

The Secret Hearth – 1: In the House of Tom Bombadil

“-. .-“

Bungo Baggins led their party to a gently rising hill. The water began to murmur. The white foam glimmered like rolling diamonds in the falling evening, where the river flowed over a short fall. Then suddenly the mists were left behind and the trees came to an end. The dwarves stepped out onto a wide sweep of grass. The river, now small and quick, was leaping carelessly past them, glinting in the shades of the evening and the soft light from the moon that was already showing his face in the sky.

The grass under their boots was smooth and short now, as if it had been mown or shaven. The leaves of the Forest behind were the same, clipped and trim as a hedge. The path was now plain before them, well-tended and bordered with stone. The path went down a hill again ahead of them, and then up again, along smooth hillside of turf all the way to the top of a grassy knoll. There, still high above them on a further slope, were the twinkling lights of a house.

“There be Tom Bombadil’s house, up, down, under hill.”

Nobody replied to the words of Bungo Baggins – Bilbo’s father, really? – as they were all too glad to see the friendly sight. Already half their weariness seemed to leave them, so the dwarves hurried to follow Bungo up to the home. Finally, they stood upon the threshold, and a golden light was all about them.

Kili’s eyes, though, strayed to the sight of the steep land that lay beyond the hill. Though the sun was still out, that place already looked more grey than green. Bare, almost. And beyond it, the dark shapes of hill graves, standing stones and menhirs stalked away into the eastern gloom.

“The Barrow-downs,” Bungo said as he directed them to leave their boots on the porch. “A dreary place, one I’m loath to step upon even when I gather years enough to risk leaving the Forest at all, even just in spirit, but don’t worry about it for now.”

What does he mean?

The dwarves of Thorin’s company – twelve now, as they were still missing Bifur – stepped over a solid stone threshold and felt uncommonly at ease in the space they now found themselves in. The room was long but low, lit by lamps swinging from the roof beams, and there was a large table of dark polished wood covered with many candles, tall and yellow, burning brightly. A short glance was all they got, however, as Bilbo immediately led them further in through another door.

They followed the second oddest hobbit they’d ever met, down a short passage and round a sharp turn, until they came to a low room with a sloping roof.

A penthouse, Kili thought. Built into the north end of the house.

The floor was flagged, and strewn with fresh green rushes. Its walls were of clean stone, but they were mostly covered with green hanging mats and yellow curtains. Four huge mattresses were

there too, laid on the floor along one side and each stacked thick with white blankets. Against the other wall was a long bench holding wide earthenware basins, and beside it stood brown pitchers filled with water, some cold, some steaming hot. There were slippers set ready beside each bed as well, soft and green.

“The two rooms hence are same as this, so fret not for there is room for all. Your sleep will be safe and sound this night. But before the Master of this land returns, all shall freshen some. You shall clean grimy hands, comb out your tangles, cast off your muddy cloaks and wash your weary faces.”

True to his word, they didn't have time enough to do anything past washing and combing out their tangles when Bungo returned and led them back to the first room. The table was now laden with all the foods Bilbo had talked of on the road. And beyond that, in a chair facing the outer door, sat a woman.

She was a fair lady, with long yellow hair rippling down her shoulders, and her gown as green as mountain moss in the evening sunlight streaming through the open windows, shot with silver like beads of dew. Her belt looked to be made of a chain of flag-lilies, golden all, with forget-me-nots in between like pale blue eyes. There were wide vessels of earthenware about her feet as well, green and brown and each holding water so crystal clear that it was like staring up at dancing sunlight from beneath the surface of Durin's Lake. The dwarves might have taken her for an elf queen on a throne set amidst glittering crystal, except none of them felt the inborn enmity that always seized them at the very thought of the elder folk, never mind when faced with one outright.

“Come, good guests!” she said, and as she spoke Kili felt oddly certain that he had heard her clear voice before, many times. Singing. But he was just as certain this was the first time he or anyone he knew had met her. Heard her voice. He found himself the only one who strode forth without hesitation, the others taking only a few cautious steps further into the room. Some half of their company even began to bow low, their movements surprised and awkward, as if they were beggars knocking at a cottage door to beg for a drink of water, only to be answered by a divine maia barefoot on mithril glass.

The lady sprang lightly up and over the water-bowls, and ran laughing towards them, and as she ran her gown rustled softly like the wind in the flowering borders of a river. “Come dear folk!” she said, taking Kili by the hand. “Laugh and be merry, for tonight you are under the roof of Tom Bombadil!”

“So we keep being told,” Thorin said, though he seemed to not be weighed down by his usual dourness. “All the same, fair woman, I would rather know under whose roof I stand. Who is Tom Bombadil?”

“He is,” said Goldberry, staying her swift movements and smiling.

The dwarves looked at her questioningly.

“He is as you will see him,” Goldberry said in answer to their looks. “He is the Master of wood, water, and hill.”

Thorin hummed. “Then all this strange land belongs to him?”

“No indeed!” she answered, and her smile faded. “That would indeed be a burden,” she said lowly as if to herself. “The trees and the grasses and all things growing or living in the land belong each to themselves. Tom Bombadil is the Master. No one has ever caught old Tom leaping on the hill-tops, wading in the water, walking in the forest under light and shadow. He has no fear. Tom Bombadil is master. Thence he comes right now to shut out the night, along with all mist and tree-shadows and deep water!”

It was only then that Kili realized the door they’d come in was still open, and through it now came the sound of someone new singing a song. A deep glad voice was singing carelessly and happily, but it was singing nonsense.

*Hey dol! merry dol! ring a dong dillo!
Ring a dong! hop along! fal lal the minnow!
Tom Bom, jolly Tom, Tom Bombadillo!*

The beat was the same Bungo had kept, but richer, wilder, somehow more fitting like this voice was actually born to it.

*Hey! Come merry dol! derry dol! My darling!
Light goes the weather-wind and the feathered starling.
Down along under Hill, shining in the sunlight,
Waiting on the doorstep for the cold starlight,
There my pretty lady is, River-woman’s daughter,
Slender as the willow-wand, clearer than the water.
Old Tom Bombadil water-hawthorns bringing
Comes hopping home again. Can you hear him singing?
Hey! Come merry dol! derry dol! and merry-o,
Goldberry, Goldberry, merry yellow berry-o!*

Goldberry – for she could be no one else – laughed happily as if she weren’t surrounded by the roughest and crudest dwarrows of all, then lightly she passed them and exited the home to stand on the porch and sing back.

*Old Tom Bombadil is a merry fellow;
Bright blue his jacket is, and his boots are yellow.
Tom’s coming home again water-lilies bringing.
Home, the Hearth Forever, do you hear him singing?*

The man’s voice burst out laughing, but lost no word or breath, still singing loudly and nonsensically as he neared.

*Now let the fun begin! Let us sing together!
Of sun, stars, moon and mist, rain and cloudy weather,
Light on the budding leaf, dew on the feather,*

*Wind on the open hill, bells on the heather,
Reeds by the shady pool, flowers on the water:
Old Tom Bombadil and the River-daughter!*

The air grew lighter. The candle light seemed to glow all the brighter. There was another burst of song, and then suddenly, hopping and dancing up the path, there appeared out of the mists a man, as if he was always there, visible as if at midday despite the twilight. As heavy as any dwarf, but too large for one, if not quite tall enough for one of the men, though he made noise enough for both combined, stumping along with great yellow boots on his thick legs. He had a blue coat and a long brown beard, his eyes were blue and bright, and his face was red as a ripe apple, but creased into a hundred wrinkles of laughter. On his head was a sturdy felt hat, the only thing he wore that looked new, with a long blue feather in the band along the narrow brim. And in his hands he carried on a large leaf as on a tray a small pile of the largest water hawthorns Kili had ever seen.

I swear I didn't know half of these plants by sight last week.

Goldberry ran to meet the man, barefoot on the grass. She jumped to hang from his neck and he spun her around, laughing even as his flower-tray stayed aloft with not a petal startled. Tom and his Lady then walked hand in hand all the way back to the house, where he raised her on the crook of his arm lifted her over the threshold.

The man from my drowning fancy, Kili thought quietly. What is going on?

The others didn't seem to share his realization, but their tongues were every bit as tied as his. No words came to any of them that were good enough to express anything amidst the joy of their hosts. Where was Gimli when you needed him?

“Here's my pretty lady! Here's my Goldberry, clothed all in silver-green with flowers in her girdle!” Tom carried his lady further in and set her back down on her chair, then hopped around, still humming nonsense while tossing and dropping the hawthorns one by one in the earthenware around her chair. The flowers spun as they flew over Goldberry's head and fluttered down onto the water.

Goldberry twirled her hair happily around her finger until he finished, then Tom took her hand and cradled it to his heart. “Is the table laden? And we have guests too, do we?” Tom bowed to the dwarves. “I see yellow cream and honeyed berries, and white bread, and butter. Milk, cheese, and green herbs, and berry jam newly opened. Is that enough for us? Is the supper ready?”

“It is,” said Goldberry. “And so are our guests, though our Bungo perhaps not?”

Tom let her go and walked up to them. He clapped his hands. “Bungo, Bungo! Your guests are fresh and clean, but here you still be as if just come from afield! Taken you again with fuss and bother?”

“Apologies, Master,” the hobbit said. The dwarves had completely forgotten he was there. “But my boy's gone off on a brash whimsy again and I'm all afret.” That's right, Bungo had said that

Bilbo would be here, where was he? “I doubt I’ll be the best company this eve, if he’s in the Barrows as I fear.”

“Then Bungo shall do as Bungo does, just as Bilbo does as Bilbo does, and then you will come back hither and have peace until your fears have flown away with the wind of the hilltop. Goldberry will leave a light for you.”

“My gratitude is yours, as ever. I will gladly partake of your hospitality on my return.” The hobbit bowed at Tom, then them and left the house.

“As for you dwarves, come now, my merry friends, and Tom will dine you!”

Sure enough, the dwarves were all soon seated at the table, four on each side, while at the head sat Goldberry and the Master. It was a long and merry meal. Though they ate as only famished dwarves could eat, the food never seemed to run out. The drink in their drinking-bowls seemed to be clear cold water, but it went down like wine and set free their hearts and their voices. Soon they were singing, more freely and merrier songs than they had done even back at Bag End, as if it was easier and more natural than talking.

Finally, when the night had well and truly fallen, Tom and Goldberry rose and cleared the table swiftly. The dwarves were commanded to sit quiet and enjoy guest right as guests are meant. They were all set in chairs, each with a footstool to his tired feet. There was no sense of a mind to the house like in Bag End, but there was a fire in the wide hearth, which was burning with a sweet smell as if it were built of apple-wood.

When everything was set in order, Tom went around putting out all the lights in the room, except one lamp and a pair of candles at each end of the chimney-shelf. Then Goldberry came to each of them, holding a candle and wishing them each a good night and deep sleep.

“Have peace now,” she said. “Rest your weary bones, and your weary hearts also, until weariness and worry has fully left you. Rest well until the morning! Heed no nightly noises! For nothing passes door and window here save moonlight and starlight and the wind off the hill-top. Good night!” She passed out of the room with a glimmer and a rustle. The sound of her footsteps was like a stream falling gently away downhill over cool stones in the quiet of night.

Tom sat a while beside them in silence. He had no hat now, and his thick brown hair was crowned with rowan leaves.

Each of the dwarves tried to muster the courage to ask one of the many questions he had meant to ask at supper, until sleep gathered on their eyelids. At last Thorin spoke.

“Who and what are you?”

Tom stirred like a man shaken out of a pleasant dream. “Eh, what?”

Kili was surprised not to see any irritation in Thorin’s eyes, even as the identity of this being came to him from a place far older than his mother’s bedtime stories. “He is Forn,” Kili said, somehow not daunted by all the yes suddenly on him, though he did wonder at his certainty. “The One who Belongs to Ancient Days.”

Forn. Orald in Mannish, and Iarwain Ben-adar to the elves. He was said to be a mysterious figure that lived throughout the history of the world. Living in the depths of an old haunted forest, he was said to possess unequaled power, at least in the land around his dwelling. Kili had thought they were all legends and fairy tales, but now he wondered why he ever thought something so foolish.

The others became all abuzz, mumbling and whispering, but Kili only had eyes for Tom.

Thorin was much the same, though he seemed to have other things on his mind than old legends. “What are the hobbits to you?”

“They are themselves of course! Just like Tom is himself and Goldberry is herself and every tree, rock and creature is each of them themselves! Just like you are yourselves, even those of you who don’t know.”

Kili’s drowsiness seemed to him as thick as the darkness of Dwarrowdelf. *Did he just look at me?*

Thorin shook his head. “The Shire seems to think the elder Baggins dead.”

Tom laughed. “He certainly sleeps like one!”

Thorin thinned his lips, though with something like amusement instead of ire like Kili was more used to. “Who and what is Bilbo Baggins?”

“My good dwarrow, I just told you! Bilbo is Bilbo, what more can anyone say outside a song?”

Sounds about right, Kili thought, even as Nori said the same aloud.

Thorin snorted, so Kili decided to risk another word in before reality really took a tumble. “Are you the one who sent Bungo to find us?”

“Nay, it was no plan of mine. Bungo went looking for you himself, to ease Bilbo’s worries when we learned you had wandered this way. Old grey Willow-man, he’s a mighty singer, and it’s hard for folk to escape his cunning mazes, even stout ones like you. Fortunately for you, Bungo knows how to sing a fair Song by now, and Willow-man knows better than to bluster too loud lest his off notes reach far enough to ripple upon the pool of the River-Daughter. He knows what’s in store for him if ever I should walk that way and find it the slightest way in Discord.” Tom nodded as if sleep was taking him again; but he went on in a soft singing voice.

*Each summer’s end I go there, finding water lilies,
In a wide pool, deep and clear, far down Withywindle;
There they open first in spring and there they linger latest.
By that pool so long ago I found the River-daughter,
Fair young Goldberry sitting in the rushes.
Sweet was her singing then, and her heart was beating!*

Tom opened his eyes and looked at them with a sudden glint of blue:

*Could have proved most ill for you, indeed and worse my dwarrows
For not yet do I go down deep, along the forest-water,*

*The year is almost old enough, but Tom's not yet gone passing
Old Man Willow's house this early in the spring-time,
Not till the merry morrow, when the River-daughter
Dances down the withy-path to bathe in the water.*

Tom fell silent again, but this time it was Bofur that couldn't stay quiet anymore. "Tell us, Master, about the Willow-man. What is he? What did he do? Where-would he take our brother? Bungo said he'll be alright, but..."

"Aye, the addled one, I know wherefore he lies, but worry not for him! He had a nasty time of it for a spell, but he is the farthest as can be from ill befalling now. He'll be better than new by the time you're all caught up. Ask not about him again, not until the morning! Now is the time for resting. Some things do harm to speak in vain of, especially when the world is in shadow. Sleep till the morning-light, rest on the pillow! Heed no nightly noise! Fear no grey willow!" Tom stood and smiled jovially. "And fear not for your voyage either! It mightn't be quite as quick as if you'd gone with the elves and wizard onwards, but of lost days you can set worries aside! You'll reach your trolls, elves, goblin kings and eagles, even yon dragon all with plenty time to spare. Come the right morrow you shall be led along the quickest paths and gain one day for each one that you've spent so ably up to now." And with that, Tom took down the lamp and blew it out, and grasping a candle in either hand he led the dwarves out of the room.

Kili was not the only one with a thousand questions still unasked, but he was too drowsy and tongue-tied to ask them, and so was everyone else despite themselves. Nobody had the mind for combs or braids by the time they reached their rooms. The mattresses and pillows were soft as down, and the blankets were of white wool. They had hardly laid themselves on the deep beds and drawn the light covers over them before they were asleep.

In the dead night, Kili dreamed of sleeping. Then he felt a Doom so dire encroaching on his place of rest that he rose to flee before there was a sun and moon in the sky. He moved so slowly that it felt as if his limbs were made of rock. His mind worked so laboriously that the deep caverns themselves changed faster than his thoughts. He was sleepy, heavy, leaden in limb, laggard in mind, no notion of scent, unable to hear, unknowing what voice even was, and blind for his eyelids hung heavy and stiff, unable to rise the slightest crack.

Despite all that, he walked. Though he dared not take his first breath until he emerged from the mountain's womb, he walked. He walked even though his every step took an entire fullness of time as reckoned by stars he could not know. He walked from down to up, from darkness to shadow, from warmth out into cold so callous that his skin frosted over and his beard hung heavy with rime. He walked even as he did not know where he was going except away. Away from Doom, Doom right behind him, Doom that ever gained without chasing, looking, searching, not even knowing of him, but gaining, always growing, forerunning the frightful fortress of the Dark Lord crawling onwards down. He walked and walked and walked until he was still heavy, leaden, haggard, scentless, voiceless and blind, but not quite deaf anymore.

There was a thrum. First in his skin, then his flesh, then his bones, then all of him. It was with him for a thousand thousand footsteps until something warmed and loosened in his ears. A thrum that spoke of life and joy and laughter most good, what else could he do but follow? He followed it. Always away from the Doom he followed it. Always away and scarcely past even the spawn of the Doom it led him, that were the most pernicious and most keen. Until, finally, he reached the Forest. The Forest and its waters that the thrum called from. Called him. Called through. Called forth that he should dive down under. So he did.

And so it was that swimming amidst the black was the first trick he learned, long before he even knew of Hill, Wood and Water. Before Light. Before Wind. Before Music, when he'd barely achieved any sort of thought. Before Stone thawed to Fire inside his mould. Before he got around to finishing living the first day of life upon the world. Before he even learned his first word.

He dove. He sunk. He inhaled the Water. He sunk further endlessly, until the bottom of the abyss began to glow with the distant light of a Fire that even his unmoving, closed and useless eyes could not keep out. Warm and warmer, hotter and brighter the closer it became, hotter and brighter the deeper he sank, even as the water stayed gentle and cool about him as he swam and reached wantonly for the Flame. A blaze ignited within him where it had waited for the merest spark all along. The Fire warmed his bones, his sinews thawed, rapture was the blood flowing through his flesh for the first time, and his heart was beating.

Kili broke through the surface of the water and woke up all at once.

The dream faded with the first glimpse of his now open eyes, a light so bright it felt like he should have gone blind all over again, if not for the singer on the bank of the lake that cast him in his shade. Like he'd sheltered Bifur in the dream before.

Was that Bilbo? Kili wondered. He'd never felt so off-beam in his life. *It was definitely Bilbo, I'm sure of it.*

Kili sat up in his bed, refreshed and wide awake. He felt like he had slept for ages uncounted. Looking around, he saw that it was still the deep of night, though his dwarvish eyes seemed to have even less trouble seeing in the dark than down in the deepest mines. All the others were still sound asleep. Their faces were smooth and relaxed, as if no worries existed for any of them. He looked to his right where Thorin slumbered with not the slightest snore. He looked to his left, to Fili whom he never did anything without.

He got out of bed alone, went to the western window and saw the Forest. It was just as sleepy and quiet as the house, the moonlight vesting the leaves and flowers into eerie shapes on each branch and the underbrush. It was like looking down on to a sloping mosaic-roof from above. There was a fold or channel where the canopy was broken into many winding gaps and splits, the valley of the Withywindle. There was no willow-tree to be seen anywhere. Closer to the home was a flower garden, with crocus flowers and lilacs and many other spring flowers, some in bud, some in full bloom even at midnight. Turning, Kili went to the Eastern window and he saw a kitchen-garden. His view was screened by a tall line of poles already waiting for the climbing vines of beans, and

freshly dug plots beyond them were already sprouting seedlings. The sky was clear and the stars and moon bright, but not a spark of yellow was in the sky in the East.

He stayed there at the window, looking past the garden to the barrow hills beyond for what felt like hours and more. For what he *knew* was more. Dwarves had an inborn ability to tell time's passage, a trait they were said to have been given by Mahal upon their creation, long before the world and stars moved to give Eru's trueborn children something to measure by. Yet now, even as he stood at the window for hours and hours, barely a beat seemed to pass within him. Even the sky barely seemed to change, despite how many of his own breaths Kili counted, and the many times the wind changed and shifted on the hilltop. Through it all, the others slept on, dead to the world.

Beyond the vegetable garden, a stick flew past, followed by a small spotted dog. In their wake walked and hopped the Master himself, humming and whistling his nonsense up until he saw Kili watching from the window. Then he hopped over.

“Good morning, merry friend!” said Tom, opening the eastern window wide. Cool air flowed in but none of the sleepers even twitched. “Sun won't show her face for a while yet, but naught ill seems bent to rouse up any mischief this night either, with the Moon so high on his chariot. Since you're up, how about you join old Tom on a merry-go? We'll go leaping on the hill-tops, nosing wind and weather, wet grass underfoot, starry sky above us. Mayhap we'll even sing to the High Star a song or two, he's ever so grim and stern these years under that crown! And when dawn finally comes, you can go rustle up our hobbits while I waken Goldberry by singing at her window.”

The words came out before he could second-guess them. “What of Bifur?”

“Your errant kin? That's up to him! If he comes over early he'll find breakfast on the table. If he comes late, he'll get grass and rain-water!”

Kili took that for the reassurance it was and joined Tom Bombadil on his nightly wanderings. They roamed the hills, enjoyed the night air, peered inside dens and bird nests, sang to the Moon and Star, and played fetch with the small dog who Tom understood as easily as every other creature, like it was talking mannish. “He's only visiting,” Tom said brightly. “Come dawn he'll be bounding back home to his good old granny and mean grump. Scaredy thing would be your host after me, when your path takes you by their home in yonder shaws! They won't be, but dwell not on sad tidings! Let not the pleasant night be brought down!”

All the while, Tom told and sang Kili many remarkable stories, sometimes as if talking to himself, other times with his bright blue eyes keeping Kili rooted in place from under his thick brows. Kili had expected tales of bees and flowers, of trees and the strange creatures of the Forest, and indeed he learned all of that. But there were other times when Tom spoke of further things, old things. Sometimes he talked as if Kili already knew what he spoke of. The dwarf did not, though he felt like he should, and every word was like a memory returned as if he was recalling something he'd seen or heard or done inside a dream.

Then, too, were low tunes and rhymes of times so ancient that it seemed to Kili as if no dwarf, man or elf even existed in the world. Tom sang of terrible Want and rumbling earth, of cold fire

and warm wind battling for claim upon a world that was yet still a Flame inside an unhatched Egg, and of a mighty ancient laughter that sent the dreadful dark to flight. Kili listened to tales of big-gods and little-gods and plains and hills more ancient than the oldest ocean, and the lords of those places who were at first the sons of spirits of the highest's sons and daughters, then the fathers of the fathers of trees that aged no faster than the hills, and whom the countless years had filled with wisdom and pride and malice.

That malice lingered still, in this Forest that was a survivor of those vast woods forgotten, a hatred of things that go free upon the earth, the destroyers and usurpers that gnaw, bite and break, hack and burn those who once ruled the land. Tom's words revealed to Kili the hearts of trees and their thoughts, so often strange and dark, none more so than Old Man Willow. His heart was rotten but his strength green, a master of the winds, and a song and thought so strong that his grey thirsty spirit drew power out of the earth, and spread through the ground and the air like fine root-threads and invisible twig-fingers, till it had nearly all the trees of the Forest under its dominion from the Hedge to the Barrow Downs.

Suddenly, Tom's tales turned inward into the Forest, dancing down the withy-path to dive deep into the pool of the River-daughter, deep down through the water paths that one could only call open if they had Mastered the right Songs. His tale burst out through a lake's surface into the light of the First Tree, where nothing rots and all things bloom and wait, whole and hale, for when the marred world has been vanquished and the time comes to birth the World Anew from the Womb of the Old.

"The Music made the World, the Secret Fire gave life to the World, and that which was First heard in the World was Laughter." Tom sang in a bouncy tune that somehow didn't not fit the grim tale he was ending. "So it will be again once the final wrangle is done and done with. The Dark Lord will no more abide to grasp wantonly, and so his petty spite, too, will be no more to twist and bury all good things in darkness when he burns himself. The Egg will hatch, the Secret Fire will no more be Secret, and the World will mend and see a right and proper Spring, Unmarred this time."

Tom's words were like a Doom themselves, and Kili would have thought it one of those things that did harm to speak of when the world was in shadow. But unlike the terrible prophecies that doomed the Elves and Turin and Hurin and all those who sought to defy Angmar's Witch-King, this one was not etched from the Discord. It felt like it was being read straight out of the Music itself, and made Kili feel hopeful and sure instead of cold. He always did despise the cold, for he always felt like his blood should be molten hot and his heart a furnace.

"Who are you, master?" Kili asked when his words finally returned. "What are you, really?"

"Eh? Don't you know my name yet? That's the only answer. Tell me, who are you, alone, yourself and nameless? You are the sapling grown from the base of an old tree, but I am older still beyond even its reckoning. Eldest, that's what I am. Mark my words, small unworn friend: Tom was here before the river and the trees. Tom remembers the first raindrop and the first acorn. He made paths before the Big People, and saw the little People arriving. He was here before the Kings and the graves and the Barrow-wights. When the Elves passed westward, Tom was here already, before the seas were bent. Tom sang the first song, laughed the first laugh, and kindled the Fire's light

before there were guests to host and dine. Tom knew the dark under the stars when it was fearless – before the Dark Lord came from Outside.”

A shadow seemed to pass overhead, and the dwarf glaced hastily up at the sky. A cloud was just passing under the moon, casting the night into deeper dark than Kili had seen it since leaving the Blue Mountains. When the Moon showed himself again, he looked back to the Master only to find that he was no longer there. Tom had wandered off and was playing fetch with the dog again. Kili hurried over and opened his mouth to-

“It will be a glad morning today!” Tom said suddenly, derailing Kili’s oncoming words like a runaway mine cart. “Now, my dwarf, go find Bungo!”

Kili, to his own astonishment, was half-way down the hill before he even realized what he was doing.

He found Bungo Baggins where the Forest ended and the Barrow Downs began. The elder hobbit was sitting on the boundary stone and looking eastward, as if he thought that peering hard enough would allow him to see past the twists and turns of the treeless hills. Kili stepped forth to stand next to the hobbit and waited in silence for what felt like weeks, even though the stars barely moved in the sky, and his inner sense of time barely advanced three turns. Finally, he spoke.

“I can see were Bilbo gets it.”

“Do you now?” Bungo asked, his smile quite carefree in that brief moment when he was looking at Kili instead of the grim hills ahead. “Don’t count me out just yet.”

“I’m not.” He really wasn’t. “The Shire seems to think you long dead though.”

“I would’ve been, but Bilbo brought me here instead, and the Master bore me hence into the firelight which abides by no rot or ending.”

Kili dearly wanted to ask, but he knew a set-up for a joke at his expense when he heard one. “Time is strange here.”

“The Master can be corralled by nothing, not plant, no beast or man, not by fear, and not by time if he so likes. And he only ever partakes of company on his own time, even if it means stretching the coda between notes. He used to prefer the natural flow of things, but has since proclaimed that Bilbo mastering the Master’s own goodwill was an omen of more stretchy times.”

“... Can you do the same things as him?”

Bungo laughed. “No indeed! Tom alone is Master here.”

“So you’re his successor? Or Bilbo is?”

Bungo smiled with the air of someone in on just half of some secret joke. “I’ve not quite mastered all that needs be mastered. I can only hope I’ll be able to overcome the last hurdle when the time comes. Alas, for the time to come means Bilbo needs to be in an untenable situation I wouldn’t wish on strangers, never mind my dear son. I’ll be glad when he finally settles down properly.

Then I can go wandering far-off places on my own two feet, maybe, instead of haunting maimed minstrels like a ghost in my sleep.”

Kili suddenly had a hundred new questions, but if the earlier bit had been a setup for a joke at his expense, this seemed ready to put on a whole play. No thank you. “Where is Bilbo, anyway?”

“Out there somewhere,” Bungo vaguely indicated the gloomy Barrows. “Badgering ancient ghosts into fulfilling his whims, as usual. He’s quite the brazen one, my boy.”

You don’t say? “Mister Baggins, I really have no idea what you mean.”

“I’m sure you don’t.”

Well, that was a false vein if ever there was one. “Are you coming on the journey with us?”

“If only!” groused the elder Baggins. “Bilbo is certainly past the stage where he would feel stifled to be loomed over by his father, but I dare not. You lot are trouble. More trouble than even he will handle, I think, before the end. No, I shall stay behind and make way to lift my son up when at last he falters, as a father must. Ah, but fie on such grim talk, I must yet go finish my goodbye surprise!” Suddenly, Bungo hopped off the boundary rock and gave Kili the sort of look he only ever saw on swindlers. “There’s a surprise in store for you lot too, and it wouldn’t do to ruin it! I don’t suppose I can persuade you to go retrieve him?”

Kili immediately said no, but even as it took a fair bit more than a moment this time, he still found himself half-way up the next hill before he realized he’d been blandished into changing his mind.

“I’ll keep a song on!” Bilbo cheerfully called from far behind. “Just listen for it if you can’t find your way back!”

“That can happen?!”

“Well of course, lad! It’s midnight!”

Oh. Right.

Kili traveled down along the floor of the hollow, and around the base of some sturdy, steep hills until he stepped into a deeper, broader valley. He was no ranger, but his steps were as sure as if he’d walked all over these places before. Bungo’s song trailed behind him, not bouncy but somehow fairly-like. With each step he took, each note seemed to last longer before giving way to the next, and the time between his inner time beats got slightly shorter.

Kili didn’t know what he was looking for. There was no tree or stream to guide him, only grass and short springy turf. Even those he barely saw, for though the Moon was bright and the sky clear, it was as if the Barrow-downs had their own mists veiling their secrets. Still, he figured that ‘the biggest predicament around’ was always the right bet with Bilbo Baggins, so he listened for music. And when he still only heard Bungo’s meandering tune behind him, he listened instead for where the silence was deepest and the cries of strange, lonely birds were the most forlorn, and that’s where he went. He traveled over the shoulders of the next hill, and the one valley and the hills behind that, then down their long limbs and up their smooth sides again.

Finally, in both more and less time than he'd have thought, he came to a hill that did not have the same grassy mounds on top as the rest. Instead, the top was wide and flat, like a shallow saucer with a mounded rim. The mist was flowing past him now in shreds and tatters, the wind hissing over the grass. His breath was fogging, and the darkness was near and thick despite the pale and icy moon above. And at the center of the hollow circle was a standing stone, shapeless and cold. It cast a long pitch-black shadow that stretched westward over him, and was bestowed with the significance of either a landmark or warning. Both of which were being currently disregarded.

Bilbo Baggins was at the base of the stone, sat on a long and naked sword while sounding out words and writing them down in ones and twos and threes.

And aside him, like a dark black shadow against the eastern stars, loomed a Barrow-wight that was teaching the hobbit Adûnaic.

