong, but not bitter and its smoky aftertaste worked well with milk. There was also something… quite regal about it, something old and unyielding, a sort of presence that needed a bit of getting used to. Yes, it would fit the vampire perfectly. Or so he hoped.

And that was how Bilbo Baggins ended up having a tea with a vampire.

It wasn’t so bad, he thought later, the porridge turned out great and the plum marmalade was, indeed, to die for. Bilbo spooned it into his bowl with cheerful abandon and even licked the spoon afterwards, like a greedy little brat. Waste not, want not – as his grandma used to say. He took his tea without milk today, only adding a spoonful of cherry syrup and a bit of lemon – vitamin C was important and he was never a fan of taking pills of any kind.

Thorin sat at the opposite end of the table, with a book in one hand and a cup of tea in the other that he took from the shorter man graciously and with another little nod. He didn’t comment on the flavour, though; he barely spared a moment to add the milk before diving back into his book, not even looking up when his housemate settled himself down for a meal in front of him. The vampire sipped his drink slowly, carefully, and Bilbo had a suspicion that he wasn’t really thirsty; he didn’t seem to enjoy the taste either, but… maybe the motion of it? The warmth of sturdy porcelain in his hand? There was something there, something that his brain tried to decipher, but couldn’t. It was quite frustrating.

For his part, Bilbo tried to eat without making too much noise and told himself it’s out of politeness; it was quite rude to slurp and smack when a person in front of you tried to read a book in peace, right? He regretted not picking up a newspaper or a book when he was in town; then they would at least have an excuse for ignoring one another while sitting at one table. The awkward meal would go so much faster and then each could go their own way without bothering the other.

It was about that time when the ridiculousness of the situation caught up to Bilbo.

He was having a tea with a vampire.

He almost spat his drink when the urge to laugh tried to overwhelm him. It was all so strange! He felt surreal, like a character in a sitcom or a novel! Because things like that didn’t happen, did they? People didn’t buy historical mansions that contained secret rooms with vampires hiding inside! It just didn’t happen to normal, plain, boring people like Bilbo Baggins!

Maybe it was all a dream? Or some sort of hallucination? Or a psychosis brought on by the loneliness? Maybe he’s finally cracked?

Or maybe he was just tired.

Bilbo wondered for a while if he should mention the case of the missing Durins, but decided against. Thorin had to know that he was in town – it was pretty obvious after all – and didn’t ask, so Bilbo didn’t feel compelled to admit how little progress he’s made so far. When he has something more substantial than ‘they disappeared’, then he will breach the subject. It was… safer, this way, right?

So he didn’t laugh and didn’t talk; he ate his porridge and drank his tea and felt the exhaustion weigh him down. It was a busy day, all in all, with the morning spent on shovelling the driveway, writing and tidying up the conservatory so more furniture could go in there. The shopping trip was exciting, but a bit too long. And meeting new people always exhausted Bilbo’s mental faculties.
He stood from the table and put his dishes into the sink, promising to wash them tomorrow. He also re-stocked the stove to make sure that in the morning there will be some hot water to wash in.

“Please, put your cup in the sink when you’re finished,” he requested quietly as he was passing the table and its sole occupant. “And turn the light off.” And then he stifled a yawn and said, “Good night, then.”

He was already closing the door behind him when he’s heard an equally quiet, “Good night.” For some reason it made him feel better about this whole wretched business.

Bilbo was already in his bed when the thought of what he’s said to the vampire struck him between the eyes. The boldness!

Oh well, he was alive, so it couldn’t be that bad.
Afternoon teas and family matters

Chapter Notes

Ha ha! I am entirely sorry for making you all wait so long, lovely ppl O: Just one thing after another happened and, well, yeah.
But look! There’s so much happening in this chapter! :D And it’s a long one too!
Though for some reason AO3 keeps eating up my formatting, but I will try to solve it after I come back from work->_>_ Maybe because it's my first thing ever written entirely in google docks? Who knows?

BUT BUT BUT there's so much happening and LOOK HERE http://ewebean.tumblr.com/post/63624037383/a-second-later-he-shouted-when-bony-fingers (seriously, look!) Cool as ice Ewebean drew an amazing rendering of Bilbo’s and Thorin's first meeting:D Well, rather unfortunate meeting for dear Bilbo, but hot and amazing for us to look at! (looks at it)

And that's not all! http://shaerahaek.tumblr.com/post/63663005609/don-t-bite-me-please-inspired-by-bed Marvellous Shaerahaek drew an assemble scene with our two lovely leads and I am chuffed like a chuffed thing! :D go and looook!

I am going now, before I fall flat on my face from all of these emotions raging in my head=_=
Have a good read, lovely people:D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Next week turned out to be a busy one. The boys started to move all the old furniture into the conservatory that was, for all intents and purposes, extremely accommodating. Surprisingly, really; after all the boxes and massive pots have been moved into one corner or disassembled for kindle (a task to which Kili took with disturbing zeal) it has opened into a spacious winter garden with an incredible view on the snow topped mountain range.

Bilbo still had a hard time believing that he was Erebor’s owner (well, partial owner, at least) – how in heavens he was so lucky to get it for the price it was offered for. If he was ever forced to sell it, he would take no less than a hand and a leg and a signed contract for the buyer’s firstborn. Only with those in hand he could be sure that this magnificent building would be fully appreciated by the new owner.

On paper the conservatory was supposedly Edwardian, but to Bilbo’s somewhat trained eye it completely avoided the influences of the era it was built in. The craftsmanship was visibly old school and solid: carved wood and fantastically bent metal, and hand cut glass sheets that the makers arranged into sharp edged mosaics tinted gently in parts. The canopy was tinted blue – and Bilbo imagined that even on a rainy day the sky viewed through it was less grey. There was a row close to the tiled floor tinted with green that had to make the grass outside seem fresh and colourful even in autumn. All in all it was an amazing piece of local craft, because Bilbo would swear that he’d never seen anything like it – the shapes, the detail, the overall layout – before. Clean cut shapes and measured elegance of Edwardian architecture were replaced with angular designs full of sharp turns and shapes that however strange and foreign when alone, together created a mesmerising pattern that
blended effortlessly with the harsh landscape outside.

It was almost a shame to bring in all the dust and mess into a place so tranquil, and Bilbo promised the house that he will restore the conservatory to its full splendour no matter the cost.

Yes, he was one of those people.

There wasn’t a lot of furniture to salvage on that floor – a medium sized chest of drawers, a dozen or so chairs and two old bedframes, of which one was too big to fit through the doors or be carried, so, sadly, it had to be disassembled (which again, brought that infernal smile on Kili’s face that Bilbo tried not to consider too deeply). Bilbo was time and time again astonished at the strength and stamina of his two helpers who lugged heavy wood and rolled up carpets and all kinds of stuff up and down the stairs without breaking a sweat most of the time. There was of course much complaining and grunting, and though the older man was convinced that the boys were just showing off he was never remiss in rewarding his employees with cups of hot chocolate at the end of every “shift”. Oh, to be young and spring again!

They’ve made a good time, though, and soon enough all the rooms on the first floor were ready for proper renovation. Mister Dwalin proposed that he would look to organize a team that would help them tackle the issue.

“It’s a bit on the edge of things, if ya get my meaning,” the towering man said one evening from behind a cup of strong tea, speaking over the racket of Fili and Kili fighting over the last biscuit in the box. “Strong winters often leave us cut off and most of the folks here have learned to deal. We do our own business and we do it well.”

That, in Bilbo’s opinion, was a very sane attitude, especially if it got him closer to finalising his dream sooner rather than later.

There was only one glitch in that dream.

Glitch that for some reason took to occupying the kitchen in the evenings.

And drinking his tea.

Bilbo was too far into this whole mess to panic; really, now it was mostly just surreal. He didn’t know if it was some sort of a test or a scare tactic meant to keep him away from that particular room, because Thorin, apart from polite Good Evenings and Goodnights, never spoke to him. Well, the first few times he’s requested his tea, until Bilbo just started making it without being prompted.

There was a moment of panic during the second week when he’s realised that he’s running out of the blend his vampire housemate took to, but always kind Mister Bombur agreed to order a few tins with his next delivery. Bilbo was stupidly grateful – in fact he took it as an opportunity to treat the man to his father’s most treasured recipe for apple tarts. It was a nice day out.

Although the problem at hand was still… well, at hand. Or at the table, so to speak. Reading. As Bilbo was not inclined to take his meals in the bedroom, he was oftentimes sharing the same table. He was usually focused on his meals – preparing them and then eating, trying to keep out of the way when his housemate decided to move. A sane person would say that he’s asking for some strange and unusual death by being so close to such an obvious danger, but Bilbo threw the notion of saneness out of the window in the exact moment he decided that arguing back to Thorin is a good idea. Besides, Thorin has promised.

A sane person would believe that Bilbo was stupid.
A sane person was free to go on their way and leave him the hell alone.

Sometimes Bilbo wondered what will he do when the B&B is finally up and running… with a vampire in the basement. He didn’t dare to hope that the matter would go without a glitch, there was no chance of that, but he hoped that Thorin would be reasonable enough. He was, until this point, quite accommodating in Bilbo’s opinion. Scary and stubborn, but accommodating in his own way.

So the dinners were happening and after a time Bilbo kind of got used to them. There were evenings when his housemate didn’t appear and those meals Bilbo spent mostly wondering what has kept him – there wasn’t a lot to do in the mansion, and what did vampires do anyway to keep themselves entertained? Well, he knew that his books went and came back and that the living room on the first floor has seen some activity, but other than that… the room in the basement he remembered was pretty bare. Maybe he was going out?

Maybe he was preying on the people from the town when Bilbo slept? Chasing them down and draining their blood and leaving them with no memories of the whole thing?

That was a sobering thought –and yet, Bilbo didn’t want to believe in it. Thorin just seemed too… dignified for that. Too distinguished. And he seemed genuinely contrite when he’s apologised to Bilbo for biting him – but in a strange sense. As if he wasn’t apologising for drinking his blood as much as he did for doing it without asking first and in such wild manner. From the looks of it, his behaviour and the way he carried himself, Bilbo suspected that Thorin was the kind of man who would use silverware during his meals if it was at all possible and regretted being unable to do so.

A dignified monster. What an interesting idea.

Or maybe he was over thinking this whole issue. One thing he knew about the vampire for sure was that he liked to read.

And it took him a while to get enough courage to finally voice the question he wanted to ask from the first time he’s seen the vampire with a book in hand.

“So… what do you think?”

At first Thorin didn’t seem to hear him and Bilbo waged if he should repeat the question louder, but after a few seconds he was rewarded with a thoughtful hum. The vampire turned the page of the book without looking at his housemate.

“It’s interesting, if a bit fanciful,” he said in a level tone.

Bilbo released the breath he’d been holding and nodded mostly to himself. Yes, it was a fair opinion.

It was his first trilogy, one that has started his career and the word ‘fanciful’ described it fairly well. He grew since that time as a person and a writer, there were some things he would change and the overall tone of the story sometimes caused him a headache… Come to think of it, Thorin was much kinder in his feedback than his first editor has been. Elrond very nearly pulled him by his ears out of the YA section, with a firm belief that Bilbo has enough skills to pull off a full blown adventure series for older readers. He was right, but that didn’t change the fact that he could do smug with the best of them.

Still, “Adventures of Tom B.” was a minor commercial success and Bilbo was greedy for varied opinions. An age old vampire was as varied as you could get.

Thinking it was all there was to it, Bilbo shrugged mentally and went back to his dinner. He’d lost a bit of time today due to it being Saturday - and as much as he liked Fili and Kili, he was not ready to
leave them alone to do their work yet - the dinner was nothing fancy. Practicality instilled in him by his father convinced Bilbo that a big tin of shepherd’s pie will serve him neatly for two days at least, so he set about making one. As always, he’s followed Bungo’s recipe and, as always, it’s turned out great. A shame that the boys had to go early today, he was looking forward to their opinions on his cooking. That Mister Dori had to be a hell of a cook if his dishes has managed to keep both lads full throughout the day!

It took Bilbo an embarrassingly long moment to realize that he’s being stared at. And when he did, his throat again made this funny little sound he’s been trying to unlearn for the most of his adult life.

“Yes…” he asked after clearing his throat.

Thorin was looking at him in this specific way that was a bit less blank than his usual stare - Bilbo fancied that he’s getting versed in the wordless language his housemate was practicing; learning how to differentiate his moods just from the space left between one eyebrow and the other.

This was not exactly an inquisitive look. More of an ‘interested, but only mildly’.

“You wrote this,” the vampire spoke. It was an odd halfway between a question and a statement that Bilbo wished he would know how to translate into text. One or two of his villains could do well with it.

“Yes, I did,” he answered calmly.

“And published it under your own name.”

There it was in all its glory: one eyebrow edging a millimeter over the other. Genuine curiosity.

“Yes.” This time Bilbo couldn’t stop a shade of defensiveness from creeping into his voice. “Is that… a problem?”

The vampire did a tiny little move that could be read as a shrug and his gaze went back to the book for a moment; he looked thoughtful, saying, “Apparently not in this time.”

“Not in… what?” Dinner forgotten, Bilbo was pushing the plate to the side, curious and a not knowing if he should feel offended. “How am I supposed to understand it?”

“I did not mean an insult,” Thorin assured. “I guess that the book market has undergone a remarkable change in the last century for your story to be acceptable for younger audience,” he said, flipping the book over to point at the blurb on the back cover. “Although the title of a Young Adult seems quite odd to me.”

And it would be, Bilbo thought in mounting confusion. There… there was a joke in there somewhere, his brain tried to tell him, he just couldn’t - or didnt dare to - figure it out yet.

But besides that there was surprise and a quiet sort of… excitement coursing through his veins at the vampire’s words. There was interest in them, curiosity, they weren’t a closed clause like usually. No, his time Thorin gave him an incentive for a discussion.

And Bilbo, starved for intellectual stimulation of any kind, could not let that opportunity pass.

“I would think that it did,” he answered mildly, choosing to address the most recent comment. The ‘suitability’ of his own name will come later. “Reading is more popular, for sure, free public education made sure of that. And there’s more books available; one can practically read about any subject they want to.”
He could be mistaken, but Thorin’s eyes widened at that. He looked at the book resting in his hand and then back to its author, clearly coming to some sort of conclusion he didn't deem to share. Bilbo, as it was his habit, kept talking to fill in the silence.

“I am mainly writing adventure and fantasy, dragons and magic and kings and knights,” he said, half-defensive and half-proud. “It’s... relaxing and fun, to tell you the truth, to create my own worlds and make sure they work properly. And people like a bit of escapism every now and then. There are of course other genres, as I said, somewhere there’s a book on any subject you would like to explore; and they’re easily accessible nowadays.”

“History,” the vampire spoke suddenly. His stare, striking enough to begin with, thank you very much, turned almost piercing. “Crafts. There are still books on that?”

Bilbo, quite sure that his poor heart will not take more of that intensity resolutely stood up from the table and went about refilling his teacup. It didn't help that he could feel the stare boring into his back, the vampire apparently knowing evasion when he saw it.

“Well, of course there are books on history. Crafts... are we talking papercrafts? Knitting? Mechanics and carpentry? There’s a lot of those going about, you know? There are magazines and journals and how-to’s… it all depends on what you’re, eh, after?”

It was almost without thinking that he set a new cup of a strong, milky brew in front of the vampire before he went back to his chair. Thorin lifted his eyebrows at him, but Bilbo pretended not to see it.

So he turned hospitable when flustered, big news, he was a Baggins!

“So, what is that interests you?”

Half of his brain didn’t want to believe he was having his conversation with a creature of darkness that he’s been introduced too via bite on the neck - it was his Took side, surprisingly. It called him to arm himself and watch his housemate’s every breath, waiting on the best time to attack or run. The Baggins side, however, was a lot more practical and knew what a bother it would be - to act like that whole day without stopping, because guess what, the vampire was staying and Bilbo was too, so it all would be just a huge inconvenience. This side mused that the way this conversation is going was quite sensible, all in all.

Didn’t the vampire say that he’s been trapped in Erebor for over hundred years? With the mansion staying empty for the last 60 years at that? There was a slim chance that whoever lived here before had the grace to take up a century-long subscription for The Times and have it delivered on schedule.

No wonder that his housemate went to read Bilbo’s books and… pilfer through his stuff.

The thought almost made him choke.

“It was you!” Bilbo wheezed out, pointing rather rudely at the startled vampire. “You left that…. that nonsense on my typewriter!”

Thorin blinked - it was a very slow and extremely un-amused blink.

“Oh, I knew it!” The shorter man was on the roll. “Can’t you not watch with your eyes only? It’s a priceless machine, I’ll have you know, and I will not be happy if it gets broken! Especially here, where I doubt there’s anyone who knows how to fix it!”

He was about to rise from the chair and actually attempt to stare the bastard down when a cold hand landed on his wrist and prompted his mouth to snap shut. Bilbo sat back with a huff, suddenly boneless and surprised at his own boldness.
The vampire stared at him, amused; after a minute passed by without another explosion he took the hand away. Bilbo fought the urge to put his limb under the running water.

“It’s precious to you,” Thorin stated seriously. “Understood. I will not touch it again.”

“No, you…” lost for words, he tried to backtrack to before he’s turned into a massive twit. “It belonged to my father, you see. He was a writer too, and he loved that old thing, so I… it’s one of a few things I have left of him.”

That seemed to do the trick, because the amusement on his housemate’s face turned to understanding, confirmed by a terse nod.

“I understand. Are there other precious things you would like to remain untouched?”

“No, not really. There’s typewriter and, oh, the china. The blue china set belonged to my mother and she was very fond of it.”

When he thought about it, there was very little in his life that actually mattered anymore. And what a depressing thought that was! Actually, aside from the typewriter, china and Minty, Erebor was the first thing in a long time that’s mattered to him enough that he couldn’t see himself losing it.

“So your father also wrote?” Thorin asked. It was the most talkative he’s been since their rather unfortunate first meeting and Bilbo, strangely, appreciated it. The more they talked, the less scary his housemate appeared - with human reactions and emotions staying longer and longer on his face.

“Oh yes, dad was quite a born scholar,” Bilbo admitted proudly. “Although his interests went in the direction of, well, earthly endeavors. He was a great chef, though.”

“Chef?”

“He cooked. And wrote about food. He was an acclaimed author, you know, specialising in traditional European cuisine.”

He didn’t feel defensive about his parent’s accomplishments, he was very proud of his Da. It was just that he wasn’t sure if Thorin, coming from another era completely, could understand and appreciate the value of it. It had to be hard, Bilbo mused, to be thrust into a new age like that; maybe he should try to explain things to his housemate as they talked more, so he wouldn’t feel out of place? It would be a nice thing to do.

“So,” he allowed his manners to reassert themselves with a polite inquiry, “was your family also…”

Thorin just looked, waiting for him to finish, while Bilbo was busy biting his own tongue.

“Monsters?” the vampire supplied when silence stretched unpleasantly.

Oh for the love of all that’s holy, what was wrong with him?! Where did all his common sense go?!

“‘You’ll be happy to hear that no, they weren’t. They were like you, Mister Baggins, completely human.’ Shields behind the blue gaze slammed back down with an almost audible crash and there was nothing left of the gentle curiosity that’s been in there a moment ago.

“That’s…. surely a good thing to hear,” was Bilbo’s meek answer.
His sense of decorum has curled up in the corner, crying and begging to be shot.

“I think I will turn in early today, it was a busy day.”

His housemate was silent as he put the half-eaten meal away and tidied around the kitchen. Washing up will have to wait till morning.

If he was paying the smallest bit of attention he could be able to see the tiny smirk on the vampire’s face and a blue gaze that followed his every move. Maybe better that he didn’t, though, it would only stress him more.

After the usual exchange of quiet ‘Goodnights’ Thorin went back to his book, and the smirk slowly turned wistful.

* 

“The rest of the family has to be informed.”

“Aye, that is not good news at all.”

Fili rested his forehead on a hand and let out a long sigh. Kili looked to his lover with concern and let one hand rest on his shoulder in a silent sign of support. Dwalin, sitting on the other side of the blond, clearly reflected the uneasy feeling that fell over the group: his bushy eyebrows were pulled together as he folded his massive arms across his chest.

The rest of the occupants of this particular table looked equally gloomy, standing out massively against the cheerful air of the pub they were all in. Ironhillers milled around, mingling and drinking stout local ale, seemingly unconcerned with the group in the far corner of the room - that’s what a casual observer would think. A local would tell without a shade of doubt that the trajectory of conversations and tipsy patrons was carefully measured so that it never went too close to that table - even those less sober than it was wise were kept by their friends in a respectful distance.

Only the barman, a massive man with a shock of gray and black hair, with an ugly scar on his forehead, kept one eye on that corner, waiting for the subtle sign for more ale to be delivered.

“I didn't see anything out of ordinary,” Bofur stated from the cloud of pipesmoke. “Neither did my lads and lasses. Winter is harsh, bastards may want to wait it out.”

“That is one hope,” Balin, the older gentleman with a long white beard, nodded carefully.

“That’s right, we can’t be sure of anything before we see the proof,” Dori added. “My brother likes to exaggerate...”

Fili lifted his head and all the voices silenced as everyone looked to him.

“It may be so, but I would rather be careful while we can still afford it.” The voice with which he spoke belied his youthful appearance - strong and serious and pained. “You have to understand that Others are not like us.” His eyes begged the assembled for that understanding. “Cold won’t hinder them at all, neither will snow. They have no conscience and will not stop until they’ve gorged themselves on blood in any way they can. They move in packs, like rats, to see only one is enough to see them all. If the message Nori sent us is true...”
Complete silence fell over the table; as each member of the gathering turned the information in their heads their faces reflected different flavours of distress. Even the ever cheerful Bofur let his pipe down and stared at it blankly.

“Ironhill is not safe,” Fili declared. “Nori might exaggerate,” he nodded to Dori and tried not to look at Dwalin as he did so. “But if he says that he saw Others moving towards us, I will hear it as a warning and act accordingly.”

“We need watches set up,” Dwain spoke, breaking out his knuckles. “Just carefully, so no one panics. Get them children out of the fields and keep everyone inside the town as much as possible.”

“I will talk to Gloin about that,” Balin promised, downing his remaining ale in one great gulp. “He can issue a message to the townspeople. I also think that organising some indoors events would be a good idea.”

“It won’t be easy, them little ones swarm the river now that it’s frozen and it will take much to keep them away from it.” Bofur remarked. Then he turned to the side to smile at a pretty young barmaid that brought a new pitcher of ale to their table. “Ah, Bomris, you are prettier and prettier every time I see you!”

The girl beamed at him and kissed his cheek, saying, “And you are the biggest flatterer this town has, uncle Bofur.”

“I can’t help it. If all my nieces are so good looking, I have no choice but to acknowledge it! And there’s too many of you to leave me a moment of peace!”

Bomris giggled at him and shook her head; before she turned to go she winked at Kili and chuckled once more when Fili growled at her in amused exasperation.

“Wolves!” Kili piped up suddenly when the girl was gone and the attention of the gathered landed on him.

“What?” Dwalin was the one to voice the question they were all thinking.

“Wolves,” Kili repeated, rolling his eyes. “We can tell everyone that wolves came down from the mountains and that it’s unsafe to walk about after dark. Some dead sheep should scare mothers into keeping their little ones inside.”

“That’s… a remarkably good idea,” stated Dwalin.

“Thanks, though you don’t have to look so surprised that it came from me.”

“No, you are on to something,” Fili cut into the brewing argument. “It’s better that the townspeople don’t know yet. Wolves are a good excuse. Dwalin, you get together with Gloin and have these watches sorted out.” The massive man nodded obediently and Fili turned to Dori. “When Nori contacts you next, tell him to keep an ear out on anything that may confirm or disprove the situation.”

“Yes, of course, I will.”

“Bofur.”

“Aye, lad?”

“Tell your family to keep an ear out too. And to be careful,” Fili eyed the man seriously, “They will
go for the weakest prey first and that means children. You can have your nieces and nephews spread
the warning among their friends to watch out for each other and not to stay outside after sunset.”

Bofur nodded in understanding, his usually cheerful appearance gone, replaced with a steely glint in
the kind brown eyes. The Ur family was big and universally liked for their affable demeanour, but
the moment someone tried to pick on one they came together like a pack of wolves to protect their
own. There was no doubt in anyone’s mind that their children and children’s friends would be kept
safe.

That was just as well, Fili surmised, they need their people to stick up for each other.

Lastly, he turned to Balin who was in the process of emptying his second cup.

“Balin, I need you to meet with Óin and help him with the research.”

The old lawyer raised an eyebrow at that, but didn’t protest, only asked one question:

“Are you sure it’s wise, laddie?”

Fili spread his hands on the table between them in a gesture of helplessness. His whole posture
seemed smaller all of a sudden, diminished; he looked tired and worried. He looked his age.

“I think it’s the only thing we can do now,” he admitted quietly. “There are weapons able to kill
their… our kind. My father has spent so much time trying to avoid them that we’ve never had a
chance to figure out how they work and in the end it might have been the reason he’s dead. Now
more than ever we need to understand how to protect ourselves and our own, with the town at
stake.” And then, at once, a part of that tiredness evaporated under the heat of resolve that took its
place in the blond’s eyes. And for a moment all present could swear that the blue pools glowed with
their own light. “I will not let the Others touch my people, not while there’s still a drop of Durin’s
blood in me.”

Silence fell over the table - and all around it commotion quietened, patrons calmed down
instinctively, not even knowing that they’re doing it. Kili moved closer to his partner, putting an arm
around his shoulders to pull him into a calming embrace. Bofur cleared his throat loudly and deftly
refilled his pipe, pretending that the overall atmosphere didn’t affect him like it did Dori, for example,
who looked precautiously close to shedding a few tears over the emotional display.

Balin, to his credit, didn’t look that affected.

“Well said,” he praised, gently petting one of Fili’s hands. “I will contact Óin as soon as I get home.
And speaking about going home…”

It took the old man a bit of effort to get up until Dori kindly offered him his arm.

“I will get going too,” the tailor said, pointedly not looking at Dwalin. “Ori will be finishing soon
and I have to pick him up. Come now, Balin, I can drive you home. Bofur?”

“I’m okay,” the man waved the question away. “Staying the night with Bifur. There’s a Christmas
train that needs maintenance before we can let it out in the market.”

“Be safe,” Kili said when the last goodbyes were exchanged and the pair turned to leave. “And tell
Ori the same.” He waited for the two older men to leave the earshot before turning to Dwalin with a
disapproving frown. “You are acting like a twat and I strongly disapprove.”

“Language,” scolded Fili.
Dwalin just harrumped and turned the other way, much to Bofur’s amusement.

Kili shrugged, with a face that clearly said ‘why am I even bothering?’. Extracting himself from Fili’s side he stretched the kinks in his back and looked around the room in concentration.

“I am hungry,” he declared after a few moments. “See you all in a bit.”

Fili waved him away, amused with the antics; then he rolled his eyes when Bofur wagged his eyebrows in a manner suggesting that he was going soft.

“There’s one thing left to consider,” the miner said, leaning closer to the blond. “What about your little friend on the hill? How are we going to keep him safe long enough to get what we need from Erebor?”

“That is, indeed, a good question,” Dwalin admitted.

“Well…” For some reason Fili’s tongue turned heavy in his mouth when he thought about the small, kind man they’ve left all alone in that big empty house.

*

“Oi, Bard!”

Kili could not believe his luck. He stepped out of the pub for a moment to escape the stifling atmosphere surrounding his table, planning to wait outside until Dwalin and Fili stop thinking of bad things. Of course, he knew that the situation was serious and he wasn’t about to dismiss it... But Fili was their leader and, true to the title, he worried about everything concerning Ironhill and the family; Kili was used to acting as a wall of calm and positivity that his lover could lean on when times became harsh. But firstly, he had to calm himself down and get something to eat before his stomach starts ruling his head.

Curse Bilbo Baggins for offering them food at every opportunity! It confused their instincts and made their hungers flare up at the oddest times!

“Hey, Bard!”

Bard was a good, sturdy lad and Kili often thought that if he was still a teenager himself, he would find him very attractive - the kid was surprisingly tall for an eighteen year old and his outdoorsy lifestyle kept him healthy and strong. He was also a virtual vault of dirty jokes that he could tell with the straightest face known to men.

Kili liked him well enough - even more for the ease with which he shared his blood with him and Fili. It was refreshing to have a meal that didn’t giggle in his ear like one of Bombur’s lot (although a pretty girl baring her neck to him was still a sight that Kili was strongly in favour of). Bard was cool about the notion - not inviting and not hard suffering, just… understanding that someone had to eat and that sharing was a decent thing to do.

Also, his grandmother ruled the town with her quince tincture.

“Hey, kid.” A hand on the shoulder stopped the teen and it seemed that it also pulled him out of some funk, because he flinched and glanced at Kili in confusion before his eyes cleared and a hesitant smile appeared on his face.

“Oh, sorry,” Bard mumbled behind his enormous hand-knitted scarf, “Miles away.”
Kili frowned, turning the boy to face him fully.

He was going to ask for a few sips, but after looking closer at the lad he’s changed his mind. In the warm light of streetlamps Bard’s face was very pale and there were prominent dark marks under his eyes. He didn’t particularly seem… all there, also.

“Are you feeling alright?” Kili moved the oversized hat up the teen’s face to feel his forehead with one hand while the other he slid under the fluffy scarf to investigate the pulse.

Bard stood still on the pavement, allowing Kili to paw at him. A few passer-bys glanced their way in concern, but the sight of the brunet reassured them that the matter is being taken care of.

“I’m okay,” Bard muttered. “Do you need something?”

“No, if you're in this state.” Kili took his hands away. “You look ill, kid. Go home and stay in bed for a couple of days.”

“But… I need to do the shopping,” Bard protested. A carefully folded list was quickly snatched from his hand. “Gran needs…”

“She doesn’t need you walking around feverish and looking like crap. I will take care of that, you go home and rest.“ There was a bit of compulsion in the words, but just a bit, enough that the boy would listen, not enough to make Fili disappointed. Rolling their own people was strongly discouraged; there was a delicate balance between two sides of Ironhill that the family did their damndest to keep.

However, this time Kili thought that his intervention is justified. Children were a future of the town and keeping them safe and healthy was a priority.

Still, though, having to actively search for his meal sucked - with an added bonus of unplanned shopping trip!

Grumbling to himself, Kili folded a neatly written list into his own pocket and set about finding his second favourite person in town: uncle Bombur will surely find a way to help him with both of his problems.

* *

The days after his ungraceful fail in manners Bilbo spent mostly stuck in the conservatory. He decided that there’s no better time to start working on revitalising the old furniture, least he loses interest in them. Being a child of self-proclaimed handyman - well, a bit more than that, since it was Bungo who was responsible for making Bag End livable in the past, even though it was his wife’s project, - Bilbo knew his way around a hammer. During his last trip downhill he’s acquired a sizable toolbox and some new ideas for transforming the antique pieces without mangling them too much. Deciding to start with chairs - as overall easier to manage - Bilbo prepared a stack of sanding paper, glue, some chisels, lacquers and polishes... Then he sat on a kitchen’s stool and admired the craftwork he was about to deal with. There was no time before, when him and boys were all cold and dusty, but now he could see clearly that his salvaged furniture fully reflected that devotion to detail and solid craftsmanship clearly visible in every corner of Erebor.

Well, almost every corner; there was one element of the package that refused to work for Bilbo - an
ancient furnace in the centre of the conservatory, designed to keep the place warm. It was a beautiful work of wrought iron and geometric designs that for some reason would not open for him regardless of the level of force used - and, after the first hour of fighting with the accursed device, Bilbo was using quite a lot of force.

This was the reason that the first day of crafting Bilbo Baggins has spent huddled close to the door leading to the hall, swaddled in coat and scarf and cursing every time his cold, stiff fingers got caught under the sanding paper or slipped on a chisel.

Next day was not much better. With the winter in full swing it was quite a wonder that the glass and metal walls weren’t creaking from cold. Thought the sight of sunlight passing through the colourful glass covered thickly in frost flowers was truly sublime, it was hardly worth freezing ones bits off for.

In the mornings Bilbo tried to write as much as it was possible in his warm and cozy little box of an office and then to force himself out of the house for at least an hour - to get some fresh air and movement, so that his sedentary lifestyle doesn’t kill him before his fortieth birthday.

But that bit of wandering was also cut short when the boys brought him distressing news about the wolf sightings in the area. Fili was extremely serious when he plied with him to stay inside as much as possible and not wander too far from the mansion. Kili was only nodding to what his brother said, but his face was pinched with concern. Feeling tearful and grateful for the kind consideration, Bilbo baked a dozen muffins stuffed with cherry jam while the lads worked on wallpapers in the first bedroom; they’ve accepted neatly packed goods with sufficient grace, promising to share with their uncle like good boys. But Bilbo wasn’t born yesterday, he knew what the smirks exchanged afterwards meant.

Sadly, neither his young employees nor their uncle quite knew how to help him with the stubborn furnace. They admired the piece, but had no idea whatsoever how to make it behave.

It only stood to reason that, as it often happened in his life lately, help would come from the most unexpected corner.

*  

It was an extremely cold evening; Bilbo suspected that the weather forecaster on the radio lied and temperature in the North Quarter was actually well below -15 Celsius. He was inside and his breath was turning white, for goodness sake! But there was only one leg left to sand and the male part of his brain taunted him with visions of failure, if he’d gave up now when the victory was in sights!

Hunched over the chair in the flickering light of a naft lamp Bilbo was so focused on his work - and the rest he blamed on the wind murmuring in the background - that he didn’t hear when another person entered the conservatory. He didn’t hear them coming closer; if he’s only looked to the side, he would see the reflection of a body standing behind him and looking around the place in slight confusion. But Bilbo didn’t think to look.

That’s why he’s got a scare of his life when a long, grinding sound cut through his peaceful silence. “Holy heck bugger it all!” Bilbo shouted, jumping up like a startled rabbit. “What are you doing?!”

The vampire gazed back at him, impassive. Then he looked to the side where his hand was resting
on the furnace’s door.

“Confound it all!” Bilbo flopped down on his stool, feeling suddenly boneless, air escaping him in a tightly controlled gust. “Please stop doing this! My heart can’t take much more!”

“Apologies,” the vampire inclined his head, but otherwise looked unaffected. “I simply wished to check what’s wrong with the furnace that you don’t light fire in it. It has to be tedious to work like that.”

Bilbo looked down on his last best jacket, now covered in dust and wood shavings, that was, indeed, quite a hinderance; on his rigid hands and bluish fingers, and the anger flooded him in a sudden, short-lived burst.

“I’ll tell you what’s wrong! The bloody thing doesn’t want to open!”

Unimpressed, Thorin moved his hand on said bloody thing and opened it - with a startling amount of grating noise, but also with relative ease. Struck dumb, Bilbo could only stare.

“But… how?! How did you do it?” He choked out. “I tried and tried… and boys tried and no one… how did you…?” He knew that his housemate is stupidly strong, but… but!

“There’s a trick to it,” Thorin said it as if it was obvious. He called Bilbo over with a gesture and the shorter man got up and went without a moment of hesitation. He was a curious egg. “This house was full of children at one point and fire is never safe. I had made it so that the little ones could neither burn themselves nor damage Erebor.”

Wait.

“You had… made? You made this?”

Leaning over, Bilbo followed the finger pointing to a small lever cleverly hidden behind the outer rim of the furnace’s door; how he’s missed its presence he could not fathom. Thorin closed and opened the door once, to show him how the mechanism works before he moved back to survey the state of the room. It was not pretty, really, all cluttered with furniture and old rugs and a metric ton of dust. Bilbo was a bit self conscious about it, but at the moment most of his mind was taken over by the ire at being outsmarted by a fireplace of all things!

There was another sound by his side and he stepped back just as the vampire dropped an armful of firewood at his feet and then, without further ado, started to arrange the smallest bits in the iron belly. Bilbo didn’t really know if the lack of rebuffal means that he’s allowed to watch, but decided that as long as he’s not reprimanded, he will stay. Thorin was working methodically and it was obvious that he knows what he’s going - stealing a few cues on how to deal with a temperamental device wouldn’t be amiss.

It took a while, and the vampire glanced his way only once, a bit surprised when he was being handed a pack of matches, but soon enough a small fire was eating its way along the stack of kindling and dry paper, hungrily taking over bigger bits of wood. Thorin looked at it for a while in concentration and when he was sure that the flame will not go off, he stood up from a crouch and slowly circled the fireplace, touching here and there, making thoughtful noises and pulling at certain bits and pieces. Bilbo didn’t understand a quack out of it, but paid close attention anyway.

“This thing is old, Master Baggins,” The vampire said when his steps brought him back to where he started. “It requires more skill than simply stacking wood inside. But it’s in good order and will work well for you, if you treat it with care.”
Startled at the serious tone Bilbo tried to gather his wits, saying, “Well, at the moment it would seem that I lack the kind of skill required… oh wait!” A thought struck him. “Is it one of your places? I didn’t know! So sorry for the mess…” he apologised in panic, appalled by himself yet again. “I can have all this moved…”

A hand on the shoulder stopped his mad scramble to tidy up.

“Peace, Mister Baggins.” Thorin said with the tiniest of smiles. “Every place in Erebor is mine, though I only reserve the basement for my personal use. Rest assured, if you ever overstep, I will inform you of it.”

“Oh, well, that is... good, I guess?”

Apparently happy with himself, Bilbo’s scary housemate turned back to the fire that was cheerfully gnawing at the provided sustenance. He chose a thick block of some dark wood and placed it carefully on top of the burning pyramid.

“Fire can’ be rushed,” he said quietly after closing the wrought grate. “It has to be coaxed into being, slowly and with care. “

Oh, there was a beautiful metaphor somewhere in there and Bilbo’s writing mind stored the words away for probable future use in one of his stories. At the moment, though, he was starting to feel the warmth radiating from the furnace; he put his hands on it and it was so pleasant to feel his fingers again that he sighed with joy.

“Very nice, that,” he muttered, unknowingly repeating Kili’s favourite praise. “How long will it take for the whole place to warm up?”

“It’s hard to say.” Thorin looked around and did that miniscule shrug that had to look splendid in the past, when he was decked out in proper gentleman's getup. A strange thought, that. “There are pipes running under the floor and along the walls, if you fill them with water, they should make the playroom comfortable in a matter of minutes.”

“In the walls?” Bilbo spoon around, eyes trying to fish out the shape of said pipes amongst the mosaics and support beams. “Where?”

“They are cleverly hidden,” this time the vampire smirked at him openly. Bastard. “What’s the point in making them obvious to the eye and breaking the composition of the garden?”

This place was ancient and yet it had an underfloor heating installations? What a marvel.

“But enough about the past, Master Baggins, I am most curious of what is going on here now, if you are willing to enlighten me.”

Ah, that was a completely different pair of slippers.

*

Bilbo was almost surprised at the easy way with which his housemate took the news about his endeavour into restoration. He was also a bit sour at the slightly pitying look the vampire gave him as he surveyed his attempts so far. Well, how was he supposed to know that you always sandwith the grain? And that he was supposed to use linseed oil instead of varnish?
Well, these things were good to know, but... *but!*

Apparently, not only his unexpected housemate was a blood drinking creature of the night, he was also something of a skilled craftsman. Go figure.

The annoyance was mostly caused by his own behaviour - because in the end Bilbo was impressed with Thorin’s skills and knowledge in spite of himself. He was a nerd, of course he was impressed with knowledge! But what impressed him the most was that, even though the floor in the conservatory was freezing, the vampire still couldn’t be bothered with putting shoes on. And he didn’t even wince once!

Surprisingly, when the furnace finally got going Bilbo could walk into the playroom in his sweater; it was so pleasantly warm that he had a silent suspicion his housemate has somewhat found a way to fix the pipes without him knowing.

Strange vampire he was living with.

As the November rolled along, Bilbo was left with little time to dive into his housemate’s twisted psyche - his boys (and now Fili and Kili were firmly ‘his boys’, no matter how often Bilbo tried to explain to his own brain that they’ve had their own family to claim them and that he was just setting himself for a fall in the end) took to fighting with old wallpapers. And, more distressingly, to wandering around the mansion when their employer wasn’t looking.

Bilbo had it in mind to be lenient with them - after all of the ghost stories Kili has told him, it was not surprising that the lads wanted to explore a bit, - and if the circumstances were normal he would let them scout Erebor top to bottom without a word... But ‘normal’ didn’t include a vampire living in the basement and stalking the corridors at strange hours.

To be completely honest, Bilbo didn’t believe that Thorin would hurt his boys - it might have been a stupid blind faith, but he did not fear for their lives. No, what he feared of was the way Fili and Kili would react and, subsequently, how the townspeople would react. Thorin’s words about hunting monsters and burning houses rung fresh in his ears every time he’s found Kili snooping along the staircase, every time his brother wandered too close to the attic. He could not let them know that something was amiss in Erebor. He’s promised Thorin that he would keep people away and, frankly, didn’t see any way the situation wouldn’t go downhill once he broke the promise.

Apart from that, there was more than enough excitement in his life when the boys finally introduced him to their uncle’s boyfriend.

Dori, as it turned out, was a tall, stout gentleman in his forties. Impeccably dressed, with neatly combed silver hair, rather fancifully shaped beard and gentle hands. There was something inherently motherly about him; he spoke with a soft accent that made him sound a tad effeminate, but it was about the only soft thing about the man from what Bilbo was told.

“He is the only one in Ironhill who can beat up Uncle Dwalin, you know?” Kili whispered to him a minute before the meeting. “Once he punched a bloke so hard that they had to remove teeth from his sinuses!”

Lovely.

Bilbo didn’t ask who was the bloke and what his misgiving was, but quietly decided that being polite and agreeable was the best policy when one was dealing with Dori Ri. Unsurprisingly, the rule proved to be true and then some. Dori was all about business, or better yet, businesses - as he had at least three of them in Ironhill. He was a certified tailor and owned a delightful little tea house by the
Town Hall, on the side he was running a textile wholesale and dabbled in interior design… And, as every enterprising person Bilbo has ever known, he could talk circles around any potential customer without stopping for a breath.

Fili’s advice proved its worth when Bilbo was forced into a sort of a verbal sparring match - thankfully, he was a Baggins and until very recently used to be poor as a church mouse, therefore his ability to keep the contents of a wallet inside said wallet was unmatched. It seemed to impress Dori a good deal and soon enough they were talking about potential design plans for Erebor and best ways of brewing loose leaf tea. Bilbo was a firm believer in a good old fashioned kettle, while Dori insisted that leaving the leaves to soak for more than three minutes was a crime.

Following the theme of making new acquaintances, Bilbo was also introduced to the local carpenter working for Dwalin - until that point known in Erebor as the ‘windows guy’. In truth, he was a carpenter/miner/handyman/toymaker, which was, apparently, a family business. Huh, what do you know.

Bofur was his name. A cheerful chap in worn out overalls and a floppy fur-lined hat that he didn’t like to part with. A bit unshaved he was, and a bit sloppy, but his sunny personality more than made up for it. Bilbo was ready to swear that he’s ever met a person so optimistic and easygoing in his entire life.

He was so going to write the man into one of his novels; as a flighty musician or a companion beast of some sort or something!

Apart from being a positive influence with the cheekiest smile and amazing dimples, Bofur was also a viable well of gossip. And Bombur’s older brother - even though he looked way younger than the portly shop owner.

During their first meeting Bilbo has learned more about Ironhill and its people than he thought was logically possible; and, even more surprisingly, it were all good things. No malicious tongue wagging Hobbiton was so fond of, but a cheerful account on all the comings and goings of the town.

Who would have known that Dwalin and Mister Balin are brothers? And that the Ur family was so numerous? And that there was this weird old man who lived in the mountains and came to the town every spring to sell animal furs and skins? Not to mention who was the prettiest girl in the North Quarter.

Walking up and down the stairs behind the man while surveying windows and floors was surely more informative than reading the town’s paper. More entertaining too.

Thankfully, only two sets of windows required full resealing and there was a dozen or so loose planks in the parquet on the second floor that could be left alone until spring.

Bofur, however, mentioned an issue Bilbo was aware of, but tried not to think about.

“If I were you, Mister Baggins, I would check central heating off as soon as possible,” he said when they were back in the kitchen, warming themselves over a kettle of honeybush-lemon tea. “Winter gets rough after New Year and in February it really starts to bite. If you want to have stuff done in the house, you’d better make it so that the wallpaper glue won’t turn to ice inside a bucket. Get the boiler checked while there’s still a chance of getting a handyman uphill and so on. On the side, though,” the man took a long whiff of steam rising from his mug, “That is very nice, that.”

Yes, it was a very good advice. There was just one problem with it.
The boiler was in the basement.

Bofur offered to take a look at it, since he was a bit of a jack of all trades, but Bilbo lied that he’s lost the key somewhere and promised that he will try to get it sorted out as fast as he can.

In his head ‘as fast as he can’ meant ‘right after he re-negotiates certain Contract with a certain vampire’.

Which actually meant: ‘sometimes before Spring comes knocking.’

*

Ironhill’s Library was placed a bit on the side of the town’s centre, opposite to the chip shop Bofur swore up and down was serving the best pike fillets this side of the globe, in an old, imposing building. The brick it was made of has darkened with age, strengthening the mood created by tall, narrow windows and arched entranceway. Yet that imposing dreariness was overthrown by a colorful banner hung over the entrance and a presence of paper stars and snowflakes glued to the window panes.

Inside, the first thing that met Bilbo’s eyes was an old sandstone tablet dedicated to, who else, one of the Durins. Nain Durin, responsible for funding the Public Library in the early 18th century seemed like a decent enough fellow just for that fact alone. The tablet praised his pursuit of knowledge and the will to share it with everyone willing to learn, it also mentioned his generous patronage that after his death was continued by his younger cousin Thrain.

Judging by similar tables mounted on the local church's wall and on the Town Hall’s gate, and by the Market, these Durins seemed to care for their people quite a bit - and the people of Ironhill were slow to forget their kindness.

Shrugging, Bilbo crossed the hall and stepped into the reception area. Library was empty and silent, not surprising taking the time being early morning, but the absence of a Librarian was a bit startling.

Bilbo stopped by the desk tucked neatly into an archway between the reception area and the Library proper, and leaned over it in search of anyone willing to help him. There were a few flyer stands behind him and a door opening into some sort of a playing area for children, full of pictures and kit-sized colorful furniture.

“Hullo?” he called cautiously, but no answer came.

Maybe they went out to get some tea? Far it was from him to interrupt, then.

Bilbo scanned the flyers and the advertisement stand, raising his eyebrows at some things and filling others for later.

Apparently, a yearly Holiday fete was upon them, attractions including a mini train running around the Market, numerous contest for children, and, most importantly of all, stands full of local baked and cooked goods available for everyone. That one was going straight on Bilbo’s to-do list.

Someone lost their doll during the story hour. Local pub was looking for a part-time personnel. And so on… right up to a red A3 poster with a warning about the wolves Fili and Kili relayed to him a few days prior. Mayor of Ironhill implored parents to keep their children from wandering into the
fields; also, a system of guardians was established that would keep an eye on the kids that wanted to skate on the frozen river. Anyone wanting to know more about that was welcome to contact the mayor’s office during the working hours.

Huh, for a town full of people such as Bofur, Bombur, or the boys, they were impressively quick to organise themselves when the situation called it. Bree would be flailing and panicking for at least a week before anyone got their head out of their behind.

“Excuse me, can I help you?”

Bilbo, somewhat used to being crept on by this point, didn’t jump at a soft, slightly timid question behind his back. He turned around like a civilized person and tried to hide the double take at the sight of the supposed Librarian.

That… was a lot of wool.

The man was a youthful incarnation of a bookworm - he was clean and neat, but his hair was mussed on one side, probably from leaning on a hand while reading, and there was an edge of a shirt tail peeking from under the overlong cardigan on only one side - what could be a fashion statement turned into a telling sign of a fellow nerd. Rimless glasses threw all lingering assumptions of possible Hipsterity out of the window.

Reassured that he’s in the presence of someone he can communicate with, Bilbo plastered a smile on his face and extend a hand over the desk.

“Bilbo Baggins,” he spoke cheerfully. “I am new in town and I wondered how long it would take to get a card done…”

“Oh… Oh!” the Librarian exclaimed as some sort of recognition lightened up in his eyes. He grabbed Bilbo’s hand in a shockingly strong, wool-clad grip and shook it enthusiastically. “You are the new owner of Erebor! Pleasure to finally meet you! My brother has told me about you and Fili and Kili never shut up about your hot chocolate!”

”Good to know my fame precedes me, I guess,” Bilbo kept the smile on while trying to discreetly remove his hand from the vice-like grip. “I regret to say that I didn't catch your name.”

“Oh, sorry,” the grip loosened. “Orion Ri, but please call me Ori, it’s less embarrassing that way.”

A Ri? Huh, that’s where the ‘brother’ came from, Bilbo guessed; there was some familial resemblance between this youngster and Dori - mainly centered on the shape of the nose and the impossible, effortless strength of a handshake.

Ori was a lot more nervous than his steady older brother, though, he fumbled with papers and forms when Bilbo expressed a wish to apply for a library card, and then almost dropped a pen when handing it to the man. It was a harmless clumsiness, though; its cute kind that made the spectator want to smile and pat the chap on the back for all the effort he’s been putting into it. It might have been an answer to Dori’s mothering attitude.

As it turned out, getting a proper library card would take a few days, but a provisional was easily printed and stamped, and soon enough Bilbo was given a pair of comfortable slippers (knitted, of course) and invited to step past the desk and between the countless shelves filled to the brim with books, magazines and dvds. For a moment he stood in awe, shocked by the sheer amount of material in front on him - Ironhill was not a big town, and yet its library was better stocked than the one in Bree!
“So, what are you after today, Mister Baggins?” Ori asked, coming to stand behind him. The slippers made their steps nearly silent in the vast room and Bilbo wondered, if he could request a pair to take home with him; if the winds were right maybe he could get back at the vampire for scaring him so many times? “We had a delivery last week with the newest fiction and, of course, cookbooks; those are usually reserved for Mister Bombur, but I am sure he wouldn’t mind, if you browsed them first.”

Bilbo came there for one reason only - his knowledge of the supernatural was lacking and he could not think of better place to bring it up to speed than the Folklore section of a well stocked library. Yet, when he went to answer the question, his brain did a strange little flip and his lips said something else entirely.

“Crafts.”

“Crafts?” repeated Ori scratching his stubbled chin. “What kind of crafts are we talking here? We have mechanics, and Holiday related crafts, and a lot of woodwork. Mister Baggins?”

“I, ah, mechanics?” He stumbled, not sure what he was doing. “I am writing… well, planning a story in a quasi-modern setting and the hero is a, well, kind of a genius at building things, but I know nothing of the way engines or circuits work and such… I think I also need to brush up my history a bit. Do you have something that would help me?”

Goodness bless his imagination and lack of scruples when it came to getting research done. Ori’s eyes lighted up again at the mention of writing. He clapped his gloved hands in glee before walking off to the left, crossing sections without a glance, muttering to himself.

“Oh, of course, you are a writer, of course, that makes sense. I can help you here, we have a very expansive section on… or maybe not this, it’s too expansive.” The notion was followed by a sudden turn between the bookcases. “There are lighter things you can use to brush up the technicalities, very popular in the town, actually. Just a moment…”

Bilbo followed - or rather skated after the young man, as his slippers were extremely, well, slippery and the parquet was polished to the inch of its life. He also wondered what was he doing at all. He intended to ask for material on… vampires.

Oh, bugger!

“You will also not search for anyone who could help you kill me; neither will you tell anyone of my existence or even hint at it. “

It would seem that the Contract had a way of reasserting itself when it felt threatened - and how that worked, Bilbo had no idea whatsoever. The only thing he knew was that when he comes back home there’s a serious conversation waiting on him, with a vampire he expressively asked to stay out of his head!

“Oh, there we are, Mister Baggins, the right shelf…”

* 

Thorin eyed the stack of magazines his housemate dumped on the table in the living room with ill concealed curiosity. Bilbo, for his part, leaned back to stretch his aching back and wiped his hands on the jeans; they were not dirty, but there was quite a lot of dust gathered on some of the publications he was genially allowed to borrow - even if the rules of the library stated clearly ‘5
books or less’ Ori was quite happy to bend them in exchange for having his copies of ‘There and Back Again’ signed by the author.

It was good to have fans.

“What is this now?” the vampire asked.

“New reading material,” Bilbo mumbled, flopping down on the couch. “I was in the library and thought that it would be a nice thing to do. You know, nice neighbours do nice things for each other.”

_Like, oh I don’t know, not ransacking each other’s minds!_ Bilbo’s Took part wanted to growl, but the Baggins part silenced it. A long drive uphill served to cool down his anger and helped him come to the conclusion that he was being a bit silly with this whole vampire-research. The stories he’s heard as a child and throughout adolescence matched with his housemate in about 30% - with some of the most important aspects of the lore not met at all.

The most established one being the fear of sunlight, - that was hard to take seriously when they were both sitting in a sun filled room at this very moment and the vampire was not melting. He kind of squinted a bit when looking into the light, but otherwise seemed unconcerned with it.

There were things like blood drinking, that were almost right, - except Bilbo was still alive and not turning into a mindless thrall or a vampire. Also, in this case blood was apparently easily swapped with tea.

That left super strength and speed, - both present.

And mind powers, - that the creature in question promised not to use.

No, he was being silly and irrational.

Thorin was a nice neighbour, if one was willing to forget his, hm, monstrosity. In the very beginning he took care of Bilbo, bringing him water to fight off the bloodloss-hangover. He didn't let him run into the night in a bathrobe. He was a reasonable enough guy when it came to living arrangements and house sharing, and in the end he’s even ‘fixed’ the damned furnace!

Also, Bilbo was not stupid enough to overlook it when his shoddy work on the chairs was being corrected by a more skilled set of hands from time to time.

The least he could do, really, to uphold their good relations was to make the transition into the new era a bit easier for his housemate. Dragging two dozens copies or so of _Popular Mechanics, How It Works_ and _History Today_ up and down the stairs was a small price to pay for not having any of his appliances pulled apart just so said housemate could see how they work.

“Will that be okay?” He asked, a bit drowsy after all the excitement of the morning slowly died away in his blood. He was not an early riser by nature - especially after pulling out a late nighter with his trusty writing machine.

There was just no way to sleep when the new plot point was beating on the insides of his skull, demanding to be let out onto the paper. And all because he’s decided to introduce two new characters: a pair of young thieves, orphaned at an early age and fighting their way towards regaining their birthright, that decided to join the main hero of the story when their quests intersected.

Silently, Bilbo admitted that the addition was necessary to put a bit of life back into the plot that became quite dreary once he’s introduced that gloomy, angsty, handsome prince in exile. He knew
the readers will love him, but there has to be a bit of humour present to offset him.

And witty, humorous banter was what Bilbo spent a better part of the previous night writing.

Elrond will kill him for making a mess out of the plot yet again. Ah well, the usual then.

“I didn’t know where you… stopped,” he tried to skirt around the issue of a secret room under the staircase. “So I brought the lot of them. There’s a lot more if you’re interested, and different subjects too. Just try to keep them in the state they came here so the Librarian has no reason to kill me.”

While Bilbo was busy musing and making himself comfortable on the couch, Thorin picked up one of the magazines. The feel of glossy paper seemed to startle him a bit, as well as the amount of photos and loud typefaces on the front cover, because he stopped for a while to study them in-depth. He leafed through the periodic carefully and his eyes widened a bit every time he turned a page.

Bilbo looked on, fascinated by the play of emotions apparent on the usually blank face of his housemate. And it felt… good, to see it. See how doing such a simple thing brought someone joy. Heck, he was a bookworm, he knew how awful it was to run out of reading material.

“…thank you.” For the first time since he knew him, Bilbo saw Thorin searching for words. “This is, indeed, very kind of you. I am grateful.”

It was also incredibly nice to hear these words. Huh, the vampire was a decent man… er, creature?… guy.

“Good, I’m glad,” he acknowledged before a powerful yawn almost dislocated his jaw. “If you want some books too, just tell me.”

“I will, thank you.”

“Oh yeah, and if you want to work on the chairs with me, go ahead, I am crap at it anyway.” His eyes were closing on their own. “It would be nice, you know, to… to have company…”

“I will consider that.”

“Do that. I will…”

He will take a short nap.

*

It might have been a dream. Bilbo suspected that it probably was, even though the alternative would make quite a funny anecdote - if there was someone to tell it to that wouldn’t take him for a loon.

He dreamed that something roused him from the dream, but just a bit. Drowsy, he looked around with a sleep-clouded eyes and saw a dark shape of his housemate.

Said housemate was standing next to the cupboard and stared intently at Bilbo’s old radio. There was an open magazine in his hand. Blue eyes shone brightly, as they usually did when their owner was concentrating on something, trailing from the spread to the radio and back, as if confused by something.
Oh.

“It’s on the back…” Bilbo dreamed up saying. “It’s an… old model… the black switch… on the back…”

He didn't see the expression on the vampire’s face, because his eyes choose that moment to close. He was probably dreaming anyway.

Beethoven always made him dream of strange things.

Chapter End Notes

Also, thank you MUCHLY for all the kudos' and comments, you make it all worth it:D

Btw, talking about the conservatory I imagine something that’s a cross between these two examples:
http://www.newenglandconservatories.com/images/Solariums/solariums01.JPG as a form and this coloured glass

And the temperamental stove is a bit like this http://ogtstore.com/architectural-antiques/antique-kitchen-bath/antique-bath-fixtures/national-stove-co-victorian-iron-furnace-with-slate-surround.h
Or this http://img.projektoskop.pl/koza2.jpg
It looks sufficiently complicated:P
Of jams and terror

Chapter Summary

Plot thickens...
...and lightens at the same time;) At least for a while.
Enjoy, good people;D

The moan rang loudly in the winter garden: a long, drawn-out sound of pure delight.
Bilbo closed his eyes in bliss, slowly licking his lips. Oh yes, that was exquisite!
However, he could feel he’s being stared at.
And, sure enough, Thorin was staring at him with raised eyebrows, big hands momentarily still on the piece of antique chair he’s been working on for the last couple hours.
Bilbo felt the blush rising from his neck all the way up to the hairline.
“What?” he mumbled defensively through a mouthful of bread. “I just… it’s good!”
The culprit was resting in his hand - as innocent as a piece of toast covered in gooseberry jam could be, but it was one big lie. The jam was anything, but innocent! Bombur didn’t lie, Bilbo has never eaten anything like it before. It was magnificent! Sweet, but also sour, a bit bitter, but just enough to offset the blandness of bread underneath it.
It was, simply said, a king of all jams!
Surely, Thorin could understand!
“I can leave you alone, if you wish so.”
Or maybe he wouldn’t.
“No, you don’t get to make fun of me!” Bilbo rose, taking a jar of jam from the old chair he was using for a temporary table and shoving it in the vampire’s face with all the dignity he could muster in his flustered state. “Here, try it yourself!”
The look he’s got in return was still amused, but a bit hard-suffering too. As if his housemate was thinking ‘Am I not doing enough already that now I have to entertain you too?’ - which was complete bollocks, because as far as Bilbo was concerned it was him who did most of the mental heavy lifting since they’ve started their strange co-existence. Thus he felt justified in not backing off, but just stood there with a determined expression, almost daring the vampire to chicken out.
The vampire didn’t. He wiped his hand on the rag kept close just for this purpose and gently run one finger over the inside rim of the jar. The amount of jam gathered this way was barely a taste and Bilbo was about to scoff again, but he stopped himself when the finger in question touched his housemate’s lips. The change that overtook Thorin’s face was instantaneous: his eyebrows jumped
up and his eyes blazed blue for a second (Bilbo’s breath wanted to stop every time they did that, but this time thankfully it lasted only a second) in some sort of recognition.

“I take it that the Urs are still around, then?” The vampire inquired. Seeing Bilbo’s surprise he decided to elaborate. “There’s no secret in this world guarded closer than Bomir Ur’s recipe for gooseberry jam, Master Baggins. I do not believe that even a century would change it.”

To think that, if Bilbo didn’t come to live in the Northern Quarter he would never taste the sheer perfection in this little jar! What a dreadful thought!

Of course then he wouldn’t have to bother with a vampire in the basement...

“You should try their blackcurrant chutney,” Thorin suggested. “If you ever have an opportunity.”

...but the notion somewhat lost its bite with time. Having a vampire in the basement turned out to be a bit of an asset.

Looking at the dozen of chairs standing in a neat row - sanded and cleaned and awaiting their first coat of oil, none of which has been touched by their new owner, - one could learn to appreciate the strangest things. It was a very quick decision for Bilbo to stop meddling in his housemate’s work; he was good with painting and putting wallpapers on, but intricacies of proper woodwork overwhelmed him in the end. The feeling of being stared at and judged every time he’s attempted to work also didn't help matters.

Now he was spending his evenings in the cluttered room attempting to learn and leafing through the magazines he’s borrowed from Dori, trying to choose perfect colours and fabrics for his home. However, the view from there was so nice and tranquil that he was seriously considering moving his little office.

With no small amount of surprise Bilbo realised that, while he hated anyone interrupting his creative flow, Thorin’s presence didn’t chafe him at all. Truth to be told, most of the ideas he’s got in the last month or so could be traced back to the vampire and their interactions in one way or another.

Evenings also took on a brighter note as they moved them from the kitchen into the living room, where Thorin's magazines stood stacked up on the coffee table and the fireplace offered much needed warmth. Not to mention the radio was there - and Thorin was adamant about not missing the 6 o’clock news and an 8 o’clock concerto block on Classic FM. Bilbo tried to convince him to give a chance to some modern pieces, but so far it has only resulted in confusing the vampire. Then again, Bilbo never understood the phenomenon of Lady Gaga himself, so that might have been just a personal taste-thing.

It was funny, because if one thought about it, they were becoming… domestic in a way.

“Out of curiosity.” Bilbo came back to his senses to hear his housemate speak. “Who is the current head of the family?”

“Head?” He wondered out loud; it sounded so old-fashioned. “I would say that it’s Mister Bombur and his wife? They have the most of children and everyone else seems to be orbiting around their home.” And it was a very loud, but also a very happy home. Bilbo, raised as a single child, felt overwhelmed by the noise and commotion happening around him during his first visit, but there was something charming about it nonetheless. About people calling each other from across the house and singing and pushing and, of course, eating together. “Or it may be his older brother, since he seems to know everything about everyone. They are a nice family, though,” he finished with a shrug.
“They always were,” Thorin nodded sagely.

And then he was back to wiping off the last chair in the row of seven that would be treated right away - the other six were more used and had bits missing that required filling in and Bilbo was notoriously forgetting to buy the right kind of glue for the job. At least he supplied a stack of clean clothes and old newspapers, and fully intended to help with the oiling - or at least learn how to do it properly. Thorin was not opposed to teaching him small skills, like building a good fire or forcing their temperamental furnace into compliance.

One thing he was opposed to was relinquishing his hold over the basement. Bilbo could not enter it and the notion of any stranger from the town breaking that rule caused the vampire's eyes to glow, so the subject was quickly dropped. Thankfully, not all was lost, as Thorin has promised (or stated in his own emotionless way) that he will take a look at the boiler and fix it, if necessary.

Bilbo tried not to doubt his skills and stop thinking about Erebor exploding one day around his ears. His housemate soaked knowledge from the magazines and books Bilbo kept bringing him like a particularly thirsty sponge, but there was something to say for an experienced professional making sure that everything is taken care of. Thorin was still new to technology, after all.

“You should go downhill, you know?”

Only when the vampire stopped his work to look at him, Bilbo realised he's said it out loud. Oh, drat!

“Should I?” Thorin drawled, this time not amused at all.

“Yes, you should. They are… you have no idea how nice these people are.” Bilbo struggled for the right words while gesticulating with his toast. “How inviting and helpful. If you keep the fact that you’re… well, you know, a secret, I don’t think they will come after you with pitchforks and torches.”

As long as they don’t feel threatened, that is. Warning about the wolves was still out - and still adhered to almost religiously.

“And they really love your family, you know?” Bilbo added more gently. “Listening to them one would think that you’ve built this town brick by brick on your own.”

But Thorin wasn’t looking at him anymore. He was focused on his work and silent in that cold way that spoke without words ‘I don’t want to talk about it.’ Bilbo disliked that expression with dedication some reserved for unexpected rain.

“At least come with me when I go to the Library,” he coaxed. “You could choose our own books and the lad that works there is extremely nice, he won't cause trouble.”

What was he doing? Trying to get the vampire to see the world? How irresponsible was that! He was trying to lead a fox into a pen full of oblivious chickens, - chickens that Bilbo liked!

Indeed, here he was: a piece of bread in hand, aggravating a monster!

...or was he? Was Thorin a monster?

Because the only thing Bilbo got for his nagging was a short glare and a growled out warning: “You are overstepping yourself, Master Baggins.”

Which sounded adequately chiding, but not dangerous.
“Am I?” Bilbo grumbled, falling back in his chair. “Oh, alright, you grumpy old crumpet, have it your way.”

A peal of quiet chuckles was unexpected - and it seemed to surprise them both in equal measure. Thorin looked downright startled at the sounds that came out of his own mouth and Bilbo…

The chuckle was low and melodic and Bilbo could swear that he felt it all the way to the soles of his slipper-clad feet.

“I haven’t been called that one in a long while.” The vampire said looking up and his eyes were gentler than before. “There was a girl, in the past, who called me names like this one.”

Bilbo stared, transfixed, almost forgetting about his toast. “It was my mother’s favourite,” he said, feeling embarrassed, but not sure why. “She always tried to make it sound stern, but my father never took her seriously when she scolded him like that.”

His housemate ‘hmm-ed’ and nodded in agreement. It was all very strange in the end, because…

...because there was a girl in the past that was courageous - or maybe suicidal - enough to call a real-to-goodness vampire a “grumpy old crumpet” while Bilbo was still double-guessing their every interaction. A girl said vampire seemed to remember fondly - or, maybe, the fondness was not directed at her?

Maybe he just remembered killing her in an awful way for the insult?

Maybe Bilbo had too much jam on his toast?

“Tell me of your family, Master Baggins.” It would be a polite request if Thorin’s voice wasn’t so commanding in itself.

“My family?” Bilbo repeated, surprised.

“You’ve bought a very big house,” the vampire observed. “But you are well versed in taking care of domestic tasks, so I guess that there is no women in your life to do it for you. You’re a bachelor, then?”

One day they will have to have a long conversation on the subject of social changes that took place in the last century; Bilbo will prepare notes and diagrams and even slides, if needed. That day, however, has not yet come. He will not discuss his sexual orientation without some good backup. For now he decided to ignore the insinuation that he was only efficient at living alone because there was no one to take care of him, and ploughed through the indignation that notion awoke. He knew to choose his battles.

“You are right, I am single at the moment.” There was no confusion on Thorin’s face so at least that moniker was familiar to him. “My parents are both gone for almost a decade, too. They have left early, first father, then mother… Mom never had the time for a second child, not with running her own business, so I have no siblings.”

While he was talking, his housemate finished wiping the dust and wood shavings from the chair he’s been working on. Then he cleaned his hands on the sides of his dusty trousers and went around collecting tools to put them back into a wooden toolbox. It was more of a chest, really, and it was - as everything in Erebor seemed to be, - ancient and beautiful. Thorin has brought it with him that first day after Bilbo’s invitation and shamelessly planted it in the middle of the room, like a declaration that from now on he will be directing this little project. It had a number of compartments filled with dozens upon dozens of hammers, chisels, keys and files, nails and clasps, and pins of all sizes, and
things Bilbo could not even properly name. Every compartment was carved with different pattern and seemed to possess its own key - that was kept in another compartment altogether. It was like a never ending game of finding the right boxes to be able to open other boxes that will make it possible to open the boxes one needed to get things from. Fascinating and frustrating at the same time. Thorin operated it with ease that was downright insulting.

“There’s no family on either side that’s worth mentioning apart from a cousin of mine who married, interestingly, another cousin of mine, just from my mother’s side. They have a little boy, my godson. He’s five now, I think.” Bilbo scratched his head trying to remember. “But they live in the South Quarter so we don’t see often.”

The last lock snapped shut and Bilbo realised that the vampire was watching him again.

“Well, I guess it sounds pretty sad when you put it like that,” he shrugged self-consciously.

“Quite,” Thorin easily agreed, not wasting his breath on politeness for the sake of politeness. But his next words were gentle and even a bit whimsical. “Durins were never numerous, but people in the town were always close to us. Take this house, for example,” he looked around the conservatory with a fond gaze. “One of my… grand-nieces taught their children in this very room. Every winter they would come here to learn how to read and count, or make paper stars and other decorations for their homes.”

“It sounds lovely,” Bilbo admitted quietly, fascinated with the sudden change.

Thorin seemed to miss that mesmerised look, lost in some warm memory. “It was,” he whispered. “It was a good home.”

The silence that fell after these words was ill-fitting. Bilbo watched as the vampire started moving furniture in the far end of the conservatory to make space. He didn’t move to help, knowing that he would only get in the way, instead opting to find something else to say.

“I could not find anything about them, you know,” he finally voiced the issue that was plaguing him for weeks now. “Whenever I ask someone in town they always say the same thing. They sing praises to your family, but when I ask what happened to them, no one… no one knows.”

Thorin didn’t turn to look at him, but his wide shoulders sagged a bit, or so Bilbo has thought - it was hard to tell from where he was sitting.

Curious, he got up from the chair and moved closer to the vampire who was now sorting through the wads of old curtains and carpets. They were now stored in the corner of the winter garden, along with the old bedframe and some other bits and pieces that didn’t pass the muster.

“What are you doing?” Bilbo asked, spooning some more jam into his mouth. That was the last spoonful, he promised himself. Just one more and he will put the jar away.

“Trying to find something suitable to cover the floor with,” Thorin answered without looking over his shoulder. He pulled a medium sized rug out of the pile and looked at it critically before putting it aside. “I would rather not stain the stone or risk anyone slipping on the residue.”

Taking into account his speed and other inhuman traits, the ‘anyone’ has clearly meant one Bilbo Baggins.

“This place is a masterpiece of craftsmanship of its time,” the vampire continued. “Not surprising, as it was made by the local masters and, let me tell you that, nowhere in the North you could’ve found better craftsmen than in Iron Hill.”
Bilbo smiled at that, remembering Bofur’s ridiculous boasting.

“Would it have, by chance, someone who was a carpenter/miner/handyman/toymaker?” He asked.

“Indeed.” This time Thorin looked over his shoulder and even gave him a small smile. “The Urs were one of the first families to settle in these lands after Durins.”

“Oh, so it is…”

“A family business, yes. For the last two hundred years, as far as I know.”

Bilbo almost chipped his tooth on the spoon as the sense of Thorin’s words reached him fully.

Two hundred? Now they were up to two hundred? What… then how old was his housemate, really?

He looked at Thorin: wide and tall, strong and solid, and helplessly, hopelessly almost-human-yet-not-exactly. His hair were dark with only bits of silver showing at the temples, his unblemished face seemed no older than Bilbo’s own. There were tiny wrinkles in the corners of his eyes, but that’s about it when it came to signs of age. And yet there was something about him that kept one at a distance, some sort of chip in reality that made him seem separated from it all. As if the time and air and reason went around, taking special care not to touch him.

“How did it happen, that you…” Bilbo spoke without thinking, daring to ask the question that was on the forefront of his mind… before the fear of offending Thorin won. “That you… that you were trapped here?”

The vampire didn’t answer at first - he looked over another rug and threw it to the side, then another. Bilbo, feeling stupid, stuffed another spoon of jam into his mouth in hopes of maybe stopping his lips from speaking. It was only when Thorin turned his way and looked at him without any visible offence, that he realised how anxious he was.

“How did it happen, that you…” Bilbo spoke without thinking, daring to ask the question that was on the forefront of his mind… before the fear of offending Thorin won. “That you… that you were trapped here?”

The vampire didn’t answer at first - he looked over another rug and threw it to the side, then another. Bilbo, feeling stupid, stuffed another spoon of jam into his mouth in hopes of maybe stopping his lips from speaking. It was only when Thorin turned his way and looked at him without any visible offence, that he realised how anxious he was.

“You mean to ask me how did I become a monster?” There was something quite standoffish about this question - as if Thorin was tired of hearing it already.

“I mean that…” He sighed and started from the beginning, following after the taller man who went back to his search. “You know, you call yourself that, but, take it from me, for a… what you are, you’re very un-monstrous.”

He’s got a raised eyebrow for his trouble. “Oh really? Tell me, Master Baggins, how many of ‘what I am’ have you met in your life thus far?”

“Not many, I admit. Some, if we count in politicians and accountants, but they seem to have their own blood-sucking category,” Bilbo mused, easily gesticulating with the spoon. This gave him a chuckle and so he carried on. “I mean, you are polite and you like to read, and that is already more than I can say about some people. You would fit well into the Baggins’ family meetings… huh?”

He stopped himself a moment before crashing into his housemate’s back.

“Thorin?”

Thorin was looking at the pile of little rugs thrown haphazardly over the old wooden frame. It had to be Kili’s doing, Bilbo remembered him dashing from place to place, armfuls of fabrics flying as he threw them around without a care in the world, creating quite a mess. Still, it was just a few thrown
curtains, surely not that… bad?

But Thorin was still - very, very still. In that way that terrified Bilbo the first time they’ve ‘met’; the way that put into question breathing and blood flow and heartbeat.

“Thorin? What is it?” He tried to peek over the wide shoulder, but he was too short for that. “Do you need help?”

“…this?” The whisper was barely there, pale lips moving just a millimetre.

“What?” Bilbo pushed his way to the vampire’s other side, eyes searching for a reason of this strange behaviour, but finding only what was there before: an old wooden bedframe and old dirty fabric. “I don’t understand…”

He didn’t get to finish when the pile in front of him exploded in a cloud of dust and splinters. He jumped back with a startled shout as Thorin tore into it with the speed and strength of a charging bear. Bilbo scooted back as the planks started flying over his head.

“Thorin, what are you doing?!” He shouted in terror.

There was a moment of stillness, one loud shocked breath, and then a carved headboard was crashing into one of the pillars surrounding the fireplace. Bilbo squeaked and dashed to the side, but his voice disappeared in the roar that shook the walls around them.

“What is this doing here?!”

Thorin stalked to the headboard and looked like he wanted to kick it, but stopped a few feet away from it, glaring. Big, heaving breaths shook his frame and made his words hard to understand.

“What is this doing here?!” He was snarling like an enraged beast, voice so low that Bilbo could swear he more feels than hears it. “I said to burn it! I will not look upon it in my home!”

“Burn it…?” Bilbo could feel the bile of blind panic rising to his throat. “It’s… Thorin, it’s just a bed…”

“SHE DIED IN IT!”

And then, finally, the vampire turned to him - with a face paler than freshly fallen snow, with eyes shining in it like two fallen stars, like two windows into a frozen hell.

Bilbo almost managed to make a step back before his legs gave out.

* 

Blood was heavy on his tongue, and even though Fili’s brain knew better, it always felt hard to swallow, as if he was trying to drink some thick syrup. Kili once said that for him it feels like trying to swallow too much peanut butter at once - laborious, but satisfying. Bofur compared it to trying to drink treacle - sweet and lingering. Dwalin didn’t want to share his impression.

Fili didn’t know the taste of peanut butter, the smell alone was enough to upset his stomach; treacle was a hazy memory from the times when he could walk upright under the kitchen’s table and his
nanny sometimes prepared some sort of treat or another, if his behaviour was good. He couldn’t
force himself to refresh the flavour.

He could not eat human food. Not like Kili. He didn’t yearn for it, there was no appetite in him left,
smells and sights of the dishes he loved… before, were bland to him now, could as well be non-
existent. He could force food into his body when it was necessary, like any of them, with varying
degrees of success, - and it was still more than his Father was able to do, - but holding it down was a
strenuous, torturous process he didn’t want to go through often.

That’s why he hated Bilbo Baggins a bit. Just a bit, for his mothering instincts, for the way his
kitchen was always filled with food, for the way his human condition expected them - two young
boys - to eat. Before that first night in Erebor, the night he and Kili pushed their way into the small
man’s life, Fili had been feasting for decades and didn’t miss a thing. He ate only because his guise
had to be perfect, because the man was tiny and alone and, for all his amiable behaviour, scared.
Thank goodness that drinking was not beyond him and that it was a hot chocolate Mister Baggins
decided to treat them with - if it was any sort of juice, it would all end up in a very sudden, very
unpleasant way.

Sometimes he envied Kili his ability to at least hold the food down, hell, his ability to want to eat.
Kili liked scents of food, missed the tastes, the textures, looking at mayonnaise didn't make his
stomach roll!

It had to be something in their blood, Fili suspected. Because Dwalin was just like him, so had
Bofur, much to the miner’s despair. They were the Third generation from Him and their limits were
the same. Their elders, Fili’s Father and Aunt, have been trapped in an even tighter net - they
couldn’t taste food at all and their craving for blood was even stronger.

But their control was far greater than anything Fili has ever seen. They could feed thrice a year
whereas he could not stand more than a month away from someone’s veins.

Then there was the Fourth generation where things started to get blurry. Kili’s self-restraint was slow
in coming, his hunger easy to sate, but also easy to awaken. He was, distressingly, more human than
any of them - and at the same time, less.

Was his blood not strong enough, Fili wondered sometimes with a note of despair. Was it too diluted
to turn his shining star, his love, properly? To make him right - as right as they could be? It was a
strange thing to ponder, the way they were both stronger and weaker at the same time depending on
the sorting order, that they could not fight their dark nature off, get rid of it for good. It was always
there, always barely held back by something not altogether good, but just worse enough in an
opposite way.

It was unnerving and sometimes Fili wished for someone who could explain to him how it was even
possible, for someone to fix this. To fix them.

But the only person he knew of that could possess the power to do so was long gone. The Second
generation was gone also and now it was up to him - the purest Third in the family to deal with all
their problems.

“Stop nibbling, you twit, and take a good, strong swing!”

Fili sighed when a soft hand, strong enough to knock a man unconscious, gently rested on his head.
The touch stirred him from the funk of dark thoughts and fears, and made him once more aware of
the blood on his tongue.
Raspberry syrup - a thought appeared in his mind. Of all the things the taste of which he could remember it was the thick raspberry syrup his Nan used to feed him every winter when his throat ached from cold. A medicine and a treat, sweet and warming. A familiar, good thing.

Hand on his head stroked his hair and he let out a contented sigh. It was the usual sign that he was full and ready to pull away, and Dori reacted as usual, reaching for a wad of gauze and a bottle of disinfectant with his free hand. It was hardly necessary, as their feeding was neat and the wounds left afterwards were fully closed by the next day, but Dori was a fussy creature and liked to have things in order.

Fili pulled away gently, licking two tiny wounds his fangs have left over the dark line of a vein, wishing them closed and painless, before the owner of the hand pushed him away with a light shove in the direction of the sink.

“Wash your teeth,” Dori ordered in a stern no-nonsense way, cleaning the wound with brisk, practiced movements. “And get a kettle going, if you please.”

The blond smiled and shook his head in exasperation, nonetheless following both orders - even if the first one was quite ridiculous he still filled his mouth with water from the tap and spit it out obediently. His hunger argued with the motion, trying to hold on to the taste of blood for as long as possible, unhappy with the cold liquid washing it away, but Fili was taught to be respectful to those who shared their life-force with him so he paid it no mind.

Dori was caring and kind, so the least he could do was to take his OCD in stride.

“Are you feeling alright?” He asked, filling up the electric kettle and setting it to boil.

“Of course I am,” was the fully expected answer. Dori was no gentle damsel, regardless of his bearing, and sometimes went out of his way to prove it. “That brother of yours drinks more than you do, even Ori does. Feeding you is no worse than pricking myself with a needle.”

There was worry dressed as teasing in these words and Fili hurried to cut it off in the bud.

“I don’t need more than a mouthful to keep me going,” he said quickly. And then added. “And Kili is a glutton of monstrous proportions, you should know that by now.”

A smile answered him and his heart calmed. Dori was a steady, strong presence in their lives these last few decades, an unwavering source of confidence in their cause and skills. A dear friend from the moment they’ve befriended his older brother.

Maybe one day, a thought came out of nowhere, they would consider Bilbo such? Because his fussy, proper personality was so much like Dori’s, his politeness and willingness to open up his heart to strangers. Maybe, when everything was said and done, he would be willing to be persuaded to trust them once again?

“And where is that monstrous brother of yours?” Dori asked, pulling his sleeve down, getting up to put away the first aid kit. “Weren’t you going to go uphill today?”

“He’s with Dwalin, loading the car. We won’t be gone for long, though.”

They could not afford to leave the town now, not with the constant threat of Others over their heads. As much as they needed to investigate Erebor, their place was now with their people, protecting them, standing watch; because Ironhill always stood by their side, there was no other way to repay for that devotion.
And with the way their search was going at the moment it was not a bad idea to take a moment to re-evaluate their methods. Because something went wrong at some point and Fili could not for the life of his figure out what. Mister Baggins has changed in the last few months: whereas he was malleable and easy at first, now he was immune to any sort of suggestion and mental prodding. He seemed… closed off. Whenever Fili touched him, pushed himself a bit closer to the man’s mind, there was… nothing. Not even a barrier, not even a wall, just an empty space his mental power couldn’t cross.

It was strange and disconcerting, and forced them to rely on their own charm more than they’ve ever had to. Luckily, Kili knew how to use his big brown eyes more or less how Fili used his powers, with almost the same effect. It still wasn’t enough.

Now was not a good time for their plan to meet complications!

“We’ll just deliver materials and come back before it’s dark,” Fili reassured Dori. The kettle started to whistle so he switched the power off and poured the water into two provided cups. “There won’t be time to start painting before Christmas, anyway.”

He put the kettle back on the counter in the exact moment kitchen’s door opened and in stepped a lean, gangly figure swathed in an overabundance of wool. Fili, unsurprised, handed one cup to Dori and the other to the newcomer. “Always on time, Ori.”

Ori smiled and shrugged, all puppyish innocence and sparkling eyes, and bent down to kiss the top of his brother’s head. “Good evening, Dori.”

Dori swatted at him half-heartedly before scooting his chair a bit to make space for another one. A questioning glance at the blond still standing by the counter was answered with a headshake.

“I will be going,” Fili said out loud. “Kee should be done by now and we have to swing by Grandma Gal on the way back.”

“Oh?” Ori mouthed over his steaming tea. “Is Bard still sick?”

“It would seem so, I haven’t seen him in a while,” Fili shrugged. “With their house so far on the outskirts of town it may be necessary to move them closer until everything is back to norm.”

“He’s a skilled shot, that boy,” Dori pointed out, not missing the underlying message.

“But Gal is old and, if he’s sick, well… caution never hurt anyone.”

“Of course,” agreed Ori easily. “If they need a place to stay, eh, we do have a spare bedroom.”

That admittance was a hard one to make and Fili understood the reason perfectly. He rested his hand on the wool-clad shoulder for a moment, letting the youth feel the pride he was feeling at the thought of his friends finally coming to grips with their loss. Of course, Nori was not lost for good, but with the role he chose to play in this scenario he was not expected to come back anytime soon.

“Good evening to you both,” the blond said in the end. He nodded to Dori. “Thank you, my friend, rest for a bit before going back to the shop, okay? Ori,” he turned to the other, “make sure that your younger brother gets some rest before he goes back to the shop, okay?”

Ori giggled his agreement in an accompaniment to Dori’s annoyed huff and Fili felt a bit better about everything. Seeing his people, his friends, happy was something he would never tire of. He stepped out of the kitchen with a small smile on his lips and didn't even make it to the door before a shout stopped him.
“Wait!” Ori thumped his way to him. “I completely forgot! If you’re going uphill, could you deliver something for me?”

Fili frowned. “Deliver what?”

“Oh, just a few magazines Mister Baggins wanted to have a look at, nothing much.”

*

Bilbo was suffocating. His own body wanted to suffocate him.

He didn’t know how, but he regained his senses curled up in the far corner from the place he remembered standing last - well, falling last, to be honest. When Thorin turned and his legs gave out and his mind blacked out... And now Bilbo was shaking like a leaf, big, rippling spasms running through his back, shoulders and legs, and he had to bite his teeth hard so they would stop clicking against each other.... so he wouldn’t bite his tongue...

There was water on his face and... was he crying? Oh god, he was crying, wasn’t he? Why was he crying, damnit, it was so humiliating!

He wanted to turn around, to look behind, but his body didn’t let him, his muscles locked him in this miserable position, nerves taut as strings on the verge of snapping, cold sweat breaking all over his skin...

What the hell happened?! What was going on?!

Oh goodness, he couldn’t breathe!

“Master Baggins...?” Quiet voice spoke behind him and Bilbo unwittingly pawed at the glass trying to claw his way to the other side.

That... monster was there! Behind him! So close!

“I... apologise.”

That thing with the eyesandclawsandteeth!

Oh, for goodness sake!

He tried to get a hold of himself, of the panic growing in his chest, squeezing out his breath and reasonable thought.

Stop it! He ordered. Stop it, it’s Thorin! It’s just Thorin!

Thorin who didn’t hurt him, who was not trying to crawl into his head... who a moment ago was behaving in a very questionable and very concerning way, but... but it surely didn’t deserve this kind of reaction.

He could not breathe, for fuck’s sake, and it was completely, astoundingly ridiculous!

He was not afraid!

“...Bilbo?”
“A… a… a mom… moment,” somehow he managed to push the words past his clenched teeth. “Just a… mom… ment.”

It was strange and stupid and he couldn’t control it. Like a panic attack that completely skipped the brain and went straight for the spine. It was scary in on itself, even without the threat of a vampire standing just behind him.

He was not afraid!

But his face was wet and his hands were wet and his only comfort was the fact that he haven’t pissed himself yet… wait, hands?

One quick look down showed him that somewhere in his mad scramble along the floor he’s managed to crack the jar and now his whole front was covered in gooseberry jam. One of his hands seemed to be bleeding, and that sent another wave of panic through his system, even though Bilbo tried to tell it the cut was tiny. Barely a scratch, *come on, stop it!*

“I didn’t mean to startle you so,” vampire’s voice was quiet and contrite. He was speaking in gentle tones one reserved for small animals and frightened children, and Bilbo wished to know to which category he belonged at the moment in his housemate’s mind. “I was not aware that my, hm, distress can cause… this.”

“Now we… k-know, at least,” he tried with all his might to find some sort of humour in this whole messed up situation, something to hopefully re-direct his mind to its usual sensible ways. Slowly, painfully slowly, his body stopped shaking, he could almost breathe normally. “Don’t worry, I am just a… simple mortal… I would probably fall apart, if you sneezed… in my general direction…”

“So… then let us hope that I will not have to sneeze anytime soon.”

Oh, the bastard was joking now, wasn’t he? Wait, could he even…?

A hand landed on his shoulder - big and careful.

His body seized and trashed and Bilbo was so done with this he could not even feel properly angry at it. It was just resignation with which he grabbed handfuls of Thorin’s shirt and, wedged between the wall and the vampire, yet again tried to calm his breathing.

“Can you even… sneeze?” He asked when the last of the tremors passed.

He could not lift his head and look Thorin in the eyes because his face was hot with embarrassment and for a moment he contented himself with staring at the wads of dark material bunched between his filthy fingers. Oh great, as if he wasn’t feeling humiliated enough already...

“Is it done?” Thorin asked over his head.

“I think so,” Bilbo answered cautiously. “I don’t know what happened… I think it’s just some sort of… panic attack? Instinct or something of the sort…”

“I scared you.”

“Yeah,” the admittance was easy enough. “But I would like to think… I’m made of sterner stuff…”

“I have never met with this reaction before,” Thorin kept speaking in that gentle tone that was entirely unusual for him, but not all tall unfitting. “My temper sometimes escapes me and I regret it, but… this is new.”
They will have discuss it at length, Bilbo promised himself. At some point in the future, maybe tomorrow? Or in a week? Right now he tried to relax when the vampire once again put a hand on his shoulder. He felt a wave of calm descending over his frantic thoughts like a curtain of smoke clouding the fear, his muscles finally relaxed and breath stopped hitching.

And he was aware, this time for sure, that it was not natural. It was that hand on him, the touch that somehow made it possible for the vampire to get a hold of his distress and pull it out of him like a handful of weeds.

“We talked about this,” Bilbo protested on the principle only, because he wasn’t eager to go back to panicking all over the place. It was just good manners to have his housemate aware that he is aware. “I told you to stay out of my head.”

“I assure you, Master Baggins, I am honouring our contract to the letter,” said housemate answered calmly. “Your mind is locked and safe.”

“Okay,” he repeated out loud. There were other things that needed to be done. “We can get up now, my legs are cramping.”

Wordlessly, Thorin shifted his hand to grip Bilbo’s elbow and helped him find his footing. It took a bit of effort for the shorter man to unclench his fingers and step away from the vampire, but he wasn’t rushed or anything. Truth to be told, after his recent bout of madness, Thorin was almost eerily calm.

“Bugger it all,” Bilbo muttered, taking stock of his sweater and hands. “That will never wash off…” Then he dared to take a look at the vampire and swallowed nervously. “Oh, I am so sorry about your shirt!”

Thorin was a mess - as much as it was even possible. His clothes, face and hair were covered in dust and wood shavings, and the front of his shirt was just a tragedy.

“We’re both a right mess,” Bilbo sighed miserably. “Can I… I can wash these for you,” he pointed at the stained clothes. He was good at domestic stuff, it helped him to focus and calmed him down, and right now focusing on the simple, easily fixable things seemed like the best thing to do. “There should be enough hot water for a shower left… if you want to take one?”

As many miracles of construction and craft Erebor contained, Bilbo was almost completely sure that the plumbing in the mansion was still not working - apart from his little suite. He never really wondered how his housemate has managed to keep himself and his attire clean, but now he did and the first thing that came to mind was the cold snow outside. And it was so medieval that even thinking about it made him shiver.

*  

“Just a few magazines!” Kili sneered pitching his voice and sounding nothing like Ori. Fili didn’t have a heart to tell him that. “My ass! We’re not a fucking delivery service!”

“Language,” the blond chided stoically. He tried to focus on the driving instead of the adorably annoyed expression on his passenger’s face. “And do stop complaining, love, it’s not that bad.”

“Not that bad?!” squawked Kili. “Excuse me, are we even in the same vehicle here?”

The vehicle, as if on cue, hit the pothole and the brunet released another indignant squawk as the pile
of magazines on his lap shifted and the books perched on top hit him squarely in the nose.

Fili focused on the snowy landscape behind the windshield and tried not to laugh.

*

“Hot water tap is a bit tricky,” Bilbo explained, pulling the shower curtain back. “I’ve made a dot, here, how far you’re supposed to twist it for the water to stay consistently warm. See?”

The vampire nodded sagely, his face betraying an uncanny fascination with a simple bar valve.

“If you leave your clothes, I will take care of washing them. The soap is here,” Bilbo pointed to the rose-scented bar wedged between a wall and a bottle of bath bubbles. “Don’t use it on your hair, thought, you won’t like the result. You can use this,” he pulled a bottle of shampoo from the other end of the tub, setting it in easy reach. “It foams quite a lot, so don’t use too much.” He tried to think of anything that might have changed in the last hundred years, but nothing more came to mind.

Should he offer his spare toothbrush to the vampire or would it be too forward? After all, it wasn’t as if Thorin’s teeth were anything, but spotless. Were vampires even in the habit of washing their teeth?

Deciding to leave that interesting quandary for later Bilbo shrugged and turned back, ready to announce that he was going to get some towels. However, he didn’t manage to get past the first word before coming face to face with an exceptionally naked and furry chest of his flatmate.

“Oh,” someway managed to get past his lips, but that was about it. Bilbo closed them with a snap when a dirty shirt landed in his hands, and he would gladly stay speechless (because what could be said in a situation such as this, his Took side stated brazenly), if his completely un-respectable eyes didn’t slide lower than it was decent and saw Thorin’s hands undoing the buttons of his trousers.

“Wait…” Bilbo tried to stop him, he really did, but a second later he was busy fumbling with a heavy leather belt… and then his eyes snapped up and away until a pointed stare walked him out of the bathroom with an armful of dirty clothes and blush-stained cheeks.

Of course Thorin didn’t wear any underwear! Of course, because Bilbo was Bilbo and the universe once again conspired to make his life as awkward as possible!

Well, it wasn’t a complete waste of dignity, his Took side decided. The view was pretty decent. And for once his Baggins side had nothing to say to that.

Okay, the view was decent – Bilbo always preferred his men big and rugged, and Thorin certainly didn’t disappoint in either department… but then there was that little detail of being a vampire that kind of put the shorter man off quite viciously. Not to mention the triple-digit age and glowing eyes that made him stammer and shake.

But still, one could not be blamed for looking.

“Watch it, Baggins,” Bilbo muttered when he’s heard the water running behind the door he was slumping against. “One wrong move and you will end up a heroin in some dreadful horror or worse, a paranormal romance! Ha, over my dead body.”

He tossed Thorin’s belt on the dresser and took careful stock of his shirt and trousers. The latter was
made of sturdy, dark cotton that should withstand the washing machine with no problem, but the former was made of what seemed to be very fine linen – no tablecloth Bilbo has ever owned was this fine. Certainly, none of them has been covered in an embroidery that miniscule and magnificent, and obviously handmade.

The thought that he was handling a garment older than his grandparents would be made Bilbo a tad nervous, that’s all.

Should he stuff it in the bin with the rest or wash it in hand? Soak it beforehand? Oh, if only his mother was still alive! His big mouth! Why couldn’t there be a tag on this bloody thing telling him exactly how to handle it?

Bloody?

Oh no!

Bilbo dropped the shirt as if it was on fire when he realised that the cut on his hand opened again and he was smearing blood all over the garment.

For crying out loud!

“Thorin?” He called, knocking lightly at the bathroom’s door. There was a hum of some sort he decided to take as an answer. “I have to go to the kitchen for just a moment.” Another hum.

So he went.

Blood was much harder to wash off than jam or dust, that Bilbo knew for sure – he was an accident prone child in his early years.

In the kitchen he first washed his hands and cleaned the cut – it was a tiny affair on the base of his middle finger, really nothing as dramatic as the mess it made. It actually felt as if he was wasting a plaster on it, but there was nothing to be done.

Secondly, he filled the sink with cold water, mixed in liberal helping of salt and dipped the shirt in it, gently trying to rub his own blood out. The fabric was very dark, thank goodness, but still it would be a shame to stain it after a hundred years of proper care.

“Way to go, Bilbo Baggins,” Bilbo mumbled as he worked. “Ending up as a vampire’s maid! And I lost a full jar of jam because of him, too. This day can’t get any better…”

A long, drawn out sound of a car horn proved that, indeed, it could.

*

Kili stumbled on the way to the stairs, the magazines shifting in his grip, and said a very foul word when he almost stubbed his toe on the first step.

“Language,” Fili warned, climbing after him, struggling with his own armful of books. “Wipe that scowl off your face, love, he’s coming.”

Kili growled another bad word and barely escaped a kick directed at his shin, right on time too, because at this moment the door opened and a very hurried Bilbo Baggins appeared in the doorway. It took Kili half a second to lose the grimace and plaster a smile over his face. The little man liked
when they smiled at him.

“Hallo, Mister B!” He exclaimed loudly and, hopefully, cheerfully enough, stepping past the man and, quite rudely, pushing his load into his flailing arms. “Hold them for a moment, would you, I have a stone in my boot that threatens to drill a hole in my toe!”

The man mumbled some sort of response, flustered and only slightly amused, but Kili was paying little attention, focused on his little act of removing said boot and checking for imaginary stones. Stupidly, he was not prepared to have his unprotected fingers stepped at by a very angry ‘brother.’

“You are a menace,” Fili growled out before turning to their host with an apologetic smile, a fine actor that he was. “I am sorry for my idiot-sibling, Mister Baggins, we are just here to drop off the paint and… are you okay?”

The last part, spoken with real, honest worry pulled Kili’s attention back to the man and made him realise that, indeed, he didn’t look that well. Bilbo was pale under the flush covering his cheeks, his pupils were blown wide and he was covered in dust and… something dark red… and he smelled of blood…

Kili’s ire and frustration went out of the window in an instant. “Mister B, you’re hurt!” He jumped to his feet, grabbing the man by his shoulders. “What’s happened? You’re all… filthy!”

“Kili!” Fili snapped, but his eyes were also eyes moving up and down the small body, trying to assess the damage.

“Oh… it’s nothing at all,” Bilbo seemed even more nervous now. He looked at his poor sweater, or what was visible of it over the magazines still weighting his arms down, and shook his curly head. “It’s just jam, boys, nothing to worry about.” He made a move as if to pat Kili’s hands of his shoulders, but couldn’t. “… I tripped. Yes, that. Luckily, the jam was the only casualty… I mean luckily, but it was a very good jam, you know, from Bombur’s store so that’s a pity right there…”

While the man was mumbling nonsense Kili and Fili exchanged worried looks over his head. The excuse seemed plausible enough. Closer inspection confirmed that the stains were, indeed, jam-related and there was a plaster on their host’s finger that explained the smell of blood…

But… there was something off about Mister Baggins. Something very off.

“Oh, goodness, let me take those,” the man offered, turning to Fili and nodding at the books. “I will put them away so you can get the rest in.”

“I can help,” Fili offered, but was cut off almost immediately.

“No, no, that’s okay,” the man smiled at them in that wonderful, bright way. And yet, Kili still felt it was strained in some way. “I wasn’t expecting you, boys, and my room is a complete mess, I could not possibly allow you to see it. Please, next time call beforehand,” he chided gently before turning away and slowly shuffling in the direction of the kitchen.

Fili’s hand on his wrist stopped Kili from following.

“Something’s wrong,” he whispered nervously. “Did you feel anything?”

The blond shook his head, eyebrows pulling down in a troubled frown. “Nothing. Again.”

Of course, their little employer chose a great moment to become roll-proof!
“What do we do?”

“We can’t do anything,” Fili shrugged and pulled him back outside. “Not at the moment. Let’s just get on with it, we still have to visit Gal before sun sets.”

*

Bilbo was shaking apart. With a great huff he stepped into his bedroom and pushed the door closed. He dropped the magazines on the bed and wheezed for a moment, trying to gather his thoughts.

He didn’t expect the boys to come today! There was no warning! They always called first! Always.

What was he going to do? There was a vampire in his bathroom! A vary naked, very unpredictable vampire! And now there were also two young fools who liked to wander about and ask questions!

Well, of course they asked questions, his Baggins’ side snapped, we look like a post-nuclear disaster!

They did… he did! He did. Okay, there was a way out of it. Nothing happened yet. Nothing bad.

Small steps. First things first.

He grabbed the hem of his stained sweater and pulled it off in one move, tossing it in the general area of the bed. He jumped to the dresser, almost pulling the drawer clean out in his haste, grabbed the first jumper his hand landed on and pulled it over his head.

Next thing next, he decided, walking to the bathroom’s door and trying to push his head through the hole at the same time. So it was a given that the door would open at this exact moment and slam into him. Of course, the force of the hit sent him back to stumble against the bedside table painfully hitting his shin.

At least the landing was soft – even, if a body smashing into the mattress pushed half of the magazines to the floor on the opposite side of the bed Bilbo didn’t really mind at the moment.

“Master Baggins.” It wasn’t exactly a question and there was little surprise in Thorin’s voice, but there was a grain of pity that the prone man tried to ignore. “I take it that you have unexpected guests.”

“Yeah… Oh, bugger!” It took a bit of wiggling and struggling before he was finally able to free himself out of the cursed woollen trap his grey turtleneck has turned into, all of it accompanied by a lot of mumbled cussing and prayers for patience when all his recently acquired aches fought for attention. “Curse this dratted thing…! There, finally!”

Thorin was standing in front of the bed, water dripping from his hair and pale skin, clad in nothing more than a small towel that tried with all its might to barely-but-not-exactly close around his waist. His face was dead serious, but from where he was laying, Bilbo could see with no problem that the blue eyes were laughing at him.

“Towels,” he muttered, changing his train of thoughts and, less subtly, his line of sight. “Right.”

“I take you will want me to stay out of sight,” that was also not a question. “Until your guests are gone.”
“If you could, yes, I would like you to stay here. The boys are… curious. Lovely,” he hurried to assure, “but curious and… I would like to… please.”

Words escaped him, he didn’t really know what he wanted to ask for, but Thorin seemed to understand. It was an awful day already and it was turning worse by the minute.

The vampire nodded his thanks, or acquiescence, when Bilbo handed him two brand new towels, and watched in silence when the shorter man walked out of the room to deal with his ‘boys’.

*

“What happened to this place?”

Their employer shifted on his feet uneasily while Kili took a moment to survey the winter garden that looked as if a bagful of cats exploded in there.

“I tried to, uh, tidy it up a bit,” Bilbo explained. “But it kind of… didn’t work.”

That was an understatement of the century. The place was a mess, with the carpets and curtains spread over the floor and the old bedframe laying in pieces, and oh, there was the jam in question. Huh.

Kili set two buckets of paint he was carrying (Magnolia and Maroon, as per Dori’s orders) on the floor and went to have a closer look at the catastrophe. That such a small man could do something like that…

“Now is not a good moment for me to start fearing you, Mister B,” he joked, trying to make the man smile again. “If that’s what happens when you lose one jam…”

It worked, somewhat, because Bilbo chuckled and gave him that lovely, fond look, but his shoulders were still tense and he was still too pale. He also winced when he walked and that, surprisingly, made Kili nervous.

He liked that tiny, cuddly, kind man, he didn’t want to see him in pain.

“Oh damn, what exploded in here?” Fili’s voice was filled with the same astonishment when he stepped in from the hall, arms leaden with rolls of wallpaper. He laid his burden on the nearest pile of empty boxes and took stock of the place.

Bilbo didn’t answer, just smiled and shrugged, probably not wanting to repeat himself.

“I am sorry that I can’t offer you tea, but I… it’s not a good day,” the little man said, following them into the room. “I was about to have a bath when you came, and…”

“No worries, Master Baggins, we understand,” Fili was quick to assure. Kili watched him approach the man and, once more, try to push at his will – he felt a wave of frustration pouring off his lover a moment later. “We also have a lot to do today, Kili, get your ass in the car!”

The brunet snorted at the authoritative tone, but followed the order anyway. At least until his foot tangled into an old curtain and when trying to dislodge it accidentally uncovered a true marvel.

“Hey, Fee, look at this! Mister B, where did you get it from?”
“Kili,” Fili groaned, stalking over to his side, “we have no time for…”

And he felt silent.

And pale.

“Oh, that old thing?” Bilbo followed after. “It was… on the attic. Yes, I found it there yesterday and thought that it would make a great… little… coffee table, or something…”

Kili paid sparse attention to the man’s words, most of it directed at his partner who was staring at the wooden chest as if it was a Ghost of Christmas Future himself. He gripped him by the elbow and turned to their host, calling a smile to his face.

“That’s very cool,” he stated awkwardly. They were all suddenly awkward and nervous, and for the life of him he could not understand why. Fili was the smart half of their pair, but at the moment he seemed stuck in his head so it was up to Kili to bail them out. “Next time we can try to open it and all… but now we have to go. Take care, Mister B,” awkward or not, he would not pass on a chance to hug the man. He was just too cuddly! “We will be back in a few.”

“But call next time, okay?” Bilbo requested, walking them to the front door. “And stay safe on the road, you hear me?”

“We will,” Fili mumbled at last. “Thank you. Goodbye, Mister Baggins.”

They were halfway down the driveway before they’ve heard a shrill, unbelieving, “You’re driving?!"

* 

“They’re driving!” Bilbo stomped down the hall like a particularly out-of-sorts bear.

Well, at least until his left shin reminded him that it’s very annoyed with his behaviour by almost sending him to the floor. In the end he kind of shuffled – quite like a dying walrus, - and there was little dignity in that.

But the relief of an avoided crisis kept his spirit up.

“Can you imagine, they’re still kids and they’re driving that monster of a car on their own!” He ranted, stepping back into his bedroom. He was exhausted and in pain, and cared very little for decorum of any kind.

Thorin, thankfully clothed in his bathrobe this time, looked at him from the magazine he was leafing through, eyebrows raised in question. At least he was gracious enough to pick up the mess Bilbo has made before, so that was something…

…but right until Bilbo realised exactly what kind of magazines his housemate has picked up from under the bed along with the rest.

“These are quite explicit,” the vampire said, going back to his lecture, brazen as you please. “I wondered for a while, if this sort of periodicals endured with the times. Quality of the images surely improved, but I have to say that the raunchy stories in the old papers were at least amusing.”

Was it anyone else, Bilbo would laugh it off.
“However, it is a thoughtful thing to have them split in such way that would sate everyone’s…
tastes.”

As it was, he kind of wanted to die.
Touch of sorrow

Chapter Summary

Woot, I will just warn this chapter will be a bit darker and gloomier than previous ones. Erebor finally sees some explanations and in Ironhill shit hits the fan. Not only that, it also has the cheesiest title I could come up with:D Enjoy folks!

Chapter Notes

Woo-hoo this time I've managed to finish the chapter surprisingly quick!:D All because there were people poking me... err, supporting me (by poking with sticks) and I am very grateful to them for every kind word:D *gathers and hugs* Especially lovely little-magnolie who agreed to preform regular check-ups on this story as a Beta:D

And to add to the awesome, there are some marvellous things some peeps made for this story!
Like ewebean's AMAZINGLY AMUSINGLY delightful fanart - she knows what scenes people wanted to see most in the last chapter I guessXD *I wanted to see them too!* Nekkid Thorin and flustered Bilbo.

And little-magnolie made that thing I don't know the name of that's a sort of a moodboard for Erebor!

And then, and then kelpie12 made a Cover for the story that I would already paste here if I knew howT__T

It's all so awesome I just want to flailT__T

Bilbo just stood there, speechless.

It wasn’t that he was ashamed of his, as the vampire just called it, tastes. No, he would be ashamed if it was his mother sitting there and leafing through the last year’s special edition of Bears&Cubs and his Playboys, – if it was her, Bilbo would be already out the door, heading towards the nearest pub.

No, Thorin, for all his strangeness and every supernatural factor that played part in it, was a man and men – even those separated by decades of social changes and different perceptions – were supposed to have an understanding in these matters. Accidentally unearthed porn was to be either admired at great length or ignored to save both parties from embarrassment, and that was that.

There was no way anyone could want to discuss smut like it was the latest number of Medical Journal, just no way! A thought that the vampire was genuine in his need to point out the obvious and demand answers was too morbid, too scary to even contemplate!

It was easier to assume that Thorin was just teasing in his strange, serious manner. There were so many things they had to talk about still! That whole matter of shiny eyes and chaos and someone
who died in that bed! Not to mention the loss of his magnificent jam! So many things more important that his private stash of porn and Bilbo’s mortification at it being discovered!

And the clothes, of course, the clothes!

“I have to talk to their uncle,” Bilbo stepped into the room, closing the door with a tired sigh. He hoped that his housemate is too polite to mention his obvious attempt at changing the subject. “The day started so well…”

“I apologise for my part in it,” Thorin said in a deep, gravelly voice. “It is also not to my liking.”

“It’s… thanks.” Bilbo raised his head, but his eyes stayed down, because his patchy bathrobe was a size M and his housemate was a wide man, so there was no way that it was going to close over his chest and outright staring was something no respectable Baggins would ever lower themselves to. “It was pretty crazy for a moment.”

There was a sort of uneasy pause that Bilbo used to right his room a bit, to pick up Thorin’s trousers and wonder if he has anything that would fit the vampire while his clothes are in the wash. He had a set of pyjamas he’s got from Lobelia for Christmas five years ago that was two sizes too big (and if it wasn’t deliberate, he was willing to eat his shoes), and it might have a chance to even fit… but the pattern on it was dreadful! No, Bilbo was not about to dress any living (or, well, un-living) creature in pastel paisley unless his body’s integrity was at stake!

Just as his stress levels started to fall, just as he dared to believe that the worst was over, Thorin made another of those thoughtful noises in the back of his throat and said with all seriousness and no small amount of displeasure, “It is surprising that this kind of periodicals can be found in the local library.”

Bilbo, being the caring, kind person that he was, felt compelled to defend his fellow bookworm to the last drop of blood – even if Ori will never hear about it.

“Actually, these are mine,” he admitted quietly, staring holes into the wall to the left of vampire’s head.

The reaction to his words was instantaneous and baffling: Thorin turned to look at him before closing the magazine and putting it back on the pile. And for some reason, “I am sorry, I didn’t know,” he seemed genuinely contrite.

“No, no, that’s okay,” Bilbo flailed a bit, not knowing what to make of that sudden seriousness.

“No,” the vampire cut him off. “These are your private things, I had no right to rifle through them.”

Well, he was right, but it was an accident. In the end no harm was done. And anyway…

“The cat is out of the bag, at least,” Bilbo shrugged. “If you want to have a gander at them it’s all fine with me.”

Who was he to deny another man his jollies? Especially one that had spent the last hundred years trapped in the basement of a deserted mansion!

“Are all these to your tastes, then?”

“All to… what?” Bilbo startled a bit at the question. He looked at the pile of dirty mags, confused, until he understood what has surprised the vampire. It was quite an eclectic collection, after all. “Ah, well, yeah…” Hm, it was much less awkward that he thought it would be. Not that he’s ever thought a lot about trying to explain the concept of bisexuality to a creature of the night. “They are.”
“So I gather that it’s not frowned upon, then?”

“Not… so much, anymore.” Oh, how nice it would be to tell him that the world’s population reached a consensus in acceptance, but Thorin was a man out of his time and deserved to hear the truth. “Well, there will always be folk who have opinions and such, but, when aren’t there?”

Another thoughtful hum followed and Bilbo was tempted to end it here, leave and have some tea or something, but… but he was a curious guy and the overall atmosphere that day seemed to encourage personal questions.

“You’re not… bothered, yourself?” he asked gently, cradling an armful of dirty clothes and remembering that the person he was talking to came from a different age – an age when people were scorned for less than their choice of bed partners.

And yet again he was met with a quizzical look that meant Thorin either didn’t understand the question or the sentiment behind it. It took him a moment to get the unspoken part, a moment Bilbo spent sweating over his own forwardness and daring.

“I’ve been alive for a long time now, Master Baggins,” the vampire said. “I’ve seen love and lust in all of their forms and, truth to be told, I have other things to be, as you put it, bothered about.”

Which was still a better answer than the shorter man expected to get; a promise of, if not exactly approval, then at least acceptance.

And, since it looked that there would never be an opportunity to discuss these things again – he would make sure that there wouldn’t be! – Bilbo decided to throw caution to the wind and ask a question on the issue that had bothered him ever since he’s read one very popular teenage romance novel.

“Can you… I mean, if it’s not too forward for me to ask,” he checked himself before continuing. “I mean, your kind, can you even… eh, be bothered by it?”

Great one, Baggins, his Took side sneered in open mockery. Really, for an acclaimed author you have such way with words!

Thorin’s eyebrows seemed to reflect the sentiment – one inched higher while the other stayed perfectly horizontal and unmoving. It was a ‘no bullshit’ combination that Bilbo tried not to evoke too often, because it reminded him too much of Uncle Isengrim and his famous political rants.

“Master Baggins,” the vampire started slowly and Bilbo snapped to attention like a startled ferret. It was different, this time, the way his name was spoken, even the way Thorin was sitting seemed different (even though he didn’t move a muscle!) he seemed taller and more dignified than ever before. “You’ve experienced first-hand what happens when I let my emotions run free, did you not?”

That… thing in the conservatory? Glowing eyes and growling and chilling fear?

“I imagine it would be possible for me,” Thorin continued, gesticulating briefly to the magazines. “If I dared to risk losing control of what lives within me.”

Bilbo swallowed. “What?”

“I do not relish in drinking blood. If it was left for me to choose, I would not do it.”

That was a good thing to know, surely, but where did their awkward and embarrassing conversation took a turn into the creepy forest full of things better not to be contemplated?
“Then why did you…?” His hand moved on instinct to cover the side of his neck, *that side*, but he couldn’t put it down fast enough when he saw the vampire wince.

“It is what I have to do to live.” Thorin stood up in one graceful move, and there was no apology in his voice, just resigned acceptance, as he approached Bilbo. “I can’t die of exposure or wounds – the lack of sustenance only weakens me. And when I’m weak, hunger takes over and it is not a kind creature.”

But his eyes told a completely different story, Bilbo realised when he dared to look up and meet them. They were bright, that ethereal light hiding just under the surface, and full of sadness born out of some awful experience.

“I’m sorry,” he said, because there was nothing else to say.

But that admission made him question their hard-won peaceful co-existence. Just this morning he wasn’t afraid of his housemate at all, *(well, maybe a little)* and now… he was torn.

Thorin had to guess the direction his thoughts have taken because when he stopped in front of Bilbo, his whole posture was smaller and he lowered his head to be more level with the shorter man. It was an altogether conscious and calculated move and Bilbo was a bit impressed and a bit scared of how easy it was for the vampire to adjust his behaviour like that – and how easily it worked!

Then all his attention was snapping back to the hand that was, once again, reaching for his neck. “I will not need to feed for quite a while, yet,” Thorin said, almost gently. His eyes asked silent permission before brushing his thumb over the scar. “What I’ve taken from you that day will keep me alive for a long time.”

“Alive. But… won’t you be hungry?”

“I am always hungry.”

Struck dumb, Bilbo didn’t even think as his body took a step back and pulled out of the vampire’s reach, - good thing though, because his mind was completely useless at protecting him lately. It was altogether better to leave his wellbeing in the hands of someone qualified.

“Goodness, look at the time!” His inner Baggins took over, turning around swiftly and reaching for the doorknob. “I better put these into the washing machine if we want them clean and dry today.” The door opened an inch or two before that same wide hand landed on the wood, stopping its progress. “Oh please, don’t…”

“But I am too old to let such basic instinct rule over me,” Bilbo could feel the cold on his back as the vampire leaned over him and spoke quietly over his bowed head. “If you’re ever in any danger from me, I will warn you beforehand, I promise you that.”

But then what? Who will take the burn of it?

"Before,” he whispered, cowed by the shadow that fell on his tense frame. “How was it before? Can you eat anything else, like, like you drink tea?”

Silence in this case spoke volumes.

The hand holding the door retreated and Thorin stepped back, allowing Bilbo to take a few deeper breaths and, yes, escape if needed.

“There’s no need to rush,” the vampire said in a level tone. “I have clothes to wear in the
meanwhile."

And then he just walked out of Bilbo’s room, as if everything that just happened didn’t, well, happen.

*

“Okay, now spill!”

Fili didn’t answer. He didn’t even turn to look at Kili, instead he seemed lost in his own head again – sitting there with his eyes open, but unseeing.

As much as Kili wanted to pull him out of that state via shouting or a strategically placed poke, in the end he decided to shut up and focus on driving. That was just how Fili got sometimes, losing himself in memories of his long life, of the times ‘before’, and there was nothing to be done about it.

Truth to be told, Kili didn’t really understand how it worked or why. His memories were just that, memories, he didn’t get lost in them like that. He was aware of the difference between him and Fili, of course, they were not standing on a level ground. Fili was… more. Stronger, wiser, respectable, more in control of his powers and his monster…

All in all it would be easy to look at him and be jealous – and maybe, in some small part of his soul, Kili was a bit envious of the power his lover wielded over the family just because he was awoken by someone who was already gone by the time Kili was ready to join the family (even if some would argue that one was never ready, that any age was an awful age to die). He would be completely justified in feeling resentful over the time and attention that he should have a part of.

But he wasn’t.

As impulsive and mindless as Kili knew he could sometimes be, he certainly wasn’t blind.

“It was the box, wasn’t it?” He wondered out loud, trying to connect the wooden artefact with his partner’s sudden loss of grey matter. “You saw it and just switched off. What is it?”

He was surprised when this time Fili has answered.

“It was a toolbox…” the blond whispered, eyes still distant, but at least now he was back to breathing.

“A toolbox,” Kili repeated, “right. And what’s so special about it?”

“It… I remember it from the past,” Fili turned to him and rubbed his eyes, coming back from whatever memory he’s been visiting. “Before. When I was a child. It was always in the winter garden, tucked into a corner. Father told me many times not to touch it.” For a moment he smiled, and Kili’s heart jumped at the sight, but quickly enough a frown pulled blond eyebrows together and Fili’s eyes turned dark. “There was a trick to opening it, I remember, there was a tick to everything in the house… everything He’s built.”

The car swayed on the snow-covered road when Kili hit the brakes, – a bit more force and he would be perfectly able to stop the car with his heels alone.

“What?” He snarled, killing the engine and turning in the seat to give Fili his most incredulous stare. “And you just left it there?!”

“What choice did we have?” The blond answered, unshaken.
“Oh, I don’t know, maybe taking it! There might have been a clue in it, or anything at all! If it’s His…”

“Bilbo was there!” Fili didn’t need to raise his voice to cut his lover off mid-rant. It was one of these things that his stronger blood allowed him to do. “I can’t roll him!”

“So what, just… just leave it?” The steering wheel bravely took on Kili’s frustration, enduring hit after hit without a complaint. “We can’t keep at it, Fee, we can’t keep stepping back like that or we won’t get anywhere!”

The hitting stopped when a strong hand grabbed Kili by the wrist and Fili pulled him closer, close enough so they had to meet each other’s eyes.

“No!” he sounded angry now, but it was directed at himself mostly. “He stays. I can’t roll him, and I am the best we have, so it may mean that no one can. We have his trust and with that we can work now and later, to convince him, to pull him to our side. But not yet, do you understand?”

“He will know sooner or later!”

“But no sooner than we have the map! Kili, think! What if he freaks out and revokes the invitation? What then? Waiting another 80 years for a new owner that Erebor will let in?”

That option obviously hadn’t even occurred to the brunet, because his glower smoothly slid into the petulant scowl. “He wouldn’t…” he mumbled.

“Wouldn’t he?” Fili pressed closer, almost close enough for their noses to touch. “If we present ourselves like that?”

“Then we can make him believe he has no choice!” Kili shook free and leaned back, unhappy with being treated like a child and with the whole situation in general. “He doesn’t need to know about the law of invitation, hell, he doesn’t know now and lets us in as we please. We just have to scare him a little…”

“Could you?”

Silence fell in the car after these two words. Kili looked away from the blue eyes of his lover that dared him to answer. He looked out of the window, at the sun slowly drifting towards the horizon, chewing at his lower lip, upset and angry.

“I could, you know?” He said finally. He run his fingers through his tangled brown mane and repeated with a bit more conviction. “I would. It wouldn’t be pretty and I would feel like shit, but if you couldn’t… I could.”

He could scare the little man that made him hot chocolate and patiently endured his hugs, the same man who called them ‘boys’ and always wanted to know that they’re alright. He could do that and worse, he was able, perfectly equipped to do worse to people than just scare them a bit. They all were, but he was the youngest and his temper was the quickest - if push came to shove he knew how to point his monster in the right direction and let it go without much remorse.

It was ugly and sad, but it was how he was.

“No,” Fili decided for them both.

This time it wasn’t a fist that impacted with the steering wheel.
“Ungh!” Kili mumbled from underneath the curtain of hair. “This whole thing turns more complicated than the last iTunes update.”

A hand landed on his shoulder and squeezed in a gesture of support. “You have to stop reading Terms and Conditions every bloody time. Now, drive, we still have things to do today.”

There was still tension to be felt in the car, mostly visible in the way Kili's hands gripped the poor abused steering wheel and the way Fili’s eyes kept flicking between present and past.

"Next time I will distract him and you grab the box," the brunet decided in the end. Someone had to. “I want to get this over with before Durin’s Day.”

*

The conservatory was still a mess.

Standing in the doorway, showered and clean and dressed in a new jumper, Bilbo didn't have the energy to even start straightening it out. The only thing he decided that had to be done today was cleaning up the gooseberry puddle left on the antic mosaic. He was a Baggins, and leaving food on the floor just wouldn’t do!

Cleaning it up wasn’t easy - the jar broke into a seemingly endless number of pieces the size of a pine needle each. Trying to sweep them up only resulted in the tiniest ones stuck between the tiles and Bilbo kneeling on the floor with a pile of wet paper towels, trying to fish them out. He could use a vacuum cleaner, but it was currently on the first floor, full of plaster dust and scraps of wallpaper his boys have been pulling down last week. It was altogether too much of a bother to carry it down two flights of stairs.

By the time all that was left of the mess was a wet stain on terracotta, Bilbo realised that he isn’t alone anymore. It would seem that Thorin has finally emerged from his lair.

Well, it might have been a bit of an over-dramatization to call the basement that, but Bilbo has seen that little room in all its Spartan glory and couldn’t really find a hole in his reasoning.

Likewise, ‘emerged’ was too strong of a word. Bilbo turned his head and Thorin was just... present, standing by the double doors, dressed and combed and perfect in his strange way.

It spoke something about a man, when his only reaction to someone appearing behind his back out of nowhere was an exasperated sigh - and Bilbo didn't really want to know what it was. Truth to be told, he was a bit proud of the fact that this time Thorin’s clothes gave him more of a pause than the vampire himself.

And it was only because said vampire has been wearing dark colours for so long that seeing him now in a brilliantly blue shirt was something of a shock to the system... although it was also easy to see that it did compliment his pale skin and dark eyes excellently (but no one was attention to that, certainly). As with the garment currently soaking in the sink, this shirt was also made of the thinnest linen and decorated with a geometric crosshatch design that was so intricate Bilbo’s eyes wanted to cross just from looking at it. At least the trousers were the same, dark cotton.

Still no shoes in sight. Bother.
The only accessory Thorin decided on was a patchwork bathing robe hanging off his shoulder.

“Oh, thank you.” Bilbo blinked, realising the purpose of this sudden re-appearance. “You can just leave it over there,” he pointed to the stack of boxes to the left, where Fili has left the wallpaper earlier. “I will take it when I finish here.”

Thorin did just that. And then stood in place some more, probably surveying the chaos he’s wrought - or maybe not, it was hard to tell with his blank expression on. Bilbo didn't really know what to expect from him at this point; an explanation would be nice, but he didn't hope to get it, because that would be too easy and his life was dead set on avoiding ‘easy’ like a plague.

Feeling exasperated and not a bit confused, he pulled himself to his feet and went about discarding the towels in a quickest way possible - by throwing them into the fireplace. It might have been a bit over the top, but… but it still gave Bilbo a little shiver of delight whenever he's managed to operate the ‘trick’ correctly, even if the grating sound of the door opening still made his teeth hurt. It was just like solving a puzzle, he guessed, a thrill of an adventure that was completely safe and domestic.

Unlike the one that decided to move when he wasn’t looking and now was kneeling by the toolbox just a few feet away.

“Will you stop…!” Bilbo jumped, startled. “How do you even do it?”

Thorin looked at him over a shoulder and shrugged, hands busy with unlocking locks even when the eyes weren't there to supervise them.

“What are you looking for?” The shorter man stepped closer, interested, trying to catch a peek of another ‘trick’. “This is a very nice thing, isn’t it? Did you make it too?”

The vampire nodded, still without a word. Hm, it would seem they were back to the non-verbal communication and it didn't sit well with Bilbo at all. He looked around, desperate to find something to talk about, to break the uneasy silence between them, when his eyes fell on the demolished headboard, still lying by the furnace.

Once, it had to be a beautiful piece of carved and painted wood, adorned with flowers and wines and little birds. Now it was a broken mess and it almost hurt to see it, especially knowing that it was Thorin’s hands that made it so – the hands that knew how to create such beautiful things, too.

“I don’t know what to think of you anymore,” Bilbo whispered and yet it still sounded too loud in the still sir between them.

No answer came.

He decided to be bold (or maybe suicidal, who knew these days?) and asked, “Who was she?”

This time the ‘no answer’ was much colder and pointed and Bibo didn't simply drop the subject - it tore itself out of his hands and crash-landed on the floor breaking into hundred pieces.

His housemate finally found what he’s been looking for and, not even looking in his direction, chose one of the freshly scrubbed chairs to sit down and... started stuffing a pipe?

His movements were slow and steady, face calm, but there was a tension in the air that seemed to thicken with every passing second until Bilbo felt as if waves of ants marched up and down his back. He had never been in the presence of Thorin like that, come to think of it, he had never seen him angry. He felt very glad that he didn’t.
Leave him alone, his inner Baggins advised cautiously, a cup of tea would do us good right about now.

Let him have a smoke and calm the heck down, his Took agreed.

Bilbo was not about to argue.

Walking back to the kitchen, he briefly considered writing a few more pages, but his muse was busy trembling in the corner and he was full of nervous energy that wouldn't let him sit still for more than five minutes. Trying to write in that state was just a waste of time, he knew. He had to do something... something physical, that would tire him out and leave him too exhausted to feel uneasy.

“Well, if anything, we will never run out of snow to shovel,” he muttered to the empty hall, changing directions for the coat closet.

His Took and Baggins both groaned in unison at the idea. Sadly, Bilbo didn't care one bit.

*

Bard was still pale as a ghost, but at least he had stopped swaying like a rugged banner whenever someone sneezed in his general direction. Headstrong, as the boy was, he still insisted with helping to carry the packs and suitcases into the Ford, even though Fili and his grandmother told him repeatedly to sit the hell down and rest.

“I don’t know how you handle that boy,” Fili whispered to the old woman. He helped her to walk from the stairs of her modest cottage to the car and then simply lifted her frail form into the passenger seat. “He’s stubborn as a mule.”

Old Gal chuckled at that and patted his hand in thanks before blinking mischievously and whispering back, “I have a lot of experience with Durins, you see.”

Fili smiled back and, after making sure that the seatbelt is secure, closed the door and walked to the driver’s side. Kili and Bard were on the porch - the latter locking the house for the long absence and the former hovering over his shoulder, as if he expected the teen to drop down in dead faint at any moment. When the last bolt slid home and the door didn't budge under a shoulder push, Kili grabbed the boy under his arm and, to vocal and vigorous protests, walked him to the car.

“...can take care of myself, thank you,” Fili heard as the boy climbed into the back seat.

“I would rather make sure that my favourite blood bank doesn’t fall on his face,” Kili answered tartly, climbing on the other side. “It would be such a bother if you broke your nose or lost your front teeth, I would have to look for another pretty person to feed from.”

“You’ve got plenty of girls jumping over themselves to feed you,” Bard grumbled from behind his scarf, obviously unhappy with that state of things.

“Privilege of age, my boy.”

“You don’t even look older than me!”

“I have more experience in, oh wait, everything.”
“And you’re shorter.”

“First and the most important lesson of your life is that it’s not the size that matters, b.”

“And I already have more facial hair than you will ever have.”

“Oi, that was completely uncalled for!”

“Do I have to stop the car and visit you two dunces back there?” Fili asked, glaring into the rear-view mirror. Both ‘dunces’ shranked in their respective coats while next to him Gal chuckled lightly.

“I have more experience in dealing with my bloodline than you will ever have, girl,” he growled at her playfully.

“I wouldn’t dream to forget about it,” she answered.

Fili refocused on driving; the roads on the western outskirts of the town were still mostly covered in snow and dangerous if one didn’t know how to navigate them. He glanced into the mirror sporadically to make sure that no more arguments take place, but, luckily, Bard at some point decided to fall asleep and did so while leaning on Kili’s shoulder. They made a cute couple. Gal also took a moment to rest her eyes, but at her age it wasn’t that unexpected.

The blond sighed, looking at the old woman sitting next to him. When he saw her for the first time, she was just a little girl, a newborn that was a few days old, a child clinging to her mother’s breast, tiny and adorable. Then, when they came back to Ironhill to check on Kili, she was a young lady - the prettiest girl he’s ever seen, with waist-long hair that glistened like gold in the sun and the prettiest, kindest smile one could imagine. There was a line of suitors waiting at her door almost every morning, waiting for a glance, for a smile.

When they came for the last time, this time to stay, she was a woman of age, happily married and raising her own child. Still as beautiful as a summer’s morning.

That beauty was still visible in her, even at the age of ninety and four: it was in the curl of her smile and wrinkles around her eyes, and in the still thick, snow-white hair braided with care and curled around her thin shoulders. She was looking better than majority of people who have lived to see an age pass them by, but then again, folk in Ironhill cheated time on regular basis…

Even so, it was painful to look at their people growing old and weary, Fili mused. His favourite ‘niece’ was growing tired of living and he knew that they didn’t have much time left with her - she’s raised her only grandchild into a good man and there was a husband and a daughter waiting on her behind the Veil, it would be cruel to keep her longer from joining them.

The rest of the ride to Dori’s was spent in silence - each of the passengers occupied with their own thoughts or sleeping. Fili should have suspected that the calm wouldn’t last long.

When he finally parked the car in front of a nice two story townhouse, Ori was already waiting on them and, stranger still, so was Bofur. Grim looks on their faces didn’t bode well.

“What’s happened?” The blonde was out of the car as soon as the wheels stopped turning. “Bofur?”

The miner/toymaker shook his head and pulled him to the side, motioning for Ori to help Gal and her son out of the car.

“Won’t talk about it on the street, you understand,” he muttered. “Better come and see for yourself.”
“See what?” Kili joined them a second later, curiosity and fear fighting for space on his face. “Come where?”

“The sawmill. I will drive,” Bofur pointed to his own beaten up truck parked a few yards down the street. “Dwalin’s already there and Bifur too. Balin’s getting Gloin. Come on.”

“Wait.” Fili turned back and went to Gal. “We have to go, but we will be back as soon as possible,” he promised, gently grasping her hand. “Ori will help you with everything in the meanwhile.”

She lifted her other hand, so thin and frail, and brought it to his face in a tender caress. “Be safe, Little Uncle.”

With the last chuckle he turned from her and nodded to Bofur to lead the way.

*  

Shovelling snow was tiring and there was no way around it, though it was a great way to unwind.

Also, a great way to sprain one’s back and turn them into a cold, huffing, sweaty mess, but that’s beside the point.

The sun was already halfway behind the line of horizon when Bilbo decided to call it a day. He’d managed to clear the driveway from the shed to the gate sufficiently, praying that the night will be calm enough and that he won’t wake up to piles upon piles of snow the wind has brought in from behind the fence. The last time it had happened he was almost in tears.

Nodding with satisfaction, he put away the shovel and checked on Minty, making sure that her battery will be ready for tomorrow. He was stalling, but it was completely understandable - nothing awaited him inside apart from tense atmosphere and silent anger of his vampire neighbour. Nothing pleasant to go back to.

Out of sheer desperate need to stay outside for a little while longer, Bilbo took to building a snowman. He was set on recreating Uncle Frosty to the best of his abilities - bald head, beard, eyebrows and all. This time he decided to locate him closer to the porch, behind the junipers, hoping they would shelter it from the wind.

However, the wind picked up and his fingers were absolutely freezing by the time the last ball of snow was formed. It was also getting dark and Fili’s warning about the wolves was still fresh enough in Bilbo’s mind to force him back inside.

That, and he was getting quite hungry.

Smell of tobacco carried by the cold air startled him a bit. Curious, he peeked from behind the shrubs and, well, of course Thorin was there. Trust the menace to be constantly underfoot just when he wasn’t wanted. He was sitting on the stairs, and Bilbo shivered reflexively at the sight of his thin shirt and bare feet buried in the snow almost to the ankles. The cold didn’t seem to bother him, however, as he calmly sat there, smoking his pipe and staring into the purple western sky.

With a shrug of resignation Bilbo stalked out of the cover and made for the front door wondering if he should bother with locking them behind him or would it only anger his housemate more. A bit of spite simply wasn’t worth having his brain scrambled again and another sweater ruined.
There was enough space left to walk up the stairs comfortably, and Bilbo did so without a word, not even glancing at the vampire.

“I loved her.” Three little words stopped him mid-step.

“The girl I told you about,” the vampire spoke levelly. “She belonged to my family and while all of them were precious to me, she was a kindred soul I have never thought I would find.”

Bilbo stepped back, but still didn’t look. No, it would be too daring to look, his thundering heart told him, too invasive.

“She called me names and approached me without fear or reservation. So full of life, she was, my little girl, so full of love. A bright soul, untroubled and pure.”

After these words silence fell while more smoke weaved into the still air and Bilbo, who could never stand cigarettes, found that the smell is actually quite pleasant. Woody and rich, like herbs burned in the fragrant autumn air. In some strange way… its presence fit.

“What happened?” He dared to ask, because he understood how hard it was to try and push through the grief. He knew that sometimes one needed incentive to continue.

“She fell in love in a lad from the town,” Thorin breathed out. “I approved,” he added quickly, surprising the shorter man, who started imaging completely different scenario. “They married in winter, because she wanted the wedding to happen on the lake, thought it was all romantic and whatnot.”

A low chuckle followed, but it quickly turned hollow and painful, and from the corner of his eye Bilbo saw the vampire covering his eyes with one hand.

It made him finally turn, just a bit. He didn’t dare to reach out, but he said, “You don’t have to…”

“She could not carry children.”

His mouth snapped shut.

“They’ve tried again and again over the years,” Thorin was speaking as if every word caused him pain. “But the children always came too early and none survived, while she grew weaker and weaker… I begged her to stop trying. She didn’t listen.” A long intake of breath and more smoke wafted into the cold air. “The last time was almost a success, but… but the child was resting wrong and there were… complications.”

“Thorin…”

“It killed her,” the words fell heavy and dark between them. “Something she thought of as a blessing, and it killed her. And for all of my power and skill… for all of my love… I could not bring her back…”

*

The sawmill was dark when they got there. It was well after the sunset and, barely more than a week before Christmas, the place stood empty as the workers were granted time off to spend with their
families before the holiday. Lack of lights didn't bother their kind in any way, but it served as a confirmation that the situation inside was serious. - Dwalin obviously didn’t want to concern any townsfolk, least someone decides to investigate strange gathering in the old mill.

Bofur knocked on the solid, steel-reinforced door three times and it took no time at all before they’ve opened, revealing a dishevelled figure on the other side.

“Is Balin back yet?” Bofur asked, pushing inside and motioning for the other two to follow.

Bifur’s hands flew up in a flurry of signs accompanied by a low growling; by the time he finished speaking Fili almost growled along.

“Lead the way,” he ordered and followed the man into the darkness, Kili and Bofur right on their heels.

The thing was, he could have easily found the way by following his own nose - the place simply stunk of wet fur, blood and sickness. The smell alone was enough to raise hair on the back of his neck and a powerful urge to remove that thing from the vicinity of the town, from the existence alone, was almost choking him.

Walking behind Bifur, step in step with his own pack, eased the urgency a bit, grounded Fili in the mindset of a leader instead of a bloodthirsty avenger.

They crossed the crew area and the production hall, heading for the smaller stockroom in the back. Kili, for once, was silent, only the tightening grip he had on Fili’s hand betraying his nervousness. Bifur kept signing to his brother who nodded and signed back in a silent conversation the blond didn’t pay attention to. All his senses were focused on the trail of stench, narrowing down to the double steel doors in front of them that were halfway open.

Dwalin’s powerful figure appeared in the gap, his stern face looking as grim as ever.

“Children spotted it stalking on the other bank of the river,” he said without preamble. “Bifur was on watch. By the time I got there it was done an’ dusted, but you have to see it.”

Fili nodded slowly and said only two words. “Show me.”

He entered the stockroom and there it was, laying on a plastic tarp in a circle of weak moonlight falling into the room through the single small window in the ceiling. Blood barely had the time to dry, covering its head and stomach in dark red splotches that stood out starkly against the tangled, ashen fur. The body was… just wrong. Front legs too long, claws too big and misshapen, hind legs were still short, but twisted to a degree that had to cause the beast immense pain when it tried to walk as bone tore through the skin in a few places.

The head was the worst. Regardless of the damage taken from Bifur, it was horrifically deformed: gaping mouth filled with altogether too many teeth, with a scrap of a tongue that the animal had to chew off in its madness, even the eyes… Fili swallowed with difficulty at the sight of engorged eyeballs sticking out if the skull at sickly angles.

“What kind of devil is that?” A voice spoke next to him and it took a moment before he realised it belonged to Gloin.

The mayor stared at the fallen beast with ill concealed horror and un-concealed disgust, one coat sleeve stuck to the nose in hopes of protecting him from the smell of decay.

“It was a wolf,” Fili answered calmly. Too calmly, said the way Kili squeezed his hand. “At some
point in the past, at least."

“A wolf?” Balin stepped closer, as always collected and hiding his shock well. “This is too big to be a wolf, lad.”

“But it was,” the blond assured. He looked at the body and snorted in disgust, barely stopping himself from kicking it. He needed air. “If we need more proof that the Others near, this is it,” he snarled. “Only their foul blood can do something like that with a living creature.”

A low growl turned everyone’s attention to the Bifur who was signing something furiously.

“He says that he saw it before,” Bofur translated for the ones that could not understand the language. “During the war, he says… wait, that?” The minder/toymaker turned to his sibling, furious. “And you never told me, you lump?!”

A signed argument followed.

“He is right,” Dwalin picked up the issue. “I remember them tales of beasts… mostly thought it to be tales lads in the trenches told to scare each other or just normal madness. But they were telling about wolf-beasts as big as a pony stalking the forests they've tried to take cover in.”

“It wasn’t madness, at least not the kind you think of,” Fili forced himself to look over the creature once more, this time trying to assess as much as possible, while the carcass kept decomposing right in front of them. “This one is young yet, not transformed fully I would guess. They grow bigger, but only if they eat like crazy, so at least we know that there are no bodies to search for. It was easier to make them during the war, with all the meat lying around and no one caring to count it…”

“Fili,” Kili’s whisper brought him back from dark memories. “Let’s get out of here. It stinks.”

They all seemed to agree, so he just nodded. After the doors have been closed and locked for good measure, Fili felt his knees go weak. His beast was still agitated, but at last now, with more fresh air to breathe in, it’s territorial instincts somewhat settled.

“They make… these?” Balin was, yet again, the one to ask important questions. “How?”

“Their blood’s poison!” Dwalin growled out. “It taints everything it touches, that’s how! It turns normal folk into… into…”

“Monsters,” Fili finished, laying a hand on the powerful arm and sucking out as much anger from his friend as he could. It was cheating, but he needed them all with clear heads now. “As far as I know, we are different from the Others in almost every sense.” he spoke to the gathered men. “We can walk in the light, we can wield silver and we don’t have to kill to survive. These are our advantages. But they have numbers on their side and you can’t reason with them. They find joy in killing their victims and turning them into monsters, like that thing in there,” he pointed at the steel door. “The lowest of them will feed on animals if there’s nothing else available. That poor beast has probably bit its killer before dying and it was enough to twist it…”

“What do we do, then?” Gloin voiced the question they were all thinking. He belonged to the long line of nobles that lived in Ironhill, his concern was for his family and citizens first and foremost, and his trust in the Durins till now was unfailing. “How do we defend ourselves from that plague? We can’t evacuate whole town! Not in this weather.”

Fili lowered his head for a moment, mind awhirl, trying to find a solution, a way to protect them all, but nothing came to mind. They needed weapons that would work on the Others, not only repel them, but kill them permanently and these were rare and closely guarded by the Hunters.
Hunters that hated their kind on par with the Others.

“We need this research done faster,” he decided in the end, nodding to Balin. “Everything you can unearth, we will try it. Contact Nori,” he turned to Dwalin. “I don’t care about your little spats, but if he has any pointers, we’re taking them on. Gloin,” the red-headed man jumped, when addressed, “call off the townsmen, from now on the watches will be our business. Just… try to keep everyone in their houses as much as possible, the law of invitation has power over these rats, at least, so they should be safe.”

“Should,” the man repeated stoically.

“Should,” Fili said in something of an apology. “I have no idea why they decided to come here now of all times,” he confessed. “But this is a place He’s created, so maybe they look for the same thing we are, maybe not. Maybe it’s just a stray pack moving at random, maybe not. All I know now is that we have to do everything we can to protect Ironhill. I will do everything I can, Gloin, you can trust that if nothing else.”

“I trust you, boy,” the mayor said, grasping his shoulders in his big hands. His face always had something fatherly about it, a steadiness and resolve, but now it reflected only fear.

I trust you, but I am afraid all the same, was the unspoken part.

“Aren’t we all,” Kili agreed quietly.

*

Cold wind tried to bury its icy claws in his face, tangling his hair and trying to get at his eyes. It brought tiny snowflakes that stuck to his eyelashes and he didn't have the will to blink them off. He felt tired, empty of resolve of any kind.

He felt hollow. From the moment he woke up from a century-long dream, he felt hollow.

In the darker moments he compared his body to a casket - the one that has been buried under the stone in the Churchyard downhill many ages ago, bearing his name and a false promise of eternal peace for his soul.

There was no peace for him, not now. Not ever, maybe.

Not while he kept losing them, and losing them, and losing them…

Decades in the small, barren room had to rob him of something more than strength, he mused sometimes, because he remembered that he’s never felt this empty before. Even despair was a pale shadow of what it should have been - of what it was, before. As was curiosity for this strange new world he’s been pushed into, as was fascination with its numerous developments…

He restored his strength, at least some of it, via the short, awkward man that dared to claim his home. True, there was still some grey in his hair he never acquired in life, but his body was back in shape and the hunger was back under control.

And yet everything else was… dormant. He tried to feel with all his might and sometimes, when he couldn’t stand it anymore, he shamelessly stole from his little guest, - in small doses, touch after
touch, trying to fill up that hole in himself with the pieces of robbed feelings.

The anger earlier was unexpected, yet glorious. It poured out of him and filled every crack and every crevice in his soul, and for a moment all he wanted to do was to let it run free, to drop the reins and let the rage carry him…

But he was, indeed, too old to let go like that, he already knew that there was only bigger misery to be found at the end of this road. And so he reined himself in and tried to control the damage his momentary lapse in common sense wrought on the poor, little man he shared Erebor with… And when he touched that small, trembling shoulder another shock rushed through his system, like a strike of a lightning, unexpected and stunning.

Fear he felt in that touch was unlike anything he’s ever felt before from anyone - pure and undiluted, as if there was nothing between them, as if they shared the same headspace and it was filled with electricity.

It was… weird. And unsettling.

But it was feeling, the kind he yearned for since awakening, so he kept the connection open for as long as possible.

Now even the sound of the man’s breathing behind him was strangely grounding - in the way that only a presence of someone living, someone real, was reassuring to a lonely creature such as him. There was no outward reaction to his story for a long while and it gave Thorin enough time to start doubting his decision to tell it.

It’s not that he wanted forgiveness or understanding from the human, he was too old to expect those, too proud to accept any attempts at consolation. No, he didn't need any of these. He just wanted… to say it. It happened so long ago, but for him it might as well have been yesterday - he wasn’t given time to mourn his kindred soul, his beloved little girl and her husband, who was a good man. Their unborn baby that she’s waited on for so long.

“Who is going to wipe that frown off your face when I’m gone? I need to leave someone behind who will take care of your moods, you grumpy old crumpet.”

He just needed to say it, needed for someone to listen. It was for him, no other reason, just for him and his peace of mind.

When he finally heard the man moving, he thought it was to walk away - and was quite surprised when Master Baggins settled down on the step next to him, close, but not touching. Huddled in his red jacket, in a truly ridiculous hat, with his cheeks and nose red from cold the man looked startlingly young and unguarded.

“I told you my parents are already gone,” his expression was relaxed and peaceful when he started to speak. “They left early. Dad died when I was just a teenager, you know, he was coming back from one of his research trips, was going to write a book about Hungarian cuisine. Twenty miles from home a lorry… that’s a very big truck… crashed into his car. He died on the way to the hospital.”

Thorin looked at the man, startled. What was the purpose of it? He didn't understand…

“My Mum followed him seven years later,” Bilbo continued, seemingly not noticing the inquisitive way he was being regarded in. His small gloved hands were pressed tightly together, fingers twisted around each other. “Cancer,” he said. And explained quickly, “It’s a kind of a disease we have no cure for yet. There are treatments to make it better, but… it was in her bones and there was nothing
to be done about it. Just… just waiting. I was barely out of university, with no job, and there was no one else to take care of her. We had to sell Bag End. It was my mother’s business,” he smiled wanly at the memory. “Bed and breakfast, lovely place, really cozy and peaceful, she loved it to bits… but there was so many bills to pay and the medication and nurses…”

Pipe smoke felt bitter in his mouth when he sneaked a look at the glassy, grey eyes. Were his own eyes glowing again? It was hard to tell, he'd never had any control over it, but it felt wrong when the man winced and lowered his head.

He wasn’t that off putting, was he?

“Well, it was over within a year,” Baggins spoke to his collarbones. “She wasn’t in pain at the end, thankfully. It’s just that I thought… that she would he there forever, you know? That they would be a constant and we would have so much more time together…” A muffled sniffle followed, but the man bravely stopped himself from any further display of sorrow. "Ah well, not everything can be as sturdy and lasting as your furnace, I guess, no matter how much care we put into it.”

And then one of these small hands patted his hand and the man startled.

“Oh, look at that!” he exclaimed quietly, bowing his head to take a closer look at the snowflakes clinging to Thorin’s skin.

They weren’t melting. They never did.

“That is… oh,” he mumbled. “That’s… strange. You’re not that cold at all, and yet...”

“It’s how it is,” Thorin said. “I guess that my kind stands apart from logic.”

Apart from everything, he stood, forever removed from reality of the living by the curse placed upon him. By the constant existence he was forced to endure. And yet...

Unthinkingly, but quite daringly, he turned his hand, slowly, not to scare the little man sitting next to him and looking at him with concern. He didn’t look as his fingers spread to intertwine with the warm, human ones, because his eyes were busy with paying attention to Master Baggins’s face, searching for the smallest sign that the touch was unwelcome.

It didn’t seem to be. He was trying to be gentle, remembering his strength, but a moment later it was his hand that was being squeezed tighter and he felt.

No reassurance and no pity. No, in that moment on the stairs to Erebor, in the dark and really bad weather, the only thing between them was a speck of shared misery. A bit of understanding born out of pain and loss, and loneliness.

“No,” the little man patted their joined hands lightly, a small sad smile gracing his reddened face. “I think that a cup of hot tea is in order, don’t you?”

And maybe… maybe that was exactly what Thorin needed at this moment in time.
Okay, as promised, this one is long:D
And also, as promised to someone, this one is a bit more 'racy' than the usual fareXD (as much as I can make it at this stage, you know, they've just metXD)

Also, I am crap at getting the plot together because I want to write about EVERYONE and EVERYTHING and ALL! T_T So sorry, so sorry...

Also, you should totally check out this thing this thing made by Ewebean because it's amazeballs=_____________= You should be amazed. Are you amazed yet?

Also, I am thanking all the peeps who picked me up after my recent stumble into the realm of self-doubtT_T You are all lovely and if I could, I would hug you all till you popped:D
Special thanks to Syxx for being extra cool to meT_T Syxx, along with Kazechi, are the ones who betaed this chapter (cause I suck) and for that another wave of thanks rolls their way:)

That being said, as per usual, enjoy:D

Bilbo woke up with a stretch and a groan. The curtains in his room were half-drawn - he left them like that on purpose, so the sun could finish the job his alarm clock had started and push him out of bed sooner rather than later.

He was not an early riser by nature and coming to grips with the reality of mornings always took him more time than it was entirely respectable. Dragging his body from under a pile of warm coziness was a real task - made even more frustrating by the fact that, ironically, it was in the morning that his muse was working her hardest and his writing flow was the swiftest.

All was made even worse when there was a morning problem to take care of.

Like today.

Sometimes, Bilbo had enough brainpower to feel exasperated with his own body. He was a mature man, not a teen anymore! Waking up half-hard in an empty bed was a bother more often than not, especially when there was a busy day ahead of him.

But sometimes, on those rare lazy mornings bright with young sun, warm and cozy under a comforter and a pile of blankets… he was willing to spare a few moments on dealing with his problem in the old-fashioned way. Mostly by thinking of heavy breasts with soft rosy nipples hardening under his touch or of thick shoulders and furry chests pressing him into the mattress -
greedy as he was, Bilbo never imagined a life where he would be forced to choose one over the other when both visions were quite lovely and perfectly serviceable.

Today’s fantasy focused on the latter. A tall sturdy body tightly pressed to his shorter form, every move inducing delicious friction between them. All that glorious muscle and hot skin under his hands, a thick tangle of chest hair he could bury his fingers in...

Smiling softly to no one in particular Bilbo turned to lay on his back, one hand slowly sliding down his naked belly and easily slipping under the hem of loose striped bottoms. His eyes opened a crack to take joy in the beautiful, sunny morning...

...

Never, in all his life, has his cock deflated so quickly as when his wandering gaze met the eyes of a vampire standing calmly by the footboard. By the time Bilbo snatched his hand back on top of the covers there was so little blood left in the organ that it *stung*!

“Y… you!” He spluttered, backing up against the headboard, clutching at his covers like a Victorian maiden. “You!”

The vampire nodded politely.

“Master Baggins,” he answered in greeting.

“Mast… no!” Bilbo was having none of it! “What are you doing here?! Is knocking on the list of things *your kind* avoids, too?!”

He could have sworn that Thorin hesitated a bit with his answer, as if the presented notion never crossed his mind.

“I apologize,” he said with a tiny little grimace that could be counted as something apologetic. Or not. “I am unused to living with strangers and sometimes I forget myself. I was about to wake you.”

Huffing like an old crock pot, Bilbo slowly rolled out of bed (after quickly ensuring that yes, his erection was well and truly dead) and tried to locate his slippers. The vampire stood in place, watching him curiously and not offering any sort of help or explanation. That was just rude.

“I do hope you’re not spending your nights watching me as I sleep,” Bilbo allowed himself to joke at his housemate’s expense and the sheer ridiculousness of that idea almost made him laugh out loud.

“Why would I do that?” Thorin folded his powerful arms across the chest, one eyebrow raising. He knew he was being made fun of in some manner and just wasn’t sure if it’s worth getting offended over.

“It’s a book reference,” Bilbo explained. He gave up trying to stay at least partially warm and dived under the bed in his search. “Pop culture, I will explain it to you sometimes.”

“Ah, dreaded pop culture,” the vampire stated sagely. “I am not sure I want to know about it, then. Not after the... last time.”

“Last time” happened a few days prior when Bilbo stupidly decided that he has enough knowledge to explain rap music. That conversation led to even more confusion and an explosive argument that ended up pretty much on a note of “Alright, then!” versus “Fine!”

Afterwards, they both felt like idiots and needed a lot of tea to recover from it.
“But I still don’t know why you’ve decided to barge in like that!” Bilbo growled from under the bed. Why was it always the left slipper that marched its way almost beyond reach? “And why are you even… awake yet?”

True, usually Thorin is who-knows-where and doing who-knows-what throughout most of the day. The earliest glimpse of him Bilbo ever got was in the late afternoon - just in time for tea, and wasn’t that suspicious?

“I do not spend my days sleeping, Master Baggins,” the vampire answered, wry amusement colouring his voice. “But you have mentioned that you intend to visit the library today and I would like to request some specific material. The magazine you’ve brought last time falls somewhat short on explaining the more intricate details of a feedback carburetor.”

“Well, they are not very in depth, I agree.” He could almost touch the damn thing! Just an inch more… “They’re mostly arranged in a way that would give young people information they can actually understand.”

“Also, there seems to be a problem with your washing machine.”

“What...?!”

One bonk to the head and some pained flailing later a very unhappy Bilbo Baggins was glaring at his housemate, still one slipper short. And just like that his glorious morning was irretrievably lost.

*

“Home appliances?” Bombur took a moment between bagging Bilbo’s shopping to scratch his head in thought. “What kind are we talking about?”

“Washing machine parts,” Bilbo explained, unhappy. “I need a new drawer for mine, you see, there has been an accident and it’s… well, it needs replacing.”

No, he was not happy about the situation and would it be at all possible, he would be already halfway through a rant of epic proportions. If he was living with anyone else other than Thorin, Bilbo would act like every exasperated housemate on the surface of the Earth and complain to everyone who was willing to listen. But he wasn’t and so he couldn’t.

And to think that he’s even agreed to run an errand for the vampire after having his morning marred with trauma and his property destroyed!

Well, Thorin did apologize for both occurrences, but… that was the crux of the problem, Thorin always apologized. And always made it seem like he means it. And that fact alone made Bilbo, raised to be well-mannered and respectable, virtually unable to be anything but polite. He wanted to hold on to his anger, he really did, but faced with heartfelt remorse he could not utter anything beyond a grumpy, but agreeable, “Well, yes, just don’t do it again.”

He almost suspected that his housemate had discovered that fatal flaw in his personality and was now using it to his own advantage whenever possible. But that was too scary of a thing to ponder. Not only was Bilbo easily overpowered by his supernatural neighbour, now he was easily outwitted by him too!
“Hmm, you can ask Frar if he can order it for you,” Bombur kept talking, seemingly missing the
glower on his customer’s face. “He has an electric store in town.”

“That would be great,” Bilbo nodded, allowing friendly conversation to calm his nerves. “Where can I
find it?”

“Ah, right! I keep forgetting that you’re not local,” the man laughed jovially. “It’s just off the market,
on the left of the Town Hall... or, you could always ask my sweetheart for directions. She has a stall
at the Christmas Market full of her special preserves, you would do well to see her about that jam,
Mister Baggins. Some of our lot are supposed to be helping, so just follow the noise.”

“I think that I just might,” Bilbo answered eagerly enough. It was a serious matter after all - as of
now he really didn’t imagine his life without a liberal amount of the Ur’s gooseberry jam in it. “Now,
however, tell me about that apple pie? Did it turn out well?”

He was pretty anxious about it, to be honest; not every day a Baggins was willing to share one of
their most praised recipes. His worries, however, were dashed entirely by a wide smile appearing on
Bombur’s dimpled face (yes, it was when they smiled that the resemblance between all Urs was plain
to see - dimples, cheekiness and all the rest).

“I have to tell you that it turned out more than well!” Bombur was visibly pleased with himself. He
leaned in closer to whisper conspiringly. “I would be grateful if the matter stayed between the two of
us, if it’s at all possible. It would not do for everyone in Ironhill to know how to make pies of such
superb quality least they all start thinking they can bake and where will that leave us, real
connoisseurs?”

Surprised by this side of a man he up until now had thought to be very straight-laced and benign,
Bilbo started to giggle. Oh yes, he was missing that.

Lately he was able to lure his housemate into a conversation more and more often, but these random
debates still fell woefully short of a real friendly chat his soul desperately needed. He was an
introvert, not a loner!

After a while Bombur and Bilbo were both chuckling and swapping witty one-liners (to the overall
bewilderment of customers milling between the shelves) and all but pinky-swearing that the secret to
a perfect apple pie will stay buried with them. Bilbo asked politely about Bombur’s children (all eight
of them) and the man was happy to tell him of the funnier developments going on in his amazingly
loud, incredibly busy home. He laughed off Bilbo’s inability to remember the names of his brood,
claiming that he himself had problems with them from time to time and if it was left to his wife, their
children would simply have numbers assigned at birth to make things easier.

Exiting the Cauldron almost an hour later, laden with bags full of food, Bilbo felt light and happy.
He stuffed the shopping into the boot of his car and closed all the locks, deciding to take a walk to
the Market. It was a nice, sunny day, and streets were busy with people trying to get the last of their
Christmas shopping done. There were children enjoying their school holidays and elder couples
strolling hand in hand across the white world of Ironhill. It was...

So peaceful. So different from always loud Bree, from London and its constant rush of bodies. Bilbo
didn’t remember a winter in a city that was just... white. Snow was a rarity down South and it tended
to turn into a nasty slush as soon as it touched the ground.

Ironhill was busy too, but in a completely different way. People still had time here to greet each
other, to stop and chat for a moment or two on a corner of the street, to invite each other for coffee or
a cake.
Walking into the Market Square Bilbo was so enamored with the image of the town, with the sound of snow crunching under his boots and the clean whiteness all around him... that he almost got ran over.

By a train.

“Watch yer step!” yelled the smiling machinist with a ridiculous hat and a gaggle of underage passengers repeating after him - perfectly mimicking the accent and over-pronunciation.

“Bofur…?” Bilbo yelped, tripping over the miniature tracks in his haste to get out of the way. “What…!”

The man sent him another cheeky smile and pulled on a string hanging by his shoulder. The steam whistle tooted and the choo choo rolled along, trailed by three little carts.

Dumbfounded, Bilbo’s eyes followed the train until it disappeared behind a wall of stalls and busy crowd - which wasn't exactly difficult, since it was four feet tall at most. It also rolled forward at a staggering speed of a leisurely walk, as confirmed by a rather scary man following it on foot and making sure that none of the children fell out of the carts.

When their paths crossed, said man gave Bilbo a very reproaching look, as if the whole incident was him trying to sabotage the main attraction, which was just ridiculous! Really! It’s not as if there was a sign or anything at all warning him what to expect!

He walked into the labyrinth of stalls mumbling and grumbling, but soon enough his mood cleared and dark thoughts were replaced by nothing short of elation. No Baggins could honestly hold on to his ire when surrounded with this much food.

There was just so much of it! The smells and sights and colours, and sheer assortment!

Dwalin told him some time ago that the Ironhillers were mostly self-sufficient when it came to all kind of things, but Bilbo never expected that trait to extend all the way to the contents of their fridges!

The first stall he stumbled upon was filled with cheeses of all sizes and flavours, packed neatly into handmade straw boxes. The next one was a logical choice, really, where a man in a thick, furry parka praised his local wines without stopping for a breath and offered samples as freely as if he was manning a bar rather than a market stall. Following his nose led Bilbo to a local baker and baskets full of crunchy, aromatic breads and rolls. Cakes and pastries with all kinds of fillings surrounded him from all sides, all demanding to be tasted!

Jars of pickled peppers and sauerkraut dumplings, pies filled with pork or apples, slathered with icing or adorned with crumbs. Garlands of dried mushrooms and fruit hung over his head filling the air with their aroma. Fish and lamb fought for attention amongst the stalls that hung heavy with smoked sausages and cured hams. And all was interwoven with the finest examples of local crafts - woodworkers and metalworkers talked and laughed, warming their hands on the cups of mulled wine and grog, their works reflecting the sun with polished lacquer and gleaming steel.

Everything a person could imagine to find on a Christmas market was here, and Bilbo, for all his apparent maturity, felt like a ten year old surrounded by miracles.

That is, a ten year old with a hefty wallet.

The feeling only intensified when he has wandered into the separate section of the square, pulled by the sounds of children’s laughter and exclamations of delight, and saw the toys.
It was as if Santa’s workshop exploded over the stalls. Little miracles made of wood and metal danced in front of his eyes on strings and springs, and in many different ways he could not even explain. Hand painted horses galloped around their carousels to the notes of waltzes and lullabies, ballerinas twirled and soldiers checked their weapons; knights and princesses met and fell in love to the sounds of dozens of whistles and harmonicas, and tiny, perfect fiddles.

By the time Bilbo had managed to catch a glimpse of Bombur’s wife, he was laden with bags and boxes, face fixed into an expression of awe.

Alris Ur was, ironically, tiny. A wisp of a woman that didn't look like she could be a mother of eight children. With a ninth on the way, from the looks of it.

She spotted him from afar, waving in greeting, and when they've met she hugged him and kissed his cheek - a mother to everyone that sat at her table at least once, it would seem. In no time Bilbo was struggling to keep up with sampling all of the preserves pushed his way, but he wouldn’t even dream to complain! He shared his misery at losing the best jam of all way before its time and was almost ecstatic to see that, thank goodness, there was more of it.

Three jars more, to be exact, all of them ending up in his possession.

Alris was a talkative, lively sort, laughing and joking all the time, and the man didn’t even realize that he’s spent almost an hour at her stall, discussing weather and gossiping while the oldest of her children milled around.

This state of affairs came to an end, however, when a pair of arms sneaked around Bilbo’s chest and he was unceremoniously lifted into the air and… hugged.

“Mister B!” A cheerful voice exclaimed into his ear and all the kids around them burst into giggles.

“Kili! Put me down this instant!”

“How much do you want for this one, Alris?” The teen ignored him in lieu of addressing the chuckling woman. “I would like the fancy box too… Ow!”

Bilbo pulled at the ear he’s managed to capture until his feet were back on the ground.

“You need to be taught manners, you scamp!” He snapped, attempting to right his rumpled clothing and, maybe, force his face to stop blushing in embarrassment. The gall of this boy, really! “I will talk to your uncle if you don’t stop doing this!”

“I am sorry, Mister B,” Kili said while looking not sorry at all. “But I haven’t seen you in ages!”

“It wasn’t even two weeks!” Bilbo corrected, incredulous. “And only because Fili said you have things to do before the New Year…”

Wait. There was something not right with the image of the lad in front of him. Something that pulled at Bilbo’s attention.

Oh, right.

“Where’s Fili?” He asked, looking around for the other half of the Oakenshield Set.

“Helping Balin with stuff,” Kili shrugged. Then he reached for Bilbo’s shopping that, till now, was leaning carefully against the side of the Ur’s stall. “What did you get? Any presents for your handsome employees?”
Bilbo tried to smack him away, but the lad was simply too tall and gangly, and his reach was superior.

It was just when they’ve heard Alris clearing her throat in a rather pointed fashion that they’ve realized that people all around were staring and giggling.

“Now, Kili, don’t harass my prized customer in front of everyone!” She teased. “You know better.”

“Yes, I do…” the boy agreed with an unhappy little frown.

“No, he doesn’t!” Bilbo wanted to argue, but didn’t; they’ve already made enough commotion as it was. What would his father think of him now! People were staring! “Anyway, I have to go,” he turned to Alris. “It was nice talking to you. I don’t know if we will see each other before Christmas, so please take my best wishes for you and your family.”

“Thank you kindly, Mister Baggins,” Alris reached out to give him one more hug, but halfway through her expression changed, as if a great idea reached her. “You know what, that mansion is so big and empty… If you don’t want to spend Christmas alone, you are always welcome in our home!”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t possibly impose…” Bilbo stammered awkwardly.

“Bah humbug!” The woman swathed at his shoulder. “You’ve seen the chaos already, one more head won’t make a difference and you’ll have some warm homemade food on your plate!”

“Well, then I will be delighted to come over.” This time he hugged back properly, eyes misting with emotion.

They were just so nice, here! All of them, they were so nice...

“So, where are we going now, Mister B?” Kili asked, already in possession of the better part of his shopping.

Okay, maybe not all...

“I am going to find an appliance store,” Bilbo said with a direct pressure on the ‘I’ part. ”And I would thank you not to hurl me around like a toy!”

“Oh, Frar’s?” Kili freely ignored his request and pushed through the crowd. “Why? Are you finally coming to your senses and getting a sandwich toaster?”

“Nothing of the sort! I just need some parts.” How could he stay angry at this lad? It was the same with Thorin, one genuine smile and a bit of young enthusiasm and he was done! “For a washing machine if you need to know.”

“Yeah, that’s cool,” Kili didn’t seem to pay all that much attention, but Bilbo couldn’t really blame him since every five seconds the teen was being ambushed by a child or waved at by a pretty girl - all of whom seemed dead bent on wishing him Happy Christmas, with a generous serving of ‘and pass it on to Fili’. “I can show you where the store is… oh, hey Bard! That’s Bard, over there!”

Bilbo’s head almost twisted off when he was pointed to a rather lanky looking teen trudging through the crowd.

“You may see him around Erebor every once in a while. He is our resident hunter. Don’t worry he’s good. Just saying, in case you’ll ever see a guy stalking along the hedge with a hunting rifle and
Oh, well, that was surprisingly thoughtful. And Kili seemed to know it too, because his smile showed nothing but teeth… until another little person bumped into his stomach, causing his eyes to almost pop out of the sockets.

“You seem very popular today,” Bilbo skillfully covered a chuckle with a well-timed cough.

“Today?” The youth wiggled his eyebrows at him and the chuckle won. “I am popular every day, Mister B.”

“And quite full of yourself, too.”

“Of course, who else should I be full of?”

The older man almost choked at that, because it was so close to an innuendo… one that a person so young should not mention in public at all! He’s already felt like the lad’s uncle of a sort, he didn’t want to discuss… things like that… with him!

“Oy, Mister B, how about you finally get a TV into that dreary place of yours?”

Glad not to have his suspicions confirmed, Bilbo happily changed the subject.

“No, Kili, I told you already, I just need some parts…”

“Yeah, yeah, boring,” the boy sneered. “Come on, it’s Christmas! Live a bit! Buy yourself a present!”

“You mean, buy you a present by extension?”

“Yes, that too, but you come first.” The cheeky monkey didn’t even see the problem. “You are so old for such a young guy, you know? Do you even have a tree set up yet?”

Bilbo realized with a fair amount of surprise that no, he had not. There was just too many different things to worry about that there wasn’t any time for him to even attempt decorating... Bugger.

“Uncle can get you the biggest, bushiest spruce you’ve ever seen, you know, just ask.”

“Needles!”

This mumbled answer got him a look so genuinely shocked and distasteful that he almost blushed in embarrassment - not even sure why.

“Oh Mahal, you’re not fun at all!” Kili exclaimed for all the world to hear.

Ma-who?

“I am plenty fun, thank you!” Bilbo pushed forward without a glance. He was far from being a stick in the mud some people wanted to paint him as, thank you!

“Just not the messy kind?”

“Exactly!” He was just exceptionally good at shooting himself in the foot, wasn’t he? “You…!”

“Don’t worry, Mister B, I’m just messin’ with you,” Kili smiled, patting him on the back with surprising gentleness. “You’re just like Dori… with the difference that you can’t pop my head off
with one hit… so it just feels natural to tease you, I guess. Come on, let’s get you that non-messy tree, then.”

What was this magic, Bilbo didn’t know, but soon enough a box containing a mini Christmas tree joined his other burdens. He’d even let Kili bully him into buying a wreath for the front door and some festive decorations, even though he saw little sense in decorating an empty house.

But then again… the house wasn’t empty, there were two occupants living in it. And it has never even occurred to him to ask Thorin about his opinion on the matter of Christmas. It was beyond inconsiderate!

Pushed by guilt, Bilbo obediently purchased more decorations and even some nice smelling candles he imagined would look lovely in the conservatory (and hopefully kill the faint smell of linseed oil that filled the place).

It barely registered with him when they've finally managed to get out of the throng and stood in front of *Frar’s Essential Electrics*.

Frar was a grumpy old man that apparently didn’t care for anyone who interrupted his intense battle of wits with crosswords in *Ironhill Daily*. At least that was Bilbo’s first impression when he’s finally braved the utter labyrinth of washing machines, dryers, shelves full of radios and flat screen TVs, only to be rewarded with a very unimpressed look and a disgruntled grunt that might have sounded a bit like ‘what’ya want, ey?’

However, the situation changed completely when he was pushed to the side by a mobile mass of a teenage boy and his cheerfully loud, “Hi-ya, Frar! I have a customer for you!” that made the man almost fall off his chair in the mad scramble to *be useful*.

Huh, what do you know?

Half an hour (and one successfully placed order) later Bilbo could not stop the question that has been on the tip of his tongue.

“Are you a magical creature?”

Kili stopped trying to stuff the biggest bag between Minty’s driver’s seat and the back seats and looked at him like a deer caught in the headlights. “...What are you talking about, Mister B?”

Well, okay, the question was silly… at least for someone who didn't know that vampires existed and wasn’t forced to share his living space with them.

Or wrote fantasy novels for a living.

“Or some sort of a companion beast in human form?” Bilbo carried on, unconcerned by the strange look he was receiving. He closed the boot after carefully arranging his shopping inside. “If I take you out with me every time, are you adding points to my Rhetoric or is it some sort of hypnosis?”

Goodness, it certainly seemed so! The sheer charm that the Oakenshield brothers harnessed for their own purposes could not be natural. Heck, Bilbo always considered himself to be a fairly headstrong person, quite jaded and impervious to cons of any kind… and that faith was hard to hold onto when he kept dancing to the rhythm of two teenagers like a toy on a string!

“Mister B, you are too cute to be real.”

Or having them speak to him like that!
“Pardon me…!”

“I am sooo going to hug you now.”

As he said, he did, and with no more warning than that Bilbo was being hugged. On the sidewalk. In plain sight of Ironhill.

_Oh, for heaven's sake!_ His Took sneered at him like Aunt Gloriosa used to do. _He’s right, you act like an old man!_

And since the Baggins side had nothing to contradict that statement, Bilbo sighed and tentatively hugged the boy back. At least this time Kili wasn’t trying to lift him up, small victory as it was.

“You desperately need a girlfriend,” the teen said in the end, straightforward and shameless, and obviously pleased with himself. “Or a boyfriend. Or both. Someone to give you cuddles and think of things like Christmas trees and television for you.” The cheek! “And I happen to know a very nice single lady that…”

“Kili!”

Oh, what wouldn’t he give for Thorin’s ability to glower someone into shutting up! Or that thing he did with _silence and looking_ that had the potential to peel paint off the walls!

The young ruffian laughed like a loon and, with a wave and a promise of _seeing later_, allowed his long legs to carry him away.

Bilbo, meanwhile, did his best to forget that the scene he just took a part in happened at all. He shook himself off like a cat that unknowingly walked under a lawn sprinkler and firmly put the whole experience out of his mind.

He didn't need anyone! He was perfectly fine on his own! And he’s already had a… well, he’s had a vampire in the basement!

A vampire that kept him company and provided enough distraction. Bilbo didn't really miss sex all that much - not enough to bother with a _proper_ relationship and all things it entitled, anyway. Not after the way the last one had ended…

“I will _have to_ talk to Dwalin,” he promised himself, closing the car. His next stop was the library, then just a quick visit to Post Office and he would be home with his scary housemate and his tea. “This is getting ridiculous!”

_Yet you love it_, his Took part whispered unhelpfully.

_We certainly do not_, the Baggins lied through his teeth.

*

Balin’s reading glasses were a constant source of amusement for Fili ever since he saw them for the first time some forty years ago. Thick, horn rimmed lenses looked downright comical from any angle and on any face - that is, except their owner’s.

They were a comforting sight, though, a familiar element that didn’t change, but stayed stubbornly the same, sitting on the old man’s nose and almost daring time to try and move them. The lenses have
been swapped so many times and the hinges were close to snapping (Fili made a mental note to change them again), but there was simply no talk about getting a new set.

Even though they could make his eyesight better, Balin never asked. Even though he was the only one of all the people in Ironhill that Fili wanted to keep by their side, Balin never asked.

He just fixed his glasses and carried on as usual, resigned to his mortality, but still offering all the comfort he could to his two wayward friends.

It was painful to look at him growing old, but it was also comforting in a way, because time has been kind to their friend. It was a short life, by their standards, but it was a good one.

“I don’t know, lad,” a voice cut into Fili’s nostalgia, snapping him back to the present. “Anyway I look at it, there’s no mention of anything.”

What was with him and these recent bouts of sentimentalism? Was it just because they were in danger or was it some sort of cruel foresight?

“I know it has to be somewhere!” Fili answered with force. He pushed a leather-bound notebook away with a disgusted sigh and picked another from the pile on the table in front of them. Balin patted his hand absentmindedly and Óin harrumphed loudly to show his annoyance. “Father swore to me that he’s seen it mentioned somewhere by that damn alchemist.”

“Aye, maybe he did, but this chicken scratch is enough to drive you cross-eyed,” the old doctor grumbled. “It’s enough that I am half-deaf already.”

Óin was a strict and oftentimes downright grumpy presence, compared to the rest of the Family, but he was always unfailingly honest and straight to the point, and these two qualities endeared him to Ironhillers like nothing else. He was also an owner of a ridiculously thick moustache and a master of unimpressed stares - both traits common in the Groinson clan.

And yet the best thing about him was that for an educated man of cold science he was an unmatched folklorist and a dedicated believer in the Unknown.

He could also read quicker than a barcode scanner.

“I am not doubting your father’s words, laddie, but I am not at all trusting that old hack who wrote this gibberish,” the man said, pointing at a dusty tome spread in front of him. “Half of it is this magical bullshit and the other is just theories, nothing solid to support them! If my notes in the Medial Academy looked like that I would never be allowed to operate on anything bigger than a newt!”

For someone who has spent the last twenty years of his medical career prescribing patients all kinds of remedies of his own invention, Óin was a strong believer in clear documentation backed by unshakeable proof.

All to the better, in Fili’s opinion, as the population of his town was one of the healthiest he’s encountered. When the world went in a panic about the flu a few years ago Ironhillers just shook their heads in pity and went about their day.

“I am not inclined to trust that man either,” he grudgingly admitted. “But he is the last link we have to what happened back then.”

“Not the last one,” Balin spoke softly, looking at him with kind eyes.

Fili almost laughed, but there was nothing to laugh about. He brushed a hand over his face and
shook his head in disagreement.

“I was a child,” he said. “No more than eleven, I barely remember that day and I was not really told what was going on in the first place. All I knew was that aunt was giving birth and something went wrong, and that He has left and Father went to find Him… and didn’t come back. He could not tell me what happened either, just that they Awoke with aunt and the Hunters were already on them. I was not in Erebor anymore, the alchemist took me to Ironhill…” He stopped for a moment to gather his thoughts, trying to jog his memory for any detail that might have escaped him. “It was… such a mess! I don't remember well, but Girion was talking about the Others while Hunters were after our blood, and then people stepped in on our side and all Hell broke loose.”

He was just a child, passed from one set of hands to another, to be protected, to be hidden while adults fought and no one listened when he wanted them to stop. He wished, so much, for Him to come and settle this mess, but it never happened and Fili couldn’t understand why. He always came for him! Whenever he needed help or was simply sad and wanted to hide, He always came for him! He was always, always there!

Within good reason, Fili thought bitterly. Left to their own devices the Durins were nothing short of hopeless.

These few days were the most terrifying time in his entire life - and that included the Second World War he’d spent hiding in one battle-ravaged town after another. That included his own death.

It was an all-out war that took over something that should be safe and peaceful, changing it into a nightmare. He remembered townsmen coming to their aid, afraid and yet loyal, remembered aunt finally deciding that they will go away, that they have to run.

So they had run. Leaving their heirloom, leaving aunt’s newborn baby, leaving their home behind.

And they didn't stop for decades.

“Have you ever considered a possibility,” Óin’s gruff voice once again tore through the cloud of memories, “that there might be no map to speak of?”

The answer was instant. “No!” Fili raised from the chair and leaned forward, hands slamming into the table. “No, there has to be one. Father has seen it! He told me that there was a place somewhere in the Misty Mountains that was special,” he said hotly, jabbing his finger into the journals and maps to drive the point stronger. “A place where it has all started, that was the source of His power!”

“Considering the kind of power it was,” Balin added calmly, “I think it would be quite prudent to assume that this place may not be very welcoming.”

Fili deflated at these words, his temper cooled and he slumped back down feeling ashamed of his behaviour. He was old enough to know better.

“I am aware of that, my friend,” he said tiredly. “Nothing good has come out of it so far, but… but we’re looking for answers and there’s no better place I can think of to find them.”

“ Hunters seem to know an awful lot about this whole business,” Óin pointed out.

“And they would rather eat broken glass than help us.” No one had to mention that the sentiment was mutual. “No, we have all the help we can get from Nori, but that’s it. I will risk no one else to their non-existent morals!”

Just as Óin was opening his lips - doubtlessly with a perfectly logical argument on his tongue -
another voice entered the discussion.

“We’re talking about Nori?” Kili strolled into the room, wide smile on his mouth and a crumpled envelope in his hand. “Good, because I have a message from him you may want to take a look at.”

He threw the letter at the table where Balin picked it up. The old man smoothed the paper out with his hands and pulled out a small pocket knife to cut along the seam of the envelope with precision some reserved for dealing with unstable chemicals.

Kili, meanwhile, pulled another chair next to Fili’s and fitted himself to the blond’s side, leaning his folded arms on the table and his head on them. “You won’t guess who I bumped into at the market,” he smiled lazily at his lover. “Our favourite Bilbo!”

“He’s our only Bilbo,” Fili laughed, fondly ruffling Kili’s dark mane. “You didn’t harass him too much, I hope?”

“Nah, just enough to keep him on his toes.”

Balin finished scanning the letter and handed it over to the blond, who took it with one hand (the other was still trapped in the tangled black mess), but didn’t start reading it at once. He looked at his other half with an expectant stare.

Kili, for his part, looked like a child that tried really hard to keep a secret from slipping out, but was too excited to stop it.

“He told me I am full of myself,” he admitted finally. “And then asked me if I’m a magical creature!”

“Kili!” There was a warning in Fili’s voice, but the brunet waved it away.

“It was something else! But how cool is that? We’ve got to keep him!” He pleaded, looking to Balin for support.

Balin raised his hands in an ‘I want no part in it’ gesture while Fili finally glanced at the contents of the letter.

“Come on, Óin, back me up here,” the brunet changed targets. “You haven’t tried his hot chocolate yet. I tell you, it's so good! I bet we could use it as a medicine just like your mixtures!”

The doctor raised one of his rather impressive eyebrows and snorted. “And that’s supposed to make me agree?” He said with a sneer. “I am earning my living off these mixtures, lad, why would I want any competition on my turf?”

“Mahal’s balls, you are all so fucking old and boring!”

“Language!” Fili chided absentmindedly.

“Anything interesting, then?” Kili finally decided to let it go and refocused his attention on the letter. “Anything that can help?”

“Salt, apparently, works as a weak barrier against the Others,” Fili answered after a small while. “But we have no way of knowing how it will act in the snow. Garlic was used as a repellant, good enough, I guess, but troublesome. How are we going to convince everyone to carry garlands of garlic around their necks is beyond me, but we can try to hang it outside the houses.”

Balin nodded sagely and Óin scribbled quick notes on a spare piece of paper. It was Kili whose eyes
took on a sudden glow.

“Garlic salt!” he exclaimed in a moment of genius… and got smacked on the head for it. “Ouch!”

“Be serious!” Fili growled at him for good measure before going back to the letter. “What else… iron is harmful to them, huh, that’s something. It means that weapons will be useful… oh.”

“Oh?” Óin stopped writing and leaned in, interested by the sudden silence. “What is it, lad?”

“It says that crosses and holy water are the main weapons,” Fili looked at the paper as if it was personally guilty of insulting him. “But that makes no sense,” Kili said, scratching his head. “What, are we going to throw water at them? In winter? Because I am not going to throw a cross at this filth, damnit!”

“These Hunters have no respect at all!” Óin spat in disgust. “Barbarians, the lot!”

“Wait,” Fili snapped abruptly. He stood up and reached for the nearest map of Ironhill, looking it over with a thoughtful expression on his face. “It may… it may just work,” he muttered.

“What might work?” Kili asked, trying to peek at the map too.

But Fili was already a whirl of movement as he gathered the letter and the map, and rushed out of Balin’s office, barely managing to grab his coat on the way. “I will tell you when I’m sure!” He yelled as the door slammed behind him, leaving the three men with their mouths hanging open.

“Oi…!” Kili whined, rushing after the blond. “Wait for me, Fee!”

When they were finally left alone, Balin took off his glasses and carefully folded them before slipping them into the leather bound case.

“I think I need a cup of coffee,” he stated calmly.

“Yeah, me too,” Óin nodded in easy agreement. “Every time I’m around these two old farts it ends up in a headache.”

*

The library, for once, was full of noise and it took Bilbo a moment to remember that on Tuesdays it hosted activities for children. Especially now, a week before Christmas, when school plays were rehearsed and kids needed to be entertained while their parents were otherwise busy.

Thankfully, Ori was easy enough to spot in the cheerful chaos spilling from every nook and cranny. He was standing by a pyramid of boxes that took the space usually occupied by his desk - or maybe it was still there, who knew, buried under the cardboard avalanche. Actually, missing the lad in the crowd was pretty much impossible due to a really bright, intensely visible (and somewhat atrocious) pattern of yellow stars adorning his red jumper that day.

“Mister Bilbo!” Ori called cheerfully.

To get to him Bilbo had to sidestep two energetic toddlers running from their exasperated older sibling and an excessively decorated Christmas tree, all that while struggling with an armful of
returned magazines. Upon closer inspection, stars on the jumper turned out to be snowflakes. Not really an improvement, but still...

“I haven’t seen you here in a while,” the librarian stated as soon as they were close enough to hear each other over the noise.

“I was busy with pre-Christmas cleaning,” Bilbo lied a bit, it was more of a post-vampire stress disorder, actually, that kept him from leaving the mansion for a while. That, and an unexpected deluge of inspiration it has brought. “There’s enough grime in Erebor to scare off a pack of rats.”

“Well, at least you don't have Dori breathing down your neck about every crumb and speck of dust,” Ori gave him a long suffering look. Then he exclaimed, “Oh, where’s my head!” and stepped aside, bowing courteously to the older lady sitting comfortably in his worn office chair. “Gran, please let me introduce you to Mister Baggins, the new master of Erebor.”

“Bilbo Baggins, it’s nice to meet you,” Bilbo bowed politely, reaching out with his free hand.

“Call me Gal,” the woman said kindly, accepting his careful handshake. There was something inherently gentle about her, Bilbo noticed. Beginning with the way her fingers felt in his hand: like a few dry, fragile twigs bound together in thin layer of skin - ending with the smile that was so very grandmotherly. She had to be a beauty in her youth, with a delicate bone structure and bright blue eyes. And what at first seemed to be a pale shawl wrapped around her neck, was actually a braid! It had to be at least four feet long!

“I’ve heard a lot about you, dear,” Gal admitted with a mischievous little smile.

“Some days I think that everyone in Ironhill has,” Bilbo rolled his eyes and, to Ori’s great amusement, pretended to be put out. “I still can’t decide if I should be grateful or scared for the way Fili and Kili keep advertising my presence.”

“Oh, they say all the best things about you,” the old woman reassured him. “And their friendship is a good thing, dear, it can make or break your stay in this town.”

Yes, he wasn’t as dim as to not see it for himself, the way Fili and Kili were universally cherished by the townspeople. He didn’t want to think about it too much, however, because then he would have to start wondering why the boys never mentioned their parents or any other family member besides Uncle Dwalin. They didn’t call Balin an uncle, even though the two men were brothers; they neither shared last names nor looks.

If he’s allowed himself to think about it, he would probably end up all sentimental and say the wrong thing at a wrong time and embarrass everyone. No, he was good at waiting to be included, he was a Baggins, there was no need to rush his boys, they will tell him when they feel like it.

In the meanwhile he would take joy in the fact that both Fili and Kili were loved by someone.

“It’s an honour, truly,” Bilbo joked, “…when they don’t try to take off with my stock of hot chocolate and don’t carry me around like a doll, that is.”

“Oh, Kili,” Ori sighed and shared a look full of understanding with the older man. “He never learns.”

Surprisingly, they were joined in their mutual misery by Gal, who shook her head with a fond, “No, he never does,” closing the circle of support for People Tackle-hugged by Kili Oakenshield.
Bilbo never suspected that the problem was so widely spread, but knowing that he’s not the only victim made him feel a bit better.

“Mister Ori…!” A shout from the direction of the play area startled them all, but Ori’s reaction was the strangest.

He jumped in place like a startled meerkat, looking around frantically before his panicked gaze settled on the bunch of magazines Bilbo held under his arm. In one swift move they were all liberated and with a quick, decisive, “I will take care of these, excuse me,” the young man all but bailed from the premises, leaving his companions gaping after him.

Well, at least Bilbo was gaping. He was quite used to making undignified exits, but never at this speed.

“This always happens to the poor lad,” Gal brought his attention back. She pointed at the group of young girls gathered close, all of them pretty and cheerful, and very young. “They swarm him as if he was selling pastries after Mass!”

“He is a young, intelligent man,” Bilbo admitted, shrugging. “Handsome too.”

“There’s a reason he’s our librarian, though,” the woman looked at him pointedly. “It’s a quiet job.”

Well, okay, the girls were all but that.

“Would you be a dear, Master Baggins, and get the old woman a cup of tea?” Gal asked him in a much friendlier tone. “There’s a kettle set by the staff room. Just milk, no sugar.”

Indeed, there was a little table set by the window, with an electric kettle, a box of tea, sugar bowl, carton of milk, and a full assortment of mismatched cups and mugs. Not one to miss out on a free hot beverage, especially after freezing his bits off for the last three hours, Bilbo prepared two strong, milky brews and carried them back to the desk… at least he’s attempted to.

With so many little people running around and the bigger people running after them, walking with two cups full of hot liquid was a true test of skill and judgment that firmly reminded Bilbo why he’s never wished for children. He liked kids, make no mistake, but he liked them in certain time-frames and with the option of returning to the owner available at all times.

“Hey, watch out!” He exclaimed when one particularly lively boy almost crashed into his legs.

The child paid him no attention, though, running up to Gal.

“Gran, Gran, look!” The boy shrieked showing off… a cardboard sword?

Oh, Bilbo realized, a little Roman soldier - he always wanted to be a soldier in all the nativity plays in the kindergarten. Being a sheep lost its charm somewhere around the third time he had been forced into a scratchy, smelly costume.

“Look, Gran!” The boy was all but vibrating from excitement. “I’m a Deathness!”

A what?

“Deathless, dear,” the old woman corrected him with a smile. “That is very nice.”

“I’m gonna slay the dragon!” the child shouted, stabbing an imaginary foe with his imaginary weapon. “Will you see? You have to see!”
“Of course I will come to see, young master Gimli, I wouldn’t miss it for anything.”

“Good!” Gimli nodded decisively, then spun around and dashed back to the group of similarly unruly kits, again missing Bilbo by no more than an inch.

“Did I hear right?” Bilbo asked in disbelief. He handed Gal her cup and perched on the edge of the desk, carefully blowing the steam from his own beverage. “Are they killing dragons in the Nativity?”

It sounded crazy… and at the same time so much more fun than any play he’s experienced in primary school.

“Oh no, dear, of course not,” Gal laughed genially. “Our Nativity is no different from any other. Young Gimli here was talking about the Tale of Durin the Deathless.”

“A Tale of… huh?” Bilbo didn't even bother with hiding his confusion.

“You wouldn’t know, of course,” the woman patted his hand. “It’s an old local legend, very important for us Ironhillers.”

“And there are dragons in it?” His curiosity was decidedly piqued.

“Oh no, dear, of course not.” Gal laughed genially. “Our Nativity is no different from any other. Young Gimli here was talking about the Tale of Durin the Deathless.”

“A Tale of… huh?” Bilbo didn't even bother with hiding his confusion.

“You wouldn’t know, of course,” the woman patted his hand. “It’s an old local legend, very important for us Ironhillers.”

“And there are dragons in it?” His curiosity was decidedly piqued.

“Only one, luckily, but... ah, it would seem you’re in luck, Master Baggins,” Gal stated, pointing in the direction of the group of preschoolers little Gimli was a part of. They were herded by two older ladies into some resemblance of order and all around the noise started to die out. “You can watch the rehearsal and see for yourself.”

Bilbo didn’t need to be told twice. At this point how could he be not interested in a story that contained a Durin, a dragon and a sobriquet Deathless?

* *

His fingers itched to fix the washing machine, but his little neighbour was adamant that he doesn’t even come close to it. In fact, Master Baggins was positively livid when he was presented with the small broken part - to the point of forgetting to be afraid.

Which was fine, Thorin preferred to live with someone who didn't cringe from him in terror. He was also willing to admit that his neighbour was very entertaining in his anger - even, or especially, when it was directed at him.

In this instance Thorin was aware of his own fault, of course he was, even though it wasn’t his intention to break anything, he was just curious and wanted have a closer to look at the mechanism. One of the magazines had a spread with a quite detailed information about this sort of machine (although the presented model was slightly different) and he just intended to compare the notes. He certainly didn't expect it to be so fragile! He pulled the little drawer out, as per instructions, not even putting that much strength into the move and… it just came apart in his hand.

But it was still a simple element and fixing it should not be a problem.

It wouldn’t, if Master Baggins didn’t demand that he leave it alone.

Thorin, in all his long years, wasn’t used to being told by anyone what to do. No one would ever dare to forbid him from doing something, much less demand it as if he was nothing more than a misbehaving child! And even though he stepped down from the position of the head of the family a
long time ago, his opinions were always sought after and his decisions respected.

Today Bilbo Baggins basically told him to go into the corner and sit on his hands, and then left in a huff like an angry maid.

It was… a new experience. Startling and quite unpleasant, but also intriguing.

Come to think of it, he’s already seen once how protective his little neighbour is about certain objects - his typewriter, for one. And his books.

Thorin wondered how far would the man go to protect his things? How far could he be pushed before he started pushing back in a way that was more substantial than raising his voice a bit? Not that he wanted a fight on his hands, it was just an interesting thing to ponder while sitting in the kitchen and staring at the broken appliance he was forbidden from touching.

It would be…. nice, he thought, to interact with someone who could step up to meet him halfway and not back down out of fear or reverence.

She… she was the last person to do it, and even then his status amongst the family and love they’ve had for each other made it quite hard to argue, really. She had listened to his advice, he had respected her opinions, and when they didn’t agree on something the issue was usually dropped.

Bilbo Baggins was very polite and a bit cowed, especially at the beginning, but as the time passed his fear waned and Thorin had a feeling that his agreeable behavior was lined with some sort of tougher material.

He wasn’t optimistic enough to hope for steel, but a swatch of hard-wearing cotton would be enough of an improvement.

* 

The rehearsal has ended and Bilbo was willing to admit that the Tale of Durin the Deathless was quite captivating. It had all the elements of a proper folk legend - a dragon kidnapping pheasant girls, a brave lord willing to protect his own, the blessing of a goddess and an epic fight ending with gruesome but necessary decapitation of the beast. It was told in a poetic fashion too, not exactly rhyming, but it was obvious that a very long time ago someone wrote these words that remained unchanged ever since.

All the kids took to their roles with zeal, especially the little redhead, Gimli, who truth to be told was quite an actor for a six year old.

Later, when the old lady left with her grandson (who was, coincidentally, the same hurried youth Kili pointed to him earlier at the market) and Ori had decided to come back from his hiding spot, Bilbo shared his thoughts with the young man. He was fascinated with every bit of local folklore he could find and this story was even more fascinating for the way it shed some light on the almost reverent way in which Ironhillers viewed the Durins.

“Actually, it’s not said in any source that it was a dragon,” the young librarian revealed absentmindedly, hands busy with scanning a new stack of reading material Bilbo wanted to check out. “Some sources have it to be a troll, some mention a great big wolf or even a demon-bear… but that’s about the only thing we’re not sure of.”

“You believe the rest?” Bilbo asked, curious.
At that Ori raised his head and looked at him steadily from behind his glasses. It was a look of utter surety and calm acceptance.

“Five hundred years ago this place was pretty much the end of the world and it was then that Thror Durin chose to settle here. In a very short time under his guide Ironhill became a prospering little village, even though apart from the mines and the lake there was very little natural resources available and winters were even harsher than they are now,” he explained. "People of Ironhill believe that the first Durin was a very special man and that his spirit lived in all of his descendants throughout the ages. My family is not local,” Ori admitted, “and even I have to believe that he’d had to be quite an extraordinary person to achieve all that.”

“Well, when put like that, fighting dragons seems quite superficial. He probably did it every Thursday just to keep in shape,” Bilbo joked over the edge of his teacup and Ori chuckled in agreement.

But his head was busy thinking about Thorin, his age old vampire housemate, and the love he’s had for his lost family. About the Ironhill that was lost to him - because a hundred years was a lot of time and the people he knew were all dead and buried. No wonder he didn't want to leave Erebor when Bilbo offered to take him downhill. He was probably afraid of what he would see there… or what he wouldn’t.

“Do you ever wonder…” he mumbled absentmindedly, staring at his cold tea, “if there’s any of them left out there?”

Ori smiled apologetically and shrugged, “I wouldn’t know, really,” he said. “Dori and I came to Ironhill… quite recently.”

It was sad, thinking about Thorin being so alone. Especially now, when Christmas neared and everyone did their best to spend it with their family and loved ones. Bilbo didn't have many of these left himself, but there were still people he could call and send cards to, not to mention all of his new friends… Thorin had no one. And Bilbo was surprised he didn’t realize earlier how tragic it was.

“There we go.” Ori scanned the last book and arranged the stack neatly on a tiny patch of available space that was left on his desk. The rest was covered in… things. “That’s all gifts,” he explained, seeing Bilbo looking curiously over the assembled boxes and bags. “Tomorrow we’ll have an auction to raise money for a new projector.”

“That’s a worthy cause,” Bilbo admitted, eying the contents of a few open boxes with a casual interest of someone used to visiting charity stores.

“It is, but all these have to be tagged and bagged by tomorrow morning and all my helpers are late. Dori promised to come over and help, but he has…”

Almost unconsciously, Ori’s voice slowly faded out when Bilbo’s attention was pulled elsewhere. Something beckoned him from the nearest box, something familiar… He leaned over to take a better look.

It was a quilt.

New or scantily used from the looks of it, freshly washed and neatly folded. It was white and blue, with some accents in golden thread, and the pattern… the pattern was what grabbed his attention. He knew it, but from where…

Of course, Thorin’s blue shirt!
It was the same eye-crossing, complicated design of interweaving lines and sharp angles that adorned the collar of the garment.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?” Ori came to stand next to him and pulled the quilt out of the box, spreading it between his hands for a better view. “It’s from Gal, actually, she’s a wizard with a needle. It’s all hand-sewn too. Classic Ironhill pattern, I believe it’s called the Mineshaft. And here, on the edge, it’s Durin’s Road. Oh, and let’s not forget this little quirky stitch…”

Bilbo listened with one ear only while his hand, almost without a signal from the mind, reached for his wallet.

* 

“Where are we going?!?” Kili gasped out, all but running after Fili across the busiest part of the town. He’s almost walked under the damn train because of him! “Fili!”

People parted in front of the blond like the Red Sea, some of them without even knowing it, and he didn’t even seem to see them, focused entirely on the old map swiped from Óin’s table. The old healer won’t be happy when he realizes it’s gone.

“Fili, it’s not even remotely funny…! Tell me where are we going!”

“Church.”

At that Kili stumbled and almost face planted into the snow.

“Church?” He stuttered. “Do you believe this nonsense about throwing holy water?”

“No,” Fili answered calmly. “I have a much better idea.”

* 

It took Bilbo roughly three trips to get all his shopping into the kitchen. He had no idea where he will find space to put the jams in, since all the cupboards were already full of food, plates and cooking utensils, but he wasn’t really worried. He was too happy and excited to be worrying about anything, actually.

He rummaged through the bags, humming cheerfully, mesmerized by the sheer amount of marvelous food and all the little knick-knacks. If he was charmed with Ironhill before, well now he was simply in love! All these little treasures were his!

Firstly, a handful of letters tied with a rubber band was set aside to be read later, toys landed under the table where no one would step on them.

Secondly, because Bilbo was more of a Baggins than a Took when it came to food, he started sorting his edible shopping into categories and sub-categories. Jams and marmalades were separated and sorted by colour, chutneys by the level of spiciness. All meat had to be stuffed into fresh bags, marked, and carefully nestled into the drawers of his medium-sized freezer - sans the hunter’s sausage that found its place on a convenient hook over the stove. Dried fruit and mushrooms landed
in boxes and cheeses… well, cheeses had to be sampled before going anywhere.

Sampling took a while, but at least Bilbo was sure that he didn't empty his wallet for nothing. He was never a big shopper, he didn't like to spend a lot of money on anything, including food. Back in Bree he was a regular visitor at the local farmer’s market and his colleagues used to joke that he wouldn’t be caught dead in Waitrose. Today he was just… just supporting local economy. Yes, as his future business depended in large measure on the sympathy of the locals it was a good idea to make them sympathetic.

Three lovely boxes of novelty tea were… well, there was a small problem with tea.

Whoever had lived in the annex before had to be more than six feet tall - a conclusion Bilbo came to when he’d tried to stock his cabinets and half of the shelves stayed stubbornly out of his reach. Having to climb on a chair every time he wanted to add to his tea collection was an annoying inconvenience, one of these things short people had to sadly get used to.

No one thought of the wee folk.

He had no idea how it happened, truly, the chair was stable enough when he climbed on it and stood still when he picked up all three tea boxes from the counter and reached up to push them into the crowded cabinet. And it was so very stupid, because all said chair did was wobble a bit - it didn’t move more than half of a damn inch! It was Bilbo’s panic and clumsiness that did the rest before gravitation joined in.

"Oh bugger...!"

Stupidly clutching the boxes to his chest rendered him unable to grab on to anything, so when he swayed back, feet leaving the chair, there was no other option than to curl up and hope that his skull is harder than the floor tiles… and that he doesn't break his spine. Or anything at all. Some medium sized bruising will do nicely, thank you kindly….

...But there was no bruising. No broken bones. No concussion.

There was a soft landing way before Bilbo expected it, accompanied by a grunt of effort that wasn’t his. Actually, it might have belonged to the owner of arms that were holding him a good distance away from the stone floor and grievous bodily harm.

“You are heavier than you look, Master Baggins,” an amused voice spoke over his head. “What in the Mahal's name were you…” A pause. "You can open your eyes now.”

Could he? Oh goodness….

A wave of relief left him limp like an overcooked noodle and he slumped in the hold, leaning against the wide chest. For a moment he allowed himself to just breathe.

"Master Baggins?"

"I am okay. Yes, peachy. Only let me…"

Thorin set him down on the floor with an ease of someone putting down a kitten, reminding Bilbo once more how ridiculously strong he is. It was just indecent! Quite humiliating too, because Bilbo's knees didn't want to lock properly and the vampire was forced to walk him to the treacherous chair so he could sit.

“Thank you,” he mumbled. “Just… yeah.”
Thorin waved the apology away, “It was nothing,” he said. “I am rather interested in what were you attempting to do. I am used to seeing children climb these cabinets in search of sweets, rather than adults who should know better.”

“These…” he was still hugging these dratted boxes, wasn’t he? “I wanted to put them into the cupboard. I bought so many things that there’s not much space left, you see…” In retrospect maybe he did buy too much.

“Ah,” Thorin murmured finally, an understanding descending on his serious face as he looked around the kitchen. “I gather that the Christmas Market still takes place?”

“Does it…?” Bilbo babbled.

The sheer incredulity of that question pulled him into action.

“Of course it is! It’s amazing! Look at this!” He pushed a wooden toy-soldier into the vampire’s hands. “It even moves its eyes! And this?” A box of dried herbs followed. “I’ve never smelled anything more divine! It will do splendidly with a trout. There’s never enough teacups if they’re as pretty as this one! I have never seen a pudding with juniper, but what’s there to say it won’t be worth it?”

His housemate nodded obediently at every item presented to him, interested in some more than others, but appreciative none the less. The toys especially held his attention.

“I always dreamed about a copper pan like that, you know? It even has a decoration around the rim! I have no idea what this is for, honestly, but I don’t care, it’s beautiful! Oh, Thorin, it’s all so great!” Bilbo exclaimed, almost breathless with awe. “You should go and see for yourself, they even have a miniature train!”

”Master Baggins…”

“I bet, if I introduce you to the boys they will take care of the rest and no one will say a word! There’s even a play based on your ancestors! Little children kill dragons because they love you so much!”

“*Master Baggins, stop.*”

It took a low growl and a warning look before Bilbo realized the direction his excitement and the need to fix the world had taken him in. Not a good direction. It made him self-conscious and worried for about three seconds before he realized that Thorin is neither leaving, nor trying to kill him yet. There was a chance to save his misstep, then!

“Oh!” He exclaimed. “And I’ve got this!”

The vampire almost spluttered when a bundle of cloth was showed right in his face.

“This is for you.”

Actually, Bilbo had bought the quilt on a whim more than anything else. Supporting the library was all fine and well, but it was just when he was back in the car that he realized he doesn't really want it. No, he was alright in the quilt department. As beautiful as the spread was, it wasn’t much in his style (too few roses, too much geometry).

But he knew whose style it would fit.
Sudden thought of that dark, stark room under the stairs flashed up in the back of his mind. A thought that he was not alone in Erebor and that good neighbours did nice things for each other from time to time.

“I thought you would like the pattern,” he justified uselessly when silence lasted a bit too long to be comfortable. “I was told it’s a traditional Ironhill design and that, eh, a lovely lady made it for the library’s fundraiser, so…”

Thorin chuckled.

“You know it’s terribly impolite to laugh at someone who just gave you something?”

“You are the strangest creature,” the vampire spoke, his previous exasperation turning into amusement. “Only this morning you were about to tear my hair out and now you give me presents.”

“It’s not a present,” Bilbo was only too quick to protest. “It’s a… well, you fixed the heating in the conservatory and helped me with the chairs. Just now you probably saved me from breaking my neck…” He threw his hands up in resignation. “Oh forget it!”

“No.”

“...What?”

“I will not forget it,” Thorin said, folding the quilt with care. “You do kind things for me and I appreciate it. Thank you for this gift.”

If he was a bit flushed earlier, now Bilbo felt like a living torch.

“Well, you can be a pain in the back sometimes,” he mumbled, going back to his work and not at all hiding his face from view. He was a middle-aged man not a schoolboy! He certainly did not blush and stutter whenever an older, prettier person said something nice to him! “But, all in all you’re not a bad housemate I guess…”

Deeming the subject concluded, Bilbo looked at the tea boxes, at the cupboard, at the chair, back to the boxes. Wiser with experience, he climbed on his toes and proceeded to shove the new tea on top of the old teas. His Baggins pride would never let him lose to an inanimate object. Especially not in front of someone else!

“I mean, it has to be cold in that dungeon of yours,” he grunted out, struggling a bit with the slippery metal. “If you want anything else bought, like a tablecloth or some pictures, I can get them too. And you would really do well with an electric heater down there…”

Thorin’s answer came from above Bilbo’s head, “I have no need for pictures, though thank you for offering.”

He squeaked when a bear-paw of a hand took the box from him and then squeaked again when he realized that he’s pretty much stuck between the vampire and the counter. Said vampire stocked his tea cabinet - apparently unaware of the awkwardness their proximity invoked.

“I appreciate the thought, but cold doesn’t bother me all that much and I already have all the comforts I would need.”

“Ah… yes, er,” Bilbo allowed himself to breathe in deeper only when Thorin stepped back. No personal space issues with this one, right. Good thing to know. “I mean… I also brought you the books?”
It was a nice, safe subject to fall back on, wasn’t it?

“This is the best I could find about the mechanics,” he dug out a massive tome and handed it over. “There’s a new issue of History Today you may like, oh, and this. I used to love reading Focus when I was younger, it’s about, well, a bit of everything actually.”

“And this one?” Thorin asked, squinting at the black cover with a pair of pale hands holding an apple of all things.

“That one, er…” Bilbo hesitated a bit before ploughing through. “This is a leisure read.” He did his best to keep the giggles from escaping. “I hope it will make some references clearer for you.”

*And may provide some entertainment for me,* he added to himself. The book wasn’t a big hit, but it had a strong fan base Bilbo could not wrap his head about. He knew the mechanics of appealing to an audience, of course, but this was something completely different.

He ached - with pure academic curiosity, mind you - to discover Thorin’s *opinion* on the matter.

“Thank you,” the vampire nodded politely and gathered his things. “I will be finishing the last two chairs this evening, you’re welcome to help if you’d like.”

“I can watch?” Bilbo offered with a little self-deprecating chuckle. “We’ve already established that I do more harm than good to that poor furniture.”

Last time he’d attempted to help ended up with him almost setting the conservatory on fire and Thorin’s unimpressed look almost made him die of shame.

“Nonsense, everything can be learnt with practice.” The vampire apparently believed in the impossible. “It’s a good skill to have.”

“I will see…”

“Do that.” He was also used to being obeyed. “And, if you decide to come, bring some tea with you.” And catered to.

It was quite a surprise, but Bilbo wasn’t annoyed by it anymore, there was no righteous anger at being treated like a servant. Instead, he felt a sort of fond exasperation at his housemate’s antics.

Oh goodness, they were becoming domestic!

How peculiar.

* 

“Are we really doing this?”

Kili still had problems with grasping the idea his lover had concocted in the depths of his twisted psyche.

It was just too crazy!

Father Théoden shared his doubt, if the brunet was any good at reading people’s faces - and he was,
thank you. The old priest was confused, but resolute. And, just like Kili, he was still willing to try. The three of them trudged through the snowy fields with long purposeful stride, willing to try everything that would save their people.

“And you laughed at my garlic salt!” Kili growled when the river came into view.

The Running was a deep, wide stream that flowed from the mountains and entered the lake west of Ironhill and then exited it to travel east, beyond the valley. Curiously, in spite of the freezing temperatures in wintertime she’s rarely ever froze all the way over, and never enough to safely walk across. Her currents were too strong for even the best swimmers and getting under the ice meant sure death.

Kili knew it from experience.

“Well,” Father Théoden shrugged, pulling the sleeves of his grey parka up and folding his black gloves into the pockets. “The sooner we start, the sooner we’re back home.”

Fili nodded sagely and Kili settled down for a long wait.

*

The furnace, apart from being the loudest thing ever, was a marvelous thing, really. Bilbo’s newfound appreciation came when he’d discovered a spot on the side designed and built to keep the kettle hot. That fact alone also raised his appreciation of the builder, what genius.

Thanks to that said genius, the tea was nice and cozy, and at the perfect temperature for drinking.

This time Bilbo, not overly fond of falling from chairs, decided to share the kettle with Thorin. Russian Caravan, as it turned out, was the only box he’d kept on hand, right next to the breadbox. Maybe he was subconsciously hoping that the creature of the night will one day make his own cuppa? Maybe he was getting a bit too domestic?

Maybe he just forgot to put it away.

No matter, the tea was nice and went perfectly with a plate of small sandwiches with cream cheese and black pepper Bilbo prepared for his evening snack.

Unfortunately, ordering the kitchen and putting things away took a bit more than he'd expected, and by the time he’s got to the conservatory, Thorin was already done with the first chair and starting on the second one. With an apologetic shrug Bilbo went to his usual spot by the fireplace and made himself comfortable.

He’s planned to buy a proper table and a set of rattan furniture as soon as the place was up and running, but for now a wide plank leaning on two low stools with a tablecloth made out of an old curtain was enough. Even if Thorin tended to raise a skeptical eyebrow at the flowery spread.

Now someone drinking tea out of a teacup painted in roses and daisies had no right to point fingers, in Bilbo’s opinion.

...Even if his fingers were dirty and left greasy marks all over the finest porcelain in West Bree,
filling its owner with despair.

Bilbo didn’t explode into a huff only because the vampire was doing him a huge favour with the furniture and it would be rude. Next time he will simply pick a less expensive tea set to celebrate his good day with.

Also, Thorin seemed so engrossed in his task that interrupting him just wouldn’t do. He was a craftsman in love with his craft and it was plain to see. He treated every piece of wood under his hands with care and attention, smoothing out all the marks left by use, effortlessly wiping clean all the fingerprints left by time. Watching him work was truly inspiring.

That and, well, he was a very watchable person. With the sleeves of a plain grey shirt pulled back and out of the way to reveal powerful forearms and surprisingly nimble wrists. With his shoulders visibly straining under the layer of thin linen…

Letters! Yes, letters!

Letters he was about to read, a full stack of them, yes, those!

Actually, there were two stacks. The Important one: consisting of Christmas cards from family and friends, a letter from his agent, and a hefty package from Buckland. And the Non-Important one: flyers, adverts from the looks of it, one Christmas card he didn’t want to deal with (luckily the fireplace was very close), electricity bill, and one more TV License threat... were they serious?

Naturally, Bilbo went for the important stack first.

Now, what he said to Thorin about not having a lot of relations to speak of held true - even though his extended family was quite sizeable. Tooks and Bagginses were basically the building blocks of Hobbiton and, to some extent, Bree, but nowadays only the oldest of them remembered the ways in which everyone were related to each other. Bilbo, raised far away from most of the familial drama, didn’t have close connections with any of the older branches, save for his late uncle and a young cousin Drogo. And they didn’t seem to care for him too, save for that one yearly game of pretend that was sending out Christmas cards.

He’d always thought it to be some sort of a competition between the old housewives, culminating in how many cards will they manage to proudly exhibit over their fireplaces every year. He was willing to play only because it was something his mother used to enjoy, even though from year to year the number of cards in his letterbox grew smaller and the wishes in them dryer.

Not to mention that Lobelia’s dogged attempts at winning the game of courtesy with him tended to leave Bilbo with a bad taste in his mouth.

Thankfully, there were people he actually liked that evened out the score at least a bit.

Elrond, his hardworking agent, had sent him a beautifully crafted card (probably made by Arwen, his ridiculously gifted ten year old daughter) with best wishes and a not-so-subtle inquiry about the first draft of the current book. A week ago Bilbo had sent the man and his family a big box of sweets and a bottle of the most expensive brandy he could find in Ironhill. After Christmas he had planned to send another one. Then he will consider telling the man about all the changes to the main plot he’s decided to implement.

The big, heavy envelope from Buckland carried a surprise.

Primula and Drogo were a pair of his favourite cousins, both young, energetic and ostentatiously modern, unlike their families, and it would seem they liked him too. Not only was he the first one
they’ve asked five years ago to be a godfather for their little boy, they’ve also never missed a chance to send him the biggest, most robust card they could make.

This year the card was made of scraps of colourful paper and pasta noodles, which could mean that either Primula foraged into surrealism or that Frodo was finally big enough to join her crafting hobby. What was surprising, though, was that apart from the card and warm wishes, the package contained a stack of photographs that spilled into Bilbo’s lap the moment he opened it.

And another letter written in Primula’s clean, tiny handwriting...

Intrigued, he pulled the reading glasses out of the pocket of his cardigan and started reading. It didn't take long before a genuine smile blossomed on his face.

The photographs were Frodo’s answer to all the pictures of Erebor Bilbo had sent his cousins right after moving in. Apparently the little lad, raised in a two-bedroom flat in a busy part of Buckland, was fascinated with the big, lonely house and all the snow around. And with the overall notion of photography. From Primula’s account, he’d demanded that they send some pictures back as soon as possible so Uncle Bilbo can see their home too.

And indeed, the little cozy flat was featured prominently on most photos in his hands. Some of them showed a wide-eyed five year old boy with a gap in his smile and a pretty blond woman. Drogo was on two... or rather, parts of him - as the camera was very close to the floor at the time of the shots being taken. Most of the angles were awkward and wonky, and that was a clear sign that Frodo not only started the project, but also carried it out.

Bilbo didn’t realize that he was chuckling at some of the pictures until a shadow fell over him. Looking up revealed a vampire staring at him with a strange intensity in his bright eyes.

“Eh…” Bilbo stammered. “This is my nephew, the one I told you about? Well, at least a part of him…”

Indeed, the bottom half. Quite handsome feet and all, and didn't Primula have a sense of humour?

“Wait, on this you can see better, here,” he shuffled the photos before Thorin had a chance to comment. “This is Frodo. And this is his mother, my cousin, Primula. She’s from the Brandybucks.” At that the vampire nodded, as if he understood the implications. “And this is Drogo, my other cousin, a Baggins born and bred, lovely chap, we used to go to school together.”

Before he even knew it, they were both bent over the cards and photographs, with Thorin sipping his hot tea and Bilbo explaining to him patiently every familial connection and level of sympathy they should have for them. Though the vampire seemed more fascinated with the photographs on a technical level than their content, he patiently waited out all of Bilbo’s ranting and nodded obediently to all of his stories.

Though he kept staring at him in that peculiar way that was quite distracting.

“Erm…” finally fed up with it, Bilbo decided to confront his housemate. Politely, of course. “Do I have something on my face?”

“Yes.”

Okay, the answer didn’t make him feel better.

“You are quite young still, yet you wear glasses,” Thorin elaborated, pointing with his teacup.
“Oh, these?” Bilbo unconsciously raised his hand to push the wire frame higher up his nose. “These are just for reading. I was always a bit long sighted, so… is that a problem?”

“Not at all, I was just curious.”

“Oh, that’s okay. Though my mother would tell you it’s from watching TV all the time if she were here,” Bilbo joked, taking the glasses off and looking at them fondly. “I used to spend hours in front of the TV every day before we moved to Hobbiton and I got kicked out to play in the dirt. The best thing that’s happened to me at the time, to be sure.”

Only when he looked up to see the slight consternation on his housemate’s face did Bilbo remember the difference between their upbringings.

“I mean television,” he explained hurriedly. “It’s like a projector, but a personal one…”

“I know what television is,” Thorin cut him off rather rudely. Was he feeling insulted by Bilbo’s assumption or just annoyed with his flailing? Or both? Drats, lately his face was hard to read. “So, your parents were wealthy?”

That conclusion made the shorter man chuckle.

“No, I wouldn’t say so… well, not in a way that you may understand it,” he shrugged, putting the glasses back on. “Oh, mom’s family certainly was and it caused quite a stir when she went and married my Da, you know, ‘she could do so much better than all that cram,’” Bilbo raised the pitch of his voice to imitate some of his old aunts. “Dad was a young writer and she didn’t want to rely on anyone else… we were comfortable,” he nodded in the direction of the house with a pleased smile, “This is the most space I’ve ever had to myself, to be honest.”

He missed his tiny room in their old home, of course he did, but the present was so much more exciting and full of possibilities! He wouldn’t give up Erebor for anything!

“And nowadays TVs are not that expensive,” Bilbo returned to the subject at hand while Thorin went to pour himself another cup of tea. And to leave more grease on his expensive teapot. “Everything is a lot smaller than it used to be, I guess, and less cumbersome… telephones for example, you can carry them in your pockets now. Same with photo cameras. These for example,” he raised one especially wonky photo as an example. “This was taken by my godson and he’s five!”

Come to think of it, it was exciting as all heck! To think that Bilbo could clearly remember the time when cellphones were a faraway dream for about 90% of the population, when a phone with a colour display and polyphonic ringtones was something to proudly show off in front of friends. When computers weighted half of a calf and 5 megabytes of free space on a hard disc was enough.

And Thorin remembered even further than that. To the time when none of these things that now are taken for granted even existed or, if they did, they were so very different… There was a reason why he didn't know how to handle a washing machine and the notion of colour photography and cameras that fit in one hand was intriguing to him.

...Oh goodness.

Stricken, Bilbo stared at the photographs in his hands, at the envelopes cluttering the bench, and an idea started to shape in his head. It was still small and half-formed, but it grew like wild vines, spreading possibilities across his mind.

“I am not surprised,” Thorin's calm voice only fueled the fire of that particular forge. His calm, collected, resigned voice. “Technology rushes forward and the only thing one can do is to get out of
the way. Some things are made to last,” the vampire patted the belly of the furnace with somewhat heartbreaking fondness. “But that doesn’t mean they won’t become obsolete the moment something new and better comes along. All they can do is to try and bide their time until they’re replaced.”

And wasn’t that also true about him?

Bilbo stared after the man, his dark brooding housemate, locked in this house for the last century. This genius man trying to introduce himself to the new time by reading magazines and listening to the radio, but afraid of leaving his prison, of confronting the changes he was so interested in head on.

It was kind of sad, if one thought about it. Out there was a world made to love Thorin - that small town and all of its inhabitants clinging to the legend of a family that was their benefactors and protectors for so long. A world that, Bilbo was sure, would take him in with open arms if only it was given a chance.

“Come now, Master Baggins,” the vampire, unaware of Bilbo’s inner turmoil, called with a gesture to join him in the corner with the last chair. “You may at least try to get a hang of it before I fix the rest. Come here.”

With a last considering look Bilbo left the photographs and shuffled to the vampire, hoping that this time he won’t make too much of a fool out of himself.

The small idea had already grew roots in his mind and it was just a matter of time before it bore fruit.

*

“Okay…” Kili muttered, staring at the dark line of the river in front of him. Hands in pockets, shoulders hunched under the onslaught of a cold wind, he glanced at Father Théoden and asked, “Did it work?”

“I have no idea,” the old man replied cheerfully. “Whatever you’ve wanted to achieve, I did all I could, the rest is in the hands of the higher order. Now, if you forgive me, boys, I am expected to be back before dinner.”

Huffing and puffing from cold, the man turned away, leaving them at the bank.

“Is that all?” Kili shuffled close to his partner, cold and annoyed. “Do you think it will keep them away?”

For his part Fili resembled a statue carved in some pale stone, standing with his back straight and eyes fixed on the river’s other bank and the lake beyond.

“It worked,” a whisper passed his lips when his hand was grasped in a loose hold.

“How do you know?” Kili squinted at the dark water. He didn’t like this place, not one bit.

“I can feel it. The river is… different. Can’t you feel it?” Fili turned to look at him.

Kili shrugged. “I am not exactly fond of water, you know,” he joked.

His hand was squeezed in reassurance and he held on.
“It won’t hurt us,” Fili assured, pulling him closer.

“Let’s hope it will hurt them, then. Come on, my bits are about to start falling off in this cold.”

“We can’t let that happen. Lead on.”

As they were returning to town, Kili threw one last glance over his shoulder and it might have been an illusion… maybe the moon’s reflection or something… but he imagined that he could almost see a translucent silver-ish glow spreading over the river like a thin layer of mist.

But that was just silly, the Running was just a river - whether made of holy water or not.

*

The Idea (because by the time Bilbo got back to his bedroom it had acquired a capital letter) cleared itself under the shower, like all great ideas were prone to do.

It was a stroke of genius so magnificent that Bilbo had to take a moment to appreciate it for its greatness. Decked out in his sleeping gear (flannel pajama pants, woolen socks, and a cotton undershirt) he rummaged through his room, putting the plan together.

Later in bed curled under the comforter, he was staring at his small camera standing proudly on the dresser, charger plugged in and a new SD card ready to go.

It was a marvelous idea, really, amazing in its simplicity.

Because if Thorin didn’t want to go to Ironhill...

...Ironhill will simply have to come to him.
Guys, writing a Christmas chapter in summer is a hard thing to do XD But I prevailed! Some things will come to light and some things will happen - mainly, baking!

For the rest of the week before Christmas Bilbo was a very hurried man. Which was quite strange, because these days were entirely uneventful compared to the previous weeks.

He’d spent a lot of time locked in his miniature office, bowed over the typewriter, fingers flying lightning-fast across the keys. He was nearing the end of the first draft for the fourth book in the series and, as always, excited to finish. The edits loomed over him like a dark shadow, staring at him accusingly and chanting the names of all the new characters he’d introduced out of thin air, demanding sense and reason. Bilbo waved them off and just wrote.

Dinners were a quiet affair once more since Thorin apparently decided to disappear into the darkness of the basement, probably taken with his new reading material or whatever was that vampires did when they weren’t busy with conservation of antique furniture.

And thank goodness for that.

Not that Bilbo didn’t miss their conversations, and the tea, and just the presence of another being in sights, but…

But Bilbo was a healthy male in his prime and a vampire bursting into his bedroom willy-nilly seriously cramped his style. Masturbating under the shower, behind locked doors, reminded him too much of his awkward, neurotic teenage years to be in any way satisfying.

Not that he needed to masturbate all that often, not at all… it was just that his vampire had a very distinct habit of just appearing whenever he wanted to be and owned feet that didn’t make sound when he walked, and that stoic, calm expression that didn’t betray any agenda at all. He might have been stretching his legs as well as searching for a new victim to suck dry - with a face like that it was hard to tell.

In a way Thorin was like a ghost: noiselessly wandering through Erebor, searching for something that has been lost ages ago.

Now, that was a metaphor!

Bilbo wrote it down on a piece of paper that he nailed to the corkboard in the ‘office’ where he kept his best ideas from wandering off.

It was a bit lonely, yes, but it was also easier to carry out his Idea when there was no one looking over his shoulder. Not that Thorin would follow him downhill or anything, but Bilbo was a very scrupulate person and liked to know where all his assets are all the time.
Vampire - at home.

Camera - in the car.

Car - securely locked up just in case.

As it should be.

Until two days before Christmas when Bilbo got a call from Frar’s Electrics that the new drawer for his washing machine had arrived and was waiting on him to be picked up at the store.

Now, it has to be said that Bilbo Baggins was raised in a proper British manner, meaning that he knew how to queue and ask people how do they do, and was versed in all kinds of useful social tricks up to, and including, sending letters of complaint. It was a marvellous skill to have when one was too shy or too frustrated to argue with a living person on the other side of the line. Especially, when the first round of the argument has already happened and didn't change a thing. Letters were a serious business, you could copy them and list them, and get all kinds of proof that your message got across safely and unchanged - it helped greatly if the matter happened to blow out of proportions and involve authorities.

This time people responsible for urging him to get a License for the TV he didn’t own were going to get a taste of the Baggins’ famed politeness.

At least, that was the plan. Bilbo would go to town, pick up the parts, drop the letter at the post office, quickly visit the pharmacy and their photo-printer and be back home for tea. Simple, clean, no fuss.

Of course, because Bilbo was Bilbo, that plan went down the tubes the moment he’s stepped into Frar’s Essential Electrics and another Idea hit him squarely between the eyes.

* 

Thorin reappeared on the 24th as if he’s never been gone, silently and without a word.

And he acted, well, strange.

Stranger than usual, Bilbo had to concede, and it made him nervous.

Because Thorin stared at him. And not in his usual way, as a cross between amused and exasperated, too. No, this was something completely different; a blank, unblinking stare that didn’t follow anything that the shorter man was actually doing, just… him. As if there was a light-spot on the back of his shirt and the vampire was an interested cat.

It would be quite distressing for anyone, Bilbo imagined, especially for someone who tried to hide something. The secret was weighing on his mind uncharacteristically, going as far as to interrupt his sleep a couple times a night, making him shiver in the darkness like a child. He’d already checked the car twice, locking the boot securely and keeping the key in his pocket at all times. Would Thorin break their deal if he suspected deception? Was he already suspecting something and trying to make his human housemate break?

Whatever it was, Bilbo tried to ignore the raising awkwardness of the situation and carry on with his
baking.

And there was a lot of baking to be done, because he was a Baggins and a proper Baggins never showed up to dine in someone else’s home with their hands empty. Showing with anything but the best was simply disgraceful!

To that end Bilbo had been forced to pull out his father’s notes from the bottom of his memory box and rifled through them in search of something appropriate. He had spent most of the previous evening choosing, considering and crossing off recipes to finally settle on the four that were his mother’s favourites.

Pecan pie with toffee and blackberries was the first choice - a moreish starter that threatened with diabetes, but was *oh* so good. Next, a lemon curd cheesecake with caramelized almonds on a chocolate base - graceful and fancy. Then raspberry cupcakes filled with minty cream as a refreshing snack.

And finally, the best of the best, his Da’s showstopper: peanut butter cookies with chunks of milky chocolate, half-dipped in vanilla glaze.

There was nothing - *nothing* - in the world of confectionery and beyond that could match the cookies in taste or savouriness. Three dozen should do the trick of stealing the souls of Bilbo’s new friends forever.

And a dozen would do well for the jar in his office, because his soul has already been sold.

...still, what was left of it shrunk in on itself whenever Bilbo felt Thorin’s eyes boring holes in the back of his neck.

“Is there anything wrong?” He asked at some point, elbow deep in cookie dough, trying to politely convey the fact that the stare was making him uncomfortable.

“No, everything is as it should be,” Thorin answered calmly. Unblinking. “Why are you asking?”

“Eh…” Bilbo wanted to tell him, really. “No, I… actually, it’s nothing.”

He could always ask him to leave, but… what reason would he give that an adult person wouldn’t smirk at? That he didn’t like to be looked at? For all he knew the vampire was just interested in his recipes or in the whole process of baking, or…

Bilbo froze with one hand in the bowl of chocolate bits.

No. That couldn’t be.

His self-esteem would plummet to the unknown depths, never to recover, if Thorin has turned out to be also marvellous at baking - on top of everything else he was great at!

Stiff as a board, Bilbo dared a glance over his shoulder - to a shadowed corner of the kitchen his vampire has settled in to observe.

There were no men this ideal in this world, surely. There *couldn’t be*.

“Yes, Master Baggins?” The vampire raised an eyebrow and Bilbo swallowed with difficulty.

“Just wondering,” he babbled. “If you… I mean… Do you bake?”

“Bake?” Finally, a blink! Albeit a slow one. And a shadow of a smile. “I have never had the need to
partake in this particular activity, to tell you the truth. I am sure you can figure out the reason for it.”

For someone just reminded about the fact that his only companion used to drink blood on regular basis Bilbo felt ridiculously relieved. A sane person should not be tanking goodness hearing that - and it only went to show how strange his life has turned out to be.

“Why,” Thorin continued. “Do you intend to put me to the task?”

…yes, indeed, his life has turned strange.

“Funny that you should mention it,” Bilbo smiled and at the same time asked himself what is he doing. Just a second ago he was nervous… now he was pushing a metal bowl the vampire’s way and looking at him expectantly. “I need these pecans peeled before pie base gets out of the oven, if you’d be so kind as to help me with it…”

The look he’s got in return was bland and unimpressed, but Thorin still accepted the bowl with dignity others reserved for medals of honour. He moved to the end of the counter and started cracking the nut shells with his fingers as if they were no harder than overripe grapes.

Though even that didn’t stop him from staring. Bugger.

* 

The evening before Christmas was the longest evening in a while.

At least all the cakes and cookies turned out alright.

Bilbo attempted to start conversation with Thorin a few more times and each one he was met with that blank stare and short, polite answers. He has cleaned the kitchen in record time and begged off to take a long, hot bath, hoping it will calm his nerves.

Now, Bilbo thought a lot about the correct way of framing his Idea to turn out perfect. He had cleaned out the living room on the first floor and decorated it with all the little trinkets Kili had bullied him into buying. The three was pathetically small for the spacious room, even when set on a chair, but the lights and shiny baubles hanging off the branches made the space feel… more homely than before. Cosy in a way that he’s been missing without even knowing. He’d even moved the couch and rearranged scant furniture to prepare space for the new addition without making it look like he was adding something.

Christmas Eve dinner was a silent, lonely affair, since the vampire decided to finally leave him alone. Bilbo had a light meal of fish with roasted potatoes in his bedroom, accompanied only by the solitary picture of his little family from the times they’ve all been alive and happy.

He didn't cry after his parents anymore, but there were times when the pain of their loss still hit him hard and made breathing harder than it should be. This year at least he didn’t have to deal with well-wishing aunts checking in on him and there was always the promise of tomorrow - of a first Christmas in a long while he will be spending with people he liked.

“This is such an amazing place,” he whispered to the picture, trembling fingers tracing over past happiness locked behind the glass of a cheap frame. “You would love it, mom, it’s so peaceful and big enough for all your flowerbeds and veggies. And the people are so nice, Da would be right at
home in Ironhill.”

It was a sad, nostalgic state of affairs that a ringing phone interrupted a few minutes before 8 pm. Bilbo picked the handle with a perplexed sort of curiosity only to be greeted by a shrill voice on the other end wishing him Happy Christmas and all the best.

He has forgotten that Brandybucks celebrated Christmas a bit earlier, German-style, opening their presents on the 24th.

Primula and Frodo fought for the phone, both talking at him more than to him, both in good mood. The little lad listed all the presents he’s got from Santa and asked Bilbo about his presents - he seemed genuinely impressed with the notion that his favourite uncle got a whole home this year. Bungo managed to wrangle a few minutes to talk to his cousin in a true Baggins fashion, but then it was all Primula and her cheerful chatter that Bilbo couldn’t help, but love. It chased the gloom away, reminding him that there were people he still mattered to and who have mattered to him. People he loved.

It made him fall asleep two hours later with a warm feeling in his chest and a smile on his face.

It might have been the reason for him waking up ridiculously early next morning.

It was either that, or another round of shivers and the feeling of being watched from the shadows.

*

The Urs lived in an honest to goodness wooden cottage - albeit a really big one, filled with more rooms and little hideouts than Hogwarts. They were numerous and hard to keep track of on a normal day, but the moment Bilbo stepped through the doorstep, greeted enthusiastically by Alris, he was met with a virtual mob. It would seem that not only Bagginses liked to gather in numbers at any given opportunity, even though this crowd was much more cheerful and nice. And louder.

He was led through a throng of children and adults, greeting and being greeted, sharing well wishes and swapping names he could not remember a moment later, and generally trying to come off less awkward that he was feeling. His offerings were taken in by Bombur himself with a shout of delight and even though Bilbo would gladly stay in the kitchen with his hosts, there was already a place for him at the long table almost bowing under the weight of food.

He was not a social person, not really, and being surrounded by two dozens of loud, rowdy people made him self-conscious and tongue-tied at first… that is, until a heavy hand landed on his shoulder and he was met with the sight of the most amazing dimples this side of the world.

“Mister Baggins!” Bofur exclaimed, slapping him on the back and slumping into the chair to Bilbo’s left as brazenly as you please. The chair’s previous occupant moved along with nothing more than a smile and an eye roll. “Finally out of that dreary place, I see! You have chosen the best place to be on this fine day, if I say so myself!”

Bofur, as it turned out, was not only a well of information on everything and all, but a skilled ice-breaker too. Ten minutes with his smile, dimples and teasing humour and Bilbo’s anxiety disappeared almost entirely. The noise too stopped being irritating when he started hearing the joy in it; inability to remember all the names ceased to be frustrating when he realised that everyone around him reacted to ‘love’ and ‘dear’, and treats him like a stranded member of the family already.
They were not judging him, Bilbo realised between saying Grace and the first dish, and it startled him how much of a surprise that notion brought. He was so used to his own family, to always being judged and found lacking that the absence of whispers and displeased frowns rendered him almost helpless for a minute.

But then Bofur said something funny and another plate piled high with smoked salmon canapés was passed around the table, and Bilbo found his ground.

Soon enough he was partaking in conversations about current politics and the weather and learning all the newest gossip. It was all very genial and harmless gossiping, to be honest, mostly serving to make the guests laugh. A story about a missing bicycle that in any other town would mean a thief, in Ironhill turned out to be a case of misplaced identities. Two bikes of the same make and two confused owners.

This one made Bilbo chuckle - and then laugh out loud when his eyes fell on Bofur giggling hysterically under his moustache and hitting his chest to get some air.

At some point after the third helping of mashed peas and truly marvellous duck pate, Bilbo realised that the number of people around him tended to vary, some faces disappeared to be replaced with new guests who greeted him enthusiastically.

“In Ironhill Christmas is a bit of a walking holiday,” Bofur explained, seeing his confusion. “We walk to where the food is.” He wagged his eyebrows, making the short man laugh. “That’s my last stop today, to tell you the truth, so one more bite and I may explode.”

Indeed, the carpenter/toymaker’s plate was still clean, unlike the cup in his hand that seemed to refill magically with wine and cranberry juice whenever Bilbo wasn’t looking. A pity, that, because everything on the table was superb - starting with mashed potatoes with bacon and ending on honey-glazed turkey and hot stuffing.

The Urs were the apparent gods of the local cuisine, because the amount of people at their table was just ridiculous by the time Bilbo remembered about the camera hidden in his pocket. He went through the house, shamelessly taking shots of the people, much as he did a couple days before on a much grander scale, and excusing himself with the need to document his first year in Ironhill as best as possible. All the pretty girls (and there was a lot of them) and smiling lads and kids that were blurring in movement, their parents with cheeks rosy from wine and laughter… dishes and drinks, and the outside view of the town shrouded in the soft, early darkness were immortalised on the little device.

Around six a flurry of motion took over the dining room - the plates and cutlery were swapped for fresh ones, meat and vegetables were cleared out in record time to make space for platters of cakes, puddings, dried fruit and a massive bowl of punch. Many guests cheered and formed a near-stampede in their rush to taste the sweets.

Bilbo was one of them, actually, thought he would never admit it in front of anyone.

...although he didn’t quite manage to get his hands on the first batch of cinnamon rolls.

“Oh Mahal, this is the fluffiest sweater I’ve ever seen!” A voice exclaiming behind his back was the only warning before a pair of familiar arms wound around his chest and squeezed. “It’s so fluffy I could die!”

“You will if you won’t stop manhandling me!” Bilbo shouted back, uncharacteristically loud. Surely no cardigan, even his best cream cashmere button up, deserved such wild treatment!
There was a slap and a groan before he was reluctantly released. People around, thankfully, were too focused on their plates to pay attention to his humiliated blush when Bilbo spun around to scold the misbehaving boar of a boy…

“I am sorry for him, Mister B,” Fili got out before his employer managed to open his mouth. “Just ignore him, please, he will never learn.”

The first thought Bilbo’s mind supplied at seeing the boys was how… handsome and elegant they looked. Almost mature, to a degree. Starched shirts and pressed trousers were a surprise for someone used to seeing Fili and Kili in jeans and old t-shirts; as much as seeing their hair combed and tied back for the first time in… ever, really.

The second thought was - how tired they both looked. Pale and worn, with circles underneath their eyes and smiles that were a bit too shallow.

“It’s okay,” Bilbo said calmly, his anger instantly forgotten. “At some point he will grow up, and I reserve the teasing rights.”

“I will send you a form to fill, then,” Fili nodded with a smile.

“Hey!” Kili protested, still rubbing his aching ear. “And I thought that you’re supposed to be nice on Christmas!”

“I guess,” Bilbo muse, opening his arms to the boys. “Even animals deserve some kindness from time to time.”

There was an affronted “Oy!” mumbled into his cardigan, but it was drowned in the laughter.

* *

The day had ended and he was still alone.

His little neighbour left him a note in the kitchen, on the table, next to the ceramic teapot with a portion of tea already measured into a little net inside of it. There was another note with an instruction on how to operate the electric kettle - as if Thorin didn’t know how to press a big, red button. He could feel insulted by the notion if the first note wasn’t dripping guilt from every word.

To be said, Master Baggins probably wasn’t even aware of it, thinking that the simple information about leaving Erebor and wishing him Happy Christmas was just that. Short and simple. But for someone who has lived as long as Thorin did, reading between verses was as natural as breathing. Also, Master Baggins was a writer very skilled at converting feelings into words - and seemed unaware of it.

Thorin’s little neighbour was nervous and guilty, the question remained: of what.

Was he hiding something? Was he re-considering their arrangement?

Were Thorin’s scare tactics proving to be too much for him?

Maybe he was going a bit too far, admittedly it was just recently that Master Baggins stopped fearing him. But then again, a man should not be expected to take deception laying down and some lines had
to be drawn in the sand.

He was not angry, not at all, just exasperated, and it was a new feeling he was not resentful of. It felt almost… playful to interact like that. To pretend to be a part of the man’s life.

Thorin wondered if it was a sign of his feelings returning. Maybe he was finally shaking off that stifling nothingness?

The house creaked and whispered as he walked through the halls in a language all of its own and he listened to the secrets his oldest companion muttered to him. He knew the stone in the walls and the wood underneath his feet. It was alive in its own way, this place. It had protected him for ages now, him and his secret, his task.

And the most precious thing of all, his family.

It was his keep, his castle, Thorin thought with bitter amusement. His burden and his safe haven.

The rooms were now empty, stripped of furniture and presence filling them to the brink in the past. Dust and cobwebs replaced the laughter and love, the sweet thrum of life that had made living there bearable for so many decades.

It had never been so quiet, so still in Erebor. The air had never felt so dead.

That room was a nursery, always ready for children. There was no crib and the walls were washed bare, the toys piling in the corners gone.

Opposite from it was the room he used to spend whole nights in, not that long ago, waiting by his young descendant’s bed, watching over the sickly child and comforting it with gentle touch every time the coughing had started and the fever grew.

His lovely, bright child that grew up into a mischievous lad and a handsome youth.

His lovely child that he’s saved from early death only to watch him die a scant two decades later; that he’d laid down next to her, in that same bed so they could rest in peace together, inseparable even in death...

It was hard to believe in it being that time of the year again. To think that the last Christmas he was a part of a joyous celebration, surrounded by family and friends, with children climbing onto his lap and reciting the Tale or asking for more cookies.

Last time Thorin has seen a Christmas tree, it was a spruce tall enough to touch the high ceilings and so wide a dozen of children could hide underneath its branches - not a tiny plastic decoration he could almost see the wall through. That one was covered in paper stars and globes of hand-painted glass, candles burned on it like little stars late at night when everyone was sleeping in and he was the only one to sit in the winter garden and look at the fire until it also fell asleep. It was just him and the furnace he’d built out of sheer boredom, just him and the mountains outside, the whisper of the snow and the song of the wind. And awareness that they’re all so close, all in his reach.

It was not that long ago! It was just… an age.

He walked alone now, reaching for the walls and touching them with the tips of his fingers. Erebor felt him, his sadness, and it tried to comfort its first and the last owner. Untrained eyes wouldn’t be able to see it, but gradually the darkness around Thorin receded, moonlight fell in through the tall windows just at a right angle to illuminate his way, to turn the shadows soft and inviting.
It was a cold night, but Thorin could not feel the temperature. He knew of it, but it didn't bother him, his bare feet didn't register any difference between the carpets and snowy ground, not anymore... though it was somewhat amusing when his little neighbour cringed at the sight of them every time Thorin has ventured out on the porch.

His little neighbour… well, he was the only thing in Erebor that wasn’t cold now, living in an island of cosy warmth with all of his pots and porcelain, his countless boxes of tea, his slippers and soft cardigans. With his unobtrusive, polite presence of a small animal that settled down in the minimal amount of space that it could manage and make comfortable around itself.

It was a very curious kind of comfort, too. Not the understated stoic-ness Thorin had been raised in, where everything was stark and to the point, and things weren’t adorned with frills and flowers. It was different from the loud and exuberant joy of Erebor he’d lost one hundred years ago.

Master Baggins brought in a piece of something strange to Ironhill, surely, something different, but Thorin didn't begrudge it. He even suspected that with time he could get used to tiny flowers and soft blankets. To hot tea served in fragile shells of expensive porcelain and to the sound of another person puttering about, constantly humming and muttering to themselves.

Curiously, it was that enclave of warmth Thorin’s feet carried him to, with the help from the house. He smiled, exasperated that the place could still fool him into following the path it thought is best; and amused that it would decide that he needs to be there of all places right now. He had planned to go back to his rooms downstairs, but… might as well stay.

Truth to be told, he was rather curious as to what new adventures awaited the two young thieves Master Baggins had been writing about lately.

Thorin sneaked his way into the man’s office on numerous occasions, always taking care not to leave anything out of place - he was a creator himself, though of a different kind, and knew the way one created a perfect order around themselves and how stressful disturbing that order was. Instead, he reached for the manuscript stacked neatly on the little table, reaching over the typewriter careful not to touch it. The story was entertaining enough on its own, the way these two rapscallions unearthed the plot that, until this point, was getting a bit stale, in his opinion.

Though he still didn’t much care for the sad prince in exile that came to be their silent guardian. The man was just too sullen and indifferent for his taste, but Thorin guessed that he worked as a foil to the exuberant and oftentimes careless duo.

He read and he smiled a bit, reminded of the way she was with her older brother - mischievous and quick witted. Together they were a force to be reckoned with - her so strong-willed and him so protective, and both curious above all else.

The book was near the end, he guessed, with many plot points resolved and many more evolving into more serious issues that would keep the readers hanging, a good tactic. It was a good prose, Thorin decided almost an hour later, putting the draft back, soulful and witty. Though he will have to inform the author that there were easier ways of getting the fire going in the rain and that feeding his heroes only hares for weeks at a time was not the best idea health-wise. Wild game had little fat on it as it was, certainly not enough to feed properly a group of growing youths of both genders and one adult man.

Exiting the tiny office (everything around his neighbour was curiously small and quaint) brought him back to the small bedroom and Thorin’s eyes fell on the bed almost covered in clothes - he imagined his little neighbour pulling clothes out of his dresser and discarding them in panic, trying to find something that would match, and it was another amusing thought that pulled him out of the gloomy
nothingness the day has become.

Thorin considered righting the clothes a bit, maybe lighting a fire in the fireplace to warm the place up for its occupant when he’s back from the dinner. It was just that… it was already long past the dinnertime and Master Baggins was still not back. Maybe he won’t be back today? Maybe there was nothing to go back to in Erebor, just silence and cold and an old man haunted by the past. Truly, nothing worth leaving a happy celebration for...

There was something that caught his eye, though, half hidden amongst the clothes on the bed was a picture frame. Curious, Thorin picked it up and almost gasped. The woman in the picture had her eyes… wide and bright, crinkled at the edges from laughter. The man with his arm around the woman was alike, with wide face used to happiness, a peaceful man, settled in his life.

The boy standing between them, not appreciating his parents picking at his hair, was a wonder, though. A teen, barely out of his baby fat, thin and gangly… and smiling. Smiling in a way Thorin hadn’t yet seen Bilbo Baggins smile even once.

He sat on the bed staring at the photography with sorrow and disbelief fighting in his chest, remembering the tale his little neighbour told him that evening on the stairs to Erebor. A tale of loss and pain that almost matched his own.

*Almost.*

But then Master Baggins at least had some trace of his family left to him. A young nephew he could dote on. Images of his past happiness to remind him of better times.

Thorin had nothing… his house has been stripped of their presence, traces of his loved ones carelessly wiped out of existence like so much dust. If he’d only had some pictures…

He sat on Bilbo’s bed staring at the picture in his hands, meanwhile, the house grew silent around him, letting him have the moment of solitude. Thorin touched the flowery pillow on the bed, one of the cardigans, the soft blanket. It was so hard to believe into the existence of another person when it was so quiet.

He carefully put the picture away thinking that the man is a good company, all in all. Intelligent and kind, and so ridiculously proper. More thoughtful that Thorin gave him credit for at the beginning.

And so very lonely.

What a pair the two of them made in this empty house.

What a pair…

*“You are giving children bad example, you know?”*  
*“Nah, our pets are having too much fun to notice one guy sneaking out for a smoke.”*  
*“Kili.”*

There was a warning in Fili’s voice, carefully enunciated and dosed, and it made the brunet lift his hands in surrender and give him that disarming smile. Though he didn’t put out the cigarette.
“I was joking, joking!” He waited for the blonde to close the door and walk up to him, standing by the banister on the Ur’s porch. For a moment they just stood there, looking over the sleeping town spread in front of them like a colourful patchwork. It took almost half of a cigarette flying into the night’s sky before Kili bumped Fili’s shoulder with his own, saying: “Though it sometimes feels like that, you know? Like we’re looking after some, uh…”

“A flock of chickens,” Fili finished for him with a smile of his own, bumping back.

The house behind them was warm and loud, it smelled of sweet blood and other delicious food. It smelled like family, felt homely and inviting. The party - because at this point it was a party - was in full swing and the sound of singing and laughter echoed in the cold winter air.

It was a tradition for them to visit their chickens on Christmas. For the last two days Fili and Kili walked from one house to another, exchanging good wishes and making sure that all of their people are safe and happy. The primary school’s Nativity was a good opportunity to speak to some, a party at the mayor Groinson’s old house was another, midnight Mass at the local church… all good occasions to strengthen the ties between Ironhillers and their long-lived leaders.

But this, the Christmas dinner in the Ur’s old home, was more than a duty for them. More than a tradition. It was a deep breath of sanity after a year full of tension.

“It’s worth it, though.” Fili muttered, half to himself, because it was. It had to be, they’ve had nothing else left.

“Of course it is,” Kili was fast to agree. “All these pretty girls swaying in my direction! And teasing Bard, let’s not forget about that.”

“You are such a menace.”

“Hey, someone has to keep you entertained!”

They laughed, even though it was a quiet, rasping sound. They were both tired after so many days filled with anxiety and watchful nights, waiting on the danger that skirted the edges of their land, close to their people. Fili was sure the Others were there, watching and weighing their options, even though the rest of the Family would rather believe otherwise. There was no winter cold enough to stop the monsters in their tracks, he knew, he has seen it with his own eyes before.

The watches were necessary, if exhausting.

“Bofur already left?” Kili muttered, blowing smoke into the air. He finished his cigarette and put it out in the snow.

“Yes.” Fili nodded. “He left to join Bifur at the western bridge, they should be alright together.”

“Together!” Kili snorted. “I am fully convinced that Bifur would be alright on his own. Hell, I think, as fucked up as this whole thing is, that it’s actually doing him good, you know? Having a purpose again…”

“Maybe,” the blond conceded carefully. “His mind never really left the war.”

What a collection they all were! Calling themselves a Family when the blood ties between most of them were so gruesome and, well, literal! With all the tragedy of their previous lives couldn’t they at least now live in peace?

War, strife, hunger, hunters and now… Others.
Fili started a bit when his partner embraced him with one arm and pulled him closer, to lean against the gangly figure. They shared the view and the meagre warmth their bodies could still manage to produce.

“Don’t worry too much,” Kili whispered. “It will be well. Don’t…” his breath hitched a bit. “Don’t get any stupid ideas into that blond head of yours, okay?”

Don’t leave, his embrace said. Don’t you dare to leave.

“I will try not to,” Fili answered to both pleas.

He looked to the side and there was a pair of dark eyes glistening in the semi-darkness, staring at him with fondness and affection, and his heart almost skipped a beat. It always made it so, being reminded that he’s loved.

“You know, I think there was a mistletoe somewhere in there,” Kili whispered with that shit-eating grin of his, nodding towards the house.

The blond raised a sceptical eyebrow, “Was there?”

“Mhm, and I am sure you’ve stepped under it at least a few times.”

“Oh, well, if you say so…”

It was so childish and silly, and so overly cliché, but they kissed and it was perfect. Gentle and tender, and so good…

Until they heard a tiny gasp from below the porch and a painfully familiar voice muttering “Oh, dear…”

Fili felt Kili jump and tense and, between one heartbeat and the next, his mouth was cold and his hands empty. Kili backed away from him with his hands up and the apologetic smile on his face, like a child caught stealing cookies, not… not like a person that did nothing, but kissing their beloved.

For his part, Master Baggins was standing on the snow covered lawn, with a jacket thrown haphazardly over his shoulders and his boots untied. His hands were busy fumbling with a camera and he was looking at them with this kind of confusion that could be hilarious… if it wasn’t likely to turn into disgust and rejection very soon.

“Mister B, whatever you saw it’s not what you saw!” Kili chattered, his golden tongue coming into play, trying to convince the man that… what? That they weren’t doing anything wrong? But they weren’t. “You got a camera, wanna take some fun pictures? Hey, I know, let’s go and nick some cookies of Bifur, eh? You like the custard ones, yes? Come on…”

“Kili,” Fili cut in, unable to listen to the excuses that didn't make a shred of difference in Bilbo’s expression. He felt too tired to waste energy on more lies. “Go inside, I got this.”

“But what are you…” Kili mumbled, surprised.

A slight push was all it took to send him back inside the house - not without the last unsure look, but the brunette went willingly enough.

Which left Fili with the only person in Ironhill he couldn’t afford to lose the goodwill of - and the only one he couldn’t make forget. Great.
But maybe it wasn’t that bad? They’ve already told their little employer enough lies, maybe it was high time to start coming clean? At some point he will know, the town wasn’t that disciplined, it was a wonder that someone didn’t let it slip already…

And, all in all, what would Bilbo Baggins do to them? He already looked like a deer caught in headlights when Fili jumped off the porch and walked up to him. That little man cared, genuinely cared about the boys they were projecting themselves to be, he wouldn’t hurt them if he tried.

“I… I’m sorry,” Bilbo mumbled finally, shifting his feet in the snow. “I just went to get a photo of the house and… I…”

“It’s okay,” Fili sighed. He put on his most reassuring, patient expression and reached out experimentally to touch the man’s shoulder. Bilbo didn’t flinch from him, good. “I know it’s… unexpected and strange.”

The man did a move and opened his mouth as if he wanted to deny, always polite to a fault their Mister Baggins, - but there was no way he could actually say it, because he was too polite to lie like that. It was endearing in a heart-clenching way.

“I would like to explain,” Fili tightened his fingers on the sweater covered arm. “Would you give me a moment to try?”

He could see emotions chasing round the cold-reddened face in front of him, ingrained politeness fighting against itself, looking for excuses to not have this conversation. Fili was barely aware of the stone that took the space usually occupied by his stomach until when Bilbo finally nodded.

“I will need some tea, though,” the man said with a tiny, shaky smile. “Before I freeze my nose off.”

*

The kitchen was empty when Fili closed the door behind them. He was never sure how it happened, but there was some sort of power at work around him that could clear rooms or divert people’s attention whenever he needed it. It was something unconscious, triggered by strong emotions. People unconsciously got off his way when he was angry and flocked to him when he felt lonely, and fell quiet when he needed to think. He would feel guilty if it wasn’t so useful.

Of course, as luck would have it, Mister Baggins was immune to every trick his unnatural blood gave Fili.

Gathering words, the blonde slumped on the chair by the counter while Mister Baggins made a beeline for the kettle and the nearest box of tea. Bombur had probably already invited him to the family for the man to be so at home in the Ur’s central headquarters.

“Would you like some…” The stilted question was interrupted by a silent headshake. “Oh… hot chocolate?”

No, he didn’t have a stomach for anything at the moment. He had to do it right - even though the need to explain himself chafed Fili something awful. He wasn’t used to people questioning his choices, he was the leader, dammit, he was an adult - more than an adult, to be honest. Certainly older than this wisp of a boy sitting in front of him and cradling a cup of tea as if it had the power to make this conversation less awkward. This little silly human with his morals and his good upbringing…
And he was heading into that dangerous place again, Fili realised and pulled the beast back before it had a mind to start snarling at the man. He was just so tired…

“Fili, you don't have to explain anything, if you don't want to,” the man in question said gently, making the blond aware how much time has passed in silence.

“Yes, I do,” he said back. “I want you to understand.”

*

Bilbo understood - or thought that he did - enough to make a rudimentary sense of the situation. Standing in the snow outside, after the first shock fell off him, the understanding was easy.

He understood that it didn’t matter.

He’s heard his entire life jokes about small, closed off communities and their specific notion of ‘familial bonds’, of course he did. Jokes about the Welsh and Scots and their sheep… jokes about rednecks were practically reliant on insinuations of incest. Well, a different kind of incest, but…

But Fili was sitting in front of him and looking at his hands as if he was preparing to go to war, serious and sullen and pale. Kili’s earlier reaction was telling when Bilbo gave himself a moment to think about it - instant denial, desperate attempt to redirect the whole thing. How much of the boy’s fast talking came naturally and how much of it was made on trying to escape situations like this?

“I want you to understand” Fili said, but then he fell silent, probably not knowing where to start, so Bilbo decided to give him an opening.

“I take it that your parents are not around anymore?” He said gently, voicing his long-time suspicions.

At that Fili looked up at him with something like wry humour that quickly turned to pain and then resignation. He looked so mature in that moment, so strangely adult… and children shouldn’t look like that, so old and bitter.

“No,” the blonde said. “Neither his nor mine.”

Wait, what…?

“No?” Bilbo repeated, surprised. “But you…”

Fili shook his head, “We’re not siblings… not exactly. Our parents were; his mother and my father. They’re all long gone.”

“You’re cousins then!” Bilbo had to keep himself from frowning too much. He could swear that the boys introduced themselves to him as siblings, that first time, he could… but then, no one in the town called them brothers, did they? It was always either their names or the ‘Oakenshield boys’ and how could he miss it? Did they lie to him? But why?

“We didn't want to lie to you,” the blond said, as if reading his thoughts. “It’s just easier to come off as siblings, you know? People outside Ironhill are not as forgiving. And, to tell you the truth, no one in town pays attention to that distinction anymore. My mother… she died in childbirth, his father in a mining accident before Kili was born. Father and aunt raised us practically together and that’s how everyone knows us to be.”

It made sense in a way, because these two were always together. The scarce amount of times Bilbo
has seen them separate always jarred him, there was always a feeling of something missing. He’s known couples who seemingly lived in each other’s pockets (like Elrond and his lovely wife, Celebrian), but this was not it. They were not a couple, they were just… together in a sense that went beyond finishing each other’s sentences and other such nonsense.

And Bilbo understood that other, unspoken half. He was raised in a small backwater town himself, with the ‘joy’ of nosy neighbours and judgemental attitudes accompanying him every step of the way. Later, when they moved to Bree after Da’s death, it was no better, the damage has been done. It took Bilbo a long while before he stopped caring what strangers would think of him if he turned his head after a nice looking bloke one time too many...

“We didn’t know you at first,” Fili was speaking to him gently, like a man talking to a spooked animal the feared would bolt. “And then we just didn’t want to make you uncomfortable, you are so proper and well, you.” And what was that supposed to mean? “But you are going to stay and for that you have to know some things to fit in better. You might have realised that Ironhill is a bit different from other towns.”

The way the boy said it, with serious slant to his mouth, made Bilbo nod instinctively. Yes, the town was… he wanted to say peculiar, but that would imply some sort of unpleasant strangeness resting in its shadow, when nothing could be further removed from the truth. It was a peaceful place full of lovely, caring people. Like some sort of a magical kingdom cut off from the rest of the hectic world, set against breathtaking backdrops of Misty Mountains and the Long Lake. And Bilbo wanted so much to fit in there. To be accepted and... stay.

“No one here sees a problem with us,” Fili continued steadily. “And no one has any right to. I would like… we would like to keep visiting you, Mister Baggins.” Serious blue eyes pierced the older man with intense gaze. “Kili adores you, if you haven’t realised already, and it would break his heart if he was forced to stop.”

“Fili…”

“What I’m trying to say here is that… He is one of a few good things I’ve been left with, there’s no way I could live without him. I don’t want to see him unhappy.”

It was said with utter surety and Bilbo swallowed nervously. This was no teenage rebellion and promises of ‘forever or never’, no, this was stated as a matter of fact state of things.

It was also as close to a shovel talk as one could get without actually mentioning a shovel.

Without much ado, Bilbo set his cooling tea on a knitted coaster and reached out, covering Fili’s clasped hands with his own. Gently, waiting for the boy to look him in the face and stop being so very dire. Goodness, were they afraid of his reaction that much? What kind of impression has he made on them? His mother would cry if she knew!

He tried to smile and sound reassuring when he said, “Of course you can keep coming over, you are always welcome in Erebor.” Because it was that simple. “Well, as long as you call in beforehand and Kili stops manhandling me at every occasion, that is.”

The youth looked at their joined hands with strange intensity before glancing up at his employer, expression changing subtly. Some amount of tiredness disappeared from around his eyes and he tightened his fingers a bit. “You are truly a strange man,” he said finally.

Bilbo frowned. Was he really? Thorin apparently thought so, and now Fili…
“So you don't mind us all that much. I expected more… issue, you know, with you being so proper.”

“You don't seem unhappy, quite the opposite,” Bilbo shrugged, going back to his tea. “I do like both of you, and seeing you two happy is worth more than being proper.”

They were young, so young and already they’ve lost their parents - he knew how horrifying losing only one person at this age was, but to be left alone like that… They obviously had support from their uncles and certainly from the people around them, but… but he wanted to contribute too. A Baggins could hardly stand back and let others take care of the matters!

“Kili is right,” Fili mused with a small smile. “You are a marvel, Mister B.”

“Oh, come off it,” Bilbo waved the embarrassment away. These two revealed in making him blush, didn't they? “Now, let’s go back before someone comes looking for us.”

It was quite strange that they hadn't been interrupted till now, to be honest. The house was full of hungry people and the kitchen was always a prime spot for some good gossiping.

“You go first, Mister Baggins.”

Bilbo dutifully rinsed off the cup and put it away on the dryer. But just as he was about to open the door and step out of into the hall, he stopped and looked over his shoulder at the youth hunched over the table. “Oh, and Fili,” he said quietly. “It’s Bilbo, if you would indulge me.”

The smile he got in return, tired and worn as it was, was worth stepping into a hall full of people pretending not to stare at him. It really made him feel better.

* 

“How is it going?” Bofur asked cheerfully, sitting himself down on a little folded chair next to Bifur.

His cousin raised one hand in a sign of ‘okay’ and went back to staring at the snow covered banks on the other end of a bridge they were both on. The river wasn’t frozen all the way over, there was still a dozen of feet in the middle where water whispered gently in the darkness. They didn’t have any lanterns or torches lighted - it would not do to alarm the Others to their presence and they could both see better enough just by moonlight anyway.

Bofur reached into his pocket for a pipe and some matches, ignoring the scathing glance from Bifur. A tiny spec of light was easy to hide and completely worth the comfort a good pipe weed provided. Some addictions carried over into death, it would seem.

“The party is nice, back at home,” Bofur whispered to his companion. “Bombur went all out and the little ones are so happy. You should visit them tomorrow.”

He was answered with a harsh grunt and a pointed look towards the other bank of the river, and he sighed. Trust Bifur to be stubborn about keeping them all safe over making them happy. But that was okay, that was a nice change of pace from the usual blankness of the man’s face and his aimless stares. They were both craftsmen, they needed something to do with their hands and minds, even if one of them was damaged; the need to do was inherent. Especially with Bifur, who never forgot how to be a soldier, who was robbed from seeing the war’s end and so could never believe it has ended.

As much as fear gnawed at his feet, Bofur was in some way glad for it - in a stupid way, sure, but he was. Seeing Bifur sitting next to him with a homemade (but not less terrifying because of that) iron
pike resting on his thigh, watchful and still, and more alert than he was in decades was quite reassuring.

Now, Bofur didn’t know these Others, has never seen one in his life - but he’s seen what they could do with a living being and it wasn’t pretty. He’s seen fear in Fili’s eyes when he spoke of them and it was enough to for him to take the situation seriously.

But then, he knew his cousin since they were both three feet tall and he’d seen him in battle.

Whatever these Others planned, and whatever their powers were… if they thought that getting into Ironhill will be easy, they were in for a nasty surprise.

*

It was well past eleven when Bilbo finally stepped into the hall, rosy cheeked and weighted with bags of cakes and leftovers Bombur had packed for him. Everyone seemed to be getting a goodbye gift of some sort, so Bilbo didn’t feel guilty about taking the food with him - the mushroom stew was so good that he would gladly steal a whole pot of it!

The house was silent as Bilbo tiptoed in the direction of the kitchen, a bit unsteady on his feet thanks to a generous serving of delicious cherry wine he foolishly consumed before driving. He was an adult, he was allowed some stupidity once a year! And it’s not as if he was drunk all of a sudden, goodness no, just a bit… warm. Yeah, that.

In the kitchen, a surprise waited on him - there was a low fire burning under the stove, warming the place up and ensuring enough hot water for Bilbo to take a bath. Sighing with relief, he wondered if Thorin had already showered…

It wasn’t something they talked about, nor was it something discussed beforehand, it just kind of happened. Thorin used his bathroom every once in a while and Bilbo left him to it. Sometimes the vampire left his clothes near the washing machine and Bilbo simply added them to the laundry almost without thinking and then hung them all to dry in the conservatory, because why not - only to have his things back in his bedroom on the next day, folded neatly on top of the dresser. He wished he could fold like that. There were no questions asked and no answers given, they just kind of fell into that sort of domesticity where each party’s engagements fit neatly around the other’s.

Bilbo made tea, Thorin fixed stuff. Bilbo did the laundry, Thorin didn’t destroy anymore of his appliances. A good deal.

And speaking about Thorin, there was no trace of the vampire so far. It was late, yes, but maybe… maybe that was Bilbo’s chance to set his present up without blowing the secret.

Halfway down the hall Bilbo asked himself why is he tiptoeing, but dismissed the question with a little chuckle and continued on. Dragging the boxes out of the boot, across the yard and up two flights of stairs was hardly an example of stealth, though. Especially by the third time when the huffing and puffing reached a critical mass and Bilbo had to stop in the hall and sit down on the floor to change his shoes, because doing so while standing threatened injury.

“Getting old,” he muttered with a bit of self-depreciating humour. “And out of shape, Baggins, better watch it.”

Bilbo’s breath hitched and his heart almost stopped when his undead housemate stepped into the small circle of light created by a lonely bulb. Of all the unfortunate moments to meet…!

“Nothing! Nothing at all,” the smaller man rambled. He tried backing away from the vampire, but only ended up smacking his head against the wall, though the pain was easily ignored in lieu of hiding the last package from sight as much as possible. “Just muttering to myself, you know, nothing of importance. So…” he stopped for breath, mind awhirl with searching for a way to get the vampire to leave. “How was your evening?”

Oh, for goodness sake, Baggins!

Thorin raised an eyebrow at him and stepped closer, “Uneventful,” he said. “Are you quite alright?”

“Yes, yes, I’m fine, perfect, really!” Bilbo waved away the hand that reached to help him up. “I am good…”

“And you’re going to stay down there?” The vampire asked with an amused glint in his eyes.

“Yes, this is a perfect spot, I am quite content.”

He could not risk touching Thorin, not yet, not with that strange power of his still unexplained! What if his housemate detected the lie this way? That would utterly destroy the surprise...

Either that or Thorin lowering himself to the floor and sitting nonchalantly less than a foot in front of Bilbo, staring at him once more.

“What are you doing now?” The smaller man asked, wary.

“This is indeed a good spot to rest in,” the answer was completely serious, “I can see what brought you here.”

Minutes passed in silence between them while the wind outside of Erebor hummed and tiny snowflakes whispered on the glass windows. In the end Bilbo let out a long sigh and moved, leaning on the wall as he got up to his feet. His backside got cold and his legs almost fell asleep, and it was doubly irritating when the vampire rose in one smooth movement.

“Here,” Bilbo showed the package into his flatmate’s hands, ungraceful and annoyed, and already feeling guilty. “It’s your present.” Before Thorin managed to open his mouth, he added, “But you can’t open it before I tell you! I was going to prepare everything, but you showed and… messed everything up!”

His housemate was looking at the package in his hands in stunned silence. Bilbo suspected that the packing paper stamped with tiny stars and snowmen was a bit much, but the original plan was to present everything unwrapped and laid out elegantly in the living room - with the fireplace going and a pot of good tea at the ready. Now it all went to Hell in a hand basket and for some reason he felt like crying...

“That is very kind of you,” Thorin’s voice was very quiet when he finally decided to speak and look at him. “I am… Thank you. Although the quilt would be enough.”

“This is a Christmas present,” Bilbo pointed out. He turned to the stairs and climbed them tiredly;
careful not to show that his eyes were a bit glossier than it’s strictly necessary. He hoped… he wanted to make it special. “That was just… that was different. I wanted to… well, it’s not important anymore.”

A heart attack would have been a preferred option to what his insides did when the vampire simply appeared two steps above him.

“Why are you doing this to me?! You… you… you prat!”

“I apologise.”

Bilbo hung on the railing, wheezing and shaking, trying to stop himself from murdering his housemate in cold blood. Any sense of disappointment and regret he felt a moment ago disappeared entirely. “Stop apologising and just don’t do it anymore!” he shouted. “I get enough scares from Kili, I don’t need you to…”

“I will make tea.”

He almost swallowed his tongue at that. “What?”

“You said that you have something to prepare. I will not get in your way, but a cup of tea will help your moods.”

The nerve of that man, Bilbo fumed silently, glaring at the suddenly empty staircase in front of him.

*

The package was unopened. It was lying where he put it, on the table in the kitchen, silent and obedient while Thorin went around pouring water into the kettle and stoking fire under the stove.

He could use the electric kettle, of course, but that would be too quick and graceless. This time of the year demanded some more effort to be demonstrated and he was all too happy to oblige. Master Baggins indeed owned a proper kettle he rarely ever used - a little marvel made of enamelled steel with a porcelain handle and a real whistle.

Master Baggins owned also a little tea set of fragile, white china painted in tiny blue flowers that was a better choice for today’s tea than the usual sturdy mugs and a ceramic teapot with their insides stained brown from years of use.

Thorin took a minute to admire the workmanship on the kettle before setting it on the stove. Then he stole another few moments because the tea set wasn’t used in a while and it only made sense to wipe the dust off of it, but gently - not to damage it in any way.

He was not in a hurry, after all. It was prudent to choose the blend carefully this time. It was not only him that was going to drink it and his small neighbour was more of a connoisseur than Thorin has ever been. One of the new boxes bought at the Christmas Market looked promising - mild Assam blend with hawthorn berries - good for the heart, this. Although some salvia and melissa would have served his neighbour's nerves better, there was nothing of the sort in any of the cupboards.

One time Thorin looked back at the table, the package was still there.

Covered in that cheery, glistening paper that in his times would be used for something more than a wrapping that will be torn and discarded. She would’ve made something beautiful out of it, he knew,
some sort of decoration or a whole present in itself…

Present. Huh.

His hands were steady as he cleaned the porcelain, but inside Thorin was quite shaken. The scene from just a handful of minutes before was playing on repeat in his mind and try as he might he could not find any sense in it.

He knew that Master Baggins was trying to hide something, of course he knew. It was as easy to read the man as it was to look into the sky and figure out the time of the day. Bilbo’s face was unable to hide his stress, all the little ticks and small gestures, his very heartbeat for Mahal’s sake!

Thorin knew that the man was planning something that had to do with him. He just never expected it to be… this.

Whatever he did expect - though he didn’t think that far up the hill yet. - it was nothing as innocent as what he’d got. And it distressed him that he wasn’t concerned before - that he didn’t feel the need to search for answers and prepare for the worst. Once already he had trusted in his own strength, in the painful unchanging stability of his life. Once already he has trusted fate that it wouldn’t burden him more than it already had. That nothing worse could happen to him and his loved ones.

Once already he had been shown the error of trusting the outsiders.

It was a hard thing to accept, now, that he was all in all resigned to possible scheming under his roof and took it as a normal state of things. And that it were only the good intentions of his little neighbour that threw him off balance.

Hence, the unopened present staring at him accusingly from the top of the table.

Hence, the way he was cleaning the milk saucer for the third time, wiping off imaginary dirt with ridiculous precision.

He promised Master Baggins some time alone and Thorin needed every second of said time to come to grips with emotions stirring in his chest.

*

The sight of his housemate standing on the other side of the door with a tray resting on one palm and his present in the other hand, made Bilbo stumble in his direction almost on instinct alone.

“Careful with that!” He gasped reaching for the tray full of his very expensive and extremely precious china… only to have it shifted out of his reach and way over his head. “Hey what…!”

“I am more than able to carry it to the table,” the vampire grumbled in good nature, “You, on the other hand, have already proven that your coordination needs some work.”

Oh, the gall of this man!

He is right, though, Bilbo’s Took side whispered. We’re not very impressive as of late.

It didn’t mean he had to be a complete pushover, though! It was his home and his china and his tea… which tea was it actually? Oh, there were cookies too! Bilbo still felt full from the recent feast, but
one cookie with his tea wouldn’t hurt. It was a nice gesture to bring them, especially since he was sure that Thorin wasn’t going to partake.

He shuffled to the low table, not to seem too eager and slowly reached for one of the teacups and his beautiful kettle… and only then it came to his attention that the present he almost threw at his housemate earlier was still unpacked.

“You didn’t open it?” Bilbo asked, unsure.

Thorin looked at him with a raised eyebrow, “Wasn’t I supposed to wait until you give me your permission?”

Oh.

“I wasn’t serious…” the shorter man muttered, embarrassed. “I was… it was silly of me to snap at you like that.” He admitted. “I’m sorry.” It was such a crazy evening, still, there were so many things he had to face… But now it didn’t matter. He had a plan and there would be no better way of getting on with it.

So, without further ado, Bilbo cleared his throat to get Thorin’s attention and with a sweeping gesture towards the rearranged end of the room he said, “Happy Christmas.”

At first the vampire didn’t react - and it made the shorter man a bit sweaty. But then blue eyes widened a fraction and the eerie glow filled them almost completely. Thorin stalked - there was no other way to describe his smooth predatory moves - to the 32” flat screen TV perched on top of the linen cupboard and the DVD set sitting underneath it.

Bilbo prided himself on being self-sufficient and setting everything up wasn’t hard at all, it didn’t take him more than half of an hour to figure out the cables and cords and clean the boxes out of sight. The TV wasn’t connected to the aerial yet - because who knew where the plug even was in this house - but for now the DVD player should provide enough entertainment for both of them. Especially since the stack of movies Bilbo acquired in town was almost a foot tall. There were some fun times ahead!

That was, unless his vampire housemate kept staring at the device like it was made to fight him and didn’t say anything for the rest of the night.

“Erm,” Bilbo felt the need to remind of his presence. “It was a spur of the moment thing, really, I just thought… well, that you would like to see some of the things you read about in the magazines and, eh, to see how the world has changed when you were… absent. And the boys were wheedling me about getting a TV into this place for a while now… there’s rarely a home in England without one I think. It’s…” He took a deep breath to stop the nervous rambling and asked in a clear, calm tone. “What do you think?”

“I think that you’re far too kind,” Thorin answered calmly without turning. His eyes were still glowing - Bilbo could see their reflections in the black void of the TV screen and it made him shiver. “I cannot thank you enough for this present, although I also feel obliged to say that you should not spend money on such extravagant gifts.”

“So let’s say it’s a gift for both of us, alright?” The shorter man answered lightly, flopping down on the sofa, cheeky smile firmly on his face. “I can hardly let you stay cut off from the world while you live under my roof.” He politely ignored a huffed noise his housemate made to that notion. “If you don’t want to go out and meet the world… for whatever reason, which is alright with me,” he hurried to reassure. “Though I still think it’s a bit silly… well, whatever. But I just wanted…”
Thorin took over in the ensuing silence, when the smaller man searched for words that wouldn’t insult him anymore, finally turning around and saying lightly, “So you’ve decided to bring the world to meet me, Master Baggins?”

Bilbo’s blood pressure jumped momentarily when he caught a glance of the fluorescent shine of the vampire’s eyes, but he settled down quickly enough. It was supposed to be a happy time.

He patted the cushions on his left invitingly and picked up the remote from the coffee table. “Settle down,” he said with a smile. “I have a Christmas classic waiting on us.”

A pair of thick black eyebrows went up in a mockery of sudden interest and the eyes underneath them (finally!) powered down to a dull bluish gloss that was almost easy to ignore. Almost.

“Let’s see that ‘classic’, then,” the vampire said imperiously and his human housemate chuckled and turned the TV on.

*

Almost ten minutes into a movie, Bilbo was a bit disappointed and a bit unsure.

Disappointed, because a little part of him expected the vampire to at least pretend to be shocked by the moving pictures in front of him, by the sounds and the colours and the overall ‘newness’ of the whole experience, but no, Thorin was focused on the screen, true, obviously interested in the workings of both machines, but so far there has been not even one small exclamation of awe from him. Not even a murmur. Have the magazines prepared him so well?

The ‘unsure’ part jumped in around the time the family on the screen was running through the airport - in an extremely un-British rush - and Bilbo glanced to the side to see Thorin staring at him with a raised eyebrow and a very unamused expression.

“That is a Christmas classic,” he said in a level tone, someway managing to sound questioning, dubious and unimpressed all at the same time.

“It is,” Bilbo rushed to reassure as if his life depended on it. “A staple of civilised Christmas! Every year some channel has it on, so there’s no escape, I’m sorry, we’ve all learned to live with it.”

Having revealed that sad fact of modern life, Bilbo lifted his teacup in a calculated move and pretended to focus entirely on the bitter tea just as the mother on the screen exclaimed in distress over losing one of her ducklings.

He could feel the vampire staring at him for a moment longer, but in the end moving pictures won his attention back. As they should.

*

“An ingenious little boy,” Thorin said admiringly about ten minutes later.

Bilbo agreed with a low hum. He had snuggled into an old quilt and cradling a cup of hot tea in his hands. The room was dark, but for the glow from the TV screen and for a small moment he could
pretend that he was still a young boy trying to stay awake on the Christmas night while his parents were busy in the kitchen, listening to the radio and sipping on mulled wine. It was much colder than in his old house, but that could be forgiven, he still hasn't got the heating sorted out and the false leftover warmth from the wine evaporated slowly.

“Just wait,” he muttered, a mischievous little smile stretching his lips. He knew this movie so well he could recite the dialog from memory and didn’t do so only because he wanted his companion to have the best experience possible. “Just wait, it gets better.”

An inquiring look was his answer and that was okay. The time of the Christmas dinner was two minutes away.

*

Shenanigans began and Bilbo had problems sitting still. He absolutely loved this part of the movie - no matter how many times he’s seen it. The iced over stairs scene was the surest way to send him into peals of laughter and choking on air. For some reason he just found it hilarious enough to stuff his face into a fold of the quilt in a weak attempt to stifle his mad chuckling.

He watched the screen, but his attention was divided - one eye constantly on the vampire by his side, gauging his reactions to the slapstick galore unfolding before them. It was not easy, though, because Thorin’s expression was… empty.

The vampire was staring at the screen in something that could be blank incomprehension, if there was more of it to judge by. His eyes were wide open, and his lips pressed tightly together but that didn’t tell Bilbo anything. It made his nervous again.

Had he misjudged?

Did he choose a bad film to start them off on? Did Thorin even understand what was happening on the screen? That it was a fiction and no harm came to anyone? Was he…

Sweating more and more by the minute, Bilbo tried to find an excuse or an explanation, and a way to stop the awkward atmosphere that got only more awkward when the pressing iron fell on a man’s face and another series of giggles fought its way out of his chest.

...and something strange happened then.

The blank, impenetrable wall that Bilbo has got to know for a couple of months as his housemate’s face… the marble surface that showed emotions only in the palest of colours… the mirror that only reflected sadness and wry amusement at the best of times…

It cracked.

Just a tiny twitch, at first. One corner of the lips moving up. Just a bit.

But then the other side followed. A sigh that could be a muffled snort came after that and the wide, powerful shoulders shook lightly with repressed emotion.

Then the glue and feathers happened and the cracked surface broke with the sound of the loudest, most open guffaw of hysterical laughter Bilbo had ever heard.
And the best - and the worst - thing about it was that it didn’t stop. Thorin laughed like a possessed man, completely unashamed. He laughed at the glass bulbs and the tiny cars and by the time the cans of paint started to fall he was almost in spasms, leaning forward on the sofa and holding his heaving sides. Nothing made him stop or even tune down and Bilbo started to suspect that the vampire didn’t really need the air to live, because it was just impossible for a person to go at it for so long…

It was amazing, to see that stoic man so changed, laughing so freely at the stupid slapstick, like a normal human being.

It was also startling and not a little bit concerning, because there was an edge to the laughter that wasn’t pleasant at all.

Bilbo watched, unsure, his own smile dying slowly, his hands shaking with the need to do something, but not knowing what. Was he dealing here with a case of shock? Hysteria? Some sort of anxiety attack?

But Thorin kept laughing until tears started to fall from his eyes - and that was the signal enough for Bilbo to press the pause button on the remote. He was familiar with tears of joy, but not when they were tinted red and not when the person crying them covered their face when the chuckles gave way to the sound of pained gasps.

It was awful more than anything. In a rush of blind panic Bilbo grasped Thorin’s hand and the man held it fast, fingers entwining and tightening to the point of pain. With other hand still covering his eyes the vampire laughed and cried, and tried to breathe.

“You can take it,” Bilbo whispered after a while of helplessness that left him close to tears himself. Thorin’s breath hitched, but there was no other reaction, so he tried again. “I know you can take it… you’ve been doing it for a while now, didn’t you? Like when I was scared then, in the garden… you took it away, right? It was you, I know… can you do it now? Can it make things better…?”

He thought of calm. He thought of his father - the steadiest man he’s ever known, with all his unchangeable habits and little quirks; with the way he stirred sugar into his tea - five swirls to the right, five to the left. It was silly, but it had always meant order to the child Bilbo has been once. He tried to think of the spring mornings back in Bag End when the routine of dressing, eating breakfast and going to school was familiar and comforting. He tried to think of anything that would help his ridiculous housemate get a grip on his emotions.

Then, quite unexpectedly, fingers on his hand flexed and Bilbo felt it - for the first time prepared and aware, he had a rare occasion to feel this particular brand of magic. It was not the connection he was so scared of at first, the one that marked the vampire entering his mind and shuffling around. This one was nothing like it. It was just… less. He felt a bit less calm. A bit of emotional fatigue settled around his shoulders, as if it was him who was crying and trying to manage his breakdown not Thorin.

It seemed to take a while - but the time around them lost its meaning somewhere between one shivery exhale and the next. Bilbo, daringly, put his free hand on their joined ones, as if to hold the man in place. He would dare to embrace him, he was a caring person after all, but the fear of setting that mad laughter off once more stopped him, made him unsure and impotent. He could be there, though, close enough to touch and try to project calm reassurance to his strange friend, so that was what he has focused on doing.

Yes, when it came to keeping their heads in stress, Bagginses were exceptionally talented.

Many minutes ticked by slowly before Bilbo decided to open his mouth and test the waters. “I am
sorry about that.” He nodded in the direction of the TV. “I thought to make… I don’t know what I was thinking. Sorry.”

“No need.” Thorin’s whisper was rough and low, but calm. “You’ve made me a great service. I… I simply didn’t expect to be overwhelmed in such way.”

“Oh… okay. I mean, you’re welcome.” Bilbo patted their joined hands and settled back against the couch cushions. His heart was slowly climbing down from the vicinity of the throat, good. All that stress was bad for his blood pressure. “The telly is really yours, by the way, but I would like it to stay here… The boys will soon know about it and it would be awkward to explain to them where it went.”

The vampire chuckled at that, the sound worn out and tired, but surprisingly warm. “You care greatly for these boys.”

“Yes, I… I guess.” The smaller man shrugged. “They’re just so… so alive and genuine. I wish you could meet them, you know.”

He stopped speaking, afraid that his stubborn Took side was about to start bothering the other about going downhill again - they didn't need that discussion to happen again. Especially not now, on top of everything else.

“I am sorry for this… outburst,” Thorin said. He looked so… unsettled. Rough around the edges, yet strangely more animated than Bilbo has ever seen him. “I didn’t think it would… I have never…”

“No, it’s quite alright,” Bilbo allowed his Baggins side to take over the awkward situation with impeccable politeness. “You don’t have to apologise at all.” Their hands were still joined and neither of them seemed willing to change that. Better not to risk another episode. “I think I should’ve started us on something, eh, less frantic, you know? I have some older movies with slower pace and less screaming?”

“I would like to finish this one, if it’s all the same to you.” There was a strange look to the vampire, somewhat embarrassed, but intense. “I would like to see how the boy will deal with the robbers.”

Bilbo blinked, “Really? ...I mean, of course, whatever you want!” He babbled. “There are about 30 more minutes left.”

Thorin nodded decidedly and, completely out of the blue, smiled at Bilbo. Like, really smiled - with teeth showing in a non-dangerous way, and the skin around the eyes crinkling, and all. “He reminds me of a child in my family,” he mused. “Little boy with golden hair and eyes blue like cornflowers.” Tender light entered man’s still reddened eyes and Bilbo stared, fascinated. “Her brother, his name was Frerin. Such a small, frail thing he was, and yet so full of heart. Even when the sickness kept him to the bed he was still dreaming of adventures and travelling to faraway lands.”

“Oh,” Bilbo whispered, subdued. “I’m sorry.” The child was sickly... obviously not alive anymore. But Thorin shook his head at his awkward condolences and stroked his thumb over Bilbo’s palm. “He got better,” he revealed. “I’ve spent so many nights by his bed, afraid of losing another child, another bright star… but he’d got better with my blood and there was nothing to stop him from growing into a fine young man.”

“Your blood?”

“One good thing this curse has brought me, Master Baggins, the ability to give my children a few
more years to live.”

Silence fell after these words, because what could be said to that?

Bilbo nodded, partially to himself, and settled comfortably against the cushions, reaching for the quilt one-handed and then pointing at the remote in a silent question. The vampire nodded his acquiescence and a second later screen in front of them awakened witch chaotic humour and wild screaming.

“You know what?” Bilbo muttered, knowing that he will be heard over the noise. “Next year we’re getting real Christmas here. With decorations and pies and a proper tree. I’ve been promised the biggest spruce in Ironhill… amongst other things.”

“Hmm,” Thorin hummed, eyes glued to the screen.

Bilbo, warm and not a bit tired nodded sleepily, was finally content. Even, if he couldn’t get his teacup back, because his hand was still trapped under the heavy, cool weight of his housemate’s palm, he was quite happy with the state of things.

*

When the movie ended, Thorin was startled to hear a low snoring from his companion’s side. A sideways look revealed that Master Baggins had fallen asleep sometimes during the last act, wrapped in a flowery cocoon like some sort of a cuddly caterpillar topped with a mess of blond curls. He looked younger like that, he even looked… a bit happier. Which was a good thing.

The house whispered around them in a gentle, sleepy tone and it took a moment for the vampire to remember that his hand was still loosely clenched around the smaller palm of his little neighbour. He had half a mind to be embarrassed by his lack of awareness, but in the end there was nothing indecent about the gesture. It was there to comfort him, this bit of human flesh and warmth, to give him calm he so desperately needed when his nerves broke under the pressure of unexpected emotions...

He felt conflicted now. At the same time tired after the near mental breakdown and strangely invigorated by seeing the fascinating technology of the future with his own eyes. Memories of his little boy weighed heavily on his mind, but it were all the best memories of the lad: the happy times they’ve shared, bright sparks of life and smiles.

And all that thanks to this soft, unassuming man slumbering next to him.

Thorin allowed his fingers to tighten around the small, soft limb a bit before letting it go. Master Baggins was a creature of comfort, after all, and sleeping in a half-sitting position was bound to hurt his back tomorrow. One way to prevent it.

Gathering the man into his arms was easy and Thorin fancied that even was he still human, without his unnatural strength, he wouldn’t have much trouble with it. Walking across the room with an armful of a sleeping human as to not awake him was a bit of a challenge, but not impossible either.

Passing the low coffee table he glanced at his last present, still unpacked, and so very tempting. He would return to it soon, after he deals with this other precious gift.
Goodness I forgot to add that everything Bilbo decided to bake for the party is, well, my own imaginationXD I am a 'let's put this and this together and see what comes out' type of baker and though every recipe is possible, they do not exist yet;)

And they were totally watching Home Alone, because I am a sap, but not that much of a sap to show them Wonderful World or Die Hard XD

And Christmas at Bombur's are pretty much like any family occasion back at my home - loads of people, loads of food and gossiping in the kitchen;)

Chapter End Notes
Blood on the snow

Chapter Notes

Haha, yes, please don't kill me T_T Some things had happened in RL and I was basically braindead for 2 months or so...
But the chapter is here and now it's just 2 to go:D
The title, yes, it's ironic XD

Special thanks to lovely givemeadecentusername for being an absolute angel and making sure the chapter is readable:D THANK YOU SO MUCH!

Also, I am so very very sorry for not answering the comments in a while - I just couldn't in good conscience talk to anyone knowing that the next chapter was not even half-done>_>_ But I appreciate every single one of them, and every single one of you, and I apologise for being a twit.
EDIT: Don't panic, you're not going crazy, I just reuploaded the chapter to have it in a massively upgraded version thanks to givemeadecentusername :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was the same dream again. Bilbo would have sighed in frustration if he was not, well, dreaming.

It was strange, repeating time and time again. Every morning Bilbo found it harder and harder to blame it on badly cooked ham. The human brain thrived on finding connections and patterns wherever it could. Bilbo’s brain was sure it was no coincidence, there was a reason for this situation. But what could possibly make him dream of being watched?

He didn’t remember where he was in the dream, or even who he was. The only sure thing was that he was always alone, and regardless of that fact, he was being watched. No matter where he turned, no matter where he ran, the feeling of being observed never ceased, never lightened. It was very stressful, to say the least.

Well, as mysterious as the whole kerfuffle was, Bilbo was less and less amused every time it happened. Even his dream persona’s patience was starting to fray around the edges the more it was forced to go through it again and again. Honestly! Waking up covered in sweat, with shivers running up and down his spine was unpleasant and completely unnecessary.

It took a couple of minutes for his heartbeat to soften enough that Bilbo could hear how loud his shallow breaths resonated in the cold, dark room.

Well, not that dark, actually. The moon stood high on the sky, full and bright, its silver light slipping in between the cracks of curtains and casting the bedroom in a soft, pale glow. It settled on the dresser and the half-open bathroom door, on the footboard of Bilbo’s bed and his armchair and the person sitting in it.

“Sweet Lord in heaven…!”

If his heart could beat any faster, then it would be running down the slopes of the Misty Mountains, trying to find a way out of this snowy world of amazing views and horrifying monsters.
The figure stared at him with unnaturally blue eyes.

“Thorin…!” Bilbo gasped, trembling hands clenched on the blankets. “What… what are you… what?” Okay, so he wasn’t very articulate at stupid o’clock in the morning!

The vampire was still staring. Without a blink, without a word.

Silently watching…

Wait. Watching?

Oh… that twit!

Bilbo spluttered, frustration and mounting anger slowly taking the reins from fear and confusion. “Why would you…. Thorin!”

Was it this bastard’s doing? The dreams were his work? Why? Was it some sort of a game? A joke? Revenge for something Bilbo unknowingly insulted the vampire with?

As if reacting to that last thought, the vampire in question shifted, nothing more than a shrug, but it was enough for the moonlight to touch on the object in his hands. Bilbo caught a glance of a book with glossy black cover… Any resemblance of anger turned into pained understanding and then shame in the span of one quarter of a second.

“Oh… oh.” Bilbo swallowed with difficulty, grasping the blankets on his lap; they made for a shabby shield, but there was nothing to choose from. “I’m sorry.” His eyes begged forgiveness. “It was just a joke… and I am so, so sorry, I really am…”

Finally, Thorin looked down at the book, then back at him. Bilbo watched enough crime dramas to heed a warning when it was given.

“I will never… never again!” He swore vehemently. “Promise! I’m so sorry!”

Maybe it was stress, or maybe just shadows arranged around the vampire in a quirky way. Or maybe he was losing his mind. Because when Thorin finally stood up, in a move regal enough to shame the Queen, for a split second there was a silver halo forming around his head.

But asking about another weird thing seemed redundant at this point, so Bilbo decided to stay silent.

*

The town slept.

Under a blanket of cold whiteness it seemed small and defenseless, with its fragile humans and their soft bodies. Like a child, trusting in the safety of the bed, easy to pluck up from the warmth of the sheets and suck dry.

One hungry enough would be tempted to do just that… and they would die, stepping into their own death like a witless fox so overwhelmed by the sight of a chicken pen that it forgot about the guard dogs.

Thankfully, his eye was good enough to recognise a trap when he saw one.
This whole town was like a shiny trinket wrapped in barbed wire. And to think that the guard dogs would be so sneaky. He expected the river to be an obstacle, - running water was a nuisance to his kind at best, a deadly trap at worst - but he didn’t expect the brats of Durin to find a way to arm their ally.

Maybe they’ve underestimated the last children of the soiled blood?

He’s planned to use the element of surprise and attack the town under the cover of one dark, moonless night, when every living being holed up in their burrow to hide from the cold. But, unexpectedly (or not), his lot has turned out some fools who couldn’t keep their hands to themselves. Stupid beasts that went on an unauthorised hunt and, even worse, allowed one of their prey to escape!

They’ve paid for that mistake with their un-lives, of course, but the damage was done. Durin’s brats were aware of their presence and the town was preparing for the attack. And it wasn’t how it was supposed to go at all. His pack was strong, but it wasn’t numerous. He could not dare to bring more of his kind. There was no way to hide them for too long in this frozen wasteland, his underlings had to eat. Now they were forced to stall even more and the dissent in his ranks started to show. They were hungry and bored, and started to turn their violence on each other.

The worst thing was that he wasn’t sure how many of Durin’s line were in the town. The brats, for sure, he could feel their tainted stench where he stood on the other bank of the river. Probably the old soldier and the mad toymaker, surely others… but how many? How strong? What help did they have?

It would all be so much easier if he had someone on the inside… if not for the morons who betrayed their presence he would have them. He would be prepared and the invasion would be a walk in the park. His revenge would be final and his master would be pleased.

Now?

Now they have to wait. But he has a feeling that they won’t wait long.

* 

Bilbo sipped his hot tea with a little pleased sigh as he took in the snowy landscape stretching behind the walls of the conservatory as far as eye could see. Thanks to the furnace working full steam, the winter garden was warm and cozy. It was also clean. Boxes, carpets and chairs went into one far end where also resided Thorin’s magical toolbox. A few days after Christmas the vampire was the one to clean up the wreckage he’d made out of Her bed frame. He picked it up carefully, reverently touching the wood, tracing gentle patterns over carved birds and flowers. Bilbo hasn’t seen the frame since then and he was pretty sure it didn’t go on the pile with the rest. It shouldn’t.

He didn’t ask, Thorin was obviously still raw about the issue of his lost family and Bilbo was happy to give him space.

And that was why he was in the conservatory now, with his chair and desk and typewriter, - giving his vampire housemate space. Or, more specifically, giving space to Thorin’s affair with their TV.

When he was installing it, Bilbo didn’t care to think that his little office would be placed right under the sitting room; and that even the old stone walls thick as a forearm weren’t enough of a challenge
for the Marx Brother’s marathon that was taking place in Erebor for the last three days.

Thankfully, Thorin agreed to restrict his affair with the cinema to daylight hours, so his human housemate at last got some uninterrupted sleep out of the bargain. Especially since the old geezer stopped his elaborate revenge campaign and ceased to play-act a character from a tween vampire-romance novel.

Thorin watched the movies with diligence bordering on religion. Soon enough Bilbo was forced to visit the library more often than he already did. Ori raised his eyebrows at the speed with which Mister Baggins was going through the DVDs, but didn’t comment on it. Which was well and good, because Bilbo had enough explaining at home, where his vampire friend took every minute he wasn’t glued to the TV to invade Bilbo’s personal space and discuss five topics at once. Topics ranging from men’s fashion to exaggerated stunts with bladed weapons to Salma Hayek.

Surprisingly, current political climate didn’t interest him a bit - as long as it did not touch Ironhill, Thorin waved a hand on it and went back to the photographs…

Well, yes, the photographs.

There were a few instances in his life when Bilbo was so proud of himself as when he went upstairs on Boxing Day and saw the photo album he worked on in secret for two weeks laying spread open on the coffee table. His vampire housemate hunched over it, gripping the leather-bound cover with trembling fingers, his eyes glassy with emotion.

Bilbo got a bit teary eyed himself, to tell the truth. Especially when Thorin raised his head and looked at him - just looked, for a minute that mysteriously stretched into forever. The expression on his face was entirely unexpected. Open and grateful and, oh, Bilbo was blushing even before the vampire stood and walked up to him, and rested his big hands on Bilbo’s shoulders.

It felt warm and pleasant. All the things that Thorin didn’t know how to say, all the things he could not put into words that wouldn’t embarrass them both. It felt good, to have this strange power working between them to ease what they’ve usually struggled with - clear communication for once made easy.

After that morning Thorin kept the photo album at hand and every so often Bilbo saw him with it spread across his lap, fingers tracing over the photographs, a faraway look in his glowing eyes. It was something that surprised him. The change that came over his housemate in front of him, and almost because of him. From the sullen, grim, dangerous monster occupying the darkness under the stairs, to the open and well-spoken craftsman enjoying his evening tea by the fireplace, discussing Quentin Tarantino with disgusted amusement. It was nothing short of magical.

A new project was born out of this, Bilbo never went anywhere without his trusty camera anymore. It proved especially beneficial during the New Year firework show two weeks ago. The recording function allowed Bilbo to not only enlighten his housemate on the generosity of the town’s mayor. He could also send the CD with the film to his cousins and show off a bit.

But mostly, it was a nice feeling, to be able to help someone and the peace it has brought also affected his work to some degree. Political climate in his novel changed a bit, a new city-state was discovered, a home to the two young thieves and the quest’s brooding guardian. A city-state governed by a guild of craftsmen, full of beautiful things and good, kind people. A sort of a safe heaven between the adventures and strife, with good food and singing aplenty. Where houses were tall, the gardens covered under glass, and people shared their wealth with each other with no fuss.

Yeah, an idyllic dream, sure, but if he couldn’t put it into a fantasy novel, then what was the point of
writing?

“Master Baggins, isn’t it high time for you to get ready?”

“Oh, cra… crackers!”

Bilbo was not exactly scared anymore by Thorin appearing out of thin air in his corner of the conservatory, but he was still a human with a pulse.

“Master Durin!” He snapped, fixing the glasses that slipped down his nose when he jumped on the chair. Then he stopped, startled by a sudden realisation. It was half past five already and he’s been invited for a dinner at Urs’ cottage at six pm sharp. He completely forgot! “…Thank you for reminding me.”

Thorin shrugged the thanks off easily. “No need. Though you may want to be careful sitting so close to the furnace, Mahal knows how quick your papers will burn.”

“Who’s Mahal?”

Thorin stopped doing whatever he was doing (it was some sort of a great secret usually hidden under a stack of carpets that Bilbo had no courage to explore even when the vampire wasn’t around). The gaze directed at Bilbo was blank enough for him to realise that the answer may not come. The vampire did it sometimes, the ‘not answering because the moon phase is wrong’ thing.

“An old lady in the Library used it. The one that made your quilt.” Bilbo folded his glasses and put them away; it was time to dust off his Sunday best. “And I think Fili said it once… I think. So, who is it? Another local hero? A creature form folklore?”

Honestly, he would put nothing beyond the people of Ironhill. This was a different world.

Thorin’s smirk, however, signaled more prosaic explanation. “Mahal is a patron of the miners. Great Father Aule, the Maker and the Craftsman. Don’t forget that Iron Hill was founded on the mines underneath these mountains, Master Baggins, miners were it’s foundation and they brought with them their own beliefs.”

“Oh?” Bilbo inquired. His spine cracked alarmingly when he finally stood up and bent back to loosen the muscles tense from hours spent in one position. Huh, the the age was catching up to him. “Did he kill a dragon or some other monster?”

(Some other monster.” The vampire chuckled and went back to his mysterious work. “Be safe on the way downhill.”

“I will, thank you.” Bilbo felt so pleased by that small pleasantry he could feel his cheeks reddening. Ridiculous. “Errn, would you like me to bring you something back?”

“No need, I have everything I need.”

“Okay then, I will see you tomorrow.”

It felt… nice, to walk out of home with the knowledge that someone was there, waiting for his return, - even if they won’t own up to it.
The bridge was covered in snow that creaked under the shoes as the town’s librarian walked back and forth to stave off boredom and stay warm. Well, cold was not a danger to this particular man for a long time now, but old habits died hard, as layers of wool covering his body on daily basis attested. Good thing that Dori was a wiz with knitting needles or his older brother would start looking really shabby really fast.

It was a boring watch, maybe even unnecessary since Father Theoden blessed the bridge a night ago, but if it calmed Fili’s mind to have one of them there, then Ori was willing to stand in the middle of a blizzard for a night and a half.

The town behind him was aglow with leftover Christmas lights and decorations. Ironhill was still re-living the firework show and Ori couldn’t really blame them for it. It was a grand spectacle and Gloin was rightfully proud of organising it. But there was something else to the joy it brought, a sort of desperation to prolong it as much as possible could be felt in the air.

Desperation Ori recognised from the past he didn’t like to think about.

It was the sort of desperation people experienced when they were feeling under their skin that something is wrong around them, but weren’t sure what. It was a war-torn city a night before the bombs started to fall like rain to turn everything into rubble and death. It was a battle almost won before the enemy’s reinforcements arrived. It was sitting in a crowded, dirty basement and trying to sing happy songs and keep the morale from slipping into black despair.

Ironhill knew that something isn’t right. No matter how hard the Family worked on hiding that fact, how hard they were trying to play off protective measures as this year’s quirks, the people knew.

How could they not? Fili really didn't give them enough credit, Ori thought. How could he, when the son of the Durin’s line was never a helpless victim waiting patiently for death to come for him and ease the pain? When all the blood he’d lost was shed in battle? When he was never a cowardly child that cowered in fear as mortar shells whistled over its head?

Ori wasn’t bitter, not at all. What he’s seen and lived through, he would never wish on anyone. He was thanking fate every day that his brothers were too young to remember any of it in detail. He wasn’t thanking God. Not since the day he saw his mother executed on the street and was confronted with the fact that God wasn't trustworthy anymore.

He was glad that their leader was built out of stronger rock than him, that he could be trusted to stand in front of them and keep them safe at any cost. Like he’d done before. For that Ori will forever remain in his service.

That’s why he would stay in the town he’s been calling his for the last sixty some odd years, regardless of the danger it would put him in. It was a good sixty years, more than he was worth and more than he deserved. A borrowed lifetime among kind people and books; an unpaid debt of the highest order.

The other bank of the Running was shrouded in darkness; the moon was only a thin sliver of silver, like a crack on the starless sky. A reddish glow surrounded it. Fox fur Hat as Ori remembered from when he was a small child and his mother explained to him the phenomenon and beliefs surrounding it. It was supposed to signal a drop in temperature.

A wary glance down, at the river, brought a recurring nightmare closer every time Ori looked at the thinning trail of moving water between thickening jaws of ice slowly closing over it.
They've attempted to break the ice on the river a couple of days ago, but it was only a temporary solution. The current was too strong to risk getting in its grasp and soon enough the attempts were deemed too dangerous.

If the temperatures stayed below zero, the river will freeze over, and then…

A glint of light from the other side of the bridge stilled Ori in the middle of a step.

Was it? what he thought it was? Was that a movement? A flash of a dog’s eye or a wolf’s? Was it worth alarming others over or…

“What are you doing here?”

It was a split second decision that Ori’s mind took for him that saved Bard from being socked in the nose when the startled librarian swirled around in a flurry of wool. Tense as he was, Ori might have cleanly punched through the boy’s face… which would be horrific.

“Bard… you know not to startle me!” Ori hissed out, glaring at the pale youth standing in front of him. “What are you doing here? You’re still not well.”

It was clear to see the reddened face and glazed over eyes, even as Bard shrugged weakly and attempted to a sour grimace. “Don't I know it. Gran and Dori keep smothering me, so I went for a walk…”

He was sweating under the huge winter coat and Ori’s keen eye could also catch the minute shivers going up and down his hunched shoulders. Not good. Not good at all.

“You seem to have walked long enough,” he mused, slipping his arm around the youth’s shoulders and leading him back towards the town. “You will never get better if you catch one cold after another. Let’s get you back home.”

And let's inform Fili about the activity on the other shore, he thought to himself.

“Why do you all keep mothering me? First Kili, then Dori and now you...” Bard demanded to know just a moment before a dizzy spell almost brought him to his knees. “Okay, nevermind,” he admitted, struggling to stand. “Mother me... What were you doing there, though?

When the boy tried to twist his head around and look in the direction of the bridge, Ori quickened his step a notch, forcing him to pay attention to the front. “Nothing much, I just needed a moment of peace and lost track of time admiring the scenery.”

“What scenery…?” Bard rolled his eyes, but he kept stealing glances at the river until the buildings obscured his view.

* 

Dinners at Urs’ were quickly becoming the favourite part of Bilbo’s life. Robust menu and cheerful atmosphere, and the cakes! Oh, the cakes!

And to think that for the last thirty something years of his life Bilbo Baggins considered himself to be a loner! Ha! But then again, his family meetings were nothing but a thinly disguised gossip session,
and exercises in mockery of those not present. And sometimes of those who were present too, his inner Took reminded him. Who would have thought that the key to resolving his various issues would be waiting for him halfway across the country, in a snow-covered little town in the middle of nowhere?

Bilbo came back home long after it was decent and, moving in a haze caused by too much homemade mulled cider, he climbed into bed not bothering to change into his nightclothes. Shorts and an undershirt made good enough sleepwear, his tired brain decided in a very Tookish voice. And since his Baggins was already asleep, Bilbo agreed.

Eight hours later he was woken up by waves of persistent heat that dried up his nostrils and throat. He rolled on his back and moaned weakly, feeling the hangover settling in comfortably behind his eyeballs like a good friend.

No wonder Bilbo had so few friends, most of them were assholes!

And goodness, was he hot! His thin undershirt was glued to his chest and back, so Bilbo used the last dregs of resolve to manoeuvre his aching body into a sitting position and peeled the soaked fabric off. It was marginally better, and strange. Usually his low blood pressure kept Bilbo just on the verge of freezing when he was dressed any lighter than an arctic explorer. But today he was positively toasty. The sun was bright outside the window, but the icicles hanging from the cornices were also still, well, there.

Sitting around acting maudlin won’t help you any, his inner Baggins seemed to be unhappy with him. But a cup of hot herbal tea will.

As usual, he was also right.

Bilbo gathered himself together and rolled to his feet, taking careful steps to the bathroom. He would pick up his discarded clothing later, when he felt more like a human and less like a dried up plank of wood.

In the bathroom, however, he was met with a rather unpleasant surprise. The massive cast-iron bathtub was full of water - as in, half an inch from a flood full. A layer of lather hung precautiously over the edge and the smell of lavender filled the room.

Thorin.

Thorin took a bath and left the bathwater… why? Usually the vampire was so tidy! Why today, when Bilbo dreamed of nothing more than a nice shower to cool down his aching body? To leave these nice, linen clothes all over the floor, like an impatient child. It was incredibly rude!

Well, technically, the bathroom belongs to Thorin, too, since Erebor was technically his home first, Bilbo’s Took side tried to argue, but the Baggins shut it down with a glare when Bilbo reached into the tub in search of the plug.

Technically, he thought, Master Durin can kiss my… foot?

A foot. In his hand. A human foot!

Bilbo pulled frantically on the appendage in his grasp at the same time a powerful force pulled back and the water parted violently splashing over the rim of the tub. An angry face plastered with wet black hair rose from the lather, shiny blue eyes glaring daggers at the terrified man.

Bilbo screamed and jumped back... and slipped on the wet floor. Before he hit the ground, a thick
arm appeared above the water and strong fingers caught him by the shoulder. Slick and awkward, they pulled him forward, as his legs tried to backpedal... the rim of the tub charged to meet his face and Bilbo closed his eyes just as he was almost bodily lifted off his feet… He felt a dull kind of pain when his nose connected with a wall of cold hard flesh, but that was not even half as important as the amount of water that sloshed all over his bathroom when he fell into the tub and right on top of Thorin.

Thorin, who was still holding onto him and, when Bilbo finally managed to move his head and opened one teary eye, looked at him in muted terror. Bilbo closed his eyes, he didn’t need to see the pity directed at his clumsy, terrorised self.

“Master Baggins…”

“Pwease, don’t ‘Mastew Baggins’ me,” he tried not to whine, really did. “Noh nof.”

The body under him moved a bit. Was it laughter? A sigh of exasperation? His lips were filling with a familiar metallic taste, distracting him from any possible anger he might have felt at this whole nonsense.

“I fhink I bwoke my nose on yoh… yoh shest.” Oh goodness he did. And now he was laying with his head on said chest, cheek squished into a hairy pectoral hard as a rock. “I also fhink I damaged my neck. I’s all yoh fauf. What wewe yu eben doen hewe?” And he sounded as pathetic as he felt. Great.

He should move and make this whole situation a bit less awkward, he would love to.. but his every twitch sent even more water on the floor. Confronting that mess on top of everything else was more than he could handle at the moment.

“I was resting,” the vampire answered in his stoic voice. “You startled me. I expected you to knock before entering the room someone is taking a bath in.”

“Tis my bahwoom!” Bilbo protested weakly. “I shudn habe to nok!”

“I also expected you to leave my personal space before we begin another argument.”

“...cabt mobe…”

“Ah yes, the neck. My apologies.” The bastard sounded right amused too. “However, your bleeding is not ceasing and you should do something about it.”

Oh yes, a vampire. Blood and a vampire, not a good combination. Bilbo’s neck still sometimes ached slightly at the memory of the bite. It would be beneficial to his health to move quick and far away… if he could.

“Mahal’s beard.” It was the only warning he got before the vampire in question heaved himself up, lifting Bilbo along like a wet ragdoll. Sadly, feeling angry at being so callously manhandled required more energy than Bilbo had to spare. And as a mode of transportation, Thorin wasn’t so bad.

Oh, they were going in the direction of the bed! And they were wet and all that water on his clean sheets, not to mention watery blood that Bilbo could not stop with his hand and that started to drip down his forearm and chest. He would never clean up the mess!

As if on cue, Thorin changed directions and instead settled his wet load in the armchair by the window. Bilbo was gently set down and could feel the vampire staring at him in concern. From very close.
There was a time when having a gorgeous naked man carry me around would follow a different scenario, Bilbo thought bitterly.

“Were I significantly younger and you much less clumsy, it well might have,” a low, amused voice muttered over his head, strong hands still resting on his shoulders.

“Dif I say if ouf louf?”

“No, you just thought it very loudly.”

“Oh…” Bilbo nodded and then twitched, remembering the Contract. “Oy, no peepin! The wules!”

“I know no other way to keep your pain manageable, Master Baggins, so I will bend the rules a bit.”

Oh. Oooh, so that’s what all the touching was for! Indeed, now that he thought about it, Bilbo realised that conking himself on the nose like that should hurt a lot more that it did. He still remembered a time in his youth when he was playing ball with young Hamfast Gamgee and the lad accidentally kicked it into his face. Bilbo fainted from the pain and the shock of hearing his nose make that sickening crunch. Now it was just a dull ache, thanks to Thorin.

“Fanh you,” Bilbo mumbled, patting one cold hand on his shoulder. “Buf I neef shomefinh fo bloh fhe blooh... afd you neef fo puf shomefinh on.”

Yes, that was the highest order of the things now, to staunch the blood flow and to make it possible for him to be able to look at the vampire without blushing like a schoolgirl. His housemate looked magnificent, his body just on the side of ‘heavyset’ that Bilbo preferred in men, but they have just began having a decent friendship!

“Yes, that is a good idea. I will be back in a moment.”

When the hands left Bilbo’s shoulders, a gasp of shock tore from his lips as the pain, until now kept at an arm’s length, slammed back into place. Oh, it was bad, very bad. Thankfully the nose wasn’t broken (nothing moved too much when Bilbo gently probed the appendage), but it hurt.

“Here, hold it to your face.” A slightly damp hand towel was placed on Bilbo’s lap and he had just a moment to mourn white cotton before stuffing his face into it and leaning back as far as the chair would allow him. “Do you need my help again?”

Bilbo wanted to say that yes, he would greatly appreciate any help at all, but his inner Baggins coughed meaningfully, so he asked instead. “Doufnf if huhr yuh?”

Thorin, now thankfully covered with another towel tied around his waist, had to be an amazing linguist on top of everything to understand the increasingly slurred speech of his housemate. “I can deal with pain much better than humans, Master Baggins. And I find that it... grounds me when other things attempt to distract me.”

There was a certain pressure put on the last part of the sentence and it took Bilbo a moment to figure out that the vampire meant his blood. His blood being distracting.

I am always hungry.

It came back to him, that conversation they’ve had all these months ago (months? It felt longer!) that back then terrified him to the core. The admittance that he will never be fully safe from his housemate’s hunger. And now? He was sitting there, hurt and weak, covered in blood and unable to
move more than a few steps in any direction. A sitting duck, so to speak. And yet...

“Phease,” Bilbo mumbled, reaching out with one bloody hand.

Thorin was equal parts amazed and shocked by the easy acceptance his warning was met with. Master Baggins truly had come a long way since the first days of their acquaintance to be so trusting and unafraid. One part of him admired that adaptive trait, the other was dismayed at the way his little houseguest seemed not to care about his life.

The blood called to him, though, its smell thick in the air between them and intellectually Thorin knew that the best course of action for him would be to just get up and leave; to bury himself in the basement and wait out the worst of it. But at the same time a distaste rose in him at the notion of leaving the small man injured and alone. Bilbo was weak, hung over, and dazed by the hit to the face. Not to mention wet and dressed only in a pair of soaked undergarments. Taking into account his clumsiness, there was a big chance that if he were left alone now, Master Baggins might never be seen again. Thorin would find him head down in a snow drift outside or hanging from a tree or something.

Thorin took that small hand into his. Ignoring the red stains as much as he could, he focused on his power to pull the pain closer into his body. He wasn’t lying, he was made of sturdy material. Injuries generally didn’t trouble him. Sometimes he imagined himself as a rock, a piece of the mountain side that broke off the heights and fell into Erebor to live surrounded by the soft, gentle people. His body was cold and his skin hard, even if he could play pretend with the best of them.

“Fafh feehs beffed. Fanh yuh.”

So polite, his neighbour, so unguarded. Thorin could feel the warmth of the smaller man through their bond and it was… strange. Comforting when so little brought him comfort. He wasn’t one to be soft and careful when it wasn’t about his children, but he wanted to be now. It concerned him, but also gave him a feeling of purpose he so desperately needed. A sort of responsibility he could carry with ease.

Curious, he thought with amusement, was Bilbo Baggins to be my pet now?

Well, at least he wouldn’t have to take care of feeding him properly, a rather fond thought appeared. He appraised the wet figure on the chair in front of him; short and soft around the middle, but regular shoveling of snow did have an effect on the narrow shoulders. A small one, but it was there none the less. It would be a gross overstatement to call Master Baggins at all feminine. Still Thorin found him pleasing to the eye. Which surprised him quite a bit since he’d never been taken with men’s looks. Oh, what he’d said earlier applied, when he was still human, his tastes were varied, but men were not attractive to him visually. Not the way women were, rather he was pulled in by the strength of character and contrary temperament.

Both things Bilbo Baggins was bereft of.

Curious and curiouser, Thorin thought.

“I finh fhahs enuh.”

He moved back when the smaller man leaned forward and started to wipe the drying blood from his face chin and neck. Thorin let go gradually, easing Bilbo into the pain like a parent eased a child into water. There was a quiet hiss and a loudly taken breath, but nothing more, good.
“Goohness,” Bilbo breathed when he finally moved the towel away from his face and saw the amount of blood on it. It was… substantial. He looked at the vampire, patiently standing by his side, and felt a sudden stab of shame and uncertainty. “You cah leave me alohn foh an houh. Geh decenh ant all…”

He felt awful. His face was swollen and his eyes red and glassy, he probably looked as if he was crying for a solid hour. And even after that unexpected bath, he still needed a shower, because he was still a bit sweaty and… huh.

“Why is if so huh in heve?” Bilbo muttered, quizzically eyeing the room. The furnace was dead, and his tiny electric heater wasn’t even plugged into the wall…

“For the same reason I ended up occupying your bath today,” Thorin answered calmly, crouching in front of the chair, and its occupant. He rested his hands on both sides of said occupant’s face and turned it first left, then right, then up, eyeing the damage with an air of someone experienced with these kind of injuries.

Bilbo went with it for the sake of peace. And just a tiny little bit for the chance to see the muscle bunch and work under the skin of his vampire’s broad shoulders. He was just an agreeable kind of person, really. “Whah reasoh?”

The vampire shrugged. “I fixed the heating.”

“Whah?!?”

“The boiler room was full of dust and soot, so my clothes may be unsalvageable, but the boiler itself is still in good shape. Ground and first floors should be adequately heated throughout the winter,” Thorin spoke in an absentminded fashion of an experienced craftsman. “The second floor, though, will probably still require someone to stoke the fire in the fireplaces couple of times a week to keep the chill out. The pipes are wide and the water pressure too low, I will require specific tools to fix it when the winter is over. I will not risk flooding Erebor in the middle of February.”

“No, no, if’s noh…” Bilbo shook his head before the motion doubled the pain, so he settled for grasping the vampire’s hands in his and lowering them to his lap. “You.. fixeh if… all by yuhself?”

That was apparently not the greatest thing to ask, judging by the look of affronted pride on Thorin’s face. “Of course, Master Baggins, who do you think helped me in this endeavor?”

Oh for the love of…!

“Bihbo.”

“...pardon?”

Bilbo sighed like his mother used to do at the sight of muddy footprints in the main hall of Bag End, and minutely tightened his hold on the cold hands in his lap. “Bihbo,” he repeated. “Cah me by me nabe, phease.”

At this point they were long past the sort of decency that imposed polite speech patterns, he would think. Just look at them, wet and naked, and holding hands. If Thorin won’t start calling him by the name now, then nothing will make it happen.

Thorin, for his part, seemed surprised by the request.
“Bilbo,” he repeated, testing the word. Then he chuckled and stood up, taking his hands away. “You are a strange creature, Bilbo Baggins,” he said on the way to gather his clothes. “A strange one, indeed.”

Well, pardon him! Bilbo wasn’t especially fond of being called a “creature”, especially by someone who barely qualified as a human himself. He didn't go into a full blown huff only because it was hard to look intimidating dressed only in wet boxer shorts. He watched the vampire leave his bedroom. When the door closed, he slumped in the chair a bit. It was one of the most confusing mornings he’d experienced in his life. On one hand he’d made a fool out of himself and his face hurt something terrible. But on the other, he got to see his housemate naked for a prolonged amount of time, which wasn’t a bad thing.

It was a good thing that he couldn’t see Thorin on the other side of the door licking his fingers clean of the blood he accidentally smeared on them. It would ruin his appetite on top of everything else.

*

“You are not supposed to be here.”

Emulating Dori was the last thing Kili has ever expected to do in his life; it was right up there with swimming and riding a tricycle. Stern and over overprotective just wasn’t him. But hard times called for hard measures and being the next in line of succession in Ironhill kind of put him in the position where he had to lay down some rules.

“You’re supposed to be resting!”

Bard didn't look all that impressed. Well, he didn't look all that healthy either. He didn't look rested or patient.

“Granny wanted tea with honey.” He defiantly hugged a paper bag with groceries to his chest. “And we’re out of honey.”

“And you live with the biggest mother hen on the planet!” Kili argued back. “Dori would have it delivered straight to the kitchen if you’d have only asked him!

“I… I can do it myself!” The youth raised his voice, though not by much, due to sore throat. “I don’t want to live on anyone’s…”

“Charity?” Kili finished when the boy cut himself off and blushed hard.

Ugh, Bard was such a child sometimes! ...but then again, he was a proud young man, used to caring for himself and his grandmother, to hunting and being active all the time. With the ban on leaving the town after dark that forbade him from hunting and the prolonged illness that just didn't want to go away, he had to be going stir crazy. That Kili could understand, even if he didn’t like it.

That’s why his voice gentled when he spoke next. “You are a guest at the Ri’s, not a burden. Ori invited Gal to stay, because it’s dangerous to outside of the town, now.”

“But I don’t see you dragging Baggins downhill for the whole winter,” Bard pointed out, sulking.

“Because Mister Baggins is an adult who can take care of himself and doesn’t stalk the fields at night
And because if there was a place safe from the Other’s right now, it had to be Erebor.

“I have a rifle and a knife too.”

“And that will help you so much when a pack of hungry wolves surrounds you in the dark!”

“As if you knew what it’s like!”

*I know what it’s like, brat!*"

Bard stumbled back and it was only then that Kili realised that he put more behind the words than his anger. He could hear the boy’s heart thrashing in his chest, clearly see his dilated pupils, and instantly he felt like a twit. The kid was annoying, true, but he didn’t deserve to be mentally manhandled this way. Good thing it was the middle of the day and the street was relatively empty with few people to hear the argument. If Fili heard about his lack of control on top of all their other problems...

It was all so screwed up, with the tension in Ironhill rising and tempers flaring. That’s why he left home, to stretch his legs and clear his head before Fili bit it off - and now he was getting all worked up because of some child’s immature behaviour.

“This is not the first harsh winter to ever visit Ironhill,” he said calmly, reaching out to the youth to steady him. “And you’re not the first young fool who thinks he’s immune to harm, you know?” He shook the kid lightly, affectionately. “I like you, you know that, and I am not really bothered by all that age and wisdom stuff. But I will not have you mouthing off when all I’m doing is trying to keep you safe, you understand?”

Mahal’s holy balls, he sounded just like Fili at his most protective! It was a bit scary and a bit exciting at the same time. It seemed to work like a dream, because Bard allowed himself to be shaken and he rubbed at his face with gloved hands. “I am sorry,” he whispered. “I don’t know what’s going on with me, I keep losing my temper lately… sorry.”

“Why won’t you help Dori at the store, if you can’t stay in bed?” Kili proposed. “I know you’ve heard it a dozen times already, but you really won’t get better if you won’t take care of yourself.”

“Yeah, that sounds… like a good idea. I will. Thank you.”

*Don’t thank me*, Kili wanted to say, but didn’t. The status quo had to be maintained even if he felt like an asshole for it. Every once in a while he had to remind people around him that he wasn’t one of them anymore, that he cared about them enough that sometimes he had to be harsh.

“Yeah, go home now,” he said, pushing the boy on his way. “I will come over around teatime to have a word or two with Gal so behave, understood?”

The youth snorted and shook his head in disbelief; good, that he wasn’t afraid anymore. “Tell Mister Baggins I said good afternoon,” he said before disappearing around the corner of the City Hall.

It struck Kili dumb for a whole five seconds. “Mister Baggins…” Until he turned around and saw a familiar figure stumbling through the thigh-high pile of snow left in the middle of the pavement. His lips could not stretch wide enough.

*
Well, at least this day is better than the last one, Bilbo mused as he tried to squeeze through a sliver of space left between a row of parked cars and a pile of snow left by the road services in the most inconvenient place possible. At least his nose stopped hurting after a good night’s sleep. To be honest, the day wasn’t all bad. After his catastrophic morning, Bilbo did all he could to catch Thorin and show him how grateful he was to have the heating fixed. A pot of his best tea was a small price to pay for such a great favour.

Thorin, for his part, accepted the thanks gracefully, and politely inquired about Bilbo’s nose. And, even though he didn’t call him by his name, he refrained from the whole ‘Mister Baggins’ business as well. Bilbo counted it as a small victory.

Today his nose felt better and the weather was nice, so going into town was no hardship. Bilbo got his mail from the post office and visited Bombur’s shop. Now, half an hour later, he planned to take some photographs of the Market Square for Thorin and his cousin Drogo, who was a Baggins and thus appreciated good food like no other.

And it was all going well until a wild shout behind his back almost made Bilbo trip before a speeding mass smashed into him, sending him into the beaten up snow anyway. Face first.

“Mister B! How have you been? I haven’t seen you since the Christmas party and… oh, your nose. Is that… Oh my god, Mister B, you’re bleeding!”

He was going to kill that boy!

*

“Ori, I didn’t want to break Bilbo, honest!”

“Kili, sit your bum down on this chair or so help me, I will sit the chair on you!”

Who would have thought that quiet, gentle Ori could be so bossy? And stern enough to make the ever-stubborn Kili plop on the chair like a little boy scolded by his grandmother? It had to be from all the kids he had to deal with every other day of the week and twice that around Christmas.

Ori was also surprisingly efficient when presented with an injury.

Bilbo was sitting on the other chair in the little kitchenette at the back of the Library where Ori brought him as soon as he was dragged into the building by a screaming Kili. It was easily one of more embarrassing moments in Bilbo’s life. And the boy was impossibly strong for his age!

“You’ve very good at this,” Bilbo acknowledged, pointing at the ice bag he was holding to his face - which was nothing more than a sandwich bag filled with a crushed icicle and wrapped in a hand towel - and trying his hardest to ignore a sulking teen on his left. “It’s quive smaht.”

Just two days and he already missed being able to pronounce his consonants.

The young librarian put a cup of hot milky tea in front of him and smiled in that hopeless, endearingly modest way of his. “With a brother who constantly kept getting into fights I had to learn this or that.”
Bilbo couldn't believe his ears. “Dovi? Into fights?”

“Oh goodness, no!” Ori covered his mouth with one mitten-clad hand as he chuckled. “I’ve never had to worry about Dorian of all people! He’s never lost a fight.”

Kili sniggered as Bilbo’s eyes grew bigger. Cakes and puddings, but Mister Dori was such a gentleman!

“I have another brother, Norbert,” Ori explained. “We call him Nori. He was trouble from the moment he could walk, that one, incorrigible! Got into fights about anything and everything. The number of bleeding noses I had to take care of throughout the years, Mister Baggins, I can’t even guess it!”

“I dov’t think I’he hah pleasyve of meetinh him yeh.”

“You wouldn’t.” And just like that, the atmosphere in the little bright room paled just like the smile on librarian’s face. “He’s… out of town at the moment. Working in London; Ironhill is too small to contain him.”

There was a story behind this, Bilbo was sure of it as he was sure of his last name. He wasn’t a writer for nothing. He could smell a good story from miles away! (Or maybe it was just his Bagginsian gossip detector, the Took suggested, and promptly got scolded by the Baggins in question.) But he would not mention it. Nor ask questions, because he genuinely liked Ori and had more important things to worry about anyway.

“Kili…”

“I am so sorry,” the boy repeated for the nth time. True, Bilbo had never seen him so contrite and worried. “It was an accident, I just wanted to hug you and slipped... Please, don’t be mad at me.”

Mad at him? When he looked like the saddest puppy in the world? He would gladly strangle the boy for being such a nuisance, but being mad at him? He wasn’t heartless!

“Kili,” Bilbo sighed, pulling the ice pack away from his nose and turning to face the boy fully. “I am not mad at you,” he pronounced carefully. “But I am very disappointeh.”

He could hear Ori gasping behind him and see the way Kili’s face turned white. The youth shook his head and covered his face with both hands, moaning like a dying seal. “Way to go, Mister B, start with the big guns, why won’t cha!”

Well, he had to try.

“But I’he told you so many times to stop mahandling me!”

“But you’re just too cute! How I am supposed to resist, if you're just standing there looking all fluffy and tiny!”

“I am not tiny!”

Goodness, he was getting a headache! This argument was leading them nowhere!

“Alright.” He took a deep breath and released it slowly. “From noh on, you will come no closer than three feeh in radius, unless I alloh oherwise. Is that undehstood?”

Kili looked as if he's been shot in the heart. By a friend, no less!
“You’re not serious,” he choked out.

“I am completely sehious,” deadpanned Bilbo.

He could swear that Ori was trying to stifle mad laughter behind his back, but didn’t acknowledge it. This was serious business. This was ridiculousness of the highest order and still Bilbo had to come out on top.

“No, Mister B, I will never tackle you again, I swear!” Kili was up in a flash, stalking to the shorter man, grabbing his shoulders and shaking him like he shook Bard not long ago. “I swear, but, please, don’t be like that!”

Was he whining? Mahal, he was whining like a child!

“Misteeeer B…”

But Mister Baggins had that steely look in his eyes and every last bit of Kili’s mental suggestion bounced off him; it was like throwing peas at the wall! In the end, could Kili blame him? Just look at his poor face and swollen nose. The blood on the towel, his chin, little droplets staining the collar of his coat. It was more blood that he expected.

“I won’t revoke the ban if you can’t behave yourself,” Bilbo was speaking, but his voice sounded hollow in Kili’s ears. “And shaking me like a doll is exactly what the ban is about.”

His small hands touched Kili’s and tried to pry them from his person, and Kili allowed him, because his interest in the argument waned substantially. Instead, he could feel his pupils expanding and his teeth aching… when the man moved back to sit straight the air around him moved and the smell of blood hit Kili straight in the face, and his teeth almost - almost - slid into place to…

Then a kitchen towel landed on his head and Ori’s shaky voice scolded him from above.

“Enough dramatics! Let Mister Baggins rest. Go! Get!” The librarian shooed him away and Kili had never been so grateful in his life to be treated like a stray chicken. “Go and tell Fili what you did, or… or I will call him and it won’t be pretty.”

He looked into Ori’s eyes and saw fear, and that was enough to spin him on a heel and walk him out of the Library without a word or a look back.

Outside he broke into a run and didn’t stop until he reached Balin’s house.

*

Inside the cozy kitchenette, Ori let out a shaky breath. Resting hands on his hips, he turned to the injured man. “He will sulk for a day and that will be the end of it. He will be back to bothering you in two day’s time.”

Bilbo laughed and shook his head. This boy was impossible. A real health hazard.

“So, Mister Baggins, what brings you to Ironhill on such a beautiful day?”

The change of subject was obvious, but quite welcome after all the drama of the last hour.
“I was going to take some photographs of the market.” Bilbo reached into his pocket and pulled out a battered camera. Thankfully, Kili’s antics didn’t damage it. “For my cousins, they were asking me about local food since I moved here. But no one wants to go home and… just rest.”

“Kili can be trying,” Ori admitted quietly.

They drank their respective teas in easy companionship - interrupted only once with Bilbo’s shocked exclamation when the librarian, instead of milk and sugar, completed his cuppa with a slice of lemon and a spoonful of honey. They talked about their families and the Oakenshield Brothers being either a treasure or a nuisance. They discussed Bilbo’s newest book, and Ori could not contain his excitement at the little hints Bilbo dropped here and there about the next one.

It was such a nice time but they were interrupted by a loud, rude knock on the kitchenette door.

“Ori, you there, lad?” A gruff voice asked a tad too loudly. “I brought them books back. Need another batch!”

“Coming, coming,” Ori called back, swiftly disposing of his empty cup. “I am sorry, Mister Baggins, it will take just a moment…”

“No, no.” Bilbo also stood and gathered his coat. “I have to go, actually, dinner won’t make itself. I’ve already taken a lot of your time.”

“Nonsense! I was happy to help.”

“Orion Ri, are you asleep in there?!” The voice called even louder.

“Coming, Mister Oin!”

Left on his own, Bilbo took his time dressing and making sure that his face was clean and his nose dry. His coat wasn’t badly stained, if he hurried, he would be able to save it before the blood stains set in.

What a day.

When he exited into the hall, Ori was gone. He could hear his voice from the main room, so he assumed that the lad was busy between the bookcases with that loud, gruff person. It would be easy to just slip out into the cold, bright day outside, but Bilbo’s inner Baggins grabbed him by the ear and demanded that he at least says ‘goodbye’ before heading out.

But then, Bilbo was not about to enter the Library proper without slippers - that was one rule that Ori enforced vehemently. He settled for stopping at the desk to call out his thanks. And, like always, his luck was walking backwards. The moment he leaned over the furniture, his elbow struck a pile of heavy tomes, sending them to the floor.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” He apologised to the books, dropping on his knees to pick them up. He was a writer, he didn’t have to make sense! “Leh me jus… Oh.”

Oh, indeed.

A Chronicle of Ironhill years 1950 to 1960 was in Bilbo’s hands, thick, leather bound and instantly sending his interest through the roof. He spied two similar books, laying in a heap at his feet.

“Are you alright, Mister Baggins?” A hurried voice called from behind the desk.
“Everything is fine,” Bilbo called back. “I just drohhed somethin… Say, Ori, could I bohhow these…” He stopped, realising that with Ori still gone behind the rows of cases, he had to be more specific. “A couple of boohs from your desh? They look intereshing.”

“Oh, of course… Mister Oin, this is not the way to stack them properly… I will be right there!”

“Doh rush, please.” Bilbo leafed through the papers on the desk and found a clean page and a pencil to jot the numbers of the books down. “I whote the numbehs down. I phomise to theat them well.”

“If you say so! Have a nice… Mister Oin, this is not…”

Bilbo exited the Library with a smile on his face. He could never get enough of these people ever. But more importantly, three heavy tomes under his arm were a find indeed! He was such a daft muffin, as his dad used to say. Why didn’t he think of it earlier? Every town in England had some sort of records at hand! If there was a way to learn about the history of the place, and its most prominent residents, there was no easier way than that!

He’d lost so much time searching for the lost Durins and taking pictures - when he could go back to the roots and, at the same time, show Thorin how his home has changed throughout the years!

Bilbo leafed through one of the albums carefully and, yes, it was full of photographs, newspaper cutouts and annotations. Such a treasure of knowledge!

Even when the cold air stung his tender nose, Bilbo was still smiling.

*

Kili was close to tears.

Fili didn’t know why, and didn’t ask. If the matter was light, Kili would tell him the moment he stepped into the room where his lover was studying the maps with Balin. That didn’t happen, the dark haired lad snuck in like a scolded dog and made a beeline for his golden counterpart’s lap. Now he was laying across the old, battered couch with his head on Fili’s lap.

Balin didn’t ask either. It wasn’t his place. His friends will sort it out in their own time, he was sure. He just fixed his glasses and cleared his throat to get Fili’s attention.

“Weather forecast came in,” he said, waving his mobile phone for emphasis.

“Not great, I take it.” Fili didn’t even bother to ask.

“Not good.” Balin didn’t bother to sugarcoat the truth.

Fili’s hand rested heavily on Kili’s head and nothing else had to be said.

They were in deep water now.

*
“Noh, noh I can’t beliebe it!”

Thorin was trying to read, he really did. The books his little neighbour brought back this time were interesting indeed. He wanted to focus on the old, faded photographs, on the memories they invoked, on the changes he didn’t foresee an age ago… But he couldn’t.

“Thif ih so unhair!”

The moans and stifled sneezing reverberated throughout Erebor since morning, and for someone with hearing as keen as Thorin’s they were inescapable. Maybe he could ignore them, if he wasn’t so ridiculously afraid that the moment Bilbo Baggins stops speaking will mean that he’s dead.

He felt entirely excused in thinking so. The last day’s escapades proved to him that sometimes children weren’t the only ones that required constant care.

Thorin tried not to laugh at the man when he came back from town the day before with his face more swollen and tender than when he was leaving the mansion. He tried to ignore the mournful grumbling about rude young boys that were never taught manners. He tried, really.

But he was just a… well, his origins were human.

“I caht be sih! I caht! Achoo!”

After all, laughing never felt as good as when you were laughing at someone’s elses misery.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I am hinting here pretty heavily at Ri’s place of origin, sorry for the sudden angst in the middle, but I have a big sprawling plan on where Fili found them all, so... yeah, sorry:)

Also, Thorin's thoughts on Bilbo being not his usual fare male-wise don't mean that he loved women just for their looks. He was just very specific about the men he would have relationships with - he always looked for someone who could argue with him until they both dropped... with Bilbo being soo agreeable and plain nice, and still being attractive to him, Thorin is a bit confusedXD

Also, the Foxfur Hat on the moon can mean different things - in some parts of my country it means it will get warmer, but in mine it meant cold weather, so I am going with it:)}
Late gifts and cold feet

Chapter Notes

And here I am with yet another apology for being so late. I will only say that I forced myself to end the chapter here - it was supposed to be much longer than this, I wanted to cram so many things in there... but realised a few days ago that it won't work. It will have to be next chapter. But what is in here is also pretty sweet I think! Thorin talks! And Fili plots!

And hey, it's mostly well written since over the half of it was looked over by my amazing beta reader: givemeadecentusername :D (the other part I finished in a hurry and had to push out before I lost my nerve¬__¬)

As always, I apologise for all the comments that I haven't answered yet, I will get on it promptly after I get some sleep:) (I am just awkward like that¬_¬)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The liquid in the jar was thick and clear, it looked unthreatening at the first sight.

But then again, so did nitroglycerin.

“It’s a cough syrup,” Ori explained with a small smile and the air of someone used to dealing with people questioning his methods. “Onion and sugar are the only two ingredients, so you don’t have to worry. Since Bard and his neverending cold are staying with us, Dori makes a bowlful almost every day.”

Bilbo nodded and unscrewed the lid. An experimental whiff proved that indeed, the syrup smelled of onion, but not overwhelmingly so. He dipped a finger in, licked it and, yep, it was sweet. Quite tasty, actually.

“You should keep it in a cool place.” Ori continued. “Have a spoonful every two hours; it should help with the cough, plenty of vitamin C and essential oils in there.”

Bilbo capped the jar and smiled gratefully at the sweater-clad librarian. The visit to the Library was supposed to be brief and to the point, Bilbo needed to use a printer, but as it turned out he was a Baggins and a well raised Baggins never refused an offer of tea and gossip. It was just in bad tone.

“Thank you. It sure tastes better than Beechams.” He lifted the heavy, colorful mug to his face and inhaled the steam rising from it, almost feeling how the peppermint unclogs his sinuses. Ori had to take lessons from his brother on how to make a magnificent cup of herbal tea. “Frankly, I am surprised that it took me this long to get a proper cold. This place is beautiful in winter, but the climate should kill a southern bumpkin like me in two days’ flat.”

“Yes, it is a bit hard to get used to,” Ori agreed easily. “But it’s refreshing in a way.”

It was. Bilbo just wished that he won’t have to put ice on his face anymore for at least forever. His cold was not exactly dramatic, but persistent, and editing the last fourth of his manuscript with a dull throbbing headache and ridiculously persistent cough wasn’t something he wanted to repeat anytime soon.
“I would tell you to drink hot milk with honey and garlic before sleep, but I know that not many people can stomach it.” Ori’s smile was a bit wistful. “So I will just advise to drink hot milk with honey to warm up.”

“That sounds fantastic, but I’m afraid that with the heating sorted out I am downright toasty!”

And whose fault was that? Bilbo still didn’t have access to the basement and, following that, he had little to no control over the central heating. It was Thorin who stoked the fire and kept it going days and nights. And he stoked it well.

“You are a skilled man to get it fixed on your own. I barely know my way around the stove.”

“Oh, it was mostly just dirt,” Bilbo waved the acknowledgement away, uncomfortable with the need to lie, but seeing no other way to get out of the tight spot he put himself in. Thorin demanded only one thing from him: secrecy. And when a Baggins gave their word, they did their utmost to keep it. “I imagine that I could start painting the walls soon… well, if Kili and Fili come back before spring starts.”

He could do it on his own, he was no slouch when it came to hard work - it’s just that help would be nice.

“They are busy in the sawmill from what I’ve heard.” Ori smiled faintly, awkwardly rubbing his wool-clad hands together. “A last minute order, probably. It happens every once in a while and Dwalin needs all the help he can get then.”

Bilbo nodded in understanding, he could imagine that.

The forest on the west side of the lake that the sawmill harvested wood from was vast and old, trees taller than houses and wider than grown men stood side by side as an impenetrable wall of dark bark and tangled branches. It looked decidedly unfriendly even from the height of Erebor, and Bilbo - usually in love with every aspect of his new living place - didn’t feel a shred of pull towards it. Maybe one day in late summer he will go and search for mushrooms, but otherwise he was fine with not setting a foot between these trees.

He hoped that his boys are alright. Mister Dwalin wasn’t a careless type, hopefully he was keeping them safe.

“It’s just, eh, a bit quiet in Erebor without them,” Bilbo admitted awkwardly. “I understand the need to help, goodness, I was running errands for my mother during summer season since I could run… But it’s winter! Children should be playing in the snow!”

There was something wistful in Ori’s expression when he looked at Bilbo over the rim of his colourful mug. “I agree with you completely,” he said and his voice for a second or two sounded pained. “But these two have a strong sense of responsibility in them.”

Bilbo snorted inelegantly. “You mean, Fili has,” he corrected with a smirk.

Ori smirked back, “I mean that, yes.”

They were worse than a pair of old washerwomen, really! If not for the visit at the Post Office, Bilbo felt that he would easily spend a whole day at the Library, gossiping and drinking tea. But, alas, the manuscript couldn’t wait another day and Ori had his own work to do.

The lad was already doing Bilbo a huge favour by allowing him to use the copier free of charge… well, maybe not exactly free of charge.
Thankfully, the work was done on time and sending it off to his editor was the only thing left. Bilbo was a thorough writer and a Baggins at that, so his need for organization trumped all; he still had a good half of a year before the book would go to print - a time he was usually spending on a back-and-forth with his editor to iron out all the typos and loose ends. He considered himself to be an extremely lucky fellow to have an editor as good and committed as Celebrian. Elrond’s wife was his dear friend and she always made time to help him out.

It was almost unworthy of mention that she had a personal interest in the series being popular; an interest that Bilbo steadily rewarded by adding a bit of a romance, a few longing looks and some meaningful conversations between certain characters. He was curious what she would think about his three newest additions. Will she pester him about deepening their relations too (of course she would, she had a weakness for dark, tortured souls), and how far will he be able to take it (as far as the plot allows, probably)?

But he didn’t mind tweaking things a bit here and there. The two thieves had a good dynamic going on as siblings, but the tall, dark and handsome was steadily becoming a match for the main heroine. Their banter was surprisingly easy to write and their conflicting worldviews kept their interactions animated. There was plenty of space for a small insinuation here and there.

From what he understood, most of his fans liked insinuations and Bilbo was glad for it because when it came to writing romance he’d always preferred to veil things a bit and give his characters time to grow into their relationships instead of falling headfirst into them.

"Can I really read it?" When Bilbo put a stack of papers in front of the librarian, Ori’s face took on an unsure expression of a starving child given a loaf of bread, afraid that it will be taken away. "Is it not a breach of contract or anything?"

If it was, then the contract has been plenty breached already. Bilbo wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed, but even he could tell when someone is going through his things and Thorin wasn’t the subtlest of creatures. Three times already he’s left linen oil fingerprints on Bilbo’s tiny desk.

“Well, the contract doesn’t forbid me from doing research, and this is a library, isn’t it?” Bilbo winked, chuckling a bit at their little conspiration.

What could happen if he left the draft in the there for a week or so? It was a good solution, his Took side reasoned, because it knew well enough that after the last stretch of the marathon, Bilbo needed to wind down, let his adrenaline levels drop a bit and allow the story to settle. If he left the copy at home his fussy nature wouldn’t let him rest - he would be spending days and nights bent over the pages with a green pen, correcting, crossing off and generally agonising over the text without a good reason.

This way, he could leave the copy with someone he trusted to keep it out of public’s hands and get some time for himself. Floor in the kitchen won’t wash itself and his secret stash of buttermilk cookies was alarmingly depleted and needed some serious restocking.

He also kind of missed the quiet evenings when he and his vampire would sit on the couch and sip tea while watching a black and white musical.

While he was musing, Ori looked at the draft like it was an answer to the question about the meaning of life. His hands even seemed to shake a bit when he picked it up and said… well, he said something that had Bilbo choking on the last sip of his tea and staring at him with a look of pure, unadulterated shock. And the words were:

“Funny, I’ve been a librarian for over thirteen years and I’ve never had a manuscript in my hands.“
“Thirteen?!”

There was an honest to goodness smirk on Ori’s face. As if he’s been used to this reaction and took satisfaction in it. “I am thirty six, Mister Baggins,” he revealed. “I only look like I’ve just lost my milk teeth.”

“Now,” Bilbo breathed out, trying with all his might to hide his astonishment. “Don’t get ahead of yourself, you don’t look that young and fresh.”

But the truth was that, yes, he did. With all these woollen sweaters, big eyes, smooth face and gentle manner, it was hard to believe that the librarian was only three years Bilbo’s junior. It was a strange thing to consider, but at the same time some things fell into place. Like Ori’s seemingly unending patience and calm acceptance of the chaos often happening around him, and the fondly chiding way in which he had mentioned his younger brother and scolded Kili two weeks ago.

“We’re peers, then.”

“Almost.”

“Oh, stop it.” Bilbo waved the correction away. “A couple years here or there hardly matters. Oh, and please, call me Bilbo. Everyone calls me Mister Baggins and I am starting to feel like everyone’s boring old neighbour.”

“As you like, Bilbo it is.”

“Good,” Bilbo nodded decisively and made to stand up, grabbing his coat. “The tea was delicious, but I’m afraid I have to go. Post Office won’t stay open forever and I need to post the package before my editor takes it on herself to come here on dog sleds.”

And he knew that Celebrian would do it too.

Ori also stood up to clear up the tiny table and almost dropped the mugs when the door to the kitchenette slammed open with a loud crash.

“Ori!” A small, chubby redhead charged into the room, stopping only when he was close enough to step on the librarian’s toes. “Ori, I lost me sword!”

“Gimli Gróinson! Where are your manners?” Ori chided the boy without losing a beat. Impressive, considering that Bilbo was still trying to swallow his heart. “The card on the door says that I’m on a lunch break, does it not?”

“…aye,” the child mumbled, suddenly ashamed, its bold gaze escaping to the side.

“And I have a guest, as you can clearly see.”

“…aye. Hullo Mister Boggins, sir.”

Bilbo returned a half-hearted wave sent in his direction, not even bothering to correct his last name; to be honest he was more surprised by the fact that the boy knew him at all. Come to think of it, Kili has made the same mistake that very first time they’ve met.

“And it’s ‘mine’ when you speak of the sword.”

That got the red head back up and the gaze in the lad’s eyes sharpened instantaneously.

“No, it’s mine!” Gimli stated with excessive force. “I am the Deathness!”
“Are you now, Gimli son of Glóin?” A new voice entered the already crowded kitchenette.

Anything else that the newcomer might have wanted to add was downed in an ear-splitting shriek. “Fili!”

Gimli charged at the teen like a train cart gone rogue – only to be caught and thrown into the air, high enough to nearly bump the ceiling. Bilbo gasped and jumped to catch the kid, but Fili had it covered. He caught Gimli with ease three feet above the floor and spun him around, throwing him over the shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Potatoes that wiggled and giggled, and sneaked around said shoulder to land on the ground with the ease every child below ten seemed to possess – born out of solid belief in their own immortality.

“Uncle Fili!” Gimli spun around to stand in front of the blond, eyes big and hands behind his back. A picture of innocence. “Are you here to see the last reversal? I am gonna be slaying a dragon!”

“I am now,” Fili answered with an easy smile and ruffled the red mane with the ease of an accomplished older sibling. “But I have only a short time to spare today, so run along and get everyone ready, okay? I want to see you all reversing in ten minutes.”

There was an air of authority about him that Bilbo couldn’t help but notice; and not for the first time he was impressed with the maturity Fili Oakenshield exhibited. Kili was a klutz and a joker, and when they were together, Fili followed much of the same pattern, but when alone… The youth was turning into a completely different person.

Crisps and crackers, Bilbo thought to himself, give it a few more years and he may as well take over the mayor’s office and become a very respectable leader.

Either that, or become an MP.

“Wait!” Gimli spun on a foot like a top, eyes big and hands in constant motion. “Did you ever kill a dragon?!”

“Where would I find a dragon to kill?”

“Dunno,” Gimli shrugged, unbothered. “You are old, so maybe…”

“You little scamp! Get!”

Quick like a ferret, the giggling boy got.

“The amount of disrespect I get from these kits, seriously…” Fili grumbled, shaking his head.

“You’ll get used to it with age,” Bilbo patted the lad on the arm, the other hand busy with tying his scarf. “Once you cross the magical gate of… “The blonde finally turned to him and the words died on Bilbo’s tongue. “…thirty.”

He looked, for the lack of a better word, haggard. Pale and tired, his eyes were glassy and surrounded by dark circles. There was something rushed about him, some nervous energy that caused an immediate concern to raise in Bilbo with a red flag in one hand and a foghorn in the other.

“Fili?” He reached out to check the blond’s temperature, but the skin under his palm was cold and dry. “Are you alright?”

His hand was carefully removed. “Good enough, Mister Baggins.”
“Fili.”

“Bilbo.” Fili corrected himself with a smile that was a pale shade of his usual joyful grin and that Bilbo didn’t believe one bit.

“You look like death warmed over.” He directed the boy to the chair. “Now, I know that your uncle allows you to help him at work, but you have to take care of yourself too.”

“It’s really nothing,” Fili patted his shoulder and skipped cheekily by the chair. “I have a big project to finish and I might’ve skipped a few nights... nothing some RedBull and a few days of sleep won’t fix. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“Well, I can’t help it, can I?” Bilbo wasn’t pleased, but then again, he remembered his own young years and the path of education, and a few nights skipped here and there seemed pretty tame to what him and his colleagues were usually up to. Heck, Fili looked like a downright paragon of good sense compared to a few much older people Bilbo could name. And as long as the lad won’t come up with an idea to keep a vampire in his home, respectful Mister Baggins had the first spot on the list.

Fili patted his shoulder affectionately. “I guess not, but that’s a part of your charm, isn’t it?”

“I am leaving,” Bilbo mumbled, embarrassed. “Just take care of yourself and tell your silly other half to do the same, will you? Just so I can sleep better.”

“Talking about my silly other half,” Fili turned to Bilbo fully, curiosity shining in his eyes. “Before you go, care to tell me what happened between the two of you the other week? He’s been moping around the house for two weeks now!”

Kili was what? Bilbo’s mouth opened in expression of disbelief. Was the boy taking that accident so seriously? Kili? The joker and ‘no notion of personal space’ stealth-hugger Kili?

“I…” What could he say? It was an accident. Yes, he was a bit angry and very exasperated, but Kili apologised and the nose was all healed now, there was no point in bringing the matter up, was it? “It was an accident.” Bilbo decided to skip grisly details. “You can tell him that I am not angry and he is very welcome to come over.”

It was a bit lonely, even with a vampire under is roof. Erebor desperately missed life.

“Well then, have a good day, I will see you later,” he declared on his way to the door. “I need no more disrespect today.”

“You get used to it with age,” Fili called after him.

Bilbo stuffed his hands into the pockets of his coat and smiled when one of them wrapped around a small metal case. “Oh wait!” He spun on a heel and before the blond could react, camera flashed and Bilbo was walking away with a smug smile and a portrait of a deer caught in the headlights stored safely on a memory card in his pocket.

“You are a menace!”

Absolutely not, he was a respectable Baggins from the top of his head to the bottoms of his soles. He just didn't have much in the way of actual entertainment lately.

*
Ori shook his head and gathered the empty mugs into the sink to wash them later. He waited for Fili to stop rubbing his eyes, - their sight was very good and a sudden flash like that was quite a shock to the system. A lesser of them might have even lashed out in fear, - Ori didn't even want to think what he would do. With his stupid strength and speed there was a slim chance of good Mister Baggins surviving his little joke.

But, once again, Fili was proving himself to be made of a different cloth entirely.

“Children,” the blond let out an exhausted sigh. “Wherever I turn, children. I don’t want to be the leader of this town anymore.”

Ori didn’t comment, it wasn’t necessary.

“Do you feel alright?” He asked instead, hoping that at least in the presence of family Fili will dare to be honest. “He was right, you do look like death on a banner*”

Fili shrugged, but at least didn't lie outright. “I will be better as soon as we get this situation under control,” he evaded smoothly.

But Ori wasn’t born yesterday and he knew that time for control has long since passed. The watches were tripled in the last week and safety measures in town started to make even the most wary of mothers whisper uneasily; people started to ask questions. He was of opinion that at least some of them have to be answered, but the heads of the Family disagreed.

Ori understood their choice, really, it’s just that it wasn’t the first battlefield he was standing on and the memory of damage that the lack of knowledge and foresight could cause amongst witless population was a chilling one. The Family was doing all they could, but they were already stretched so thin, with the watches and research, and preparing weapons, that it was hard to hope. Nerves ran thin these days and fuses were distressingly short. Dori and Dwalin hasn't exchanged one word for the last three days, ever since the argument about Dori’s involvement in the upcoming battle - or rather, the lack of it. Dwalin was unbent in his decision to keep Ori’s brother out of the whole mess - a decision the librarian fully supported, even though he understood the unfairness of it. Dori, on the other hand…

They got another letter from Nori yesterday. Their youngest brother demanded to know what was going on and why did they ask for his knowledge two months ago, but in a display of truly astounding hypocrisy Dori spun some excuses and forbid Ori from revealing the truth.

Ori decided to go with it for the peace’s sake. One way or another, Norbert will know what happened.

He was not an idiot, no matter his young and helpless looks, and Balin wasn’t either; together they’ve composed a message to London that would reach his brother if their struggles were not enough. It was a plea for help. Hunters would jump at the chance to save helpless people of Ironhill from the monsters - as long as the other kind of monsters was gone.

Fili agreed, but he wasn’t happy. Understandable, taking into consideration his history with the Hunters. Oh, if only they could work together…

“Come along,” he motioned for the blond to follow him out of the kitchenette. They crossed the hall, passed by the play area full with children trying to catch their attention. He felt a wave of immense admiration when he saw a smile that Fili has somehow managed to raise for the younglings.
They took a turn by the entrance and were greeted by a tight, dark staircase. It led to the first and second floors, and was strictly off limits to the wider population of the town. Ori protected the archives of Ironhill with a zeal some reserved for protecting their children. He was prompted not only by his respect for the history and hard work of the chroniclers, but also by the unbeatable inner need to keep memory of the town living. His own history as full of holes and empty rooms with nothing, but dust and cobwebs; places he knew as a child, as a human, were long gone, destroyed, burned to the ground. People he knew and loved existed nowhere outside of his memory, not even their graves marked the earth that soaked their life so many decades ago.

He would be damned twice if he let anything like that happen to the place that became his new home.

The first floor staircase opened to a spacious room full of old furniture taken over completely by papers. Files and folders stacked on chairs and cupboards, laid in piles on the floor and window sills. Dust drifted in the air, sparkling in the sun falling into the room through two massive, frost-covered windows.

Ori pointed to the only uncluttered area in the whole mess - a small desk tucked into a corner, - and went right by it to riffle through the nearest pile of papers.

“Will you tell me at least what happened between these two?” Fili asked, looking at the librarian accusingly. “I’m not exaggerating, Kili is miserable.”

Ori tried to shrug the question off, but the persistent blue stare didn’t leave him. Drats, he always felt so awkward with Fili, as if he was a child that stole the cookies and still had crumbs stuck to his mouth.

“Kili was being himself,” he answered after a long deliberation. “And it ended up with a bloody nose.” He shrugged again for good measure. “There was quite a bit of blood.”

He could imagine how Fili’s face pales even further. “Did he…”

“No. He left while there was still time, I swear. He kept his head.”

There was no reason to tell the blond that it was a close call and that only his intervention saved the day. That didn't save him from another suspicious look, though.

“He doesn’t act like it wasn’t a big deal.”

It was with a tormented sigh that Ori finally turned around, with an armful of papers, and faced Fili properly. “Because the two of you fear yourselves more than any other person in this town fears you.” He pointed out. “If you stopped for a moment, much drama would’ve been avoided.”

That got him a tiny, but real smile in response. “But shouldn’t it be like that, Ori? We are the most dangerous in here.”

He rolled his eyes and put the papers on the desk. “Yes, well, I’m just saying that you're taking this whole ‘martyr’ thing a bit too far.”

Fili instantly crowded close to look over his shoulder at the first opened page. “You would know, wouldn’t you?” He muttered.

“Of course I would. Don't argue martyrdom with me, I’m Polish.”

“How could I forget.”
“Yes, how could you.”

And that last retort finally got him a desired response. Fili laughed. It was a thin, rather anemic laugh, but it was something.

*

Bilbo left the Post Office with a spring in his step and a happy smile on his lips. It really felt good to have another book off his back for a little while. Maybe he should pop into the Cauldron and buy some celebratory wine? He wondered if Thorin drinks wine.

Could vampires get drunk? Hmm…

If, hypothetically, a person got drunk and then was bitten by a vampire - would said vampire get drunk on their blood? How about a second-hand hangover?

Could a vampire taste the cake their ‘victim’ ate a moment before being bitten?

Hypothetically speaking, of course. Not like he would actually ask his resident vampire about that when they didn’t really talk about… well, that. Not really. For all the time they’ve spent conversing and arguing, there was actually many subjects that they haven’t discussed at all. Like blood - and the hypothetical amount of time before Thorin will need another meal. Or the mind-share thing that they’ve had seemingly developed over the last months - it was pleasant most of the time and very useful, but the mechanics of it were shrouded in mystery where Bilbo was concerned.

There was so many fascinating things about his housemate, to be honest, that if he ever acquired the courage to start asking questions Bilbo didn’t know if he would ever stop. All that knowledge - two centuries of life’s worth of history! Supernatural elements! How did he manage to survive for so long without wearing any shoes?

But he couldn’t ask Thorin about any of that, could he? Because the vampire had that habit of going silent and getting a faraway look in his eyes whenever the discussion touched on his family or his confusingly undead state. And Bilbo was a Baggins, which meant that he skirted around any uncomfortable subjects with a skill and grace of a figure skater.

In the end he got the wine. It was locally produced and Bombur swore up and down that there’s nothing better to warm a person up on a cold winter evening like a glass of this cherry special. So far Bilbo had no reason to doubt his rotund friend’s advice.

He got home just past two, hurried by the notion of the wolves that had the town under strict curfew. Something he will have to think about if he wants to get the B&B going properly. If every winter spells this kind of danger it may easily throw a wrench in his plans.

Erebor was silent when he stepped through the door and made for the kitchen, no sound coming from upstairs, meaning that his housemate wasn’t caught in the spell of another old musical.

However, Bilbo didn’t manage to put the bags down when a shiver running up his spine told him exactly where the vampire was at the moment. Right behind him. He turned, and indeed, Thorin was there, standing straight and composed as always, as if he was occupying that bit of space since times immemorial.
Bilbo carefully put the shopping on the table and cleared his throat. “Hello.” He was getting better at this game, hardly ever jumping and shrieking anymore.

“Good afternoon,” Thorin returned the greeting. “Master Baggins.”

Master Baggins scoffed. “Bilbo,” he corrected for the twelfth time this week and a second time in the last two hours. If not for the sheer ridiculousness of the idea, one would have thought that Fili and Thorin were related, with the way they steadily refused to call him by his name.

“Still,” the vampire said and it meant nothing at all and at the same time spoke volumes on the subject. Volumes Bilbo had no time to read. “If you would join me upstairs for a moment?”

“I…” That was a bit more official than usual. Usually Thorin informed him about the movies shown that day in the theater upstairs, requested a cup of tea to go with them, and that counted as an invitation. Not once was he so… stiff about it. “I will join you shortly…?” And Bilbo didn’t know why it made him feel so nervous all of a sudden. “Just after I’ve put away this stuff?”

Way to be assertive, Baggins, a few more years and you will be upgrade to using a comma instead of a question mark, his Took sneered derisively.

The vampire nodded in agreement and left without another word, causing the short man to huff in annoyance. Trust this big lump to act all cryptic and leave him with no answers at all! Let him wait then, inconsiderate twit!

Whatever his Baggins side tried to tell him, Bilbo put away the shopping in a record time and soon enough found himself climbing the stairs to the first floor. He wasn’t afraid, per se, he tried to keep the seed of apprehension from taking root in his chest. A few times already he’s made some unsavoury assumptions about his housemate that turned out to be complete hogwash, so this time he decided to wait and see how the situation unfolds.

That didn’t mean that he didn’t stop for a moment at the top of the stairs to take a deep breath and gather his resolve closer to the body, like a coat made of tissue paper. Well, nothing to it!

As soon as he stepped into the sitting room, Bilbo was struck by the strange atmosphere that filled it from wall to wall. And it was certainly strange, because the room hasn’t changed at all, it was maybe a bit tidier and less cluttered, the TV was turned off for a change… But the light seemed dimmer and… softer? Of course it might have been just his eyes playing tricks on him, Bilbo assumed, because surely shadows cast by the furniture and curtains were just shadows and they couldn’t move on their own, stretching towards the still silhouette standing by one of three tall windows. Surely not, what was he thinking!

“Master Baggins,” Thorin said once more and Bilbo had enough, he was just about to open his mouth and scold the stubborn mule when said stubborn mule turned around and continued in a softer tone: “Bilbo.” And these electric blue eyes fell on him, and the harsh lines on that handsome face softened in the dim light, and Bilbo lost his train of thought.

Uh oh, muttered his Baggins.

Gingersnaps!, hissed his Took.

But the vampire seemed not to notice his internal struggle, not to mention his external stupefaction, and continued with what was slowly becoming to be apparent was a prepared speech.

“As you might have realised, smalltalk doesn’t come easy to me.”
Which is an understatement of the century, Bilbo’s Took rolled his eyes.

Baggins still tried to close his mouth.

“Yes, well...” Was the vampire embarrassed by this admittance? It seemed. “It never did. I am grateful for your patience with me in that regard.”

The Took choked and Bilbo almost followed suit.

What… what was going on? He opened his mouth to ask, but a raised hand stopped his attempts at forming words.

“Please,” Thorin stepped closer, away from the window and into the soft glow of electric light. “I am aware that I am not easy to live next to and that our beginnings were somewhat…”

Awful? Terrifying? Catastrophic?

“...rough. And I have never apologised for scaring you back then.”

Oh, so that’s what it was all about!

Bilbo released the air he’s been holding in and allowed his shoulders to slump in relief. “Thorin,” he said gently, walking up to the vampire with a hand raised to pat him on the shoulder. “It’s alright…”

“It’s not alright.” His hand was grabbed mid-pat and his brain tried to crawl down to his feet when the blue eyes staring at him from very close started to glow slightly in agitation. “It’s not a light thing, not for me.” Thorin’s voice got lower and rougher, but still was uncharacteristically gentle. “I was confused and struck with grief, yes, but that’s just a reason, not an excuse for my behaviour. I’ve seen you as weak and dim back then, but I’ve been wrong on both accounts.” Bilbo’s hand was gently squeezed. “I am sorry, more so because since then you’ve offered me nothing, but help and friendship. And I would have you know that I hold both in high regard.”

“Ah… well,” his throat was tight. No help from his Took side, it was busy gathering its jaw from the floor. His Baggins was nowhere to be seen. Bilbo was left on his own to untangle the mess in his head before the silence stretched too long and the expression in these eager blue eyes will change to disappointment. “Oh, you say… I mean…” His hand was still held and they both seemed to forget about it.

“Goodness, you’re always so dramatic.” Bilbo muttered in the end, partly to himself.

With a pointed stare he requested his hand back and when it was released, he used it to pat one wide shoulder affectionately. “I am honoured that you think so.” He hoped that his embarrassment was not as visible. “And I accept your apology. Now, can we have a cup of tea and watch a movie?”

And forget about this whole awkward situation?

“In a moment. First, I would like to show you something.”

He was led, by the hand of course, because why not, he didn't need it all that much, let the presumptuous twit keep it. And they weren’t even going that far, only to the other end of the room where the old dining table stood showed in the corner, there was hardly need for hand-holding.

Lady doth protest too much, the Took sneered in the back of his mind and Bilbo was very tempted to show him a mental representation of a two fingered salute.
“You’re gracious and generous,” Thorin spoke, crushing Bilbo’s hopes of containing the blush to his ears only. “And I would like to repay you at last in a small way. I hope that you won't think me presumptuous.”

Was he reading his mind again?

“Thorin, really, the TV was as much for you as it was for me, because the boys kept pestering me about it and you absolutely don't have to… oh.”

Oh, indeed.

There was his writing machine. His father’s writing machine. The writing machine that he specifically asked not to be touched and the vampire has promised not to touch - the one Bilbo left in the conservatory the day before. It was there with them, on the table, obviously touched and moved and carried up the stairs…! And someone put it in the box!

And the box was simply marvelous.

A wooden case made to size, dark with varnish and decorated with intricate geometrical carvings. Bilbo slowly reached out to touch it, as if afraid that it will disappear into thin air, and when his fingers skimmed over the wood, he hummed with wonder. The case was open, with the lid laying next to it, even more intricate and decorative. An array of bolts and locks was worked into both parts of the box to close it safely, Bilbo guessed. There was a brass handle with a leather-covered grip and the inside of the case was laid out with dark brown velvet.

Bungo’s writing machine sat snug in it, without an even a speck of dust on the keys.

“Oh, Thorin, you shouldn't…” Bilbo muttered, overwhelmed by the gesture. It had to take weeks of work!

Instead of answering his half-strangled admonition, the vampire pulled up his sleeves and bent over the case. “Look here,” he said and did something with his fingers that had the three sides of the box separate and drop flat to the table, leaving only the back of it standing. The double bottom became visible and, oh, another wonder. “You can store paper in here when you’re going away.”

“This is amazing!” He was struck dumb with the thought put into the gift. This way he could take the machine everywhere and use it without worrying that it will get damaged!

“There’s also this.”

Here Thorin reached for the lid, pushed at one corner of it and a whole rectangular piece came off. It was another little box on its own! Just like his toolbox, this case was made of things within things!

“Here,” the vampire gave the box to the shorter man with a smile hiding in the corners of his eyes. “Open it.”

Bilbo did.

The box was as big as a palm and very light, but surprisingly solid. Inside he found the same brown velvet and… his glasses.

One hand flying to his chest pocket, Bilbo exclaimed in surprise. He could swear that he had them with him…!

“You keep leaving them in strange places,” Thorin explained. “And when you’re not, you carry
them in your pocket."

“I had a case for them,” Bilbo said. “But I lost it during the move and, well, didn’t think to get a new one… Though, I’m glad now, because this one is… well… it’s…”

Oh, he hated it! He was getting all teary-eyed and emotional over a stupid piece of wood! It was such a non-Baggins thing to do! He should graciously thank for the gifts and offer his housemate a cup of tea or something… not stand there like a simpleton, staring at his hands and blushing. He was an adult, not some bashful girl, they were friends and this was just a simple thing! Just Thorin being nice to him.

It was just such a long time since the last present he got from anyone. And that last one was his father’s writing machine.

“Miste… Bilbo?” Thorin’s voice and the concern in it brought Bilbo out of the funk. “Did I overstep myself? If so, I apologise.”

Oh, this stupid lumbering oaf of a man!

There were no words on his usually clever tongue, so Bilbo did the only thing he could: he put the glasses down and grasped his vampire by the hand. And let him feel instead. A near-silent exhalation and a low hum by his side told him that his intent has been received and understood.

“We really need to talk about it one day.” Bilbo tried to smile and it was a valiant attempt, sadly interrupted by a loud sniff. He used his free hand to wipe his nose and nodded towards their joined hands. “This is getting normal for me, and I don’t even know how it works.”

Distraction. Yes. He needed a distraction from the way his eyes watered and his mouth went dry.

“I barely understand it myself.” Thorin shrugged. “It’s just something I could do since I got a grip on my abilities.”

“How about the not-wearing-slippers thing?” Bilbo smiled and elbowed him in the side. He almost chipped his elbow. “Is that also an unexplainable superpower?”

Thorin frowned. A heartbeat later a hint of a smirk appeared in the corners of his lips. “Make no mistake, I haven’t been a human in a long time now, I can not-wear much more than slippers and still end up on top.”

Was he…? Oh goodness gracious, was he insinuating…?

Bilbo put the glasses back into their case very slowly. No, he couldn’t. It was just an unfortunate choice of words.

“Say,” he said with a sunniest smile he could manage “How about a glass of wine to celebrate my new favourite gift ever, eh?” What was he saying? “You can drink wine, right?”

The vampire shrugged elegantly once more. “I can drink it, though it does nothing for me amusement-wise.”

“So it’s the flavour you will have to savour today, because I for once feel like a glass of wine.” He was rambling. “And I was assured that the bottle I got will be worth my while, so, eh… let me get it… wait here a second!”

And then he ran like a scared child.
Needless to say, he was blushing all the way to the kitchen.

*

Sigh.

Fili was trying to focus on the papers in his hands, he really tried. But it was increasingly harder when every five minutes the lump behind his back was shuffling around in Balin’s old armchair and sighing. Loudly.

“Can you stop that?”

The lump spluttered. “I am not doing anything!”

“And that's the problem.” Fili put the paper down and resisted the urge to rub his temples - the skin there was already red and irritated. He spun around in the chair to cast a chastening look at Kili. “Moping around and listening to Ed Sheeran won't fix the situation!”

“Wha…!” Kili nearly tore his ears off in his rush to take the headphones off. “I am not listening to that unshaven peach!” He shrieked. “And there’s nothing to fix! Why would you think that there’s something to fix?”

Fili just stared. After fidgeting awkwardly for three full minutes Kili finally gave up the pretence of innocence.

“It was Ori, wasn’t it?” He grumbled. “I bet it was him, that wool-clad know it all! When I get him I will…”

“You will nothing,” Fili finished for him. This idiocy was going on for far too long; he was tired and, frankly, needed Kili out of his hair at the moment. “I will tell you what you will do.” The brunet opened his mouth to protest, but one sharp glare cut him off before he drew breath. “You will shut up now. And then you will take your shoes of the armchair, or so help me Mahal, I will break something!”

A pair of leather boots landed on the parquet with a thud.

Fili released a breath. He liked that armchair. “Good. And now you will go uphill and apologise to Bilbo for acting like a spaz, is that clear?”

Predictably, the whining started before he even stopped speaking. “Buuuuut Feee…!”

“I am going to start ignoring you now,” Fili said calmly and turned back to the desk and his stack of papers. “And I will not stop until you have this sorted out. “

“But Fee!”

Silence.

“Oh come on, this is childish!”

Rustle of paper was his only answer.
“You can’t just… ugh, alright!” Kili got up with a huff, making sure that his soles hit the floor louder than it was strictly necessary. “You’re such a terrorist!” He shouted stomping out of the room.

When the door slammed shut, Fili rested his head on a folded arm. “I am a terrorist,” he muttered to the empty room.

*

“You really can’t feel the cold?” A mug of liquid courage in one hand and a sweet pastry in the other, Bilbo had much less trouble looking Thorin in the face.

“I do feel it.” Thorin was answering the questions patiently for the last half an hour. “Not feeling it would be kind of pointless, wouldn’t it? I am simply not bothered by it.”

The weather outside was dreadful, the temperature fell way below zero Celsius and around teatime the wind picked up blowing scarce snowflakes against the windows and pushing the freezing air through the miniscule gaps between the glass and wood. Yet, in the living room on the first floor, sitting on front of the fire blazing happily in the heart, Bilbo was warm and cosy, and quite content. He once more wished he had a dog or a cat what would sit on the floor by his feet or perch on his lap, and lean into him with all of its furry weight.

What he had instead, was a tall, broad man that occupied the armchair on the right to the couch, barefooted and yet regal, blue eyes reflecting the fire under heavy dark brows. It wasn’t a bad tradeoff, come to think of it, not at all.

“So, why tea?”

“It’s not as much tea, as it is water I need from time to time. I don’t need to eat, as you might have noticed. Actually, food is somewhat repulsive to me.”

“Oh, you poor thing.” Okay, well, yes, the wine was a mite stronger than he expected.

Thorin awkwardly accepted the hand that patted his arm in sympathy. “It’s no matter. At this moment I have lived longer without food than with it, one can get used to it. Or, un-used, as is the case. But my body is still working in some human ways, I speak and for that I need to draw breath and have some moisture on my tongue. I need if for my eyes to be comfortable.”

Two hundred years with dry, itchy eyes sounded like a torture of the highest order. Only a bit better than two ages with no food.

“My body utilises liquids, though it’s more for the ease of functioning, than out of necessity.” The vampire smiled. “And let me tell you, Master Baggins, plain water gets boring really fast.”

“Oh.” Bilbo nodded sagely. “That makes perfect sense. So then, shoes?”

Thorin laughed. Actually laughed – it was small and stifled, but it was a laugh.

“Why are you so fixated on the matter of my footwear?”

“Because everyone wears shoes!” Bilbo gesticulated lively. “It’s a staple of a civilised individual!”

“Am I to understand that you consider me uncivilised?” He wiggled his toes with a cheeky smile.
“You don’t even wear slippers!”

“I have no need for slippers.”

“It’s winter!”

Another gust of laughter, this one stronger and more open. Bilbo found that he liked listening to it.

“Then I apologise for the distress my bare feet are causing you, Master Baggins, but it is a habit I have been indulging in for decades now and that may be impossible to break. You will have to excuse my boorish behaviour,” Thorin said, finishing with a ridiculously graceful bow.

“I did not say that you’re a boor,” Bilbo muttered over his mug, flushed and awkward. “I don’t mind all that much, you are making me sound like some stuck-up posh twit!”

“Well, you are from a wealthy family.”

“We weren’t wealthy!” He protested maybe louder than it was necessary. “We had to work, you know? Unlike some ‘I own a town and a valley and a mountain’ family I could name.”

“I certainly never owned the mountain.” Thorin answered stoically, but the corners of his eyes crinkled with humour. “Only everything underneath it.”

Bilbo couldn’t stop a high-pitched giggle that ended up in a hiccup. Alright, the wine was stronger than he expected.

He topped up his mug.

“To the King of the Under the Mountain, then!” He raised the mug up. It was one of his nicer ones, with a bouquet of pansies painted on the side. Very fitting. “Oh, have to remember to write it down, I can use it in the novel!”

“It does have a nice ring to it,” the vampire nodded his agreement and raised his own plain cup. “Though as a former miner I feel hardly worthy of the title.”

“You were a miner?”

“I was many things, Master Baggins. You will find that long life gets boring quickly and one has to constantly search for the ways in which they can be useful.”

“Well, I wouldn’t know,” Bilbo rubbed his warm neck. “I don’t have an age waiting on me and there never seems to be enough time for everything and everyone.”

“Maybe it’s for the best.” Thorin’s eyes took on a gentle glow. “The only way in which I consider myself lucky is that I had the chance to spend time around my family. And that too was taken from me without any warning…”

Well, the atmosphere turned dour. Bilbo refused to drink himself into tears!

“How about your eyes?” He fired out the first thing that came to mind. “Why do they glow?”

At that the vampire looked at him with wit wide eyes, astonishment clearly written on his face.

“My eyes glow?”

Bilbo was speechless.
For all of a minute before the tiniest crack appeared on Thorin’s face and a corner of his mouth twitched.

“You’re such a twit!” He threw a cushion and Thorin caught it with little effort.

Bilbo laughed hard, hiccupping again, leaning sideways. He didn’t realise he was in the vampire’s personal space until a cool hand landed on his shoulder to prop him up and still he’s managed to hit his elbow on the wooden arm of the chair Thorin was sitting in. The pain was dulled by the alcohol in his blood and served only to make him laugh even harder.

“Why does it always… happen to me?” Bilbo hiccupped, holding his elbow, eyes shining with mirth. “You are bad… for my health.”

“You are just very skilled at damaging yourself,” Thorin answered, gently pushing him back into sitting position.

“You’re calling me clumsy without calling me clumsy, aren’t you?”

“Now, why would I even attempt that?” Dark eyebrows went up a notch. “This level of deception is below me, I assure you.”

“Yes, of course, how could I forget, O King Under the Mountain.” More laugh. Bilbo attempted a bow that would be at least half as graceful as Thorin’s before, but only succeeded in almost falling off the couch. “Crisps and crackers! I am not making a very good impression, am I?”

The vampire sighed in mock exasperation, once more helping him up. “Believe me, the things one can get used to.”

“You insulting me… again…?”

Bilbo lifted his head and all too late realised that the vampire was very close, and that his eyes were very, very blue.

And the expression on his face was surprisingly fond and his lips looked very… well.

“I do trust you, you know?” Bilbo whispered out of nowhere, before he had a chance to think about it. He didn’t move back.

“That may be not the wisest course of action,” Thorin whispered back. He didn’t move either.

His hands were pleasantly cool on Bilbo’s wine-warm skin. And even through layers of two shirts and a sweater the touch was solid and steady, someway conveying the effortless strength that laid in wait behind it. It wasn’t unpleasant by any means.

“It may be too late,” Bilbo smiled, feeling the courage swell in his chest like a tide, crashing through all his insecurities and doubts, coming up to his throat in a wave of words that would surely choke him to death is he was sober. “I like you already.”

This exact bravery kept his head up and his face unflinching when the vampire’s eyes alighted with their unearthly glow. That’s why he could see clearly when these eyes lowered, frank stare landing on the lower part of his face when he licked his lips.

“This may be also not the wisest thing.”

“I will let you know… that I am a very… intelligent person.”
Where was the air? Where did it go?

“I will have to trust you on that.”

...

The doorbell saved Bilbo from suffocating.

“I should…”

“You better…”

“Yeah, I will.”

He put away the mug and rushed to answer the door, only stopping once in the doorway to half-turn and narrow his eyes at the vampire. “We really have to talk about the glowing-eyes-thing.”

He was going to kill whoever was on the other side of the door, but most probably he will hug them.

...

But the sight that met him after opening the front door was a pitiful one.

“Hi Mister B. Can I, er, come in?”

“Will you try to jump me with no warning?” Bilbo wanted to be sure before he entered any sort of deal with the youth. He also wanted to give his vampire flatmate time to hide. Kili could not pick a worse time to visit… or a better one, to be honest. What was he even thinking back there?!

The boy looked genuinely crushed at his admonishment, though, making Bilbo feel like an ass.

“No, I will… I will not.” The youth promised with his head down, hands buried in the pockets. He also looked miserable and, even swathed in his thick parka and a long woolen scarf, he shook every time the wind blew stronger. He was half-covered in snow and a keen look over his shoulder didn't detect a trace of the car… Meaning that he walked all the way uphill on foot.

In this freezing weather?

“Come in, you silly thing,” Bilbo opened the door wider and grabbed the boy by the scarf to pull him inside. Accidentally his hand brushed the lad’s cheek and the cold of the skin pulled out a surprised gasp out of him. “Kili, you are absolutely freezing! To the kitchen with you, we have to warm you up!”

“Mister B... I am just for a moment...” The boy tried to oppose being marched through the mansion like an unruly child, but in the end allowed himself to be pulled. “I wanted to apologise and I have to go… wait, hey, were you drinking?”

Was he swaying as he walked? Maybe a bit, but nothing serious. At least he thought so.

“You caught me,” Bilbo decided to go down with grace. “I was having a celebratory cup of wine. I just finished a novel, you know? And it was a pretty thick one too!”

“I am not saying that I mind… congratulations on the book?”

“Thank you.”
The cad could be polite when he put his mind to it.

“Here,” Bilbo closed the kitchen's doors behind them and pushed a chair close to the stove. “Sit here and get you shoes off, they look proper wet! And the jacket too, I will hang it out to dry.”

“Mister B, I…”

“You will not argue with me!”

He left Kili in the kitchen muttering something about being ordered at every corner, and raced to his bedroom for a spare blanket to cover the shivering thing with. His mind, full to the brim with concern, momentarily forgot about Thorin and the almost-a-thing they shared upstairs.

When he came back to the kitchen with one of his flowery spreads under one arm and a water bottle under the other, the boy was cuddling up to the stove, dressed in a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. Bilbo almost choked at the sight of his pale arms and gray toes curled over the rim of the chair.

“Are you senseless?!“ He exclaimed, unable to tame his shock. “Dressing like that and walking all the way from the town! Do you have a deathwish?!“ He looked at his burdens, deciding on the spot that they’re not going to cut it. “Did you stop to think what would happen if you froze to death somewhere out there? Of course you didn’t! We wouldn't be able to find you till spring!”

Kili looked at him with big eyes, lips pressed into a thin bloodless line of stubborn resentment. He didn’t even try to defend himself, but his shoulders raised higher after every angry accusation thrown his way, until they almost covered his ears. It was just then that Bilbo stopped his rant and, with a tired sigh, put the blanket and the water bottle away, and stepped close to his guest.

“Come with me,” he said, gentle this time. Maybe he was a bit more tipsy than he thought, to lose his temper so fast. “A hot shower will do you good and give me a moment to dry your clothes.”

“I don’t need a shower,” Kili muttered stubbornly, looking away.

Bilbo stopped another sigh from escaping him and felt proud of it. “You do,” he contradicted. “If you want me to listen to the apology you came here to give.”

That struck a chord with the lad, because after no more than five heartbeats his shoulders slumped back down and he slowly unfolded his gangly figure form the chair. “You are such a terrorist,” he mumbled. A hiss escaped him when his naked feet touched the stone tile of the floor. “No wonder Fili likes you, you're the same breed!”

Bilbo didn’t have a clue what that was supposed to mean, but, however unintentional, he took it as a compliment.

*

The bridge was covered in snow that crunched under his shoes as Fili made way to the other side. The torch in his hand crackled on the wind and sent sparks into the night. It was such a primitive thing, and yet, it brought him a measure of comfort to have it. Just like the silver blade by his side - a knife as long as his forearm, thick and sharp, freshly honed. Whatever could be said about Bifur and his strange ways, he was a trained blacksmith and his work was solid.
He wished that the transport bridge could be closer to the town, then they could bring the car along, but that was just his human experience talking. His other blood kept reminding him that on short distances not even the best engine could go from ‘here’ to ‘over there’ quicker than any of them.

“Are you sure it’s a good idea for ye to go there?” Dwalin’s voice was quiet and careful, barely a whisper on the wind.

Fili sent him a short glare over one shoulder and continued to march at the head of the group. “I am sure you would like me to stay behind,” he said with a snarl in his voice.

Dwalin agreed easily enough. “Aye, I’d rather have ye back there.”

“Safe and sound, no doubt.”

“Aha.”

“With women and children.” This time it was a snarl worthy of a wolf.

Dwalin was still not even remotely impressed. “If that’s how ye like it.”

Fili snorted at that and stopped when the wood of the bridge gave way to snow-covered ground. They were about to literally step out of a safe zone. The silent procession stopped behind him. Bofur with his sturdiest mattock clutched in both hands and his sturdiest smile peeking from under his moustache. Bifur and his ridiculous spear. Dwalin was armed with an axe and had a second one thrust behind his belt. Ori stood in the back, clutching a book and a bottle of holy water to his chest.

“It's as if you don't know me at all,” Fili said in the end.

“It’s that I know ye only too well,” Dwalin corrected without a moment of doubt. “And I know yer ridiculous need to throw yerself headfirst into danger. Don’t think I don’t know why ye sent Kili to Erebor.”

Well, yes, guilty as charged. He needed Kili to stay safe if he was to go through with this plan.

“That’s not important,” Fili ended the subject with a stern voice. “Bofur.”

The miner-toymaker stepped up to him, “Yeah?”

“You said you’ve seen it here?”

“Aye. It was prowling over this side, right along these trees there.” Bofur pointed to the clump of withered willows growing some two hundred feet from the place they were standing. The clump was slanting towards the river’s bank, not really big, but thick enough to hide someone from sight easily enough.

Fili wasn’t sure if he wanted more to find it empty, or occupied.

“Alright.” He tightened his hold on the torch for a moment before giving it to Ori. “If anything happens,” he looked the librarian in the eye, “go back to Balin and follow the plan. Get Nori back even if you have to ship his ungrateful ass via airmail. Him and his… friends.” Then he turned to the other three men. “We follow the plan. To the letter,” he stressed out. “If any of you gets hurt in any way I will let Dori mother you back to health, understood?”

He saw a shiver run over the group. Good.

It felt so strange to be there once more, on the edge of a potential battlefield. It felt like that night in
Lviv over seventy years ago. That night they were already so tired from running and blood and death, and yet still were surprised when the fire started raining from the sky. He didn’t feel this kind of tension in his muscles since then.

“Allright,” he said once more, just for the sake of saying something.

“I hope it goes quick,” Bofur mused cheerfully on his left. “I haven’t stretched me joints properly in ages.”

“Aye,” Dwalin agreed. He twisted his head left and right with a sickly crunch. “Civilian life doesn’t suit me as well as I thought.”

Bifur signed some scathing remark and that was a perfect reason to move on before a fight broke out.

The river shone with a silvery glow in the darkness of the new moon as the four shadows split and disappeared in the darkness like embers from the torch.

Chapter End Notes

Ori uses this one awkward ‘death on a banner’ thing, which is a Polish saying when someone looks tired as shit;D

And yep, I made the Ris Polish. Because come on, a student, a tinker and a thief? Stereotypical Polish emigration much?XD
Hello, my lovely readers. I apologise that this is not a new chapter of the story, I really do from the very bottom of my heart. I made you all wait for so long and I'm sorry for thisT__T

This chapter is not a good news, and some good news in one.

So, to the thing.

Thing being, that I intend to take this story off of Ao3 on the first of November. The reason for it is that, after sleeping on it for a long while (I'm so so so sorry), I decided to rewrite BBB into a novel. I've spent a lot of time on the portion that I have already, and I dare to say it's to date the best I've ever written in English. Also, originally BBB started out as a novel concept that I adapted to Hobbit prompt and then adapted back and forth until it became the piece it is today. But I would like to challenge myself and go back to the first concept, and try to write a full-length story that's not a fanfic - because I think that it would be a good opportunity to grow a bit as a writer, writing something about characters I have no initial connection to and the plot that's not tied up to an existing world.

So, I will hopefully manage to re-write BBB as a strange vampire romance of epic proportions it's at all possible.

I haven't decided yet if it will be straight or gay romance, I'm still tossing a coin on that ;)

In the end, I would like to apologise for all those who waited for this story to end within the Hobbit-verse. I apologise form the bottom of my heart, but I feel that if I won't take this chance and push myself here, I will never dare to do it with anything else.

Also, I'm writing this message to warn everyone who would like to save BBB before it gets deleted on the 1st of November.

And to thank everyone who commented, kudosed and simply gave this little thing of mine a time of their day, it was all of you that really pushed me onwards with writing chapter after chapter when normally I'd drown in self- doubt a long time ago.

Thank you all so very much and please wish me luck with my endeavour:

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!