**A Christmas Dwarrow**

by short1_2005

Summary

A modern re-telling of a Christmas classic. This is A Christmas Carol for the modern day, retold with new/old characters. The timeline is futzed with, some spirits visit, shenanigans happen - all in the name of helping Thorin realize what an idiot he's been and how important Bilbo really is.
Chapter 1

Chapter by IzzieChickadee, short1_2005

Chapter Notes

This work is complete already (woooo NaNoWriMo win!). It's all being edited now and will be posted regularly - probably once a day so I can get it all up before Christmas, depending on how long edits take.

Big giant HUGE thanks to izziechickadee, my effervescent inspiration and storyboarding muse. We storyboarded together and she organized the entire thing, complete with inspirational gifs and graphs. That doc is still extant, for any who might want to see the madness XD

Finally, please remember that I am still human, and thus fallible. I will happily accept constructive criticism and love receiving positive comments, but nasty ones will not be tolerated.

“Bebother and confusticate that man!” Bilbo muttered to himself. He eyed the pile of reports still waiting to be typed and filed before he could head home for the night. The pile was less than a fourth of it's original size, but it continued to dwindle. He resigned himself to another hour at least and it was long past supper time. The process would be swifter if his boss, the ever-stubborn Thorin Durin, would actually use his laptop or tablet during meetings. Bilbo had told him this so repeatedly and regularly it felt like he could set his calendar by the reminders; he often wondered if the man continued to hand write in that awful scrawl just to make Bilbo’s job more frustrating. The man’s handwriting was illegible and completely unpalatable to Bilbo; it was particularly awful since Bilbo dabbled with calligraphy and loved the act of writing by hand with a finely crafted pen. Or, well, he used to when he had time to spare. Which happened rarely of late. Instead, Bilbo was stuck at the office past eight, a scant few days before Christmas, trying to decipher illegible notes. Mr. Durin would undoubtedly want it all typed neatly in an easy-to-read report first thing the next morning. His boss hadn’t actually specified the work had to be done before he left, but experience and a general lack of mind-reading abilities that forced Bilbo to push through the work rather than leave it for the morning.

This had, understandably, put Bilbo in a rather poor mood. He knew his boys were at home, waiting anxiously for his arrival so they could all decorate their Christmas tree. Beorn helpfully delivered it to their small cottage that afternoon and sent him a short email to that effect. It was as gentle a rebuke as the man ever gave: the reminder that the tree was waiting for him. Trimming the tree was a family affair, after all. And, well, he knew his lads. By this time of night, Merry and Pippin will have undoubtedly hauled out the boxes of decorations and pulled out their contents. To stop Sam from balking, they would likely claim they were just going to organize the baubles into different piles for ease of decorating. Nevermind that Bilbo made sure everything was well organized before storing them each year. The trouble-making duo would have also urged Sam to make popcorn and find the cranberries for garlands to string up around the trees in front of the house. Sam, bless him, would be trying to corral the youngest two, keep the piles of chaos to a minimum, and ensure Frodo was comfortably entertained on the sofa.

Bilbo could picture it all so clearly; they’d developed their own Christmas-time traditions over the
years, and he knew his lads down to every mannerism and quirk. He also knew just how disappointed they would be when the time crawled ever on and he didn’t walk through the door. As the clock ticked towards nine, Sam would have stuffed Merry and Pippin into their pyjamas, sent Frodo off for his, and made just enough hot chocolate that everyone could have a small cup to sip on, and be placated by, while they waited for Bilbo. He half-hoped his lads would nod off on the sofa so they wouldn’t be awful to wake the next morning. Sleepy mornings aside, he wouldn’t begrudge them one second of excitement. Instead of home, amongst all that cozy cheer, Bilbo was stuck at the office, slogging his way through awful handwriting that had been dumped on him in heaps just before Mr. Durin left the office that evening. And wasn’t that just adding insult to injury? The man himself was off doing whatever it was he did when he wasn’t locked away in his office, making irascible comments to whoever dared speak to him. And he’d been in a fine mood when he left. It was small comfort indeed, knowing that Mr. Durin was likely just as hard at work wherever he was. Bilbo knew he’d find a fresh pile of scribblings slapped on his desk in the morning, despite working so hard to clear out his in-box each night.

It was what he hated most about his job. While it was regularly interesting and occasionally - very occasionally these days - rewarding, it kept him away from home and away from his boys. Family time, especially around the holidays, was not something of value to Mr. Durin; it was as if the man managed to ignore the excitement of impending cheer altogether! The infuriating man seemed to have a heart encased in stone, for all that Bilbo knew deep down (very, very deep down), he was actually a good man with a warm heart. Bilbo remembered Thorin - the Thorin he thought he knew - back before he became Mr. Durin, President of Arkenstone Gems, largest subsidiary of Erebor Industries (which the man also ran, naturally). Before taking the helm of such a large company, Thorin had been - not outgoing or overtly friendly, but at least contented, in his own quiet way. Bilbo hadn’t been able to sort out what exactly had happened, but the memories he had of a far less irascible Thorin were what kept him working for Mr. Durin.

As he tidied up for the night, finally, Bilbo glanced at his calendar - better to be prepared for the horrors to come than not, he supposed. Oh sod it all! Tomorrow was the trade show. Honestly, who thought to schedule such a sizeable industry event days before a major internationally celebrated holiday? Tomorrow would be utter hell, and an even later night than this one. He really should speak to Mr. Durin about a few days holiday after that. He’d sorely need it, and it would start to make up for all the lost holiday fun with his boys. Yes, he resolved mentally, he’d ask tomorrow after Mr. Durin was cheered up by what he knew would be quite an excellent haul at the showcase.

Work done for the night and cheered by his resolution, he went in to Mr. Durin’s office to file everything appropriately. The man’s penmanship was questionable at best, but his organization was superb - largely because Bilbo handled it all. Which suited Bilbo just fine; he knew where everything was and could find needed documents quickly when Mr. Durin called for something ‘immediately, if not sooner!’ as he so often did. The real boon had been cleaning out the closet so it could be used for storage, hanging, and other properly closety uses, rather than the impending-avalanche of papers it used to be. Well, alright, the cleaning hadn’t been enjoyable. That had been several late nights of organization once the office’s owner had gone for the day.

The real excitement was the small sculpture Bilbo found under the heaps of paperwork. It was a lovely thing, all harsh angles and contrasting soft lines. Definitely a tree of some variety, but certainly not the sort that one found in nature. One side was harsh lines, like a weeping willow made of steel beams trying to burrow itself into the earth. The other was gracefully curving branches reaching out into the distance while curling in to protect a small shimmering opal. But more than its aesthetic qualities, it was a reminder of depth, of heart. In it, Bilbo saw a great sadness, but also a fledgling hope that was trying to grow even as it tried to protect its heart. Looking at it, Bilbo felt so sad for the man who crafted it, but hoped one day that smith would emerge again. The small sculpture belied a heart, an emotional depth that Bilbo knew Thorin
possessed. Unfortunately, his employer seemed to have protected that shimmering heart so well it was buried beneath layer of bark.

Though, goodness knows what happened to that dear little tree. When he found the small thing, he’d set it on Mr. Durin’s desk, in a corner mostly out of the way but still visible from that hulking great leather chair. Bilbo may have checked, just to be certain. However, he’d come in the next morning and it had vanished, and not a word spoken about it. Curiosity would have done him no good anyway. Shaking his head to excise the memory, Bilbo finished his filing. After the run of late nights, he certainly needed to make it up to his boys. He’d ask for a week, at least. He was owed as much, for all the work he put in at that accursed office. Though no use focusing on that tonight, with no one to give an earful. If he went home now, there was still hope for at least a few minutes of decorating with his boys before they all had to be off to bed.

Across the city, alone in his sitting room, Thorin was cradling his tumbler of scotch and savoring the peaty burn it brought. On this cold night, with the wind threatening a storm and his emotions doing something similar, the artificial heat was welcomed. He generally preferred a well-aged brandy, but tonight, in honor of his oldest friend, scotch was the only acceptable libation. And a young scotch at that, more’s the pity. Over twenty years ago, Dwalin had accepted the offer for employment with a demand for the nearest pub and a bottle of cheap scotch to celebrate. As the years passed and the company found its feet again and they all prospered, Thorin had educated him about a well aged drink. He even kept a crystal decanter in his office that held a scotch worth more than it’s housing. But for every celebration - finally chasing off their rival company, the birth of Thorin’s nephew, the day the company finally reported a profit every quarter for a year solid - the cheap scotch was pulled from some unknown hidey hole and they chased their joy in a haze of truly awful alcohol and worse hangovers. Drinking Dwalin’s favored brand alone in his hulking house felt like a misdeed as much as it did an honoring of memory. A night with Dwalin and his bottle meant laughter, crowds, unceasing toasts to everything that came to mind. It was never a dimly lit empty room in a similarly empty house.

His house was nearly silent now that his housekeeper was gone home for the night. He thought he heard the faint tinny tinkling of the radio, which she occasionally forgot to turn off. It was a poor mimicry of the lively bands that seemed to live in Dwalin’s favored watering holes. Perhaps his housekeeper thought it might stave off the lonely groaning that came as his old family house settled for the night. Instead, it only highlighted how poorly Thorin managed a drink on his own. Dwalin would have been ashamed, had he been there. But he was gone.

Dwalin had been buried a year ago to the day, but the loss of his business partner still burned like a fresh wound. The man’s business sense used to be unrivalled in the world of precious stones, metals, and jewelry. Thorin tried to follow his friend’s business practices but failed. Like his drinking habits, it was a poor facsimile of his friend’s abilities; he did not have the natural knack for buying and selling that Dwalin used to. Arkenstone continued to do well, Erebor even better, but Thorin could see the subtle markers in the quarterly reports just as he saw the contrast in drunken nights. The difference was Dwalin and his inherent skills. Their profit margins continued to rise, no doubt about that. The company prospered, but it could do better. They lacked Dwalin’s intuitive sense of what assets to take on and when to sell them off.

More importantly, however, Thorin needed his confidant back. Dwalin had been the last person he trusted would never betray him or the company. His taste in scotch spoke to that. Without Dwalin - well, everyone else was after his company or his hard earned wealth. Greedy bastards, every one of them. Dwalin had been the only one at Arkenstone who was interested in their trade for the thrill of negotiation. He was not swayed by the profit; rather, for him, it was the fun of it all. There was no one else who chose scotch that had been bottled that year over something decades old. It was why he had hired the man to begin with. From the first interview and the way
he spoke about his dealings in the business world, Thorin knew he could be trusted. Dwalin had been enthusiastic - in his rough demeanour - about an internship he’d recently finished with a bullion company. Combine that with a family of jewelers and a desire for bigger trade, and he made the perfect new hire. He rose swiftly through the ranks when Thrain took notice of his business acumen. And aside from the odd difference brought on by a slight gap in age and a deplorable taste for cheap Scotch, he was an enjoyable companion. He had been a man who enjoyed his career for the sake of business, not just the earnings. And he learned to enjoy well-aged liquor, both qualities Thorin approved of. Thorin did not know how to deal with the vacuum left in the wake, both professionally and socially.

He had lost others, before Dwalin. Those losses still lingered, despite the passage of years. To Thorin, it was like the pain of skin pulled tight over healing wounds; it was manageable so long as the wound wasn’t jostled. Dwalin’s death was not the most torturous he had experienced, but it was the freshest, so that pain still burned bright. He missed his friend, though he had never used that word for their relationship before. They were business partners, co-executives, but never once had Thorin called his friend thus. He held out hopes that it had been implied well enough, before Dwalin died. It had been pride that had stopped him from admitting it. He had been Dwalin’s supervisor for so long it became habit. At least, that’s how he justified never telling his friend he was one. Just as he’d never told the others how much they meant to him, before they were gone. And now he had no one. All that was left to him was the legacy his grandfather built and the slowly fading memories of those he loved. It was only in the haze created by cheap scotch that Thorin allowed himself to loosen the steel grasp on his emotions enough to even admit it to himself. In the morning, he would take the pain, the betrayed and helpless feelings from every loss, and tuck them all back deep inside where they couldn’t hurt him.

Tonight, on this unhappy anniversary, he honored his friend through the two things he’d come to associate with the man: drink and honesty. He knew his choice of drink on this melancholy night would cease to mean anything the moment he refused to be honest with himself. It was only in his dimly lit sitting room, in the near-silent house, that he could mourn. He had three glasses already put away and a fourth one going before he dared to admit anything, even to himself. On this miserably cold night, with only a bottle and glass for company, he could clearly see how different his life had been, how much more it had meant, before. Now, it felt like work, more than it ever had. It was all he could do to press forward. He would follow Dwalin’s instructions about the business and try to remember the warnings his friend had given. And possibly, in the morning, he might even remember the muddled thoughts that kept him company this night.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Bilbo gets introspective and you get a bit of background.

The gemstone showcase was just as busy and frantic as Bilbo expected it to be. And Mr. Durin, also as expected, paid no attention to the diminutive assistant trailing him. He plowed on through the teeming masses full steam ahead and growled at Bilbo to keep up. Bilbo had a niggling feeling that Mr. Durin was in a worse temper than usual, but there was no outward sign; the man was as pleasant as he ever was. For all that meant. He strode through the crowds in search of this vendor or that salesman at a pace that kept Bilbo scurrying behind, just on this side of jogging. As was generally the case, Mr. Durin was all purpose and no explanation, so Bilbo girded himself for a day of dodging bodies as he endeavoured to keep up with his employer.

Despite the busy nature of the day, Bilbo’s services were generally of the fetch and carry variety at these events. Thorin spoke with as many vendors as humanly possible and Bilbo was expected to keep track of everything, per usual. It didn’t require much mental acuity to follow the orders barked at him: File this vendor’s information. Set up a meeting with that one. Find a coffee - black - and something to eat. Note this down. So long as he could physically keep up with his employer - and he was easy enough to find in a crowd, thanks to height and breadth - Bilbo was spared a mentally taxing day.

It was a semi-annual mental holiday he allowed himself. It was the best thing, to let his mind to wander rather than try to see every detail of the visual chaos around him. He’d learned this years ago and it now topped the ‘How to Survive the Trade Shows’ list he mentally created. Each show, his musings took him somewhere new. For a handful of these days sprinkled through the years, his musings were completely taken up with adoption proceedings, paperwork to file, and preparations he’d have to make at home. Other times, he thought about what he would do with his savings. Though that particular train of thought was less appealing now that he knew just how much it cost to raise four children on his own. This year he was feeling more introspective. The tree-trimming last night had impressed on him just how much his boys had grown and how much time had passed since they’d each become his. As busy as he’d been with fatherhood, it had been quite a while since he’d last evaluated his life. And as the end of the year approached...well, it was the time of year he most often tended to check in with himself. The impending new year in such close proximity to the anniversary of his hiring at Arkenstone tugged at those wayward thoughts he resolutely tucked away each morning. Was he really happy anymore?

He would never have imagined that the enthusiastic historian of two decades ago would have ended up where he had. Perhaps it had been too idealistic, but he had always planned on a bit more...use for that degree than he ended up having for it. He vaguely recalled dreams of being a writer. Thick tomes of well-researched, accurate-as-possible, compelling histories. None of those dry tomes either; he wanted everyone to experience history the way he did: vividly and with excitement. He wanted to write a volume on the fall of Rome - then again, what historian didn’t? But there were so many fascinating periods and he was determined to bring life to them all!

Or perhaps he’d teach. It would have been a challenging and joyful profession, the moulding of young minds. He could have done that easily enough and carried on with his penchant for tweed. Then again, he also thought he might have curated at one of any number of museums all over the
globe. Giving tours and creating exhibits of artifacts from thither and yon. What a thrill that might have been! He had tried his hardest to ignore those lost dreams in the years he worked for Mr. Durin. Most days, it just served to remind him just how miserably he’d failed at using his degree. Occasionally, the memory of lost dreams made him contemplate quitting. However, the curse of debt and the cost of living meant a realistic career won out over the idealistic. His epically failed career as a historian kept him firmly in place as Mr. Durin’s assistant. Though, thankfully, the benefits helped soothe over the ragged wounds of failure.

As he watched Mr. Durin study the contents of a display case, fingers brushing ever so gently across gleaming metals, it was easier to remember why he stayed. Well, aside from the looming threat of crippling debt. There was a private reason, one he never shared with another soul. As his boss inspected the sheen of some silver ore, his face relaxed enough that Bilbo could see the man he used to be. The one who used to radiate contentment whether he soldered huge pieces together or delicately engraved the finest details. The young man who hummed mournful tunes in that low low voice of his, careless as to who listened. In that moment, the comparison was so stark he would have sworn he was witnessing time-travel. The scene in front of him transported Bilbo almost tangibly to the small museum of students’ works at university.

Thorin as a young sculptor had been obtuse, but that hadn’t stopped everyone from adoring his creations. The autumn he’d taken an art history class, Bilbo discovered a small cove of seats near the exhibition area. This turned out to be the best place on campus to study for his courses, thanks to the dearth of both loud housemates and flocks of giggling women. It was odd, that little alcove. He normally detested weighty metal sculptures; they held little appeal in comparison to a lovely watercolour. He certainly wouldn’t use those awful abstract concoctions to decorate his home! And yet. There he had been surrounded by them. Though these were no clunky, weighty modernist pieces. They were still abstract and had a tendency toward the geometric, but there was something indefinably attractive about them. Maybe it was that, despite their unusual aesthetic appeal, they felt honest. Almost raw in how clearly they conveyed a sense of their creator. Whatever it was, Bilbo felt quite at home in his little cubby hole.

He hadn’t even noticed Thorin, or anyone else really, until a gloomy fall day. The rain clouds hung heavy in the sky, Bilbo couldn’t quite get warm enough, and was sure illness was imminent. Then a pair of rippling biceps - attached to a proportionately handsome man - rounded a corner. That in itself was enough to lead Bilbo down the path of licentious thoughts. But the man was hefting a awkwardly lethal-looking concoction of glass shards and bulbous metal orbs, which added to the visual appeal. His face had been stiff in concentration but he treated the piece so gently, despite how unwieldy it appeared to be. The tiny redhead that trailed him fussed after the work - Bilbo assumed it was her masterpiece given her attentions - but Mr. Tall Dark and Muscled was as gentle as if the sculpture had been his own. In that instant, Bilbo was gone.

As the weeks passed, the silent sculptor caught his eye more often. They had apparently shared an art history course for at least three months by this time, and Bilbo soon saw why he never noticed the man before. Honestly, the class wasn’t half as deserving of the thunderous looks his mysterious crush sported! But once Bilbo spotted him, he picked up the pattern: the man sat near the back of the lecture hall and was nearly always the first out the door. By the time Bilbo made it into the hallway, he would catch a glimpse of that black curly hair to know the sculptor had once again disappeared into the bowels of Fezziwig’s dedicated smithing studio. And goodness, that hair! While it was usually pulled back in a queue at his nape, Bilbo might have had a fantasy or two (dozen) about winding his fingers through those lovely long curls. At the end of the day, it was hardly enough to base such an encompassing crush on. All Bilbo really knew about his fellow student was that he was respectful, reclusive, and a sculptor with an admittedly impressive amount of lovely hair. That limited knowledge did nothing to stop Bilbo’s heart from pattering against his chest a bit faster every time he stepped into the art building. Would today bring him a chance to actually speak to the well-sculpted artist?
Rainy days turned into snowy weeks and classes were nearly done in anticipation of the winter holiday. There had been one last student show, displaying final works, and Bilbo milled around the entire evening it opened. Disappointment dogged him across the passing hours. Each time he thought he might step into his courage and approach, he was beat out by someone a bit more forward. Though, as he observed through the course of the evening, the sculptor never seemed to warm to the effusive compliments he received. Each comment about strong lines or harsh angles was an attempt to draw the artist into a discussion, and every comment was greeted with the response, “it’s a trinket. Not near as impressive as you say.” Slowly the accolades re-routed away from the creator in a shift toward the mentor. Fezziwig himself was happy to accept praise on behalf of his pupil. It was only near the end of the night - leaving Bilbo feeling very much like Cinderella rushing to leave the ball - that he managed to sneak by the artist and mutter something about how compelling the restrained emotion of the man's pieces before his courage fled. He followed it out the door, embarrassed but glad he’d at least managed to glance at a title placard - he finally knew his mysterious artist’s name.

The voice behind him, gruffly muttering “why has this silly trinket caught your eye?” jarred Bilbo from his memories. Mr. Durin was looming over him in all his state, watching Bilbo stare intently at a small sculpture while lost in thought.

“Oh! It - well, it reminded me of something. Or rather someone. A person I haven’t seen in many years.” And that was the truth. Thorin’s shoulder-length riotous curls and absent-minded scruff of a beard had been shorn away - quite literally. The Mr. Durin of today was the picture of a model businessman: slicked back hair, finely cut suits, and never once did the man forget to shave. It was quite the contrast to his youth.

“I’m not paying you to dally over poorly wrought copper trees. There’s plenty more to do before you’ve earned the day’s wage.” With that, Mr. Durin turned on his heel, obviously expecting Bilbo to come to heel and follow obediently. Which he did, fuming all the while.

That jibe hit Bilbo on multiple levels. Lowly peon that Bilbo obviously was, he certainly had no eye for quality as far as his boss was concerned. Though honestly, not everything had to be studied for it’s inherent value! Bilbo had been eyeing the tree not for it’s quality but for the memories it exhumed. It was a play on hard and soft lines, so very like the sculpture Bilbo had unearthed in Mr. Durin’s office closet. The one that reminded Bilbo of the brilliant sculptor that Thorin had been, before he turned to the family business.

Thorin had been such a fine sculptor, with the promise of even more depth of talent yet to be unearthed. He was reclusive, even back then, but his passion emanated from his works. Bilbo never did manage to suss out the full story about why Thorin had given up the metalworking he studied so fervently. Which was quite the pity. That Thorin, past Thorin, the one who treated heavy hunks of metal with the tenderest attention, was one to be admired. He pursued his craft with single-minded attention, but that attention came with the deepest reverence. Bilbo had often wondered what kind of lover he might be. Observing a younger Thorin, he could see respect, passion, and a deeply rooted sincerity about his work. If those qualities carried over to personal relationships, well. In all the years he’d known Thorin, Mr. Durin, he never saw the man interact with a significant other, so that question remained academic. But as a young artist, driven by his craft and restrained (however minimally) by the guidelines of coursework, Thorin appeared the ideal partner to Bilbo.

Things had changed as time passed. It was subtle at first. There were a handful of years between that art history class and his employment at Arkenstone, but Thorin had seemed the same man, at least initially. It wasn’t until years had passed, until too much happened at work and at home, that Bilbo realized how much his employer was altered from that young artist. And now it felt too late to bow out gracefully. Though he was initially hired by Dwalin, he stayed past those first few
months because of Thorin. Bilbo knew he had a bit of a healer’s streak in him. Seeing the impassioned artist struggle against the bonds of business and regulations - Bilbo stayed to help the artist break free.

These days, it felt as if the bonds that trapped the businessman were reaching out to ensnare him as well.

As they wound down yet another lane full of vendors, they were approached by a venerable-looking trio of precious stone wholesalers. Despite how many businessmen Mr. Durin dealt with on a regular basis, these three were memorable. For one, Bilbo was convinced they were all related, however distantly. Or working in close proximity for decades had slowly melded their features. Also, however, was how deeply knowledgeable they were about the gem and mining industries. Listening in on previous meetings with that group, Bilbo felt like he should have been sat at his grandfather’s knee, learning the meaning of life. Unfortunately, Mr. Durin hardly seemed to feel the same.

Balin, the usually elected leader of the trio greeted them both - and wasn’t that delightful proof that he was better than baggage to some - before requesting a quieter area for a bit of discussion. Once they were all settled with a drink in the convention center’s restaurant, Gloin cut directly to the point, “Durin, we need a decision on that contract we discussed. You’ve had ample time to think on it while our wares sit in a storehouse, growing dust.”

Bilbo winced. This was, perhaps, not the best tack to take if they hoped for a swift resolution. “And what of that is my problem? Boxes of uncut gems are hardly going to crack open like sprouting seeds as they sit in the dark. If they did, it might be simpler to get at the perfectly cut stones within.”

“We have other offers on the table we could see to. We offered you first right of refusal on the memory of your father and grandfather, but we’re hardly likely to continue this business if every contract takes so long to settle.”

Mr. Durin settled back in his chair, outwardly conciliatory. Balin, at least, knew that look was trouble. He spoke up before anyone could make matters worse, “My partners raise an excellent point. We all lose profit the longer those stones sit in storage. It would be best if we could resolve this quickly, to start the new year on a profitable foot, so to speak.”

That appeased Mr. Durin well enough. “You are right that none of us prefer to lose profits when we could be taking action. I will accept your offer.” The three men grinned as if they’d won. “But my price has changed.” And oh, Bilbo wished he’d been able to warn them. Nagging Thorin Durin into a business deal rarely ended well for the opposing party.

“Now see here, that’s hardly fair!” Gloin blustered. “The price we offered was a particular deal, in honor of decades of partnership. If we go any lower, our laborers will bear the consequences! How can we deprive them so close to the holidays?”

“Ambitious five percent interest is hardly more than a pittance. If you wish this deal to go through, you will meet my price.”

Balin tried, soothing where his compatriots blustered, “We will both profit quite nicely at the original price. I am loath to end business dealings with such a long-time partner.” The threat subtle, but Bilbo was sure Mr. Durin picked up on it just as he had. “If you do not care for our price, we will offer the deal to another source and you will have a shortage of stones to adorn your
jewelry. There are hardly any other suppliers who can meet your demand for quantity and quality. That's what we do—suppliers like the something-or-other mining or unearthing group, for instance. Their output is quite high, but their gems are tawdry in comparison to what we source.”

“I know very well what my supply options are. I am content to seek them out if necessary. However, if you seek out another offer, the deal will not happen before the new year comes, and then where will your laborers be? An additional five percent will finish this today and you may give your workers the spoils of our agreement as you see fit.”

All three men were crestfallen at the lack of holiday sympathy. Balin voiced their collective thoughts, “Either choice harms our employees just before Christmas. Will you give us an additional day to discuss this?”

“If you wish. Though if you worry about the cost to your labor force, it would behoove you to sign everything today. Tomorrow it will be an additional five percent.”

“Damnit Durin! That’s not fair!” Gloin burst out.

With one raised eyebrow, Thorin looked each man in the eye and told them squarely, “No. That’s business.” The look on his face told Balin, Oin, and Gloin just how serious he was. This was no terribly gauche joke meant to rile up long-time business partners, no matter how much the trio surely wished it was.

In the end, the three elder businessmen slunk away, thoroughly defeated by Mr. Durin’s ruthless dealings. The victor rested one arm across the back of his plush leather seat, legs sprawled, and sipped his congratulatory drink. Bilbo struggled to sink deeper into his chair, ashamed that he’d even borne witness to a partnership torn so thoroughly asunder. Despite all the reasons he kept telling himself he stayed at this job, he thought, surely, this was the worst of it. Could Thorin even be drawn back from the ledge that dropped to all-consuming greed?

After the tradeshow that evening, Bilbo was dragged back to the office to take care of all the paperwork that had come from a busy day of dealings. Mr. Durin pottered away in his office, clearly still riding the euphoria of such a large and successful deal. Despite how ashamed Bilbo felt for being party to that deal, he knew his employer’s moods well enough to chance it. If he was going to ask for a bit of a holiday, now would be the time to do so.

He knocked stutteringly on the door that separated his space from Mr. Durin’s. It would be well worth facing the wrath of the dragon if he got a few days in a row to spend entirely with his boys.

“Enter.” For as successful (Bilbo hesitated to call it good) as Mr. Durin’s day had been, the man didn’t sound any more pleased than usual. He didn’t sound displeased in any case, so Bilbo took a deep breath, girded his mental loins, and entered the office.

“Mr. Durin? I was hoping to speak with you about the upcoming holiday. Do you have a moment?” Thorough politeness was required when asking anything of his employer.

“What about it? I suppose you would like a reprieve from the ‘daily grind’ like the shiftless masses of this country.”

“Er, yes sir. I’d like a few days to spend with my children. It’s just- We’ve been so busy lately and I haven’t been home for any of our Christmas traditions. A short holiday would give me the time to foster those memories with them, while they’re all still young.” Really, a week would be too little. He was owed quite a bit of holiday time. Unfortunately, Mr. Durin was hardly likely to permit the time, despite it being written in as part of the standard employment contract.
“I understand. There must be a tree to trim with mass produced baubles, piles of gifts to buy and wrap, and a veritable feast of sweets to bake and gift to neighbors who will summarily toss them out. You must, of course, indoctrinate your children into the meaningless materialism of the day while they’re still too young to question it. I suppose you want a full week? You must budget time to recuperate from the busy days of commercialism.”

What? How could he possibly- did he really believe-? Right, the point was not questioning Mr. Durin’s decidedly humbug feelings about Christmas. It was having several days in a row to spend with his boys. “That- that would be appreciated, yes. I am owed quite a few days off, according to HR.”

“Owed time off? You believe you have a right to be paid to stay away from work? Or is it that you expect a reward for doing your job like every other employed adult in the country? And I suppose you feel you’re owed the coffee you inhale daily,” which Bilbo never drank, thank you very much. He brought tea from home, “the internet service and technology you use for personal emails and social media?” Again, features Bilbo didn’t avail himself of. He was kept too busy to even answer is own emails half the time. "And of course you must have money funneled into an account for your retirement that the company matches.” Well, that was a promised benefit when he was hired. Mr. Durin quirked an eyebrow slightly, daring Bilbo to question the claims he’d made. Despite the (relatively) light tone, Bilbo saw stronger emotions simmering just under the surface.

But for heaven’s sake, did the ridiculous man even think about the claims he’d spouted just now? Did he possibly mean to penalize Bilbo for payments that were automatically deducted from his paycheck? Good heavens! Apparently the bottom line had become the most important thing! Bilbo couldn’t help but gape mentally, thankful he’d at least managed to keep his mouth from flopping open and flapping like a fish.

“I- it’s just-” How could he possibly argue back to that nonsense?

“Just nothing. You have wasted quite enough of this office’s resources as you’ve dithered about this evening and I will cover no more of it. Get back to work before I decide you cost the company more than you’re worth.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Enter Thorin's nephew with news, plus a meeting with some old friends

Early the following morning, Bilbo was already at his desk when Fili Durin came swanning into the reception area with a grin several sizes larger than usual. Even after so many years, it still occasionally shocked Bilbo that the lad had any sort of genetic relationship with his dour boss. Fili was the polar opposite of his uncle, in both physical looks and temperament. Where his employer was dark hair and sharp features, which generally put Bilbo in mind of a thunderstorm, Fili was perpetual sunshine. He was cheerful and ebullient while his uncle was reserved and increasingly irascible. His features were softened and rounded, most definitely from Vili’s side of the family. At least, he was growing up to look very much like the friend Bilbo had known at university. He was rarely seen without a smile, and the sweet-tempered lad always had a kind word or a joke to share. If he hadn’t known the lad’s parents, Bilbo would have almost guessed at adoption, excepting that Fili had his uncle’s eyes. Though they were perhaps made brighter by his colouring or character. And, now that he was grown, he carried himself with the bearing of a Durin. The breadth his uncle owned was missing, but the lad was still young; he still had a bit of growing to do, though he likely wouldn’t ever be quite as broad through the shoulders as his uncle. The comparison between the two Durin men fascinated Bilbo, especially after seeing the lad grow up. He often wondered what another Durin son would have been like. As Fili was an only child, it was a moot point, but Bilbo still pondered what it might be like, to have a boy that ended up somewhere between the two. Maybe he would have kept Fili’s fair colouring but matched Thorin’s sharper features. From what he remembered, Thorin and his sister had quite similar features, though they suited her just as well as they suited him.

Perhaps it was best for Fili to take after his father. Maybe it would help the lad pass straight by the ambition and greed that consumed Thorin over the years. It was hard to imagine Fili the Shining succumbing to the same madness that had overwhelmed his uncle as the years passed.

“Good morning dear Uncle Boggins!” Fili winked merrily at the old joke of a greeting. This was the Fili he remembered, a joking title that hearkened back to when the lad was eight years old and Bilbo was often the nearest parental figure. “Oh, and what a glorious morning! Only a few days until Christmas now. Have my little cousins got ants in their pants over all the Christmas excitement in the air? I’ve heard it’s catching, you know.”

Fili was an especially welcomed ray of sunshine after the previous day. “It is and they do indeed! Merry and Pippin have started be-decking every inch of the house that they can reach and I haven’t the heart to move things up or disperse them more evenly. The garlands across the door frames are the most troublesome, but I do so love seeing them so joyful. Oh, and you must stop by to visit soon. I believe the lads have a bit of a Christmas surprise for you, wrangled primarily by Frodo.”

“And of course I will! How can Christmas be complete without seeing their smiling faces? But for now, I’ve got to spread a bit of Christmas cheer of my own. Is Uncle too busy to interrupt?” And how telling was that? Fili knew better than to ask if his uncle was in the office, despite it barely being eight.
“He is always free enough for a visit from his only nephew, despite what he says. Go, spread your cheer. This office can always use a bit more. He remains...serious despite his success at the tradeshow yesterday.”

Fili gave Bilbo one more smile before crossing to his uncle’s office door. He gave two quick raps before charging in calling, “Uncle! Merry almost Christmas! And a little birdie shared that you had quite a day at the tradeshow yesterday. I come bearing glad tidings as well. You must join me for a celebration!”

Bless the lad, he left the office door wide open. Bilbo would able to follow the conversation without needing to later guess at his boss’s mood. It was always very hit-or-miss, how Mr. Durin would react to a visit from Fili.

“Nephew. You would know more about my news if you joined me as I asked. It would have been an excellent education for you.” His tone was filled with censure, though he sounded like he was trying not to push too much. Bilbo could already see how things would go if he continued on in that vein - one or the other of them would be cut open and bleeding before too long.

“Yes, yes, I know. But I had very important plans uncle! So important that I couldn’t possibly change them for the tradeshow. There will be plenty more where those came from, but there can only be one yesterday. And it went perfectly! Which is why I’m here, of course. Uncle, I want you to share in my joy. There’s just so much to celebrate! Say you’ll come to my Christmas party this year. Of all the years, this one is the most important!” Had Bilbo missed something recently? He knew Fili was enthusiastic about Christmas, but this was...more.

“Christmas is just another day. Surely you don’t plan to throw money away on a party yet again? The cost isn’t worth the gain.”

Fili paused for a moment before chuckling madly. “Uncle, you’re ridiculous. I almost believed you meant that! Oh, that was excellent.” His mirth calmed and he was able to continue, “This year, my party is more than just a Christmas party; it’s also an engagement celebration!” At this, there was a loud thunk. Bilbo assumed, given his long history of this action, that it was Mr. Durin’s chair abruptly meeting the wall behind it as the owner stood too quickly. From his limited vantage point, Bilbo could see snatches of Mr. Durin’s form as he rounded his desk and approached his nephew. Who promptly stepped toward his uncle and embraced him soundly. “Oh, I knew you’d be thrilled for us! I decided ages ago, but now that it’s finally legal for us to properly marry, proposing was the only choice that made sense and Kili accepted! We agreed that there’s no better way to celebrate that surrounded by all our family and friends, so you must come Uncle! You must!”

At this point, Fili had released the hug and was bouncing excitedly around his uncle. Who was stiff as a board and clenching his fingers so tight that Bilbo could see the white tips from across the room. “I will do no such thing. A Christmas party is bad enough, but I certainly will not support you throwing your life away so young! You should have been with me at the showcase yesterday, not allowing yourself to be ensnared by some starving artist you’ve had a few lustful thoughts about. Bad enough that you continue with this jewelry making nonsense instead of learning the business, but to let that boy drag you to destitution? I won’t have it! Monday, you will quit that ridiculous farce of an apprenticeship and begin working full time at Arkenstone. It’s high time you learn about the empire you will take over.”

Thorin made to sit, thinking the issue resolved, but Fili wasn’t having it. “Uncle, I’m not asking your permission. I would rather be a starving artist with Kili, doing what I love with the man I love, than wealthy and miserable.” The ‘like you’ was left unsaid, but it hung heavy between them. “I love Kili and I love my craft. And I’m good at it! My show at the Imladris Gallery has been so well received that I sold half my pieces in the first month and have a pile of commission
requests to sort through. I’m already set up enough to last me a year without working at all, and
that’s before taking on any commissions!” Fili’s voice started rising in both pitch and volume as he
argued. Rather than allow those strong emotions to take over, he paused in his rant and Bilbo
could hear him releasing a slow breath to steady himself. It was apparent to Bilbo, who’d known
him more than a decade, that the quick-tempered boy was growing up.

When Fili continued, it was calmer, but no less passionate. “But that’s not the point. The point is
it’s Christmas! And I’m engaged to someone I love with my whole heart! At this time of year,
especially now, there’s so much reason to be joyous and spread it to others. This is a time to come
together, family and friends, to enjoy each other’s company. Christmas is the best time of year. It
should be a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time; the only time I can think of in the entire year
that urges us to focus on the good in life. You gripe about the commercialism of the holiday, but
it’s not about that. Not for me, anyway. For me, Christmas is a time to remember all the glad
tidings in our lives and to celebrate it. To find those things that are best, the people we care about,
and hold them tight. And to help others do the same. I don’t think it’s commercialism that makes
me want to draw together the people who mean the most to me. Especially after Mum and Dad -
and your dad and grandfather and Dwalin - I thought you’d understand more than anyone. We’ve
lost so much, which is why we should celebrate what we still have! We have our good health, a
roof over our heads, plenty to eat, and people who care about us. No one knows how much time
we have left, and I want to go to my grave with memories of love and happiness, not work and
stress. Just taking one day a year to enjoy all that we have is such a little thing, in the grand
scheme of life. There’s nothing to lose and only happy memories to gain. Is there any better reason
than that to celebrate?”

As Fili finished his compelling argument for Christmas joy, Bilbo was filled with joy. He’d said
everything Bilbo wanted to the night before, but couldn’t. He found himself letting loose a cheer
and clapping loud enough to be heard across the office. “Well said Fili! Absolutely brilliant!”
Someone needed to remind that pessimistic man why Christmas was such an important day and
Fili had done brilliantly!

At the look on Mr. Durin’s face, now glowering at him from the doorway, Bilbo thought he
should have probably been a wee tiny bit less enthusiastic in his support for Fili in direct
opposition to his employer. Thorin needed to hear Fili’s thoughts - just, maybe accompanied with
less vocal support from Bilbo. But no, he wouldn’t regret that, even if Mr. Durin did make his life
particularly difficult for the rest of the day.

“Fili, you are being a fool about this and I won’t stand for it. Now get out of my office, and don’t
come back until you’ve found the good sense I taught you. And you,” he turned to Bilbo, pointing
menacingly and looking down his nose in a potent glare, “if you’re so fond of spreading
Christmas cheer, I’ll free you of your current situation and you may do so year-round, if that is
what you wish. I don’t want to hear one more word about Christmas in this office!” With that, he
slammed his office door, leaving Bilbo and Fili stunned.

Both men stared at the door then each other, flabbergasted by the vitriolic response Mr. Durin had
to Fili’s news. Judging from the wide eyes and nervous tugging at a moustache tip, Fili had
expected that response just as little as Bilbo. After a long moment of weighty silence, Fili perked
back up. “Right, so that’s a no from him. Again. But you’ll come, won’t you? And bring my little
cousins? The celebration won’t be complete without family there.”

That notion warmed Bilbo’s heart, and he was sure to say so, “Of course we will be! It’s not every
day your oldest nephew gets engaged! As soon as I tell them, the boys will be clamouring to rush
out and meet your Kili. I’ll be hard pressed to convince them to wait!”

Bilbo’s response soothed Fili’s ragged edges enough that his smile finally returned. He came
around Bilbo’s desk and leaned against his chair, one arm wrapped across Bilbo’s shoulders.

“Well, bring them by Beorn’s place once you’re free of this place! Even he can’t keep you here late today, on the start of your holiday. And if he does, you tell me. I’ll come back for round two with him!” Fili threw up an approximation of the traditional pugilist’s stance, fists raised and circling. It was enough to draw a quiet laugh from Bilbo; he still worried about being heard and chastised once more, but Fili knew how to pester the happiness out of anyone. There was a scraping sound from Mr. Durin’s office and they both stilled in the anteroom. Fili continued, a bit more serious than before, “Honestly, do come. I’m meeting Kili there for drinks, to celebrate, you know. And I know he’d love to meet your boys. We’ll help you keep an eye out, so you can relax a bit. You work too hard Uncle Boggins.” This last was said sadly. Fili, the eternal optimist, had told him on more than one occasion that Bilbo deserved a better life for all the good he did for others.

Internally, Bilbo wholeheartedly agreed, that he deserved better and that he worked too hard. But his job was important, even if the work didn’t seem to be. He put on a cheery smile in an attempt to keep him from slipping into maudlin thoughts once more. “I’d be happy to come, but the boys have plans elsewhere. I do appreciate the offer, if you still want me to interrupt your cozy evening. I was planning on a few hours of quiet in that drafty old house of mine, but excellent company sounds so much cheerier!”

“Then you must come! We’ll keep you from the boredom of a quiet house, no doubt about that!” Given that Kili was even more exuberant than his partner, Bilbo was sure his time away from the boys would be no quieter than if they were in attendance. Still, it was a lovely prospect. There was another thudding in the office and Fili took that as a signal. He gave Bilbo a quick snug of a one-armed hug from his half-seated position before standing upright. “See you later Uncle Boggins!” He left quickly enough, given the threat of his uncle in a strop, but turned and gave Bilbo one last smile and a wave as the elevator doors closed.

The pub was just as noisy and raucous as Bilbo expected. Fili and Kili managed to corral a couple of tables off to one side of the room, and had already collected a small group before Bilbo arrived. Knowing the personable duo, they’d likely lure in a few more before he left.

A booming voice called out from the kitchens, “Bunny! You giant pain in my arse! Come lay dow- Oh, Bilbo!” As Beorn emerged from the back and spotted the enormous dog’s target, he relaxed and sent a wave. When he drew near enough, the giant of a man clapped Bilbo on the shoulder and exclaimed, “No children for her to herd today? And where are your collection of rascals?” Beorn stood in front of him, grinning as Bilbo craned his neck to greet his old friend. Bunny, the nuisance, was already nosing at his leg, hoping for a bit of attention.

“Frodo’s with the physical therapist and the rest are at Radagast’s. He’s holding a party and the lads wanted to go see their friends.”

“Delightful, for them and you, but a pity for poor Bunny. You know how she loves to shepherd them around! Ah, well, more of her slobbering affections for you! When you’ve had enough of her, just send her back. I’ll have Nori by with a pint for you soon. Anything to eat? Of course you will! Bombur’s made a giant pot of stew and was just pulling the latest batch of soda bread out of the oven when I left him.”

Beorn had ‘lost’ his tab more than once, and Bilbo wasn’t here for charity! He patted his friend on the arm and told him, “Oh, no, I’m quite alright with just the pint. I’m sure I’ll have to feed the boys something green after all the sweets at the party. I shouldn’t eat without them, you know. Must set a good example, and all that.”
The barkeep, whose size was usually a deterrent from any patron arguing with him, was having none of Bilbo’s excuses. “I’ll just send out a small bowl then. You need something to warm you up on this chilly day and they’ll both will want to say hello. Now, go join your friends!” With that, he tromped back to the bar and left Bunny to follow Bilbo over to Fili and Kili.

Once greetings were exchanged and Bilbo tolerated a round of Uncle/Mister Boggins from the lads, he sat down off to the side. Bunny found his leg immediately and Bilbo resigned himself to leaving Beorn’s with a patch of wet on his left thigh. Fili and Kili had snuggled themselves up as close as the separate chairs would allow, as befits a newly engaged couple so deeply in love. They were chatting with some fellow artist friends who shared gallery space - at least, that’s what Bilbo was given to understand from the less than thorough introductions that Fili gave. There was a rapid-pace argument happening over the costs involved in putting on a show, and Bilbo wasn’t entirely sure who was winning. As the topic was an unfamiliar one to him, Bilbo chose to sit back and observe, absentmindedly patting Bunny’s soft ears.

Nori was the first to approach, bearing a pint and a look that spelled trouble. Before he could even get a word out, Bilbo headed him off, “No, whoever it is, I’m not interested!”

Nori slid the drink across the table to Bilbo and grinned, a facial expression that, on him, was somewhere between a smirk and overtly sly. “Now, Bilbo, why would you think I’ve got someone to interest you?”

“Because you always do! I have half a mind to stop coming here, for all your awful suggestions. One day, you’ll go too far and I’ll never return, and then where will you be?”

“Finding someone easier to set up apparently. I don’t know why you turn down every offer. I only pick out the best of the lot for you, you know.”

They went round and round this old argument every time Bilbo came to Beorn’s pub and the ginger nuisance showed no signs of letting up any time soon. He let his head thunk down on the table as he mumbled, “The best of the lot is all well and good, but what if I don’t want to date?”

“And how do you know you don’t want to date when you haven’t even seen my latest person of interest! He could be the one!”

Bilbo let out a groan from his spot on the table.

Before he could respond, Fili interjected, “Bilbo’s got someone who might be the one? And you never said anything? Uncle Boggins, how dare you keep a secret this big from your favorite nephew! Tell us everything!” Kili slid his chair closer to Bilbo’s right while Fili moved around the table to drop down on the chair to his left, nudging Bunny further under the table.

Looking up, Bilbo noted that nearly everyone had left the table. He let his head thunk back down rather than face the sudden inquisition. “There isn’t anyone to tell about. Nori is offering suggestions, as he always does, and I’m refusing, as I always do. Nothing more.”

“But why Bilbo? Don’t you want love?” Fili sounded so pained at the idea that his surrogate uncle might not want a fairy tale love like he’d found.

Bilbo raised his head and gave him a pat on the arm. “Love would be nice, but I’ve already had my once-in-a-lifetime chance and that’s it for me. I’m not going to use what little spare time I have going on a manhunt. I’d rather spend it making memories with my boys, with friends, maybe even the occasional nuisance of a nephew.” He sighed and nudged Fili with his shoulder. “I know you all mean well, but I’ve just accepted that I had my chance and it ended...badly. I’m not going to
find anyone who could compare to that lost love.”

Kili brightened a bit at this and inched his face closer to Bilbo’s. “Maybe we can find your mystery true love and get you two back together! This is a story Fili’s never told me, and remember, the more details you give, the more likely we are to be able to help!” By this point, Nori had sat down across the table and Bombur appeared with the promised stew and bread. The rotund chef slid it across the table before sitting next to Nori. Bilbo picked up the bread to give himself something to do with his hands. The memories welling to the surface of his mind pulled his fidgets along for the ride.

“That’s sweet of you Kili, but your help is entirely unnecessary. It was less a relationship that ended badly and more one that fizzled before it could really take off.” Looking between Fili and Kili, he admonished, “Remember, both of you, that relationships take work to start and keep. You can’t rely on love to carry you through if you’re not willing to fight for it. Unfortunately, it was much more complicated to find love as a gay man in the 80s. Once we finally managed to work out that we were both interested, I had high hopes. But his family had a very strong negative reaction that kept us apart.”

Well, that was the sanitized version of events anyway.

Fili and Kili hardly needed to know that he got roaring drunk at an end of term party where he accidentally bumped into Thorin - literally - and used the sloshed beer as an excuse to get the man out of his pants. Somehow, his drunken courage impressed on the artist just how interested he was in Thorin’s works. One blissful, absolutely perfect drunken shag later and Bilbo was imagining the home and life they’d forge together. That night had proven that, even as drunk as they both were, the qualities Bilbo saw in Thorin as an artist absolutely extended to the man himself. And how he treated a lover. The awkward conversations they’d had in between classes proved the man’s intelligence and passion for his craft, but that night proved his patience and care as well. After so long observing and getting to know Thorin, that one night had cemented in his mind how perfect Thorin was for him (and hopefully vice versa).

It wasn’t until the start of the following term that Bilbo even knew anything had gone wrong. One afternoon loitering in the art building, hoping to catch Thorin, was enough to catch up on the myriad gossip of the department. And Thorin was the central figure. If the scuttlebutt was to be believed - and in this case it likely was - someone had witnessed Thorin clearing out his work space while his father stood by to observe. According to Fezziwig himself, when the professor questioned why his star pupil was clearing everything out, he got the response that ‘family duties’ would prevent him from returning to school. Another student, someone who lived in the same building announced that early one morning, just before Christmas, he had witnessed a giant row. Harsh comments were made, the fight played out, and in the end, Thorin bowed to his father’s wishes and left school.

Years later, when they initially met again, Thorin showed no signs of recognition. Bilbo took it as understood that he was Mr. Durin, executive of Arkenstone, and would brook no mention of their shared history, however brief it was. He had apparently pushed that part of his life to the recesses of his thoughts. He’d even gone so far as to remark, “He looks more like a school teacher than an executive assistant. Where did you dredge this one up?” as if he’d never met Bilbo before. So Bilbo tucked his unreturned love away on a back shelf in his mind and set about to do the job he was hired to do. A small part of him thought that, perhaps, Thorin might have remembered that night and what he assumed they’d been building toward. But no promises were made and Thorin slowly became more and more the capitalistic Mr. Durin who didn’t really see most of the people around him. Bilbo’s hopes dwindled and his debts rose. Some days, his life as it was currently, was entirely untenable to him. A broken heart that refused to heal, a horrid job, and more medical bills than he could hope to pay off. But he remembered his sons, and Fili (and now Kili as well),
and he found his positivity once more.

Rather than continue to bring down the mood at their table, Bilbo turned to look between Fili and Kili as they wedged him in. He decided a change of subject was definitely in order, “But times have changed and the legal system has finally worked in your favor. Tell me lads. I have yet to hear the story of your proposal!”

At that, Kili tugged up the sleeve of his shirt, revealing a polished silver cuff. It was thin, but well smoothed and bore a very familiar looking knotwork chain that spanned the border to create a continuous line. “Gorgeous, innit? I know Fili hardly does jewelry but he said I’m worth the effort. Even if he does like his tiny detailed mathoms better. And he’s already promised to make us rings to match.” His grin was enormous as he showed off his lover’s skill.

Bilbo ran a finger along the knotwork, studying the design. Beorn, who had migrated back to the table sometime while Bilbo had been lost in thoughts, spoke up, “It’s a fine piece. Does the design have a special meaning for a Celtic heritage?”

Fili fielded the question as he’d designed the piece, “Not as such, no. It’s actually a family pattern. It has it’s origin in Celtic design, but it was modified and used as our family’s insignia centuries ago. At least, that’s what Uncle told me. I’ve had trouble researching much of anything about it.” Ah. And shite. Of course that’s where he remembered it - Thorin’s sculpture had that same design etched along its base.

Kili reached across Bilbo’s shoulders and squeezed Fili’s shoulder where it met his neck. “The giant sap. Had to ask me to join his family in such a subtle way and he know’s I don’t do subtle! I didn’t get it until he explained.”

Fili mimicked Kili’s motion as he commented, “Good thing I don’t keep you around for your mind, love!”

What ensued was a short tussle over Bilbo’s head and behind his back before Kili announced, “Well, at least you’ve got your priorities in line. We both know you first asked me out because of my fantastic arse. And don’t even try telling that line about wanting to learn about working with glass because of a piece you had in mind!”

Fili blushed but sat straighter, “Well it worked, didn’t it? I caught your interest, even if you never did make it through a single lesson with me.”

The two were grinning sappily at each other and Bilbo felt sorely out of place sandwiched between them. He checked his watch and was surprised at just how much time had passed. Somewhere along the way, his stew and bread disappeared - and he wasn’t ravenous, so odds were good that he ate it before the lads could get to it.

“At least our future adopted babies will get the best of us. My good looks and charisma and your skills and eyes. They’ll be set!” Kili gave his best cheeky cat-with-the-cream grin and Fili smack his arm.

“That’s not how it works!” Fili offered a confused rebuttal, not entirely sure how to react to his partner’s illogical ideas.

“Oh of course it is! Just you wait and see. One day, twenty years from now, we’ll look at our amazing children and you’ll admit I’m right.”

That Bilbo took as a sign. He nudged Bunny off his knee and scooted his chair back, dislodging the pair of arms that had stayed resting there after their mock fighting. “And, speaking of children,
I need to go collect mine. Bag End still needs it’s decorations and I need my decorators. Fili, Kili, congratulations to the both of you.” As he stood up, both lads hugged him round the middle.
“Beorn, Bombur, Nori, it was lovely to see you all again. I’ll try to bring the boys by for a visit with sweet Bunny soon.” He gave the dog a final pat on her head, tried unsuccessfully to leave a handful of pounds on the table, and headed for the door.

As he wound his way slowly through the crowd, he heard Kili ask, “Why did you name such a huge dog Bunny?”

Beorn’s laugh echoed across the pub, “Well, when I got her she was a wee shy little thing….” and launched into the story of Bunny as Bilbo slipped out into the quiet cold evening.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Thorin has a drink or three and starts to see things.

Thorin finally left the office after the building had settled into a cold silence. After the unsettling argument with his nephew that morning, Thorin’s stomach had been bothering him. It was hardly something worth leaving the office early over. But as he exited the building to head home, the day of discomfort had really built upon itself. So when a small voice piped up behind him wishing him, “Merry Christmas Mr. Durin!” Thorin couldn’t help but snarl as he turned.

There was a tiny slip of a boy with dark hair flopping into his eyes, wearing a coat too large and pants too short. He was braced on metal crutches and leaned back against the brick of the building behind him. Obviously a vagrant of some sort. “Don’t beg on this corner boy.”

The boy tilted his head further up, to look him in the eye. “I’m not begging, sir. I’m Frodo Baggins; I’m waiting for my father.”

Father? His assistant had children? Surely he would have heard if the man had married. Was he even still in the office? Things had been quiet when he left, but Bilbo often ran errands throughout the building. “Baggins, eh? You’ll have a long wait, I imagine.” With nothing more to say to the boy, he turned and walked away. A quieter but brighter “Merry Christmas sir!” trailed after him. He muttered, “Humbug” under his breath, wondering what possessed everyone around him to bring up the infernal holiday today.

At home, it became instantly apparent that his housekeeper had found a lone box of Christmas odds and ends that he vaguely remembered shoving somewhere in the attic. There were ribbons wrapped around the banister and fresh garlands draped over the windows in the entry hall and across the mantle in the sitting room. And there, what could only be the centerpiece from hell, was a photo from the Christmas Fili was seven. The last Christmas is nephew had with his parents. Which was the only reason Thorin hadn’t binned the bloody pic years ago. For him, the photo was a reminder of loss on several levels.

It was a bittersweet memory, that last happy Christmas, and Thorin found himself wishing to experience the simple happiness that had been captured in that photo. In it, Dis was perched on the arm of the armchair; she looked as if she was ready to spring up and leave the room - and if she had been cooking, she likely was up and back several times - but didn’t want to miss a minute of the fun. Vili was leaning across half the couch, one arm behind his head, sporting a huge grin. It was a relaxed Christmas morning, but so joyous, and his pose reflected the feelings. Fili was sitting next to the overly-baubled and tinsel tree - Dis had loved the holiday to the point of excess and decorated to match - surrounded in the detritus of gift wrappings, grinning from ear to ear. Fili was understandably spoiled, as the only child. That Christmas, Fili was most excited about the shining new bicycle he kept within arm’s reach, even in the photo. According to Fili, the photo was taken at the exact moment Dis agreed he could go out and ride it as soon as they cleaned up. For all that the boy was spoiled in a consumerist sense, he was well-behaved and always ready to do what was asked of him. The love he received from his parents balanced out how they all doted on him.
How Thorin wished he could bask in that idyllic scene. He wished he could chase after his young nephew as he tried to steer the new bike on snow and muck. Time with the boy would be entirely worth the mud and wet that soaked through his jeans and trainers. He wanted to hear Dis in the kitchen as she attempted to not burn Christmas dinner (again). He wanted to see Vili sneaking after her, trying to stop mishaps before they happened and fix mistakes that had. He wanted to hear Christmas crackers and mad giggling as they read jokes and donned paper crowns in garish colours. He wanted most of all to be happy. He wanted the Christmas he’d never had. And with Dis and Dwalin gone and Fili grown up, that wish was gone.

It was- Dis would be horribly disappointed in him. He couldn’t even remember the last time he’d celebrated the holiday. Fili had been throwing parties of his own before he should have been old enough to, and Thorin hadn’t attended one. And this year, Fili was engaged, to boot. Had she still been alive, Dis would have thrown a party all of London would talk about for years to come. It would have been the Christmas party to which all others aspired. What had happened to him? How did he become such a man as his father?

Deciding that the garlands and ribbons and photograph were making him too maudlin, he pulled down the garland and left it lying crumpled before the dying fire. He was tempted to do the same with the photograph, but couldn’t bring himself to ruin it. Though it was a close thing. He pulled it off the mantle and shoved it in a desk drawer where it would hopefully be forgotten until Fili went looking for it. He dropped the framed photograph in and nearly slammed the drawer shut but a glinting caught his eye.

It was that wretched sculpture. At the sight of it, he nearly hurled his tumbler across the room. It was a night for memories to come nipping at his heels, apparently. He hadn’t thought of that sculpture since his assistant unearthed it and set it on his desk at Arkenstone, quite a while back. At the time, he hadn’t been able to bear the sight of it and the memories it unearthed. And tonight was no different. He pulled the thing out and gave it a once-over before dropping it back in and this time actually slamming the drawer closed.

It was a tiny thing. Not nearly as impressive as most of his old pieces. But those pieces hadn’t meant as much and he had no idea where any of the others ended up. He only had this one because it was still on his work space that awful day. He’d managed to shove it in his bag along with his equipment and raw materials, keeping it well hidden. For all that his father hated his initial degree choice, he hated wasting money more, so the remnants of his artistic past were collected and packed up along with his clothes and books. Somehow, that logic did not extend to the other works that had been displayed in the student museum. Now, it was just a twisted reminder of all he’d lost that day. How ironic that Thorin was left with his most personally meaningful piece as the only physical reminder of so long ago.

It represented another bittersweet memory for him. The tree itself began as a self-expression of his growing hope. The metaphor seemed rather obvious, but he couldn’t bring himself to care about hiding those obvious feelings. He started the tree early shortly after he began working under Fezziwig’s tutelage. And he had been skilled and driven enough to warrant attention from the man himself. Fezziwig was a cheerful menace, but so brilliant and he fostered the seed of artistic skill he saw in Thorin. Before he progressed to the larger, sharper, more abstract works that he started to become noticed for, he started with a tree. Something angular and sharp, yes; a physical representation of his feelings about taking over the company after his grandfather and father. Joining Fezziwig’s program had been a new start. It was the beginning of hope that maybe he didn’t need to go down that path. So he made a tree - it was a representation of his hopefulness, of the new life the art program would bring him. But then the sculpture faltered. Doing the tree entirely of heavy angular branches felt too oppressive for the emotions he wanted it to represent. But something delicate and curling and soft was not in his nature. In the end, the sculpture didn’t feel right and Thorin shoved the unfinished piece to the back of his work space, where it
remained forgotten for a couple of years. Then, finally, he found his inspiration. And it came from the most surprising of places.

It took a painfully drunken night at a Christmas party before he finally figured out what was plaguing him. An extremely drunken night and a realization that started with a courageous drunken action. For all the women his father set him up with, none of them felt right. Then, at a party that he only vaguely remembered, he was approached by a curly-haired vixen. He thought the person was a woman initially - possibly because he’d been too drunk to see past her hair - but kissing led to more and more led to one blissful experience. And a realization that smacked him in the face. He was gay. No woman would ever be right because he had no interest in them. And so, after that night, he was hopeful. He’d seen his sister blissfully disgustingly in love, and he craved that feeling for himself. But no woman had ever been right, and each unsuccessful date sent him further into despair; he’d wondered if something was wrong with him, to be incapable to find any woman attractive.

Despite being unable to remember anything else about that drunken shag, he’d found his hope. The next day, hungover but rejuvenated, he fell into a manic frenzy of sculpting. Two days later, he walked out late at night with a finally finished tree. And then his father had appeared and dragged him home before he could even ask around about his mystery partner. Well, he could have asked around, but hadn’t had the time to do so discreetly - and given the general attitude of homophobia at the time, discrete would have been the only way to get a truthful answer. Now, he was alone with a blurry memory and a soppy sculpture he found inspiration for in the first satisfying sex of his life. It had been twenty years at least, and he couldn’t remember anything but feelings, but it remained a highlight. That one week had seen him at the highest and lowest points in his life. Thinking on it now, he wondered why he still looked on that gay shag with any sort of positivity. All it had caused him was hardship and the memory only brought him misery.

It was a good thing he only opened that desk drawer to stash away bad memories. The sculpture and the photo could both stay in there to rot; he had no use for either one. There was no use in dwelling over things he couldn’t change, and neither finding a man from a drunken shag twenty years ago nor bringing his sister back from the dead were within his powers. Much as he might wish they were. There was nothing to be done and he was not the naive young man he’d been back then. It was really for the best, to forget those memories and ignore the misery they brought. With nothing positive like that on his horizon, it would only affect his work and sour his days.

He settled in to his preferred armchair, once more working his way through the bottle of Dwalin’s favored scotch. Today was the anniversary of his funeral, so another night of tribute was in store. The day was much like it’s counterpart the year before: cold, bleak, biting. It had been the day that hit home how alone he was, and the memory of that realization stung just as much. He sat in front of the dwindling fire, trying to find some warmth in it and his drink, but neither was working. The feeling of loneliness had permeated far enough to chill him to his bones. Tossing back one glass and pouring himself another, Thorin gave in to the shudder. It wasn’t his loneliness, it was just a cold front moving through, sending the chill creeping through every nook and cranny of his old house.

A further few drinks in, Thorin began to drift off in his seat. His drink rested on his thigh and his head flopped to the side, where it was cushioned by the high back of the chair. He thought about moving to his bed, but lacked the energy. Ten more minutes and he’d go. When he glanced over at the clock standing against the wall, Thorin was jolted to full wakefulness. There was Dwalin, sitting on the sofa, staring into the dying embers in front of him. He was a bit greyer than Thorin remembered, but the likeness was otherwise exact. Thorin must have made some sound because the dead man looked over at him. “Ah, finally awake are you? Been waiting for a while. Never knew you to fall asleep in front of the fire like an old man.”
Thorin gaped at him, nearly dropping his glass from his slackened hand. He straightened in his chair, redoubled his grip, and asked, “What manner of tasteless deceit is this? Whoever you are, I demand you leave my house at once!”

At this, Dwalin stood, dragging a great length of weighty pendulous chains with him. “You mean to boot your trusted business partner from your home? Without even offering me a drink?”

Thorin stared stonily at him, taking in his largely unchanged appearance. Whatever was happening, someone put substantial effort into it. “You look like him. You even have his voice. But the Dwalin I knew has been dead for a year. Whatever is going on, you are not him, and I will not brook such reprehensible nonsense on this night of all nights.”

Dwalin stood before him now, eyeing him with obvious disdain. “Why do you doubt your senses?”

Thorin raised the glass in his right hand and replied to the imposter, “A little thing affects them.”

“No matter. I have a message to deliver whether you believe me or not. Though it might be easier if you’d offer a glass.” He eyed the bottle Thorin had sitting next to him. “Even if your taste in drink has gone horribly downhill in my absence.”

He rose to usher the crazed actor out of his sitting room, but the mention of his drinking tastes made Thorin stop short. There were so few who knew of their drinking tradition, and fewer still who would ever remark on it. Perhaps, in spite of whatever strange powers were at play - or because of them - Dwalin really was standing before him? He moved to the sideboard for a second tumbler, poured a healthy two finger serving, and handed it to the Dwalin-like being. Whatever he was.

Dwalin moved to grasp the glass and grew frustrated when his hand passed through the glass each time he tried to close his fingers around it. In a final angry attempt, the dead man moved his head directly to the glass and moved to drink from it as Thorin held it. Feeling amused and obliging, Thorin tilted the glass. Dwalin failed to gain a drop of scotch from the glass and spun, chains flaring around him, as he looked for something he could punch.

As the incorporeal Dwalin’s hand went straight through the wall - and not in the sense that he punched a hole in it - he muttered and terse, “Fuck.” He moved back to stand in front of Thorin and carried on, frustration in his voice, “Knew those bastards would make this trip a bloody nuisance. And I can’t even soothe myself with a wee kip. Right, I have a message to deliver before I can go back. Best sit yourself down, you’re not going to like it.”

Now that he’d established that this was indeed - unbelievably - Dwalin, in ghost form, he was more inclined to heed the warning. The man always steered him in life; why would that differ in death? He returned to the armchair and Dwalin grew more serious. “I come bearing a warning. The powers that be are not please and they sent me, thinking you’d be most likely to believe me. Thorin, it’s time to get your shite together.” The incredulous look on Thorin’s face must have shown his disbelief. Dwalin snorted and replied bluntly, “well, they phrased it different, but that’s the long and short of it.” He grew serious once more, “See in me your fate, if you do not shape up. I stand before you in the chains I wrought through my wretched life. The burden is great and my fate is sealed. Every action of greed, every selfish moment, was forged into a link. Each link forged into a chain is a moment of my miserable existence, born of the accoutrements of my greed-filled life. Does it not seem familiar to you? Every ledger and spreadsheet, each contract and stock sale in which we put business above all else, they are all captured here. Many of these links are moments you were a part of; they affect you as much as they do me. I am cursed to bear these chains and walk the earth until the very end with no hope for peace or reprieve.”
The spectre paused and raised the lengths of chain, spreading his arms so Thorin could see just how far they extended. “Yours was this long thirteen years ago, but it continues to grow. You have toiled on it at great length - it has long since become a ponderous chain indeed.” Dwalin paused here, hoisting his chains and rattling them menacingly in Thorin’s face. Now that he’d given the dire part of his warning, the mood lightened slightly and, seeing that Thorin was still paying close attention, Dwalin gave him a quick nod. “I’m only the first sent to save you. There are others coming. They will bear further warnings, and none as pleasant as mine. Heed what they tell you, no matter how barmy they may be, because they may lead you to your salvation. If not, this is your fate. And while I’d appreciate the company, you still have a hope. Change your ways before you end up like me.” There was some unspoken signal, some clue that Dwalin was finished, because he was surrounded and swept up into the sky. The beings that appeared around Dwalin filled the room and continued beyond. There was the glimmer of chain out on the lawn. Some of the beings were familiar - old business partners and the like - and every one bore a heavy length of chain just as Dwalin did. In an inkling, they were gone and Thorin was once more alone in his sitting room with his unfinished scotch.

What was that? Had he finally gone mad? He lifted his head from where it rested against the back of the armchair and moved his sleep-heavy limbs. Surely he had simply fallen asleep after one too many drinks; the cheap alcohol must have caused the bizarre dream. Thorin set his scotch on the side table and banked the fire. He would sleep. With the impending holiday, there was no reason to wake early - no one else would be working tomorrow, so there was only so much he could do at the office. After such an odd, unsettling dream, all he needed was a full six hours to put himself to rights once more. By morning, the dream about Dwalin would be a hazy memory.
By the next morning, Dwalin’s visit had faded entirely from Thorin’s mind. There were concerns over a contract that was, as yet, unfulfilled. There was paperwork that needed to be filed with the mining commission. And there was always a stack of business proposals for Thorin to wade through, marking them up with a vicious pen to remind himself what needed changing before they’d accept the business.

With so much to occupy his time, Thorin forgot entirely about the warning Dwalin left him with.

He worked steadily into the night in his office at Arkenstone. At some point, a hot meal had appeared at his elbow and a quiet voice reminded him to “eat up, before it gets cold. Stew is hardly as satisfying once it’s cooled.” Without consciously doing so, he managed to follow his assistant’s - because surely that had been Bilbo? - directions and finish the stew before the room cooled it. Bodily needs sated, he was set to continue wading through his work. After the memories that bombarded him the night before, Thorin had no desire to spend the evening shut away in his dark quiet house. Tonight, he couldn’t feel the happiness and love that once emanated from his sister. He lacked the hope once gained from his curly-haired harbinger of self-revelation. He missed the blunt advice and trust he gained from his business partner. Without any of that, he had no need to sit alone, stewing in the past.

All those elements added together to make it very surprising indeed when two celestial-looking beings appeared in front of his desk. When he heard a quiet huffing of breath, he glanced up briefly before looking back to his work. He assumed they were patrons putting in an after-hours appearance in order to ask for mercy on a contract or a reprieve on billing. No need to rush his work for them. But as they quietly waited for his attention, Thorin grew more restless. Not once did they interrupt him or try to hurry him along, and that was more disconcerting than if they’d been audibly anxious.

When he finally looked up, Thorin understood their patience but found himself growing more confused. Why were there two seemingly angelic beings standing before his desk? These beings were undoubtedly other-worldly; they glowed from within, putting off a gentle light like that of a lit candle. Both were tall and fair, with long lean figures and flowing white garments. One figure
was chestnut-haired while the other’s hair emanated an unnatural golden gleam, but both bore the
delicate features he’d always pictured on an angel. Or perhaps a fairy, if fairies came in such a
size. As he remembered from stories told during his youth, fairies were tiny things; they should not
tower above his own taller-than-six-foot frame. But these were not the playful sprites of fantasy
stories. They gave off an aura of aged-wisdom and peace-bringing calm. They had the sort of
ethereal beauty that was not of this earth; they both bore long flowing hair, flowing robes - he
wouldn’t be surprised if their limbs flowed like water as well. They definitely weren’t the sort you
could ever imagine riding the tube. Standing before him, they were close enough to each other that
their glow masked their outlines. He could hardly tell where one being began and the other ended.
As they watched him studying them, both tilted their heads away from each other in a smooth
simultaneous movement.

Dear god, it was going to be one of those nights? Again?

The dark-haired being - a male, he was moderately sure - opened his mouth and spoke quietly, a
calm cadence to his voice, “Good evening Thorin Durin. We come to you-”

The blonde - woman? angel? He damned well wasn’t going to call them fairies all night - finished
the brunet’s sentence, matching his tone and cadence, “-bearing a warning. Your fate is dire, but
we are here to help. We are-”

And again the brunet resumed speaking, “-the Ghosts of Christmas Past. We come to show you
the shadows of what has been. But do not blame us-” Here they exchanged a look that was blatant
enough for even Thorin to catch it.

“-for what you will see. Each moment is as it was, nothing more.”

For fuck’s sake, did they practice that shite in the mirror? Surely he wouldn’t have to put up with
this shared speech and shared mind nonsense through the duration of their visit. It was barely
palatable already and they’d hardly been in his office five minutes.

The golden one spoke once more, “Come, take our hand. We must begin-“

“-if we are to see everything this night.”

That was enough! Thorin threw down his pen and stood from his desk chair. He growled at them,
“What makes you think I’d willingly go anywhere with you lunatics? Ghosts of Christmas Past?
What nonsense. You’re just a couple of lunatics doing a poor job at playing a prank. Go with you,
no questions asked? Not bloody likely.”

This time, the golden one gave a serene smile and spoke first, “We are not a jest, Thorin Durin.
We are-”

Before the other could speak, Thorin jumped in, “The Ghosts of Christmas Past. You said. For
those of us not clearly insane, that title means nothing.” He moved from behind his desk, intent on
ushering them out the door so he could return to his work.

The dark-haired spirit raised one elegant eyebrow, looked down his nose at Thorin, and
questioned, “Did not your friend warn you of our imminent arrival?”

Friend? Warning? Wh- oh. Dwalin. How had he forgotten that bizarre dream about Dwalin
appearing with a message about chains and spirits? But- the spirits should have no idea that
happened. Hadn’t that just been a drunken hallucination? A liquor fueled dream?

While Thorin was mired in his confusion, the spirits gave each other knowing glances - obviously
they knew of and were well prepared for a recalcitrant Thorin - and each grabbed one of his arms.
In a twinkling, they were flying over English countryside that grew steadily more familiar looking. As they flew, a familiar grouping of frost-tinged red brick buildings came into view. There it was, his old boarding school. And, as they entered the dormitory by way of the roof...was that him? But- how was that possible? A much younger version of himself by the look of things.

Then, in a rush, he realized what was happening. Someone had set up an elaborate series of holograms to make him believe he was witnessing his younger self. Though, why someone would go to that effort, he had no idea. He and the spirits drew to a stop then, standing in the middle of the darkened dormitory where hologram-teenaged-Thorin sat on his bed. Younger him was holding something, turning it over and running his fingers across it in an agitated manner.

“This was a most important day-” the male spirit began

“-the day your troubles began. Though you may not believe us-” The spirits shared an all-knowing look, like parents watching a child prepare to misbehave.

“-given the moment you are seeing.”

And they were absolutely correct, though he’d never say it. How could this day be a bad one, since any moment, his sister would-

There she was. Dis, young and jubilant, just as he most often pictured her. He watched his sister run towards him...before passing straight through him and leaping toward his younger self. Thorin was instantly bereft. To have that flare of hope that he’d be able to hug his sister once more, only for it to be ripped away just as quickly - the hurt seared through him as he watched his younger self.

But watching and remembering the joy of that moment...he’d be lying if he said it was almost as good, but it was good to relive the memory in such a visceral way. This was a memory he treasured. It was the first year since age seven that Dis was allowed to surprise him this way. He could hear her across the room, talking excitedly, “I actually did it! I finally convinced the old man! Quick, pack your things. I finally got permission to take you home for Christmas!”

He remembered the letter she sent, telling him the same thing, nearly word for word. He hadn’t believed it. He still had difficulty believing it when she was standing right in front of him. After a decade of attending school year-round, it hardly seemed plausible that his father just now relented to his sister’s and his pleas to allow him home for Christmas. Every year before found him lost among too-large halls and too-quiet rooms. He had his run of the library, but what good were stories when all his fellows went home and saw their families and friends? Got to be home?

Younger Thorin was voicing his disbelief just as the memories flooded Thorin’s mind, “He can’t have. He never has before. At best, you only ever get to visit me, and that’s just for a day!”

“But this time is different Thorin! I finally managed to soften him up. Father has changed, honest! And to prove it’s true…” She pulled out the train tickets for their return journey, waving them proudly in his face.

His younger self snatched them from her hands and Thorin remembered the substantial feel of those flimsy bits of paper. In his hands, at that moment, those feather-light slips felt held the weight and importance of gold bars. His face must have shown something other than the joy he felt, because Dis was speaking, “I’m sorry Thorin, so sorry I couldn’t come sooner. I know it’s so close to Christmas, and you’ll have to be back just after the new year, but it’s the best I could do!”

Thorin wished he could do exactly what his younger self was doing. He watched as he - and this was all still very odd, to watch himself like this. Whoever had created this setup had done a very thorough job - dropped the tickets and the letter he’d been holding in order to snatch his sister up
and twirl her around until she stopped apologizing. Younger Thorin told her, “You have nothing to apologize for, you wonderful girl! I get to go home! For Christmas!” Once he set her back on the ground again, he began a frenzy of unorganized packing. Thorin remembered not wanting to pack, in case it all turned out to be false.

Older Thorin - present day Thorin - turned to the spirits, who had hovered behind him as the scene played out and asked them, “Well? What was so wrong about that? Surely you don’t believe that my happiness was or is a troublesome thing. Unless that’s what this nonsense is about? Let’s all build an elaborate ruse to remind the great Thorin Durin what it was like when his family was alive in order to drive him mad. What rubbish. Seeing my dead sister is only going to convince me that you lot have far too much money and time on your hands to pull through a charade of this magnitude. I demand you cease all this and take me home at once!”

The spirits smiled gentle smiles - if Thorin had been paying more attention, he would have known instantly they were only humouring him - simultaneously. They replied together, “Take our hands and we’ll be off.” And more fool him, he did.

Rather than his sitting room, office, or even his bedroom, Thorin found himself even further away from them. And in the middle of a party.

“What is this? I don’t want to waste my valuable time watching drunken idiots hobnob! Why have you brought me here?” Thorin was moving from annoyed deeper into frustrated. He walked away from the spirits and deeper into the teeming mass. Rudeness be damned. He had to walk away before they could pull that disgusting mind-reading thing they apparently did.

Given the recent mystical exchanges with unexpected beings, he should believe differently, but Thorin was sure the party had nothing to do with him. This smacked of Fili’s annual Christmas bashes, and he had yet to attend one. Perhaps that’s why the lad was so intent on him attending this year? He should put in an appearance eventually. But, surely his nephew didn’t really want him to attend. No one wanted the parent-figure to appear and make everyone straighten up and act on their best behaviour. Thorin knew Fili only invited him each year to be polite. He chose to reciprocate by declining. Better to decline than attend and bring down the jovial attitude through his presence alone.

Glancing around, Thorin began to question his initial assessment of the party. The styles everyone wore were decidedly not current; but Fili had thrown themed parties before, so that meant little. What struck him more was that he recognized a fair amount of the party’s attendants. A - very small - reason he’d never attended Fili’s parties was the knowledge that he wouldn’t know a soul beyond his nephew. He definitely did not want to be the only adult-looking adult at the party and stand in a corner like the lonely wallflower. With that in the back of his mind, Thorin was surprised to recognize at least half of the partygoers by sight, if not by acquaintance.

How had the spirits found this many people with legitimate 80s party wear? And...hair styles? That was dedication on the actors’ parts. He wouldn’t willingly return to that awful ponytail he once sported, even with payment. Unless it was quite a substantial amount. And there was a man legitimately and unironically sporting a mullet. From where he stood in the center of the main room, Thorin was in an excellent vantage point to see all the goings on. But he had yet to figure out why they were there. He turned to face the spirits, intending to question their purpose (again!) when he saw her. There was Dis, shimmering in silver, and chatting up— was that Vili? He could hardly tell, they were both so young! But now Thorin at least knew the connection. They brought him another Christmas with Dis. Perhaps the spirits were more benevolent that he originally assumed. But he still didn’t remember this party. Was this a gift? A party with his sister that he didn’t originally attend?
This whole rigamarole with the Ghosts of Christmas Past whizzing him through time and space with no explanation was wearing him down. What was their purpose? A few paltry moments with his deceased sister meant nothing when he would still end up in his own cold bed in the house that echoed its emptiness. Still, he would enjoy seeing his sister young, happy, and besotted. Or inebriated. Likely both, knowing how much she loved him through their relationship and later marriage. Loved him so much she cut ties with the family. Studying the pair more closely, Thorin estimated that this must have been when they were at uni together. As he moved closer, it became readily apparent that neither of them were speaking. The speaker, who currently wasn’t in sight, was telling them, “I’m glad to hear it! I knew you two would get along splendidly! No need to thank me. Honestly. Vili has been one of my dearest friends for years, so of course I want the best for him! I just hope you two lovely people will be lovely and happy together!” The voice gave a watery sniff and released a small sigh. As he drew nearer, he could see Dis and Vili listening with wobbling intensity to a small…

Curly haired…

Familiar…

...Bilbo?

Why was his assistant at an 80s-themed Christmas party talking to his dead sister and her equally dead husband?

This was- Ridiculous! Absurd! Absolutely beyond the pale! Where were those insipid spirits to berate?

He glanced around for them but stopped short. There was Fezziwig, talking to someone. Between his professor’s form and the shadowing in that corner of the room, Thorin couldn’t quite make out who it was. But, given the comfortable stances of the pair, it must have been someone he was close to and comfortable with. He could hear his old professor’s merry laugh over the music and the noise of the crowd. Fezziwig lifted his arm and wrapped it around whoever he was speaking with, hugging the person close for a moment before releasing. Thorin could see hands gesturing beyond Fezziwig, and the man nodding as he listened. He could picture his professor’s face; in conversation, he was prone to gentle smiles and encouraging nods, but not interruption when someone was speaking. There was an intensity in his eyes that stood out even more to Thorin. It used to make him feel like he was the only person in the room worth listening to. Whoever Fezziwig was speaking with, he or she was very lucky to have the caring attention of such a man. Thorin wished he’d had longer to bask in the glow his old professor put off, before he left university.

Between his assistant speaking with his sister and her husband, the awful fashion choices of the partygoers, and his old instructor chatting away in the corner, there was quite a lot of information for Thorin’s mind to process. The pieces of the party equation wasn’t adding up to anything Thorin understood or remembered. Was this another well-detailed charade concocted by the spirits to make him want? Was this a future he might have known if he hadn’t left to go work at Arkenstone? That was a preposterous thought, but- Could it be? Were the spirits showing him some alternate universe where everyone was happy?

By the time Thorin’s brain found the short and repaired itself, he looked up to see that Fezziwig and his conversation partner were gone and the trio was gone from their previous place. Dis and Vili had vanished from sight, undoubtedly making themselves lost among the throng. And off to the right, if he turned a bit further, there was Bilbo, walking up to- Younger Thorin? Though this was not-quite-as-young Thorin, based on the ridiculous queue of long curly hair at his neck. This was definitely meant to be a party while he was off at university, studying under Fezziwig. Uni-Thorin was feigning nonchalance with as much finesse as a drunken octopus, but Bilbo didn’t
appear to mind. He was looking up at Thorin with shining eyes - was he sad, drunk, or something else entirely? Watching himself with Bilbo was akin to those awful romantic comedies his sister used to love. Bilbo was blushing - honest-to-god blushing! Thorin hadn’t known anyone actually did that. And now, he was nibbling on his lower lip. Was that supposed to be a come-on?

It was working.

Sweet, innocent, Bilbo tugged delicately on his lip with his teeth and stumbled into uni-Thorin. Who somehow managed to catch him with only minimal sloshing of their drinks onto uni-Thorin’s trousers. It was sickeningly adorable. Present-Thorin was increasingly convinced he was trapped in an awful dream in which he was the romantic lead in one of his sister’s movies.

Now, Bilbo was leaning into Thorin’s welcoming arms. Present-Thorin’s arms rose of their own volition, almost as if they wanted to wrap around Bilbo’s soft form. The need was...incessant. Thorin turned away from the scene to see the spirits watching his face shift with subtly amused expressions. Their eyes crinkled slightly at the corners and their mouths turned up further when they caught him noticing. He found his mouth frowning in disgust and he turned his back to them, temporarily forgetting why he turned away to begin with.

In that instant, Thorin was glad he turned back as one of his biggest questions was answered. Thorin watched as Bilbo placed a small hand on Uni-Thorin’s shoulder, tipped up on the balls of his feet, and placed a small kiss to the corner of Thorin’s mouth. It had been close enough to his cheek that Bilbo might have been able to play it off as a friendly gesture that missed its intended mark. With the drinks they both held, he had an easy target to blame poor balance on. But it was also close enough to a more sensually-related place that Bilbo conveyed his interest. All his younger self had to do was respond. Present-Thorin found himself inching closer, prepared to give his former-self a nudge if he failed to act appropriately.

Present-Thorin watched for his counterpart’s reactions, hopeful and intrigued. He remembered snatches and blurry pieces from that (this?) night, but seeing it unfold in front of him was a different sort of experience altogether. Thorin felt more than a bit voyeuristic, but he couldn’t tear his gaze away, now that he knew where this was heading. He needed to know what transpired, to fill those gaps in his memory, now that he could.

Younger-Bilbo let his courage further its reign. He grabbed uni-Thorin’s arm and tugged him to follow as he wove through the crowded hallway deeper into the building. The gently-rounded smaller man ducked under wild gesticulations and swerved past drunken lurching with an unexpected agility. When Bilbo glanced back, present-Thorin was sure Bilbo looked directly at him as he grinned a broad cheeky smile and threw back a wink. His stuffy, nagging, over-anxious assistant had been quite a bold and wanton creature! Present-Thorin, of course, followed after them, wondering what would come next. Was uni-Thorin truly about to be debauched by his future (current?) executive assistant in a back hallway of the art building while his younger sister fell in love with her future husband somewhere nearby? More shocking than that was the warmth and admiration shining in Bilbo’s eyes. The look he wore told present-Thorin that it was no accident that Bilbo chose to approach uni-Thorin at a party. How did this sweet, bold young university student end up working for him? And why had the man never said anything about this night? They could have been having years of really delightful sex! Given how quickly Bilbo drew him in this first time, all they needed was a moment to jog Thorin’s memory of this drunken night and they could have picked right back up. Thorin would have welcomed an advance if it meant lots of happy sex.

Or would he have done? If he remembered correctly, Dwalin hired an assistant for him while he was tending to Dis. Which went a long way toward explaining why he hadn’t recognized Bilbo when he was hired. One drunken - very drunken - night at a party, nearly a decade in between,
and he met the man again during a very fraught time. It was hardly a shock that Thorin hadn’t made the connection between his vague memories of curly hair and sex and the mousy man with shabby business attire made from a kindergarten teacher’s colour palette. Most days, Thorin didn’t even notice the man was there, except when he needed to find something quickly.

And, after all this time, Bilbo’s interest in him had surely waned. And there was no real relationship there; just sex. Once. It was not, on further reflection, the best foundation to initiating a physical relationship with one’s employee. Nevermind that he and younger Bilbo were off- Oh. Well. Was Bilbo still that flexible?

Surely not. Otherwise he might have to find a way to revisit the past. Without glowing spirits whizzing him around.

Present-Thorin was now positive that thinking of those blasted spirits made them appear. Without warning, they were on either side of him, the golden-haired one wearing a knowing smile and the dark-haired one raising an eyebrow at him with the hint of a smirk. They couldn’t actually hear his thoughts...could they? Thorin felt blood rush to his face in shame. Then willed his thoughts quickly away. There was nothing shameful in thinking appreciative thoughts about a man he had sex with years before. And seeing what was going on before him, he understood then why it was such a satisfying experience. Because not only was he gay, as he realized that (this?) night, his evening with Bilbo was surprisingly tender and almost...loving? Especially given how much alcohol was involved in the event. But no, after the frenzied lovemaking was finished, the pair were cuddled together on a fortuitously located couch. Bilbo was running his fingers through long strands of hair that had been released from uni-Thorin’s hair tie and kissing him so sweetly. And his younger self was giving just as well as he got. Thorin’s callused hands mapped the freckles across Bilbo’s shoulders while his nose nestled into the soft skin where neck met collarbone. It was far more domestic than Thorin expected of himself.

The spirits on either side of him moved calmly closer. Quietly and serenely, the blonde asked, “Are you prepared to move on?”

The brunette followed up with, “There is more still to see before the night is done.”

This time, Thorin felt less prepared to leave the scene. Before, watching Dis come to collect him, he knew what came after. This tender moment with Bilbo...he wasn’t sure what came after. All he remembered was the headache and stickiness he was left with when he woke the next morning. Couldn’t the spirits allow him to finish out the night here? No other shag, before or since, had come close to his scattered memories of this night. He needed to know why it had such impact on him!

The blonde spirit placed her arm gently on his shoulder, her eyes softening as they took in his expression. Her counterpart grasped his elbow on the other side and the trio was airborne once more.

They didn’t go far this time. As they dropped into the small front room of his university flat, uni-Thorin emerged from his bedroom, running his fingers gently along his bottom lip as he made for the door. Present-Thorin’s stomach dropped; he knew without asking exactly which moment he was about to witness.

It wasn’t joyous like the last two had been.

Sure enough, a knock pounded on the door before uni-Thorin reached it and his father came
“Pack your things. We are leaving and you are never coming back to this institution of higher learning.” The last was sneered, giving Thorin no doubts as to his father’s feelings about the school he was attending. Had attended, until that point.

Uni-Thorin was frozen to the spot, shocked at the vitriol he heard in his father’s tone. “But-Father? Didn’t you- I thought you wanted me to get a degree.”

“I did. But you will not stay here a minute longer. Not after hearing what this cesspit has done to you. I sent you here to earn a degree that would bring us prestige. Something that would help Arkenstone grow and prosper! I did not send you to here so you could throw away your life on some useless arts and crafts playtime!” Thrain paused in his seething to glance around the room. Evidence of Thorin’s craft was everywhere. Sketches for sculptures littered every flat surface, including parts of the floor. Small models or larger pieces and half-finished molds were used as decoration as much as they were being worked with. In his personal space, there was no denying that uni-Thorin was an artist. And a prolific one, given the evidence around the room. Present-Thorin knew that if the door to the bedroom was nudged open, his father would have blow up even further. His room used to be a disaster area of semi-formed ideas, bits and bobs for creating, and late night inspiration. If Thorin wasn’t sculpting or attending classes, he was sleeping; everything in between was just the detritus of his days.

Gesturing at the ephemera around them, Thrain continued his rant, “Is this what I’ve spent my hard-earned money for? All these…” he picked up a nearby model of a sculpture and looked for a moment like he was quietly impressed. The look left his face as quickly as it appeared. “This paperweight? That’s what you’ve been doing here? I don’t know whether I should take you home or just leave you out in the cold. Fend for yourself as an artist and you’ll quickly see how useless this idea of yours was.

I can see now that this Fuzzywag program you’re in has really gone to your head. Rubbish everywhere, useless degree, doing nothing worthwhile with your life. I didn’t raise you to live like this.” Present-Thorin bristled at that; his father hardly raised him at all, given how little time he spent at home during his youth. “And then I find out you’re some sort of fucking fairy! And don’t you dare deny it. Your sister told us all about that party on the weekend when you fucked some young boy in front of everyone! Arty nonsense and now this? You’ve taken things too far. No one will respect you if you continue down this path. You will end up homeless, hungry, and unloved by everyone.” For a moment, it almost sounded like his father worried for him. In a warped sense of parental duty. “I won’t allow a child of mine to live the life of the destitute artist when I can prevent it. Now get your things. We’re going home where I can straighten that faggot thinking out of you. When you’re older, you’ll look back on this misadventure and know I’m right. You can thank me then and keep your mouth shut now.”

Thorin remembered being cowed by his father’s speech at the time. How ashamed he’d felt when his father had pointed out his poor planning and errant behaviour.

As he should have done. His father was right to take him away from school and from a liberal program where homosexuality was propagated. Thorin shuddered to think where he would be if he’d been allowed to finish school or continue things with Bilbo… No. He was much better off now, with things the way that they’d gone. He trained with his father and grandfather, built up Erebor into the powerful conglomerate it is and oversaw Arkenstone’s day-to-day business with a keen eye. If his father hadn’t pulled him from school that day, he’d probably be living on the streets, starving and diseased.

But this was neither a happy memory nor a Christmas one. Why had the spirits brought him here? He turned to ask and they, as one, stepped closer to him. “This isn’t a happy Christmas experience
and it certainly doesn’t make me feel more benevolent about the holiday in question. Why did you bring me here?” The spirits were close enough together that he could level his glare at them both simultaneously. He wished it actually cowed them, even just a bit.

The golden-haired spirit gave him a soft pitying look. “We are not here to show you what you want to see.”

The dark-haired spirit frowned and his eyes grew unfathomably deep and immeasurably sad, as if, for that moment, he held all the ill feelings in the world. His expression relayed his empathy for the unpleasant scene they had all just witnessed but did nothing to soothe present-Thorin. “-we are showing you what you need to see. And if, after all this, you are not better for it-”

Better for what? How was seeing his dead sister and being yelled at by his father supposed to make him better? He cut off the spirit mod-speech, “How, precisely am I supposed to be improved by seeing what you’ve shown me tonight? Even if, by some half-crazed delusion I choose to believe this farce, all I’ve seen are a pair of happy moments and a dressing-down with my father. I’m not going to change my mind about the uselessness of celebrating Christmas after that.”

The dark haired spirit looked like he was prepared to strangle Thorin. Which Thorin was suitably impressed by as the spirit’s face had returned to an expression of placid serenity. “You have seen more than that, Thorin Durin. Believe us or not as you will-”

“-it is immaterial. What you have seen tonight was not meant to soothe frayed memories from your past.” The golden spirit smiled at him, eyes softening as she spoke.

“Nor is our journey meant to change your feelings about Christmas. These are moments you need to see-” the sterner spirit warned.

“-if you are to find the strength necessary to save yourself from your current fate.”

This was all…a warning? Did Dwalin get one? That was just- It made no sense!

Thorin was hardly inept at hiding his feelings, after so long in a position of power, but he could not keep his confusion and disgust from creeping through. What did these spirits know of him, to judge him so?

The spirits were looking at him with an odd sort of look on their faces. Their eyes held questions and the soft upward curves of their lips offered encouragement. It was disconcerting to see the same look coming from two different faces. The golden haired spirit, the gentler of the two beings, stepped close and placed a hand on his forearm.

“Thorin Durin, we have more stops to make before our time is through. We must continue.”

Chapter End Notes

In the final section of this chapter, Thorin's father shows up shortly after the party. Thorin is yelled at and chastised for his degree choice and for having sex with a man at the party - something his father heard about by way of Dis. Thorin also questions why he was forced to witness that scene since it was neither Christmas-related nor happy. The essence: It isn't something he wanted to see, but it was something he needed to see.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

The first visit continues. Things get heavy.

Chapter Notes

There is a mention of assault in this chapter. It is entirely non-graphic and basically consists of a character saying, "X was assaulted." It does NOT get any more graphic than that. However, unlike the last chapter, there isn't really a good way to skip the section because you'd miss a LOT. If you're concerned, feel free to message me with questions before reading. Remember, your mental well-being is more important than my story!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Another jaunt over fields and towns brought them to a room unfamiliar to Thorin. It was well appointed but generic; there were no personal details dotted around to clue him in. A door opened and Dis walked in wearing…a wedding dress? Long, white, lacy, a bit of fabric trailing behind; it carried all the markers. But, why was she in a wedding dress?

Thorin’s thoughts whirled, trying to remember when and how she wed Vili. His mind drew a blank where the event was concerned. Didn’t he couple just elope? They had to have done. She wouldn’t get married without inviting her brother! But in this strange room, his sister stood dabbing a handkerchief under her eyes in a battle against tears and running makeup. She had a phone tucked between her ear and shoulder and was trailing a long cord with her as she paced around the small room. She started speaking into the phone, and he knew from her tone that his sister was speaking to him, “Where are you, you bastard? It’s my wedding day and I have no family here. You promised you’d always be there when I needed you. You promised! No one to give me away, no one to welcome Vili into the family. Your fucking business deals can’t be more important than your baby sister’s wedding day! You’ve got an hour and the church is in town. I don’t care if you’re in your rattiest pyjamas, so long as you make it. And if you don’t, I’ll never forgive you!” She slammed the phone down hard onto its cradle, took a deep breath, and forced herself to straighten up. She wiped away the remaining moisture on her cheeks, checked herself in the mirror, and went back through the door she entered from - and was that Bilbo’s familiar curly hair in there? - announcing, “I need to fix my makeup!”

Thorin turned to the spirits. “What is going on? When was this? Why wasn’t I- I didn’t even get an invitation! How was I to know she was getting married?”

The looks the spirits gave did not bode well. In a blink, they were across town in Thorin’s old flat, the one he had before his parents died. The dark-haired spirit warned, “You were working, the day she married.” He did not look pleased, but he also was not angry. Both spirits looked deeply saddened by what they knew.

The light-haired one explained, “You were invited, though you never knew.” She gestured at the
That statement caused Thorin to rock back, as if the spirit’s assessment physically shoved him back. “Surely not. She was my sister. I loved her. I- How could I miss her wedding?” Thorin looked around the sparse living area. He could pick out the thick cream-coloured envelope that must have been the invitation. It was at least halfway down the stack, by the texture made it easily discernable, even from across the room. All he needed to do was take a moment to look, to experience his life.

He had promised her. So often, when they were children, he’d written or phoned. His relationship with his sister was strong from a young age, despite the petty disagreements between siblings his classmates told him was normal. They hated how rarely Thorin was allowed to return home, so he made the brash promise of an older brother: he swore that as soon as he was grown up, he’d be there, whenever she needed him, no matter what.

“Where was I?” Thorin’s voice felt thick as fear and hurt clogged his throat. “Where was I instead of with her?”

The spirits replied, “Where else?” From the windows in the room, he could see across town where Erebor stood proudly, towering above every other building nearby. The direction of the spirits’ shared gaze told him all he needed to know. He failed in his promise to his sister. To him it had been like any other day. One of the biggest days of her life and he was absent. Is that what working did to him?

“I want to go now. Take me home.” Thorin knew he sounded like a spoiled child, but at that moment, he needed time at home, alone, to mourn this new grievance he didn’t even know he’d caused.

“We have one more visit to make before our night is through.” Thorin nodded once, sharply, and they were off again.

Thorin knew exactly where they were. The hum of machinery and quiet discussions were enough on their own, but the smell was what gave it away instantly. It was something foreign: chemicals mixed with something herbaceous all clouded over with an aura of decaying flora. To Thorin’s left, a familiar door. Thorin felt a knot of unease grow in his stomach. Inside, he knew his sister would be laying on a stiff bed, hooked up to beeping machines, slowly dying.

He didn’t know if he could face that again. Hopefully the spirits brought them to one of her short lucid moments, few though those were. Mostly he remembered hours upon hours of staring at her battered body and, hope against hope, willing her to heal. Those days were hard enough for him to remember on an ordinary day, and Thorin had just - well, just now for him - missed her wedding. The guilt of that would claw at Thorin for the rest of his life, and seeing this - re-living this - might actually bore a hole directly through his heart.

Thorin remembered that month as a grief-filled blur. There were moments that stood out, sharply bright in the dullness of constant pain, but mostly he remembered the overwhelming hurt of it all. And he wasn’t the one who had been attacked.

He almost expected the spirits to start at the beginning of that horrible time. Any minute now, his younger self would come barreling through the hallways, demanding to see his sister. He hadn’t
even caught it at first, the assurances from the nurses that his nephew was fine. It didn’t pertain to his sister or him, so he ignored it. Until the implications sunk in. It had been the worst possible day to meet his nephew for the first time. Vili dead, Dis in critical condition, and Thorin hadn’t had a clue what to do with a tearful eight year old he’d never known about.

The salt rubbed in the deep jagged wound that was the aftermath of the attack was that the attacker was never caught. Serial rapist, the news called him. But for all his attacks and brutal murders, justice and retribution remained elusive.

After that day, Thorin had flashes of moments when Dis managed to wake, if only for a handful of minutes at a time. Every time she woke, Thorin was hopeful. But just as quickly, his hope would sink as she drifted off again.

Then, the sharpest pain of them all: Dis died. Dear God, he hoped the spirits didn’t plan to take him to that day. He couldn’t handle living through that again. He couldn’t. Witnessing his past self horribly bungle those initial days with Fili was awful enough.

It seemed like the spirits - or whoever it was doing the choosing - chose something in between. It wasn’t the day of the attack and it wasn’t her death. Because there, sitting on a chair in the hallway was a young Fili, looking tired and sad, but not overwhelmingly so. At eight years old, he was so very much like his father in looks. But bore the Durin eyes. Dis’ eyes. He learned, later on, that they were usually bright and full of mischief, but sitting on that vinyl chair, all Fili could do was stare at the ground with tears constantly threatening to spill over. It was understandable, given the current circumstance.

Thorin had a strong urge to sit with his nephew, to comfort the memory. He glanced between the spirits and Fili, a questioning look written blatantly on his face. In response, both slowly shook their heads and the golden one softly warned, “He cannot see or hear you, as with the previous visits.” Thorin still felt the pull to go sit, despite any good it would do for Fili. This memory, more than any other, he needed comfort too. He moved to sit, but was interrupted as a very familiar curly headed figure rushing down the hallway. Here was Bilbo once more invading his memories. This time, he didn’t look nearly so young. He still had the rounded face and happy features, but in this moment, he looked more drawn than Thorin remembered ever seeing. When he was near enough to the row of chairs, Bilbo set down the basket he carried, knelt in front of young Fili, and gently urged the boy into his arms. Fili went willingly and almost immediately the tears spilled over into great body-wracking sobs.

Bilbo tightened his hold with his right arm and brought his left up to cradle the younger boy’s head, gently patting it. Thorin moved closer so he could hear Bilbo murmuring, “This is so hard and you’re being so brave. My dear sweet boy, I’m so proud of you. I know it hurts, I know. I’m here.” It was soothing for Thorin, listening to Bilbo quietly speak comforting words into his nephew’s ear. He was glad someone thought to do so.

As Fili’s tears slowed, Bilbo released his left arm from it’s comforting hold and tugged the basket closer. “Come, see what I’ve brought with me. It’s far too dreary for all that it’s nearly Christmas. Would you like to help me decorate your mum’s room? I’m sure a bit of Christmas cheer will help brighten her spirits. And you never know, she loves Christmas so much, it might help her heal.” This last was said gently, with cautious optimism not meant to get the boy’s hopes up too high.

The little boy nodded and wiped at his eyes while Bilbo started pulling things from his basket. “I’ve brought some garland to string up, and some fairy lights, and a few photos. Oh, and things for you to make snowflakes so we can hang them up in the window. We’ll create a winter wonderland, just for your mum.”

A tug at Bilbo’s sleeve was all the warning he got to pause for Fili’s whispered, “Are they
coloured? Mum likes those best. Says the white are pretty, but the coloured are more cheerful.”

Bilbo gave the lad a soft smile. “I did bring coloured. And plenty of shimmering tinsel besides. I know your mum’s ideas about Christmas very well. Did you know, she made sure your dad and I decorated our flat every year when we were at university?” Bilbo pulled a framed photograph from the basket to show Fili. “She would march in with a huge box and start ordering us about. We thought she was mad. What university student decorated their tiny flat? But she came every December and it always felt more like home after that.” Fili looked at the photo, and a tiny smile escaped. Thorin peered over their shoulders and saw Vili and Bilbo, decked head-to-toe in globs of tinsel. The small living room around them looked cozy and well lived-in, made cosier still by the garlands and lights. There was even a small tree tucked in the corner. “Your mum never let us help with the tinsel after that year.” He gave a small chuckle and looked quite pleased that Fili was perking up a bit. “Would you like to help me decorate?”

The young boy nodded and they entered the quiet room, armed with supplies. Following the pair inside, present-Thorin noted that Dis was lying motionless on the bed and the Thorin of thirteen years ago sat in the far corner near her head. This slightly-younger-Thorin, for all he was hidden in the lengthening shadows of the late afternoon, looked the most like Thorin did now. His hair was cut in a conservative manner and had been combed neatly to one side, before it was tousled by frustrated hands carding through. He wore a well-tailored suit, though the jacket and tie had been discarded across the back of his chair and his sleeves were unbuttoned and rolled up. He obviously hadn’t bothered to even shave in a handful of days. Slightly-younger-Thorin was staring at his sister, as if trying to wake her by sheer force of his steady gaze. He didn’t look up when Bilbo and Fili entered. Both newcomers moved toward the side of the bed closer to the door, opposite past-Thorin. Bilbo went to set down his burden and Fili moved to his mother and gently kissed her cheek. Bilbo busied himself with the basket to avoid interrupting the lad’s greeting.

After bussing her, Fili stayed bent over near Dis’ head and started a quiet greeting, “It’s almost Christmas Mumma. You should wake up soon so you don’t miss it. I know you’ll be so sad if you miss your favourite holiday. Though it’s okay if it takes longer. We can just have Christmas late.” Fili paused to sniffle and sigh. “Uncle Bilbo is here. He brought things so we can decorate. He said you used to help him an- and D- Da decorate their flat a long time ago and he says he’s returning a favor. So I’m gonna go help him. We’ll make it pretty in here, just for you.” He gave her another quick buss and moved over to where Bilbo had begun untangling strands of fairy lights.

As Fili spoke to his mother and Bilbo worked quietly, slightly-younger-Thorin became aware of their movement in the room. He looked up when Bilbo flicked a lamp on and watched their interactions quietly. As Fili inched closer to him, Bilbo loosed one arm from its task and hugged the boy close for a brief moment. He then tugged out scissors and a stack of white paper, “If you start on snowflakes, I’ll hang the higher up parts. Then we can finish up together. How does that sound?”

“Mmkay.” Fili sat on the floor and set immediately to his task. These would be the finest paper snowflakes ever, if the look of concentration on Fili’s face was anything to judge by.

Bilbo moved to the other side of the room, near not-quite-as-young Thorin, to string lights around the window. When he was within whispering distance, Thorin muttered to him, “I realize you were recently hired and may be confused about your duties. They are generally restricted to the office and any meetings we have related to Arkenstone. I do not require your services here.” He paused his harsh whispering to level a glare at Bilbo, “This is for family only.”

Bilbo froze. The look Bilbo responded with was a mix between hurt and rage; it would have
cowed a less self-absorbed man at twenty paces. Thorin continued watching his sister and missed it’s effects. Bilbo resumed his hanging and quietly muttered, “Vili was a childhood friend, and I’ve known Dis since university. I am here for their sakes, and for their son. In this, you are not my employer, but a fellow visitor. Someone” Bilbo hissed, his anger shining through despite the quiet tone, “needs to make sure Fili is looked after now that Vili is gone and Dis is...recovering. He’s lost his father and his mother cannot be there for him right now, so someone else must. And while you may be his uncle by blood, I don’t put much stock in your child care abilities, since you didn’t even know he existed before the attack. As a familiar figure in his life, I am here to comfort him. So pay me or not as you choose, fire me if you deem it necessary. But don’t make this worse for Fili.” Bilbo huffed out a soft puff of air and glanced over at the blonde boy carefully cutting snowflakes. He chose to heed his own words because he quietly urged past-Thorin, “If you wanted to ease things, you could offer to help him in his task. Once the snowflakes are cut, they’ll need to be hung. It would let him get to know you better.”

Thorin watched as his slightly younger counterpart looked guiltily at his nephew - a nephew whose first eight years he missed entirely, because he never spoke to his sister. He missed her wedding, the birth of his nephew, and never took a single step toward healing the rift between them. All because he blamed her for getting him pulled out of university. Though honestly, after all the memories he’d revisited so far, he might have been too hasty in placing the blame squarely on her. Dis was the one who sought to bridge the gaps in their family, who made him feel connected, wanted, loved. His mother tried, but she spent too long demurring to her husband. His father was too concerned with finances and the welfare of Erebor - and Arkenstone as the most profitable of the subsidiaries - to worry about the day-to-day goings on at home. Thrain ensured they were all fed, the family home was kept up, and Thorin and Dis were well educated.

For all the good that education did her. She never finished her degree and married an artist. Vili must have been a good man, for her to choose him over family and financial security. Present-Thorin studied his young nephew as he and slightly-younger-Thorin cut snowflakes. The lad was well groomed and his clothes were warm and bore only the sorts of holes that came standard on the clothes of a young boy having copious amounts of adventures. He was polite and generally agreeable, with the logical allowances made for a boy who was dealing with life-altering and traumatic experiences.

Present-Thorin was still thankful, a full decade after the fact, that Fili had been staying with a friend when his parents were attacked. It was traumatic and brutal; better that the boy not have to deal with the mental and emotional harm that would have come from watching his father murdered or his mother raped, beaten, and left for dead. It was honestly a miracle Dis held on as long as she did, after the attack. But his sister was stubborn and loved with every ounce of herself, down to the very core of her being. During one of her brief moments of wakefulness, she confessed to him that she was fighting to make it to Christmas. She didn’t want to spoil such a happy day for him or Fili, no matter what happened to her. Dis had always loved Christmas. When she was a child, it was the joy of candies and treats and gifts. As they grew up, the importance of the day shifted, but it held its importance. And apparently spread to others, if Bilbo and Fili were any indicator.

Present-Thorin was shaken from his thoughts as Bilbo began bustling about again. Now that the lights were all strung - a bit crooked where he had a bit of trouble reaching, but the room was already brightened by having them - he was pulling more packages from his basket. His assistant definitely had a knack for organization. Or his basket was deeper than it looked. Now, Bilbo pulled out a collection of plastic containers and silverware and began pushing them at Thorin and Fili. Bilbo strove for a calm cheeriness as he told them, “You both need to eat up. You must keep your strength up to decorate properly. And you can be sure Dis will know if it was done poorly, just as soon as she wakes up next.” He offered the pair seated on the floor a smile and passed bread with thick pats of butter spread across them.
Present-Thorin stepped back and surveyed the scene. He remembered being angry at how Bilbo barged in and took over caring for Fili and nagging him to look after himself. Those weeks with Dis in hospital were awful enough without an upstart assistant overstepping his duties. However, these visits with the spirits showed him just how integral Bilbo had been in his sister’s life - and apparently his own. For years longer than he ever knew. Especially when he hadn’t been around to do so. With the perspective allowed by time - and a bit of pushiness by a pair of glowing spirits - he could see just how much Bilbo had done to hold things together. That one shared meal on the floor of the hospital room nudged him to recall several others. Bilbo must have brought food by at least once a day when Thorin and Fili were there visiting. And he knew Bilbo had taken to herding him around during the day, when he was attempting to work but worrying over his sister.

Bilbo was the one who - on his first day as Thorin’s assistant - had insisted Thorin throw a Christmas party. “You must! Everyone knows you’re hurting, that your family has had a great calamity happen. But it will help keep up company morale, having a Christmas party.” Somehow, that argument won and the party was planned. His assistant was practically Mary fucking Poppins in all he did for the Durins. Thorin found he was grateful and resentful in equal measure. Largely because Bilbo had been around for moments Thorin had missed, but they were moments his sister or nephew needed support. And how easily Bilbo was loved by everyone who met him.

It was a comfort, knowing that help was there when he needed it - especially since he wasn’t good at asking for it. And Bilbo never had brought up that drunken shag. It likely hadn’t meant as much to Bilbo as Thorin had built it up to be in his own memories. As his assistant, Bilbo remained organized, cheerful, and professional. Even if his manner of dress left something to be desired. Now, after years of his employ with a decent paycheck, the man still dressed in much the same way. It might even be the same assortment of oddly coloured suits, for all Thorin knew. Couldn’t the man go buy a few black or navy sets?

That wasn’t the point. The point was that Bilbo was in every bloody memory he’d revisited so far. Well, very nearly all of them. Though, Bilbo’s appearance with the never-ending basket of Christmas cheer did help place the memory they were in. They were nearing the end of his sister’s life. He couldn’t recall exactly, but he knew the decorations hadn’t been put up until at least the week before she died. She’d been able to enjoy them, at least enough to notice they were there.

As the trio sat with their supper, Dis began to stir above them. “You boys- How wonderful!” This was said quietly, but they could all hear the happiness in her ragged voice.

All three jumped up, food forgotten. Bilbo stood a half-step behind Thorin and Fili, obviously not wanting to intrude on the family moment. Her eyes crinkled and grew moist as she took in the garlands and lights and noted the paper detritus on the floor beside them. “This is just what the doctor ordered. You boys have brought the Christmas spirit in here, just for me. I love you all for it. So dearly.”

Fili carefully climbed up on the bed to sit closer. After so many weeks in hospital, he knew that his mother would only be awake for a short time. “Do you need anything else Mumma? I bet we could sneak a tree up, if you want!”

“No, thank you, little love. This is splendid. And your snowflakes! I can tell just how hard you worked on those.” They were all a bit unevenly cut, but each one done with such care. Not a single one looked like the others - which was exactly the point, according to Fili. “It’s properly decorated, just like I would do. If I’m not better yet, perhaps you could come celebrate here with me? I’m sure Santa will bring your gifts here if you write him.”

Fili shook his head carefully, mulling over his words in the obvious way that young children do when they’re trying to act more grown up. “It’s okay Mumma. I don’t need Santa to come at all. I wrote and asked him not to come this year. I asked for him to help you instead.”
At that, Dis teared up to the point that it started hindering her breathing. It took a few long minutes for her breathing to calm enough for her to tell Fili, “My darling boy. You are so wonderful, to even think of that. Don’t ever forget, that’s what Christmas is really about. It’s not presents and cookies, though those are nice. It’s about spreading love and cheer to everyone. And don’t forget, you have your Uncle Thorin and Uncle Bilbo to help you remember. They’re good family to have, even though you didn’t know Thorin sooner. They will be there for you any time I can’t.”

“Just remember love: your views may change as you grow up, but never forget how important it is to have the Christmas spirit all year long. Be loving and have faith, just as you do right now.”

Fili nodded very seriously, though the lad likely didn’t understand the full weight of what she was telling him. Thorin reached past his nephew and squeezed her hand, nodding silently. He spoke gruffly, “I’ll bring him. First thing Christmas morning. We can open presents together.”

She smiled up at her son and brother then looked past them to Bilbo. “You too?”

He smiled brightly, “Of course Dis! Wouldn’t miss it, just like every other year. Shall I bring a big slice of fruitcake for you?” He teased gently. He, like Thorin, apparently knew just how much she detested that seasonal treat. Her response never came, however. She had drifted back to sleep while they were looking at Bilbo.

Fili gave her a gentle kiss and moved from the bed to resume his supper. Thorin and Bilbo followed the lad to their now cool bowls of stew. Not that any of them noticed.

A whirring started up around them, as if the world started moving in fast-forward. Then, just as suddenly as it began, it stopped again. Thorin and the spirits remained where they stood in Dis’ hospital room. It was late at night now. The sky outside the window was fully dark and few of the surrounding high-rises had and office lights on, if any at all. And- Oh.

Well fuck.

The doctors were rushing around and the machines monitoring Dis were all working rapid-pace to warn that bad things were happening.

It was time. Knowing what was coming didn’t make things any easier for present-Thorin to watch.

Slightly-younger-Thorin rushed in, still dressed from the holiday party that Bilbo forced him to attend. His assistant urged: “Just put in an appearance. It will be good for company morale.”

Bilbo’s logic was sound, and besides, Dis would never have allowed him to mope around her when there was a Christmas party to attend. So he went. But the emergency call from the hospital during the festivities left him convinced he’d made the wrong decision.

So he rushed across town, frantic and worried he wouldn’t make it in time. He didn’t even know what he needed to be in time for - the message was vague at best. But the emergency call came, so he moved as quickly as he humanly could to reach his sister. And now he stood, wild-eyed and breathing heavily in the doorway of the room, watching the frenzy of activity. Doctors barked brusque orders and nurses complied. A breathing tube had just been inserted but the activity didn’t slow. One of the nurses urged Thorin outside of the room and closed the door.

Present-Thorin remembered this evening with crystal clarity. No need to watch; he knew what was going on. Her organs were failing. Had been failing slowly as Dis held on until Christmas. She didn’t want to spoil what she called the ‘most joyous day of the year’ for her brother and son.
Well, didn’t want to cause any further hurt. She knew Fili was already hurting from his father’s death, and Christmas would be the first big event in his life without Vili. And Thorin had always struggled with Christmas; most of them had been lonely holidays despite his desire for time with family or friends. So his tenacious sister clung to life in hopes that she could keep from adding to their misery.

Bilbo and Dwalin came hurrying down the hallway with Fili between them. They stopped just short of the room, clustering close to slightly-younger-Thorin. Present-Thorin backed against the far wall, unprepared for what he knew was coming soon. They all stood, clustered silently outside the window to the room, trying to glimpse what was happening between the busy bodies of the doctors and nurses. Fortunately for Fili’s wellbeing, none of them could see much beyond gestures and passing of equipment.

There was an analog clock down the hall and the ticking of passing minutes was the only sound. It felt and sounded too quiet for all the busyness the small group could see going on. Thorin remembered expecting more noise, more people, more of a frantic press around them. Instead, the hallway was calm and the silence was only broken by the ticking clock and the occasional squeaking tread of a shoe in the distance. Dis was too vibrant, too full of life and love for the oppressive silence around them.

The clock ticked steadily on and the group held firm in their vigil.

It felt like hours later when a doctor finally emerged from the room. Inside, the frenetic motion had calmed and the rest of the nurses were quietly packing up. The doctor approached the group and said, quietly, “We’ve done all we can, but her body has been through too much. Her organs are failing. We’ve given her what we can for the pain and she’s lucid for now. It’s time to say your goodbyes.” The doctor’s face showed the pain of losing a patient just as much as Thorin, Fili, Bilbo, and Dwalin felt it.

As the small group entered the room, it was to see that the breathing tube was still in place and Dis’ eyes were open barely more than slits. Present-Thorin followed them in and stood in the doorway, unwilling to step any closer. Part of him felt that if he kept his distance, this moment wouldn’t hurt as much.

Fili threw himself at the bed, sobbing. No one needed to explain to the boy what the doctor had meant, and that was heartbreaking to watch. The men followed and Thorin moved to grasp the hand that wasn’t clutching limply to Fili. For the span of several long breaths no one said anything. It was hard to find any words after such news as what the doctor had just delivered.

Fili broke the silence by wailing, “Mumma, don’t go. I love you too much!”

Tears were streaming from Dis’ eyes and her frustration at being unable to speak bled through in the way her mouth muscles twitched. Bilbo placed a hand on Fili’s back and said, “She loves you. So very much. And she always will.” Fili looked up at her face and her eyes crinkled, as much emotion as she could convey to her son.

Thorin squeezed her hand. “I’ll look after the boy. Don’t worry. I… I love you s-so much Dis.”

There were no dry eyes in the room. Even the stoic Dwalin allowed a few tears to quietly leak down his face. Bilbo and Fili cried openly and Thorin covered his eyes to hide and wipe his tears.

At Arkenstone, the company party continued and Thorin felt the disparity in that moment. What he wouldn’t give to have been at that party, with her, hale and hearty. Cost be damned. Instead, he was at the hospital as his sister cling to life.
With the last of her family clustered around her, Dis Durin slipped into death in the early hours of Christmas morning.

As the pulse monitor notified everyone that she was gone, Fili and Thorin broke down. Bilbo bundled the boy up and held him tight while Thorin collapsed forward on the bed.

Present-Thorin backed out of the room, barely restrained grief trying to eek through his stern expression. He turned to the spirits and growled, ‘I’ve had enough. Take me home!’

The golden spirit opened her mouth to speak - something placating and too saccharine-sweet, judging by the gentle smile and pain in her eyes - and Thorin was in no mood. His sweet sister, who had done no wrong had been viciously attacked because he hadn’t been there for her in years. A month holding vigil at her bedside was small payment for the pain she endured at his hand. He’d missed her wedding. Missed Fili’s birth. Wasn’t there to meet or get to know her husband. To hold them all together a family after their father died. He missed every important moment because of a petty belief that she’d wronged him. Over something that he didn’t even really regret; he knew the path which removed him from university was the best for him to be on, but he’d held that against her anyway. He turned to the spirits and everything he was feeling released in a desperate plea, “Take me back now! I can’t handle this any longer. The pain- Losing my sister. Young Fili’s heart crushed to pieces. And I wasn’t there. It was the worst Christmas, the worst day, and I can do nothing to fix it. I just can’t- I can’t- Take me back.”

The spirits looked down at him, pity written plainly across their faces. They spoke as one, “These are shadows of things that have been. That they are what they are, do not blame us!”

Thorin could bear no more, after all he had seen. He stared at them, nonplussed by the lack of sympathy they showed. For all the remorse he’d felt, the emotions he’d lain bare to these strange beings, they did not respond in kind. How was reliving all this supposed to help him fix things so he didn’t end up with Dwalin’s fate? He studied them, saw the pity in their eyes, but felt none of it extend any further. They stood and pitied and judged while his heart felt like it was flayed open for their perusal. But what good would it do? They could take him back and show him the past, but they could not fix it. Nor could he. All that was left to him was hurt and frustration and it built and built inside him until suddenly it all burst forth, “Go away you useless creatures! You have no sympathy. You do nothing useful. Go AWAY!”

And they did. Surprisingly.

Thorin looked around, blinking as the lights suddenly dimmed around him. He was back in his office, seated behind his desk. The clock on the wall told him no time had passed at all.

Well, at least those useless glowing things had the courtesy to not waste any of his time. He glanced down at his desk and found the contract he’d been reviewing before they appeared. He could manage to finish that before he went home for the evening. It was the perfect distraction from all he had seen and felt during that odd visit.

Yes, that was the best idea. He couldn’t change things now. It was thirteen years too late to help Dis. But he could work. He could set up Arkenstone to be the best it could possibly be, as a gift to Fili. He couldn’t bring back his nephew’s parents, but he could leave him with a company that would ensure he was successful. Fili was so like his mother sometimes. Choosing his fiddly jewelry-making and the love of a destitute artist over the more responsible options… It was the choice Dis made: love rather than financial stability. Well, Thorin would make sure Fili at least had Arkenstone to come to when everything else went south.

And tonight, that meant one more contract. Thorin retrieved his red pen. It was for his nephew. He had to do this right.
Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry. I give myself feels every time I re-read this bit. And I definitely cried horribly while writing it. But new things will be posted tomorrow! Hold on darlings, the happy end will come!
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Another warning, another spirit, another visit.

The next morning dawned clear and crisp. Just what Thorin needed to shake off the emotional hangover lingering from the night before. However poorly he was feeling, there was nothing he could do to change the past, so Thorin soldiered on. He would spend the day at the office. It would be peaceful, with nearly everyone gone to begin their holiday celebrating. There were just a few things left that had to be finished soon, but today would be a perfect day to begin reviewing their overall operating scheme. Without anyone to question or distract him, it would be easier to see if the company was leaking finances somewhere. He needed to check; people were greedy at their core and were not to be trusted.

When a small group of people appeared before his desk, Thorin’s first inclination was that those bloody Christmas spirits were back to harass him once more. How did they keep getting in, anyway? Thorin glanced up and remembered too late that Bilbo wasn’t at his desk. At least the men before him weren’t glowing. They were already less off-putting than the last visitors to his office.

The leader of the trio, the man with the great drooping mustache, acted as spokesman for the group: “Ahem, Mr. Durin sir? We’re from the miner’s coalition. We’re here to talk to you about-”

Thorin cut the man off before he could really get going on his speech. He’d made that mistake before. “The mining camps. As you do every year when you come asking me to open my pocketbook.”

“Ah, yes. Sir. Y’see, conditions in all the camps have gotten worse. They have to cut costs somewhere, and it’s better to do it topside than inside the mines. Don’t want to worry about collapse, you know. But they deserve better! It’s deplorable conditions they work in, and back-breaking labor. They need somewhere to cook a good meal and find a night’s rest. At this time of year, Mr. Durin, it’s particularly important we make some, ah, slight provision for the poor and destitute, who suffer so greatly. Thousands are in want of common necessities, and hundreds of thousands more lack common comforts. Sir.”

This was exactly what he tried to avoid. The tenacious little group of activists couldn’t take a hint to bugger off if it smacked them in the noses. “I am curious what exactly my taxes pay for, if conditions are as poor as you say. Are there cooks in the camps who provide the miners with their meals?”

“Yes sir.”

“And what about boarding houses? Are there cots available for sleep?”

“Yes sir. Though hardly enough for everyone, and they are a fair distance from the mines.”

“What about clinics, to treat injuries? The badly off surely must go there in times of need.”

At this, the trio looked a bit worried. The oldest of the trio, a man with finely combed gleaming
silver hair, answered, “There are sir, but they are hardly sanitary enough to treat basic cuts, let alone set bones or more grievous injuries. Many can’t reach them, and many know a visit to the clinic will likely end in death.” The other two nodded somberly at his assessment.

“If they don’t trust in the medics to properly treat their wounds, they must act as they see fit. We cannot force them to the clinics if they would rather not. If they should die, that is their choice, and it has the benefit of decreasing the surplus population.” At this, the trio stared at Durin, eyes bugging out in disbelief. Thorin justified his comments to himself through the lens of good business sense. Better working conditions would give the workers ideas of grandeur. Next thing they knew, miners would be demanding pay rises and bonuses. Everyone in the gemstone trade would thank him for shutting down these greedy activists. Encouraging them would only encourage the miners and hurt the business. “Their basic needs are met and the conditions are sufficient for survival. If a miner is not happy with the conditions, he is free to find employ elsewhere.”

“If we may sir, your patronage would go further than just helping the miners. It would also help us push back against SMAUG.”

“What, pray tell, is SMAUG? And why should I be worried about them?”

The first mustachioed solicitor spoke up again. “SMAUG is the greatest and chiefest calamity of our age. They are a mining group, much like those who supply Arkenstone, but they are a group without scruple. They have been encroaching more and more on union projects. They are a danger to the safety and well-being of miners and the profits of anyone in the trade. They demand longer work hours and provide the worst conditions imaginable. But the pay they offer is high enough to tempt our workers over. If this continues, SMAUG will take over the mining industry completely!”

That was it? Some interloper mining group taking up a bit of the work? It was hardly worth worrying over. “And if they do, they will be dealt with accordingly. Now, if there is nothing else?” Thorin raised an eyebrow and dared them to offer another plea for more money. He paid his taxes, which ensured his miners were provided for. Anything else would be superfluous.

The trio studied him and he stared back. He would not be brought down by pitiful attempts at disdainful stares. They must have sensed his unwillingness to budge; they all gave him nods of farewell and filed from his office.

Well, that was another successful attempt at gouging his accounts nicely diverted. Just a bit more work and he might call it a day a bit early. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve and he’d been doing brisk business lately. He felt he earned a nice dinner and a stiff drink - a proper drink, not another night of Dwalin’s scotch. He had to do something to wash the bitter taste of his youthful failures away. The unease he felt after the previous night’s visit had lingered all day. His day of work had gone a good length toward putting him to rights, and a well-aged brandy would finish the job.

“You’re late.” Thorin had been half-expecting something like this all evening. He even attempted to mentally prepare himself accordingly. When midnight rolled by and today ticked over into tomorrow’s territory, he was still cozily ensconced in his sitting room with his brandy. There was no sign of any dead friends or odd beings, so Thorin assumed he managed to stop the bothersome late-night visits for good.

Then a tall figure clothed head-to-toe in grey entered his sitting room by the door of all logical things! “I am the Spirit of Christmas Present, and as a spirit of Christmas, I am never late. Nor am
I early. I arrive precisely when I mean to. And you, Master Durin, are disturbingly unobservant. Come.” And the dreary-looking figure gave a merry twinkle and turned to stride from the room.

At this point, the mix of confusion and curiosity built up enough that Thorin felt compelled to follow. What he found was not what he expected. At all. “What the hell have you done to my house?” The grey-swathed being was not nearly as joyless in behaviour as his attire suggested. Thorin’s large formal dining room - which hadn’t seen a party or even a meal in it since his mother died - was festooned from floor to ceiling with all the Christmas accoutrements imaginable. It was as if a holiday display from a shop window had exploded across the space. It was tasteful, yes, but entirely overwhelmingly too decorated for Thorin’s tastes. For any sane person’s tastes. And seated at the head of a table sagging with food was the dully-dressed spirit.

“Come in! Come in and know me better, man!” The spirit was an odd counterpoint to the room; his monochrome attire that called to mind a rainy day, but his enthusiasm matched the embellishments surrounding them. He gestured Thorin forward and pulled a Christmas cracker from the nearest place setting. It went off with the expected pop and rained out glitter across his lap, but what emerged was no flimsy paper hat. This Christmas cracker somehow spit out a buttery-soft-looking felted wool fedora. Grey, like everything else the spirit wore, but far too nice to have emerged from a cracker, and wrapped with a fresh holly garland rather than a hat band. The spirit doffed his pointed grey hat and replaced it with the fedora. Thorin gaped, physically incapable of stopping himself. “Ah, I see you like my whizz-poppers! Sit and try one for yourself. They are the finest you’ll find anywhere. None of those flimsy paper hats here!”

Instead of sitting as the spirit suggested, Thorin studied the table and the figure seated at it. The grey left an impression, as it was the only color the man seemed to tolerate for himself. His silvery hair and beard matched, as did the steely blue of his eyes. Around his waist, jutting out awkwardly while he sat, was a scabbard for a sword - but from where Thorin stood, there was no hilt to evidence the weapon itself. There was a long staff propped against the chair to his right, dimly emitting light. As Thorin studied it, it seemed to glow a bit brighter. “Where has all this food come from? What is going on in my house?”

“I am the Ghost of Christmas Present.”

“Yes, you’ve said.”

“And what does one do when Christmas is present, besides celebrate?” The spirit stopped pulling from the platters around him and eyed Thorin from head to toe and back up. “Well, I suppose I should ask what others do at Christmas. You do not celebrate the day anymore, do you? Well? Sit. Eat. Know me better, before we embark on our venture.” Thorin made no move to do so. The spirit delved back into the food and managed a handful of bites before noting that Thorin was still rooted to the floor across the room. He set down the roll he was in the process of buttering and stood. As he grabbed the staff next to him, he told Thorin, “Well,” he drawled, taking his time in speech and movement alike, “I see you’re prepared to forge ahead. Are you quite sure you don’t want a bite before we go?” Thorin’s blank stare answered him. He replaced the fedora with his pointed hat once more and replied, “Let us away then. This night shall be very good for you, and most amusing for me.” Once he made it around the table, the spirit stamped his staff on the floor and the room was flooded with a brilliant light.

When Thorin managed to shake the dots swimming across his vision, he saw they were transported. Thorin wasn’t sure if this was preferable to the flying bit he’d done with the ghosts of Christmas past. They were in the living room of someone’s home. A troupe of children scurried around, placing baubles on the tree and arguing over what should hang where. Largely it seemed to be an ongoing battle over who’s hand-made ornaments would sit closest to eye level. It was a good thing the tree was so small; the children had no trouble covering the whole of it, despite their
heights and the general dearth of ornaments. Strands of popcorn and cranberries, carefully
patterned, were strung around the room and a thin boy sat on the couch, carefully threading
another. The stockings were hung across the mantle, below which a small fire burned. Had
stockings always been that small, or was he just that much larger than the last time he’d seen a set?

That oh-so-recognizable head of curly hair came into the room, cluing Thorin in to where they
were. Bilbo was wearing an apron. It was...more endearing that Thorin would have guessed. The
charming garment looked well loved; it was fraying near the straps and along the bottom, dotted
with flour, and splattered with - a bit of cranberry sauce? He was wiping his hands in the bottom
of the apron and calling out, “Supper time, you lot. Come eat while everything’s hot. Decorations
will still be there when we’re finished.”

This led to an entirely different frenzy of movement as the three tree-trimmers rushed to the
washroom and gave their hands a cursory rinse. The garland-maker set aside his unfinished project
and picked up a pair of crutches from where they rested on the floor. Ah, that’s why the boy
looked familiar. It was the urchin-boy from the previous day. Or, well, the boy he assumed was
homeless. But what was wrong with the lad? There was nothing to make his injury visibly
apparent, though he did walk slowly and deliberately. He couldn’t have been more than nine, far
too young to have acquired such an arthritic feel to his movements.

The youngest two - possibly twins? They constantly hovered in each other’s orbit, so it was
possible - were the first to the table, followed closely behind by the oldest. Bilbo sat, but his hands
twitching under the table implied he’d rather fuss over the middle lad. When they were all seated,
Bilbo offered a short blessing for the bounty on their table. As he and the boys started dishing
from the handful of bowls and plates around the table, he turned his cheery smile to his boys,
“Now, what are we thankful for tonight? Who’s going to start?”

The two youngest piped up together, harnessing the same sort of mind-sharing speech the ghosts
of Christmas past used. “We’re thankful da’s not working so we can finally decorate—

“-and have Christmas family time! With cranberry sauce!” The lads beamed as Bilbo smiled
fondly as one boy then the other took an extra heaping spoonful of the favored condiment.

The oldest lad was much quieter than his brothers in his response, “I’m, thankful for the feast
we’re having tonight.”

Thorin turned to the grey spirit as they stood in the doorway, eyes shining in disbelief, “This is
what they call a feast? Why is it so meagre?”

As the spirit looked over the table, Thorin got the impression he was comparing this meal to the
feast he’d created in Thorin’s dining hall. The difference was as stark as night and day. Where his
sturdy wooden monstrosity of a table bowed under the weight of the food, Bilbo’s looked as if the
dishes were barely enough to keep the table from floating away. The spirit’s reply was, for once,
less than jovial. He leaned closer to look down his nose and meet Thorin’s eyes as he replied, “It
is all Bilbo Baggins could afford.”

Thorin was taken aback. Surely his employee could afford more than that small bird to feed his
family at Christmas time?

Perhaps not, if this was something worth being grateful for.

The middle boy and Bilbo were the only ones who hadn’t shared, and there appeared to be an
unspoken rule that Bilbo would go last. After everyone exclaimed their delight over the meal
before them, the other boys all looked to their brother and waited. Once he’d gathered his thoughts
he told the table, “I’m thankful for our home. It’s cozy and happy and fits the five of us just right.”
Everyone around the table grew a bit more sombre for a moment and Thorin wondered what that implied. Since three of the four boys all had blonde hair of a similar shade to Bilbo’s and the dark haired boy shared his eye colour, Thorin assumed the boys were all his sons biologically. That he’d had a wife who was no longer around for some reason or other - though Thorin had a hard time imagining what Bilbo could possibly do to induce someone to leave him. The looked that passed between Bilbo and his sons, combined with the lad’s comment, made him reevaluate that assessment. As he studied the boys closer, he could see the differences in their features. The only two with matching noses were the two youngest. And the middle boy’s eye shape was much rounder than Bilbo’s. At first glance, they carried similar enough colouring to imply a genetic relationship, but none of the boys carried Bilbo’s features. So they either all took after their mother or mothers, or they were...adopted? Was Bilbo really raising four boys without a wife or partner to help him? Bilbo truly had a bigger heart than he knew, if that was the case.

While Thorin contemplated the mystery of Bilbo’s sons, he missed the man raising his glass and proposing a toast. “To family time and cranberry sauce, the feast laid before us tonight, and to our lovely family home. And to my boss, Thorin Durin–” At that, Thorin stood a bit straighter, despite knowing the group at the table couldn’t see him. In his moment of pride, he nearly missed the oldest boy scoffing, disgust written on his face. Bilbo paused his toast to reprimand the boy through a sharp look, and continued, “To Mr. Durin, who keeps me employed, without which we would have nothing of this except each other.”

The boys all raised their glasses quite gravely, but with an ease of motion. Participating in the toast must have been a nightly ritual for the family. The oldest boy’s glass came up slower than the others and he muttered something unkindly. Another sharp glance from Bilbo pulled an explanation, “I said: I’ll toast his health. But for your sake, not his. He’s the reason you’re never home, and I’ll not thank him for that.”

Bilbo sighed. “I apologize, Sam. And to all of you lads. I truly am sorry for all the time I must work. Once the holiday is over, I’ll speak to him about keeping more regular hours. But let’s not forget, that job provides our meals and clothes. It keeps the electricity running and the water flowing. We must be thankful for all we have, because so many out there have much less. That’s why we share our thanks every night, to remind us of the good we have. Just as I have all four of you blessings in my life, to remind me what’s important.”

The middle boy, the one with the most obvious troubles, surprised him by agreeing with Bilbo, “We’re all blessed to have our little family, just as it is.” He gave a shy nod as Bilbo beamed at him.

Thorin backed from the room and began a slow circuit of the living room. After the very unfamiliar scene around the table, Thorin craved more clues into his assistant’s life. The shelves around the room were all filled with books, most of them cracked along the spines and well-worn. There were also art works and homemade knick-knacks dotting the shelves, evidence of the boys’ efforts. It looked as if Bilbo kept and displayed every drawing the boys had made over the years. He was obviously a very doting father. The photos around the room told the most detailed story. There were shots of Bilbo with each of his boys individually, family shots all together, and mixes somewhere in between the two. Thorin began hunting for the youngest images of each boy; unless there was an album of baby photos hiding somewhere, it was very likely Bilbo chose to adopt the boys all on his own. The oldest boy and the younger two all showed up in photos as toddlers, though it looked as if the twins (if they were twins? or even related genetically?) were rapidly leaving toddlerhood when they came to be with Bilbo. The oldest was much closer to infancy. The middle boy… it looked as though he’d only been adopted in the last couple of years. Judging by his size, the lad was probably five or six when he came into the family.

With that more-or-less answered, Thorin was left with even more questions. The biggest of those
was: why? Why had Bilbo adopted four boys? Why was there no spouse to help him? Why did he adopt the middle boy, who came with ongoing health concerns if the crutches were any indicator? And the most baffling: how could Bilbo take all this on and still work long hours and maintain his ineffable cheer?

He turned to ask the spirit; surely the being knew at least some of that information. Instead of even getting time to ask, the spirit stamped his staff and they were gone in a flash of light.

The adjustment from the staff’s brilliant light took even longer this time as they went from the warmly-lit Baggins home to that moment of eye-searing brightness before the ended up in a very dimly lit pub. As his eyes finally adjusted, he looked around. It was a familiar place, though not one he frequented with great regularity. It was, like so many drinking establishments, wood paneled and trimmed with brass fixtures. There were scruffy dark wood tables and chairs scattered in a haphazard method around the space and a couple of leather booths tucked in the corners. The giant dog bounding around the patrons allowed him to place himself. It was the pub near the Erebor building that Fili frequented. And sometimes Bilbo, if he wasn’t mistaken. And there, in the middle of the room was his nephew, surrounded by friends. Everyone had a drink in their hand and food was being passed around and across the table with little care. Yet, surprisingly, nothing fell to the ground for the dog. Well, nothing unintentional. As bites were tossed around, more than one nibble was sent far enough overhead that Thorin could tell it was meant to reach the giant animal.

The group of almost a dozen were deeply involved in some card game he didn’t recognize. They weren’t even a style of cards he recognized, but whatever game it was, it kept cycling through short lulls of thoughtful silence followed by roars of laughter. Their game was so raucous it was making the other pub-goers around them nervous. This wasn’t the party his nephew invited him to attend, was it? Surely Fili didn’t think he’d actually attend and participate in this… entirely uncouth behaviour. A bit of merriment at a pub was one thing, but taking over half the place, shouting uproariously, and- dear god, who just uttered that absolutely filthy statement? His nephew was behaving as if he’d been raised in a poor-house with no manners! Thorin knew he hadn’t raised his nephew to behave in such a low class manner. And this was going on in public, where any of their business associates could happen by to witness! It was fortunate they were unlikely to frequent this particular establishment or Arkenstone’s reputation would be torn to shreds.

This had to be because of Fili’s gay fling. His nephew was too upstanding to willingly behave like this without incentive. Looking around the tables that had been pushed together, it looked like a very arty group. Several of them bore paint-spattered jackets or shirts, and one had what looked like ink stains on his fingers that moved up his hands. That boy Fili claimed to be in love with was obviously leading him to the wrong crowds if this was the sort he was spending his time with. Though, they did look like a very merry bunch. Even if their Christmas celebration was only cursory. There were hails of “happy Christmas” called out as several of the arty-types drifted away from the tables, but there was little else to suggest it was a gathering to celebrate the holiday. Well, little else besides the overabundance of food and drink.

Shortly after the arty-looking members of the group dispersed, the pub’s cook joined the table, setting down another tray full of food and wrapping an arm affectionately around someone very familiar looking. That must be Kili then; he was sure Fili had shown him a picture before. He was sitting with a pair of other familiar faces. They were all familiar to him as a group rather than individually, so no, that wasn’t Kili after all. His memory caught up with him and he recognized them as the trio of activists he’d spoken to earlier in the day. The greeting - a rough hug and a
ruffling of neatly combed hair - between the rotund ginger and the one with the droopy moustache made Thorin think they were family. The group had become a very motley assortment. There were some young, some much older, but they all meshed together with the familiarity of long-time acquaintance. Perhaps these were gallery owners or artistic mentors? It made Thorin feel better to believe that - now that the younger members were gone and that perverse game were put away - this dinner was primarily for business or networking.

While the newcomers settled in with those who remained of the original group, Thorin watched Fili weave his way through the crowd, followed by a slender brunet. He stopped at the bar and spoke with the owner for a moment before he handed over a card and gestured at the tables.

Thorin grumbled as he watched his nephew, “First they played that filthy low-class game, and now he’s paying for everything? What a waste. Obviously that boy is only with him for his money.”

The spirit heard his grumblings because he was ‘accidentally’ knocked in the head with the illuminated staff and the spirit admonished, “Thorin! Shush!”

Thorin raised a questioning eyebrow. “You said they could neither see nor hear us.” Well, this spirit hadn’t, but the pair from before had, and no one at Bilbo’s home could see them, just like the night before.

“Oh, yes, that’s right. I forget the regulations sometimes; after all, I don’t come back very often.” The spirit gave a slight smile but the twinkle in his eye implied much deeper cheer. For all his dour facade, he really was a merry fellow underneath.

Thorin watched the brunet inch closer to his nephew. “Shush! I’m trying to watch!” And he watched the boy - actually Kili this time if his actions were a trustworthy indicator - wove an arm around Fili’s waist and moved to speak directly into his ear.

Fili grinned at his lover and responded, “Nonsense! It’s Christmas! And honestly, I’ve been selling very well lately. Besides, this way I won’t end up like my uncle. All that wealth, and it’s basically useless to him. He doesn’t do any good with it, not even to make himself comfortable with it!”

Fili continued to extoll the reasons why he could absolutely afford to pick up the tab, but Thorin missed them. He was too busy sputtering, “I haven’t wasted my wealth. I haven’t squandered it, if this is what you mean by ‘making myself comfortable’ you ungrateful-”

The spirit cleared his throat and chided, “You mustn’t correct those in the right. It’s pointless, even tactless.”

“Tact is a quality I despise.”

The spirit gave him a look. “That I can see. Come. There is more for us to study. We have seen the joyous celebrations of Christmas time, but there is another facet to see.”

In another blinding flash, the pair was once more in Bilbo’s home. This time, instead of the welcoming warmth of the fire and the cheer of children decorating the tree, the house was dark and silent. The boys were nowhere to be seen. Bilbo sat on a chair facing the empty grate, staring blankly ahead. A pair of crutches were propped next to the fireplace with care. Things did not feel right. There was a heaviness to the house that hadn’t been there before. Thorin knew the feeling.
well, because it hung over his empty house.

“What is this?” Thorin asked nervously, “Are you telling me the child is dying?”

Rather than answer directly, the spirit gestured with his staff and a gave off a small flickering of light. Two small emaciated children appeared, emerging from but still clinging to the folds in the spirit’s grey robes. They were skeletally thin, eyes and cheeks sunken in, and covered in dirt and sores. Thorin unconsciously took a step back, fearful of what he might catch from them. He gestured first to the boy then to the girl, who could be differentiated only by the length of their matted hair, and spoke gravely, “These are Ignorance and Want. Beware them both, and all of their relation. But most of all, beware this boy, for on his brow I see that which is written Doom unless the writing be erased.”

Thorin stared at the two figures, and saw in their eyes the weight of every evil thing in the world. The destructive weight of all they carried warped their figures until their limbs bowed and backs hunched. Thorin looked between the two, unable to tear his gaze away, and asked “Is there no refuge, no resource for them? Surely someone could help.”

Thorin was shocked when the spirit’s visage darkened to a grim mimicry of his earlier cheer. He grew taller with the shadows and loomed over Thorin menacingly. His voice grew deeper as he used Thorin’s earlier words against him, “Are there no boarding houses? No clinics? What do your taxes pay for, if not for them?”

The shadows grew shorter once more and the spirit resumed his usual height and demeanour, though he was still more grim than he’d been all night. The spirit gestured back at the mournful-looking Bilbo and the crutches, vanishing the two piteous child-creatures as he went, “You asked previously about Bilbo Baggins’ son. I tell you this: the boy is not so distantly related to the grievous creatures you saw before you. He is closer to you than they, but no less burdened by the shadows of the world. If these shadows remain unaltered by the future, the child will die.” He paused and once more threw Thorin’s words back at him with a viciously cutting sneer, “And if he is to die, he had better do it then, and decrease the surplus population.”

Thorin sucked in a breath as the quip hit home, “You would use my own words against me in such a manner?”

In the span of a single breath, the spirit grew taller once more. The shadows again lengthened and the light of his staff dimmed, casting it’s bearer into sharp relief. “Yes! So perhaps, in the future, you will hold your tongue until you have discovered where the surplus population is. And who it is. It may well be that in the sight of Heaven, you are more worthless and less fit to live than millions like this poor man’s child.” The light grew faintly brighter and the shadows drew back, but the spirit remained at his great looming height. “Were I in command of these things, I would deal in fairness by placing judgment on one’s temperament. Not in their wealth or value to business, as you do. It is, perhaps, quite fortunate for you that I was not consulted on these things in the beginning. But know this Thorin Durin, you and the Baggins boy are linked together in ways you will never fully understand. Your fates are linked indelibly, so think carefully before you next admonish someone to decrease the surplus population. The surplus population is always nearer than you expect. You, oh lucky soul, have been warned, unlike so many who came before you. Use this knowledge well.”

One more blinding flash, and Thorin was back in his house, gaping at the empty dining room. It looked bereft after the merry decorations and abundant feast.

He’d never expected to feel so at a loss over a few baubles and some food. Not in the way he had last felt when Dis died.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Christmas Eve is here and excitement happens.

Chapter Notes

This is the chapter the tags warn about; just note that where it says non-graphic, I definitely mean it. The events described are much less violent than the movies.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Thorin arrived at his office the next morning, he felt as if every cell of his skin was grating painfully against muscle and tendon. He felt on edge, but wasn’t quite sure what he was on the edge of. All that came to mind for an explanation was the emotional upheaval of the past two nights. He usually didn’t let himself sit in pity and sorrow the way he’d been doing, and now he was paying the price for stretching those long unused emotional muscles. He wasn’t entirely convinced it was worth it.

Matters were made worse when he opened the business section of the daily newspaper. Erebor’s stocks were doing well enough, and Arkenstone in particular was performing well as far as the public was concerned. The stocks hadn’t risen quite as high as he expected, but the Christmas buying season still had time to it. Thorin handled the running of the business thoroughly, but he lacked the magical touch Dwalin seemed to have for expanding their profit margins.

But that wasn’t the problem. This was something else. Business, but not business at the same time. Thorin blamed a bad case of emotions; he wouldn’t have even taken a second glance at the article before these blasted visits from spirits trying to force a conscience on him. It was just a few mining camps. Nothing he should really be concerned with as long as production wasn’t impacted or his taxes raised. Except Christmas present visited him; the images of Ignorance and Want warred with a mourning Bilbo for importance. The parting shot about ‘surplus population’ loomed over him.

So Thorin read the article and, for once in his miserable life, actually paid attention to things like the death toll and injury count. The collapse of multiple mine shafts was horrible enough, as it would likely slow production into the new year. But now Thorin was actually concerned about how many workers were injured and killed. And, beyond that, he found himself worrying about the miners’ families. How many women were widowed by the cave-ins? How many children made orphans? It was enough to make his neglected under-used heart ache sympathetically. Not only was this costly to the business, but lives had been lost and Thorin couldn’t stop picturing Bilbo sitting alone on his sofa looking empty. Nor could he stop the images of what might pass if his assistant’s crippled son was left without his father. Most of all, he couldn’t stop picturing those two emaciated, sore-covered, utterly sad children hiding in the spirit’s robes and wondering if they were what would happen to the children of the dead or injured miners with no income to help the families. The images kept looping through Thorin’s mind and it painted a far too relatable face to the tragedy before him.
Thorin rubbed absentmindedly at his chest, just above his sternum, trying to ease the tightening sensation that had settled there. The article detailed that the mine shafts that collapsed were holdings that belonged to SMAUG, and the heavy implication - though it was never expressly said by the writer - was that the whole tragedy could have been prevented if the mining group in charge of everything had more of a care for safety measures and the well-being of their miners. Which was more or less what those activists told him the day before. When he told them to bugger off and not worry about a decrease in the surplus population. With all those images of suffering swimming through his mind, Thorin was coming to regret his harsh words. He was even wondering - and it went against most of his financial sensibilities - if he should find those activists and do something for their cause. This SMAUG coalition sounded like they might be worse for his business than he originally understood.

He folded up his newspaper, hiding the troublesome article from view, and slapped it down on his desk. He needed to make a list. He could surely find a way to help run off SMAUG without additional cost to his business or himself. It would just take some thinking. And he would definitely need to push aside those looming feelings he was beginning to have about things. His day-to-day life had been easier to live before his empathy was awoken and he felt himself caring for others. This was not what he expected when Dwalin warned him to get his shite together.

To be fair, he hadn’t really formed expectations. But if he had, they wouldn’t have involved so many emotions. Since Dwalin was the original messenger, he would have inferred an experience with more business education. Likely some crap scotch. But his friend and business partner dealt less with emotions than Thorin did. It was an awful feeling, this worrying about others routine. It went deeper than concern his nephew might make some illogical choices. This was more on the scale of worrying for his sister’s life. But on a bigger scale because he was now imagining whole groups of people he’d never met.

Damnit Dwalin! He wasn’t prepared for this! It would ruin his business dealings, Arkenstone would go down in a flaming heap, and he’d die penniless, all because of his dead business partner and some barmy spirits.

He shoved away from his desk and began pacing agitatedly across his office. Those spirit quests were hitting too close to his most sensitive emotional parts; it was uncomfortable and Thorin didn’t know what to do with himself. It was as if a whole new side to him had been unlocked. Except… well, that side had been there all along. He just never allowed it to see the light of day - or conscious thought. This wasn’t like getting drunk and toasting his dead friend. He didn’t have the recourse of alcohol to stop his memory for a bit. Nor did he have hangover sobriety to reign in his thoughts and lock them back up. How did people do this on a regular basis?

Thorin heard rustling outside his closed door. The semi-formed logic of his agitated state urged him to make sure it wasn’t some miscreant trying to steal corporate secrets. Surely that’s the only reason someone would be in his anteroom the day before Christmas. He marched over and threw open the door and was met with a decidedly non-corporate-spy rear end.

He cleared his throat, “Mr. Baggins?”

His assistant turned from whatever work he was bent over, wide eyed in surprise. “Oh! Mr. Durin, I didn’t expect to find you here. I was just going-”

Something about the man’s apologetic statement combined with his slightly hunched stance grated on Thorin’s last nerve, fraying it sharply in two. He saw all that his assistant had to handle at home, and yet he was here? After pleading so piteously to have today off? That little-used empathy muscle flexed tiredly and gave up. Before he could stop himself, all of his frustration and exhaustion bubbled over. He strode close and loomed over his assistant as he snapped, “You burdensome man! I can see now how you belong here; you’re just as greedy and selfish as
everyone else. You claim you needed a holiday to spend with your family, yet here you are. It’s Christmas Eve, which means extra pay. Well, you gluttonous little man, I will not pay you extra for working today. I certainly will not pay you holiday pay on top of coming in to work today. Whatever selfish logic brought you to this building, I won’t stand for it. You asked for a holiday, so you will bloody-well take it, and damn your own avaricious actions. I don’t care if your debtors have come calling or you’re just trying to escape your obligations, your shabby home, or your obnoxious children. I will neither feed your greed nor act as your excuse. You.” He cut himself off abruptly as the words ran dry. His anger petered off as the angry words left him. It wasn’t until he caught sight of his assistant’s face that he even realized his vitriol might have been spat out too harshly.

It was a look he’d never actually seen on Bilbo before. Usually his assistant was as mild-mannered and steady as a quiet little country stream, and just as calm as that image implied. He tolerated Thorin’s foul moods and handled every brusque demand with ease. The man occasionally gave little frowns of distaste, but those were nothing compared to the seething fury that was writ clearly across Bilbo’s face at that moment. One eyebrow was lowered slightly and the corners of his mouth tugged down, but those were just the smaller signals. What shocked Thorin most was the fury he could see shimmering in his employee’s eyes. They stared at each other for a long moment and in that awkward silence, Thorin wasn’t sure what to say or do. He watched as Bilbo straightened his spine and uncurled his hunched shoulders to stand tall and proud. He took care to smooth out his face, but it did nothing to hide the fury that still roiled in his eyes. The hand not holding a biro was clenched at his side and he shoved it in his pocket. He opened his mouth once, snapped it shut, and turned to grab something off his desk. In a flurry of swift movements, Bilbo was slapping something against his chest and storming from the room.

With his assistant gone, Thorin stared hard at the wall. What on earth possessed him to attack with such poisonous words when he knew what a kind-hearted man his assistant was?

He needed to apologise. Immediately. Or, perhaps not. The look Bilbo had given was terrifying in its newness. Waiting might be better to allow the man time to calm down. He had made more than one poorly phrased accusation. He didn’t actually think Bilbo was a greedy employee or he would have ended his employ years ago. And after what he saw the night before, he knew quite certainly how much Bilbo loved his sons and his home. It was evident in every kind word and happy expression he shared with his sons. Thorin just… needed to let out those awkward overwhelming emotions and his assistant made an unfortunately handy target.

No, no waiting. He’d go now, catch the man before he could work up enough rage to quit - even though he’d be justified in doing so - and apologise. He could explain it as an oncoming illness. A headache. A poor night’s sleep. Something to explain his uncharacteristic actions.

He looked down at the paper he’d caught when Bilbo slapped it against him. It was an unfinished note directed at him. “Just a little something to help you have a happy Chri-” There was the squiggly start of an s that jumped abruptly across the page. He’d apparently slammed his door open harder than he realized and shook his head; it was another emotion-fueled action to regret. Apparently, this spirit-induced influx of emotions was not good for him or anyone around.

Glancing back at his hand, Thorin re-read the note and resisted the urge to crumple it in frustration at his deplorable actions. The little memo sheet implied there was more. And there, on Bilbo’s desk in plain sight, was a platter of biscuits and tartlets. His assistant, who he should probably treat a bit better, made a special effort to bring him some sweets for Christmas.

Fuck.

He ducked into his office quickly enough to snag his wool coat from the rack and lengthened his steps in a bid to traverse the hallway and reach the elevator faster. He hoped he would be quick
enough to find Bilbo on the street; he didn’t want to intrude on the man at home after the accusations he’d just made, but he would if necessary. He needed to apologise. Once outside the building, he scanned left and right whilst he finished buttoning his coat. There was no sign of honey brown curls, even under the myriad knit caps around him. After one last scan of the crowd, Thorin picked the direction he knew Bilbo’s home lay. He hoped his assistant was headed home instead of making a stop elsewhere.

The weather was cooperative enough, thankfully, to aid Thorin’s search. The snow that had been hanging heavy over the city all morning was still threatening action, but hadn’t begun. The brisk wind was blowing the right direction to tug Thorin along the sidewalk. Nature was apparently conspiring to assist Thorin in his hurry to make amends, and after the strange spirit experiences he’d gone through recently, he wasn’t going to doubt an unseen force so soon after. Some nature spirit would likely pop out of the nearest snowflake to smite him if he did.

As he rounded the corner, Thorin was met with a concerning sight. The giant bear of a man from the pub his nephew frequented was rushing toward the entrance of an alleyway gesticulating wildly and, if his growling tone was an indicator, he was furious about something. By the time Thorin was close enough to hear, the man’s yelling had subsided. He was kneeling over someone and checking their head with an unexpected gentleness given his great size.

Bilbo. The pub owner was checking Bilbo’s head. And that giant hound was sitting on...another man? Thorin stopped at the entrance of the alley and surveyed the scene. The man under the giant dog had to be either unconscious or dead. He wasn’t twitching, despite the eight or nine stone dog weighing down his chest. Bilbo was resting against the wall opposite. His head was propped back against the structure despite the dirt and graffiti. The usual rosiness in his cheeks had flushed away, leaving him pale and a bit glassy-eyed. His coat hung haphazardly off one shoulder and his gold-toned hat was now a dirty mustard brown where it soaked up a muddy puddle. The displaced hat circled his attention back to Bilbo, who had blood slowly trickling from a cut near his temple. The pub-keeper had pulled out a mobile and was speaking calmly to someone. Overhearing words like ‘attacked in broad daylight’ and ‘head wound’ made Thorin assume the man was calling the authorities. While he had it well in hand, Thorin needed to reassure himself. He stepped closer, thinking to check on his employee. This change in vantage point also brought more of the man who Thorin assumed was the attacker into view.

He didn’t need to assume anymore. The albino man was rather distinct in his memory, even if he’d only ever seen photographs previous to this. That familiar figure was verification enough that Bilbo had indeed been attacked, and Thorin had never been more thankful for a dog in his life. The vindictive part of him sent vicious wishes that the dog had, at the very least, broken a couple of the attacker’s ribs. It was probably too much to hope that a spear of rib would just jab him in the heart or (and) both lungs so they could all just be done with him.

Because Thorin could add up the pieces of the scene before him. And Thorin knew, without a doubt, that Bilbo had just been attacked by a man who vaingloriously chose the single moniker: Azog. Had just been attacked by his sister’s killer.

Thorin stumbled a bit before managing to lean against the wall nearest his left side; his knees were having trouble keeping him upright at the moment. His breaths came shorter and a weight was pressing down on his sternum. His stomach threatened revolt, despite its emptiness. His hands shook, even clenched in his coat pockets. This was all too real, all too familiar.

His assistant was one protective dog, a handful of minutes, and a chance encounter away from being brutally murdered. In broad daylight. On a busy street. And Thorin wouldn’t have been there to stop anything. Might have even walked right passed the alley in his rush to find Bilbo. A Bilbo who shouldn’t have even been here to be attacked. If Thorin hadn’t loosed his tongue, had
somehow held his vitriolic feelings in, Bilbo wouldn’t have rushed out in anger. He would have stayed longer, might have even stopped in to talk with Thorin for a moment, and missed Azog entirely. But, just like with Dis, Thorin allowed his anger and hurt feelings to rule his actions and others paid the price for his failure. If Thorin hadn’t been up far too late dealing with crazed spirits and experiencing the biggest traumas of his life, he wouldn’t have snapped at Bilbo the way he did. If he hadn’t snapped, Bilbo would have been safe.

Though, if Bilbo hadn’t been so bloody kind, he wouldn’t have been in this predicament to begin with. He was the idiot who felt it necessary to bring sweets to his employer. It was a waste of time and resources, neither of which Bilbo had to spare, if that visit with the spirit was indicative. He didn’t need to bring the treats. Didn’t need to go out of his way to be kind. Didn’t need to insist on spreading Christmas cheer to all and sundry.

Thorin’s thoughts and emotions whirled at gale-force speeds. His knees still weren’t working. And now Bilbo was looking up at him with wide sad eyes. As if he’d just noticed Thorin was there and worried about his reaction. Bilbo was the one who had just been attacked! Thorin didn’t need sympathetic looks from a recently-accosted generally peaceful employee.

He couldn’t stand it anymore. No more emotional late-night trips. No more punishing others for his failures. No more pitying looks from those deserving of pity. Thorin opened his mouth to apologise, tried to force out the words “I’m sorry,” but couldn’t quite make any sound come out. After a few tries and only a flapping mouth, Thorin steeled his reserves of strength, pushed himself away from the wall, and hurried to find a cab. He needed to get home and he desperately needed enough alcohol in his system to calm his roiling thoughts.

But no hard spirits tonight. It almost seemed like an invitation. Drinking spirits invited in spirits. For all that he missed Dwalin, he didn’t need another sodding spirit to come traipsing through his house and dragging him through things better left unseen. So

It wasn’t until he was home and well into a bottle of merlot that he even realized he hadn’t actually managed to ensure that Bilbo was alright. Or that Azog would actually be detained appropriately. And he’d failed entirely at apologising. His heartbeat subsided to the normal range of beats per minute halfway through his first glass. His shoulders slackened and released the tight hold on his neck somewhere into the second. With the third, he found the energy to kick off his boots, fling his coat on the sofa, and unwrap the scarf around his neck, though he never quite managed to remove it entirely. There was something unconsciously soothing about rubbing the buttery soft fabric between thumb and forefinger as he sipped at his wine.

By the fourth glass, he’d finally calmed enough to allow himself to being thinking again. The furious swirl of emotions were muted by the fuzz of drink. His rational side, the only side he usually allowed out, could focus on the events of the afternoon without being confused by the emotional turmoil of earlier. In this state, it was easier to understand that it was only a bit his fault.

Honestly, who brought baked goods to their boss for Christmas anymore? But Thorin couldn’t really hold his assistant responsible. It was all his fault, really. Azog had obviously been lying in wait for some solitary traveler to pass his dim alley. It was the justice system’s fault for not catching the oily creature. And he’d certainly pressed for that in the wake of Dis’ death. But somehow the man slipped through the police’s nets and remained at large. It was something that would haunt Thorin for years now: how did this very distinctively featured man avoid capture for so long?

More haunting than that was the role Thorin played in the whole encounter. It was something he could never make amends for, and it almost felt futile to try. How could Bilbo forgive him after the awful accusations he’d thrown? And then, to be furious and fleeing, only to walk straight into an assault? Thorin fully expected a resignation letter waiting on his desk when he went into work
next. He should really call the man, to at least check on his well-being, but Thorin couldn’t put his
shame aside long enough to place the call.

His emotions were creeping back in and the wine wasn’t doing enough to combat it. Hoping for
distraction, Thorin flicked on the television. He just needed something mindless enough to provide
some noise for his weary mind to pretend to follow.

That was a poor choice. Instead of the mindless comedy he was expecting, he was greeted with
the evening news. The newscaster was currently reviewing the afternoon’s attack. The only
upside was the story’s filming location: the same pub in which he’d seen his nephew celebrate.
While this wasn’t important on its own, it had it’s merits in the current patrons of the pub. Bilbo
and his boys were tucked into a booth along one wall. The reporter was currently interviewing the
pub’s owner, but the camera panned to Bilbo often enough that Thorin could see he was doing
well enough. He had a bandage covering his temple, but his colour was healthy again and he was
smiling brightly enough.

It was almost sickeningly sweet. The reporter spun the story into some sort of a Christmas-
tragedy-turned-miracle sort of story. Man attacked on Christmas Eve saved by beloved dog,
allows for holiday movie-scene with family! Because at Bilbo’s table, he was surrounded by his
sons, Thorin’s nephew and Kili, and several others. There were platters spread across the table,
thoroughly picked over. Several members of the table - with his nephew leading the charge - kept
starting exuberant verses of Christmas carols as the camera looked on. However cheery the scene,
Bilbo’s smile felt brittle around the edges. Thorin felt responsible and it gnawed at him.

It was a merry enough scene, between the friendship, food, and song. But it didn’t sit right with
Thorin. History nearly repeated itself and Thorin hadn’t even been there to help. He’d barely been
there to witness the event, let alone prevent it. And it did nothing to change the past. For all his
guilt, Dis was still dead. But on top of that, now Bilbo was injured and upset, and it was his fault.

Apparently there wasn’t wine enough to wipe away all of his emotional turmoil. Was this what
Dwalin meant about getting his shite together? Was he supposed to have done something to
protect Bilbo?

He must have, because if something happened to Bilbo, his sons would be all alone. He had no
idea what would happen to those boys, but he imagined it wasn’t as bright a future as the one they
faced with Bilbo’s love and care sheltering them. Thinking of those boys being orphaned (again, it
seemed) led Thorin back to the SMAUG mining catastrophe, and the new orphans the world now
had. Surely there was some sort of organization who cared for orphans and widows of miners.
That sounded like an organization that should exist. Surely they did.

Thorin was entrenched in his armchair, mind whirling. His attention warred between following
the news story that continued to dither on and the emotional storm gaining momentum in his mind.
It was enough of a distraction that he initially missed the dark figure stepping from the shadows in
the corner of the room. Thorin didn’t notice it until a dark figure distorted the illumination put off
by the news story. When he spotted the creeping figure out of the corner of his eye, Thorin jolted
badly enough to slosh wine across his hand and knee. Oddly, his first thought after being startled
had nothing to do with the being who had just emerged from the darkness. He was more curious
whether his housekeeper could clean the spilled red wine from of his charcoal grey trousers. They
were a favored pair and he’d hate to see them ruined by his own carelessness. The spirit emerged
from the darkness so entirely without sound that he became an afterthought almost as quickly as it
stopped moving. Well, it became an afterthought until Thorin really looked. Then it could never
be displaced from his memory. This spirit was simultaneously the most forgettable and the most
frightening of the ghosts. Perhaps he was frightening because he seemed so innocuous? Thorin
already dreaded what would happen after a night’s interactions with this being. From it’s visage
alone, he knew it would be the figure that lurked at the edges of Thorin’s dreams for decades to come.

This latest spirit had neither the ethereal glow nor the jovial attitude of the previous spirits. Instead, it was as if the shadows had somehow combined and solidified into a vaguely human-shaped being wrapped in darkness. He was a very grim spectre. Well, his stature implied masculinity, but Thorin couldn’t actually see enough of the spirit’s features to make out who or what it was. All he could see was a speck of shine where the television light shone on a pair of eyes; it was disconcerting to know a pair of eyes were watching him when he couldn’t see them.

For all that he couldn’t discern the spirit’s features, it had a regal bearing. The figure stood tall and proud as a king. The misty shadow-darkened fluidity of his robes somehow supported a dark crown shaped from spikes of gnarled holly branches. This spirit was not entrancing or jovial; instead, his sadness felt like it would echo through the millennia and still carry forward. But it made the spirit all the more memorable for it. From staring at him, Thorin got the sense that this spirit did his duty out of mourning for what has been, but carried forth despite his pain out of hope for what could still be. It was a weighty task indeed, if the spirit’s only endeavour was to follow ominously on the heels of those that came before him.

Thorin got the impression that he wasn’t going to find much to calm the turmoil of his emotions. He’d already re-lived the worst moments of his past and seen what the present held for others. Thorin wasn’t ready to see what the future might bring, for him or anyone else. Despite not saying anything, the spirit looked as if it wouldn’t be put off. Thorin set down his wine glass and stood. The spirit stretched out one long pale hand and their journey started.

Chapter End Notes

Thorin's thought processes and coping mechanisms in this chapter (and previous) are not what I’d call healthy. But that's the point. He's learning and growing, but it's not an immediate process. Just know that I do not actually advocate self-medicating with alcohol or victim-blaming.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

The third spirit's visit.

With this spirit, there was no gentle flight over the countryside. Nor was there a blinding light and instant transportation. This spirit moved as if they were in a dark tunnel and everything else was rushing past at great speeds. It was decidedly grim, watching everything whiz past, shrouded in shadows.

As the shadows slowed around them, shapes became distinct once more and, while Thorin didn’t recognise where they had gone, he understood why. With Bilbo so much on his mind all evening, it made sense that he would be involved in their visit. Thorin wandered around the room peeking at the books on a shelf and peering out the cracked door. Without forcing it further open or stepping straight through, he could only see a sliver of unremarkable hallway, so that venture was useless. As the silence stretched, Thorin admitted he was avoiding looking at Bilbo, sitting on an uncomfortable vinyl-covered chair. The air around him radiated nervousness and Thorin already didn’t like where this was going.

A woman in a white coat stepped into the room after knocking softly. “Mr. Baggins?”

Bilbo’s head snapped up at her entry. He tugged his lower lip between his teeth as he stood. “Yes? Where’s Frodo?”

She gestured at the seat he’d just vacated, and took the seat next to it. “I was hoping for a moment to chat before he comes in. He and the therapist are finishing up.” She paused and looked him over. When he nodded, she continued, “I hoped this wouldn’t be the case, but his progress has stagnated recently. His range of motion is getting worse and at this point, all the physio can do is prolong things. I know you said before that it’s not possible, but he needs that additional surgery. Without it, his mobility will only continue to get worse and the strain on his heart will eventually be too great.

“I understand the surgery will be hard on him, but he’s a resilient boy. We can keep it limited to one surgery, instead of breaking it up into separate phases. But the recuperation would keep him in hospital for at least three months. Another six before he’s fully mobile again, and that’s with extensive physio.”

Bilbo scrubbed a hand down his face. “There’s nothing else you can do? Besides operate, I mean.”

She shook her head sadly. “We can continue the physio, but that will only go so far. What he needs is much more invasive, but it will give him a much better outlook for the future, in terms of bone growth and the strain on his heart.” She paused and took a deep breath, releasing it slowly but silently. “Now, I understand finances are tight, but I’ve been in contact with various health providers. We’re trying to find a way to cover as much of the cost as possible, but I don’t know what that will be yet. I just wanted to start this process. The sooner we get Frodo scheduled for surgery, the sooner we can have him up and running again! Just be sure to see the assistant at the front about payment and scheduling on your way out.” She pasted on a false smile as the young boy entered the room.
“I see. Thank you, doctor.” Bilbo told her tiredly as he rose to collect his son.

Thorin stepped forward, moved toward Bilbo. His instinct to offer what comfort he could was particularly strong after seeing the man attacked earlier in the day. He paused mid-step as he realized that Bilbo could neither see nor hear him. As he stopped, the spirit shifted in the corner of his eye, and Thorin could see that long pale hand extend.

With a brief shadowy whooshing, they were in Bilbo’s home, surrounded by his boys. It was Christmas again and Thorin could see the snow falling heavily outside the front windows. The boys were all rushing around in a flurry of coats, boots, mittens, and scarves. All except Frodo, the middle boy, who sat morosely on the sofa.

Bilbo left the oldest boy to organise the bundling of the younger two and moved to sit next to Frodo. “Don’t worry, my boy. Things will get better. You heard the doctor earlier. This time next year, you’ll be out in the thick of it with your brothers. I know it’s so hard, watching them have fun while you have a hard time keeping up, but try to be patient. We’ll get you all patched up and winning races in no time.”

Frodo looked up at his father and gave a small watery smile. “You think so?”

“The doctor said one long hard surgery and plenty of time to heal up. But you heard her, she mentioned running.” Bilbo forced himself to smile back and continued, false cheer ringing in his voice, “Now, you go pick a puzzle and I’ll start the cocoa. We’ll have our own fun in here, just us two.” The disconsolate look Bilbo allowed to surface once Frodo left the room was one that struck Thorin in the gut. Whatever he told the boy, Thorin got the feeling that the very necessary surgery might be a longer time coming than the boy expected.

He turned to the spirit and asked, “Is this my doing? The Spirit of Christmas Present said my fate is linked to the boy’s. Is there aught I can do to stop this?”

Rather than answer, the spirit allowed its head to drop just slightly. It’s dark gaze bore into Thorin and, whatever it saw in his eyes was enough apparently. They were drawn back into that shadowed tunnel and transported from Bilbo’s home.

The time spent in the indistinct darkness was longer than the time before. It felt much closer to the duration of the first trip. When they stopped, Thorin had no idea where they could be. They stood before a group of men clustered together, sharing a pot of coffee. The bland off-white walls and commercially available abstract art prints gave no further clues. It could have been any kitchenette in any office building, and Thorin failed to pick up on any immediate importance based on their location or the men gossiping over their drinks.

One of the sharp-suited office workers raised his mug in a mocking toast, “Here’s to the Old Bastard for finally having the good grace to die and leave us all in peace.”

A chorus of “here here!” met his toast with approval and the group knocked mugs cheerfully.

One particularly disgruntled employee muttered, “About time too. Thought he’d never leave us in peace.” The man looked around nervously as soon as he shut his mouth.

The mutterer was nudged with an elbow and the office worker next to him remarked, “No need to
be quiet about it anymore, he’s dead and gone. They’ll have him in the ground soon.”

“And what a poor burial that will be,” someone else chimed in. “If more than a handful of people attend, it will be a richer attendance that I expect.”

“I’d go, but only if they provided lunch!”

“That’ll never happen! Not with him so tight-fisted in life. Surely he’s even more so, after rigor mortis set in!”

“You’re right, if anyone goes at all, it will be out of a misplaced sense of duty. Those poor sods.”

“Aye, while the rest of us will be out in the pubs celebrating our new-found freedom!” This garnered chuckles from the group and quickly devolved into a discussion of which watering hole to start with and how soon they could feasibly slip away.

Thorin turned to the spirit and asked, “What kind of man was he, that his co-workers rejoice in his death? Can they not even spare a bit of sympathy for his family?”

The spirit tilted its head slowly and Thorin could feel its eyes boring into him. A wave of sadness washed over him, and Thorin wasn’t sure if it was his own mortality he was fearing or if the spirit sent that emotion to him. Either way, it was answer enough. Whoever it was must have been a wretched man and a harsh taskmaster to elicit this response from those he worked with. Thorin hoped he wasn’t half as bad as this un-mourned man.

The rushing shadow-filled tunnel returned, though they were in it a much shorter time. It felt like the short trip between seeing Bilbo at the doctor’s office and his home, so Thorin surmised they had once more traveled in space but not time. When they stepped from the tunnel, they were in a nearly empty room lined with half-labeled boxes. Thorin knew without asking that this was the home of the dead man the office-workers mocked earlier. He was beginning to suspect the spirit had some way of telepathically communicating the important information with its guests.

The wall decorations - which had hung for decades, judging by the discolouration of the wallpaper - were all gone. It looked like it had once been a fine home full of high-end finishings. Now, stripped bare, it looked forlorn. If a house could look forlorn. Standing near the doorway across the room was a woman whose bearing and attire suggested she was the housekeeper for the once-grand residence. Even across the echoing room he could hear them clearly.

“Nonsense, it’s worth twice that and you know it, you swindler.”

Her bargaining partner, a man bundled in shabby black wool, crossed his arms over his chest and responded primly, “It is. I won’t dispute that. The old man and his poor deceased family had fine taste.” The man paused and gave the housekeeper a sharp look and argued, “But you and I both know I’m your best option if you want to see a cent.”

The housekeeper sniffed and shot back, “I know others who are interested. Another five hundred or it’s no deal.”

“Another two hundred and I don’t phone the police. You know you’d never see a cent if this went through the proper channels. It would be months of legal investigations and police work. We’d all be as dead as him before they sorted out how to split the estate!”

A bit of the prim attitude sagged out of the housekeepers shoulders. “Two fifty then. I need to keep myself fed until I can find a new position. Go on then, because it’s Christmas.”
Her business partner huffed an annoyed, “Only because it’s Christmas.” before extending his hand to shake. “I’ll have the lads by tomorrow for the lot of it.”

“You’d best do it in the morning then. Anyone who might care will be at the funeral. It’ll be the best time to avoid attention.” There was a knock at the front door. Both housekeeper and pawn broker glanced nervously towards the sound before shifting a bit closer to the rear of the house. “I suppose that’s our cue to get shifting. Remember, be here by half-ten at the latest if you want this to go off smoothly.”

“You’re a gem. Until the morning then.”

As the unlawful businessman stepped from the room, the housekeeper moved toward the front door. She straightened her apron, patted her hair, and assumed the image of a proper housekeeper. As if she hadn’t just been part of an illicit meeting to sell off her dead master’s worldly goods.

She opened the door to a thoroughly bundled couple on the front stoop and ushered them in to the entrance hall. They looked around the room, as if they expected doom to come marching through the doorway any moment. The man shoved his hands in his pockets and asked, “Is the master in? We, ah- we were hoping to find him in a spare moment of goodwill.” He looked at the housekeeper hopefully, “Would now be a good enough time, do you think?”

She looked confused, “A good enough time for what, exactly?”

“Well, we’re going to be… Ah, the thing is, it’s been a rough couple of months and I know we’re behind-” He cut himself off and glanced around, looking for the looming Doom once again.

The woman took up where he left off, “It’s just, he’s been out of work since September and we have a new baby and with Christmas and bills and all-”

The man spoke up again and the words just rushed out of his mouth in a torrent, “We can’t pay our rent. I know we’re behind, but we just can’t. But we can’t afford to be booted, not with the baby. We’ve nowhere else to go and we can’t be on the streets in the cold. Do you think he’s in a merciful mood?” Goodness, who was so foul that new parents in dire straits feared homelessness all because of the capricious moods of their landlord?

The looks on the couple’s faces were heartbreaking. They were both obviously close to tears and the woman was so nervous she was shaking. The housekeeper took one look at the pair and burst out laughing. When her hysteria subsided enough that she could speak, she wiped a forming tear and told them, “Dears, it’s your lucky day. Probably your lucky year. He’s dead. There’s no one to come hunting for your rent now, not until they sort out the estate. Which they told me that will take the better part of a year, because everything is so tangled in ownership and outdated wills.” The couple sagged against each other in relief while the housekeeper continued, “Go home and celebrate with your babe. The old scrooge is gone and taken his heartless ways with him!”

The couple cheered greatly at her news. They hugged each other and the housekeeper. The woman began giggling as they showed themselves out, calling wishes for a very happy Christmas for the housekeeper. Once the front door shut, the entry way darkened and Thorin was enveloped in the tunnel yet again.

This time, their tunnel trip felt middling in length. This was no quick jaunt across the city so Thorin could see another facet of the same day, but he guess it wasn’t completely unrelated to
something he’d already seen. As the trip ended, the pair stepped out into the rear of a crowded auditorium. He took in the neat rows of crimson seats and the finely appointed stage at the front of the room. This was a place Thorin knew well.

They were at one of the semi-annual gem showcases, and just in time for a lecture of some sort. The room was packed, but a few more were quietly trickling in through the side doors, and every seat was filled. The host of the event was announcing, “Mr. Saruman, President of the Southern Mining and Unearthing Group.” A tall lean man stepped on stage, carrying a walking stick that was more affectation than useful tool. His angular features were better suited to playing a villain in a science-fiction movie than president of a successful mining company.

He stepped up to the podium, retrieved the microphone, and addressed the crowd in a dignified tone, “I thank you all for your attendance during this little announcement I’m here to make. I realise this is not the usual sort of panel at these events, but I believe this is the best venue to inform so many of you major players in the industry to all at once. It would be a rather unwieldy task, having the same conversation with every jeweler, craftsman, and wholesaler individually.” He paused to allow for a few quiet titters and offered an indulgent smile in return. After the almost-self-deprecating smile eased from his face, he continued, “With that in mind, I thank you for indulging me. The news is this: now that we, the Southern Mining and Unearthing Group, have taken control of the vast majority of all precious metal and gemstone mines worldwide, there will be a few changes to our policies.” An anticipatory hush fell over the crowd and Saruman allowed the hint of a predatory grin to sharpen his austere face.

From what he’d seen in the newspaper, Thorin already felt ill at the idea of this corporation with shoddy ethics taking over the entirety of the industry. Witnessing this speech was a good reminder for Thorin to never give up his shares in several mines; he’d hate for this oily man and his corporation to get a hold of them and pollute them as they’d done to so many others already. When he got back to the office, he would immediately bin their buy-out proposal.

“I brought some photos of our current operations, so you may all see what a difference our structural changes have made already,” Saruman continued. As the mining company’s leader pulled up a series of photos on a large screen to accompany his presentation, Thorin felt his skin crawl. Saruman was trying to wave the magic wand of false logic to delude the room into believing they were wholesome and kind-hearted, but the images he provided ruined the effect for Thorin. The people and sites depicted were too clean. Too...sterile. His marketing team were very heavy-handed with digital editing. He could only hope that no one else bought into the fantasy of a better industry Saruman painted.

“We started with a handful of our less productive shafts and mining camps. Here,” he offered a photo of shining white dormitory room lined with beds, “you can see we’ve renovated the living quarters. We are encouraging the workers to come on their own, rather than uproot their families from villages and towns. With this shift, we also changed the daily rotation. Every worker accepts longer shifts but has a bit longer off-period with which he may visit his loved ones.” Here he flashed an image of an immaculately clean mess hall followed by a sparkling clinic, both staffed by overly-cheerful employees. “We provide for the workers’ physical needs while they are on location. Every man gets somewhere to sleep, enough to fill his stomach at regular intervals, and medical care on site. They lack for nothing. The idea, proven time and again, is happier workers will work harder when they are on-shift. Now that we are not offering family housing or other self-service amenities, our overhead costs have dropped dramatically.

“Naturally, we have slightly reduced the standard pay-rate to offset the costs of the renovations. The workers will hardly see the effects of this reduction since they are no longer required to pay for the family housing. A small percentage of their paycheck will be docked to cover food costs, but this allowed us to bring in fresh produce. It’s much better fare than they would receive
throughout most of the continent.” Thorin knew, from personal experience, that the descriptions Saruman used were code for ‘the workers are too poor to notice, especially since their contracts for employment are in the wrong language.’

Saruman left the last image - a busy chart with nearly-illegible tiny script - lingering on the screen. He changed tacks, bringing the auditorium back to business with him, “Now, I’m sure you all wonder what this has to do with you as buyers. The restructuring at the various mine sites across the globe will take some time and a great deal of resources. We have had to accumulate extra land around several sites in order to fit new buildings or expand what already exists. We have to appease several different government officials and their restrictions as well as the displaced peoples from the new lands we’ve acquired. This all takes a toll on our operating costs.

“We cannot, in good conscience, take all of the recompence directly from our miners. As I’m sure you will all agree, they need enough to bring home to feed their families. So, for the next five to seven years, we are instituting a tax rise. Our operating costs have gone up; so, unfortunately, must our prices go. Rest assured that they will go back to the levels you expect just as soon as we finish renovating all of our mining sites. There is a bit of extra cost now in order to bring you all greater benefit in the long-run.” This speech was becoming too long-winded and generally vague for Thorin to believe anyone would buy into the complete bollocks of a sales ‘announcement’ Saruman was selling. Thorin interpreted the whole thing to mean that SMAUG would require a tax rise just long enough for every businessman and buyer to forget what costs looked like before the increase. Or, if they possibly remembered, it would be enough time to blame the increase on inflation. It was a standard business practice. No one here could possibly buy into his poorly disguised plan to gouge them! Well, he certainly wouldn’t partner with them. He had Balin and company to go to. He would simply offer them a better contract next time and increase his trade ventures with them.

But what of the miners and their families? What of the people who were displaced from SMAUG’s expansions? There had to be someone out there who would stop such widespread devastation. After the visit with Christmas Present and seeing Ignorance and Want, Thorin read deeper into the innocuous photos and glossed-over vague phrases Saruman offered. The ‘renovation’ would bring with it an increase in injury and poverty amongst workers. Families would be ripped apart and children orphaned just as the earlier news article insinuated. And Saruman was showing the auditorium full of businessmen that he didn’t care a whit about his workers beyond their physical needs. Would no one here stand up to the man and demand change?

Thorin looked to the spirit and voiced his question aloud. As before, he received no verbal answer. The spirit’s posture remained upright and proud, but his bearing denoted an exhaustion with the human race that ran deeper than a superficial sadness at this one event. How many situations like this had the spirit shown people across the centuries? Thorin wanted to reach out, offer some comfort, but wasn’t sure the spirit was even corporeal enough to be touched. It had avoided touch thus far on their journey, unlike the previous spirits.

Thorin looked across the auditorium, where so many businessmen he knew were eating up the half-truths and unspoken lies Saruman was feeding. The joylessness of the evening’s visits were starting to make Thorin feel as if he was on par with what the spirit felt all the time. He didn’t know how it managed this all the time. He looked around in hope once more and felt those reserves he held for his fellow industrialists dwindle away. No one was fighting Saruman. No one was combating the tax rise, the worsened conditions, the harm it would do to the part of humanity he, in his foolishness, referred to as ‘surplus population.’ Surely there were some who didn’t feel as he did? Who would stand up for positive change?

Not amongst this group, apparently. Well, whatever would happen, Thorin would do something.
As much as he could, in the face of such a monstrous threat. That had to be enough of a start, at least. Right?

There was nothing more he could see or learn from Saruman’s unsavoury speech. Thorin turned to the spirit, close to begging, “If we are through here, I’d like to go. I’ve taken in all I can of this devastation. Please, show me some emotion, some tenderness, connected to the poor man’s death everyone keeps making a mockery of.”

The spirit gave another of those acquiescing head tilts and swooped them back into its shadowy tunnel.

---

Another journey in the tunnel brought them back to the Baggins home.

Thorin clutched a hand to his chest as a sharp fear lanced through him as he took in the room. The home was not the cosy joy-filled abode he’d seen on any of his previous visits.

The only illuminated lights were a few dim lamps dotted around the room. The windows were hung with dark curtains. There was no warming fire lit in the grate. And in the middle of the darkened room, Bilbo and three of his boys were clustered on the couch, huddled together in one drooping mass.

Something happened to cast a pall over the usually cheery home, and Thorin had a horrible feeling he knew what.

Fili entered the room with a mug of tea and Kili followed with plates of biscuits and scones. The treats were set on the low coffee table before the clustered family but the mug was forced into Bilbo’s limp hands. Fili urged, “Bilbo, have some tea. You’ve got to keep your strength up.” As he said this, he slipped on the couch next to the oldest boy and stretched an arm across both the boy’s and Bilbo’s shoulders. Kili wedged himself between the twins and pulled so they were both sitting more on his lap than on the couch. Fili nudged Bilbo and coerced, “We’re here for you, Uncle Bilbo. We’ll make sure the boys all get their fruit and veg, but let us help you too.” Bilbo looked up at him with tears collecting in the corners of his eyes. He opened his mouth and the concern on his face suggested he was preparing to protest. Fili cut him off, “I remember how much you did after Mum and Da died. You gave me hope and reminded me of all the good things they taught me. You kept them alive for me long enough that I could do it myself. Let us do that for you now, Kili and me. You’re family, and family looks after each other.”

Bilbo nodded slowly and sagged into the couch.

Fili looked appeased and continued, “Good, first thing, you drink your tea. Bombur brought some things over, so we’ll get Merry, Pip, and Sam all fed up on green things and taters. Remembering all the good memories is hungry work, so we’d best all fill up.” Fili waved an arm at Kili, who rounded up the younger boys. The older boy looked torn, as if he wasn’t sure whether he should stay and comfort his dad or wrangle his younger brothers into proper table manners and clean plates. A gentle ‘go on, Sam, go get supper’ from Bilbo sent him after the trio.

Thorin watched as Fili closed the gap Sam left and pulled Bilbo in closer. “I know how hard it is, to lose someone you love so dearly. I miss my little cousin more than I can say. But you told me more than once how important it is to remember the good. And Frodo was filled with goodness, all the way to the tips of his ears. He was so full of goodness he was practically overflowing with it, which made him a joy to know. As we carry on, think of all the things he wished he could do. All the races and snowball fights. We’ll do those things and more, just for him. You know he’s
watching us all mope around and he’s hating it. He loved to see his family happy. If he couldn’t be in the thick of it, he watched and shared in our joy that way. So that’s what we have to do now. We’ll carry on and live as joyously as we can, in honour of him.”

Bilbo gave a great sniff and smiled a very damp smile, “You’re right, Fili. Of course you are.” Another moist sniff. “I just miss my little lad so much. He was so close to my heart.”

“And he still is. If you think he’s left your heart, you’re sorely mistaken. But you have three fine boys who need their Da, and a life to live to Frodo’s exacting standards. So start with tea, and we’ll go in baby steps from there, eh?”

Bilbo leaned into Fili’s comforting embrace and wiped his eyes, “I don’t know what I did to deserve a nephew so wise. Thank you, Fili.”

“Of course Uncle Bilbo.”

Seeing his nephew cuddled on the sofa with his assistant sent unpleasant feelings straight to the pit of his stomach. The scene was so wrong that it shouldn’t look this right. At the moment, Thorin couldn’t possibly have explained which of the two he was more jealous of. His nephew had never been that affectionate with him, physically or emotionally. And Bilbo… well, the man was mourning, but that did nothing to negate how perfectly cuddle-able he looked. Didn’t negate the instinctive feeling that he should be doing the cuddling.

Thorin looked up at the spirit, fighting to keep the snarl from his voice, “I asked for emotion and you bring me here? What of the dead man? Surely there is someone out there who mourns him the way this family does!” His tone was accusatory but the fight fell away quickly. He was being unreasonably angry (jealous) over a situation that didn’t actually exist, at least not now. Because wasn’t that the point of these visits with the Ghost of Christmas Yet-To-Come? If he changed things, the future didn’t need to be like this.

So many emotional scenes over the past couple days left their toll on his temper. “Please, I can’t bear to watch him suffer like this. Take me somewhere else. What of the dead man?”
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

The final spirit visit concludes. There are many feels.

In response, the spirit brought forth that whirling tunnel once more. Their jaunt in the tunnel spat them out in a dismal, run-down little cemetery. The area was dimly lit; twilight had just gone and there weren’t enough lights interspersed across the grounds to truly illuminate the place. The wind picked up, whipping around dead leaves and bits of refuse and toying with the ends of Thorin’s scarf. It was an odd incongruity if he ever saw one; he was currently a ghost or spirit outside of his own time, unable to been seen or heard, but the wind could lift his scarf with no trouble. He focused on this little detail rather than the multitude of things he’d seen and thoughts he had about each stop. After being overwhelmed with so much to take in, Thorin was struggling to compartmentalise everything well enough to avoid a total breakdown.

Looking around in the dim light, Thorin felt drawn to one specific headstone out of the lot. It was near the crest of a small hill and larger than the others around it. For all it’s prominent position, it looked far less well-kempt than the others. The grass that hadn’t been trampled around the freshly dug and filled grave had been allowed to grow high before frost killed it. It still stuck up, brown and tenacious in patches around the site. Where snow didn’t stick to the headstone, displaced splashes of mud clung to the smoothed surface of the stone, obscuring the name and dates. Or any inscription, if someone cared enough to provide one. Thorin knew without question that this was the grave of the dead man they had been hearing about all evening. That meant it likely that no one would have taken the time to inscribe something meaningful on the stone. Seeing the grave, and the lack of attention given it, Thorin was quite sure he didn’t want to know who’s name was on that stone. Though, if he were truly being honest with himself - which he certainly wasn’t - he already knew.

As Thorin stood morosely at the graveside, studiously resisting mental honesty, a new figure approached. Bilbo was making his way through the cemetery, looking older and greyer, age-softened around the periphery of his person by a scattering of wrinkles. Older Bilbo made his way cautiously over the uneven ground and stopped at the same grave Thorin had himself been drawn towards. Perhaps this had been the spirit’s mystical telepathic hint that whatever Bilbo was here for was important. The focus of this trip had to be Bilbo, not the grave itself.

When Bilbo reached the gravesite, he stopped and everything about him drooped. His shoulders sagged, his head dropped, and the scraggly bouquet in his hand dangled nearly to the ground. Thorin watched as Bilbo stared blankly for what felt like hours at the fresh mound of dirt that had acquired a thin glazing with snow. It must have been fairly recent as this mount was not nearly as frost covered as those nearby.

Thorin studied his assistant as Bilbo visibly collect his thoughts enough to say what was on his mind. He lifted the bouquet and began plucking absentmindedly at the flowers. “It’s… They aren’t much. The flowers. If you were here, you’d probably scoff at them and call them shabby. Likely tell me they were a waste of money. If you even noticed them at all. They’re hardly a grand arrangement of lilies, so they probably wouldn’t even enter into your realm of ‘things to notice.’ But, after all I’ve heard at the office and seen around town the last few days… Well, you deserve this much at least. You deserve to have someone mourn you.
“You weren’t really at your best there, those last few years. Well, maybe those last couple of decades, if I’m really being honest. Which is a horrible thing to admit at someone’s grave. I know that. But someone needs to mourn the young man you were. I know you don’t remember, but I was there, back when you were just a young artist, full of passion. You treated every work, whether it was yours or someone else’s, with the utmost respect. You created complex things that spoke of your innermost hopes and fears. Your regrets. I could see those glistening pieces of your soul in every piece you made.

“It killed me, coming back the next term to hear you were gone, that you gave up a craft and a course of study that was so integral to your spirit. When we met, years later, you were already so changed. And it wasn’t just Dis’ and Vili’s deaths. There was more that had changed you. You gave up your art and slowly lost your soul. But I was there, I knew you before, even if it was only superficially. But that night we shared, the man I saw, especially those pieces of you of you dotted around the art building… well, there was no deception there. There were no lies. I saw the true you and I hoped for years that some kindness, some good person, could help bring that beautiful soul back. And God help me, I wished it could have been me.” His voice grew softer but more forceful, and tears were trickling down both cheeks at this point. Bilbo huffed a breath out and breathed deep, calming himself.

“I mourn that young man who had so much potential for goodness, but more than anything, I regret that I couldn’t be the person you needed. It’s a selfish wish, but, well, I’m human.” He gave a small rueful grin, “Even I have my selfish moments. But mostly I wanted better for you, even if it wasn’t with me. I hoped for so many years that someone would come along, that something would happen, to pull you out of your depression and push you away from your greed-fueled habits. To pull you out of a business you obviously found no joy in. I wish someone had been able to remind you of what you loved, before money and power clouded your judgment.

“But most of all, the selfish part of me wishes I’d been more courageous. I should have told you how I felt. Should have reminded you of just how perfect our one night was. Even if that made me sound like a schoolgirl with a crush, I should have done it. Working for you, spending so many years at your side and never saying? Well, that’s my fault and we have both paid the price. I knew the man you were and I watched you spiral into the man no one wanted you to become. I only wish I had been brave enough to say something. Even if it cost me my job and what little stability I had. I should have said found another way. Should have said. And here you are, dead in the ground and mourned by so few, all because no one cared for you enough to urge you to stop and think. No one loved you enough to try to help. And now it’s too late. Foolish me, thinking there would still be time to fix things.” Bilbo knelt and gently swiped away a bit of snow to place the wilting bouquet across the grave. Thorin wondered, given the arrangement and cuts, if these were the few remains of the man’s personal garden. They were all the more beautiful for it.

Bilbo stayed kneeling with a hand resting on the top of the headstone and a burning need struck Thorin squarely in the chest. Who was Bilbo talking to? Who was Bilbo admitting to decades of pining and love for? That he mourned with such heartfelt words? He turned to the spirit, desperate to know, “Are these the shadows of things that will be, or are they shadows of things that may be only?”

In response the spirit have a deep nod and Thorin knew. “These events can be changed! A life can be made right and Bilbo can be spared so much loss!”

He scrabbled to reach the stone and wipe away the snow and mud. To see the name of the man he’d need to reach, in order to make things right. And there, etched into the stone with such finality, was his own name. A keening moan erupted from him without warning.

The dead man who was mocked by the office staff, whose death was rejoiced in but whose life
was not celebrated. It was him. His miserable existence led him to this. A cold grave and one poor solitary mourner. Even his own family, what was left of them, had been driven off at some point. There was no evidence that even his forgiving nephew had come. And he brought this on himself through greed, through spite.

He kept swiping at the deeply carved letters with bare hands, trying desperately for some way to erase the solid evidence before him. After several passes with no change, he turned to the spirit, still on his knees, and crawled closer. His voice shook with fear and sorrow as he implored, “Please spirit, no! No, don’t let this be the truth of things! Please, hear me! I- I am not the man I was. I have learned much and I am changed for it. Why would you show me this, if I am past all hope? There must be some way! Assure me that I might change these shadows you have shown me by choosing an altered life!”

The spirit remained still, observing but not answering. Thorin turned back to that deceitless stone on which his future was spelled out. He clung to it, trying to ground himself and find answers, seeking some small hope within the terror it promised. “Please,” he murmured to the stone, to the spirit, “please, leave me some way to change all this. I was ignorant of how wrong my ways were, but I see now. I am sorry, for everything I have done. For turning to profit instead of humanity. For choosing my own gain over the well-being of others. And I am so sorry for how badly I have treated those who only deserve the best from me. To Bilbo and Fili. To Dis and Valli and Dwalin. To so many others who came to me for help and received only scorn. I am most sorry that I did not see what a monster I have become. How full of greed I had become. I have been so blind! Bilbo and Fili, they offer me nothing but compassion and love, over and over, and I have only ever turned them away. I am sorry for all of it, and I will change. Give me the chance, Spirit! Allow me to make things right!” He turned to the spirit, eyes glistening and face wrecked from the rasping of emotion he felt. It felt like hours, kneeling on the cold ground and waiting for the spirit to respond. It reached out that same pale hand and Thorin instantly feared he’d be pulled back into that tunnel, or worse. But that hand extended over him and trembled.

“Thorin? Er- Mr. Durin? What- What are you doing up here? You’re...you’re supposed to be…” Bilbo’s voice cut through his thoughts and Thorin looked up to see Bilbo’s gaze shifting rapidly between the mound of icy dirt and where Thorin was crumpled against the headstone. Thorin stared back. In the blink of a tear-filled eye, Bilbo had gone from grey, wrinkled and stooped with age to the young vibrant man Thorin saw near-daily in the present. Bilbo continued to look between his kneeling employer and the covered grave, and it struck Thorin. Bilbo was here. Bilbo could see him. He released his hold on the slab and surged to his feet in one graceless but strong movement.

He was intensely aware that he was standing in front of Bilbo - Bilbo, who had just privately confessed something in the way of strong feelings for him - wearing stained trousers, a rumpled button-up, and his scarf. His hair was likely mussed. He hadn’t shaved. He didn’t even have shoes on. And they were standing in the middle of a dismal snowy cemetery. But the brightness of hope shining in his eyes made Thorin want to crawl forward on his knees, apologise a hundred times, and kiss the man senseless.

“Is this- Am I dreaming? Because, well, I can’t say I’ve ever dreamt a scene quite like this. It’s very odd, don’t you think? But, well, of course you do because this is my dream. You think whatever I expect you to think.” Bilbo was babbling, and it was more endearing than it really should have been.

After the catharsis of his graveside apology, and the flood of feelings coursing through him tinged with hope… Thorin felt rather like he could do anything. He could have flown, if the desire had struck just then. Fortunately, it didn’t because more pressing needs were at hand. And so easily attainable. He faltered forward, legs not quite in sync with his mind. Bilbo’s eyes were following
every miniscule twitch. He looked startled, like his dream was taking an unexpected turn. It made Thorin wonder what about this would have been familiar enough to believe it was a dream to begin with.

He took one long step to bring him across the freshly dug grave without stepping on it. Even though he was not a superstitious man, treading on his own grave felt like the wrong thing to do. It felt callous. And after his grand epiphany, he was avoiding callous behaviour. Call it a twelve step program, except he’d bunched all the steps together into one whopping great moment of contrition. He’d sort out the rest of his dramatic lifestyle change later.

Foremost in this moment, he had a worthy man - a man who cared for him so deeply despite what a beastly person he’d been - standing right in front of him looking somewhere between confused and bemused. And unlike all those previous visits and visions, Bilbo could see him. Was interacting with him. Thorin was willing to bet he could touch without a ghostly hand going straight through.

So of course the logical thing to do, in order to test his theory, was to bear down on the smaller man, grab his head gently by both sides, and answer that befuddled look with a gentle kiss. It was soft and sweet and there was no urgency to do anything but abide in the kiss for as long as they could.

If he weren’t standing next to his own grave some indeterminate time in the potential future, Thorin would have sworn he had somehow made it to heaven. Despite all his previous misdeeds. This one kiss was so much more than all his fogged memories of drunken sex with Bilbo all those years ago.

Fortunately, Bilbo stopped him from going too deep into poetic metaphors about a perfectly aged whiskey. Or continuing his raptures about the afterlife.

Bilbo found his coherent thoughts once more, placed his hands squarely on Thorin’s broad chest, and shoved himself away from Thorin. “What the hell is going on? You were dead in the ground and I was old and now somehow I’ve lost a head full of memories of the life I lived. And here you are, kissing me! As if you weren’t old and dead. As if you care! Dream-Thorin, I want answers, and I want them right now.” He punctuated his final statement with a small stomp, an action more fitting one of his sons. He crossed his arms and glared at Thorin, waiting.

“This isn’t a dream.” At Bilbo’s raised eyebrow, Thorin knew he would have to explain everything. And would likely bungle it horribly. “Or, if it is, this is my dream. Not yours. I’ve been visited by the spirits of Christmas these last three nights. Every night they’ve shown me impossible things. Things I didn’t remember or couldn’t possibly know. It all started with Dwalin coming from the dead to warn me and ended here, seeing my own death. With you as my only mourner.” He grabbed each of Bilbo’s hands in his own. His voice broke as he apologised, “I’m sorry. I’m so so sorry for how poorly I’ve treated you. I’m sorry I was blind to the treasure right in front of me.” He kissed each of Bilbo’s palms and promised, “I have not earned the right to your forgiveness after how abominably I’ve treated you. But know that I am sorry and I have changed. Will change. I am a new man, broken down and built up stronger, so that I may fix my mistakes. Most of all with you.”

Bilbo looked as if he didn’t know what to do with this information. Or possibly was still shocked by the kisses and tenderness Thorin offered. They were very much unexpected from someone of Thorin’s reputation. Suddenly, as if the thought burst forth unannounced, Bilbo was calling him a, “great bloody idiot. I can’t believe it took ghosts and mystical journeys to show you what a twat you were being. I knew you were better than that! I don’t understand what went wrong, but so help me, I will beat the sense into you with your own shoe if you try for that path again! I knew you, years ago. I knew what a lovely person you could be and how could you give up all that for
greed and wealth and a business you don’t even like! I know you doubted me, doubted my abilities, but if you ever try that nonsense again, I’ll-”

Thorin cut him off with another swift kiss before responding, “You’ll do as you’ve always done and provide me with kindness in abundance. Only this time, I’ll actually take what you offer so freely. And hopefully return that kindness to you. I never doubted you, I was just too blinded by avarice to see the goodness you offered me time and again. But I see you now, and I see how worthy you are of more than I could possibly offer.”

Thorin stopped and inhaled slowly and deeply. What came next, he did not want to admit to. Did not want to even voice. But he had to, to make things right. “I… Bilbo, I must apologise. I remember you now, from that university party. From so many other glimpses around the art department. But I forgot, for so long. I had no idea that shining beacon from my university days was you when you were hired. You must know, that night at the party has stayed with me all these years. Even so blinded by greed, I remembered that night when, for a few stolen moments, I felt like all was right with the world. I was going to find you somehow; I made something inspired by you, before I was pulled from the program. You deserve more than the simple apology I offer because I didn’t see you for so long.” He looked up from his hands, nervous at Bilbo’s response, to see the man in question staring at him with tears leaking from the corners of both eyes. He felt emboldened by this response and plowed forward, “I heard every word you said at my graveside about knowing the real me and knowing I was better than I showed the world. You spoke of long-hidden feelings for me. You are so good and so kind. I didn’t deserve your notice, I still don’t. Though I will strive, from now on, to be worthy of you. Please know, even if you choose to do nothing with them, I feel the same.”

That was the outside of enough for Bilbo. He shook his hands loose from the grip Thorin had on them still. Rising up on the balls of his feet, Bilbo looked Thorin in the eyes, pressed his hands on Thorin’s shoulders to rise a bit higher, and kissed him.

That was all the answer Thorin needed. Bilbo was a beautiful forgiving soul. So much kinder than he could ever hope to be. And he was kissing Thorin with everything he had. Thorin wrapped his hands around Bilbo’s waist and pulled him close. It was perfect, holding Bilbo so close, feeling his sweet soft lips nibbling and moving against his. He tugged Bilbo even closer and slipped a hand under the back of his coat and shirt. He found skin as soft as butter and smooth as satin. Thorin was lost to sensation and feeling. And he never wanted to be found, if it stayed like this.

Then those perfect lips pulled away and Bilbo was using both of his hands to nudge him back while trying to simultaneously whack him in the chest. “You idiot. We’re in the middle of a graveyard and you don’t even have a coat or shoes. What were you thinking? No, don’t bother. You just let your hormones run free for the first time in decades. While I’m not necessarily opposed to where this is going, there is plenty to sort out first. And I refuse to bend my own moral code for a quick shag with you, especially in the middle of a cemetery, just because you got overwhelmed by your feelings. If you really mean it, we can discuss it later. After we’ve sorted out a few things. Like that rubbish contract you made Balin and company sign. If you wish to keep their business, it needs to be re-written entirely. And we need a plan to handle SMAUG. They’re small enough now that they can be dealt with, but we cannot allow them to continue growing as they have. And-” Thorin placed a finger over his mouth.

“And it will keep, for the night at least. You’re right, there is much we need to discuss, including your role at Arkenstone.” And didn’t that sound ominous. He backtracked a bit before Bilbo could worry, “I must make at least one more apology tonight, and that is for the harsh words I spoke to you at the office earlier. I trust your judgment in a way I have trusted few in my life. I trust you the same way I trusted Dis. The way I trusted Dwalin. I trust you as if you were family, and I said
things in fear that I did not mean. For that, on top of everything else, I apologise.”

“Yes, well, thank you. We’ll have to come up with some sort of system to ensure you don’t do that in the future. Perhaps something like a swears jar?”

Thorin grinned and continued his interrupted speech, “We can look into that. But I must also affirm your position. I know what it means for you, in terms of providing for your boys. Once Christmas is past, we’ll discuss your role further. But I’m thinking something a bit more... elevated. One which would allow you an assistant and more time at home. I have been unfair to you over the years, and I intend to make up for it.” This last statement saw Bilbo throwing himself around Thorin’s neck and kissing him soundly.

Once the furious pace of kisses slowed, Bilbo pulled back and said, “Thank you.” It was a simple statement, but so suffused with joy that Thorin found himself grinning as well.

Thorin felt a deep peace settle in his heart. He had begun to make amends and change decades of habits and ingrained thoughts. Bilbo was absolutely perfect for him. His continual guidance would keep Thorin from straying down that dark and dismal path once more. But more importantly, Thorin had seen how much of a difference one person could make. He would endeavour to seek out opportunities to do good works and fight the ignorance and greed he encountered.

As he closed his eyes, fully happy in Bilbo’s embrace, he felt the world shift around him. In a metaphorical way. He was still standing in stocking feet in a cemetery hugging his assistant/love of his life. But he was back to himself again, the true self he had started to become as a young man, before his father interfered. Not that he was placing blame. Thorin knew that the choices he made in his life were his own, and he accepted that. Now that he had seen what devastation his actions could bring, he was reforming himself. However, the visits had shown him that his father was the ignition that spurred of a lot of poor choices. Now, Thorin was glad to see himself through Bilbo’s eyes rather than his father’s. He knew he would be better for it, judging himself this way.

Thorin allowed himself a moment to rest with his cheek leaning against top of Bilbo’s head. He felt sure of himself for the first time in decades. They stood wrapped around each other, swaying slightly in the breeze, almost dancing in slow circles but not quite. Bilbo used Thorin’s scarf to tug him down but ended up pulling it away entirely. Thorin shivered as the chill find his warmed skin, but soft hands covered the spot quickly as Bilbo finished the job he started with the scarf. As Bilbo bestowed one final lingering kiss, Thorin closed his eyes once more to soak up every nuance and feeling of this moment.

Behind him, the spirit raised its hand, trembling once again.
Thorin opened his eyes, expecting the chill and the dim light of the cemetery and the soft warmth of Bilbo’s body in his hands. Instead, he was greeted with the very familiar view of brilliant sunlight glinting off the brass of the light fixture above and a pillow clutched gently in his arms.

Was it...had everything been a dream? His body’s response told him it was real, but beyond the lightness he felt, there was no proof. There was no tangible indication that he hadn’t just indulged in too much wine the night before and allowed his imagination free reign. Merlot was a fickle bitch. It was dreams like last night’s that made him regret indulging in the red. Next time, he’d avoid it when already melancholy. Deciding he might as well at least shed his wine-stained trousers, Thorin tossed back the covers. His clothes from the day before were wrecked. His trousers still stained, and it seemed very unlikely they’d be fixable now. His shirt was even more wrinkled than the night before and his scarf was missing entirely. It was probably sitting on his armchair where he left it.

It wasn’t until Thorin bent to remove his socks in anticipation of a hot shower that he noticed it. His socks were absolutely filthy. The dark grey hid most small messes. Slide through a small patch of dust? No problem, it wouldn’t show. But crawl through a snowy muddy mess of a cemetery, well… His socks showed every fleck of dirt he’d acquired tromping across his own (potential) future grave. Now that he looked, his trousers were stained with more than just wine.

It had all been real. Thorin paused, still bent over with one muddy sock gripped tight.

It had all been real! The sock went flying like so much confetti as Thorin threw his hands in the air and released a full-belly laugh. He felt like he could leap from his bedroom window and fly across the city. He was lighter than air and floating towards the clouds with every chuckle that left his lungs. He was a changed man and he would live a life that would make him worthy of Bilbo’s admiration. That would keep him from carting around the chains of his greed for eternity. He would not grow constantly more bitter and mad, as his father and grandfather had done. He was free to live a good life, and live it he would!

And he would start by making amends with the two people who tried their hardest to get through to him: Bilbo and Fili. What better day to start fresh than today.

It was Christmas day. The realisation knocked the wind and the semi-maniacal laughter out of him. He finished stripping quickly so he could shower. There was so much to do and he wanted to get to it quickly!

He rushed through his morning ablutions and dressed quickly. If he’d been shocked and uncertain waking up this morning, Bilbo had to be ten times as confused and wary. He would start Christmas off properly by ensuring his assistant/love/title-yet-to-be-decided had a perfectly merry day. He was perhaps also planning a few pieces of news to ease Bilbo’s worries. Then he would phone his nephew. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d done so except to harangue the young man about working for Arkenstone or quitting his art to focus on business matters. Maybe it would be better if he didn’t call. But he would attend Fili’s Christmas party. For the first time.
Dear God, please let that go well. For as light as he felt, Thorin still worried about being wanted and welcomed at the celebration. He hadn’t been the picture of grace and joy when Fili announced his engagement.

He sagged for a moment, feeling overwhelmed. Then he reached for a tie and forced himself to buck up. There would undoubtedly be growing pains as he shifted to his new life choices, but Thorin would accept them gladly in exchange for the hope he now had. There was no time to think of that now. He had some stops to make and people to bring cheer to.

Thorin set down his carrier bags - he paused for a moment and thanked the retail employees who worked through the holiday - to ring the bell before stepping back and waiting for Bilbo to answer his charmingly cheery green door. Instead of his...Bilbo, he was greeted by the oldest son (Sam?), who took one look at him and told him, in a strained but polite voice, “just one minute, please” before rushing off calling for his father.

Bilbo hurried to the door wrapped in an old quilted dressing gown. He looked concerned as he asked, “Mr. Durin? What- What are you doing here? Is something wrong?”

Thorin frowned. Was it possible Bilbo didn’t remember showing up at the cemetery last night? The spirit may have left Bilbo unable to remember it or under the impression that it was a very odd dream. It was likely, since the message of change was for Thorin, that he was the only one who knew and remembered that emotive cemetery scene. This would be decidedly awkward, if Bilbo’s last remembered interaction with him was a fight and Thorin’s rude words.

Well, time to face a few of those growing pains he’d been dreading. “I- ah- I came to apologise for yesterday. And, ehm, I come bearing some Christmas cheer as a sign of my goodwill. May I come in?”

“Oh, yes, of course. Can’t leave you out in the cold, no matter how…” He drifted off, probably to stop himself from saying something rude. Bilbo looked like he wasn’t fully awake, despite the Christmas morning excitement echoing around the house from his boys.

He was led into the now-familiar living room, which showed - unfortunately - unsurprisingly little detritus of Christmas morning wrappings. But no children. He didn’t know if it was by accident or by design, but the toys and boys he heard from the open front door disappeared before he entered. Thorin shook off the slight unease and gestured at one set of sacks, “I wasn’t sure you’d had the time to do your Christmas shopping, after keeping you late and the busy events of yesterday.”

Smooth Thorin. Well done, alluding to him getting attacked the day before Christmas after being yelled unjustly. Thorin cringed internally but kept his face schooled to a placid expression.

Better to forge ahead. This was an apology for his part in those things, after all. “I brought things. Groceries. For Christmas dinner. In case you hadn’t been to the store.” Knowing how Bilbo’s organizational inclinations usually ran, he had been prepared for days. But the food would keep or supplement what Bilbo had, hopefully. He wanted to provide more than the meagre Christmas dinner he saw while visiting with the spirit.

He also wanted to provide for the boys, even just a bit. Granted, he wasn’t sure exactly what he walked out of the toy store with, but the shop assistant had been cheerful and helpful, so he allowed her to pile a variety of toys and games into bags for him. He raised that set of bags, “And these are for your boys.” He paused. He hadn’t really expected Bilbo to not remember, so he
hadn’t thought of a way to explain it all away as the kindness of an employer. He couldn’t exactly confess that he’d bought things for the boys in the hopes of earning a bit of goodwill from their father. Best not to explain them at all.

“That’s, ah, that’s very kind of you. Thank you. But, Mr. Durin, if it’s not too rude of me, why are you here? It’s early on Christmas morning. Surely there’s somewhere else you would rather be? Or, well, you did give me the time off. Is this about yesterday?” Bilbo was scrutinising him while absently toying with one end of his dressing gown tie.

“No.” He stopped himself and backtracked, “Well, yes, actually. But not in the way you’re thinking. I came to apologise. I should never have allowed my short temper to overrule my treatment of you. I didn’t mean a word I said yesterday and I apologise for them. And for my poor treatment of you in general. You are an excellent assistant and I do not treat you as I ought.” He paused again. How to admit he’d been visited by ghosts who’d shaken sense into him without admitting to witnessing Bilbo’s graveside confession?

“I had my worldview shaken and changed last night, so I came with an apology and news, to hopefully brighten your Christmas.” Deep breath. This was the important bit. Hopefully it would ease the discomfited look on Bilbo’s face. “This is something that should have happened quite a while ago, but I am correcting my errors now. Once you return from your holiday, I’m promoting you. We will discuss the details later, but here is what I felt it necessary to interrupt your Christmas for: the promotion will come with a substantial pay rise. And an increase in your other benefits as well.”

Bilbo’s eyes widened in shock and his mouth moved in a silent ‘o.’ He raised a fist to his mouth and bit softly on a knuckle. “I- Oh dear. This is just- I had a dream last night, but I never imagined… I thought it was just a dream!” He backed the two steps to the sofa and sat back with a soft flump.

Thorin’s mind reeled. A dream? His mouth took action before his brain could catch up, “A very odd dream about seeing me in a cemetery? Perhaps apologising at my own graveside?”

At that, Bilbo looked up at him in shock. “Yes. How did you know? Does that mean… It was real?”

Thorin sighed. If he was going mad, at least he was doing so with the best possible company. He smiled gently at Bilbo and explained, “As I understand it, yes. It was a vision of a future that could be. When I was there, you were an old man, but shifted to your present-self with my change of heart. I’m unsure how that happened, but it was all real in that I remember it just as well as you do. And I meant everything I said to you. Every word.” He stopped to rifle through the various bags, unsure which one he’d put it in. Bag three yielded his quarry, which he immediately passed to Bilbo. “Most everything in the bags is for your sons, but this is for you. I made it years ago. After that night. It was… I meant it as an expression of my past and my hope for the future. Hope that you gave me. But events conspired and I never had the chance to seek out the young man from that party who had been so loving. My father had some…choice words for me, the day I finished it. He said things that hurt me deeply. Probably changed the course of my life, as I reacted to what he said.” Thorin gave a sad soft sigh. He continued softly, “I am glad to give it to you now though. You should have it, as the source of my inspiration then and the power behind my change of heart now.”

Bilbo took the small tree sculpture gently and traced the branches with reverence. “It’s beautiful. Your best piece, I believe. I saw it before, in your office, but I never imagined…”

“That you inspired it? Yes. You should know how brightly your kindness shines from your soul. Everyone who meets you can’t help but see it.” That sent a bright pink tinge across Bilbo’s
cheeks. “Just as you saw something more in me, so I did with you. Even without the connection between you and the man from that happy night, I always felt more for you that I cared to admit, even to myself. And Christmas is a time for spreading joy, so that’s why I came. To bring you a bit of the joy you brought me.” He looked up and saw a couple pairs of eyes glancing around the corner into the room. “But I’m interrupting your Christmas morning, and I’m sure your boys want to share their excitement with you. I should go, leave you to enjoy your time together.” He rose to leave but Bilbo tugged his hand before he could turn away.

His eyes were shining in a mix of sadness and joy that rushed over Thorin in a wave. “Thank you Thorin. So much. I’ll treasure this,” he nodded to the sculpture gently cupped in one hand. “And this day forever. I don’t know if I’ve ever had a Christmas as wonderful as this.” He gave Thorin his brightest smile, tinged around the edges with emotions threatening to spill over as tears. “I should see to my boys and make sure they haven’t caused too much mayhem in their excitement. But you’ll come to Fili’s party tomorrow? I’d like to see you, if you are.”

Thorin matched Bilbo’s smile with a broad grin of his own. “Yes, I had planned to surprise him. It’s about time I put in an appearance at one of his parties.”

Bilbo smiled at him, shy despite recent gushings of sentimentality and deeply-rooted emotions. “I look forward to seeing his face. And more of you.” Bilbo walked him to the door and bussed him quickly on the corner of his mouth then backed a few steps further into the house. “I’ll see you later then. At the party. Tomorrow.” He paused and his voice took on a wistful tone as he wished, “Happy Christmas Thorin.”

He was through the door and halfway down the front walk when Bilbo called out, “Wait! Why don’t you stay for breakfast. If you haven’t eaten. Or just for tea, if you have. Except, well, I’m sure you have family to spend your day with and plenty of other things to do. And we’ll certainly see you for the party tomorrow, so nevermind. I only thought…”

Thorin turned and saw the uncertainty writ across Bilbo’s features. He interrupted before the diminutive man could continue to babble through his insecurity, “As it happens, I have not eaten, and I have nowhere else to be at present. I would love to stay for breakfast.” He was shuffled back into the house and this time Bilbo actually remembered to take his coat after tugging him through the door.

Bilbo urged him to sit and forced a cup of tea into his hands before scurrying off to get dressed. From the pink of his cheeks, Thorin guessed that sitting with company in the living room while still in his night clothes was either too much temptation or too strong a reminder of certain things between them that remained, as yet, undiscussed. Or acted upon. To be fair, Thorin’s mind kept drifting to what lay under the robe. Those torrid thoughts may have shown on his face, just a bit. Since there were four young impressionable boys the next room over, it was best not to act on those thoughts just now. Bilbo must have come to the same conclusion, given his haste to make himself more presentable.

As soon as he was out of the room, Bilbo’s lads came creeping out of the hallway. They all wore looks varying from concerned to upset. They looked him over and he took the time to do the same. Thorin was wary of what the boys would say or do. He hadn’t been around boys this young since Fili had been a child, and even then, he hadn’t really had a clue how to treat him. The problem was taken out of his hands when one of the twins asked, “You’re not here to make Da go to work, are you? Because it’s Christmas and that’s just wrong!”

Thorin bit back a laugh and answered, as seriously as possible, “No, lad, I’m not here to make your Da work on Christmas. I had gifts to deliver, and some food to bring by for your Christmas dinner. And some happy news to bring. Because Christmas is the best time for happy news, right?” The lad who braved the question - and the others behind him - nodded in the affirmative.
“Your Da has gone to get ready for the day, but I suppose you mustn’t wait for him. The things in
the sacks there are for you lads. To share, mind you.” They all nodded again before scooting
closer and glancing into the bags. When they saw the collection of puzzles, games, and small toys,
they began digging into them with more enthusiasm.

There was something joyous about giving gifts and watching them be received with glee. The
twins had simultaneously struck on a card game they had to immediately begin playing. Sam and
Frodo found a book and a dinosaur model-making kit, respectively, which held their attention
quitely fixedly. None of the boys noticed when Bilbo returned to the room until he was
demanding, “Boys, did you remember your manners?”

With that gentle reminder, all four offered effusive thanks and he was wrapped in a rapid but
slightly-sticky hug from the twins. As Bilbo passed by, he tugged on Thorin’s sleeve and nodded,
urging him to follow through the dining room and into kitchen. Once out of earshot of the boys,
Bilbo thanked him again for the gifts, expressing how needless it was to provide them.

“I do know exactly what you earn. And I remember how much one small boy requires to raise, so
I can only imagine how much four of them strain your budget.” He paused, distracted by
memories of a much younger Fili. He shook the thoughts away, intent on fixing things later, not
while he was here with Bilbo. He continued, “Also, they are very important to you. I’m happy to
offer them a bit of extra happiness on your behalf, because it is well within my means to do so.”

“You great flatterer. You hardly need to spoil my boys because you hope to get in my… good
graces.” Thorin thought for sure Bilbo had been insinuating something entirely different, though
the look on his face was pure innocence.

He moved closer to Bilbo and attempted to swoop in for a kiss. He managed it - barely! - before
Bilbo was urging him back and demanding assistance with breakfast preparations. Thorin balked
at that, not because he was being waved away from flustered Bilbo kisses, but because he had no
idea how to cook. “I- I couldn’t possibly. I’ll ruin everything. I should… Maybe I should go
supervise play time?”

“Nonsense! Sam will keep Merry and Pip from causing too much mischief and Frodo is quite
content on his own. Has been as long as I’ve had him. Now, come here and start separating eggs.
I want the yolks in this and you can put the whites in this bowl.” Thorin’s look of bewildered
horror must have been readily apparent, because Bilbo sighed. “I should have known… Here, this
bit is quite simple, you crack like so and use your fingers to separate them. Keep your fingers
close enough together that the yolk won’t break or slip through and the whites will separate
themselves.” Bilbo demonstrated the technique slowly enough for Thorin to follow, but he still felt
unsure. “Now, stop that look. I’ve seen your ability to delicately handle metal. Surely you can
handle a few eggs. Now get cracking! We have breakfast to get on before the boys realise they’re
hungry.”

Thorin looked at the eggs and the demanding face Bilbo wore. Then grinned widely. Things
would really be alright if Bilbo felt comfortable enough to boss him about the kitchen. Despite-
No, especially given that they weren’t intimate. Had barely done more than kiss and cuddle, and
that was when Bilbo thought he was dreaming. They had a long way to go, but Bilbo feeling
comfortable and Thorin allowing himself to be bossed felt like a good omen. Thorin looked
forward to what else the day would bring.

This was shaping up to be the best Christmas he’d ever had, and it was likely the simplest. He had
received no gifts of the physical sort, but what he got instead was infinitely better. Trust,
compassion, the hope of a fresh start… he wouldn’t give those up for all the money in the world.
And that was when Thorin knew he’d truly had a change of heart. The day before, he would have
 gladly given every last ounce of hope or trust for steady business and an increasing income.
Today… Well, he was glad to be wealthy because it allowed him to offer gifts to people who needed things more than he did.

Bilbo’s faith in him, his ready trust that Thorin meant what he said about changing himself was flattering. A bit naive perhaps, but Thorin was willing to ignore that thought completely because of how reassuring it was to have someone so kind on his side. He looked at the future with hope, for himself and for the world.
The next day dawned just as clean and bright as the day before. Logically, Thorin knew the weather was not complicit in keeping his mood light, but it certainly didn’t hurt. It also helped make the daunting task ahead of him seem less onerous. Today he would see his nephew and officially meet Kili. This would happen at a party surrounded by strangers who were likely prepared to place the blame squarely on his shoulders if he put his foot in his mouth. Which, given Thorin’s stellar way with sharing his emotions, was likely to happen.

Still, Thorin had feared Bilbo’s reactions yesterday and that had gone well enough. It had been enough for him to spend the day learning the very basics of cooking and how to play. Thorin had been surprised at just how quickly the time went. It felt like only an hour passed after breakfast, but then he noticed the shadows lengthening across the room. He’d been too wrapped up in working on a surprisingly challenging puzzle with Sam and Frodo. Then he looked up to notice that he’d accidentally spent the entire day in Bilbo’s home. At that point, Bilbo was calling everyone to wash up for supper and Thorin was hustled into the washroom with the boys.

It felt perfectly cosy to spend the day that way. Delicious home-cooked meals, leisurely playtime the likes of which Thorin couldn’t even remember having before, and a few quiet kisses after the boys finally allowed the exhaustion of a happy Christmas to overtake them. Thorin thought, as he was ferried home in a cab, that he would willingly spend every day like that, if given the opportunity.

On further reflection, Bilbo’s influence is probably what helped Fili grow up as well-mannered and well-adjusted as he had. It definitely wasn’t Thorin, who hadn’t stopped to relax in decades. Thorin wasn’t quite sure how to make the shift from cold business-focused uncle to loving and nurturing. Fili was a bit old to offer dinosaur toys and afternoons for puzzle-making. However, Thorin wanted to make it happen, if possible. After seeing how warmly Bilbo’s boys responded to their father, Thorin wished he could have even a tenth of that warmth between himself and Fili.

First steps first: actually attend Fili’s party. The lad had been pestering him to attend one for years and this year, with his engagement, was particularly important. It didn’t dull his nerves any less just because he knew Fili wished for his attendance. He could probably back out; there was still time to do so. He’d never promised Fili he’d attend, only Bilbo.

Damn. The thought of Bilbo’s wide eyes and pouting lips were enough to spur Thorin to at least finish his morning routine.

Then, somewhere after his second cup of coffee Thorin found himself standing at Fili’s door instead of standing on his own stoop to grab the daily newspaper. He wasn’t entirely sure where the morning had gone, but then the door opened and Fili’s shocked face greeted him, so there was no more time to contemplate clocks and insecurity.
He thrust forward the bottle in his hands - a bottle of scotch he really hoped would be savored and not doled out to all and sundry at the party today. Thorin didn’t mean to be miserly, but some things were meant to be savored for their quality, not their cost - and gruffly told Fili, “Happy Christmas nephew. I hope the day finds you well.” God, this was so awkward. Why couldn’t he be more personable, like Bilbo or Fili?

His awkward greeting was enough to jolt Fili back to the present. His nephew shook his head just slightly before smiling brightly and answering, “Of course Uncle, and happy Christmas to you! My celebration is all the better now that you’ve actually accepted my invitation! Come in and take your coat off. We promise to be gentle. Can’t scare you off now that you’ve finally made it to my door.” This last was said with a merry wink. It went a fair way towards making him feel more comfortable.

Fili led him inside with a grip around his elbow. It seemed as if his nephew had been serious about not letting him flee, “Come, let me introduce you to everyone here. There’s Ori, a friend of mine from uni. His brother Nori, over there with the red hair, works with Beorn and his other brother Dori is a solicitor. He’s a much older brother. Maybe half-brother. I never did get the story, but that’s him over there with the silver hair. Then there’s Bofur and Bifur. They’re cousins who work with Dori. They’re the black haired pair over by the fireplace. Bofur’s brother Bombur is the cook at Beorn’s. There are others here too, but they’re Kili’s friends, and I don’t remember all their names. Then I’m sure you know Bilbo, but those are his lads clustered behind the sofa. My little cousins, I call them. The oldest is—”

Thorin cut him off with a soft smile, “Sam. We’ve met. I may have spent my Christmas working a puzzle with Sam and Frodo and playing cards with Merry and Pippin.” He enjoyed the curious look that crossed Fili’s face. He would enjoy a bit of shock value where he could find it, for as long as it would last. His nephew smiled and shook his head, obviously thinking too hard about that mental image.

He followed as Fili led him through the clusters of people. As they stopped, Fili tugged an arm and turned to his uncle. “This is Kili. Kili, my Uncle Thorin.” Instead of shaking the hand Thorin held out, Kili used the hand to tug him closer and hug him while exclaiming, “Uncle!”

Kili was even more exuberant than Fili. He had a brief flash of insight and was instantly glad he hadn’t had opportunity to meet him as a child. Fili just laughed and answered, “Not yet, love. But soon enough.” And there was that smile. It was his mother’s smile, and Thorin felt a pang of sorrow. It was soothed by the knowledge that her son was just as happy and in love as she had been. It was a much better way to remember his dear sister than the image he tended to fixate on. He would work on that, as he pressed forward in life. Dis deserved to be remembered as the vibrant lively woman she had been in life, not the battered body he’d seen in her death. Fili was the best of her, and that would serve as reminder enough.

Thorin grinned and he saw a bit of relief eek onto Fili’s face. It was there in the gentle upturn of his lips and the soft crinkle around his eyes. Thorin was slowly learning it was easier, and generally more pleasant, to respond with happiness than anger or annoyance. “Kili, I’ve heard much about you. I’m glad to welcome you to the family, even thought it has happened legally yet. I see how happy you make my nephew, just from the smiles when he speaks of you.” Kili moved to hug him again, too stunned to actually speak a response. The glint of the cuff he wore caught Thorin’s eye and he intercepted the hug to catch Kili’s arm. He studied it with a carefully assessing eye for a weighty moment before turning to his nephew, “Fili, is this your work?”

“Yes. I hope you don’t mind that I used the Durin knotwork, but I thought it fitting. This is what I used to propose.” Fili had a hard time looking up from the ground as Thorin inspected every tiny detail involved in the simple elegant cuff. Thorin had a sudden flash of his father, and what the old
man had said about his own efforts with metal crafting. He was not his father and he absolutely would not degrade his nephew’s work, no matter how awful it might be. He knew from the way Fili described his crafting and the shows he participated in that Fili was called to this work the way he once felt. No, he was not his father. Fortunately, he didn’t need to find a way to force a compliment about the cuff.

Thorin nodded at his nephew’s admission. “Very fitting. And excellent work. I can see why your work has been selling well, if everything you make is as finely crafted as this.” Fili’s grin was bright enough to blot out the sun and Kili’s was almost as vibrant. Their responses were immediate reinforcement that he’d said the right thing for once.

Kili had apparently been fairly secretive about the cuff before Thorin’s appearance and open acceptance. As soon as Thorin released his arm, the boy rushed from one group to the next, thrusting it out and offering an explanation for it. Fili watched with a wry grin before telling Thorin, “He’s so enthusiastic. I love him for it, but it is sometimes hard to keep up.” He turned to step away then shifted back. “Thank you Uncle. I know we haven’t always gotten on that well, but what you just did? It means more to me than you could possibly understand.”

Ah. A pang of guilt hit him roughly in the solar plexus. Well, here were those growing pains he knew he’d face, and now was the time to start fixing his errors. With Fili staring up at him, he knew it was a good moment to emote a bit more than usual. “Fili, you should know: your mother would be so proud of the man you’ve become. I am not nearly as free with my emotions as she was, but you need to know that. Losing her was hard on me, especially after not speaking to her for so long. I carried that guilt with me, and I imagine I always will. But I should not have allowed that to colour how I treated you. Despite my poor efforts, you have grown into a fine young man so very like your mother. She was the brightest light of my youth, and now you carry that same light within you. I am sorry she is not here to celebrate with you today, but I am proud of the man you’ve become. On her behalf and my own. I see my sister in you, and I believe that she is still with me, through you.” He gave Fili a stilted pat on the shoulder as he tried to ignore the tears welling up and threatening to spill over. That surely wasn’t what Dis would have done, but it was all he could think to do.

He blinked rapidly several times as Fili threw his arms around Thorin and squeezed before letting go quickly. That million-watt smile grew impossibly brighter and Thorin wasn’t entirely sure how he could hold that smile while speaking. “Thank you Uncle. Truly.” The lad must have seen the struggle Thorin was experiencing over his emotional state, because he quietly excused himself and went to join Kili.

What surprised him was Bilbo approaching just after and saying, “That was the best thing I think you’ve ever said.”

In order to distract himself from praise he was very much unused to and uncomfortable with, Thorin quipped, “Are you sure that wasn’t when I told you I’m promoting you?”

Bilbo paused as if considering the two options before smiling softly and replying, “Absolutely not. Your kind words for Fili are something he’s wanted to hear for years, and you just gave them to him without prompting or coercion. It was very much the best thing I’ve ever heard you say.” Bilbo tugged him closer and spoke into his ear, “However, if you were to say something about wanting to rip our clothes off and spend a week in bed, that might come close.”

Thorin was left standing with mouth agape as Bilbo rushed away from him to pull Merry and Pippin down from what appeared to be a curtains-climbing contest. Thorin stood awkwardly as he watched Bilbo weave through the crowd, smiling and waving at other partygoers as he tracked on. Thorin could have followed, but stayed, feeling more than a bit overwhelmed and entirely unsure of the greeting he’d receive from the rest of the crowd.
Fortunately for his worries about being left an awkward wallflower, Kili joined him shortly after Bilbo left. “So, uhm, thanks. For this.” He held up his wrist and wiggled it a bit. “And what you said. Fili was worried what you’d say. Or that you’d be opposed to us. You may not know, but he looks up to you so much. Really values your opinion and wants to make you proud. So.”

Thorin looked over and was surprised by the look Kili was giving him. He expected earnest and cheery, likely because it was the only looks he’d seen the man give. But Kili was dead-serious. It was an expression that seemed very… off on his face. He didn’t quite know how to respond, but his mouth seemed to have other ideas, “I, ehrm- I was in love once. Would you believe that?” At Kili’s surprised look he continued, “No need to pretend. I know exactly what I have been in the past. I’m… turning over a new leaf, I suppose you could say.”

“Oh, ah… That… wasn’t what surprised me? No, I’ve heard what others have said about you, but Fili idolises you, so I knew you couldn’t be as awful as people said.” He paused for a moment, chewing over his thoughts before he spit them out. “It’s just that- Well, I’m not sure how to best say this? You’re really hot. I’ve got Fili and you’ve got rather similar features, so I feel like it’s okay for me to say that to you? You’re quite good-looking and I’m surprised no one has snapped you up yet. That’s all.”

Oh. Thorin stared at Kili, entirely nonplussed, long enough for Kili to start fidgeting under his gaze. “I, well, I thank you for that. Unfortunately, I did not possess the disposition to keep hold of the one I loved, back when it first occurred. I was neither brave nor optimistic enough to fight for what I wanted. So I must commend you and my nephew. You have the courage to do what I could not, and I am happy to see you reaping the rewards.”

Kili beamed and replied, “We are rather lucky. Is there no hope for you?”

Thorin gave a small grin, turning up just the corners of his mouth. “You know, it’s kind of you to point that out. As it turns out, all hope is not lost.” He looked to where Bilbo was trying to corral the octopus-like hands of his lads grabbing at the table full of food. The sight made his smile unconsciously grow a bit more. He felt his eyes soften as he watched the twins carting off plates piled high with goodies while Bilbo trailed after, picking up the bits that dropped.

Kili must have followed his gaze because he gave a quick grin and commented, “Ah, I see. Well Fili will certainly be thrilled. His Uncles Thorin and Bilbo together - what could be better? You’ll be good for each other, I wager.” He strolled off, turning to give Thorin a wink and a tilt of the head before disappearing into the crowd.

The head nod sent him to where Bilbo was seated with all four of his boys. He was busy wiping mouths and minding their manners for them in between bites from his own plate. He wound his way through the group, intent on sitting with them a while and attempting to help. Bilbo might enjoy the party more with a bit less to worry about. However, he spotted a familiar moustache across the room and inspiration struck. Best take care of this now, before he lost his nerve and hid behind his greed again.

He approached the activist and asked, “Are you still looking for help to fight against SMAUG?”

The man turned from the conversation he’d been having - oops, Thorin would notice that before he spoke. Next time - and grinned broadly. “Certainly, Bofur at your service! My cousin Bifur and our associate Dori.” He waved at the two, who turned and continued their conversation in a veiled attempt to give them a bit of privacy while eavesdropping. It looked as though they didn’t want to spook Thorin until they had his agreement in writing. Bofur led them a few steps away from the pair and continued, “You’ve rethought your stance then? No more decreasing the surplus
population for you?"

“Ah, no. Let’s be kind and say I was having a very off day. I’d like to fund your endeavours. As much as possible.”

Bofur’s grin fell in favor of a jaw dropped in shocked. “F- fund us? As much- How much is ‘as much as possible’ anyway?”

“I believe the company has several million set aside for charitable purposes. There are other smaller endeavours we’ve already promised to, but the bulk of it would be yours. I expect you do most of your work abroad?” At the man’s nod, he continued, “We’ll set up a meeting after the holidays are over. Perhaps in the new year?”

It didn’t seem physically possible, but Bofur’s jaw dropped even lower. “Millions? You-Honestly? You’d give us millions?”

“Yes. Much needs to be done to improve conditions and stop SMAUG from spreading their vile ways. We’ll get it all in writing soon enough, but you can count on sufficient funding to see it all done properly. New facilities, pensions, everything.”

He took Thorin’s hand and began shaking it vigorously. “Thank you. Thank you very much indeed! Christmas has just become a great deal merrier! We’ll start drafting everything tomorrow; must be prepared for you sir! We must recognise your generosity, as well. I know! We’ll call it the Durin Foundation, in honor of your generosity!”

Thorin blanched. No, best not go down that road. Certainly better to avoid recognition and give in to greed again. He replied slowly, letting the words percolate in his mind before he released them. “No. Thank you. You’ll have your funding and office space to work from when you’re in town. But I don’t want my name anywhere public. Too much notice for me.” He paused as inspiration struck. “Call it after my sister, if you would. Dis. She was a remarkable woman; died too young, but dedicated her time to helping others. She’d love to have her legacy live on in this way.”

Bofur gave a smile, but the sadness shined in his eyes. “Aye, that we can do. Thank you again sir and merry Christmas!” He moved back to his companions, obviously sharing the happy news, evidenced by their simultaneous beaming smiles.

Bilbo slipped up behind him and wound an arm around his waist. “That was another lovely thing you just did.”

Thorin smiled at him softly, “It felt good to do. I think. I’m still a bit surprised I had the courage to do it.” After a moment and a decided nod, “Yes, it was good. They’ll name it after Dis, and that’s not something I’ll regret. Her memory deserves that. I’ve learnt recently that more of the world needs to learn to value food, cheer, and song the way you do, dearest. We’d all be much better off if we focused on those instead of hoarding wealth or amassing goods. The world would indeed be a merrier place, if everyone lived the way you choose to.”

“You’re doing well so far, on your promise. You’re a changed man, and it’s definitely for the better. You may have learnt something from me after all!” Bilbo was looking up at him and giving him a sappy grin. In that moment, Thorin was so comfortable he forgot about the people surrounding them. He placed his hands on both cheeks, nudged Bilbo’s face up, and kissed him greedily. This would be one aspect of his life that he’d hold on to that tendency towards greed. Then again, kissing was give and take all in one go, and he would give Bilbo just as much happiness as he enjoyed. If not more.

A wolf-whistle broke through the crowd followed by spontaneous applause. Both of which sent
him jolting back from Bilbo. He was sure Fili was leading the charge but he couldn’t quite bring himself to be embarrassed as a charming flush of colour pinked Bilbo’s cheeks. He gave the man one more swift peck before looking up and calling across the room, “Now that you’ve put me in the spotlight nephew, it’s time for you to return the favor. Get your fiddle out. It’s been too long since I last heard you play!”

Fili and Kili both disappeared down the back hall and returned with instruments. As if by magic - or perhaps the preparedness of a familiar group of friends - others began retrieving instruments from bags or pockets. Along with the pair of fiddles, several pipes were produced, a few smaller drums, and Bomber managed to pull out a rather large bodhran from… somewhere. Thorin hadn’t really caught how that one emerged. Soon the room was filled with merry tunes while the young lads threw themselves wholeheartedly into an unscripted dance.

The gathering had gone from feeling awkward - at least for Thorin - to comfortable and welcoming with the addition of music. Several others began dancing with the children, drinks were being passed, and a couple of guests began singing in time with the players. Thorin was prepared to relax and bask quietly in the merriment until he saw little Frodo sitting along the side of the room, out of the way of whirling bodies. The lad looked entirely too morose for a cheery Christmas party, but the reason was evident. He crossed and knelt down next to Frodo’s chair and told the lad, “It must be hard, to watch everyone else being so active in their fun. Next year, you’ll be in the thick of it. I promise. Just hold on a few more days, even though it feels impossible right now. We’ll set up appointments and start the whole long process, so by this time next year you’ll be dancing and winning snowball fights. Anything you want to do, I’ll see to it. Well, so long as your Da says it’s alright. Start your list now and we’ll work on it soon.” He nudged Frodo and, when the lad finally looked up from his lap, gave him a nod that was both encouragement and promise.

Bilbo must have had some sort of radar for when Thorin was being a decent person. As soon as Frodo moved to sit between Fili and Kili, Bilbo was wrapping himself around Thorin once more. As he stood there with his arm around Bilbo - and a reciprocal arm warming his waist - he felt completely content with life for the first time in years. He’d made peace with his nephew, met and welcomed Fili, started talks for charitable works, named it after Dis, and managed to not completely fuck things up with Bilbo after all. He wished his sister could have been there, but knew without a doubt she would finally be happy with the choices he’d made.

He squeezed Bilbo’s shoulder and murmured, just loud enough to be heard over the music, “I’m so glad you’ve forgiven me for all that time I wasted. I’m not sure I’ve ever been as happy as I am right now.”

Bilbo smiled fondly and told him, “Well, it was a bit selfish of me. I had to forgive you so we could stop wasting time and finally get to the enjoying part. I’m going to wring every last moment of happiness I can from our time together. I’m hardly going to hold a grudge and waste time more, now that I have everything I ever wanted.”

Thorin leaned down to kiss him soundly, reveling in the recently-familiar softness of those rosy lips. This kiss was soft and gentle but it held the promise for more: this time, when we went to bed with Bilbo, he’d remember every touch and taste. But it was more than sex. He had the promise of a future unfurling with a man who loved him. There would be sleepy mornings waking up next to a cuddly body. Games and playtime with four energetic boys - something he hadn’t made enough time for with Fili; he wouldn’t waste this opportunity. He looked forward to making a home with Bilbo and the lads, a place where holidays were filled with family and good cheer, not dark rooms and loneliness. He would see more of Fili and Kili; he looked forward to more time with his nephew and getting to know his nephew’s future husband.
All of that was wonderful, a future worth living with excitement. But most importantly, there was Bilbo and the life they would build together, doing good things. He would learn how to value the truly meaningful things in life, and he would not forget the lessons the spirits taught. He rested his cheek against Bilbo’s head and surveyed the crowd. The room full of Christmas merry-makers embodied his hopes for the future. It was a comfort to look at everyone and see a reminder of what good the change of one man could do.

Across the room, Frodo stood on the bench, safely propped between Fili and Kili, and called out a sentiment that echoed Thorin’s thoughts, “God bless us, every one!”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to all of you darling readers for sticking through to the end! I’m so thrilled to have actually finished an entire story (for once), so thank you all for your attention and comments!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!