

Bilbo Blackfect in the City of Taurus

Bilbo Blackfect had been travelling for about three days and had arrived in the middle of the night, when the city gates were still closed and been unable to gain admittance, however there had been no possibility of accidentally passing the City of Taurus. Many people said the City was named after a large, strong Bull, others said the city just smelt like one. It was now sunrise and he surveyed the City from the back of his horse, just outside the large and imposing grimy gates. His clothes were stinking of the filth and grime of travel on the open plains and he felt a great and abiding affection for the city where he had been born... about a 1000 miles away from here on the other side of the Blue Mountains, where they produced a strange drink that was almost but not quite coffee.

"I'll show them!" He remarked to his horse. "It wasn't my fault I was unlucky when I was doing the practical exams. If that maniac hadn't attacked me I would have been successful in making a sale. The riot was nothing to do with me."

Sighing softly, he carefully brushed the worst of the dust from his coat and then encouraged his mount to enter the newly opened gates. Almost immediately a large lance with a bright red and green pennant was lowered in front of him and he tried unsuccessfully to avoid it. Sitting on the ground, he tried to look imposing and intimidate the large guard who was peering down at him.

"What do you want?"

"Business, my good man." Responded Bilbo, with an ingratiating smile, which was totally lost on the unshaven and dirty guard who was wearing a short metal coat with a few daggers tucked in his belt and was anything but good. Bilbo picked himself off the floor and looked back at the guard, who was still trying to understand the meaning of his reply. However, the guard at last waved his lance in Bilbo's direction on the general principle that it couldn't hurt (well not himself anyway). And Bilbo noticed several large and rusty stains, which were visible on the point of the lance; at least he hoped that they were rust. He began to search through his somewhat vague memory of the course the previous year, which described what, he seemed to recall, was the appropriate method of gaining entry in these circumstances. Fortunately at this point his wallet fell from his coat, which was already beginning to look the worse for wear. The guard immediately smiled and gave a vigorous hand gesture under Bilbo's nose.

"That's mine." Bilbo opened his mouth to protest but then decided that perhaps that might not be the best method of gaining entry, and helpfully handed it over. This was then carefully placed inside the guard's jacket and Bilbo was waved into the City by the now happy guard.

A little later, having found his horse, Bilbo was still trying to remember the lesson whilst he followed a well-trod street into the depths of the city. As he walked along this he found himself under observation by silent groups standing in doorways. They seemed to pause in their discussions and eyed him appraisingly so Bilbo gave a happy smile back towards them and after he had passed several tapped their heads and made circling gestures. As he walked along he kept a watch out for somewhere to stay but those that he saw he rejected as being unsuitable. The street seemed to weave it's way around beggars who were lying stretched out on the ground before finally reaching an open market. This was filled with stalls, which had red, blue and gold canopies with silver pennants, which waved in the light wind. As soon as they saw him the sellers became animated and began to beckon and shout out to him as he passed.

"No charge for looking inside! Very special deal for very good quality!"

Bilbo looked impressed. "Bloody good liars," he muttered. A wide variety of goods was being sold or bartered ranging from rusty knives and large coshes to dirty clothes and old, stale food. Thieves were circling around the outside of the small milling crowd and pushed their way through any small groups, which accumulated to fight

over any supposed bargain. Occasionally fights sprung up and daggers were drawn in the midst of loud shouts. Bilbo managed to weave his way through all this relatively unscathed and reached a small alley where a small boy was sitting on some steps, practising how to stab with a dagger. Behind him a large and decrepit sign advertised the premises as being Ye Old Pigs Trotter. "Hey Mister." The small boy cried out. Bilbo paused in his study of the property and looked to see what he wanted. The boy struggled to his feet and came over to Bilbo, drew his knife and then carefully cut a rope, which had been used to tie a large warm green blanket to Bilbo's horse. Removed the blanket and then ran off down the street. Bilbo stared at the figure, which was disappearing in the distance. Finally he shrugged helplessly and continued his study.

Several large bloodstains were visible on the ground and a window to his left was broken with glass still lying in front of it. In the street was a broken chair and some empty bottles.

"At last," thought Bilbo, "Some decent lodgings!" He found a broken rail and carefully hitched his horse to it before entering the dim interior of the Tavern and looking around. Tables and stools were overturned and a drunk was lying in one corner. Bilbo went up to the counter where a large bright red and green parrot was on a perch and peering at him carefully.

"Well, what do you want?"

Bilbo was a little taken aback by this and stared intently at the parrot, without replying.

"Hurry up. What do you want? I've only just finished cleaning up"

"Well, err..." stammered Bilbo, before catching sight of the fierce looking dwarf who was standing behind the counter. "Bilbo Blackfect, at your service."

"I don't need any servants, Mr. Backslid", snarled the dwarf who then turned back to carefully polishing a large and gleaming axe.

"No, I mean err... Could I have some beer?" He finished lamely.

"No, you have to pay for it!"

Bilbo at this point began to feel that the situation could have started off better and felt in his pockets for any odd coins that might be present.

Several drinks later, Bilbo had formed a deep and meaningful relationship with the parrot and the bar had filled up with only three fights to the death so far. And it was whilst the dwarf was dragging the most recent casualty to a trap door in one corner that he decided that it was time for him to reverse the luck which had so far dogged him.

"Excuse me, would you like some insurance?"

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Two hours later Bilbo nursed his drink and felt dejected. Somehow he didn't feel that the sale of the insurance had gone quite to plan. He had admittedly got the cross of the dwarf on the contract, which was now safely inside his coat, but he did feel that there was something missing, like some sort of payment. He tried to remember what exactly had happened. There had been some initial confusion with what he had been asking, with the dwarf coming to the erroneous conclusion that Bilbo was trying to obtain money by threatening to have the bar damaged. He still shuddered mentally at the memory and recalled a very large and bloody axe being sharpened on a large stone behind the bar, with those who had been close to him suddenly edging away and looking in every direction apart from towards him. Which was just as well since Bilbo had found himself gibbering and

crouching on the floor. A position, which didn't seem to have given him a firm bargaining position during the later negotiations to seal the contract. The owner of the bar had seemed to grasp the terms of this extremely quickly. At first he had seemed a little disappointed at the valuation of the property but had put forward some extremely convincing arguments for a rapid and substantial increase, which had involved some careful and prolonged sharpening. Bilbo felt that this had been a most unreasonable argument and that the dwarf was relying on it to a large extent. However he did seem to recall that he had held out for payment. He just wished he could remember what it had been.

Just then he became aware of a large and ferocious dog, which was moving slowly towards him across the floor. It looked battered and torn with one ear, which was hanging off, and saliva was dripping from its mouth, which showed signs of recent and prolonged frothing. Its nose began to wrinkle and crease and it emitted a soft growl, which began to increase in volume, and its body began to quiver in expectation of a large, if somewhat unwilling meal.

"Nice doggy," said Bilbo, hopefully. The doggy, unfortunately didn't seem to think this and Bilbo, feeling alarmed began to search desperately through his pockets. He found what seemed like a bag of money and with newfound glee brought it out, surreptitiously opening it. The sight of some brown and mouldy biscuits greeted him. Remembering the dog, which was staring intently at his throat, he threw the bag in the dog's general direction and was rewarded by this promptly hitting it straight on the nose and braking sending biscuits rolling in all directions. With only a slight and cautious hesitation the dog started to eat these. Meanwhile Bilbo started to edge round the counter and came face to face with the owner, who was looking at him curiously.

"Did you not want your payment then, Mr. Blacktit? I told you they were new only 5 weeks ago."

"Blackfeet!" Shouted Bilbo, who was looking very dismayed with the realisation that he had just thrown away his payment. And at how small this had in fact been.

The whole bar went silent. Everybody stared at Bilbo and the dwarf went very red in the face. "Are you implying that I belong to THAT branch of the family?" He then turned and leaned over the counter and there was a faint grating noise as the axe was lifted up.

Bilbo turned and ran, tripping over the dog, which had been quietly stalking him. In the midst of the ensuing confusion, with the frenzied dog jumping in the air and trying to bite everybody around him and the dwarf grinding his axe, sending sparks into the air, Bilbo somehow managed to reach the doorway and looked back. The whole Tavern was in uproar. On one side two thieves were fighting over a slumped figure. In the centre of the room tables were being smashed and a giant was swinging a broken chair in each hand at anybody who came within reach. There was loud and sustained cursing with figures swinging clubs and swords at each other. In one corner four figures were facing each other over a table upon which lay five aces and a pile of blood red gold, with some more scattered cards on the floor. A second dog had arrived and this had started to attack the first, which was now howling and biting simultaneously. A large jug smashed into the wall beside Bilbo and he fell out of the doorway into the street and then picked himself up, staring at the rail where his horse had been just a few hours earlier.

In its place was a small and evil looking donkey with his bright green blanket lying on its back. Bilbo staggered up to it and looked all around for his horse. Meanwhile the donkey also began to eye him and seemed to start sniggering. At last, realising the awful truth, Bilbo grabbed at the rope attached round the donkeys neck and started to pull. Failing in this he moved behind and gave a great push. Trying to catch his breath, he crouched in the street with his hands pressed between his legs and hoped that there was no lasting damage. He rolled his eyes, moaned and groaned several times. After about five minutes of this he opened his eyes and became aware of two drunken figure standing in front of him and gazing at him in disgust.

"Bloody pervert, why the hell don't they do that in private?"

"They should be locked up."

"Prison is too good for them."

They then grabbed some broken bottles, which were lying in the street and threw them at Bilbo, before staggering off into the darkness and starting to sing to each other.

Bilbo began to gibber and reached out in frenzy for the donkey's tail, which was conveniently within reach.

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Some time later, he was staggering very carefully through the streets, with a large green blanket dragging in the mud behind him, moving towards the city gates.

"At least I've got that bloody contract." He muttered to himself. "Nothing can go wrong with that. The company cannot blame me just because they haven't made much on the first premium."

As he reached the gates there was a loud shout from behind him so he turned and saw the dwarf come running up the narrow street. His arms were windmilling and he looked very animated.

"Oi! Mr. Blacktie. You forgot to give me a claim form for total loss."

"But I explained," said Bilbo. "It only covers fire damage. And you need to have a fire first." It was at this moment that he caught sight of some flames starting to reach into the sky in the general direction of the market and tavern.

The dwarf saw that he had noticed this and merely smiled, nodding his agreement. Bilbo silently fumbled in his jacket and produced a claim form and then turned and went through the gates starting to struggle towards the hills in front of him and the City of Evered, which lay just over the other side of them.

"I can make it," he muttered to himself. "It's just bad luck. At least it's not bloody raining!"

Behind him the dwarf was already starting to walk back towards the now heavily damaged tavern. Trying to decide whether or not he could claim for the three barrels of heating oil that he had used to start the fire. As it started to rain he speeded up his progress.

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