

The Three Daughters of the Old Took

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Table of Contents

1. The Took.	3
2. Letter From an Old Enemy.	16
3. A Welcome and Unwelcome Guest.	21
4. Surprise Amongst the Elves.	32
5. Imprisoned.	41
6. New Friends.	46
7. A Great Deal of Riding Around.	55
8. Family Secrets.	67
9. A Sort of Family Reunion, and Some Quite Nice Food.	77
10. A Message From Home, and From the Last Homely House.	86
11. Enemy Revealed.	91
12. Homecoming.	97

Chapter 1 - The Tooks

In a hole in the ground, there lived a family of Hobbits. It was not just any hole in the ground, of course, for Hobbit holes are well made, well cared for, and well stocked (especially the kitchen). But this was not just any Hobbit hole, either; it was called the Great Smials, a very old and distinguished Hobbit Hole, that belonged to a very old and distinguished Hobbit family, called the Tooks. Not that you would know it to talk to them, as the Tooks were as a rule plain-spoken, without fancy dress or fancy manners. The Tooks were known for being, if anything, a bit excessively un-fancy. They all wore working clothes, though they were wealthy enough not to have to work if they didn't want to, and many of them rode far and wide (for Hobbits), and spoke to a great many kinds of folk, fancy and unfancy, and they were most often polite but never tried very hard to give the impression that they were important people. In the world of Hobbits, though, the Tooks were about as important as one could get.

They were never, though, considered quite normal, and while other Hobbits found them quite impressive (owing in no small part to their large hobbit hole and rumored wealth), they also considered them to be not quite Hobbit-ish enough to be good friends with. It is often the case that in order to do impressive things, you must be willing to be considered a bit strange by others, and most Hobbits would rather be unimpressive than considered strange. The Tooks, as a rule, preferred instead to do impressive things, and that was strange.

The head of the Took clan, at the time of our story, was named Gerontius. He was not yet known simply as "the Old Took", as he would later be, but he was already greying about the temples, his face was wrinkled from many years of smiling and laughing, and his skin was spotted from a lifetime spent out in the sun. Though he was the chief proprietor of the Smials, he did not spend much of his life below ground, at that time in his life. He far preferred to walk, or occasionally to ride a pony, to look at his lands, and the lands of his neighbors, and the lands of his cousins in distant corners of the Shire, and when he went on trips like these he most often liked to take several of his sons with him.

For he did have a goodly number of sons, and a few daughters, with his wife, a Hobbit named Adamanta. She was from the Chubb family, a family neither so strange nor so well off as the Tooks, but quite reputable. Adamanta was more concerned with appearances than Gerontius, and she found the Smials to be entirely too large to be comfortable in, for she made certain that it was clean, neat, and ordered, and when you have as many sons as she did, that can be difficult to arrange. Gerontius and Adamanta had seven older sons, named Isengrim, Isumbras, Hildigrim, Isembold, Hildifons,

Isembard, and Hildibrand, as well as one very young son named Isengar, and each one was a unique and interesting individual in his own right. We will not, however, spend too much time talking about them right now, as our story is concerned primarily not with the sons, but rather with the daughters.

Gerontius and Adamanta also had a few daughters. The oldest, Belladonna (usually called Bella for short) was aged 14, which was not quite as old amongst Hobbits then as it is amongst Men now, but it was old enough to do a good part of the work of cooking and cleaning in the kitchen and garden. She found it unfair that her older brothers all got to walk outside in the sun and open air all day, while she helped her mother clean up their enormous home, and cook for their quite large family, and mend clothes, and do all the other things that a large Hobbit-hole with a large Hobbit-family requires. So it was that, on the day when our story began, she was sitting on the steps down to the (very large) cellar of the Smials, scrubbing the steps one by one as her mother had directed her to, and wondering why on earth it mattered if the steps were dirty.

"When I am grown," she thought to herself glumly, "I will see to it that I live in a house with no stairs. All one hallway, as far as I'm concerned. Why should we need more? Then one long sweep with a wide broom, and the job would be done."

She often thought things along this line, but she never said them out loud, as it would have lead to arguments with her mother, and sad looks from her father. Her father had the idea that his children, even once married, could all live with him, and was periodically reopening and cleaning out once-deserted parts of the Smials to be ready for that day. Belladonna loved her father (as, in truth, she loved her mother), but she quite fancied the idea, once she was old enough to be married, of moving to her own Hobbit-hole, and preferably one that was built the way she wanted it. No need to tell her father that too far beforehand, and make him sad that she would someday move away. As for Adamanta, well, Bella had arguments with her often enough, and never won them (Adamanta was a strong-willed Hobbit, and especially so with her daughters), and Bella was in no hurry to bring up this plan for fear that her mother might figure out some way of winning that argument too, and Bella would be stuck cleaning the stairs forever, even after she was grown.

Bella was not the only daughter of Gerontius and Adamanta. Donnamira (usually called just Donna), who was just 10, was upstairs cleaning dishes in the kitchen (called the Great Kitchen, to distinguish it from the Lesser Kitchen, now rarely used). She was quieter than Bella, and she fumed and planned for the far future less, but she kept her eyes wide open more, and it was she who would notice if there were a new kind of bug in the garden to be dealt with or new tears in the clothes to be mended before they got

worse. She enjoyed the cooking and cleaning no more than her older sister, but perhaps because she had less to say about it, she thought about it less. She was rinsing and drying cup, saucer, plate, and fork, in the kitchen, which had windows that looked out onto the herb garden just outside the Smials.

"A gannet," she said quietly, as if to herself, but her younger sister heard her.

Mirabella (usually just called Mira, who was aged 6) was holding a towel and fork, and pretending to help with the drying of dishes. She was not especially good at it, and Donna had to do nine out of every ten herself, but gave every tenth one to Mira so that she would learn eventually, and also so that she would look (to Adamanta) as if she were busy. Adamanta was very keen on keeping her daughters busy, not that she needed to look far for work for them to do. Just then, Adamanta was at work over the hearth, cooking a great pot of stew large enough to feed the whole family, and didn't hear what Donna had said.

"What's a gannet?" asked Mira, momentarily distracted from pretending that the fork she was drying was a doll rescued from the river.

"A bird, but not one that I normally see here," said Donna, and she handed Mira a wet spoon to dry off.

All the Took daughters were pretty, but Mira was the cutest of the three, and she was able to smile and giggle her way past Adamanta's hard edges in a way that neither of her older sisters could. She was, perhaps as a consequence of being able to charm her way past any problem in her young life, convinced that all the world was a bright, fun, and potentially happy place, if you smiled at it. She was not courageous, but rather fearless, as if she could not believe that evil could truly exist outside of the tales her parents or older siblings told her.

"Maybe we should show Isengar," giggled Mira. Isengar was Mira's younger brother, her only younger sibling, and she quite liked the opportunity to show him things, as it gave her the opportunity to pretend she was wise and knew things about the world. Which, compared to Isengar, she did. But Isengar was in his room, playing with a wooden toy puppy which Hildibrand had made for him. Mira returned her attention to the spoon, still wet, which was now jumping into her imaginary river to save the drowning fork.

"It should be the spoon that's drowning, it's still wet," said Donna. But Mira ignored her; the spoon lifted up the distressed fork and began to carry it to safety. Donna smiled

a tiny bit, and lifted the towel from the floor where Mira had dropped it and put it over fork and spoon together.

"There," she said softly, "now they have swum to land and are ready to dry off."

Mira dried the spoon, and then had fork and spoon ride the towel like a magic carpet up to the counter where the cleaned dishes and utensils were put.

The Took's had gardeners to help with their quite expansive gardens outside the Smials, but Gerontius still liked to spend some time working in them himself, not because he needed to but because he liked to. He also thought it was good for his sons, to prevent them growing up spoiled, if they got their hands dirty with weeding in the garden from time to time. So it was that, when Gerontius and his flock of older sons came tromping into the Smials, their hands, clothes, and especially their feet (which, like all Hobbits, were perpetually unshod) were dirty. They tromped quickly up the stairs that Bella was in the process of cleaning; a few of the older ones stopping to give her a kiss on the cheek. Hildibrand, just three years older than Bella, came last except for Gerontius. Hildibrand looked down at the stairs, now muddy, and then looked back at Bella, with a pail full of water and a large brush still in her hand, and shrugged his shoulders with a smirk, then continued on upstairs. Within seconds, nearly everything in the kitchen was muddy as well. Gerontius gave Bella a hug as well as a kiss on the cheek and then trudged on up after his sons.

"Boys! Straight to the tub with all of you!" shouted Adamanta, though she accepted a peck on the cheek from each one. With Gerontius, who came last of all, she did so grudgingly, as she held him responsible for the fact that her kitchen (which she had made Belladonna mop that morning) now looked a bit like three pigs had wrestled in it. The wave of boyish dirt also seemed to have carried off her daughters, Mira and Donna. The ones closest to Belladonna's age sometimes squabbled with her, but none of them ever squabbled with Mira, who they took turns carrying on their shoulders or playing with in some other way; Donna just followed along quietly, happy for the distraction to give her a chance at a break from her chores. Just then, Hildibrand was on the ground on all fours, pretending to be an unruly pony which Mira was riding, every time he reared his front "hooves" she would squeal in fear and delight.

"You could have led them to the swimming hole before bringing them in," said Adamanta, her eyes narrowing a bit as she looked at Gerontius.

"I did," answered Gerontius, "just before we went to do a spot of gardening. Your brother Falco saw us and shouted at us to put our clothes on."

"Oh!" said Adamanta, and she fixed him with a look of fear, embarrassment and (deeply but not entirely hidden), also a bit of amusement. "You went swimming without your clothes?! You're supposed to be Thain of the Shire, a dignified leader."

"No point in being dignified while swimming," said Gerontius. "Anyway, it probably was the most exciting part of his day, getting to shout at all of us. Where's my littlest one?"

"In his room, playing with a block of wood," said Adamanta, meaning the toy puppy which was Isengar's favorite toy. Adamanta sometimes gave the impression that she did not entirely approve of toys.

Gerontius walked happily down the hall, stopping to give Donna and Mira a peck on the cheek each as well.

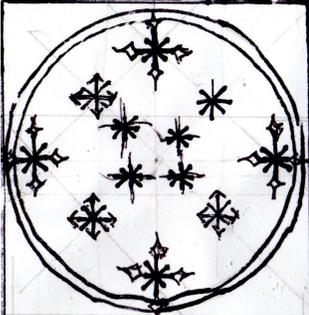
"I suppose you'll be wanting this all mopped up again," said Bella, as she appeared at the top of the stairs, hoping that the fact that she volunteered it might soften her mother's heart, and she would tell her it could wait until the morning.

"Well of course, Bella, what else?" answered Adamanta. "I've already chastised your father for it, don't worry. Not that it is likely to help." She glared at the back of her husband, but he took no notice and walked on up the stairs to the upper level where the younger children's rooms were, including the room that Mira and Isengar shared.

It was Donna who first noticed, amidst the noise of her older brothers playing in the open "solar room", and Mira giggling and squealing, that there was no noise coming from Gerontius or Isengar. She found it strange, as she would have expected her little brother to shout out 'Papa!' as soon as he saw him enter the room, and so she walked quietly over to the door of Mira and Isengar's room to see what was the matter.

She saw her father, standing in the middle of the room, looking at a letter. His expression, which she had rarely seen before, was one of shock and anguish. She had seen him laugh or shrug off the loss of a treasured vase or plate if it broke accidentally, or the loss of money if the year's crops were spoiled by an early frost. Even the loss of a favorite pony or dog was something he took philosophically; he was gentle and kind to the animals when they were alive, but upon their eventual death he would remind his crying children that everything passes in time, and that was the way of the world. But, as he looked at the letter, Donna saw not only fear, but also imagined she saw regret or reproachment, as if he held himself to blame for what had happened.

Looking around the room, she saw one other thing. Her little brother, the youngest of the Took family, who had been playing in the room minutes before, was gone.

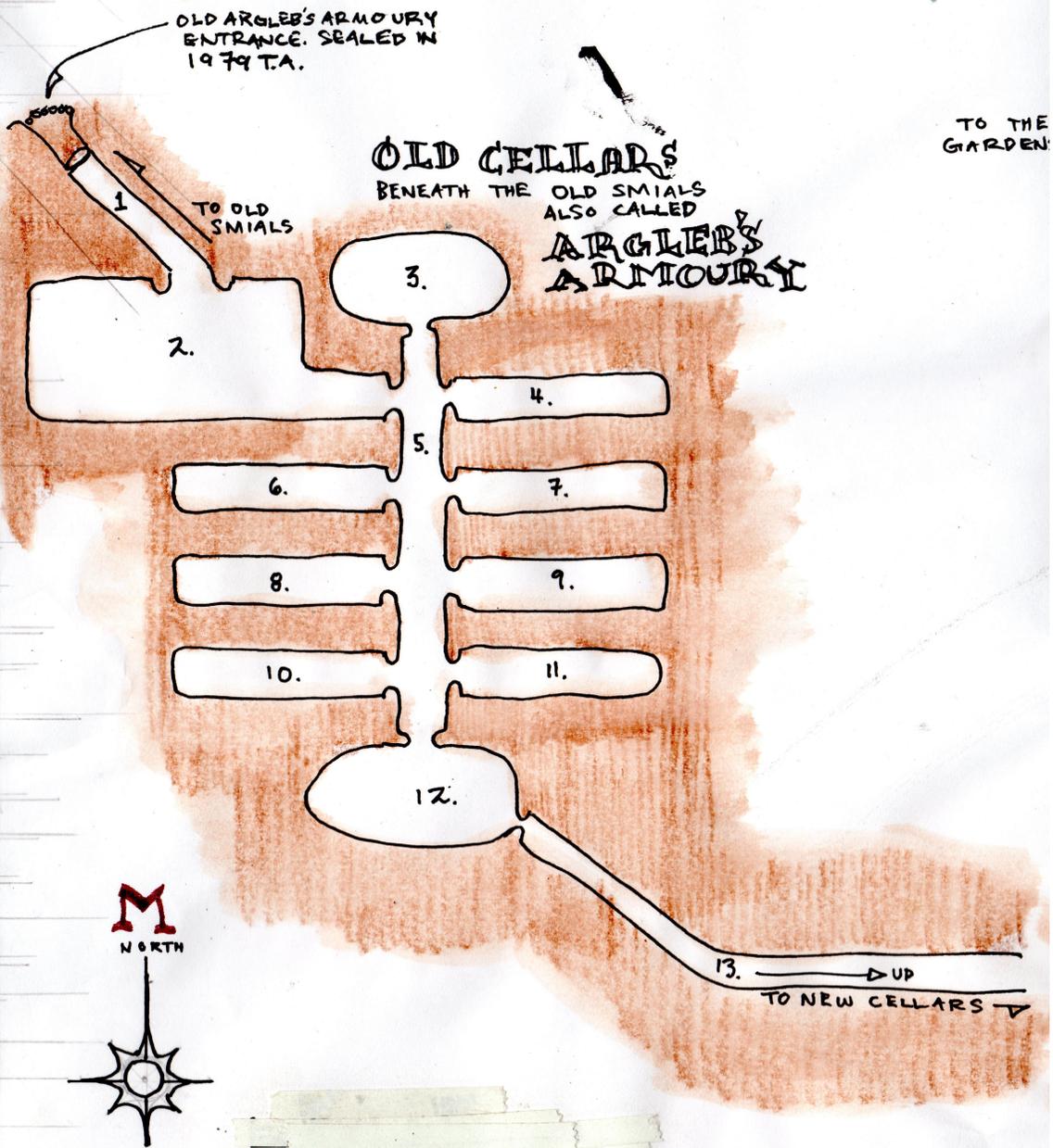


The Cellars of the Great

The cellars were the first portion of the Great Smials to have been built. They were deep and large. When the New Smials "King's Smials" were added, so were new cellars, connected to the Old by a single passage. They were larger and deeper w/ shops and smities, a cistern and access to the kitchens and sheds and access to the outer grounds.

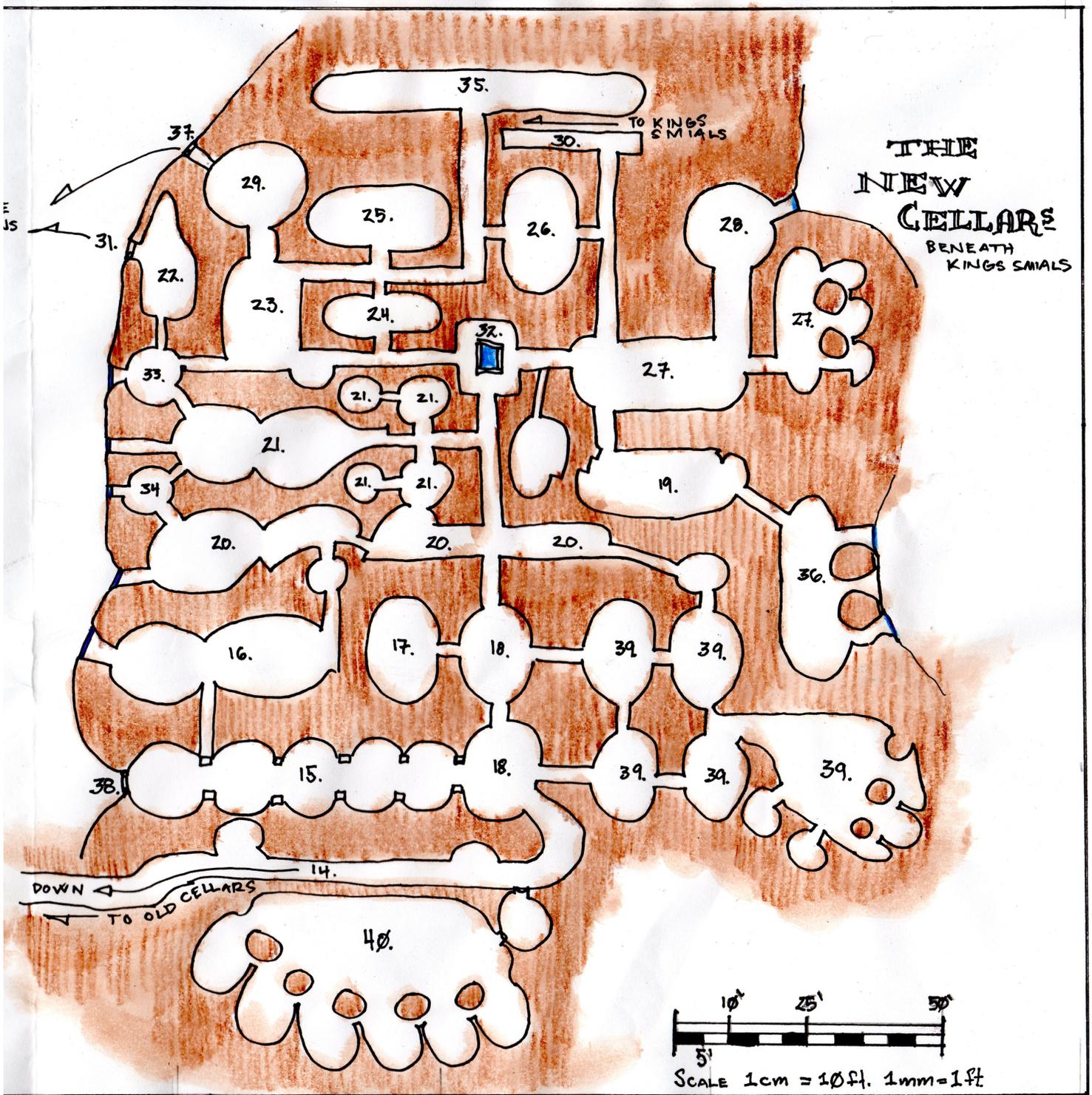
The Cellars of the Great Smials were the largest and grandest stores in all the shire.

After a time the Thains of the Shire were laid out in the Crypt of the Thains here in the Cellars.



1. STAIRS	8. BEER CELLAR	} OLD CELLARS	14. PASSAGE
2. MAIN CELLAR	9. CIDAR CELLAR		15. GRAIN
3. TASTING & PREP RM.	10. MISC. ("JUNK RM.")		16. BREW
4. CHESSE CELLAR	11. MUSHROOMS		17. CELLAR
5. CELLAR HALL	12. STORAGE GNL.		18. CELLAR
6. WINE CELLAR	13. PASSAGE TO NEW CELLARS.		19. RESERVE
7. DRY CELLAR			20. STILL

SMIALS



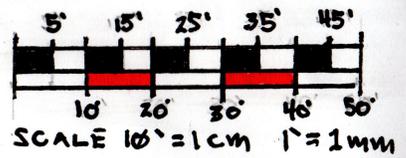
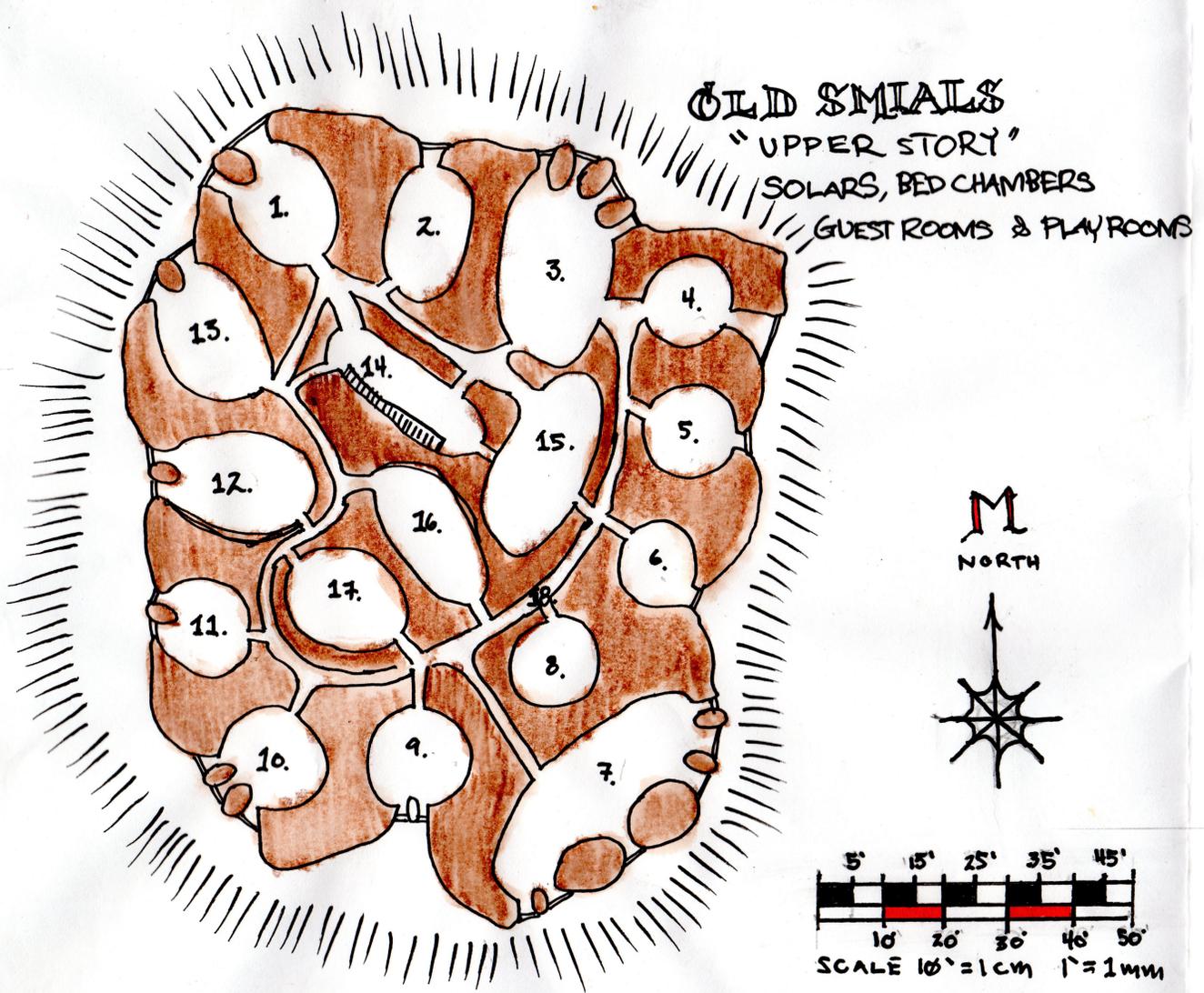
THE
NEW
CELLARS
BENEATH
KINGS SMIALS

5' 10' 25' 50'
SCALE 1cm = 10ft. 1mm = 1ft

GE TO OLD CELLARS	21. FORGE & SMITHY	28. STAIR RM. EAST	35. STORG. DRY GOODS	} NEW CELLARS.
INERIES	22. SHED	29. STAIR RM. WEST	36. TASTING ROOM	
WERY	23. BEER CELLAR	30. KITCHENS STAIR	37. GARDEN DOOR	
AR OF THE BROKEN	24. CHEESE CELLAR	31. SHED DOOR	38. GRANERY GATE	
AR OF DRY STORG.	25. MAIN CELLAR	32. CISTERN	39. SHOPS	
RYNE CELLAR	26. WORKROOM	33. KILN	40. CRYPT	
LL 18	27. WINE CELLAR	34. KILN		

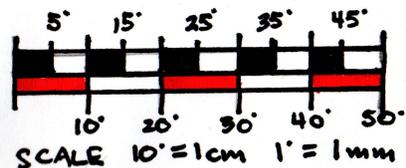
1. GUEST ROOM	12. STUDY	23. THAIN'S ROOMS	34. GUEST STUDY
2. " "	13. CHILDREN'S STUDY & HRTH.	24. " "	35. CLOSET
3. " "	14. CHILDREN'S SOLAR	25. THAIN'S SOLAR	36. SERVANTS HALL
4. SERVING CHAMBER	15. CHILDREN'S ROOM	26. CENTRAL CHAMBER	37. GUEST ROOM
5. GUEST SOLAR	16. " "	27. GUEST HEARTH	38. " "
6. GUEST ROOM	17. STAIR HALL	28. MORNING ROOM	39. " "
7. " "	18. SERVANTS HEARTH	29. CLOSET	40. STAIRS TO BARR K.S.
8. " "	19. THAIN'S HEARTH	30. GUEST ROOM	41. THAIN'S ANTECHAMBER
9. CHILDREN'S ROOM	20. THAIN'S ROOMS	31. " "	42. CANDLE ROOM
10. " "	21. " "	32. " "	
11. " "	22. " "	33. GUEST SOLAR	

KEY: KING SMIALS



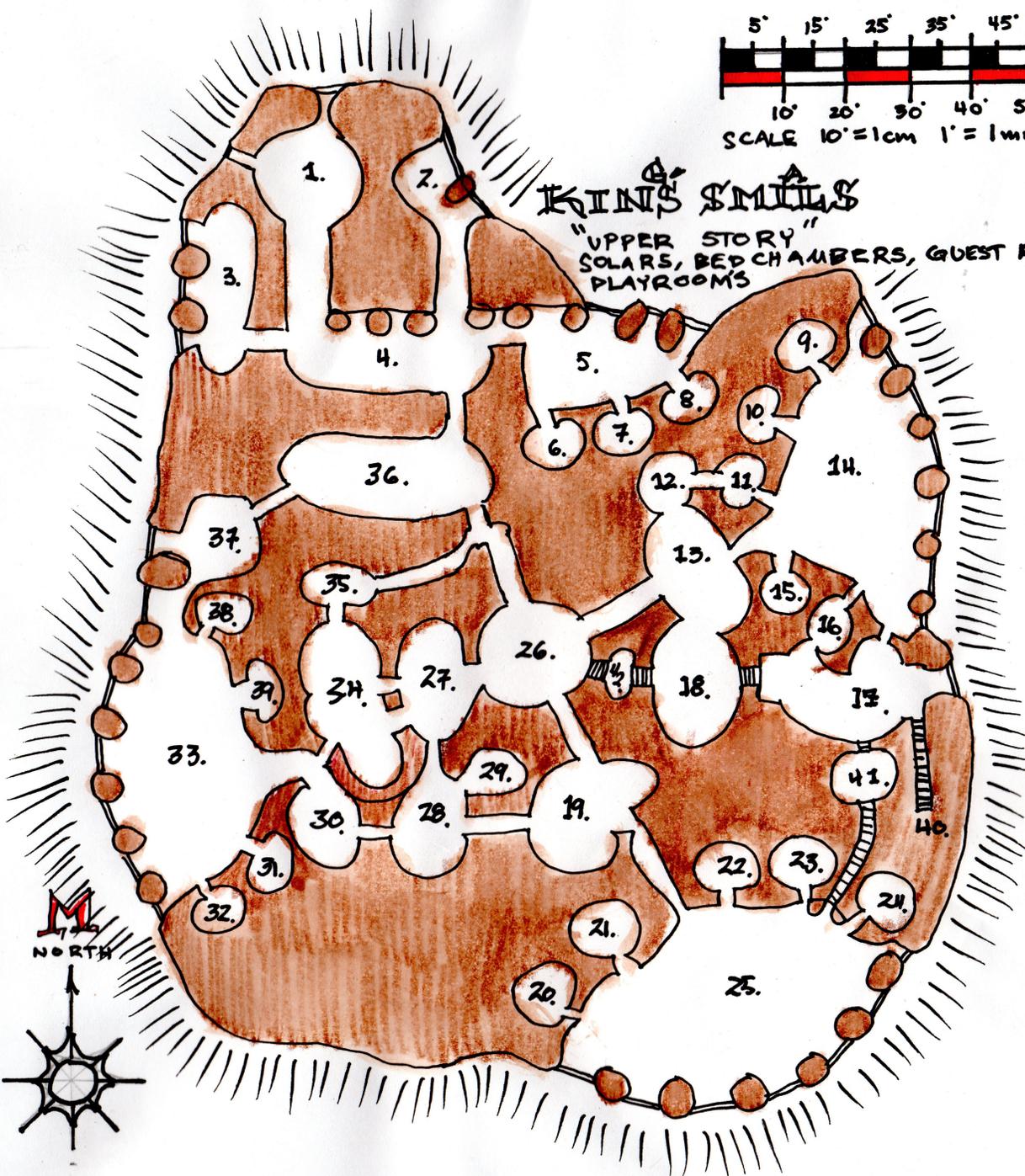
1. GUEST ROOM	6. CHILDREN'S ROOM	11. GUEST ROOM	16. MORNING CHAMBERS
2. " "	7. THAIN'S ROOM	12. " "	17. SERVANTS HALL
3. PLAY ROOM	8. CLO SET	13. " "	18. MAIN HALLWAY
4. CHILDREN'S ROOM	9. GUEST ROOM	14. STAIR ROOM	
5. " "	10. " "	15. UPPER HALL, SOLAR, & HEARTH	

**-KEY-
 OLD SMIALS**



KING'S SMIALS

"UPPER STORY"
SOLARS, BED CHAMBERS, GUEST ROOMS
PLAYROOMS



THE OLD SMIALS MAIN CHAMBERS, UPPER CHAMBERS, & CELLARS WERE MAINLY STONE, LIKELY DWARF DRESSED, COVERING WALL & FLOOR. THE OLDEST PORTION OF OLD SMIALS WERE THE CELLARS, LAID DOWN IN KING ARGELEB'S DAY AS AN ARMOURY FOR HIS SHIRE SUBJECTS. LATER THE MAIN CHAMBERS WERE BUILT FOR THE KING'S VISITS AND TO HOUSE THE ASSIGNED THAIN. WHEN THE OLDBUCKS BECAME THAINS THEY ADDED ROOMS AND ANOTHER STORY FOR THE SOLARS. WHEN THE TOOKS BECAME THAINS THEY EXPANDED TO THE EAST, ESTABLISHING KING'S SMIALS. RICH CARVED WOOD PANELS COVERED FLOOR, WALL & CEILING; IT WAS THE MOST OPULENT OF ALL HOBBIT HOLES IN THE SHIRE AND LATER HOUSED A SUBSTANTIAL PORTION OF THE TOOK CLAN.

1. OLD SMIALS FRONT STAIR
2. OLD PARLOR & GUEST ROOMS
3. OLD KING'S HALL
4. OLD SHIREMOOT
5. WEST FARTHING ARMOURY
6. SOUTH FARTHING ARMOURY
7. SOUTH FARTHING HALL
8. WEST FARTHING HALL
9. NORTH FARTHING HALL
10. NORTH FARTHING HALL
11. EAST FARTHING ARMOURY
12. EAST FARTHING HALL
13. PASSAGE TO KING'S SMIALS
14. "SUNSET" GALLERY
15. STAIRS TO OLD CELLARS
16. WET CELLAR
17. DRY CELLAR

OLD SMIALS

18. KITCHEN
19. COLD CELLAR
20. THAIN'S HALL
21. THAIN'S OFFICE
22. THAIN'S STAIRCASE
23. THAIN'S CHAMBER
24. THAIN'S VAULT
25. THAIN'S LIBRARY & SHIRE RECORDS
26. THAIN'S GALLERY "TOOK ROOST"
27. THAIN'S BREAKFAST
28. THAIN'S PASSAGE'S
29. THAIN'S ARMOURY
30. READER'S ALCOVE/STAIRCASE
31. GREAT KITCHEN
32. BAKERY
33. THAIN'S CHAPEL
34. THAIN'S PRIVY
35. THAIN'S TREASURY
36. THAIN'S LIBRARY
37. THAIN'S PANTRY
38. THAIN'S WARDROBE
39. THAIN'S CHAMBER
40. THAIN'S CABINET
41. THAIN'S ARMOURY
42. THAIN'S STUDY
43. THAIN'S GARDEROBE
44. THAIN'S HALL
45. CELLAR STAIR CASE
46. SOLAR STAIR CASE
47. NORTH FARTHING PENNY.
48. CHAMBER O' NORTH FRITHING.
49. CHAMBER O' WEST FRITHING
50. WEST FRITHING ARMRY.
51. SOUTH FRITHING ARMRY.
52. CHAMBER OF SOUTH FRTH.
53. CHAMBER OF EAST FRTH.
54. EAST FRITHING FRMARY
55. GREAT SHIRE MOOT HALL
56. GREAT DOOR

"OLD TOOKS" ROOMS

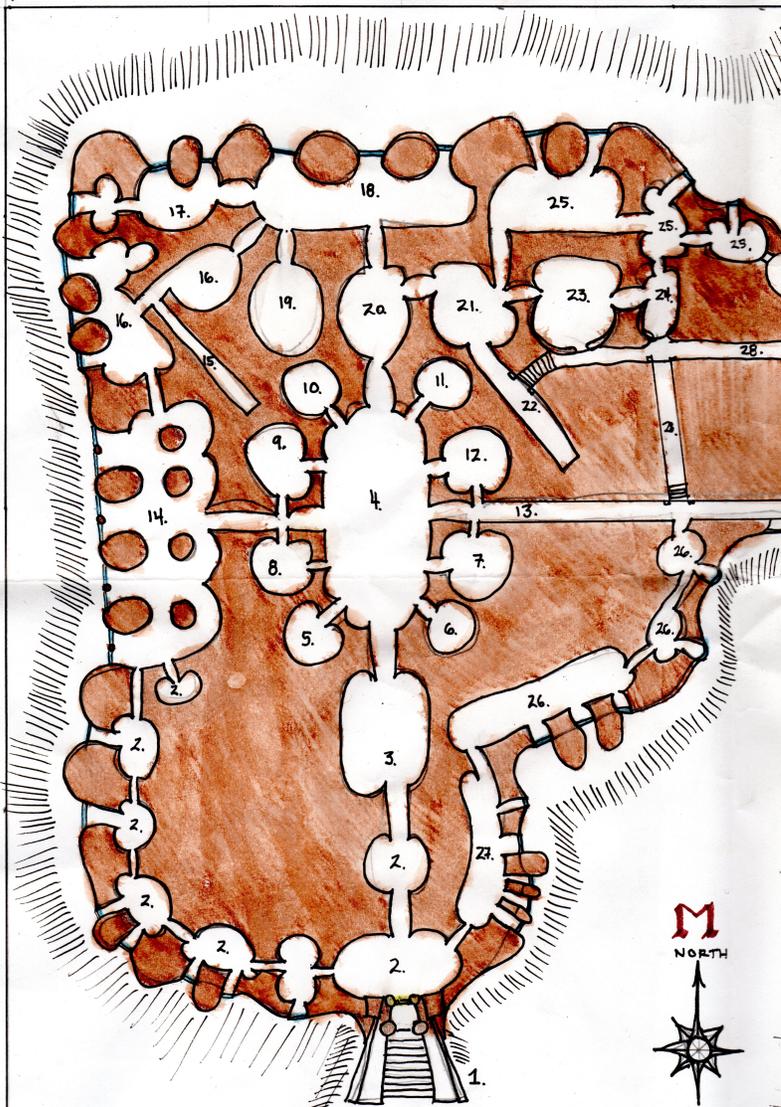
57. KING'S HALL
58. KING'S PARLOR
59. HEARTH HALL
60. GREAT PARLOR
61. FRONT STOOP
62. WRMNG ROOM EAST
63. CLOSET
64. CHAPEL
65. CLOAK ROOM
66. WRMNG ROOM WEST
67. CLOSET
68. CHAPEL

69. BROOM CLOSET
70. BROOM CLOSET
71. ROAD WARDEN'S CHMBR
72. MESSANGER'S CHAMBR
73. READER'S ALCOVE & STAIRCASE (ACCESS TO THAIN'S QTRTS.)
74. } PRIVATE
75. } STUDY
76. } ALCOVES
77. }
78. GRAND STAIRS
79. SERVANTS QUARTERS
80. GUEST ROOMS
81. OFFICES & STUDIES.

THE MAIN HOLES OF THE GREAT SMIALS

The GREAT PLACE OF THE TOOKS

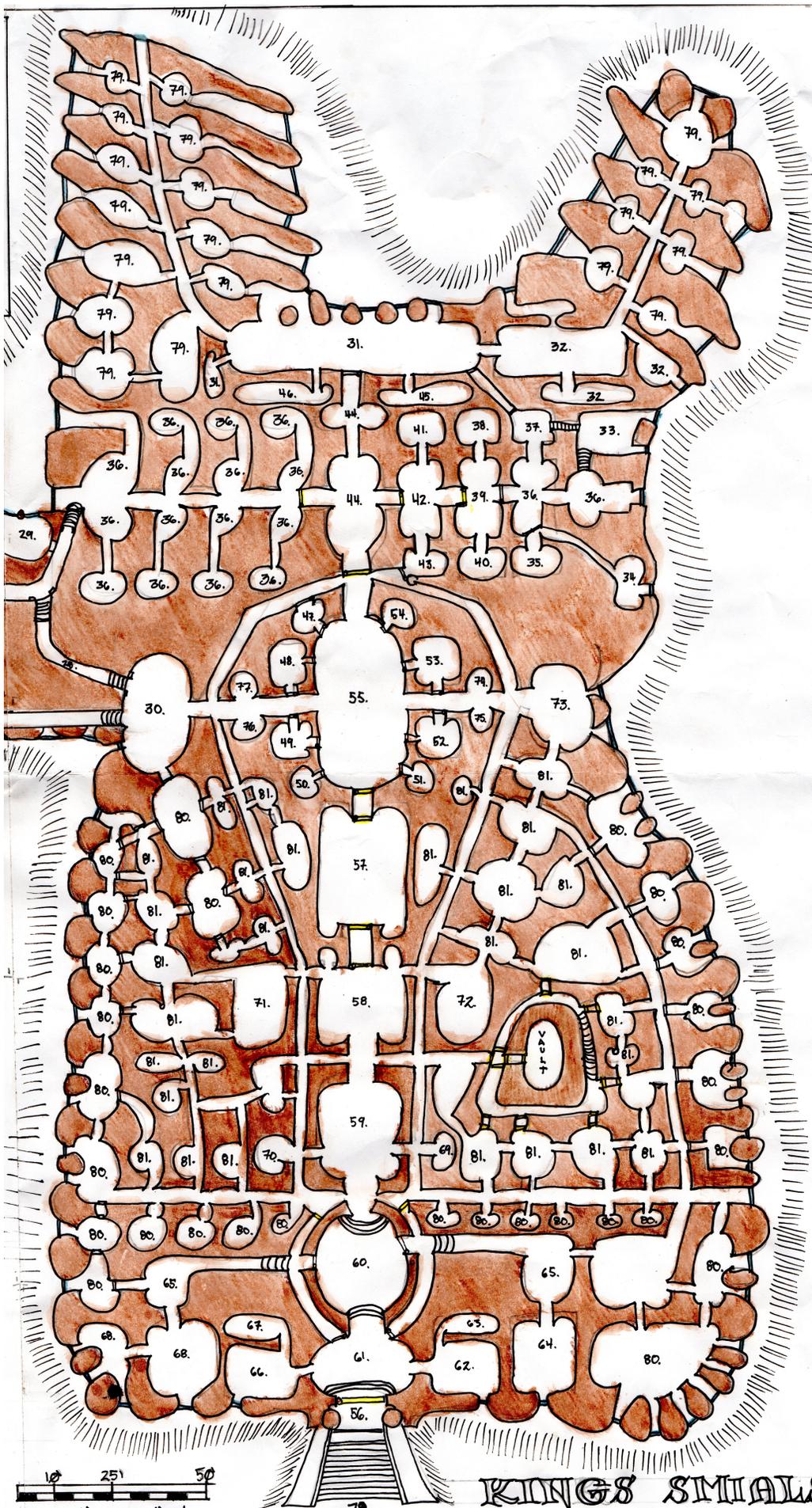
THIS SET OF PLANS, MAPS & FIGURES OF THE GREAT SMIALS AT TUCKBOROUGH IN TOOKLAND, IN THE GREEN HILL COUNTRY OF THE WEST FARTHING OF THE SHIRE, CALLED ALSO THE GREAT PLACE OF THE TOOKS IS BASED ON A SURVEY COMMISSIONED BY KING ELLESSAR, A COPY OF WHICH REMAINED IN THE THAIN'S LIBRARY. I EFENGLOM UNDERTOOK THIS TASK AT THE BEHEST OF ROSS DAVID HARTSHORN IN THE 2014TH YEAR OF THE COMMON ERA.



OLD SMIALS



THE GREAT SMIALS WERE BUILT OVER MANY YEARS. KING ARGELES OF ARTHEBAIN SURVEYED THE LAND & LAID DOWN AN ARMOURY FOR HIS HOBBIT SUBJECTS & ASSIGNED A THAIN TO WARDEN THE SITE IN 1630 OF THE THIRD AGE. IN 1778 THE FIRST ELECTED THAIN EXPANDED THE ARMOURY INTO THAIN'S SMIALS. IN 2340 THE TOOKS BECAME THE THAIN'S, REPLACING THE OLD BUCKS & SOON EXPANDED THAIN'S SMIALS, BUILDING THE LARGER KING'S SMIALS



SCALE 10' = 1cm 1" = 1mm

KING'S SMIALS

Chapter 2 - Letter From an Old Enemy

Bella stood children's solar room, her eyes wet with tears. Gerontius had taken all of his remaining sons and the mysterious letter, and stampeded back outside to search for Isengar. Mira was in the master bedroom, crying into Adamanta's arms. From time to time Mira would sob a question to Adamanta asking what had happened, and who would want to take Isengar, and Adamanta had no answers but tried to reassure her as best she could that her father would find who had done this, and find Isengar. Bella, who was accustomed to Adamanta's voice being stern and demanding, pointing out always the worst that might happen, was almost discouraged by the sound of Adamanta trying to hope for the best. If even her mother Adamanta found the situation too grim to think about the worst that might happen, then things were very bad indeed.

She stood there for a while, her heart a whirl of fear and confusion, and then saw Donna, standing by the door that led from the solar room into Isengar's room, quiet and wide eyed. Bella went in, and softly closed the door behind her.

"His feet were still muddy," Donna said softly. It was true, Isengar had tracked dirt all over the room. Bella nodded, not understanding why Donna was noticing such a thing, but perhaps she was simply in shock. Then, she noticed where Donna was pointing. Together, they followed Isengar's tracks back out into the larger solar room. There, they lost it for a bit in the trample of other brother's trails, but picked it up again near the edge of the room, where he had climbed up onto the ledge of the window. The window (round, like the doors) was set into the wall, so that the space inside formed a little shelf or bench that you could sit on. She saw tiny, muddy footprints there, right next to the window.

"Oh," said Bella, "it's on the windowsill, too. That makes sense, he must have gone out the window. We know he didn't go out the front door, and the back doors are locked."

"Look, though, the footprints are only on the inside of the windowsill," said Donna. "There's nothing on the outside."

"Hmmm, I guess so. Someone picked him up?"

"Yes, and the window was locked before, because Mama didn't like Isengar opening it. When he was sent down to play in his room Mama made me go check that all the windows to the solar were locked. They were, of course, as they always are this time of year."

"But if Isengar can't open the locked window yet, then how did it get open? You can't open it from the outside, obviously."

Donna shrugged, then opened the window herself and looked out onto the ground below. Bella leaned over to look outside with her. Donna looked for a long time.

"No footprints," she said. "Someone picked him up and carried him, someone who didn't leave any footprints themselves."

Bella frowned in thought. Who could be big enough to carry Isengar, but not leave any footprints on the soft soil outside? Who could open the locked window from the outside?

"Isengar went up to the window himself," said Bella, "he wasn't scared or he would have cried out, and run back to us."

Donna nodded, then added "But whoever got him, didn't come up until Papa and the boys had left the garden to come inside, or they would have been seen. They were coming from the north, and this side is visible right until the road curves around the hill to the cellar doors."

For a moment they were both quiet, thinking about this. It was almost as if someone had been hiding, watching, waiting for a chance to come snatch Isengar away.

"I read the letter," said Donna. Bella arched her eyebrows in surprise.

"Papa let you read the letter?"

"No, but he was holding it up and the sunlight from the solar room was shining through it. I sometimes sit on the front steps in the morning, while Papa reads his mail, and I try to read it from the back. If the ink is dark enough, and you have the sun shining through it, you can usually read what it says. I got faster with practice."

"What did it say?" asked Bella, stepping closer to Donna and lowering her voice so that there was no risk that Adamanta would hear through the door.

"It said this," said Donna, and then closed her eyes and recited it from memory.

'Gerontius, my old enemy;

You took from me what I treasured most in all the world, and then went home and thought I would forget about you. I do not forget. I will take from you what you treasure most in all the world, one at a time, starting with the youngest. You have spent your life pouring what you have into making them what they are, and I will take them, all of them, youngest to oldest, and leave you with nothing, childless and alone. One at a time, so you have the chance to fear, and run, and hide, and set traps for me, and curse me, and see them slip away regardless. I do not forget, and you will pay a heavy price for what you took from me.'

Donna opened her eyes, and then she and Bella stared at each other for a long moment.

"He'll be back," said Bella. Donna nodded.

"For Mira!" they said then at the same time, and turned and ran out of the room and down to the master bedroom, and they flung their arms around Mira and Adamanta both. Their mother opened her eyes a bit wider, but said nothing, and after a few minutes (when it was clear that no one was coming to abduct their little sister just then), Bella spoke up.

"Mama, can Mira sleep with Donna and I tonight?" she asked.

Bella and Donna shared a room together, just as most of their older brothers shared rooms, and Mira and Isengar shared a room. Bella suspected that her mother would soon move Mira into a room with she and Donna, since she did not approve of brother and sister sharing a room unless they were very young. Had they been boys, Bella was fairly certain that they would not have been made to sleep three in a room, but Adamanta had different opinions about what was good enough for her sons and her daughters. Well, this time it might help.

When Bella asked her question, she thought she saw the faintest gleam of suspicion in her mother's eyes. Does she know what's in the letter? thought Bella. Perhaps not, perhaps her papa had not told her yet. Regardless, she knew her daughter well enough to see that she had some hidden knowledge or purpose, and was about to say 'no', when Mira piped up.

"I want to sleep in Mama's bed!" she said. That swayed her mother's opinion, and she shook her head. Adamanta did not like her children telling her what to do, or even what they would do.

"No, Mira, you are too old to sleep in our bed anymore. You are not a baby. But you

may sleep in Bella and Donna's room if you like. Perhaps it's time to move your bed in there anyway."

Mira watched them, fearfully, as the three of them moved her little bed into the same room as Bella and Donna, leaving Isengar's room empty and alone. Bella thought it might make her feel that he had gone forever. She went back and fetched the little wooden toy dog which Isengard had been playing with, and gave it to Mira.

"Mira, can you watch this for us? Make sure to give it back to Isengar when we get him back, ok?"

Mira hugged it with both arms as if it were her younger brother, and smiled at Bella through her tears.

Gerontius, my old enemy;

You took from me what I treasured most
in all the world, and then went home
and thought I would forget about you. I
do not forget. I will take from you what
you treasure most in all the world, one at a time,
starting with the youngest. You have spent
your life pouring what you have into making
them what they are, and I will take them,
all of them, youngest to oldest, and leave you with
nothing, childless and alone. One at a time, so you
have the chance to fear, and run, and hide, and
set traps for me, and curse me, and see them
slip away regardless. I do not forget, and you will
pay a heavy price for what you took from me.

Chapter 3 - A Welcome and Unwelcome Guest

That evening, an hour after dusk, Gerontius and his sons returned. They had searched all the land around, and seen nothing of Isengar, nor anything unusual. The sons looked tired, and also either grim or griefstricken, depending on their personalities. Adamanta looked grim, and a bit stricken as well. Bella was accustomed to seeing her mother as stern, resolute, and strong, and to see her looking instead brittle was unnerving. Gerontius tried half-heartedly to raise her spirits.

"I have sent messages to the Rangers at Bree," he told her. "If there is anyone who can find the track of whoever took our Isengar, they can do it. And, we have always gotten on well enough, the Rangers and I. Argonui and I have supped together more times than I can count, he will do what he can. And we will look again tomorrow, as soon as it is light."

That night, the Smials was as quiet and sad as the girls had ever remembered it. They whispered softly to each other in the dark, Bella and Donna not wanting to talk loudly enough for sleeping Mira to hear them. After they went to sleep, Bella had a dream that she was in the garden, looking for cutworms that Donna had told her were eating up their potato plants. She kept turning over one leaf after another, and finding nothing, but she could feel bugs crawling on her arms and back, although they were never there when she stopped to brush them off. There was also a figure moving out of the corner of her eyes, always just at the edge of her vision.

She woke up with a start, her hands brushing at her arms to remove the imaginary bugs, and looked up at the dark wood paneling on the ceiling of her bedroom. She crept silently out of bed and went over to look down at Mira, sleeping peacefully in her own bed, with Isengar's toy puppy in her arms. Bella then went over and checked again that the window was still locked, and then finally she went back to sleep.

The next morning, Gerontius and the sons departed again, each one giving Adamanta a kiss on the cheek as they left, and a few of them giving their younger sisters a hug or a kiss on the cheek as well. When they were gone, the Smials seemed oddly quiet, without little Isengar. They cooked, and cleaned, and worked in the garden. Lunch was a quiet affair, even little Mira not making much noise as she whispered reassurances to Isengar's toy puppy.

The afternoon passed into dusk, and Donna was outside beating dust from rugs, when she saw in the distance a tall figure, much too tall for a Hobbit, and riding a full-sized light grey horse. He was dressed in grey robes, and wore a grey hat that was pointed at

the top, with a broad brim. He had a long white beard, and he carried a tall staff, but he rode easily and dismounted from his horse nimbly, not at all like an old man. Donna ran inside and up the stairs to the Great Kitchen.

"Mama! A visitor!" she called.

Adamanta came down the stairs to the door and looked out, with Bella looking over her shoulder, and Mira poking her head out from behind her mother.

"Oh!" said Adamanta. "It's Gandalf. As if we didn't already have enough trouble of our own."

"Who is Gandalf, Mama?" asked Bella. "He looks tall, is he a Man?", meaning not a Hobbit.

"An old friend of your father's," she answered, her voice tight. "He's a wizard."

Bella knew her father and mother well enough to know that her father had roamed even more in his youth than he did now, and that his mother disliked any reminder of his adventuresome past. When Gandalf reached near to the door, he took off his hat and nodded to Adamanta, who gave a barely respectful nod back.

"Mrs. Took," said the wizard, with a deep and thoughtful voice, "I have heard that you may have had your youngest son go missing. I would like to offer such help as I can. Is Gerontius here?"

Bella noticed silently that Gandalf called her father by his first name (which was unusual, most people outside the family called him "Master Took"), but her mother by her formal name. She wondered how much Gandalf knew about her father's younger days, and how much he had been involved in. She wondered if she could get a chance to talk to him without her parents around to hear.

Donna, on the other hand, noticed that Gandalf had very little packed on his horse, and that when he dismounted it he had turned to hook up its feedbag before walking up to the door to talk to them, instead of just leaving it tied up and hungry after carrying Gandalf on his journey. Moreover, when Adamanta stiffly invited him in to wait for her husband to return, he seemed to know his way around the front part of the Smials as well as any of them, as if he had been there many times before. They walked over to the "Thain's Study", a room with the most comfortable chairs and couches to sit on, that their father preferred to receive important visitors in, when he had them.

Mira, waiting in the study with Gandalf while her mother and older sisters scurried to fetch him something to drink, noticed that he carried his staff with him wherever he went, that he had a large pipe which he set to smoking, that although his face was solemn when he spoke to her he had a friendly gleam in his eye, and most of all of course she noticed that he could do amazing, magical things with smoke rings and light. He puffed a smoke ring out of his pipe, asked Mira what color he should make it glow ('pink!'), and then sent it around behind her, so that as she turned around it continued to move behind her and she ended up spinning slowly in circles, laughing. Mira also noticed, then, that he did not smile broadly, but he did smile, a very wise and subtle smile.

Much to the frustration of Bella and Donna, they were unable to ask Gandalf any of the questions they had in mind, as Adamanta sat in the study with them. She told Gandalf the bare specifics of what had happened, but had little else to say.

"I expect you know more of what happened than I do, anyway," Adamanta said.

"Not much as of yet, I assure you," he answered, and then Adamanta sniffed as if she didn't believe it, in a matter that Bella thought was not at all wise when dealing with a wizard, whether he was a friend of her father's or no. Bella didn't know much about wizards, but she knew that they could do bad things to you if you made them angry. Gandalf though, once he had determined that Adamanta had nothing more to add, amused himself with sending smoke rings around behind furniture, just out of Mira's reach, so that the little one was sent clambering all over, behind couches and under tables, trying to catch them.

Bella was just wondering if she might dare to start a conversation with the Wizard herself, and whether or not Adamanta would try to stop her if she did, when her father and older brothers returned in a mass. Gerontius was elated to see Gandalf, and smiled for the first time since the previous morning. He introduced his younger sons, Isembard and Hildibrand, and Bella and Donna as well ("where's my little Mira gone to? Oh there she is, under the couch"). Bella noticed that he seemed to know all of the older sons already, and they all seemed happy to see him.

Eventually, after several minutes of introductions, Gandalf said, "Gerontius, I am happy as ever to see your fine family and wonderful Hobbit-hole, but I believe you have more serious matters for us to discuss. Shall we do it now?"

Then, to her annoyance but not surprise, she and everyone else but Gerontius and

Gandalf were ushered out of the room by Adamanta. It was several minutes later, listening to Adamanta fume to her and Donna in the kitchen, that she noticed that Mira was still in the study, having been missed by Adamanta because she was under the couch.

"Wizard or no, he has some nerve to come to us in this time," said Adamanta, mostly to herself. Her sons shook their heads and wandered out of the kitchen, but Bella decided to keep her talking as long as she could, hoping that Mira could escape notice for longer if she kept Adamanta busy.

"But surely a wizard could be helpful just now?" she asked.

"Bah," answered her mother, "no doubt your father thinks so. He may have power enough, but I don't know that he's ever used it for our family's good. More the other way around if you ask me."

"What do you mean, Mama? Did he do something bad?"

"He's a troublemaker," answered Adamanta after a long pause, "and trouble comes wherever he goes. He looks for trouble, and he finds it, and then he drags your father or...others into it with him. I've never seen him arrive but bad news and bad ideas came with him, but your father is always all ears for it."

Bella tried for a quarter hour to cajole or trick her mother into revealing more, but got little for her efforts. As time went by, Adamanta's anger cooled, and she became more guarded and would say less. Occasionally, as when Bella asked if he ever spent time with other Hobbits, perhaps any of their family (she was thinking of the Brandybucks, a related family to the Tooks, that lived across the River), Adamanta would flare up again without warning, and Bella hoped she would let slip something she hadn't said before, but no luck. Adamanta was angry, very angry at Gandalf about something in the past, but she was still her iron-willed self, and did not wish her daughters to be too well informed about their father's adventuresome past.

Finally, she shook off all further questions, and set the two of them to work cooking, and herself went back further into the Smials to where the wines were kept (she may not have liked Gandalf but she was a determined hostess, and meant to find something fine for him to have at dinner even if she hoped he would not enjoy it). While she was gone, Donna leaned over to whisper to Bella, as they were cutting vegetables to put into the stew.

"Is Mira still in there?" she asked, barely audible from a few inches away.

"Yes," said Bella back, just as softly, "she was under the couch. I don't think they remembered her in all the hubbub."

"Is she listening, do you think? Or just playing?"

"If she were just playing she would have been kicked out long ago," answered Bella. "She must be laying quiet and listening. I only hope that..."

She was interrupted just then by the sound of Gandalf and Gerontius walking towards the kitchen, talking to each other about what they had seen the day before. Gandalf was shown Isengar's room, and looked about it for a few minutes, and then it was time for dinner, and the girls and Adamanta were kept busy serving everyone. Normally Bella would have been annoyed at being stuck in the kitchen, but today she was annoyed that Mira (who had appeared shortly after Gandalf and Gerontius, a bright gleam in her eye) was NOT stuck in the kitchen, being too young to help much with setting out plates and serving food. So Adamanta and the two older daughters were kept scurrying for an hour, and then another hour as they and Adamanta ate, and then yet another hour as they all cleaned up.

Finally, when everyone had gone to bed, including Gandalf who was put up in the largest guest room still in use, Bella quietly closed the door, and the three girls sat together on her bed (which was the largest of the three in their room), and Mira got to tell them what she had overheard. She was not old enough to tell it to them all in an organized way, as it had happened, but after half an hour of whispered questions and answers, Bella and Donna were able to piece together what she had overheard. We will tell it here as it happened, not the way Mira told it to them, so that it is easier to understand.

Mira had been behind the couch, still trying to catch a bright green smoke ring that Gandalf had sent there, when she heard the stampede of Gerontius and his sons coming in, and when Adamanta herded them all out she had stayed quiet and still under the couch.

"Gandalf," said Gerontius when the door was closed, "what do you make of this? No one has seen it yet but me, and now you."

Mira heard the sound of rustling paper, and guessed that her father had taken out the letter that had been left behind when Isengar was taken, and handed it to Gandalf to

read. After a minute, Gandalf spoke.

"It looks as though your old travels with me have come back to haunt you, Gerontius. I am sorry to hear it."

"Yes, yes, I am afraid so," said Gerontius. "Do you know who he is?"

"No, I know no more of him today than I did when you first told me. Did you remember anything of what he looked like?"

"No," said Gerontius, "it was dark, and I was hiding. I could barely hear his breathing, even, and that was after chasing me for several miles. Must have worn soft shoes, he was quiet as a Hobbit. I don't know how he knew where I was, I was fairly certain I was out of sight and silent, but somehow he knew, and was getting closer to me when we both heard the sound of your staff and boots on the stone floor. I am lucky you came when you did, my friend, or I would not likely have survived. But I wonder if it might have been better to have died then, than see revenge taken on my own children. The young should not have to pay for the deeds of their parents."

"I think it happens more often than you think," said Gandalf.

"Perhaps," said Gerontius, "but I fear Isengar may have already paid a heavy price."

"Not too heavy yet, I think," said Gandalf. "The letter suggests to me that the person wants something from you. I expect that ransom is what is desired, not just revenge."

"Ransom? Is this about money?"

"No," said Gandalf, "but you are Thain of the Shire. Having a hold on you might be worth something to some people. Also, you might still have something from your old adventures, something that others might want. But we could find out more if I took this letter to Elrond. He can tell a great deal just from the manner in which it is written. I will take it to him for you, if you wish."

"I would appreciate that," said Gerontius. "And tell him of my gratitude, once more. But there is something else you could take to Rivendell, if you would: my daughters. They would be safe there, if anywhere."

"Hmmm...they would, once we got there. But it is a long journey, and if you are being watched already then it might give them many chances to strike. I might be able to keep

them safe, but until we know more about the adversary, I hesitate to take them so far."

"But the Smials is no fortress, even with us on our guard."

"It was, once," said Gandalf.

"But that was long ago," said Gerontius, "and even then it was not made to keep out sorcery. We need elvish protection."

"I agree," said Gandalf. "Let me take them to the Grey Havens, then, it is much closer. They will be as safe there as at Rivendell, and Cirdan's people will protect your daughters, if I ask them to. Then I can go to Rivendell with the letter, and see what Elrond can tell us."

"What shall I do, in the meantime?" asked Gerontius. "Should I go with you, or search here?"

"Stay here, and continue your search," said Gandalf. "The Rangers will help you, they were already on the lookout when I talked to them yesterday, and may discover something, and there is a good chance that you will receive another letter from the abductor, whoever he is. I will ask Argonui to look into it personally."

"Thank-you, Gandalf, I appreciate it more than I can say."

"It is partly my doing that you got into this mess," said Gandalf, "I will do what I can."

That was all Mira could remember, and then the Wizard and her father stood up and walked into the kitchen. Mira had a great many questions for Bella: who was Elrond or Cirdan, what were Rivendell and the Grey Havens, and what was the meaning of all of the parts about old adventures that Gerontius and Gandalf had before? Bella could not answer many of Mira's questions, but she did know that Elrond was an elf; technically a half-elf, but Lord of a place filled with elves.

"We will get to see elves?" asked Donna.

"It sounds like it, if Mama doesn't forbid it," said Bella.

They spent a long time then, in the dark, whispering to each other about stories they had heard about elves, and elven magic. Gerontius had told them a little, and their older brothers had told them a little more, but they didn't know how much they could trust.

Was it true that they were all handsome and fair to look at? Almost certainly, all the tales said so. Was it true that they lived forever, and would have known Papa when he was a little Hobbit boy? Probably so, at least ones like Elrond and Cirdan had lived for Ages. Was it true they would glow in the dark, and their songs could make the stones laugh or weep, and they could talk to trees and birds and fish in the ocean? Hard to say, but Bella was guessing maybe some of that was only in stories. Maybe, though, some of them were not just stories, and maybe they would find out soon!

"Can they find Isengar for us?" asked Mira at last.

Bella and Donna looked at each other, silently, for a while, then finally Bella spoke.

"I don't know, Mira. I hope so."

When the other two had fallen asleep, Bella stayed awake in the dark for a time, looking up at the ceiling of her room. She tried to imagine her Papa as a young boy, or even a Hobbit in his "tweens", his reckless early twenties. It was hard to do. As far as she had seen he had always been taller, and older, and wiser than she, and it was difficult to imagine him as young and mischievous and foolish. She wondered what he must look like now to Gandalf, who had met him years ago. Did Gandalf look differently now, or did Wizards always look the same?

She suddenly realized, that Adamanta would not be able to prevent Gandalf from taking her and her sisters to the elves tomorrow. With Isengar gone, at least for now, things were too desperate for her to argue Gerontius into agreeing with her as she usually did. She realized with a sudden shock that she, Bella, was going to leave her home tomorrow, with a Wizard, and go to see elves, without either of her parents there with her. She felt both thrilled and frightened at the prospect.

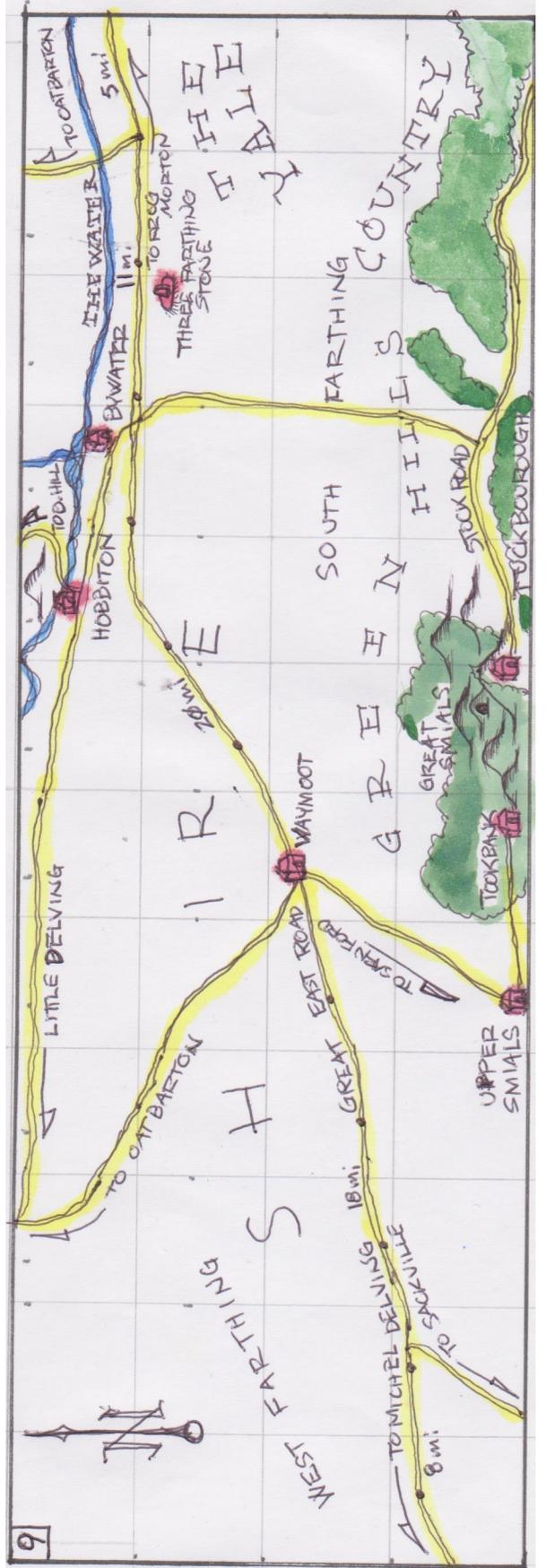
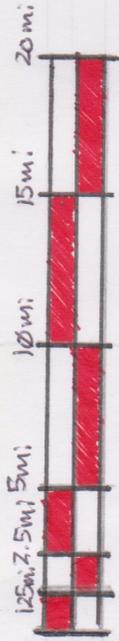
She also realized, that it was a feeling just like that which her father had felt so many years before, when he had gone off with Gandalf. Tomorrow, it would be her turn to begin an adventure.

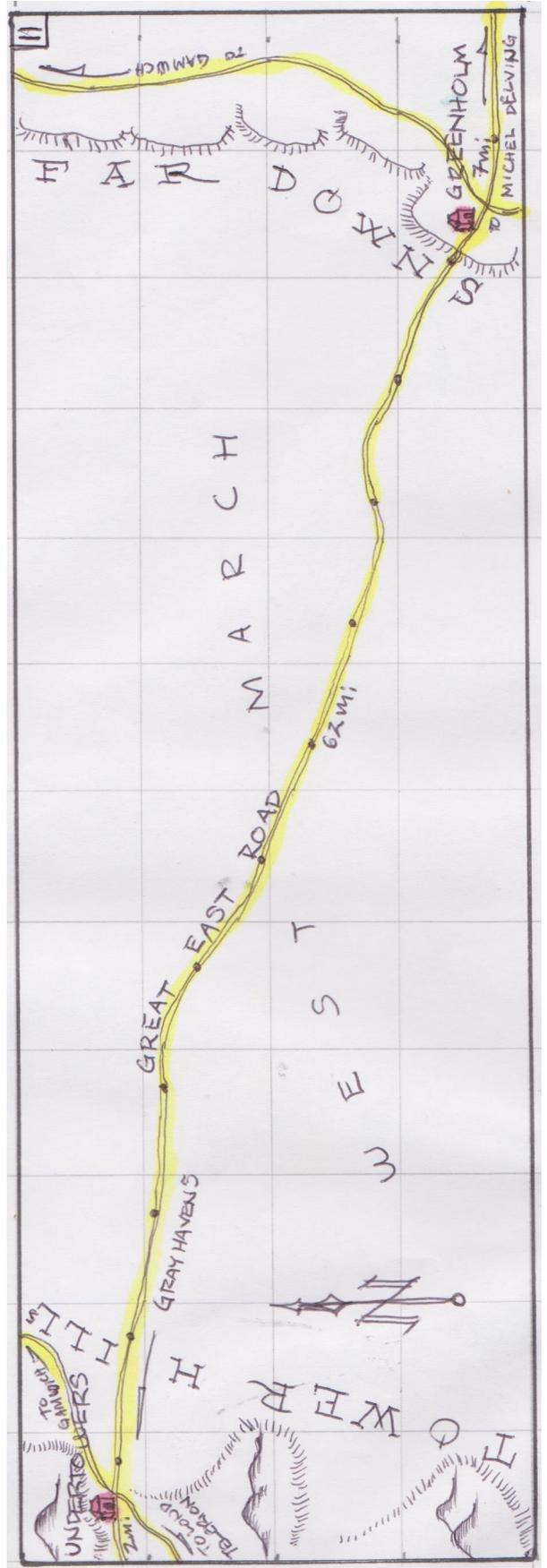
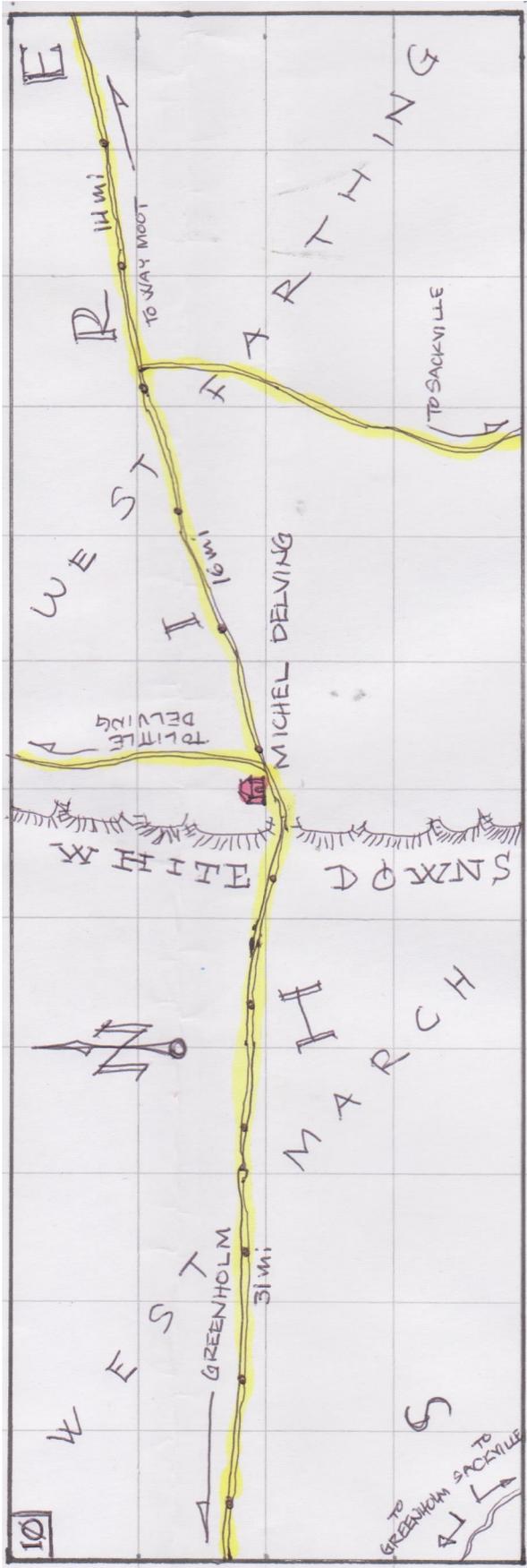
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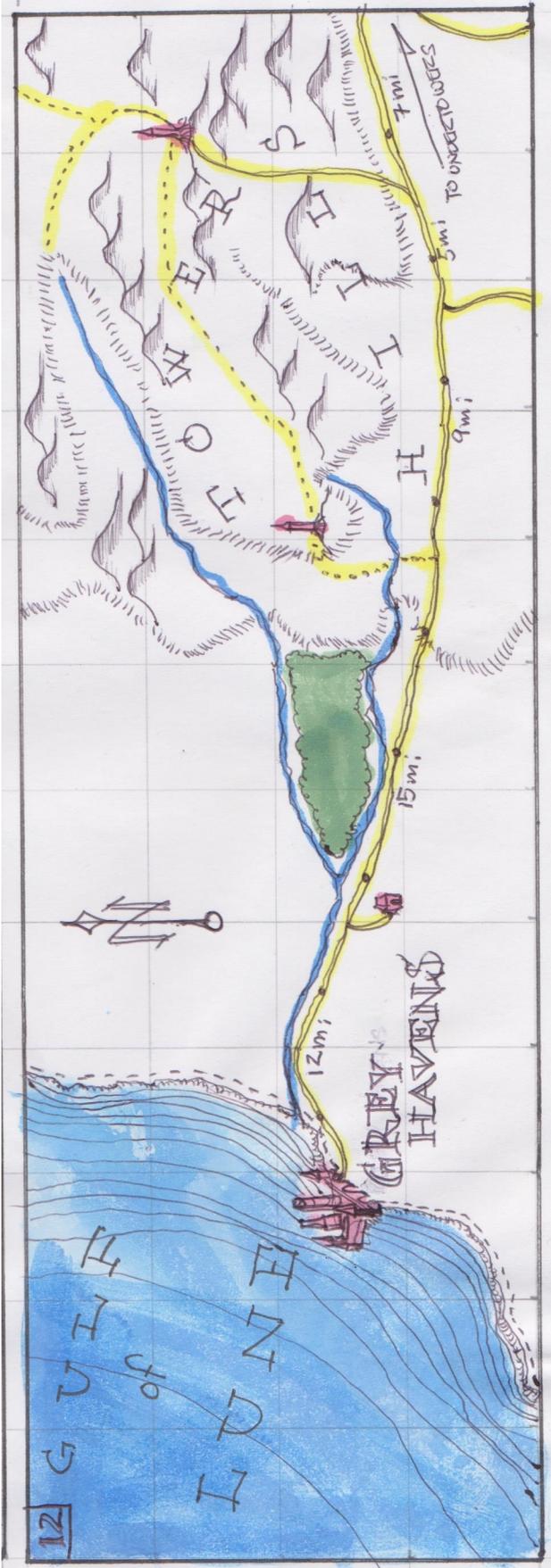
RIVENDELL TO GREY HAVENS

THREE FARTHING STONE TO GREY HAVENS

PLATE III







Chapter 4 - Surprise Amongst the Elves

Thus it was that by the middle of the next morning, Bella and Donna and Mira found themselves preparing to ride west, Mira sitting in front of Gandalf on his horse and Bella and Donna each on ponies. Bella had only ridden ponies a few times, and Donna never had; she was getting various bits of advice from her older brothers. Adamanta came up to Bella, tears in her eyes, and held her hand.

"Be careful, Bella, and watch over your sisters if you can. I wish I could go with you. Be careful!"

Bella didn't know what to say, so she smiled a bit and squeezed her mother's hand. The idea that her mother was not able to go somewhere that she was going, was peculiar to think about. She could not think of another time in her life when she was able to do something or go somewhere that her mother was not. The two of them, mother and daughter, looked at each other in silence for a few moments more, until Gerontius came up to say his goodbyes to her.

"Bella, you must listen closely to everything that Gandalf tells you," he said, and Bella saw her mother behind him grimace. "He has saved many a Hobbit before, he will keep you safe, and rescue our little Isengar. Don't cause him any trouble, though, and do as he says. Wizards know a lot about the world that Hobbit-folk do not, so do as you're told, my daughter."

Then he reached up, and she leaned over to let him kiss her on the cheek. It was also odd, being higher up than her parents, and having to lean down to them. With that, Gandalf prodded his horse forward, and the ponies followed it almost without needing any guidance from Bella or Donna (which was fortunate, as they had little idea of how to convince their ponies to do anything they didn't want to). As they rode up the little road that led to the Smials, they could not resist the urge to turn and look back over their shoulders, and see their older brothers and parents waving at them. Mira, for her part, was already giggling and laughing as she played with the mane of Gandalf's tall horse.

For a while, they were riding through the Shire, which was the name for the land where only Hobbits lived. By evening, though, they had come to the lands outside of the Shire, and as the sun began to set, Gandalf chose a spot for them to camp in a small copse of trees a short distance off the road. They had a small bedroll each, and only a thin blanket to wrap around themselves, for it was the middle of summer and even at night it was not too cool. Nonetheless, perhaps to help boost their spirits, Gandalf made a small fire for them to gather around. They had a few days' worth of food, mostly bread and

cheese and nuts, and Gandalf knew a small stream nearby where they got water to boil for tea. They hobbled their horse and ponies, so that they could eat grass without going too far.

It was all less comfortable than their kitchen and dining room at the Smials, and the food was more plain, but Bella noticed that it was all more exciting, perhaps because it was unusual for them. She tried to imagine her father camping, perhaps on the road with Gandalf, when he was younger.

"Gandalf?" she asked, when they were all circled around the fire, sitting and munching on the food Adamanta had packed for them. "What was my father like when he was young?"

Gandalf looked over at Bella, and his eyes narrowed just a bit, as if he were trying to read her mind to know what she was thinking about to cause her to ask the question. Gandalf had a way of looking straight at a person, not unkind but also somewhat unnerving because one had the impression that he was able to see what was in your thoughts as easy as reading a book.

"Well," he answered slowly, "Gerontius still is young, compared to some. But when he was your age, if that is what you call 'young', he was inquisitive, quick-witted, confident, and sly. He still is the first two, but I believe he has seen enough of the world now to not be as overconfident, and not bother trying to be as sly."

"Seen enough of the world, with you?" asked Bella.

"He has travelled a goodly amount, both with and without me," said Gandalf. "He sees more of it than you know, even now. As Thain of the Shire, it is his duty to know more about what is going on outside of the Shire, in case it is brewing trouble for you and the other Hobbits. He talks to the Rangers often, and occasionally even the elves. Hobbits are never famous outside the Shire, but he is as close to being well-known outside of the Shire as any Hobbit."

"But you did travel with him, before?" asked Bella.

"I did," said Gandalf, and he looked into the fire and seemed not to be willing to say any more.

"Does he have any enemies, from before?" asked Bella.

He looked up from the fire to stare for a moment at Bella, one eyebrow arched under the broad brim of his hat, and then turned to look at Mira, who was unable to stop from giggling. Gandalf extended his right hand to shake a long finger at her.

"You, little one, were still under the couch when your father and I spoke together, weren't you? Did your older sisters make you give a report of what you heard?"

Mira giggled more, and buried her face in Bella's side.

"Does he?" asked Bella again.

"It would appear so," answered Gandalf, but he said nothing more, and they sat in silence again for a few minutes.

"Do you think Hildibrand is in danger?" asked Donna. Their brother Hildibrand was just three years older than Bella, and now that they were gone he was the youngest one still at the Smials.

Gandalf looked up at Donna now, and made an expression of exasperation.

"Hildibrand, eh? So, why is it you would pick out the youngest child still at the Smials for your particular concern, eh?" His eyes stared out from under his bushy eyebrows, and Donna dropped her gaze and said nothing.

"I believe," said Gandalf, "that you have read the letter left in Isengar's room, the one that Gerontius told me only he had seen. Didn't you?"

Donna was silent and her eyes downcast, as were the other two. Even Mira was quiet. The sound of a wizard raising his voice in anger was frightening.

They looked up again when they heard the unexpected sound of soft laughter. Gandalf, who had been greatly annoyed moments before, was laughing to himself. He shook his head, and then looked over again at Bella.

"How did I describe your father? Inquisitive, and sly? I would say that some of his children have inherited that. No wonder Adamanta is so stern with you three, she knows you and your father well enough to see what is coming." He shook his head and laughed softly again.

"Can we go with you to Rivendell, and see Elrond and the elves?" asked Mira. Bella's

eyes widened a bit in alarm, but after all, Gandalf had already figured out that she overheard her father and Gandalf the night before. In any event, when Gandalf looked sidelong at her, he could not entirely suppress a grin, and Bella realized that even Wizards can sometimes be at least a little bit charmed by Mira's combination of youth, innocence, and beauty. Not enough to convince him of anything, however, as he shook his head 'no'.

"I have promised your father I would take you to Cirdan and the Sea Elves of the Grey Havens. Even if there were no other reason to take you there and not to Rivendell, that would be reason enough; I owe your father too much to break a promise, especially on so weighty a matter as the safety of his daughters. But, as for Elves, you will see many there, no less than in Rivendell."

Gandalf owes her father? thought Bella. For what? But Gandalf was done talking for the night, and made them finish their meal and take to their beds. Bella and Donna put Mira between them so that she would be warmer and feel safer. Mira, for her part, still had Isengar's wooden toy puppy with her, and Bella heard her whispering softly to it that they would soon be seeing elves. Looking over across the dying fire, she saw Gandalf still sitting up, staring into the fire and looking thoughtful.

When they awoke in the morning, to the sound of birds chirping at the sunrise, she saw Gandalf still sitting there, as if he had kept watch all night. She wondered if Wizards slept. She had assumed he had slept last night, when he stayed at the Smials, but perhaps he was just staying quietly in his room so as not to disturb them? She didn't know much about Wizards, or where they came from, or even what they were. They were the size of Men, not Hobbits, but her parents talked about Wizards as if they were a separate group, not Men or Hobbit or Elf.

What others were there? she wondered. She had never heard of any besides Gandalf, but her mother said he was "a Wizard", not "the Wizard", so there must be others. She wished she knew more about the world she was going out into.

After washing their faces with water from the stream, they led their horse and ponies back to the road and began riding again. They had now left the Shire entirely, and were riding through sparsely settled lands. Occasionally they saw dwarves from the Blue Mountains riding the other way, but they had little to say and Gandalf had no reason to stop them. Hobbits were naturally chatty folk, and if they see someone they don't know on the road, they will introduce themselves and share news (and gossip) about what they have seen and where they have come from. Apparently, dwarves and wizards were different.

They camped a second night, and Gandalf would tell them little more than before about their father or where they were going. He did tell them stories, though, about the Shire in older times, including stories about their great grandfather's brother, who was a Hobbit much taller than others, and who was known as "Bullroarer". He also told them a few stories about the Long Winter, when their great-grandfather became Thain during the middle of a terrible winter which lasted an entire year, and the entire Shire was nearly extinguished from cold and lack of food. It was then that Gandalf had first come to the Shire, it seemed. He told the three of them several stories of how the Hobbits of the Shire had been both brave and compassionate, helping each other to survive in such a terrible time. Bella had the impression that Gandalf might have played a part in their survival, and also that he might have travelled with Bullroarer as he had with her father, but he would not talk about his own part in those times. Perhaps, thought Bella, he wants us to know that Hobbits can be brave, and survive hard times. She wondered if she were brave, if it came to that.

"There was little enough food for anyone," said Gandalf, "and if the Hobbits then had fell to fighting amongst themselves, it could have been a far greater catastrophe than it was. Before we could find a source of food, they had to spend several long months in bitter cold, with meager meals and no guarantee that anything more was coming. If they had fought each other, or those better off had hoarded and the rest had tried to take from them by force, they could have torn themselves to pieces by the time help came. It is a terrible trial, for a Hobbit, to eat lightly day after day, week after week, only one meal a day."

"One meal a day!" shouted Mira, alarmed as if she had been told that they had eaten trolls. "A Hobbit can't live on one meal a day!" Bella smiled a bit and looked sidelong at her little sister.

"Well," said Gandalf softly, trying not to laugh out loud at her alarm, "they can. They normally don't, but it is possible, for a while. They grew thinner and thinner, though, and for some their hair began to fall out in clumps. It was an awful time. But, they held together, and held each other, and when food finally arrived most of them recovered. It was an impressive display of compassion and solidarity. If they had been less brave, or less compassionate, they would have turned on each other or eaten their seed corn in panic, and had nothing to plant with the next spring. This is what happened to many of the settlements of Men, that winter. These many years later, the settlements of Men have still not recovered to their former size."

They were quiet, then, for a while, each thinking about what it had been like to be a

Hobbit in a Shire that was more dangerous, and surrounded by villages or even kingdoms of Men. Again that night, Bella saw Gandalf sitting up by the fire when they went to sleep, and he was still sitting there when they woke up in the morning. He was even more quiet the third day, and Bella found herself needing to answer Mira's questions. She was accustomed to this, normally, but found herself a bit nervous about saying anything in front of Gandalf, for example on the question of what elves were like, for fear of being wrong and looking foolish. She was even more nervous about asking Gandalf instead, as he seemed to be lost in thoughts of his own, now, so she distracted Mira instead with songs and riddle-games. The third night passed much as the first two did.

The fourth day, though, they saw tall white stone towers in the west, in the direction they were headed, and all day long they drew nearer. They came over a ridge of hills, and all three of the Hobbits gasped as they saw the Sea far below them. They also saw the full height of the White Towers for the first time; compared to the pleasant but simple dwellings of the Shire, they seemed otherworldly, gleaming white marble cut in smooth curves and rising up into the blue sky.

"The White Towers, a pilgrimage point for Elves who wish to look into the Palantir towards the Utter West," he said.

"What is the Utter West?" asked Bella, but Gandalf gave no reply. Instead, he pointed to riders who were coming up the road to meet them.

"It seems we are expected," said Gandalf. "I had hoped as much. Cirdan keeps good watch on all the borders of the Grey Havens."

They saw a half dozen elves, or so they supposed them to be, riding on tall horses towards them. Their hair was long, and their clothes were simple but beautiful, with vivid hues of blue and silver. As they came closer, Bella could see that their faces were thin and beautiful, and only one, a little taller than the rest, showed any signs of age at all. Even he was still strong and agile, but he had a long beard and white hair, whereas the others were all raven black of hair and their features were still smooth and clear. Only their eyes, wise and knowing, showed any sign that they were more than 20 or 30 years old; that and the fact that they were graceful and sure in their movements, without any of the impatient rushing of a youngster.

"Is the one with a beard also an elf?" asked Donna.

"He is," said Gandalf. "He is Cirdan, the Lord of the Grey Havens. Wait here while I

talk to them a bit."

With that, he picked Mira up from in front of him and put her sitting in front of Bella on her pony, and rode slowly up to meet them. They had a quiet conversation, then, perhaps 30 yards ahead of Bella and her sisters. Bella and Donna both tried to hear what was said, but could make out nothing; Gandalf had learned not to trust the girls within earshot, it seemed. After a few minutes, Gandalf turned and waved to them, and they rode their ponies slowly up to meet Cirdan and the other elves.

"Daughters of the Shire's Thain," said the tallest elf, Cirdan with the beard, "welcome to the Grey Havens. I am sorry to hear of your brother's disappearance, but happy to offer your father sanctuary for his children. Gandalf, also, is known to me, and speaks well of you. I hereby grant you right of passage into our lands, for as long as your safety requires."

None of the three girls knew quite what to say to this, which sounded very formal, but they nodded their heads and smiled weakly. Bella was surprised to hear that her father was known even outside of the Shire, among the elves of the Grey Havens. It occurred to Bella that she should say something along the lines of "thank-you", but Cirdan and several of his retinue had already turned and ridden away. Two elves remained with them, one male and one female. The male spoke first.

"I am called Galdor," he said, "and we have not often had Hobbits in our lands, so you will forgive us if we do not have proper lodgings for you. Cirdan's decree is that you are to be kept in the White Towers, here close by, so that you will be no further from your homes than need be, but you will be safely watched. It may feel a bit like a jail cell, I fear, but it is only intended for your safety, and hopefully only for a short time. The view from the top will be pleasing enough, I think."

He turned to the elfmaiden next to him. "This is Maeweth. She will see you to your quarters, and make certain that you are well provided for. I recall Hobbits to be possessed of heroic appetites, so you may be ready for supper. It will not be what you are accustomed to in the Shire, but perhaps you will find it pleasing enough, especially after days of riding."

Maeweth, a female elf, smiled kindly at them and spoke less formally.

"Welcome, ladies, to elf-lands. We'll try to make you as comfortable as may be. I think there will be singing in the tower you will stay at, tonight, so perhaps you will enjoy that? I believe you also may enjoy looking out from the room you will stay in; there is a

good view of a nest of baby falcons, of the kind we call osprey, which we can see from your windows. I have a spyglass which you can borrow to look at them closer. The baby osprey call for their mother to bring them food. Perhaps you are calling for food as well?"

All three of the girls nodded at this.

The next several hours passed in a blur. They went to one of the three towers, and were introduced to a dozen other elves, all tall and graceful as lords and ladies, but quick to laugh and slow to anger. They brought them food; fruit pies and fresh baked bread and hearty stew and all manner of other foods, both savory and sweet. They drank only clear water, but it left them in a kind of light-headed glow, warm and sweet. Bella did not see any instruments, only singers, but it seemed to her that she heard the sounds of flutes and drums from somewhere. After a few minutes of song, Mira stood up and announced that she would sing a Shire-song, then belted out a song invented by her on the spot about being in a white tower and eating tasty food with elves, and singing songs. It had no discernible rhyme or meter, and to Bella (who was so embarrassed she felt like crawling under the table) it seemed to go on forever, but the elves eyes' lit up with silent amusement while she sang, and when she was done they erupted in cheers.

Somewhere in the middle of that, Gandalf slid up to them and said his goodbyes. He would not stay even for the night, eager as he was to get to Rivendell as quickly as he could to see what Elrond could make of the letter left when Isengar was taken. He told Bella that he would be back to check on them as soon as he could, and then he was gone. Enchanted as she was by the food and drink and song, Bella barely noticed what he said, and he left before she could ask any questions (perhaps this was as he intended it). The singing turned to dancing then, and Bella found herself swept up out of her chair by Maeweth, who taught her a graceful but not too difficult dance called the "courting albatross", which was rather silly to look at but with her light head and the sound of elfsong all around her Bella found that she was not embarrassed, and soon she was laughing along with Maeweth. Then she was in a ring of elves all holding hands and doing another dance, which she did not know the steps to but found she could keep up with. She looked over, at one point, to see Donna at the table, wide-eyed and watchful as ever, with a smile on her face and sleeping Mira's head on her lap. Bella smiled back, and turned back to the dancing and concentrated on learning the steps as best she could.

They danced and sang for what seemed to be hours, although her sense of time was somewhat muddled, and then when they had all three fallen asleep on the benches for a while they felt strong but gentle hands lift them up and carry them up stairs to their room. Bella opened her eyes to slits, just enough to see Maeweth closing all of the

shutters to the windows, and securing them with latches of some sort, then she closed her eyes again and relaxed into her bed.

Her dreams that night, as best she could remember them, were filled with a warm golden glow, and the sound of song.

The next morning, however, when they awoke, they found Mira had disappeared without a trace.

Chapter 5 - Imprisoned

They were awakened by a knock on the door, and heard Maeweth's voice from the other side, bright and musical.

"Time to wake up, ladies! Mira, I have brought the spyglass, we can look at the baby osprey now if you want!"

That is when Bella and Donna, rising from their bed, turned to look at Mira's bed, and saw that she was gone. They both gave an audible gasp, which Maeweth heard from the other side of the door.

"Ladies? Is everything all right? The door will only unlock from the inside, you have to let me in! Is anything wrong?"

"Mira!" cried Bella out loud finally, "she's gone! Taken!"

She heard then a silence from the other side of the door, and then she heard the sound of Donna turning the key to unlock it. Maeweth came in, looked at Mira's bed, and then at the windows. They were all still shuttered and locked.

"But the door was still locked," said Maeweth softly, as if to herself. "How could she be gone?"

"The puppy," said Donna.

"What?" asked Maeweth and Bella together.

"She took the toy puppy that she was going to give to Isengar," said Donna. "It was here, with her other things, at the foot of her bed when we were brought to our room last night. But it's gone now."

"Is it important?" asked Maeweth.

"She wasn't just taken in her sleep," said Donna, "she went willingly, and awake. She knew she was going to see Isengar, so she took the toy puppy with her."

Bella thought to herself that she had not been able to notice even that their things were in the room last night, and that Donna must not have been as sleepy then as she seemed.

"Did either of you hear or see anything, anything at all, last night?" asked Maeweth. Her normally smiling face was frowning and stern. Both girls shook their heads no, they had not. Maeweth let out an exasperated sigh, as if she had been given a puzzle too difficult to solve.

"Cirdan will not be pleased," she muttered. "And I don't even want to think about what Gandalf will do."

She turned then, to look at each one long and searchingly.

"Are you SURE you heard nothing? Nothing at all?" she asked. "Think! Try to remember!"

But it was no use, neither Bella nor Donna could remember anything after they had hit their beds.

The other elves were sent for, but Maeweth stayed in the room with Donna and Bella, as if she was unwilling to let them out of her sight. Bella and Donna, who before had been simply stunned, began to cry silently. Bella felt that, as the oldest of the sisters, she was responsible, and wondered what on earth she would say to her father and mother. Then, with a shock, she realized that Donna was now the youngest one left, and she hugged Donna tighter than ever.

After a few minutes, Galdor and Cirdan and several other elves arrived. They questioned Bella and Donna at length, and Maeweth as well, but it was of no use, as no one had seen or heard anything amiss. Galdor inspected the shuttered windows himself, and opened one to look outside; Bella could not imagine what he was looking for. The elves all then conversed amongst themselves, in a language Bella did not understand. Finally, Cirdan turned back to the two sisters and spoke to them in a measured, even tone.

"Daughters of the Shire Thain, I apologize to you for our failure to protect your sister. We will send out scouts immediately to search for her. In the meantime, as this tower is not safe, I will move you myself to another place, called Tarasband. It will not be comfortable, but we are past worrying about comfort, I think, and it is the most secure place in all the Grey Havens."

Donna noticed that at the mention of "Tarasband", the eyebrows of Maeweth and several other of the elves rose slightly, as in surprise or even shock.

"I will take them myself," said Cirdan. "Send a message to Great Smials, telling them what has happened and what we have done. For whatever good it will do, send them our apology as well. Tell them I will watch over the two remaining daughters personally while they are here."

Galdor nodded, and left, apparently to see to the message. Bella wondered if he would deliver it himself. She tried to imagine Galdor, or any elf, walking into the Shire and up to the front doors of Great Smials, and delivering the news to Gerontius and Adamanta that their littlest daughter was gone now as well. She held onto Donna's hand, and thought that perhaps she would not let it go, ever.

They descended the many stairs of the White Tower they were in, and other elves took their things for them. They rode on a great black horse, next to Cirdan, surrounded by several other elves, to Tarasband, which turned out to be a prison tower. It was still artfully done, in the manner of elves, with marbled stone and intricate carvings, and silver filigree on the doors, but inside it was obviously intended to be a prison. Bella wondered what sort of prisoner it was made to hold; it seemed to be empty now as far as they could tell. They were put into a windowless cell, with a plain bed, a table and chair, and little else, and the doors were locked. Cirdan stayed inside it with them for a time, until food and drink arrived. Trying to make them feel better about being in a jail cell, Bella supposed, but Cirdan turned out to be a stiff and formal sort of elf, or perhaps he was busy imagining his next conversation with Gandalf. Bella appreciated that he was making an attempt to make them feel less like prisoners by eating their first meal with them, but was secretly relieved when he left.

Later, more comfortable bedding was brought, and a second bed, and a book with pictures in it to look at. They were beautiful, but strange, and seemed to depict a story about a man and an elf maiden. The man had his hand bit off at one point by a giant wolf, but he survived and married the elf maiden, and they had many battles but ended up on an island together, and seemed happy there. As far as Bella could tell, without being able to read the elvish script, it was a story with a happy ending, but it seemed to take place amidst much tragedy and war. She wondered what books elves showed their children, if they had any. Surely they must get new elves somehow? But then she had heard that they could live forever, so perhaps there were only the same elves who were made when the world was new. Cirdan, though, obviously seemed older than the others, so there must once have been elvish children. She wondered if Cirdan had ever had any.

After they had eaten (elvish food, excellent as the night before), Bella entertained herself and Donna by making up a story to go along with the pictures in the book. She named the Man "Jago", and the maiden "Jessamine", and invented explanations for the other

pictures in the book. In her story, Jago was a great friend of birds (there seemed to be many with him in several of the pictures), and when Jessamine's father didn't like him, Jessamine went to visit her grandfather, who was very stern but took pity on Jessamine and told her father to let them marry. Then they moved to an island and lived there happily ever after.

They had no windows, nor any noise from outside, but at some point they decided that it must be night, because the elves had brought them food three more times, and they felt tired.

"Bella," said Donna softly, "is it ok if I sleep in the same bed as you?"

Bella looked over, concealing her surprise. Donna had not slept in her bed for years, since she was Mira's age.

"Sure, Donna, of course, there's plenty of room. And I think it'll be warmer for both of us."

A few minutes later, after they had blown out the oil lamp and Bella heard Donna's soft breathing slow down as she fell asleep, she realized something. Protecting someone else, or trying to, makes you feel less worried about yourself. She had never been frightened about the fact that an intruder had been in her own room last night, or that it might come for her eventually. She had, however, felt terrified for Mira, and also scared for Donna. She was less afraid for herself, but more afraid than ever.



Mirabella

Chapter 6 - New Friends

Mira awoke, and looked around her room. It was stone, bare except for her bedroll on the floor and a chamberpot nearby, and not more than 10 feet on a side. She sat up, and looked up at the only window, one foot square, with iron bars across it. On the opposite side of the room was a large iron door, locked. She shook her head, and wondered what would happen now.

For a long time, nothing did. She looked out the window, at the clouds moving across the sky, and at the rolling hills below her. Eventually, she became bored and went to sleep again, until she could sleep no more. At one point, she ran in tight circles around her tiny room, desperately bored, until she tired herself out enough to fall down on her bedroll and pretend to sleep. Her stomach began to hurt from hunger. Eventually, the daylight from the window faded, and she was left in the dark. Then, she heard the big iron door opening.

Mira was little, even for a Hobbit, but the troll who poked his head in was enormous. In the light of the lantern he carried, she could see that he had broad, heavysset features, his mouth was pulled into a perpetual sneer, he had odd bits of hair sprouting from every part of his face, and when he opened his mouth it revealed teeth that were rotten and crooked. The light from the lantern threw wild shadows on the walls, but Mira guessed that the thing looking in at her was a troll, even though she had never seen one before.

"Come out," he said simply, and Mira stood up, but stayed where she was. The troll was too big to come through the door, and she wanted nothing to do with it.

"Come eat, and see the other brat." said the troll. "Now!"

Mira's eyes lit up at the mention of 'the other brat', and she grabbed the toy puppy, and tried to slip out the door without the troll touching her. Quick as a snake, though, he grabbed her right arm, and held it like a vise as he dragged her down a gently curving hallway. He opened a door on the other side, shoved her in, and she heard the sound of the door locking behind her.

"Mira!" she heard a little Hobbit boy cry out, and she looked up from where she had fallen on the floor to see Isengar, his dark curly hair dishevelled but with a large grin on his broad face, playing with blocks on the ground in front of a fireplace with a merry little fire. Then Mira and little Isengar hugged and laughed and told each other how happy they were to see each other, and how much each had missed the other. When she looked up around the room again, Mira saw that the troll had left, and they were alone in

a larger room with a large, long table of polished wood, with comfortable wooden chairs piled high with pillows so that a Hobbit could reach the table when sitting in it. She thought this place must not have been made for either Hobbits or Trolls, and wondered who had made the tower they were in. It had no windows, but the light from the fireplace and several oil lanterns made it cheery enough, especially compared to the cell she had just come from.

"Isengar," she whispered, "what is your room like?"

They sat on the rug in front of the fireplace, then, whispering to each other at first, but eventually talking loud and laughing and giggling. Isengar had been there for days, of course, and found it lonely. He was only allowed out of his room at night, and had taken to sleeping all day, when he wasn't staring out the window at the Sea in the distance. He also had no toys to play with but the blocks in this room, when he was brought into it for meals during the night.

"Oh!" said Mira then, "I brought your puppy!"

"Oh!" shouted Isengar, and he began playing with it, making it bark and run around the room. Mira and Isengard played with their few toys there on the floor for several minutes more, before finally they heard a noise from the other side of the room. Looking up, they saw a small, funny looking Man with big ears, a long nose and thinning grey hair had come through the door. He was thin, and dressed in simple but neatly kept clothes of brown and tan.

He carried a large covered basket in one hand, and a large jug of water in the other. He smiled kindly at them, and began setting out plates, cutlery, napkins, and a great deal of food.

"Cecil!" cried out Isengar, apparently happy. The Man named Cecil smiled, but did not look up from his work.

"Two places to set this time, eh, Master Isengar?" he said. Then, he turned towards them and said, "Shall you introduce me?"

"Cecil this is my sister Mira," said Isengar, and Cecil stuck out a hand to shake.

Mira saw then that Cecil's eyes were clouded over, and he was only holding his arm in her approximate direction, as if he wasn't quite sure where she was. She realized he must be either blind, or nearly blind. She took his hand in a shake, and was pleased that,

even though he was a Man, he did not try to crush it to show how strong he was, as some boys did. He smiled again.

"Pleased to meet you," said Mira.

"Nice of you to say so, but I doubt it Miss, given the circumstances," said Cecil. "Still, you'll find meals here aren't too horrible, though they may not come often enough for you."

"Cecil's a good cook!" said Isengar.

"Well thank you, Master Isengar," said Cecil, very politely for a grown Man talking to a child Hobbit. "I do my best. We have fresh bread, a bowl of stew, some cheese, some apples, I've brought some berries (several different kinds), and lastly we have a special treat. I found some mushrooms in the field nearby, and I know how you Hobbit-folk love them, so I cooked 'em up for you. I hope it will do. Miss Mira, you'll find I can't provide much in the way of meat, I'm not so good a hunter, for anything that moves faster than a mushroom. I can see, but only a little, and only in very bright daylight, and rabbits and deer move too fast for me."

"I'm sure it's fine, thank you," said Mira, and she and Isengar sat down and began devouring the food before them.

"What entertainment?" asked Cecil, after they had both been eating for a few minutes.

"A song!" shouted Isengar.

"Oh, maybe Master Isengar, but shouldn't we let your sister have a say? It's her first day here, after all."

"A song would be nice," said Mira.

"Hmmm...let's see, a song about what?" mused Cecil. "Any requests?"

Mira thought for a moment, then said, "Who is that big thing that brought me to this room?"

"Oh, Grendel," said Cecil. "Well, let me think now."

After a few minutes, he began to sing, to an old tune with a quick tempo. Isengar

clapped his hands, and Mira could see that Cecil had been singing for him several times before, so that he looked forward to it. Soon, Mira decided to clap along as well. The words were apparently made up by Cecil as he went along, and he sang with his eyes closed and a happy smile on his face.

Oh Grendel is a big old troll,
He likes to frighten many a soul,
He likes to growl and he likes to roar,
He's mean and bad down to the core,

Grendel he is big and tough,
Grendel he is strong and rough,
But there's one thing that makes him sore,
Grendel can't fit through the door,

Evenings he comes round and yells,
He hates bright smiles like he hates good smells,
But there's one thing he hates even more,
Grendel can't fit through the door,

He's got long arms and he's got long hooks,
He throws foul words and angry looks,
But wishes he could do one thing more,
He wishes he could fit through the AWKKKK!!!!!!!

Just as Cecil was about to finish the fourth verse, Isengar and Mira saw the door behind him open. Grendel the troll, his mouth curved in an angry scowl, grabbed Cecil by the collar and yanked him out the door. The two Hobbit children stopped clapping and their laughs turned to expressions of alarm. Grendel stuck his head in (which did fit through the door, even if his body didn't), and said loudly to Mira.

"Brat, I almost forgot to tell you. If you try to escape, and I catch you, I'll eat you like a boned rabbit. If I don't catch you, I'll eat your brother instead. So don't even try it."

With that, he angrily slammed the door shut again, and they heard the sound of it locking. Mira and Isengar ate the rest of their meal in silence.

Cecil, they were relieved to discover, was mostly unhurt, though a bit bruised, and returned to them twice more during the night with wholesome meals. He was much quieter, but did sing them a whispered version of the same song towards the end of the

night, standing much further away from the door so that he could not be heard. Mira sang him back, very softly, another verse, when he came the third time.

Cecil he's a kind old thing,
He cooks good food and he can sing,
I like his verse and buttered roll,
I like him better than the troll!

Cecil smiled, but he whispered back, "Careful, Miss! The troll can hear better than he pretends, I guess! But I'll bring you more rolls tomorrow, if I can."

Towards the end of the night, Grendel showed up again, and called to Isengar. He grabbed the toy puppy, hugged Mira, and went out. The door was slammed shut and locked, then immediately opened again and the toy puppy was thrown back into the room. The door slammed shut again, and a minute later Grendel came back for her, and took her to her room.

Mira was getting tired by this time, and slept for a few hours, but eventually the growing sunlight woke her up, and she stood looking out the window for a time. She wished she could see the Sea from her window, and craned her head left and right as far as she could. Seeing no sign of the Sea, she decided that Isengar must be on the opposite side of the tower. She sat down again on her bedroll, and was about to try to get back to sleep, when she looked up again and saw a crow standing on the windowsill, and looking down at her.

"Oh, hi there," said Mira. "You're a raven! How are you?"

"Crow!" said the crow. "Crow!" Mira thought it sounded as if the crow were saying what kind of bird it was.

"Oh, you're a crow," said Mira quickly. "I'm sorry, I got it mixed up. Crow, crow!" Mira said in a loud, creaky voice, trying to sound like the crow.

"Why are you talking like that?" asked the crow, and Mira jumped in surprise, then grinned.

"You can talk!" she said.

"Of course," said the crow back, in a creaking voice, "and so can you."

"I didn't know crows could talk," said Mira.

"Most crows can talk," said the crow, "though many don't have anything useful to say to Hobbits. Do you have any food?"

"Oh! I'm sorry, I don't," she said. "But I could bring some tomorrow, if you come back. Do you like buttered rolls?"

"Bread? I could try it," said the crow.

"Is it ok if I pet you?" asked Mira.

"What? Of course not! Crows are not like dogs or cats," said the crow. "We don't like being petted. We like food well enough, though. You'll have some tomorrow?"

"I'll try!" said Mira, then lowered her voice. "If I can sneak it out without the troll seeing."

"Good, I'll come back tomorrow then!" said the crow, and it flew off.

Mira stared out the window, waiting and watching for other birds, for a long time, before she gave up and went to sleep for the rest of the day.

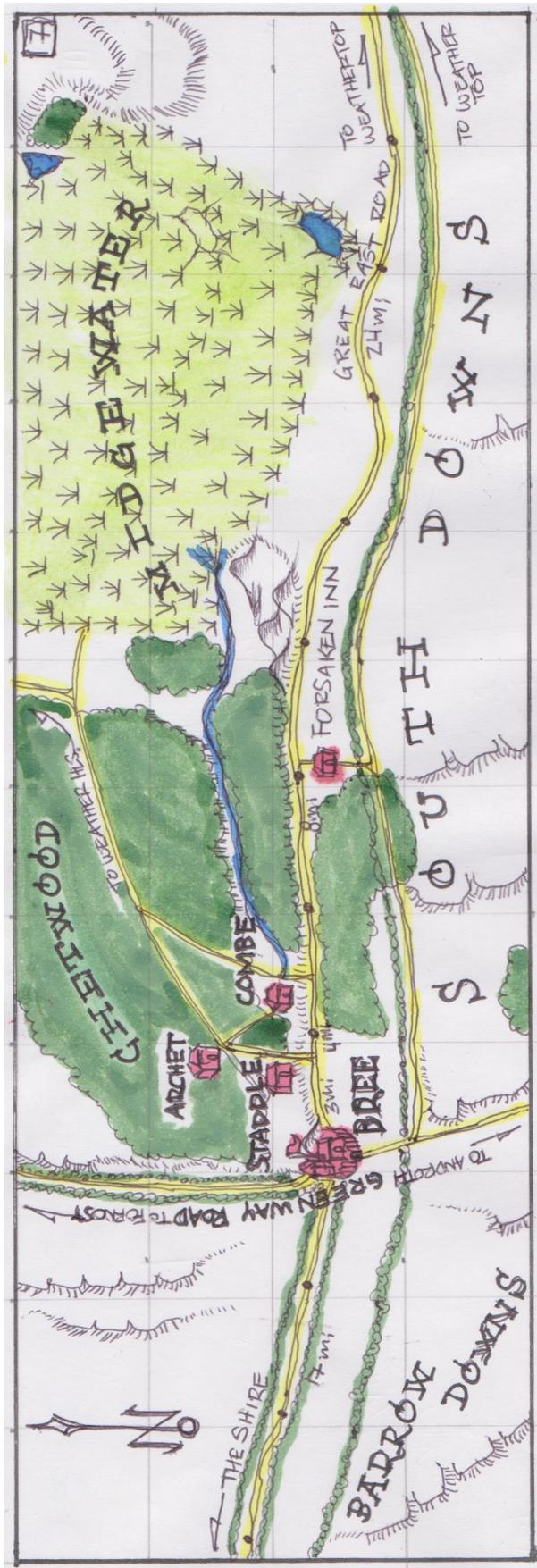
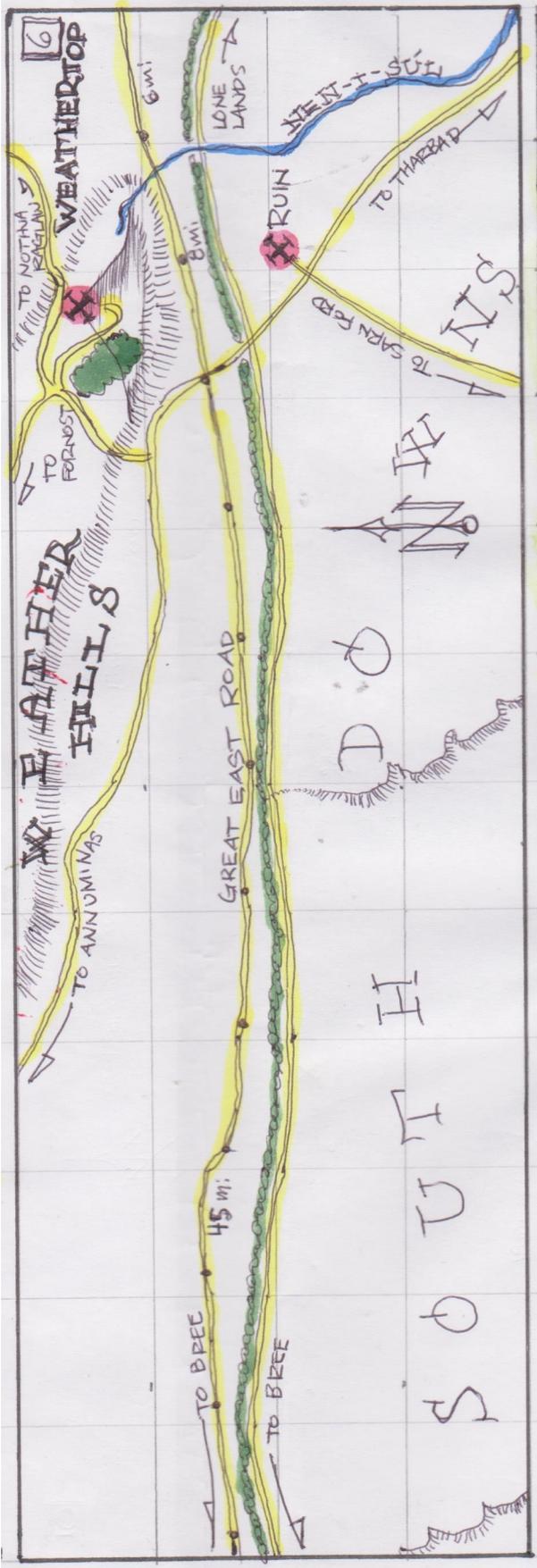
ROUTE MAP
RIVENDELL to GREY HAVENS
 PLATE III

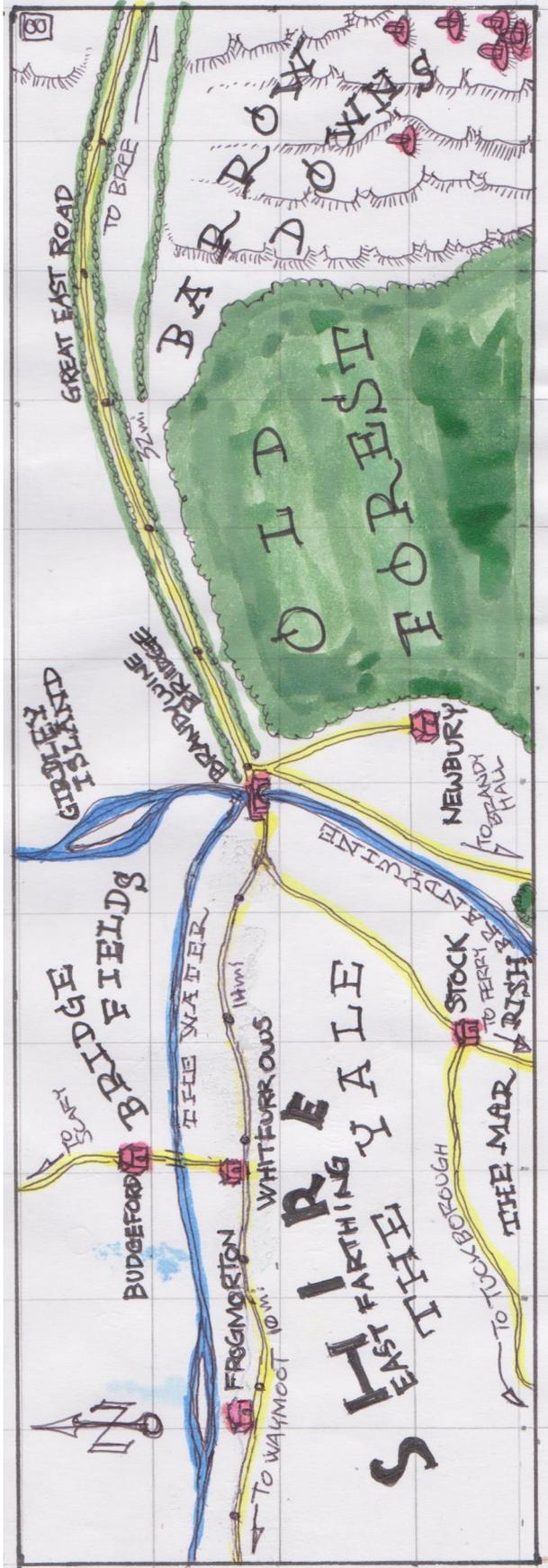
WEATHERTOP TO THE SHIRE



ROUTE







Chapter 7 - A Great Deal of Riding Around

Gandalf rode fast on his way from the White Towers back east; he reached the Great Smials in three days, whereas he had taken four days to cover the same distance going the other way with Bella, Donna, and Mira. Nonetheless, Galdor (the elf who Cirdan had sent) rode even faster, and arrived there several hours before him. Thus it was that when Gandalf stopped there, thinking only to speak briefly with Gerontius before moving on further east towards Rivendell, he was surprised to see that Gerontius was in conversation with the tall Elf from the Grey Havens. He saw that their expressions were grave, Gerontius stricken with grief and Galdor looking at Gandalf as if he were somewhat afraid of what was to come. He knew that their news was not good. He stopped his horse just in front of the Smials, dismounted, and walked over to hear the news.

Galdor told him, of course, of what had happened, as best he knew it; that Mira had disappeared sometime in the very first night, that the other two daughters had been moved to a prison cell for their own protection, and that search parties had been sent out. Gandalf appeared to Gerontius like he were holding in a fury, but he did not unleash it on Galdor. Instead, he took out of his small pack the letter, written by the abductor and left in Isengar's room for Gerontius to find, and handed it to Galdor.

"May I trust you to deliver this safely to Elrond in Rivendell, tell him what has happened, and ask what he can tell us of the person who wrote it?" He phrased it as a question, but his tone of voice made it quite clear that he was in no mood to be refused.

"Yes, Mithrandir," said Galdor, using Gandalf's elvish name. "You may depend on it. I will ride as fast as I can, and return to tell you whatever Lord Elrond has to say."

"You'd best be about it, then," said Gandalf, meaning that Galdor should leave. The elf nodded, muttered a quick goodbye to Gerontius, and leapt onto his horse and galloped away.

"How is Adamanta?" asked Gandalf. "Ready to throw pots and pans at me, I suppose, for taking her daughters to such an unsafe place? Perhaps she would have a right to, this one time. I am rarely surprised, Gerontius, but this was not what I thought possible."

"She has gone to her room, and will not come out," said Gerontius. "I think she does not know, now, what to do. I'm not sure I do, either."

"Well I shall find my way back to your other two daughters, but I think first we need to

try a new tactic. We cannot beat this enemy if we are forever on defense, and it can pick and choose its time for attack. We have been searching with wide sweeps, but this quarry is too clever for that. It is time to take up its trail right from the window into Isengar's room, and follow that wherever it goes. In this way, we may go on the attack."

"It's been over a week, Gandalf, and there were no tracks we could see when Isengar had been gone only a few hours," said Gerontius. "Who could follow it now that the trail is this old?"

"I think there is one who can. I believe you know who I mean."

Gerontius thought for a moment, then said, "Arador? How to know where he is, right now?"

"You told the Rangers 8 days ago, so he will likely have received word by now. He will go to Bree, to meet with other Rangers from the area and get their help, if he is not there already. I will go with you to Bree, and then ride back to the Grey Havens and guard Bella and Donna myself."

"No," said Gerontius, "I will go to Bree myself, you ride back west now. Please hurry. I know Cirdan will do his best, but I fear..."

Gandalf nodded, and started to turn to go, then looked back again at Gerontius, whose eyes were downcast, staring at the ground, with slumped shoulders and a hopeless look on his face. Gandalf turned back to Gerontius, and leaned over a bit to look him in the eyes.

"They are still alive, Gerontius, I'd wager it. If this is all just to cause you grief, they would have made sure you found their dead bodies by now. Something else is at stake. Don't lose hope, ride fast, and keep your wits about you now."

Gerontius looked up, squared his shoulders, and nodded in agreement. He watched Gandalf turn and get on his horse, then ride off in a hurry. Gerontius turned back, told his sons and wife what he was about, and less than an hour later he was riding a pony in the direction of Bree.

Gandalf, meanwhile, was riding the other direction, back the way he had come from. He covered the ground in three days again, pausing only as often as his horse required, and

arrived at the tower, Tarasband, where Donna and Bella were staying, in the middle of the night. They first heard of it when they heard his voice booming through the hallway, shouting Cirdan's name angrily. For a moment, Donna and Bella thought it was the mysterious abductor come for Donna, and they grabbed each other in fright.

Then, recognizing the voice, they crept up to the door to their cell and listened. They heard Cirdan's voice answering softly in the same language; he had been staying just outside their door for the last three days, entering to bring them food, and taking them outside for a few hours each day to have lunch together in the open air with other elves as guards on all sides. Each night, though, they returned to their cell, Cirdan spent a few minutes in the room with them attempting to find a topic that young girl Hobbits would be interested in talking about (he always failed, but Bella appreciated the attempt), and then leaving and locking the door himself. Bella wasn't sure if he ever slept, but if he did, she never saw it.

As Bella listened at the door, she heard Cirdan answering back, his voice much lower and more measured. There were very few words she could make out. "Mithrandir", was Gandalf's name among the elves, although Bella didn't know it. "Imladris", "cauma", and "cuive" were among the other many strange words she could detect, but there was only one word she could actually understand: "hobbit". She smiled a bit to herself, that whatever language they were speaking didn't even have a word for her people. She was fairly certain that elves and wizards did not find themselves talking about hobbits very often.

Then, she heard Gandalf say something in a harsh, demanding tone, and Cirdan say something in response that sounded accepting but also slightly defensive, and then she and Donna heard the two of them moving towards their cell door. They rushed back to leap into bed and throw the sheets over themselves, closing their eyes and pretending to sleep as Cirdan unlocked the door and pushed it open. They looked up groggily and blinked into the light from the lantern that Gandalf held.

Gandalf's expression was dark, but Donna noticed the hint of a gleam in his eyes as he said, "Wake up, Hobbits, it is time to go. Sound sleepers you are, to sleep through all that shouting. Get your things."

"Where are we going?" asked Bella.

"Rivendell. I will take you there myself."

Gandalf stepped into the hallway again to give them some privacy, and they spent a few

minutes getting dressed and gathering their few belongings. When they emerged into the hallway, Gandalf was alone there, and they walked out the front gate of the tower with him. There they saw Cirdan and several other elves they recognized from their night at the White Towers, including Maeweth.

Cirdan stepped forward and said, "Daughters of the Shire Thain, we are sorry at your leaving, and our thoughts go with your kin. Please accept these gifts from us to protect you on your way. From me, these two cloaks. You will find that they make you hard to see, in nearly every light and setting. It may be useful if you should ever have cause to hide from your pursuers."

Another elf, by the name of Calpatan, stepped forward and gave them each small lamps, which appeared to glow without any oil or wick required, although they also had hoods to cover them with when desired. "You may wish for the comfort of a light in the dark, sometimes, and these lamps will not be extinguished by wind or rain, and need no flame to light."

Lastly stepped forward Maeweth, who gave them each a necklace, upon which hung a small picture of Mira. Maeweth, or whatever artist had made them, had captured her smile, and the two sisters nearly began to tear up at the sight of her. Maeweth smiled as well, and embraced both of them in turn.

"Do not give up hope," she said, "but until the time when you see your sister again, these will give you the chance to see her smile. Hold fast to them and your hopes, and mayhap you will see her again soon."

Bella and Donna nodded their thanks, and then Gandalf helped them up onto a great chestnut horse which stood next to Gandalf's. It seemed impossibly high up off the ground, even more than the pony. Donna rode behind Bella, and held onto her with a firm grip, as if she felt none too secure herself. Then Gandalf mounted his horse, and they were off into the early morning, with the sun just coming over the hills in front of them.

Gerontius, meanwhile, had been travelling east as well. He arrived, after four days' travel, at a town named Bree. Lying just outside of the Shire (where most Hobbits lived), Bree was a crossroads town where both Hobbits and Men lived, and where it was not uncommon to find Dwarves or Rangers (who were Men with a tiny bit of elvish ancestry) passing through. When they did, the place they most often stayed was an inn

called the Prancing Pony. It had rooms suited in size and shape for both Hobbits and Men, and the common room was the center of the town's society.

After having checked his pony at the inn stable, reserving a room for the night, and putting his things there, it was to the common room that Gerontius headed. He had been there many times before, but not as often in recent years, now that he had settled down with a family (and a wife who did not entirely approve of his rambling ways). It looked much the same as before, however, a cozy room with a large fireplace and long tables flanked by benches on either side. The fact that there were few tables, but these were very long, encouraged travellers from different parties to sit together, and by the end of the evening there was usually a great deal of shared song and laughter. It was just after dark though, and things were still quiet, with only a few people present.

Looking around, Gerontius saw no Rangers, and so he got a mug of ale from the bartender (a fellow by the name of Barnabus Butterbur), and had a seat in the corner. He did not feel too much like company just then anyway, and he stared into his mug for an hour, remembering the past and wondering about the future. Eventually, he heard the sound of someone approaching him, and looked up to see Arador, the Ranger who he was looking for. He wondered if he were lucky, or whether Arador simply knew whenever anyone left the Shire and entered Bree, and came to meet him there. Gerontius smiled, and stood up to shake hands.

"Arador, I am quite happy to see you," he said, "I am in a great fix, and if there's anyone who could help me it would be you."

Arador, a tall man with dark, straight hair, close-cropped beard, and silvery blue eyes, motioned for him to sit back down, and he sat opposite him. He was twice the Hobbit's height, but while he was strong he was lean, and dressed always for travel, with tall boots and plain clothes wrapped with a hooded cloak, each piece colored a slightly different shade of dusty grey. "Gerontius, I received the message from you. It took a few days for it to get to me, but I came as fast as I could. I was headed to Great Smials, but now perhaps you can tell me something of what I will find there."

"Well, what you'll find is a very sad family, what's left of it," said Gerontius, and he spent the next few minutes telling all he knew about the disappearance of Mira and Isengar. After hearing it, Arador stared over into the fire in the fireplace for a minute in thought.

"It sounds like a peculiar kind of kidnapper," said Arador. "It would be easier to take all your children at once, I would think, than one by one like that. Definitely so if they

intended to kill them, so I think Gandalf is right on that score. But no demand for ransom, yet, so it is hard to see what their objective is."

"I think the objective is to cause me as much pain and suffering as possible," said Gerontius, "and it is working. I wish I were dead, and I would gladly swap my life for theirs, if it came to that."

"Well I wonder if that is not the purpose," said Arador, "to bring you to a point where you will agree to anything. You are Thain of the Shire, after all."

"I don't know who would care about that, outside of the Shire," said Gerontius, "and I can guarantee you this is no Hobbit's work."

"No, I'm sure it isn't," said Arador. "But in any case Gandalf is right. The way to solve this is to trace their path from your windowsill. I have brought my best hound with me, and I know something about tracking myself."

"You are better even than your father, he told me so once," interrupted Gerontius.

"We will see about that," said Arador, "but my father also told me that you have done some service to his family, once upon a time. I will do what I can to repay you. We will leave at first light, and go straight there. What say you to that?"

Gerontius lifted his mug to clink it against Arador's, and smiled for the first time in days, before taking a long drink.

Gandalf did not let them stop at Great Smials along the way; they rode straight through the Shire by the most direct route, and camped each night with no fire, just off the road but each time behind a copse of trees so they would not be seen by passersby. Gandalf did not talk to Bella or Donna much, and not at all to anyone else they met along the way, so they talked mostly to each other, until his dour mood weighed on them and they became silent as well. When they rode through the town of Bree, Bella thought he looked as if he were thinking of going into the Prancing Pony, the inn which stood at the town square, but then he changed his mind and continued on. She wondered what it was that a wizard would think about, or if he was still silently fuming at the fact that Mira had been taken.

A day east of Bree, they came to the end of cultivated farmlands, and entered a wilder

territory. Just at the border between the two stood a ruined building that looked as if it had not been used in many years (by humans; there were still some birds nesting inside it apparently, flying in and out through holes in the roof). Bella decided to venture a question, to see if Gandalf would be willing to talk; she felt she must break the heavy silence or scream.

"What is that?" she asked, pointing at the ruins.

"Nowadays it is known as the Forsaken Inn," answered Gandalf evenly. "It was once a proper inn, long ago, when there was still a King in this land and there was more traffic on this road. Its original name has been forgotten by most, and the sign is no longer readable. It is still a place where travellers stay, upon occasion, especially if the weather is foul, but it doesn't offer much in the way of shelter."

"Are we staying there?" she asked.

"I hadn't intended to," answered Gandalf. "It is more of an animal's den than something fit for people to stay in, nowadays. But it is nearly dark, and it could give us a place to start a fire which isn't widely seen, if the hearth is still intact. The chimney looks whole enough from the outside."

Gandalf stopped his horse and frowned in the direction of the Forsaken Inn for a few long moments, his eyes narrowing slightly under his bushy eyebrows, and his lips pursing slightly in thought. Then, he tugged on his reins and directed his horse towards the ruined inn; Bella and Donna's horse followed without needing any encouragement. Bella got down from the horse without help, and turned to help Donna down as well. Then she took the horse's reins and led it into the inn, imitating Gandalf's example, wondering as always why on earth the horse would do as she asked it to when it was so much larger than she. More likely, she thought, it was following Gandalf's horse, and would have done so whether she pulled on its reins or no.

The doorway had long ago lost the door it once held, perhaps its timbers burnt in the hearth by some long ago traveller. Bella looked around for the sign that Gandalf had mentioned, but didn't see any; perhaps it had been used as fuel also? The roof was sagging and had many large holes, and the inside was a shambles. It had once been two-story, but now only the stone shell remained, and the internal walls and floors had fallen down and rotted or burned. Gandalf told them to stay close to the walls, since the parts of the roof which still stretched across the open space in the middle could not be trusted to stay up much longer.

They tied the horses to iron hooks that still stuck out from the wall, probably at one time meant to hang lanterns from, and connected their feedbags so that they could eat. Then Gandalf set about making a small fire in the hearth; there were still some small logs gathered from outside by someone who had stayed there previously. Bella and Donna spread their bedrolls out and watched him, eating some of their food (packed by the elves, tasty but a bit strange compared to Hobbit fare, they could not tell what it was).

"Tell me a story," whispered Donna, and Bella furrowed her brow in thought. She lay on her back and looked up at the tattered roof in thought, and then began to tell Donna a story of the inn, as it had been before. There was light, there were people of all sorts (which meant, to Bella, Hobbits and Men and Dwarves and Elves), there was a warm stable out back for the horses and ponies. She looked over at their horses, wondered if they were listening, and decided to add that the horses were all given sweet apples and carrots to eat along with their oats and hay. There was hearty food to eat and sweet apple cider to drink. When enough people were there, someone would call for a song, and then they would sing together, nonsense songs and sad songs and elvish songs, and they would dance together. She went on for a while, making up details as she went, some of it taken from her memory of the night in the White Towers just a few weeks ago, some of it from the parties she had been to when they visited their distant relatives, the Brandybucks, in another part of the Shire from where she lived. She continued on for a while, until she realized that Donna was asleep already, and then she continued on for a minute or two more, just in case, thinking that she was talking to herself for a little while until she remembered that Gandalf was there behind her, stoking the fire.

She craned her neck to look towards the fire without getting up, and saw that Gandalf was sitting down now with his back to the wall, smoking a pipe and looking thoughtful but not as angry as he had the last few days.

"It was rather like that," he said to her, softly so as not to waken Donna. "But you left out the Dunedain."

"The what?" asked Bella.

"Not what, who. The Dunedain are a race with mixed Men and Elf among their ancestors, though in most of them the Mannish part is much stronger. There are still a few about in these parts even now; they are called Rangers by most of the Hobbits or Men who know about them."

"Rangers? I think I heard Papa say something about them. What are they like?"

"They are the last descendants of the lost Kingdoms of Arnor. When the Hobbits first came to the Shire, they were given leave to settle in it by the Dunedain King in Fornost (which your people know as Norbury, or Deadman's Dike now that it is a ruin). When the last Dunedain Kingdom of Arnor, which was called Arthedain, fell, most of its people went south, but those that remained became Rangers."

"Why did they stay?" asked Bella. "Where are they?"

"They stayed because they still have a sense of duty to these lands, to protect them. There are many dangers that would overwhelm the Shire, or Bree, or the few other places where good folk still live in the north, if the Rangers did not seek those dangers out, and kill them or drive them off. The Rangers get some support from Cirdan, or especially from Elrond in Rivendell, but mostly they wander alone, or in small groups, and they defend what is left."

Gandalf sat quietly for a while, then, puffing on his pipe, and looking into the darkness, at what Bella could not say, but probably into his own memory.

"Your father," Gandalf said, "knows more than any other Hobbit about what they do for him and his people. He makes sure that the Hobbits do their part in return."

"We do?" asked Bella. "What could Hobbits do to help with that?"

"More than you are usually aware you can do, until it comes to it," said Gandalf, looking at Bella again with a slight smile. "But in particular, he sees to it that the Rangers are fed. They get some food from Rivendell and the Grey Havens, as I mentioned, but neither have enough of a surplus to feed all the Rangers. They are not many in number, but neither are the Elves in this age. Only the Shire has enough farmland, and enough farmers, to produce food enough for themselves and still have more left over for a small army of Rangers. If the Shire did not do it, then most of the Rangers would have to till the soil instead of roaming far and wide to track down dire wolves, goblin raiders, trolls down from the mountains, bandits come up from the south, and so on. Their wives keep gardens, where they can, but the Shire is what makes sure the Rangers can think about the protection of others rather than how to feed themselves and their families."

"Oh," said Bella, "I didn't know that."

"In a way, it's a continuation of the ancient pact between Dunedain King and the Hobbits who founded the Shire," said Gandalf. "Back when this Inn was still full of people, you would have seen some of them here as well. They may be the ones who left the

firewood here, they use it from time to time in their travels. Back then, they were not Rangers, but noble lords, but the compact was the same, really."

Bella didn't know what to say to that, and she waited for Gandalf to say something more, but he fell into silence and stared back into the fire in the hearth. The ruined inn now seemed to be full of ghosts, but they were happy ones, and Bella closed her eyes to imagine them laughing and clinking tankards together, and in a few minutes she slipped off into sleep.

The next day, and the next, they rode along the road east, now out of the lands of Men or Hobbits. Gandalf was still mostly quiet, but not quite as much as before, and he would answer an occasional question about what they saw on either side. Donna and Bella began to feel their spirits lift a bit, for the first time since Mira had vanished, and although they were still frightened for her and for Isengar they began to hope that Gandalf and Cirdan and their papa and the rest would find a way to make it turn out all right in the end.

The land was a mix of different terrain. The north side of the road had marshes, and the south side of the road had a series of escarpments, like cliffs on one side but gentle rises on the other. Bella wondered if the road had been made where it was because it was the easiest land to travel on, or if the ancient kingdom that made it had filled in marshes or leveled hills to make the road. Whatever the origin, the result was that the road saw a mixture of wildlife crossing before and above them. To their right, she saw sparrowhawks and kites soar overhead, and hares chasing each other about, or sitting up briefly to look at them briefly, before returning to graze, always ready to scurry to safety if one of the circling raptors came too close. To their left, they saw a beaver hard at work on its little dam, herons hunting in the shallow water, and egrets and even a gannet flying above.

Suddenly, Gandalf stopped his horse, and motioned for Bella and Donna to stop as well, which their horse did immediately. Gandalf appeared to be listening for a moment, then grimaced, and spurred his horse to a gallop.

"Giddyup!" he snapped, and Bella felt her horse spring into a sprint, while she and Donna held on for dear life. She wondered what could have happened, as she had heard nothing untoward, but then she heard Donna behind her give a gasp, and she turned her head to look back. With a shock, she realized that coming over the rise behind them were several dozen great wolves, impossibly large, and astride each one was a goblin.

Bella had never seen goblins before, but she recognized them immediately. They were

covered in patchy, dark bristles, had large mouths with huge teeth, and they carried curved swords with wicked looking spikes along the blades. They were grinning evilly, and the wolves they were riding seemed to be grinning as well, if that were possible.

Bella turned back and buried her face in her horse's mane, holding on even tighter and hoping that horses could ride faster than wolves. For a minute, she thought perhaps they might, but soon she began to realize that she could hear the panting noises of the great wolves (or was it their goblin riders?), even above the sound of the hoofbeats of their galloping horses. She turned to look back again, and her heart froze at the realization that the goblins were nearly upon them.

Then, she was temporarily blinded by a bright light and her ears were set ringing by a thunderous clap, as if a lightning bolt had struck the lead goblin and his wolf steed. Immediately after she heard Gandalf shout, "Follow me, this way, off the road!"

Blinking, she saw that he had led his horse off the road to their right, and she tugged on the reins to tell her horse to follow (noting, while still dazed, that apparently the horse did need at least a little bit of guidance from her). He glanced back only once, to see that they were following him, and then galloped on (only barely slower than when they were on the road), until they rode in between two of the great escarpments that began on the south side of the road. They had not gone far when Gandalf turned towards a small copse of trees, and rode behind it to find a cave mouth, about as broad as a Man's arms could reach. Gandalf dismounted, and helped Bella and Donna to get down.

"Into the cave, and be quick about it!" he snapped.

"What was that, lightning?" asked Bella. "I didn't even see any clouds."

Gandalf laughed a short, harsh laugh, and said, "I don't think I can bring such weather enough to deal with all of them. But inside the cave they cannot all come at me at once, and I think they will not fare as well as if they can set about us from all sides. Take the horses back, away from the entrance. I will let you know when it is safe to come out."

Turning back to face out, Bella heard him mutter to himself, "How did they know where we were? Do they have spies of some sort in Bree?"

Bella and Donna led the horses back, and soon the only light they could see was a faint glimmer from the cave mouth, and they dared go no further. They hugged each other tight and closed their eyes. The horses panting, as much from fear of the wolves as from the sprint along the road, echoed in the cave. Then, after a time, they heard loud shouts

and cries from outside, and the sound of steel and stout wood clanging on rock, metal shield, and what Bella thought might be bone. She also thought she might be smelling the odor of burning fur and hair, and wondered if the goblins had brought fire, or if Gandalf had set them aflame somehow.

The next thing she knew, she was looking up at the roof of the cave. Someone was shouting her name urgently, and eventually she saw that Gandalf was above her, holding her shoulders and looking down at her with alarm. Bella blinked, and tried to clear her head, but her thoughts were foggy and confused. Why was she lying down? Had she fallen asleep somehow? Then, looking around as her foggy head cleared, she realized it with a shock.

Donna was gone.

Chapter 8 - Family Secrets

"What did you see! Who took her?!" asked Gandalf urgently, but Bella could say nothing. She shook her head, her wide eyes full of confusion and beginning to tear up.

"Lean forward!" said Gandalf, as he helped her to sit up. Bella leaned forward and hugged her knees, felt him brush the hair away from the back of her neck, and then felt a tiny twinge.

"Ouch!" she said. She looked over at Gandalf, and saw a tiny dart in his hands. He grimaced at it, then flung it aside.

"You were drugged," said Gandalf. "While I was kept busy with the goblins, you were shot with a drugged dart from behind, to put you to sleep. Then Donna was taken. Was she drugged also, I wonder?"

He held the end of his staff, which was glowing with a bluish light, near to the floor of the cave, and they saw the prints of Hobbit feet dragged through the dirt away from the entrance.

"Leave the horses here, for now," said Gandalf. "I don't believe the goblins who are left alive will be back any time soon. Like as not they were only meant to divert my attention anyway. If this cave goes very far back, we will soon be going where it would be hard for a horse to go."

They went further back, and the cave narrowed to a passageway, then to a space Gandalf could barely squeeze through (Bella felt good about being Hobbit-sized, for once). After a few minutes, they emerged into the open air again, in another part of the escarpment, this also shielded by a copse of trees. Nearby, they saw where a horse had been waiting, trampling the grass.

"So," he said, "they were waiting for us. The other opening into this cave is well known to travellers along this road, they must have guessed that I would go there when we were attacked. It was no accident that those goblins sprung their ambush so close to a defensible place. I took the bait, and at the back end of the cave the real enemy was waiting, to drug you with a dart and take Donna away, right from under my nose. Curse me for going into a cave that I had not searched to the very back of. Not a mistake I will repeat."

He looked over at Bella, and grimaced.

"Well, I think our foe has made a mistake as well, this time. I am no great tracker, but this trail is fresh enough I think we can follow it."

They fetched their horses again, and leaving the cave by way of the larger entrance Bella saw signs of the fight which had happened there between Gandalf and the goblins. Three goblins lay dead on the ground, and two wolves, all of the bodies charred and still smoking. She had forgotten about the danger from the goblins for a few minutes, so stricken was she by the fact that Donna was gone, but now she was reminded that she might have worse things to fear than being kidnapped.

But then, she realized with a shock, she was now the next one in line to be kidnapped. She had been worried for Isengar and Mira, but had never really thought of the possibility that things would proceed so far that she would be at risk herself. She wondered about her brother, Hildibrand, who at 17 was just three years older than her. What would he think, she wondered, if he heard that she had disappeared as well? Bella and Hildibrand quarrelled more often than most of the siblings; he was the most mischievous of the sons, and she the oldest and most responsible of the daughters. Still, she imagined he would be sad if he thought she were gone.

Shaking off such gloomy thoughts, she got back up on her horse (without help this time, she was getting better at it), and they galloped off. Gandalf stopped from time to time to lean down, or even to dismount and look closer at the ground, but for the most part they continued rapidly on. Their quarry was skirting the northern edge of the Midgewater Marsh, riding where the ground was solid enough to gallop, and going fast enough that perhaps it knew it was pursued.

Eventually, darkness fell, and they were forced to stop; the terrain was too uneven to ride across in the dark without their horses tripping and falling, and in any event they needed to give them rest; it is possible to push a horse so far that it dies from exhaustion, and then they would be unable to catch Donna's kidnapper for sure. They camped in the open under the stars, with no fire, Bella lying alone in her bedroll and trying to calm her racing mind, while Gandalf sat up, frowning and muttering to himself on occasion, for the entire night as far as Bella could tell. They rode all the next day, as far as they could without risking the loss of their horses, stopping only to look briefly at the campsite of their quarry from the night before. They had also lit no fire, and left few traces behind them except for grass that was flattened where they had sat or slept on it. There were two forms, one about the right size to be Donna, the other somewhat larger.

The next day, they came towards the end of it to cross a great, grass-grown road aligned

north-south. As they crossed it, Bella saw that it had once been paved, but the passage of many years had covered it over with enough leaves and dust for grass to grow on top of it; only in a few spots did the paving stones still show through.

"Who made this road?" she asked.

"It connected Bree to the capital of Arthedain, Fornost Erain," said Gandalf. "The Bree folk call it Norbury now, or Deadman's Dike. It was abandoned after the kingdom fell."

"How did it fall?" she asked.

"I'll let you ask that question of someone who knows the tale better than I," said Gandalf. "But suffice to say it was an army led by an evil wraith called the Witch King."

Things continued in this fashion for several more days, Gandalf riding as late as he dared, and each morning they found their quarry's campsite early in the day.

"They are watching us, somehow," said Gandalf after the third day of this pattern. "They do not stop to camp until we do. Somehow they know when we have stopped. Well, they cannot run forever, we will catch them eventually. Perhaps I would prefer not to catch them yet, anyway; let them lead us all the way to where Isengar and Mira are before we close in."

"Where do you think we are headed?" asked Bella.

"If I knew for sure, I would not need to track them," he said gruffly. "But, oddly enough, we seem to be headed for the ruins of Annuminas. What they could want there, I cannot guess."

"What was Annuminas?" asked Bella, who was becoming convinced that everywhere outside the Shire was full of nothing but places she had never heard of before. It was all becoming a whirl in her head.

"An even older city, ruined now as well," said Gandalf, "you'll see it soon enough."

He added nothing more, and they said little else for some time. That night, she had an uncomfortable dream, where she was back in her home, the Great Smials, and her parents and brothers and sisters were all there but an army was outside, led by the Witch King. They were asking her what to do about him, and seemed to expect her to know.

"But you spoke to Gandalf about him!" said Adamanta. "At least you can tell us what he looks like so we can recognize him!"

"But Gandalf didn't tell me anything about him!" said Bella, feeling she had let her family down by not knowing. "He didn't!"

In the morning, she woke up, and while still feeling sleepy she asked Gandalf what the Witch King looked like.

"Hush!" said Gandalf. "You don't need to know! Enough of the Tookish curiosity for now!"

That's the thing about talking with adults, thought Bella, you never know in advance what you're supposed to ask about, and what you're not supposed to ask about. As she became more awake, she realized that anyone who had lived so long ago was not likely to show up at their home anyway, and it was all just a dream. She quickly splashed her face with water and got onto her horse.

By the end of the day, they had come from a small river that their path had come alongside. They followed it all day, and the next, and the next, and with still an hour of sunlight left they came to where the river emptied into a large lake, surrounded on the west and north by high hills. The path they were on became recognizable as a ruined road, of the same sort they had crossed earlier. Bella wondered how long they had been travelling on a road, without knowing it, since it was covered with the accumulated dirt of centuries.

At the mouth of the river, Bella could see the ruins of a city, much older than the Forsaken Inn. There were few if any buildings left with a roof here, and some had no walls, but you could still see the crumbling foundations, with occasional broken pillars or fallen statuary. She also saw, with a shock, that there were two figures walking up to meet them. For a moment, her heart leapt, as she saw that one of them was short enough to be a Hobbit, but quickly she realized that it was her father, not any of her vanished siblings. He was walking with a fellow who was, she thought, tall even for a Man, perhaps taller than Gandalf. There was also with them a dog, wolfish in appearance but obviously tame, who walked close to the Man and looked at them with alert eyes, not unfriendly but always alert for trouble.

"Arador," said Gandalf as they drew closer, "I am glad you are here, but I am beyond frustration with the task we have set for ourselves."

"We tracked them as far as Lake Evendim," said Arador, "but there they went onto the water, where even Fenris here cannot track them. I have sent for other Rangers to search along the perimeter, east and west, to see if we can find where they touched land again."

"So you are saying, then, that you saw no one approach Annuminas before us today?" asked Gandalf.

"Donna?" asked Gerontius, as he realized that Bella was alone on her horse. "Is Donna..."

Bella got down from her horse and ran to hug him. While she buried her face in his chest, she heard Gandalf and Arador behind her.

"I am very sorry that I have to tell you this, Gerontius, but she was plucked out from under my nose. She is, however, still alive, we have been tracking her and one other for several days now. We were not far behind them, I think, not more than an hour or so. Did you see any sign of them at all, then, before our arrival?"

"None," said Arador. "We searched west along the shore for a few days, looking for sign of a boat landing, then came back through here and searched north along the east bank. I have sent for more Rangers, to help, but it will take time to summon enough of us to scour the entire of Lake Evendim. We have this last day been staying in the ruins of Annuminas, hiding, and hoping to see anyone coming through here. You are the first we have seen. It is bitter news to hear that our watch was so lax that they passed right through."

"It was not lax, I think," said Gandalf. "Say rather that we are tracking someone skilled at remaining unseen. Also, someone who knew they were being searched for. How Donna was brought so stealthily through here, is a harder question."

Gerontius, who still had an arm around Bella's shoulders, asked, "Do you suppose she was unconscious? Unable to shout for help? Or..."

"Little enough reason she had to shout for help," said Arador, "since Annuminas looks long-deserted, and we were in hiding. Who would she have thought she was shouting for? She had been captive for several days by then."

"She may also have been drugged unconscious," said Gandalf, "I found a poison dart in the back of Bella's neck that knocked her out while Donna was taken. If our enemy had

reason to suspect that Annuminas might have guards in it, Donna might have been thought easier to transport if she were knocked out again. But she was alive during the trip, I could tell that much from the tracks at their campsites."

"Did the abductor leave any tracks?" asked Arador.

"Not much that I could find. But I have not your skill in it," said Gandalf.

"There was nothing much I could find on the trail here," said Arador. "It was Fenris' nose that did most of the tracking. Whatever our quarry, it is no troll or man in heavy armor. But whatever it is, it passed by this way not long ago. Where do we look now?"

All fell silent for a moment, and Bella looked at the faces of all three. She noticed quickly that Gerontius (who she had always seen in charge of the household) and Arador (who she did not know, but understood to be a Dunedain of great importance) both looked to Gandalf.

"We wait here, with Bella," he said finally. "We cannot track over the water, and until your reinforcements arrive we cannot expect to find what we are looking for by doing a broad sweep. In any case, our quarry will be back. We may as well meet it with all of us on guard, and a guard dog to boot. The sun will be setting in less than an hour, anyway. Where is the most comfortable place in all of this ruins to pass the night, Arador?"

"The seeing tower is the only building still in one piece, or even close to it," said Arador. "It gives us a view of everywhere around, and it seems unlikely that we can be surprised if we are at the top of the tower."

Everyone else grimaced at that, remembering how Mira disappeared from the White Towers, and Arador arched his eyebrows a bit in surprise when he saw their reaction.

"Or...perhaps near the shores of the lake?" he said in response to their expressions. "We could build a fire and have clear view in all directions."

An hour later, they were down by the shore, gathered around a small fire. Bella had introduced herself to Fenris, after checking with Arador if the dog was likely to bite. Fenris was laying down next to her now, looking into the fire, tongue hanging out as he panted lightly. Bella thought he seemed happy. For a dog, she thought, perhaps a Ranger's life was what it most longed for; being out in the wilderness with its master near at hand, well fed and free to run. She ran her fingers through its fur, and looked

into its eyes, looking for signs of happiness. It looked up at her briefly, licked her in the face, and returned its gaze to the fire, then lay its head down and closed its eyes.

Arador smiled as Bella tried to wipe her face clean of dog spit. "That's a compliment, believe it or not."

"It's good luck, to have a dog with you on your travels," said Gerontius, and he looked at Gandalf. Bella thought she almost saw her father smiling himself, for the first time since she had seen him that day.

For several years now, she had been wondering about his travels, and whether or not she should ask him about them. Usually, her mother had been too close at hand, and she knew he would not speak freely about them when Adamanta could hear it. Until Isengar had disappeared, Bella had rarely ever been far out of sight of her mother, who Bella assumed was worried she might spend an hour not working. She was not sure if it was a good idea to ask him about them with others there, but then thought that maybe Gandalf would say something as well, since her mother seemed to think he had some part in it. Anyway, it was a way to take his mind off Donna, Mira, and Isengar.

"Did you have a dog with you on your travels, then?" she asked. "When you were younger, before you met Mama?"

"I did," said Gerontius, and he picked up a stick and poked the fire. For a minute, Bella thought he would say no more.

"Her name was Hildigard," he said at last. "She was as good a dog as a young Hobbit lad could ask for. She could track, and bring back a rabbit or squirrel to eat, or swim out to fetch a bird if you had shot it with a stone. She was a good guard dog, too, I was never caught by surprise with her near at hand."

For a minute, no one said anything.

"Where did you go with her?" she prodded at last, trying to keep her face or voice from showing too much interest.

"Oh, a great many places," said Gerontius, and then he gave a great sigh. "Too many places, really. She would have walked into Mordor with me if I asked it."

"Where?" asked Bella.

"Oh, nothing, I just mean she trusted me, and if I went somewhere she would follow, no matter how dangerous it looked. But she would let me know if she didn't like the way things smelled, if she thought danger lay ahead. I normally listened to her, and never regretted it. I ignored her once, and regretted that plenty. I still feel guilty about that. She died when we went into a dangerous place, and I was taking risks I shouldn't have. I barely made it out alive, and she didn't make it out at all."

"She made sure you escaped, though," said Gandalf. "That's what she wanted. She had a good dog's life with you, Gerontius."

"Well, I hope so," he said, still staring into the fire. "I think so."

Then he looked over at Bella. "Let's not mention Hildigard to your mother, Bella."

"Why not?" asked Bella, surprised. Her mother was severe in some things, but she always seemed to like dogs well enough. Bella thought she preferred dogs to children sometimes, because they were more obedient.

"Well, it's about the name. I had named her after a great-aunt of mine, a great Hobbit-lady. Then, when Adamanta and I had our first daughter, I gave her the name Hildigard, too. I don't know how Adamanta would take it if she found out it was the name of one of my best dogs. She is funny about appearances, you know, she might not approve of giving your child the same name as a dog you had."

"First daughter!?" Bella asked in shock. "I thought I was your first daughter!"

"Well," said Gerontius, "by the time you were born, Hildigard was long gone. We don't talk about her much. She died while she was still very young."

Bella, who had sat up straight as a pole, blinked in confusion for a few moments.

"What, what happened to her?"

"Well, it was very sad. She was playing in the back, by the old ruined entrance. Things were a bit wilder then, and we had some bad Men who were roaming about, taking food and whatever else they could. Several of them were trying to sneak in, the back way. Hildigard saw them before they saw her, and she screamed. We came running, but it was too late. One of them had clubbed her, to stop her from raising the alarm, even though it was too late by then anyway, we had all heard her. We drove them off, and we took her inside, but she died that night."

There was a long minute.

"If it were not for men like Arador, here, that sort of thing would be happening a lot more often."

"It should not have happened that time, Gerontius, and my father has told me he regrets it still," said the Ranger. "But we did find the Men in question, and those we did not kill, we drove far to the south. It's a task that never ends. Things are more peaceful here, in the North, and down south where there is war, crops do not get planted, or they get burned or trampled if they do. Where crops are not planted, there is famine, and next people coming north who have no food, but much knowledge of brutal tactics for taking it. But we do what we can. I'm sorry we did not find them before they came to your lands."

"No apologies, Arador, you cannot keep out all the world. If the Rangers were not here we would not be able to plant, or feed ourselves."

Another minute passed in silence, each looking into the fire with their own thoughts, and then Gandalf spoke.

"Bella, you may have found your mother to be a bit severe, always wanting you close at hand and under her watch and control. But now, perhaps, you can understand it a bit more than you did before. She has her reasons."

Bella nodded, still a bit dazed with the significance of what she had learned. She looked out into the darkness around them, imagining wild Men with clubs coming to take them. Somehow, with her father and Gandalf and Arador with her, she could not really feel afraid. She stared out at the ruins beyond the firelight, and tried to imagine what they had looked like when they were still standing. Eventually, felt her eyelids grow heavy, and she lay down on the sand and went to sleep. In one hand, she held the pendant Maeweth had given her, with the picture of Mira. She felt that it connected her to Mira and Donna both, now.



Donna

Chapter 9 - A Sort of Family Reunion, and Some Quite Nice Food

Donna's first night in the tower, she was brought to the dining hall, just as Mira and Isengar were. They were all very happy to see one another, and spent several minutes hugging and smiling. Donna, with a bit of a knot in her stomach, noticed that the long table was set with 11 chairs, the same as the number of sons and daughters in her family. Would they really all end up here? What would happen then?

Mira and Isengar took great delight in showing her the blocks and the toy puppy they had to play with, and in introducing her to Cecil when he arrived with their first meal. Donna found him to be very polite, and a good cook, but waited until he was gone from the room, and they were all still sitting at the table eating the last of their meal, before she began talking to them in a low whisper.

"Isengard, Mira, you must tell me, what did you notice on your way to the tower?"

"Nothing," said Isengar, "my eyes were covered."

"Me too," said Mira.

"Yes, of course, and mine as well, but what else did you notice? What did you hear? What did you smell? We must all try hard to remember, and see if we can figure out where we are."

"I remember the sound of waves," said Isengar. "There was a boat, I think."

"Yes, and then?" asked Donna.

"What about you?" asked Mira.

"I was drugged, I slept through it," answered Donna. "Not the whole time, but the last part."

"Then we got off the boat, and went uphill," whispered Mira.

"Did you hear birdsong?" asked Donna.

"Ducks and loons, at first," said Isengar. "But then later, ptarmigans and buntings."

"Going more than a little uphill then, probably" said Donna, "ptarmigans and buntings

are probably not water birds. And when I look out my window I see a mix of pine and oak and rowan."

"I can see the Sea!" said Isengar, a little too loudly, and all of them looked anxiously at the door, but no one came to interrupt.

"That's not the Sea, Isengar," said Donna, "that's got to be Lake Evendim. I heard the sound of a river during the last day of travel, before I was drugged again. Isengar, which side of the tower are you on?"

"The sunrise comes straight through my window," he answered, in a whisper this time.

"Ok, so you are on the east side. That means we're on the west shore of Lake Evendim. I'm on the south side, and I see forest. Mira, which side are you on?"

"I can't see the sunrise, but I can see the sunset, so I guess it must be the west side. I could ask the crow to be sure, though."

"Crow?"

"Yes, there's a crow who comes to visit me every day," said Mira. Then, lowering her voice even more, she added, "I sneak him food."

Donna smiled a bit to herself, then said, "Mira, I will write a note telling where we are. You must give it to this crow, and tell him to take it to home for us."

"What will you write it on?" asked Isengar.

"By the fireplace, there is a pot with tinder in it, to use in starting the fire when the fireplace is cold," whispered Donna. "Some of it is paper. I can use a bit of charcoal and write enough to tell them where we are, at least generally. But you will have to convince the crow to take it for us."

"Take it where?"

"Great Smials," said Donna. "We don't know where Papa, or Gandalf, or anyone else is right now, they're all riding about looking for us. But Mama will be at the Smials, or at least someone will, and they will know how to contact the others."

"But Mama can't read!" said Isengar. "She didn't even like it when Papa taught you and

Bella to read."

"But our brothers can read," said Donna, "and at least one of them will be there."

Just then, they heard the sound of the door being unlocked, and they returned their attention to their meals.

It was Cecil who came in, and they could see Grendel the troll behind him, looking through the doorway.

"Miss Donna, Miss Mira, and Master Isengar! Time for washing up! But no entertainment, orders of Grendel, who says we've been far too soft on you three thus far! No fun!" He said it in a serious tone of voice, but they saw a slight upturn in his lips, like a smirk he was trying to hide from Grendel, but wanted them to see.

"That's right! No fun!" shouted the troll from the hallway.

"None!" chimed in Cecil. "So, we will be taking you outside now, to insure you're not enjoying your time here with a good roof over your heads! The sun and rain is good enough for the likes of you!"

"Wait, no," said Grendel, sounding slightly confused. "They can't leave. They stay inside."

"Inside?! Well, we are being lax with you lot, aren't we? Well forget it then, there will be no private rooms! This isn't a vacation chateau, it's a prison! All in a common room is good enough for your type!"

"That's right!" shouted the troll. "All in one room!"

Donna saw that Isengar was about to open his mouth to say that they would prefer to be in one room together anyway, so that they could have each other for company, and quietly placed her foot on top of his and pressed firmly down. He looked up at her in surprise, and then his eyes went wide with understanding, and he looked back at Cecil and Grendel without saying anything. Mira, who didn't know what was going on but knew that Cecil must be making a fool of Grendel somehow, had buried her face in Donna's side, so that Grendel could not see her grinning.

"To show you we're not savages, though, at least there will be no hard labor, no sorting and stacking to do. So it'll be one of the plain cells for you three during mealtimes.

Nice and small, easy to keep clean."

"No!" shouted Grendel, "make 'em work! The biggest room we've got! Make 'em stack and sort!"

"Right," said Cecil, without hesitation, "you three heard him, it's this room for the three of you, the biggest room we have! Make sure those blocks are stacked and sorted! And just to make it harder, once you've got them built up one way, choose another pattern and stack them differently! No shirking!"

"Right!" shouted Grendel, unaware that Cecil had basically said they could stay where they were and play with blocks all night.

"And must we entertain you with song, or can we just stack and sort in peace and quiet?" asked Donna.

"No relaxing!" said Grendel.

"Right, you heard him, Miss Donna! I want to hear songs, at least once an hour!"

"Ohhhhhh!!!!!!!!!!!!!" wailed Donna, holding Mira tightly to keep the sound of her giggling from being heard. Mira loved to make up songs, or sing old ones she half-remembered, and had been trying to keep from singing too much for fear of the troll hearing and getting angry.

With that, Grendel and Cecil left again, and locked the door behind them. Donna, Mira, and Isengar kept as quiet as they could until they heard the sound of their footsteps disappear down the hallway, then collapsed into giggles.

When he returned with their midnight meal, Mira asked if they were really going to stay in the big room all the time.

"Oh, I doubt it very much, Miss," he whispered. "Grendel rarely remembers much about any conversation more than an hour old. He's not all that bright, even for a troll. But it's probably safe to sing some over lunch tonight."

Adamanta was washing dishes in the kitchen, alone, when the crow landed on the sill of her open windows. Five weeks earlier, before Isengar had disappeared, and all her

daughters soon after, she would have shooed it away immediately. The oppressive quiet of an empty hobbit-hole (her remaining sons were all outside in the garden), and the ceaseless worry over her children's fate, had dampened her spirits. She simply looked at it, and kept washing.

"What is it you want, then?" she asked at last, and despite her question she was surprised when it answered.

"Rest, for one thing," it croaked out. "I've been flying all day with that thing in my beak, or my claw."

Here he indicated a small rolled up piece of paper, and Adamanta looked down at it, then up again at the crow.

"Your hatchlings seemed to think you would want it," he added.

"What!? My babies? You've seen them?"

"I have," said the crow. "I liked the laughing one best. That one gave me food. The littlest one just tried to throw pebbles at me. The bigger one told me how to find you, but didn't have much else to say. It was the laughing one I liked best."

"All three of them!" exclaimed Adamanta with relief. "Are they all right? Have they been hurt?"

"Not that I can tell," said the crow. "They're anxious to get out of their cage, but they seemed unhurt. The middle one gave me food, you know."

"What sort of cage? Were there guards?"

"I think so, a big one, but I only saw him at night. There were a few others that would come and go, I didn't notice much about them. You know, the middle one, the one that smiled a lot? She would give me food."

"Big one? How big? Was it a giant? No, probably a troll, that's why it wouldn't come out except at night, because they say the sunlight turns them to stone. Where was it? Can you tell me where it was?"

"I could maybe," said the crow, "but the way I take to get there wouldn't do you much good, you can't go that way without wings, and my landmarks are all what you see from

above. No need, though, I think that paper they asked me to carry to you says where they are. You know, sometimes she would give me quite tasty food. I really liked that."

"Isengrim, Isumbras, Hildigrim, Isembold, Hildifons, Isembard, and Hildibrand!" shouted Adamanta out the window, "Come quickly and read this for me!" Then she grabbed the slip of paper from where the crow had dropped it, and ran out of the kitchen to bring it to them.

The crow stood there on the windowsill for a few moments, looking left and right, listening closely for the sound of a cat or dog. The Tooks, as it turned out, had several of each, but there were none near the kitchen just then. Then, with a hop and a flutter of his wings, he moved over to the broad table in the middle of the kitchen where lunch was being prepared. Quickly, he sampled the bread rolls, apples, peaches, rosemary-cooked potatoes, and fruit pie, taking no more than a peck or two from each one, so as to sample as many different foods as possible.

"Not a bad old hen," he said at last, "but her hearing isn't as good as her daughter's."

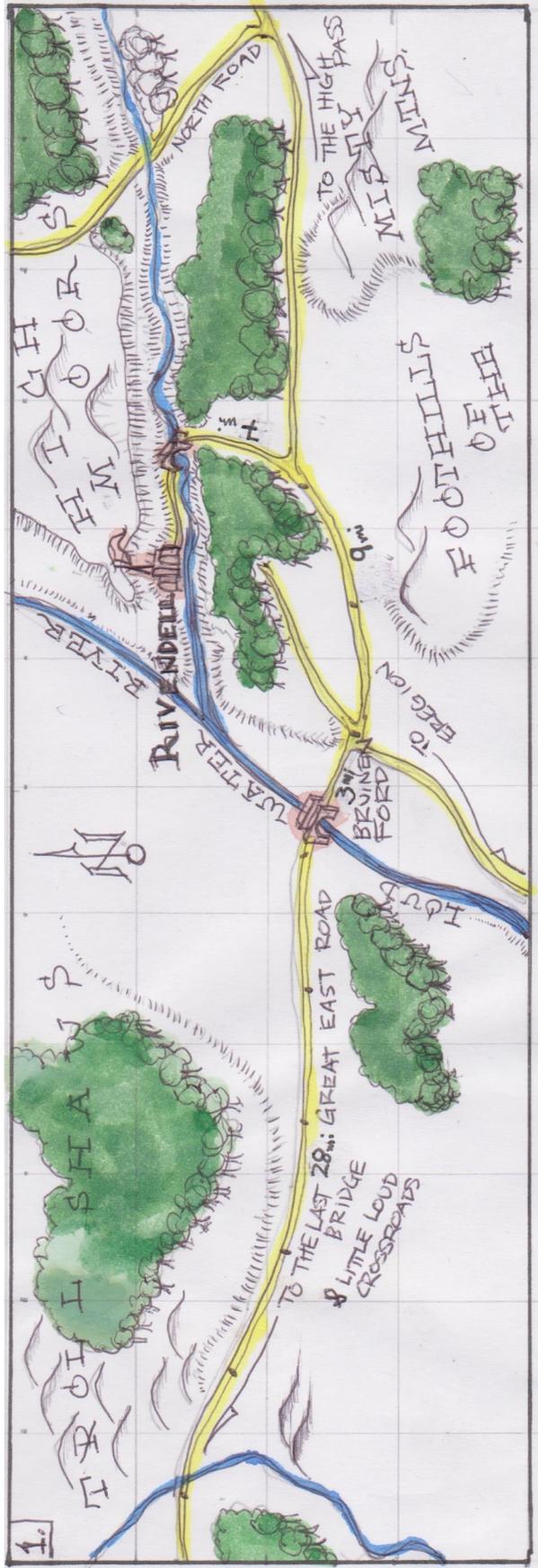
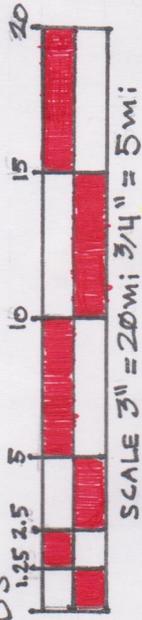
With that, he flew away out the window, ignoring the excited shouting and laughing from the garden below him.

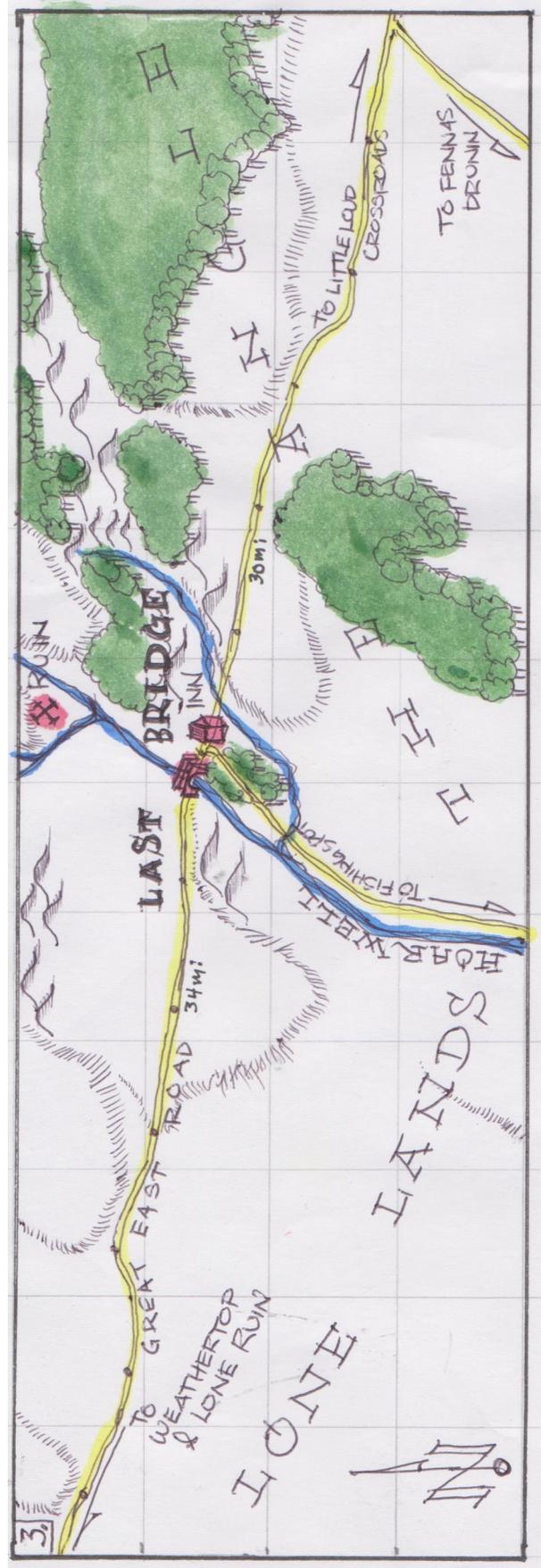
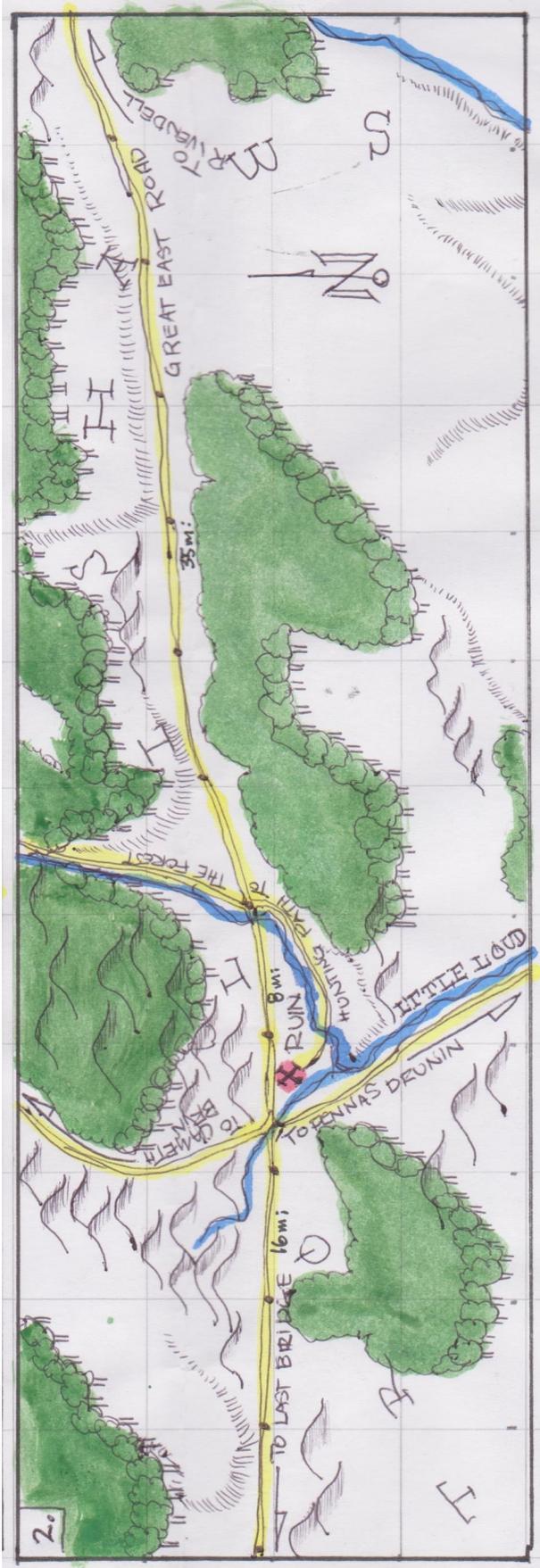
ROUTE MAPS showing the passage East to West along the GREAT EAST ROAD from RIVENDELL to the GREY HAVENS

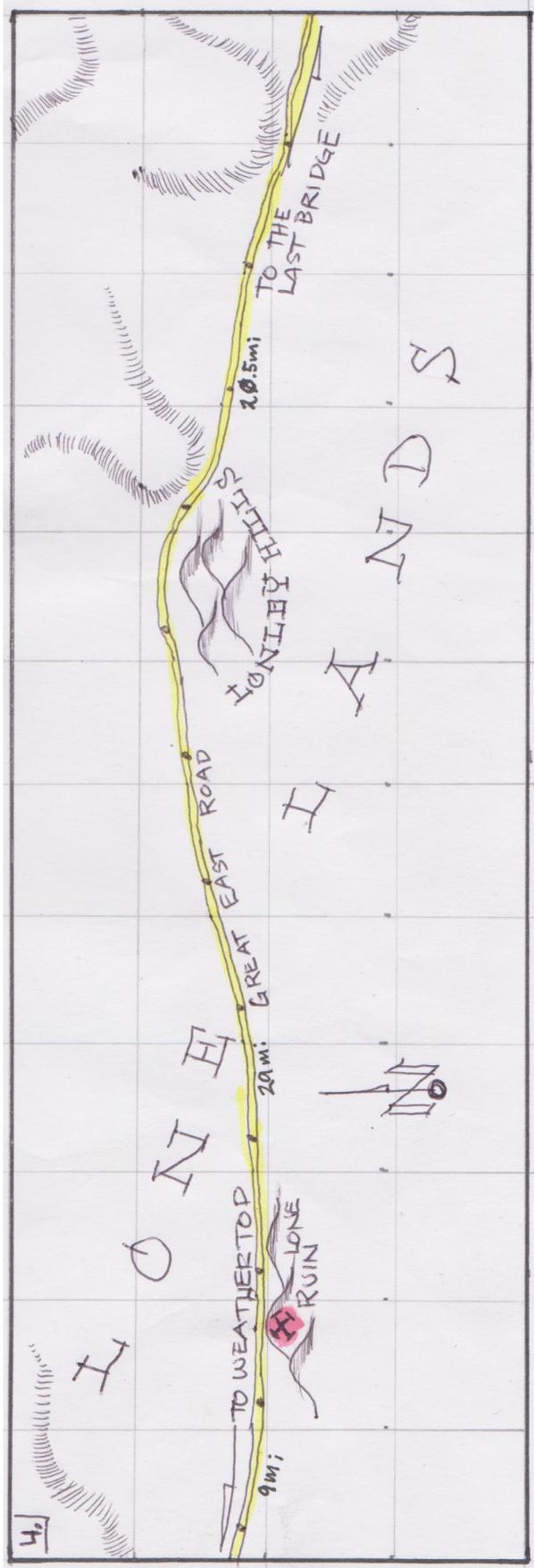
and all the length between, as taken from the KING'S ROUTE BOOK & inter-
preted & updated by Commissioned Cartographers at the BEHEMOTH of the SHIREMOOT
done in three separate Plates each including four maps of 60 miles length start-
ing east in RIVENDELL & moving west to end in the west of the GREY HAVENS
having coursed through the Breith of the SHIRE for 620 miles.

PLATE I RIVENDELL to LONELANDS

- MAP 1. RIVENDELL TO TROLL SHAWS
- MAP 2. TROLL SHAWS & THE LITTLE LOUD CROSSROADS
- MAP 3. THE LAST BRIDGE OVER THE HOARWELL
- MAP 4. THE LONE LANDS







Chapter 10 - A Message From Home, and From the Last Homely House

Bella had been staying at Annuminas for several days. First, there had been only her father, the Ranger Arador, and Gandalf. Later, several other Rangers had come to join Arador, and they had begun making plans for how to search the entirety of the shore of Lake Evendim, to find where their quarry had gone. In the meantime, she had been kept under close watch. Fortunately, there was Fenris there to play with, when he was not following Arador's every step.

Bella had laid down for the night, once again in a bedroll on the beach by the fire, looking up at the stars and occasionally looking at her pendant with the picture of Mira. She was only dimly aware of the conversation of the adults, near the edge of the firelight. She was surprised to hear the voice of her oldest brother, Isengrim, and sat up quickly and stepped closer to hear.

She saw Isengrim, taller than her father but still much shorter than the Ranger and Wizard who were looking over his shoulder, at a piece of paper he was holding.

"She says they are in a tower on the west shore of Lake Evendim," said Isengrim, "uphill but still able to see the water. And they are north of a forest. Is there much forest on the west bank of the Lake?"

"Not much," said Arador, "but there is some on the southwest corner. There is a tower there, but it was long since fallen to ruin. They must have restored it in secret, while leaving the outside to look abandoned. We can be there in a day."

"We must plan our approach carefully," said Gandalf. "There will be guards, and we don't know what their instructions might be if they are attacked."

"The crow that brought this letter said there was a troll," said Isengrim. "And maybe others."

"So much for a nighttime assault, then," said Arador. "If there is a troll, we will need to have daylight on our side. Perhaps we could approach at dawn, when any other guards might still be sluggish, but the troll will be out of the light, and stay that way."

"Isengrim and I can approach without them noticing, I think," said Gerontius, "but maybe not too many others. Then we can see how many guards there are, and where, and report back to whoever comes with us. Gandalf, will you be there?"

"Certainly," said Gandalf, "and we will bring Arador as well. How many other Rangers, do you think, Arador?"

"We will need to leave a couple here to guard Bella," he said, "but all the rest we have here with us should come. Probably a dozen in all. I will give the orders now."

With that, as Arador walked off to find the other Rangers, camped nearby, who had arrived in the last few days, Bella realized that she was going to be left behind. Under guard, to be sure, but not going with them. She was annoyed at being left behind, and wanted to go with them to where Donna, Mira, and Isengar were. She knew that they were frightened at the prospect of bringing her that close to the where there might be fighting, especially if there might be a troll involved.

She thought then about how brave Donna and the rest must have been, to not panic, but stay alert and observant, and figure out a way to get a message out. She felt a stab of fear herself, then, at the idea of her little brother and sisters being in the middle of a fight. What if the guards had orders to kill their prisoners if they were discovered?

She felt, then, a little more sympathy for why her father and the rest had decided to leave her behind. It is a hard thing to be brave on your own account. It is even harder to be brave for someone you love.

Now we must go back in time, back to about when Gandalf, Bella, and Donna were set upon by goblins on the road. While they were taking refuge in a cave, much further east, Galdor the Elf had arrived at Rivendell. You recall that Gandalf the wizard had sent Galdor there with the letter, a letter threatening revenge, that had been left on the floor of little Isengar's room in Great Smials. Galdor had taken that letter across a great many miles, riding his horse as hard as he dared, and through an adventure or two himself which we will not take the time to relate here. The Wild Lands that he rode through were dangerous, but Galdor was a wise and a powerful elf, and he made it there safely.

Elrond was sitting in a great hall, looking out the wide windows onto the river valley landscape beyond, when Galdor came to him. Elrond was a tall, dark-haired, and wise elf. He was the Lord of Rivendell, which was an excellent place full of elves, and occasionally guests of other races, that I wish we had more time to discuss, but it doesn't come into this tale very much, so we will move on to what was said.

realization of what Elrond was telling him, got up and rushed out of the room.



Belladonna

Chapter 11 - Enemy Revealed

Bella was moved to the basement of a ruined building in another part of the ruined city. There were only a few Rangers left to watch her, and they wanted to be out of sight. Bella slept poorly, waking several times during the night. Always she saw one or another of the Rangers, tall men with close-cropped beards dressed in dark clothes, seated on the stairs above her, looking out through a chink in the wall of the ruined ground floor of the building. She knew they were there to protect her, but it was not a comfortable feeling, sleeping in a dark underground chamber with no one nearby who she knew.

She was surprised to be awakened by the sound of the voice of Maeweth whispering, "Bella, wake up little one, it's time to get up."

Bella opened her eyes, and saw that it was dawn. Blinking stupidly a few times as she tried to remember where she was and who the person was that was talking to her, she eventually remembered that Maeweth was the elf from the Grey Havens. She was smiling down at Bella, but she also had a finger to her lips, indicating that Bella should be quiet.

"It's not safe for you here," said Maeweth, "there is a traitor among the Rangers. Be quiet, and come with me, we will get you out of here."

Bella sat up, wide-eyed and nervous, but did as she was told.

"The cloak you were given by Cirdan, put it around you. It will make you hard to see. I have lured the Rangers away but they will be back soon."

Bella followed Maeweth up the stairs, and she waited with a pounding heart while Maeweth poked her head up to see if it was safe to sneak out. Looking down, Bella began to think, as she came more fully awake.

"How did you find us?" Bella whispered.

"It wasn't so hard," said Maeweth. "Are you ready to go?"

Really? thought Bella. It's that easy, to find a hidden Ranger encampment? Why would she be looking for them? And was it just coincidence that she should show up just after Gandalf and the rest had left, the first time in days when she didn't have a Wizard guarding her?

Then, Bella remembered that she was wearing an amulet, given to her by Maeweth. She wondered if that amulet were magical, like the cloack, and many other things which the elves made. Perhaps it allowed you to find the person who wore it. And then, she realized one other thing.

Too late, Bella realized that she should have thought these things, without letting any sign of it cross her face. Maeweth had read her thoughts, by looking at the expression on Bella's face, and knew that she was suspicious. Now, Maeweth was still smiling at her, but it was no longer a kindly smile. It was a hard, cruel smile.

"Go ahead," she whispered, "you can shout for help. Perhaps they will even save you. I doubt that three Rangers could defeat me in combat, not as many wars as I've lived through, but it's possible. But it will kill your brother and sisters if you do. If I die, they will starve to death, locked in their cells."

'She doesn't know', thought Bella. 'She doesn't know that we know where the tower is.'

But this time, she remembered to keep any expression off her face. Instead, she decided just to look like a scared child, which wasn't too difficult. She could have yelled for help, but if she did, Maeweth might get away. If she did, they might never be safe, always wondering when and where Maeweth would strike again. Instead, thought Bella, maybe it was better to keep the enemy in front of her, where she could be seen, and maybe caught.

Anyway, it was one way to get to see her brother and sisters faster.

Maeweth grabbed her wrist, with a surprising strength, and pulled her after. The two of them crept out of the ruined basement, and through the ruins of Annuminas, to a horse hidden in the trees at the outskirts. Looking down, Bella saw that Maeweth's boots left no tracks on the dirt; it looked as if Bella had walked there alone. Maeweth made Bella get onto the horse first, then got on sitting behind her.

They rode only a short distance, away from the ruined city, and then they came to a small inlet where she had hidden a tiny boat under the branches of a tree that leaned out over the water. After they got off her horse, Maeweth turned to it and spoke a few words in some elvish tongue, and it neighed in response and rode off. Then, she tied a piece of dark cloth around Bella's head, to cover her eyes.

Bella felt herself put into the boat, and then felt the slight lurch as it pushed away from

the shore.

"Lie down," said Maeweth gruffly, and Bella felt a hand on her back pushing her down into the bottom of the boat. She lay there, a little bit queasy, uncertain as to whether it was the rocking of the boat on the waves, or the fear of what might be ahead, that was making her stomach flutter. Perhaps both?

She tried to listen for some sound that would tell her where they were (other than "the lake"), but could not tell. After what must have been hours she felt hands, hardly larger than a Hobbit's but strong, grabbing her and picking her up from the boat and setting her on dry ground. Then she felt a hand pressing gently on the small of her back, and she started walking. Once or twice she stumbled and nearly fell, but she was caught by the shoulders and held upright. Once, she started to feel a bit of an itch on her nose, and it occurred to her that if she seemed to be just scratching her nose, she might be able to adjust the blindfold enough to see a tiny bit out the top. When she tried it, though, she felt it immediately yanked back up into place.

"Don't touch that again," said Maeweth from behind her, which was the first time Bella had heard her speak in hours.

They walked on, and now began going uphill. The feel of the heat on her face began to alternate with moments of coolness, as if they were walking through dappled shade now. She began to hear different birds, and smelled pine and rowan. We must be getting close to the tower, she thought.

Then she remembered hearing the story that her father Gerontius had told Gandalf, about how her father had hidden in the dark, hoping for Gandalf to come and rescue him before he was found. She wondered if her father felt then like she did now; blinded, vulnerable. But, she remembered another thing; she was not trying to avoid capture, she was trying to capture someone instead. What would Maeweth do once she saw Gandalf and the rest near the tower? Probably, she would try to run away, leaving Bella behind. How would she know when Maeweth had seen Gandalf, and decided to flee? She couldn't see, so she tried to listen for Maeweth's footfalls. If Bella could hear when she stopped, perhaps that would tell her when to spin around, grab hold of Maeweth as tightly as ever she could, and yell at the top of her lungs. Bella knew she couldn't defeat an Elf like Maeweth, but maybe she could slow her down long enough for Gandalf and the Rangers to get there.

But, try as she might, she could hear nothing. She began to wonder if Maeweth had already left, but when Bella stopped, she felt Maeweth's fingers on her back, pushing her

forward. She was still back there, then. Bella feigned tiredness. This was something she had years of practice at, since she often pretended to be tired for her mother Adamanta, in an attempt to get out of doing chores at home. Sure enough, Maeweth kept her hand on the small of Bella's back, pushing her forward. Bella pushed aside all thought about her father's adventures, or even where she was headed, and concentrated on what she was hearing, and the touch of Maeweth's fingers on her back. For several minutes more, they walked on, Bella pretending to be almost too tired to lift her feet any more. Still she could hear no sound from the elf behind her, but she could feel Maeweth's hand on her back.

Then...

Bella heard the faintest intake of breath from behind her, just as she felt the fingers removed from her back. Flipping the blindfold up with her left hand as she whirled around, Bella grabbed for Maeweth with her right, catching her by the chain belt she wore around her waist.

"GANDALF!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" she shouted, as loud as a Hobbit child can shout, and that is much louder than you would think from their size.

Maeweth grimaced, and bloodied Bella's nose with a blow from her right hand, as she used her left to pull Bella's hand away. Bella, wincing from the pain, grabbed hold of the belt again with her left hand, and wrapped her legs around Maeweth's left leg.

"GANDALF!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

"Huissè!" hissed Maeweth; Bella didn't know what that meant, but she could guess it was not a compliment. Maeweth dropped to her knees, landing on top of Bella, driving all air from her chest. When she got up again, though, Bella still had hold of her legs, so she dropped on top of her again, then grabbed a rock, raised it up high, and tried to bring it down on Bella's head. Bella spun her head out of the way at the last instant, squirmed out from under Maeweth, gasping for breath, then when the elf tried to run away she leapt at her legs again, bringing them both down in a heap.

"GANDALF!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Maeweth turned and grabbed hold of Bella's hair, pulling it cruelly, and then sank her teeth into one of Bella's arms that was wrapped around her. Bella spun and squirmed and turned to break her grip, but whenever Maeweth tried to break off and run away, Bella tackled her again, yelling whenever she could draw breath to do it. Then, she felt

something shift, and suddenly it was as if the elf were a liquid that was draining away. Bella grabbed at what was left, and realized she now had hold of a gannet, a type of sea bird, but only by one foot. She grabbed at its wings with her other hand, all the while her hand being bloodied by stabs from its beak. Then, once she had hold of it more securely, it changed in her hands again and was once more the elf Maeweth, larger than her and her face twisted with fury, and the two of them wrestled in the dirt for a few seconds, until Maeweth had her pinned, knees on Bella's arms, and raised a large rock high over her head. Then, Bella saw a large piece of wood come into view as it smacked against Maeweth's head, and the elf lost consciousness and fell to the ground.

Looking over, Bella saw Arador the Ranger, still holding the branch he had used to club Maeweth, and also saw Gandalf close behind him. Arador helped her up while Gandalf checked on the elf, quickly tying her hands behind her back.

"She...she changed shape," said Bella, still reeling from sharp pains in a dozen places.

"We saw," said Gandalf. "I know a trick or two to prevent that. It won't happen again."

Arador had Bella sit down while he checked on her wounds; she was bleeding from a dozen places but none of them were life-threatening. While he did that, Gerontius arrived, and as soon as Arador let him, he put his arms around Bella and held her close to him for several long moments.

"The others?" asked Bella, still hugging him back.

"All safe," said her father. "There was a troll, but no other guard except a blind Man who acted as cook. The troll is dead now, and the cook put up no resistance and is a prisoner now. Your brother and sisters are with the other Rangers. We were just getting ready to leave when we heard you. Come, we can go see them now."

They got up to walk away, but Gerontius stopped, and looked at the unconscious elf on the ground. He was very quiet, and looked thoughtful.

"Do you recognize her?" asked Gandalf, who had finished tying her up.

"No," said Gerontius, "I don't. But it was dark, and she wore a mask. I wonder if she acted alone, or..."

"We will take her in chains to Cirdan," said Arador, "and hand her over to his justice. I expect he will question her long over this matter."

"I think I know the room she'll be staying in," said Bella. "It's one she couldn't get into, so I expect she won't be able to get out of it either."

Then, she heard the sound of her little brother Isengar, running and shouting excitedly.

"Bella! Bella! I talked to the Rangers, and we are going to go see the Sea! It's not far away, just over that line of hills!"

"Isengar, your sister has just wrestled with an elf, and has been worried to death about you for weeks," said Gerontius. "Don't you think you should say how glad you are to see her, first?"

Little Isengar looked briefly over to his father and then back.

"Um, hello Bella, I'm glad to see you. Bella! The Sea!"

Chapter 12 - Homecoming

They stayed in the ruins of Annuminas again that night, this time without fear, in the high tower that still stood there looking over the Lake. Galdor the Elf arrived, bearing with him news from Elrond that the letter left in Great Smials when Isengar was abducted must have been written by an elf, because if it were any Ranger he would have recognized the handwriting, and it was not written in the style of ordinary Men, Dwarves, or Hobbits. This news, while not as useful then as it would have been a few days before, did confirm Elrond's wisdom, and also that Gandalf had been correct when he said showing the letter to Elrond might tell them something about the one who wrote it.

"I rode as fast as I could," said Galdor, somewhat defensively. "It's a long way from Rivendell to Bree, and then I had to find out where you had gone before I could ride up here to Annuminas."

The next morning, they all went up to the crest of the hills, and little Isengar was able to look down on the Sea in the distance. It was much bigger looking than even Lake Evendim, that he had seen from his cell in the tower. Then Galdor and the Rangers went further down, to take Maeweth back to suffer Cirdan's judgement, while the Took and Gandalf all went the other way, back east and then south towards home. For the next several days, they camped all together, a merry lot of them: Gandalf, Gerontius, Bella's oldest brother Isengrim, Bella, Donna, Mira, and little Isengar. Gandalf and Gerontius were in a good mood, and told stories as they went. Bella tried to prod her father a bit to tell them about what adventures he and Gandalf might have had before, but she didn't get much.

"Your mother would not like me filling your head with tales of burgling and running from giants and general gallivanting around," he said, "we'll leave that for another day."

"Giants?" asked Bella. "You saw a giant?"

Her father made a face, as if he had said more than he intended, and Gandalf laughed.

When they finally made it home, Bella found herself a little bit emotional about seeing Great Smials, again. The garden, the green grass on the hill it burrowed into, the round windows and round front door. In front, she saw Hildibrand, the brother closest to her in age, only three years older than her. Sometimes she and he had quarrelled in the past, but right now she felt her heart leap to see him. For his part Hildibrand, when he saw them coming over the hill on a troop of ponies and one horse (for Gandalf), shouted and

waved, and then ran inside to tell the others.

By the time they had gotten close to the front door all the other brothers had come pouring out, as well as Adamanta, laughing and running up to greet them. Isengar, Mira, and Donna all were helped down by Gerontius and Isengrim, and they ran up to greet them. Bella noticed, with quiet satisfaction, that she had not been helped down, but rather assumed to be old enough to get off the pony herself now. She walked up to join the rest, her hands clasped behind her back, an expression of serene satisfaction on her face, until she saw that her mother was looking at her now, and crying.

Bella went up and gave her mother a hug, and the two of them stayed like that for quite some time. When they eventually came apart again, Gandalf appeared at Bella's shoulder to say something to her mother.

"Your children are all remarkable, my dear Adamanta, as I think you are well aware, but your daughters in particular proved themselves to be beyond exceptional these last few weeks. Clever and brave in equal measure."

Bella noticed a mixture of emotion on her mother's face, as if she still was not sure whether she could accept a compliment from Gandalf, but she choked back both tears and whatever grudge she held, and nodded thanks.

"Won't you come in for a spot of tea?" she asked, finally.

The entire Took clan stampeded into the Smials, the smaller ones riding on shoulders of the oldest brothers (Isengar roared, Mira laughed, and Donna giggled quietly). Bella thought she might not actually mind serving tea and scones for so many this once, but as she started to go into the kitchen she was surprised to feel her mother's hand on her shoulder, steering her into the dining room instead.

"I can get it today, Bella," she said. "Just this once, you can sit there and relax."

There followed several hours of tale telling, as Mira and Isengar got the chance to tell their stories to their older brothers. Bella occasionally chimed in, and once or twice Donna would add something, but for the most part the youngest two held center stage the whole time. Bella's favorite part was their reenactment of the dialogs between Grendel the troll and Cecil the blind Man.

"I hope Cecil was not killed in the rescue then," said Hildibrand, "he seems not to have been all bad."

"He was not," said Gandalf. "They took him prisoner, and will question him at length, but at the end of that neither Arador nor his father Argonui will see the need to punish him further, nor to turn him loose in the wilderness. I expect he'll end up working for the Rangers in the end. A change for the better, I imagine. I think things would have gone much worse for him if Isengar and Mira hadn't spoken up for him."

"What would they question him about?" asked Bella.

"I cannot say for sure, but likely wanting to know what he may have overheard from Maeweth about her motives."

"You and Arador both keep wondering about that," said Gerontius. "I think it was simple revenge."

"Revenge for what?" asked Bella, but both Gandalf and Gerontius ignored her question.

"But my dear Gerontius, there was nothing simple about it. If she had just wanted to cause you pain, she could have done that quicker and simpler by far. She wanted control over you, I think, and for that she needed your children alive. Taking them one by one was just a way to turn the knife a bit more, and wear you down so that you saw no hope but to comply with whatever she demanded."

"But what purpose would that serve?" said Gerontius. "We do well enough, but we have no wealth that an elf like Maeweth would want, nor has any Hobbit."

"But you do, Gerontius. You, as Thain of the Shire, are the reason why Hobbits still follow King's Law, and pay tribute in food to Argonui and his people."

"That was the price we promised when his forefathers gave us the Shire," said Gerontius. "Hobbits would honor their word, whether I said to or no."

"You think so?" asked Gandalf. "If the Thain said it was time to stop and let the Rangers get their own food, I think the Hobbits would stop. If that happened, in time, it would mean that the Rangers would all go south to Gondor, where the rest of the Dunedain live. It would be the end of the Rangers, within a generation."

The rest of the Hobbits had all become quiet, listening to Gandalf and Gerontius. Then, Donna piped up.

"Why would she want that? Why would Maeweth want the Rangers to leave?"

"Well," said Gandalf, "the Rangers keep the Wild at bay here in the north. When trolls come down from the hills, or Goblins riding Dire Wolves come on raids from the mountains, or bandit Men come up from the south, it is the Rangers that kill them or drive them back where they came from. So, who would want to rid the North of the Rangers? Someone who wanted to come here and operate unhindered. And THAT is what Arador and his father Argonui and the elf lord Cirdan will want to know. We can only hope that they find out sooner rather than later, but we probably have some time. This was a long-term plan. It may be your children, Gerontius, who will have to worry about the answer to that question, when they are older."

At that, Gerontius smiled, and said, "Well they appear to be capable of taking care of quite a bit already. For now, let's have some more scones."

<u>Arthedain-Angerthas</u> Runes	<u>Arthedain-Sindarin</u> Name	Name Meaning	Notes
𐌵𐌶𐌵 𐌹𐌶𐌶𐌵𐌶𐌵	<i>Ael Brennil</i>	Lake of the Lady	One Queen was said to have drowned herself in this lake after her husband the king died, afterward it was ever called the Queen's Lake, or Lake of the Lady.
𐌵𐌶𐌵 𐌶𐌵𐌶𐌵	<i>Ael Keleb</i>	Lake Silver	
𐌵𐌶𐌵 𐌵𐌶𐌶𐌵 𐌶𐌵𐌶𐌶𐌶𐌵	<i>Ael Firen Naergon</i>	Pool of Man's Lament	A Legend claims the pool was filled by weeping tears.
𐌵𐌶𐌵 𐌶𐌵𐌶𐌵	<i>Amon Darath</i>	Hill of the Path of Waiting	
𐌵𐌶𐌵 𐌶𐌵𐌶𐌵	<i>Amon Virdath</i>	Hill of the Deep-Pit Jewel	
𐌵𐌶𐌶𐌶𐌶 𐌵𐌶𐌶𐌶	<i>Annún Athrad</i>	West Ford	
𐌵𐌶𐌶𐌶𐌶𐌶𐌶	<i>Annúminas</i>	West Tower	
𐌵𐌶𐌶𐌶𐌶𐌶	<i>Aradrú</i>	Royal Wood	
𐌵𐌶𐌶𐌶𐌶𐌶	<i>Araguin</i>	King's Wine	
𐌵𐌶𐌶𐌶𐌶 𐌵𐌶𐌶𐌶𐌶	<i>Athrad Heledir</i>	Kingfisher's Ford	
𐌵𐌶𐌶𐌶𐌶 𐌵𐌶𐌶𐌶	<i>Athrad Lorn</i>	Ford of the Weary	Here surviving troops from the defeated army of Arthedain encamped before crossing the river. Those survivors were called the "Weary".
𐌵𐌶𐌶𐌶𐌶 𐌵𐌶𐌶𐌶	<i>Barad Baudh</i>	Tower of Judgment	From this tower royal law was decreed and royal judgments were passed down by judges assigned by the King
𐌵𐌶𐌶𐌶𐌶 𐌵𐌶𐌶𐌶𐌶𐌶	<i>Barad Beriaran</i>	Tower of King's Duty	
𐌵𐌶𐌶𐌶𐌶 𐌵𐌶𐌶𐌶	<i>Barad Emlin</i>	Tower of the Yellowbird	

ዘክዘር ስፀተሊ	<i>Ereb Amloth</i>	Lonely Crest	
ዘጋሾንክ ህዝብ	<i>Esgar Men</i>	Shore-Road	
ፋሊካህ ፎጅ ጋሊክ	<i>Forn Dú Sir</i>	Northern Dim Stream	
ፋሊካህሊጋሽ ዘክዘር	<i>Fornost Erain</i>	Northern Fortress of the King	
ሾሊሪክተ ጸክዘህሃዘተ	<i>Gobel Brennill</i>	Town of the Lady	
ሾሊሪክተ ዘሃዘቤህህ	<i>Gobel Enedmen</i>	Middleway-Town	
ሾሊሪክተ ዘጋሾንክ ስገሊክ	<i>Gobel Esgar Athrad</i>	Shoreford Town	
ሾሊሪክተ ሾጂስክክህ	<i>Gobel Guaeren</i>	Windy March Town	Windy March was a local name for the road that passes through this town that for much of the year is known for its quite strong winds.
ሾሊሪክተ ሊክ	<i>Gobel Hir</i>	Kings Town	
ሾጂስክክህ ሾሊክ	<i>Guaeren Pada</i>	Windy March Road	A well known pathway for its excessive and seemingly constant wind that makes travel often difficult and unpleasant
ሊክክቤ ዘህሃዘር	<i>Harad Eminual</i>	South Evendim	
ሊክክቤክክ	<i>Haradrad</i>	Southway	
ሊሊ ስገሊክ	<i>Hoth Echad</i>	Host-Camp	Here the great army of the King encamped before the Battle of Fornost.
ሰገግ ህዝብክክህ	<i>Iaur Menkalen</i>	Old Greenway	
ህዝብ ስሃሃጅህ	<i>Men Annún</i>	Road of the Sunset	
ህዝብ ሰገሊክ	<i>Men Ithildin</i>	Road of Silvershine	
ሃዘሃዘር	<i>Nenuial</i>	Lake Evendim	

Λ>Γ ΓΝΗΨ	<i>Ost Taeg</i>	Border-Town	
Λ>ΓΝΚΝΨ	<i>Ostaran</i>	Kingstown	
Λ>ΓΨΙΔΗΨ	<i>Ostnifend</i>	Fore-Downs Town	
ΠΙΨ ΒΝΚΝΒΞΙΨ	<i>Pin Baraduin</i>	Little Baraduin	
ΚΙ ΗΚΙΨ	<i>Ri Erin</i>	Crown of Trees	This copse of trees which from the south appears as a great green crown in the fullness of late spring was a traditional site of royal meditation here after coronation the new king would come here for three days of contemplation and tutoring.
ΚΛΒ ΝΓΚΝΒ	<i>Röd Athrad</i>	? (see Rood/Raudhodog)-ford	
ΚΛΒΛΓΒΛΚΨ	<i>Romolborn</i>	? (possibly, <i>rom-oll-born</i> , "horn of the red-torrent")	
ΚΛΛΒ	<i>Rood</i>	? (possibly a shortening of <i>raudh-odo(g)</i> , "Seven Caverns")	
ΓΝΞΚ ΓΝΞΚΛΨ	<i>Taur Tauron</i>	Forester's Wood	A wood that was considered the benefit of the Royal Forester of <u>Arthedain</u>
Γ>ΝΚΝ> ΝΚΝΨ	<i>Tharas Aran</i>	Seat-land of the High Kings	
ΝΚΨ ΔΛΚΒΗΨ	<i>Tirn Formen</i>	North Downs	
>ΙΚ ΝΓΝΚΝ>	<i>Sir Atharas</i>	Kings-seat Stream	

