

The Secret Hearth – 2: Propriety Boasts the Singer of Home and Hearth

“-. .-“

Bilbo watched the barrow-wight flutter like a sibilant curtain when Kili crested the hill, only to draw back when it was touched by the light the dwarf emitted in the unseen world. Like the magma glow it evoked, his light singed the dark specter. It was a light he didn't emanate when they'd last seen each other in Sarn Ford, but the core of his nature was the same. The same impervious gem faceted specifically so it directed all light and shadow alike inwards, but whose secret fire was now just a bit too large to fit all inside.

Soon, the wight fled back into the drab mists of the Barrow-Downs, to return to the petty tomb it was tasked to guard. Bilbo collected his things and then he and the dwarf set off on the trip back to Tom's house, neither saying a word.

The naked claymore was left behind where it was. Leaving the better half of the necromantic magic's anchor where Bilbo could use it in the future was just good sense. If the wight could make itself strong enough to physically haul it back so far from its barrow, it would have done it years ago.

It was only when Bungo Baggins' distant, drawling tunes became once again recognizable as a song that Kili finally spoke up.

“That thing felt wrong. And it looked wrong.”

“What did it look like?”

“It's not the same to everyone?”

“I don't know, Tom's not one for plain descriptions and I've not had anyone else to ask.”

Kili seemed disbelieving at something, but he didn't ask... whatever it was that had passed through his head. “I saw a shadow with a pale, icy light gleaming from what would be its eyes. Its voice was deep, hollow and cold. Just sharing the same air felt like I was trying to breathe ice.”

“Yes, that's what it's like for me as well.”

“You handled it better than I would have, that's for sure,” Kili muttered. He was probably wrong about that. “What exactly was that thing anyway?”

“A man's spirit denied rest by his dark master,” Bilbo replied. “He was of Númenóre once, but then he followed the rest of the mindless crowd into worshipping Morgoth at Sauron's behest. They've been slaves ever since, used by the Dark Lord and his minions to inflict all manner of terrors and torments on the remnants of the free peoples. The Witch-King of Angmar sent these ones here, to the Barrow-downs, in order to prevent the resurrection of the destroyed Dúnedain kingdom of Cardolan. The barrows here aren't just tombs, they're also treasure stashes. Gold, jewels, artefacts, weapons and other things.”

“Everything you might need for a second founding. Or rebellion.” Kili’s thoughtful hum turned into an incredulous stare. “By Mahal’s pickaxe, how did you get them to talk to you, never mind... teach you things?”

“Not them, just the one. Not all traitors are made equal. The greatest of the wights abide in the sepulcher of the last prince of Cardolan, and I was only ever there once, with Tom. This one, well, he’s even weaker and more cowardly in death than he was in life. We matched fëa against fëa and he lost.”

It had been his best musical improvisation up to that point, if Bilbo did say so himself.

Judging by Kili’s face, though, that wasn’t enough for the good dwarf.

Bilbo grinned. “Of all the fell spirits here, that one was among the more skeptical about betraying the realm of Westernesse when alive, but it still did so because it was vaguely uncomfortable with the idea of disagreeing with the rest of the cult. Now, in undeath, it betrays its equally shackled kin and distant master just as readily, simply because the consequences threatened and demonstrated by us busybodies next door are closer. More immediate.”

The dwarf prince seemed most put off. “What could anyone possibly do to coerce a creature like that?”

“Make them remember.” Bilbo tapped the strap of the fiddle hanging from his shoulder. “Songs can bring up any number of feelings in listeners. Emotions, memories, dreams, aspirations, *memories* of dreams and aspirations. With enough practice and heart put in, you can even affect others in more profound ways.”

“I suppose *you* certainly can,” the dwarf muttered.

“A mindless sycophant handles it very poorly indeed, when he is forced to recognize his foolishness. Then, too, it suffers when made to remember the time in the past when he was worth something. Such a wretch as that will do nigh everything, offer whatever prize you want in exchange for being allowed to retreat back into the mercy of mindless oblivion. The cowardly and self-deluded do not handle self-reflection well, and self-loathing even less.”

“So it’s like being blackout drunk all the time, except then you come along and sing it sober, which gives it the most horrid hangover of its life – unlife, whatever.” Kili explained in the characteristic dwarf manner. “Spiritually.”

Bilbo laughed. “Yes, I learn foreign tongues and affect all manner of mischief by giving evil spirits hangovers, certainly, why not?”

Bilbo liked to think the creature remembered something of its eminently superior condition during the time of Numenor, and that it always succumbed to his binding incantations at least in some part voluntarily. Perhaps in some secret bid to defy its dark masters like it had never dared before. To cast fort into the world at least *some* echo of the Isle of Elenna and its denizens, when they were still noble and alive.

The hobbit wasn’t going to hold his breath though.

He also had to find some other wording for that. These days he could hold his breath for as long as he could stretch a note, which was actually a fair chunk of time.

“Bilbo!” came his father’s relieved cry from ahead. The older hobbit shouldered his lute and rushed to the very edge of the boundary where he proceeded to wring his hands impatiently. “Lad, would it kill you not to go on a megrim when I least like it? It’s not as if we get much time together! Let a father have some time with his son, even if it’s the most flighty, self-absorbed and selfish son that ever was!”

“What’s that now?” Bilbo said blandly as he and Kili finally passed back into the *undisputed* part of Tom’s domain. “Is that – ooph!” He grunted at his father’s enthusiastic hug. “Is that *lies* I hear? For shame, dad, honestly!”

“Goodness me, to be slandered by my own blood!” Bungo let go with a groan most dramatic. “See if I give you your parting gift now, you grasslark!”

“That’s definitely a lie,” Bilbo said mildly, setting for Tom’s home in lockstep with his dad, while Kili trailed behind. “The odds are poor indeed, that you’ll keep anything back when there’s a good chance this lot will get me killed and you’ll never see me again.”

“Don’t try me,” Bungo harrumphed. Any overt fear at that dreadful possibility was kept unvoiced and unseen. It was that same old practicality which had seen the older hobbit build his wife a home with her own money. For part of it, anyway. Bag End had been more than even a Took dowry could cover on its own.

Bungo looked back over his shoulder. “A fine work corralling him for me, Master Kili. I’d say I’m in your debt, but you and yours are going to be leaving this place far better off than I’ll be left in the parting, so my thanks is all you’re getting.”

“I didn’t actually do anything,” Kili sad modestly. “The Barrow-wight just left and then we walked back.”

“A Barrow-wight?! Again!” Bungo balked. “Bilbo, must you? Why do you do this to your poor, woebegone old man!”

“Oh come off it, I didn’t do it to you,” Bilbo scoffed primly. “I did it to me, you just insist on becoming self-inflicted emotional collateral every time.”

“You see? This is what I have to deal with!” Bungo complained to Kili. “Take a good look at what he puts me through, lad, because you’re all next.”

Now that was neither fine nor dander! “Now see here!”

Bilbo and Bungo bickered all the way back to Tom’s kitchen-garden. It was a grand old time, Bilbo wished they could do it more often. Or at least for longer. Alas, it took a lot of thinking time to come up with material good enough to use in contests of caterwauling, even with months and years between them depending on how Tom’s time stretched. There were only so many put-upons even the most accomplished of wordsmiths could fletch for his quiver of kvetching, especially when propriety demanded no repeat performances.

Truly, the trials of a gentlehobbit's life had no end.

When they arrived, there was no one to greet them except little Roverandom, who ran over to bark and babble, hopping on his hindlegs while gesticulating wildly with his forelimbs. The frustrated dog then tugged on their bootstraps to follow him to the other side of the property, blabbering all the while in a vain attempt to make Kili understand that he really should hurry up already, there's dwarves crying afoot and it's all his fault, it's not every day that a lackwit regains his wits you know, you gotta come see, you just gotta, tell him Bilbo, Bungo make Bilbo tell him, just tell the silly dwarf already why don't you, you just gotta!

"What happened to him?" Kili worriedly whispered to Bilbo when the dog began running ahead and back in impatient distress at their pace. "I can almost understand him now, somehow, and he's – he wasn't like this last night, he's mucky and – and purple!"

"Don't worry about it," Bilbo waved. "He just took a dive in Tom's wine again, he'll be back to normal by tomorrow. Well..." Bilbo eyed the dog skeptically. "The purple in his fur might take a while to fade, and there'll be a tad more bravery in him than usual for a spell. He might be prone to gesticulating helplessly like a two-legged for the while, when something startles him, but he'll be fine."

"Who cares about him, I'm more worried about us, did you see his jaw strength? He just crushed that pebble between his teeth!"

"He only did that because he's stressed."

"If that's him afraid, I don't want to see what courage looks like."

"Wait till you see him in a boat."

That was when they turned the hill and saw the others gathered around the whole, hale and exasperated form of the one dwarf who'd been absent since the Willow-man.

"There he is now, the little *nitwit*!" Yelled the voice that had never more than muttered in dwarven before.

Kili came to a sudden, open-mouthed halt at hearing and seeing Bifur holler at him. In *Westron*.

"You nitwit, you left me!" Bifur stormed over in their direction, yelling the whole time. "You just left me, you dragged my halfwit arse through half the forest only to dump me on the banks of a lake of fire and just left me, you just left me there for my skull to melt all over my brain like an overstuffed smelter, the sod did you do that for?!"

Kili stared in shock at the elder Ur bother. At the dwarf's face. The dwarf's forehead that had no axe stuck in it. Not even traces of it. There wasn't even a scar.

"Don't you just stand and stare there, you can't fool me! There's only one lackwit in this company and it ain't you!"

"Well you's not a lackwit either no more!" Bofur blubbered over where he was sobbing big, fat, happy tears in his hat. "You was but now you's not!"

“I ain’t talking ‘bout me!” Bifur turned abruptly from his Kili-aimed stampede to snap back. “Forgesmith’s beard, you’ve turned into a complete crybaby since I got axed, what’ll mam say?”

“She’ll be cryin’ into this ‘ere hat wimme an’ you know it!” Bofur bawled.

“Oh get a hold o’ yourself,” the fat Bombur snapped as if his own red eyes hadn’t dug deep trenches down his flabby cheeks. He was also making a fair bid at emptying their travel rations with his stress-eating. “You’re just embarrassin’ us both!”

“All *three* of us, Maker, at least Bofur can still count, and people wonder who I mean when-!” Bifur pinched his nose. “How you two made it so long without being eaten by a troll, I haven’t the foggiest.”

Bilbo leaned towards Kili. “Rather gruff dwarrow that one, can’t blame you for leaving him behind.”

“What are you two even *talking* about?” Kili erupted, which had the unfortunate effect of reminding Bifur that he was supposed to be on a squall. “No! Don’t you start with me! The last time I saw you, you got tossed in the lake! Only you never showed back up!”

“And who’s fault is that?!”

Bilbo discreetly backed away once the confused argument was properly underway. Not because he was afraid, but because it wasn’t his place to get involved.

No, really.

Also, Kili didn’t seem to realize that his gone-a-wandering of the day before hadn’t, in fact, been just a dying delusion from being tossed into Grumpy Willow-man’s waters to drown.

Bilbo would rather not be around for when Kili did realize the truth, and consequently began asking pointed questions about whether or not he’d hallucinated the lake, the tree, the light, Tom, Bungo and Bilbo himself as well.

Which he hadn’t, why, the very idea was just silly. To think anyone could ever dream up that there music they all played together, the very notion was just preposterous, cofusticate and bebother these dwarves, honestly!

“That wasn’t a dream?” Bilbo barely caught Kili muttering to himself amidst the arguing, just before he moved out of earshot. Well, normal earshot, he could still hear the ruckus just fine.

Alas, for the hobbit, though dwarves couldn’t easily be called stealthy or light-footed, the ongoing bluster did serve to mask normal footsteps very thoroughly. It *didn’t* prevent Bilbo from noticing Dwalin plant himself in the middle of his escape route, but it did enough that it would be bad form to evade him. The dwarf had made his deft escape from the drama before the three of them even arrived. And since he *wasn’t* with the brooding Thorin up on the bench by the porch, that meant he wanted something from him specifically.

“Master Baggins,” Dwalin said gruffly – no, not gruffly, if just barely. *Politely*. “Master Tom’s got a thoroughly well-appointed home here. And stores.”

“I’m sure he’d appreciate the praise directly even more.”

Dwalin gave Bilbo a complicated look. He then looked at the delirious happiness of the Ur brothers for a long breath of time, before turning his eyes back to the hobbit with some manner of emotion even Bilbo couldn’t decipher. “Master Hobbit, I think we’ve had enough of disguises and fakery. At least I have.”

What did he mean? Or did he find something out? Did Tom tell him something? Maybe something he hadn’t even told Bilbo, you never knew with the Master. “Such has always been my position on most matters, yes.”

“I’ll be asking you about the stuff that’s not among the ‘most’ there,” Dwalin promised. Warned. “Later.”

“I may or may not answer. Later.” Bilbo replied in kind. “Sounds like there might be something more immediately on your mind, though.”

“There is.” Dwalin hesitated. In embarrassment, Bilbo thought, though the look in his eyes was hard and defiant. “Is the Master as well supplied with, um, personal care products let’s call ‘em?”

Bilbo blinked. He couldn’t help but give the big, brawny, rugged, balding dwarf a good once-over. “As in what sort, exactly?”

Dwalin rolled his eyes. “As in things that might work as hair dyes.” He practically glared at Bilbo then. “And ‘specially the reverse.”

Oh.

Oh.

Dwarves have had to make themselves look less conspicuous when traveling, haven’t they? More and more as time passed since the last of Arnor’s legacy kingdoms failed, and nobody couldn’t be sure anymore how many bad men were mixed with the good. Not only were dwarves’ colorful hair and beards an eyesore to those trained and raised to hate beauty and whimsy, it also worked as an added way to give away important lineages. Bilbo hadn’t had cause to think about it until now, but it didn’t much make sense that Fili and Kili had different colors of hair. They were nigh-identical in every other sense, despite not being twins. Also, both their parents and grandparents were blond, that much he’d learned off-hand when he was in Ered Luin.

Come to think of it, Thorin shouldn’t have dark hair either. Even if he was an outlier in his family, he was too old for it regardless. And that short beard of his was, quite literally, a sacrilege.

But, if you wanted to give the impression that you’re less affluent than you are... And if you wanted to obscure just how many among your lot are dwarves of a certain royal lineage, because you’re going on a quest that would call literally every malcontent to seek a piece of you and yours if they knew anything of what you were up to...

Even though it was never going to work because of the personalities involved.

Truly nothing can pass through Tom Bombadil's house without finding some manner of healing, Bilbo thought quietly. Even the dwarven spirit.

“Come with me.”

Bilbo led Dwalin inside the house and bid him wait in the den while he went to talk to Goldberry. Thankfully, it was still early enough that they hadn't broken fast, so Goldberry was still inside instead of out floating amidst the rising dew mists. He communicated Dwalin's request, and then his own assumptions about what and why he was asking. The River-Daughter merrily passed Bilbo the job to finish getting breakfast ready and skipped out to take the dwarf by the hands and lead him further in, then out of the house to what he needed.

Dwalin was thoroughly flustered, as well he should at holding hands with another man's lady who was also an embodiment of such daintiness, but followed where he was led.

Since it was a nice day outside, and the dwarrows liked their drama as long and well done as a boar on a spit, Bilbo was able to lay out breakfast on the garden table without them noticing until he rung the triangle bell. He then made his excuses and left them to it. That didn't mean he went hungry of course, perish the thought, he just made sure to eat his fill in bits and pieces and tasting everything being served.

The dwarves asked him to sit down to eat with them of course, very enthusiastically too. They were, in fact, practically *demanding* of his presence on account of the harrowing adventure they'd endured for his sake, though they still behaved a lot more politely and considerate compared to before. Why, Thorin himself never more than grunted!

Fortunately, Tom showed up singing and laughing and soon had the dwarves doing as proper guests ought, so Bilbo was able to demur on account of wanting to wash the pans before they crusted. It wasn't even a lie, he did in fact take the more gunky ones to the stream out back to clean them. While he was doing that, he looked downriver and spotted trails of new colors in the running stream. Murky ones.

With his keen sight, he identified what looked like limewash, except brown. Trails of foamy murk flowed into the main stream, coming from the tributary brook one hill over, downriver from where he was. From where the bathing spot was. Trickle, splashes, and traces of dark brown in the otherwise crystal-clear water. Drab pigment and stain was mixed with what might have been chalk and some sort of oil.

Dwalin wasn't with the others, Bilbo recalled as he rinsed the last skillet. If he's missing breakfast, it must be very important.

Bilbo put the pans away and then made his real escape while the others indulged themselves. As sympathetic as he'd grown towards the dwarves compared to the first night in Bag End, the reality was that he'd split off from Thorin's Company for more than a whim. He'd come here for a reason he wasn't going to abandon just because they'd decided to stick their nose into his business in spite of his wishes. Again.

Leaving the dishes on their rack to dry, he left the kitchen, paused at the exit from the house for a moment's thought, then doubled back and prepared an extra serving of food for Dwalin. Only because he was curious, so he may as well bring an offering.

The things I do for hospitality, Bilbo huffed quietly to himself as he left Tom's house through the other door

Alas, he was waylaid by an all-new, same-old distraction not long after he left the house, and it wasn't even a dwarf this time. It was Bungo Baggins, who was just as stubborn about following through on *his* reason for being there as Bilbo himself.

"I figured you'd abscond this way, son. Seems I might finally be getting the hang of your off-notes."

Bilbo was affronted. "I don't strike off-notes!"

"You're building up to one, you are, give it a month or five."

"How ominous," Bilbo said with disquiet he didn't show.

Good old dad was being unusually active this time. And constantly around. Come to think of it, ever since Bilbo had dragged him all the way here instead of letting the unnatural way of sickness run its course, Bungo Baggins hadn't spent so much time awake and away from the First Tree in... *ever*.

Bungo smirked at him. Bilbo wasn't the only one with a keen mind for unspoken words, alas. Not anymore.

Not here.

"I spend a lot more time out and about than you think, my boy," Bungo said blithely. "I just never tell *you*."

"Really?" Bilbo asked skeptically. "Why is that?"

"Because then it wouldn't be a surprise. Come this way, if you don't mind. Actually, best come along even if you do mind."

"Wouldn't what be a surprise?" Bilbo asked, to no reply. He sighed and dragged his feet. "Can this wait?" Bilbo motioned with the plate. "One of our guests is at risk of going without."

"*Tom's* guest, and the Missus has already seen to him. Bring the plate with you, though, you'll not let it go to waste, I'm sure."

Now, Bilbo's curiosity at this new mystery more than matched his curiosity at what Dwalin was up to. He shrugged and did as his dad bid. He followed him.

Bilbo Baggins Followed Bungo Baggins up, down, across the hill, then the next hill over to the gully between the last and next-to-last mounds *not* bordering the Barrow-downs which still existed within Tom's territory. Uphill, downhill, through the clearest and liveliest glade, to a not-

so-busy and certainly thicker and closer part of the forest, which Tom had ordered Bilbo never to step foot in.

Bilbo had never sensed any strange or dark machinations from the place, but he'd assumed Tom had a good reason for his command. Quite possibly related to all the owls roosting and hooting around the place, those things were tiny pillows filled with seething hatred. At least that's what Bungo always said about them.

Perhaps Bilbo *should* have thought twice about it.

There was a door in the side of the hill.

A round, green door.

Bilbo stopped and stared. He felt like the rest of the world had stopped completely as well, every bit as much as Tom Bombadil's penchant for pausing after and before the codas of the First Music.

"... That can't be what I think it is."

"It took a fair bit of hands-on work, but everything goes faster the second time," Bungo said proudly. "Who better for the job than the one hobbit who built it in the first place, eh?"

Bilbo didn't say anything else immediately. He was too thunderstruck.

Bungo waited.

"Is... this why Tom told me never to come here?"

"He was kind enough to grant me this small favor."

Bilbo had never been more thoroughly rooted in a single spot. "If that's what you consider a small favor, what even is a big favor?"

"You're perfectly right, 'build my flighty grown-up son an entire second home away from home' would be quite high up there, wouldn't you say?"

Bilbo didn't say. He stood and looked at the door to Bag End and didn't have it in him to say anything. The door was the same type of wood, the same hinges, same green paint, even the individual boards were the exact same size, shape and order.

In any other place, from any other person, he might just smile or scowl at the ridiculous idea that Bag End could have any manner of equal. But this was not any other place or any other person. This was the Old Forest, Tom's demesne sat above the-

"Naturally, it's fully furnished and otherwise appointed as much as was within my means as a single hobbit with access to all the timber and time in the world – and the second-best contacts beyond the woods of course – but alas... it remains a mere copy. A nigh perfect one, if I may say so, but still wholly lifeless. Empty." Bungo treated his son to a most meaningful gaze. "As always, the spirit of a place must spring whole from its master."

But Bilbo wasn't Master here.

... Then again, you didn't need to be the Master to have power and claim of your own, if it was freely won.

Or granted.

Bilbo looked back in the direction of Tom's hill, then back to Bag End. Again. And again several times.

Bungo tapped his son on the shoulder. "I'll let you settle in." Then he left.

Bilbo Baggins stood at the threshold of Bag End for... he didn't even know. Didn't keep track. He only roused from his stupor when the noon sun peaked over the treetops to warm him. The treetops bordered the... actually quite sizable front yard that Bungo had also toiled to clear out. However he'd done it. He'd done the same to a fair length of the path they'd followed here as well. Even found and placed paving stones from the door all the way to the fenced-off brook running between the hillocks.

With how big some of the trees were around here, Bungo had to have had some help from someone. More than one someone. Big and brawny someones. No. really, what did dad do, charm bears to do his heavy lifting?

Willow-man claims the trees as his kingdom, Bilbo thought. He must have been absolutely furious to see all of these ones cut down.

Bilbo hadn't really wondered at Bungo's rapidly growing skill in handling Old Man Willow's rages, but now it all made sense. By necessity, he'd had whole years of practice.

Bilbo reached out, turned the knob and pushed. The door opened inward with nary a creak. He stepped over the threshold. The sunlight followed him inside, warm and joyous. The entrance hall looked identical to the one in Hobbiton, save for the fresh new woodwork and varnish. The floor, the walls, the paneling, the furniture, even mother's glory box were perfectly recreated.

So it was that the first thing that was heard in Bag End was laughter.

“-. .-“

Bilbo wandered the hallways and rooms for a long time. The smial had the same style, the same proportions, the same number of rooms and corridors, the same kind of candelabra hanging from the ceiling, and Bilbo knew Bungo couldn't have made those, he was no smith. Neither was Tom, technically, but surely he could do anything he put his mind to. Or did they just get them on order, from Bree or some other place?

Maybe it was all done in Buckland and nobody saw fit to tell Bilbo. Or they didn't know? Or pretended to? *Gorbadoc Brandybuck, you sly old cat.* Bilbo was going to have words next time he stopped by, if the dragon didn't eat him.

Bag End didn't have any of the newer additions or changes to the amenities. It didn't have any crockery or cutlery, for example, besides the most basic sets lovingly carved from apple wood. Nor any of the books and pictures. It certainly had none of the touches of a lived-in home, despite Bungo Baggins having arguably an even greater right to the place.

But for all that, here it was. Home. And here he was too, Bilbo Baggins. He'd traveled to the liminal boundary of the Eldest's realm, delved into the deepest depths of the Old Forest that he'd not been given leave to delve before, and now that he had, here he was. In Bag End.

There was wood already collected, so he lit fire in the hearth and watched the merry blaze. He was satisfied to see that the flame caught quickly. The smoke fled through the chimney just as well as ever too. His father had even recreated the old rocking chair, so Bilbo climbed in it and sat there. Thinking. Wondering.

He played mindless tunes on his flute. He plucked at his lute. He rubbed at his fiddle strings. He strung and hummed and plucked while wondering at what new song to sing for the occasion. He wondered about that for what felt like an entire day and night, despite that the sunlight in the windows didn't seem to move more than a foot.

Finally, he decided he could come up with no new song that was fitting. He decided new songs didn't fit the occasion at all.

It wasn't new tunes he needed, but the old.

So he sang those instead. Every song that was sung in Bag End, those were the ones he played, in the exact same order that they were first heard within the smial's walls the first time around.

The music sprung from him. Songs were sung anew, in perfect pitch with not a note out of place, save when he'd done something different the first time around. He didn't remember many things without writing them down on a schedule, but for music his memory was perfect. Sad songs, merry songs, slow ones, fast ones, and everything in between. They came in the same order that they had been played in Bag End the first time, on big occasions and small occasions, and most often on no occasion at all. When his fingers tired, his voice lulled the rooms and hallways awake. When his voice tired, he plucked and ran his bow over strings while eating and drinking from the meal he'd intended for another.

His spirit spread alongside his songs, infusing the walls, the roof, the floor and the earth beyond them, then further. Up through the grass and flowers to bask in the light of the sun. Wide along the roots of trees and shrubs to entertain the gnats and worms, and the moles that couldn't see but paused in their digging to listen because they could hear very well indeed. Further still his spirit unfolded, down the tunnel leading from the pantry into the earth beneath the brook and onwards from there.

It was a mirror of his own underpassage, which he'd dug and appointed all by himself all the way to the Took Hobbit-Home. This one led not there, but to *Tom's* home, and Bilbo sensed the underground water pooling and flowing *just* in reach of a good shovel and pickaxe, if he but put

his back into it for a few months and weeks. Just below the spot where Belladonna's memorial would be, if this were the Shire.

Bilbo sang and played and sang and played until his spirit finally reached as far as the edge of the Forest to the west. Buckland. The Shire. And, through that, he touched the sleepy, probing regard of Bag End the First and Only, who always kept its mind aimed at the Old Forest after Bilbo Left. Always Bag End's own spirit wandered where its mind wondered, thinking and singing with Tom, and Goldberry, even Bungo when he wasn't haunting someone else half-way across the world, if he truly did as he boasted. All the while looking forward to the day of its own Master's return.

Bilbo could feel all their spirits now. He felt the traces of Bungo's fëa as he'd worked on the home but did his best not to leave more of himself behind than he should. He sensed the lively and pure tinkle and crinkle of the River-Daughter in every puff and whisp and vapour and trickling raindrop, in the streams flowing through wood and hill. Amidst and throughout all of them, the fëa that was Tom Bombadil was positively radiant and immanent, suffusing every last nook and cranny of the Old Forest and well past it. Even those spots and places that flowers, birds and animals held for themselves, and the trees that Old Grey Willow-man's presumed to claim as his own.

Deep beneath and within and around all, the light of the Secret Fire blazed and coaxed all living things to live their dreams as real as they were themselves. As they *will* be real, once the Music has run its course and a new, purer one may finally make a world unmarred spring forth.

Would it be presumptuous of him, to bring one of those distant future notes into the Music of the now?

Even decades after he'd first wondered at that question, Bilbo still didn't have an answer.

But he still had precisely no qualms about doing it anyway.

What'll it be, home mine? Bilbo thought where Bag End thought, so far and yet so close. *Will you dwell where I dwell, as before?*

Bag End was shocked. Startled. Amazed.

It was disbelieving, hesitant, suspicious when probing at him, at the edges of Bilbo's spirit and mind, and then deeper.

But when Bilbo opened himself to it, his home joyously leapt forward and embraced him. It didn't even need to rely on the mighty and merry spirit all around that was Tom, and it didn't leave Bag End any more than it arrived to the new one. It was Bag End and Bag End was always Bag End, the one and the same and only, as sure as the Secret Fire blazed below and above and all around them.

Bilbo felt its mind connect with his. He felt when the tunnels of Here became the same as the tunnels of Back. He felt it when Back became one and the same with Here and Back again. He felt the fëa that was Bag End engulf his surroundings until it was as if Bilbo had never stepped out of his door at all.

Bilbo sagged in breathless wonder as Bag End nestled around him, in and through and all beyond the tunnels, walls, floor, roof, and all throughout the hill.

His fiddle trailed off, but the song continued. It picked up over in his music room, where Bag End sometimes play with him and for him on all manner of pipes and strings and drumbeats, because Bilbo had made it a point to collect at least one of every instrument he could find out in the world.

The furnishings moved and settled in their proper places. The crockery and cutlery was now all in their correct locations throughout the home, filling the desks and cupboards. With sudden clarity, Bilbo knew he would be able to walk to his office and find his desk right as he'd last seen it. His paper and books and inkpot, too, were right where he'd left them.

Most amazing of all, he sensed his pantry. And his larder. They were full.

Now what's that about?

He'd told the Gaffer and Fortinbras and everyone else with a nose in his business, to take what they wanted from his larder so at least the perishables didn't go to waste. Bilbo now knew, as he always knew everything in and of Bag End, that the Gaffer and Fortinbras and everyone else other than the Sackvilles had instead decided to regularly restock his larder and keep it that way, just in case.

How fortunate that is the case, Bilbo thought dryly as Bag End finally began to think past its all-new homecoming bliss to pay heed to what was happening outside. I don't suppose you can pretend we're not home?

Bag End didn't hear him. It was too excited. As a matter of fact, it *swooned*.

Bebother and cofusticate, why are you like this? Who sowed their oats around my hill when I wasn't looking? You certainly don't get this from me!

There came a tremendous ring on the front-door bell.

Bilbo hopped out of his chair, strode over to put on the kettle, put out a second cup and saucer, was most conflicted at seeing the plate of cakes that Bag End had rustled up from somewhere – even though it was too busy doting on the ruffian outside to even hear Bilbo thinking at it – and went to the door.

“I am sorry to keep you waiting!” Bilbo was going to say, when he saw that it was not any sight he expected at all. Or, well, it was, except instead of the drab and rough appearance of before, the dwarf before him had a long, well brushed beard tucked into a golden belt, and very bright eyes under a large, magnificent dark-green hood. Its collar was so wide and the back trailed so far down that it was practically a cloak, reaching all the way to the dwarf's ankles.

“Dwalin at your service!” he said with a low bow.

“Bilbo Baggins at yours!” said the hobbit, too surprised to say anything else in the moment.

Dwalin's beard...

It was *blue*.

When the silence that followed threatened to become uncomfortable, Bilbo shook his head clear. "I hope you appreciate what a heartfelt marvel you're wearing there." A little stiff perhaps, but he meant it kindly. What could one do, if an uninvited dwarf came and knocked on one's door wearing not just accoutrements most ancient, but also a large, pristine hood woven out of-

"Oh, believe me, we *know*," Dwalin harrumphed, walking in when Bilbo stepped aside and hanging his hood in the nearest peg. He grabbed his new belt, then let go as if he was embarrassed at being caught in the act. "This is a princely gift, it is. Dwarven craftsmanship like this hasn't disappeared, exactly, but it's up there, and the maker's mark is my great grandfather's."

"Princely in more ways than you know." Bilbo said, motioning for the dwarf to follow him. "What you have there probably didn't come from the tomb of the Prince of Cardolan, but it was undoubtedly from one of his prime retainers. They had many dealings with your kin in those days. I am not surprised Tom was able to find the perfect one for you, even in his whimsies he is most considerate. But that wasn't what I was talking about."

"Your meaning?"

"The hood," Bilbo said, stopping to look the dwarf in the eye. "The felt is made of wool freely given by wild landraces fed exclusively on what Tom gives them by hand, it is dyed with the essence of the most verdant spring flowers, and it was sown together by Godlberry with string from her own hair."

Dwalin's eyes widened, and he looked furtively in the direction of the door they had left behind three turns ago. "I will cherish it like it was my own child."

"Let's not go quite that far," Bilbo shook his head, smiling. "I am just about to take tea. Pray come and have some with me."

"Don't mind if I do." Dwalin gladly accepted. "... Did your old man really just build a new Bag End here? It looks literally the same, same door and walls, even the fireplace mosaic is the same, and the curtains..."

"That's Bungo Baggins for you," Bilbo shrugged, choosing not to elaborate on everything that *hadn't* been present a while and a half earlier, including the curtains. He glanced at Dwalin as closely as he could without giving himself away, but the dwarf didn't seem to feel Bag End's spirit any more than he did before, without Bilbo to make the bridge. The house was carefully not doing any of the things that had disturbed the dwarf during his first visit.

Dwalin's hair was as blue as his beard.

They had not been at the table long, in fact they had hardly reached the third cake, when there came another, even louder ring at the bell.

"That'll be the boys, no doubt," Dwalin grunted. "They couldn't wait to be the first to clean up after they saw me do it. Well, one of 'em anyhow."

“It’s not them,” said the hobbit, and off he went to the door before he was asked to explain.

It was, indeed, not the princes. Instead, it was a certain contract drafter with his same long and white beard. Covering his head was again a cloak-with-a-hood, this one colored scarlet – no, no, still better to call it a hood-with-a-cloak, then dwarrows had wide shoulders. And big heads.

“Good afternoon!” Bilbo greeted the figure at the door.

“And so it is, though I think it might rain later.”

Bilbo nodded. “Quite right, it’s not Goldberry’s washing day yet, but some things she likes to keep especially clean and sparkling throughout, and dew just isn’t enough for some things.”

The dwarf blinked at the information he had no way to understand, but decided not to ask. He caught sight of Dwalin’s green hood hanging up. “I see the others have begun to arrive already.” He hung his red one next to it and put his hand on his breast. “Balin at your service!”

“Bilbo Baggins, at yours,” Bilbo replied, happy to find the words were all honest. He generally liked visitors, but these ones had been a notable exception. He was glad to be able to like them this time, even if he’d have preferred to know they would arrive beforehand. And to have asked them himself. Also, depending on how much more unrestrained they were this time, the cakes might actually run short, unlike before. If that happened, then he, as the host, might have to go without. How dreadful. “Come along in, and have some tea!”

“A little beer would suit me better, if it is all the same to you, my good sir,” said Balin. “But I don’t mind some cake – seed-cake, if you have any.”

Oh dear, I’m not the only one acting more familiar and unapologetic about all this. “Amazingly enough, both seem to be available.”

Bilbo led Balin to the dining room and left him with his brother to marvel over Bag End’s second coming, while he scuttled off to the cellar to fill a pint beer-mug. He also went to the pantry to fetch two beautiful round seed-cakes which – he smelled them – ah, the Gaffer had baked them just that afternoon, and given them to Bag End because it looked lonely.

Those Gamgees, honestly.

When he got back, Balin and Dwalin were talking at the table about the exalted nature of their new hoods. Bilbo plumped down the beer and the cake in front of them, and the two brothers both opened their mouths at once – perhaps to vow all over again that they would care for their new cloaks like they were treasures instead of things to keep off the rain – when loud came the bell again, and then another ring.

Now it was the princes at the door, and while Fili looked the same save for his new garb, Kili could not have looked more different. Different from his old self, but almost identical to his brother, save for the shorter beard. The dwarves both had blue hoods, silver belts, and hair of a clear yellow like the flowers of a camellia tree. Each of them carried a bag of tools and a spade. And as soon as Bilbo had opened the door, they hopped in without prompting as if they’d been invited. Bilbo was hardly surprised at all.

“What can I do for you, my dwarves?” he said.

“Kili at your service!” said the one. “And Fili!” added the other; and they both swept off their blue hoods and bowed.

“At yours and your family’s,” replied Bilbo, making a vain attempt to cover his smile. “Not going to sully the glory box this time, I hope.”

“Surely not!” Kili scoffed, and he sounded like an indulgent ancient king more than a mere boy, for a moment. Knowing whose dreams his odd luck had made him live out the day before, Bilbo wasn’t really surprised by this either.

“Dwalin and Balin here already, I see,” said Fili. “Let us join the throng!”

Bilbo followed after them and leaned against the frame to the den to watch them. The four dwarves soon were snacking and talking, about Bag End just for a little while, then about mines and gold and troubles with the goblins, the depredations of dragons, and how their new hoods were made by the Missus’ own with her own hair so you two rascals had better not use them as wipers, you hear that?

Bilbo felt oddly like the talk should have been a tad bit more adventurous, when, dong-a-ling-dang, his bell rang again, as if little Hamfast was trying to pull the handle off. He actually felt like he was back in Hobbiton for a moment there, that’s how faithfully even the bell had been recreated. Or was that just more of Bag End bringing itself over?

“That’ll be three more,” Bilbo said, blinking, looking outside through Bag End’s eyes to figure out if it was the Ri or Ur brothers.

“And a fourth, I should say by the sound,” said Fili. “Besides, we saw them coming along behind us in the distance.”

Bilbo shook his head as he left for the entrance, pretending not to know what Fili was talking about. He also didn’t let them know it wasn’t four, but five.

This time, Bilbo made sure to jump aside lest the pileup succeed in killing him like it failed the first time. Mercifully, however, *these* dwarves managed not to crash all over each other, never mind on top of him. Also, it wasn’t the Ur brothers that accompanied Dori, Nori and Ori, but Oin and Gloin this come-around. Very soon, two purple hoods, a grey hood, a brown hood, and a white hood were hanging on the pegs, and off the dwarves marched with their broad hands stuck in their gold and silver belts to join the others.

The throng was more than half-way complete, and they were not shy of taking Bilbo up on his hospitality. Some called for ale, one asked for porter, one for coffee, and all of them wanted cakes. Needless to say, Bilbo was kept very busy for a while. He was rapidly reaching the limit that a single hobbit could do when playing host.

Before he could summon up one or three of the dwarves to help, however, a particularly loud knock sounded. Bilbo had to look out through Bag End’s eyes again, just to make sure it really wasn’t a hard hat that was banging against his beautiful green door.

It wasn't a hard hat. It was a long, gnarled, familiar staff.

Bilbo practically flew through the hallways to the door and pulled it open. This was where the world showed that the Music still had some bad turns to toss at the little people – Bifur, Bofur and Bombur fell forward in a heap all over again, just as they had the first time. Thankfully for Bilbo's life expectancy – and back – his sense of self-preservation did make sure to have him out of reach of the pile-up this time around. He merely stood aside the door, altogether exasperated.

And there, behind the three groaning dwarf, who else would be leaning on his staff and laughing?

"Gandalf," Bilbo harrumphed. "You better not have put a dent in my door, it's brand new!"

"All over again and also old at the same time, yes, I can well see," said the wizard. "Peace, peace! It is not like you, Bilbo, to keep friends waiting on the mat, and then open the door like a pop-gun! Now let me just pick up these three, let's see, Bifur, Bofur, Bombur-"

"At your service!" said Bifur, Bofur, and Bombur standing in a row. The happy smiles as they looked at each other for speaking all at once, all together were practically blinding. No, really, Bag End couldn't see anything for several seconds after it happened, that was how bright the unseen world blazed with their combined cheer.

The three hung up two yellow hoods and a pale green one next to the others.

"Now, almost all of us are here, once again!" said Gandalf, looking at the row of the twelve cloaks that also doubled as the best detachable party hoods. The wizard hung his own hat next to them, though with a peg left free between them, as they were still missing the thirteenth. "Quite a merry gathering! I hope there is something left for the late-comers to eat and drink! Is that tea I smell? No thank you! A little red wine for me, I think."

"You think," Bilbo echoed as he walked in step with the wizard to see to his guest right. "Where did you even sprout from, wizard? I didn't want to think you'd just abandoned this lot in a huff when they didn't wait for you in their rush to catch up with the princes. But you also never showed up at Tom's doorstep either, so I wasn't sure what to think."

"That I didn't show up at the door of Bombadil until now was not for lack of trying, I assure you." Gandalf grumpily accepted the carafe of wine, settled on a chair near the window and took a long chug. "I was just behind this silly lot, up until they entered the Old Forest ahead of me. By the time I traced their steps, what should have taken me ten minutes ended up lasting nigh on two days! I know many queer things occur around this spot, but for time to go all wizened and senile is a first, even for this old wizard."

"I am relieved to learn it was such a silly predicament."

"That makes one of us," Gandalf huffed, taking another long drink before setting the wine aside to light his pipe. "If I did ought to annoy the Master of these lands, I'd appreciate not being kept in suspense so I may make whatever amends he requires, however unjustified."

“Tom’s not that kind of Master,” Bilbo said mildly. “I doubt he was thinking about you at all, when he did – well, what Tom does.”

“My dear hobbit, that does not reassures me at all, why I’ve a mind to-”

The door pounded with the strike of a closed fist, once, twice, three times.

Like the first time, everyone else trailed after Bilbo as he went to greet the king of Durin’s Folk. As before, the round, green door opened inward. Unlike before, however, Bilbo Baggins leaned against the edge as his eyes finally landed on the dwarf beyond the threshold, and he stared. There he was, Thorin son of Thrain, son of Thrór, King of Durin’s folk. Strong, wide, haughty, and wearing the most beautiful of all the hooded cloaks of all, a sky-blue one with a long silver tassel.

Bilbo didn’t spare his attire the slightest glance. “What the devil happened to you?” he blurted instead. It was terrible manners, but what else could a hobbit do? All he had eyes for was Thorin’s beard. It was so big and thick and long that it reached all the way to the ground. Also, it was *snow-white*.

Thorin glared. “I do not care to speak of it.”

Bilbo covered his smirk too late. “You went to bother Tom when he was singing at Goldberry’s window, didn’t you?”

“I said,” Thorin ground out through his clenched teeth. “*I do not care to speak of it.*”

“Of course,” Bilbo nodded agreeably, trying and failing to conceal the fact that this was the funniest thing he’d seen all year. “I understand the feeling well. The Master doesn’t just serenade his Lady in the mornings, he does what he wants when he wants how he wants.”

Thorin looked like his eyes might burn Bilbo to a crisp right where he stood. Considering that his eyes were blue instead of gold or red, that was quite the achievement.

Bilbo cleared his throat. “I assume that making even the most oblique suggestion that a dwarf might want to, say, trim his front hairs a little remains the utmost sacrilege?”

Now the only thing missing was the spitting lightning. Perhaps Thorin had a heretofore unknown affinity for it, rather than just flame? Poor dwarf wouldn’t have any way to know, what with living under a rock all his life. Bilbo would have to ask Elrond about checking for it somehow, when they passed through the Last Homely Home. “Right then. Do come in, if it pleases you. Would you prefer tea or some other drink?”

With a visible effort of will, Thorin stopped frowning. Finally, he stepped inside the door. Unlike the first time, he forewent his bid for the title of the worst guest in the history of Hobbiton, placed his hood on the free peg near the door, and said: “I will have wine.”

“And I’ll have raspberry jam and apple-tart,” said Bifur.

“And mince-pies and cheese,” said Bofur.

“And pork-pie and salad,” said Bombur.

“And more cakes and ale and coffee, if you don’t mind,” called the other dwarves from behind him.

“And maybe put on a few eggs, there’s a good fellow!” Gandalf added glibly as Bilbo turned around to give the throng a flat stare over his crossed arms. “And just bring out the cold chicken and pickles while you’re at it!”

“Well now!” Bilbo drawled. “Since you all seem to know as much about the inside of my larders as I do myself, how’s about you come and lend a hand?”

“Way ahead of you, Your Highness!” Fili called from a bit further in, waving in the direction of the kitchen. “See?”

Sure enough, Balin and Dwalin were already at the door of the kitchen when he got there, though they didn’t dare go in without permission. Bilbo supposed his performance the first night had stayed with them.

Good.

And so the dwarves helped the hobbit be a proper host. As well they should, the least an uninvited guest could do was not be a bad one on top of it.

The rest of the day was most good, full of light talk and grim talk, casual words and serious words, and soft words and merry shouts, and all the while good drink and fresh food sprang from Bag End’s generous larders.

Bilbo got to sit at the head of his own table without any oblique snipes or slanted eyes from the thirteen dwarves all round. Gandalf sat at the other end of the table, then the sofa near the wall, then the second of the rocking chairs in front of the fire. The dwarves ate and ate, and talked and talked, and time got on. Until, at last, they pushed their chairs back, sung their cleaning song before Bilbo could even make a move to collect the plates and glasses, and everyone took to chairs and armchairs and lounges to be calm and at ease.

Even Thorin let himself go a little, making a fair bid at competing with Gandalf in the honoured art of blowing smoke rings. Bilbo decided not to poke him, but he did get Fili and Kili to prod their uncle about his uncannily permissive mood instead. It took some doing, but they made him admit he didn’t want to impinge on the joy brought by Bifur’s good fortune. Making him admit that was like trying to rip an osier out by the roots bare-handed, but prod they did and admit he did.

Bilbo was quite proud of those two.

And Thorin too, he supposed. A little.

Alas, Thorin inevitably lost the competition, as Gandalf sent smoke rings of his own to pierce and pop all of Thorin’s one after another. The king put out his pipe with a grunt.

Then, to Bilbo’s complete shock that everyone was likewise too stunned to notice, Thorin shouted. “Now for some music! Bring out the instruments!”

There was silence most stupefied.

Thorin scowled at the disbelieving stares of everyone around him and decided, for some unfathomable reason, that Bilbo would be the most reasonable choice of who to address next. “Master hobbit! Your kin close and distant boasted about you having every possible instrument there is. Care to show proof of claim?”

Bilbo, wonderingly, began to smile. “It would be easier to tell me what instruments you want, because you’ll all fall asleep before I finish espousing them all.” Which was not the same as listing them, the world didn’t have *that* many different instruments unfortunately, it was why he’d made it his life’s work to create an all-new one. But if they weren’t going to make too big a fuss over it...

“You heard the hobbit, you lot. Get to it!”

The other dwarves sent Bilbo amazed looks, so he shrugged and motioned that they follow. Which they all did like big, loud, tromping ducks.

“And bring me a harp while you’re at it,” Thorin’s voice followed them.

When he showed them into his music room, the dwarves filed in one after another and stopped to stare. Then, Kili and Fili to pick up little fiddles. Dori, Nori, and Ori went to the flutes, Bombur chose a drum, Bifur and Bofur went for the clarinets, and Dwalin and Balin waited for last, at which point they both chose viols as big as themselves. Dwalin offered to carry them both, so Balin went in one last time and, with Dori’s help, picked up the massive harp and carefully carried it to Thorin while the rest of the company followed in their wake like a respectful fanfare.

It wasn’t the most beautiful harp Bilbo had ever seen, in fact that honor belonged to Thorin’s own harp, either made or plated wholly in gold. Bilbo had witnessed him play exactly once, that year when finally made it to the Blue Mountains, though for the sake of Gloin’s son no one would ever be told. The only reason he got to see the performance, despite Thorin only playing in private settings, was because Gimli had secretly led him in through a service passage to listen in. He’d not expected that hiring the lad to figure out how to make his very specific steel cords would earn him that sort of favor, but that was a story in and of itself.

Right now, all that mattered was that Bilbo’s harp, though not made of gold, produced, as all his instruments did, the perfect tune.

When Thorin struck the strings, the music began all at once, so sudden and sweet that Bilbo forgot everything else, and was swept away into dark lands under strange moons, far over The Water and very far from his hobbit-hole under The Hill. Bag End itself responded to the shift in mood, and though the dwarves experienced in unison the realization that this Bag End was every bit as Bag End as the other Bag End, they only sang and played along all the more keenly.

The dark filled the room, the fire died down, the shadows were lost, and still the dwarves played on. And, finally, first one, then two, and then others and more, added their voices to their strings and woodwind and drumbeats, until Bag End rumbled with the deep-throated singing of the dwarves in the deep places of their ancient homes.

[Far over the misty mountains cold](#)

To dungeons deep and caverns old
We must away ere break of day
To seek the pale enchanted gold.

The dwarves of yore made mighty spells,
While hammers fell like ringing bells
In places deep, where dark things sleep,
In hollow halls beneath the fells.

For ancient king and elvish lord
There many a gleaming golden hoard
They shaped and wrought, and light they caught
To hide in gems on hilt of sword.

On silver necklaces they strung
The flowering stars, on crowns they hung
The dragon-fire, in twisted wire
They meshed the light of moon and sun.

Far over the misty mountains cold
To dungeons deep and caverns old
We must away, ere break of day,
To claim our long-forgotten gold.

Goblets they carved there for themselves
And harps of gold; where no man delves
There lay they long, and many a song
Was sung unheard by men or elves.

The pines were roaring on the height,
The winds were moaning in the night.
The fire was red, it flaming spread;
The trees like torches blazed with light.

The bells were ringing in the dale
And men looked up with faces pale;
The dragon's ire more fierce than fire
Laid low their towers and houses frail.

The mountain smoked beneath the moon;
The dwarves, they heard the tramp of doom.
They fled their hall to dying fall
Beneath his feet, beneath the moon.

Far over the misty mountains grim

To dungeons deep and caverns dim
We must away, ere break of day,
To win our harps and gold from him!

The lines and rhymes continued well and long, deep into the evening, and then night. The dwarves sang the full history of the Lonely Mountain and its loss, and their hopes for reclaiming it and the wonders it would once again see and make. They plied their instruments and sung with their rumbling voices until the sounds of the forest faded, the fire burned to embers, and the stars came out in the dark sky above the trees.

In his chair across from Thorin, Bilbo watched and listened, even as Bag End followed the song, and the thoughts and dreams and memories of the dwarves, all across the water and land and forests and mountains, through old tunnels and new ones, and a kingdom built into a distant, lonely mountain hollowed out by hand.

The love of dwarves was fierce and jealous, but the love of beautiful things made by hands and by cunning was as pure as any magic Bilbo had ever witnessed.

Or worked.

When the song finally ended, none seemed inclined to break it. They all sat and waited, in the dark. A dark room for business not nearly as dark as the one that had so harshly tainted it before. The business was still grim, however, as Bilbo was loath but resigned to see coming from miles off, though the dwarves clearly didn't share his view.

“Bring out the contract,” Thorin commanded.

Bilbo sat forward in his chair and continued to meet Thorin's eyes as Balin and Ori rose, briefly exited the room, and returned with a large scroll folded up like a fourteen-segment accordion. Meanwhile, Nori produced and lit Bilbo's lantern, which the hobbit often used when going around at night, and which, unbeknownst to any of his guests save maybe the wizard, had been all the way back in Hobbiton until that very moment.

Bilbo accepted the new contract and read.

“Thorin and Company to Master Bilbo of Bag End, Kin Once Removed to his Royal Personage, Isumbras Took the Fourth, Thain of the Shire,

Greetings! For your hospitality our sincerest thanks, and for the honor of your professional assistance our sincere request. Terms: cash on delivery, up to and not exceeding one fourteenth of total profits (if any); all travelling expenses guaranteed in any event; funeral expenses to be defrayed by us or our representatives, if occasion arises and the matter is not otherwise arranged for.

“We have the honour to remain

“Yours deeply,

“Thorin & Co.”

Bilbo looked up from the contract. He looked at Thorin, who was inscrutable. He looked at Gandalf, who had the grace not to look as if he thought Bilbo’s agreement was guaranteed. He looked at the other dwarves, who were hopeful. He looked at Kili, who made no effort to catch his attention but nonetheless got it, because he was the only one among the dwarves who seemed to know what he would say.

Bilbo folded the paper back up, stood from his chair and gave the contract back to Balin, unsigned.

“Ask me again in Rivendell.”

“-.-“

That night, when the dwarves and Gandalf were all asleep, Bilbo Baggins rose from his bed and set out, at long last, on his own errand. His one, big, most brazen, most important self-appointed errand since he finally made it to Ered Luin years ago, to get help making reality out of his big, all-new design for a never-before-seen music instrument.

He paused at the door. He listened to the dwarves loud, rumbling snores. He looked at the instruments arrayed along the hallway wall. He looked at the blue wizard’s hat and thirteen colorful hoods hanging by the door.

Bilbo Baggins left Bag End feeling like something that had long been broken in the world was now mended.