

Chapter 2

A Walk In The Woods

"Is Papa still asleep?" asks Mira.

"I'm not sure," says Bella, "he looks like he might just be resting his eyes. Papa, we're going to read some more in your second journal, is that all right?"

Gerontius opens his eyes briefly, blinks a few times, and starts to say something. Then, after a short choking pause, he says, "Yes, please continue."

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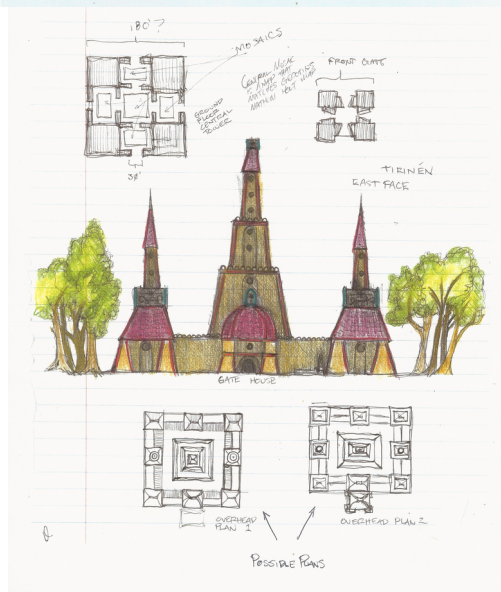
We walked on for some time before I asked, "so those great elm trees, back there, they were standing there when the elves still lived here?"

"No," said Arathorn, "though trees very like them did."

"That was thousands of years ago," said Gandalf. "Elms can live for centuries, but not millenia, that I have ever known."

"Oh, so these must have been planted again, in that spot," I said. "Did the Rangers do that?"

"No," said Arathorn, and he walked on in silence, adding nothing. I looked over at Gandalf, but he was frowning into the distance as he walked, thinking on some other



matter, and this time added nothing to what Arathorn had said.

It was not so long before we came to the ruins which Uncle Bullroarer had marked as "Mathom Hoard Breoth" on the map. Arathorn called it "Tirinen", and he seemed to treat it as a holy site of some sort. It is always a bit sad, for me, to wander in a ruined place where folk once lived, any kind of folk. The ruins of the elves, who had mostly left to go west over the sea, were even more melancholy to behold. But, there were still some mosaics and inscriptions amongst the rubble and overgrowth that were a sight to behold. I suppose if we had come in summer it would all have been obscured by lush plantlife. It was while we were looking at the ruins that we came upon it, there in the center of the ruined floor.

"Look there!" said Gandalf.

"Goodness me!" I said.

"I thought I recognized it," said Arathorn. "But it has been years since I have been here."

There, as a mosaic in the floor, was my Great Uncle Bullroarer's map.

"So then," said Gandalf, "old Bandobras, or Bullroarer as you would call him, either came here and copied that map from this one, or got it from someone else who did. From the paper it is written on, I would say that it is no more than a century old, and perhaps a good deal less, so it could date to his youth. He did wander a good bit, as a



young hobbit-lad. I wonder that he should have come to Mathom Holt."

"I wonder why?" I asked.

"It would surprise me some if he came here himself," said Arathorn. "My father never mentioned it, and these sites are watched by the Rangers, and always have been."

"Bandobras was a bit of a rascal and a sneak, in his youth," said Gandalf, "although never with ill will. But you may be correct, it could be that he received it from another."

"From a Ranger, then?" I asked, "if they are the only ones who come here now?"

Gandalf looked at Arathorn, but he said nothing, and Gandalf looked back to me with a slight smile and a shrug. "Now, who can say? No servant of the Enemy, that is sure, but little else. There are no ordinary folk who live here now, but not all folk are ordinary, and old Bandobras kept odd company at times."

"He was your friend, wasn't he?" I asked, but then realized just after I said it that the question did not sound right. Gandalf frowned but said nothing, and we all walked on. Soon, we came to another pair of great elm trees, but this time the stones standing between them were carved into statues, both much taller than hobbit or man. One of the figures held a lamp in its right hand, and with its other hand pointed down towards the space between them. The other statue held a great mace or scepter in its left hand,

and with its right also pointed down to the space between them.

That space was dark, and it seemed to be a descent into the earth, like the entrance to a tunnel. The area was overgrown with vines, and the base of the statues had been obscured with the accumulated leaves and dirt of many centuries. The features of the statues were blurred, as they had been there long enough even for rock to weather and erode. The area was very quiet, and I realized that all four of us were being as close to silent as we could. The place was old, very old, and built by a people who had long since departed, but it was as if we could still feel their presence. We stood and stared for a time, and then turned aside and continued on our way, to the south now. We walked for some time before we began speaking again.

There was a ruined bridge in the middle of the forest where it crossed a stream, and we were fortunate enough to find a large tree trunk fallen across the stream that we could use to keep our feet warm and dry.

"It is just as well we do not have to swim or wade across," said Gandalf, "and not only because it would be cold. I have heard that there may be trouble if you touch the waters of streams inside this forest."

"Not this one," said Arathorn, as he walked across the trunk first. "That's Old Elf-flood, further north, near Mathom Hord Breoth. It was called Sîr Gorlimbinnen by the elves who lived here."

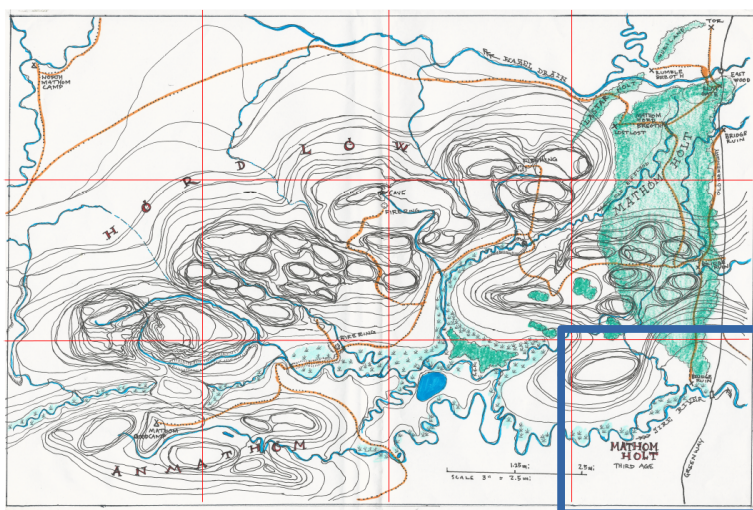
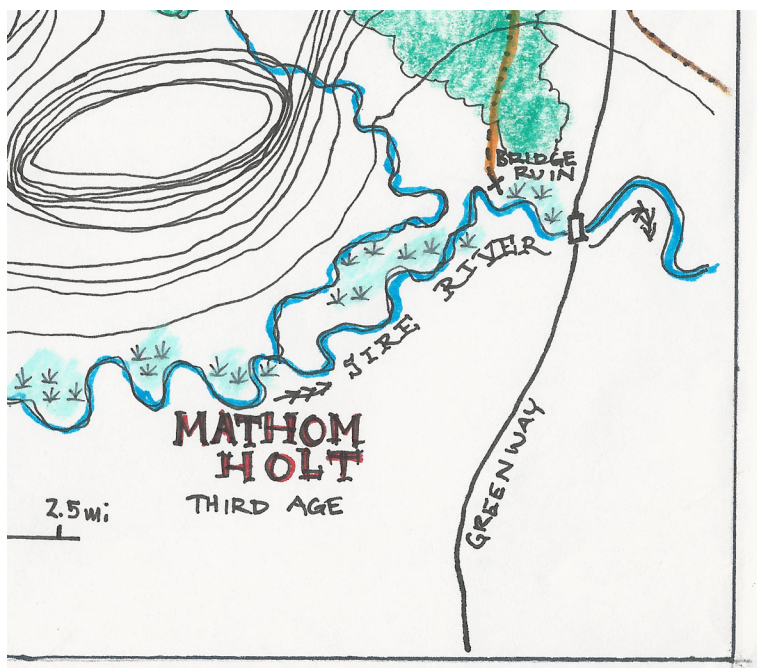
"Have you been in this forest often, Arathorn?" I asked.

"Not often," he said, and gave no more details. Arathorn is not a great one for keeping a conversation going.

We were just leaving the southern edge of the forest around dusk, when the orcs attacked. As usual, it was Hildigard who saw the danger first, or was it that she heard them or smelled them? Whatever the case, she stiffened and gave a low growl, and I knew her well enough by then that I ducked down immediately, and Arathorn and Gandalf did as well. The arrows that came shooting overhead a moment later might have been lodged in our ribcages otherwise.

I grabbed my sling and fit a stone in it, and poked my head up above the reeds that grew near the river, enough to see a target, an orc who was knocking another arrow to shoot at us. I cannot say if I hit my target or not, but I don't suppose it mattered much. With a Chieftain of the Rangers and a Wizard charging them, and the element of surprise lost, the orcs quickly decided this was not what they had in mind, and scattered and ran. Soon, I had no one left to sling at, and Arathorn and Gandalf were up near the ruined bridge where the path we had been on crossed the Sire river. As I came out of the tall reeds and approached them, with Hildigard beside me still keeping her ears up and sniffing the air suspiciously, I realized that they were talking to someone, in the rubble of the ruined bridge on the northern bank. As I got closer, I was surprised to see that it was a young Hobbit lass.

She was dressed in dark green and brown clothes, her hair was brown, and she had big brown eyes. I think she was a bit younger than I was.



"Hello there, miss," said Gandalf, "who might you be? The Greenway is not always a safe road for a young hobbit-lass to be traveling alone. I am called Gandalf."

"My name is Ricarda," she said, and she rubbed her wrists and ankles as if they hurt her. At her feet were cut pieces of rope, and Arathorn was just putting away his knife. I realized that she must have been a captive of the orcs we had just seen. Ricarda looked over at me, and her eyes widened a bit, as if she were surprised to see another hobbit.

"This is Gerontius Took, a hobbit of the Shire," said Gandalf. "You, I take it, are not. Are you from Bree, or somewhere further south?"

"Further south," said Ricarda, "near Tharbad."

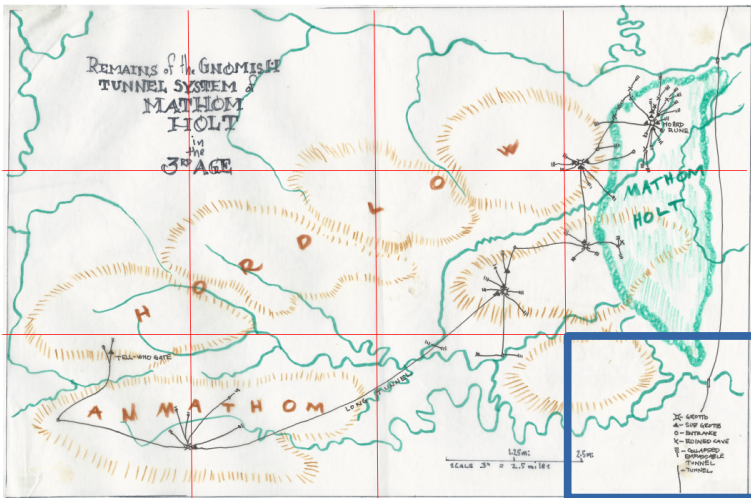
"We should pursue those orcs," said Arathorn, "or they will regroup and come back to attack us at their leisure, when we are sleeping or unprepared."

"You and I will," said Gandalf, "but we should not leave Ricarda here alone. Gerontius, you escort her back to the forest. No orc will dare to enter Mathom Holt, I deem, it is not a safe place for minions of the Enemy, and they will know it. We will come back when we have dealt with the orcs, and they are no longer a threat."

So, Ricarda and Hildigard and I turned and fairly sprinted back to the point where our path had left the forest. We did not stop until we had gotten out of sight of the open marshlands around the river, and safely into the dark shade under the rowans that grew near the edges of the



Belowground



forest. I paused, then, and for the first time realized that I might need to stay here in the forest for some time, until Gandalf and Arathorn got back, and I had no idea how long that would be. It was not something I had been preparing for, and now I started to think about how much food I had, and whether it was enough to feed Ricarda as well, and whether I knew enough about this forest to find anything to eat here. I looked over at Ricarda, and she seemed to be in need of a bit of a breather to collect her thoughts, so we sat down on the path for a bit and talked things over.

She told me that she had been traveling north, with a merchant Man named Tyne, and they had stopped at the Sire River because he had once found valuable things in it, washed down from some point upstream. He had the feeling that it had come from the small tributary that fed it, which came out of Mathom Holt.

"What kinds of valuable things?" I asked.

"He showed me some of them," said Ricarda, "and they looked elvish. Jewels, and coins. Small, but pretty, and they had writing on them which I could not understand. We looked for more, but didn't find any, and so we moved further and further upstream. Then, the orcs came on us by surprise, and the merchant galloped off on his horse, and they took me captive before I could run away or hide."

"That must have been terrifying," I said.

"It was, but I was surprised that they didn't just kill me," said Ricarda. "They tied me up and treated me pretty

rough for a bit, pinching and slapping and kicking, but then they all suddenly got quiet and stopped. I was lying on the ground, doubled up trying to protect myself, but I couldn't help but look up to see what had happened to make them stop."

"There was this...man, a Dunadan, I think, but he looked half-dead. His eyes were sunk in his eye sockets, and the skin of his face was stretched tight across his skull. His arms and legs were mostly covered by the clothes of a noble, like from the old kingdoms of Arnor, but you could see his wrists and hands and they were practically skeletal."

"Then, he said..." began Ricarda, but she stopped talking, and looked towards me with her eyes wide. I thought at first she was simply terrified at the memory, but that wasn't quite it, though she had clearly been through an awful time. She also looked like someone who wants to say something, but dares not, for some reason, and I felt bad that I could not help her.

"It's all right," I said, as reassuring as I could, "we don't have to talk about it now." Her eyes just bulged a bit wider, and she opened her mouth just a tiny bit as if she were choking, and I started to worry. But then, she closed her mouth and sighed a bit, her shoulders sagged, and she looked down at the ground. I thought she looked worried.

"You know," I said, "Gandalf and Arathorn said that the minions of the Enemy will not dare to enter this forest. It's protected still, by the spirits of the elves who once lived here. So there's nothing to worry about now. We can just wait here until they have dealt with the orcs and

come back for us, and then after that you can travel with us. Traveling with a Wizard and a Ranger is much safer than with just a merchant man. Plus, there's Hildigard, here, she's a great watchdog with keen eyes and ears."

I watched Ricarda to see if she looked reassured by this. Her expression was rather peculiar, I didn't know quite what to make of it. She looked like she was concentrating on something, but occasionally looked over at me, a bit wide-eyed, and then looked back again at the ground in front of her.

"I wonder," she said finally, in a voice that was a bit flat and emotionless, "if we should move further into the forest."

"Well," I said, "I see why you might think that, after what I just said. But I wonder if it might be easier for Gandalf and Arathorn to find us, if we stay here, not too far away from the edge of the forest."

"Too close," said Ricarda, and then she stood up, her motions oddly jerky and uncoordinated. "Let us walk to the very heart of the wood. Only there will we be safe."

"Hmmm..." I said skeptically.

"Will we be safe?" came a peculiar call. "Will we be safe?"

"What is that?" I asked, and Hildigard looked up and around. I saw that there was a small bird, a starling with speckled black feathers, in the tree looking down at us.

"It's Who!" shouted Ricarda excitedly. "Who, it's me, Ricarda! Do you remember me?"

"Do you remember?" said the bird, and it fluffed its feathers and looked down at us in a sidelong way. "Do you remember?"

"You know this bird?" I asked.

"I found it abandoned as a baby," said Ricarda, smiling now and relaxed as she looked up at it, "and I raised it. I wasn't sure what to name it, so I used to ask it, 'who are you, little bird? who?' Then it started saying 'Who', and that became it's name."

"That seems very confusing," I said. I might have said more, but suddenly Ricarda leaned down and grabbed a rock, and then straightened up again and threw it at the starling. I was very surprised, and to be honest Ricarda looked surprised as well, but then she frowned.

"Go away, impudent bird!" she said. "Trouble us no more!"

"Ricarda, it's just a bird," I said. "It probably just recognized you."

"Probably," said the starling, which had effortlessly dodged the rock by flying to another nearby branch. "Probably you. Recognized."

"It talks well," I said, "did you teach it?" But then, I realized that Ricarda had started walking north, deeper into the forest, with jerky movements at first but then

more naturally. I ran to catch up to her, and Hildigard came along as well.

"Did you?" asked the starling behind us. "Talks well? Did you?"

* * * * *

"Aunt Bella," came the voice of young Scilla Took at the door, "Aunt Bella, are you in there?"

"Hold on a moment, Scilla, I'll be right there," says Bella, and she grimaces as she looks Mira and you.

"I should probably help her out," says Bella, "there's some young Boffin or Hornblower or some such who's likely to visit, and Scilla seems to think that having this dress finished to wear for him is important."

"It's fine," says Mira, "I need to help out a bit in the kitchen actually. Donna, can you stay with Papa?"

"Actually I can," says Isengrim from the office just to the west of your father's chamber. "You three have been helping him out a lot, so I can take a turn for a spell."

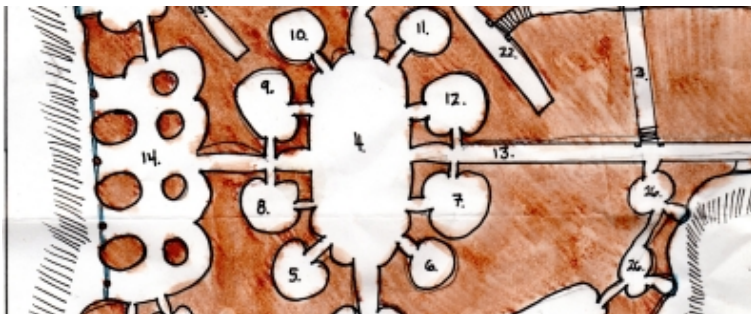
fresh flower into the snow,
every entrance to Great
lid is now open. The
Arthedain lockbox, which has
after the founding of the
picks up the lockbox, and
you look at each
I guess I'm happier to know
Arthedain lockbox, and the
lockbox's compass to keep an
squawking, from the kitchen.
thank-you," you say. It's
on the table in the middle
guess I thought it was your
lately. But not this roll,
But I don't know if even
something when he left. He
but then I thought you might
Quite the opposite,
he's gone into the woods
used to communicate with
Tassel begins tearing into
both stare at your
meal first," says your


just above this doorway, and
Smials is closed to him. It
sorcerer parried it with the
not been opened for
Shire. It might have
reaches in with trembling
other. "Bother," he says,
he's leaving." He looks up
Cardolan one as well. The
eye on where he goes. But
You and your father walk
not as helpful as you were
of the kitchen. "Hullo,
other daughter at first, the
I'm ready to eat the whole
our rolls would be enough to
staggered away like he was
want to give it back to him,
actually. But I would be
now," says the crow, and he
each other, through the
it. Your father pulls back
unexpected treasure, and
father. "First things

With your sisters both off on other errands, do you:

- 1) Look around the Old Shiremoot hall, where all the hobbits of the Shire would meet in the days of Old Buck, the first Thain? Page 19.
- 2) Investigate the four Farthing Halls, once the place where the hobbits of each corner of the Shire would meet privately when all were gathered together in Great Smials? Page 22
- 3) Pretend to leave, then circle back and tell Isengrim you can sit with your father, and see if you can talk to him without your sisters around to listen in or interrupt? Perhaps he will be more willing to talk to you if no one else is listening in. Page 26
- 4) Look at the "Sunset Gallery", where there are west-facing windows, to see the sun go down and look around your father's collection of curiosities? Page 30

- 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 ARMOURY
- 11. EAST FARTHING ARMOURY
- 12. EAST FARTHING HALL
- 13. PASSAGE TO KING'S SMIALS
- 14. "SUNSET" GALLERY



You head south, with a lantern in one hand and the Arthedain lockbox in the other, to the Old Shiremoot hall. This is one of the oldest parts of Great Smials, and is now more or less a mess. It is sometimes referred to simply as the Great Room now, since it has not been used for a "moot" or meeting of all the Shire hobbits, in centuries. Anything too big to be put elsewhere, but of too much interest to your papa to be discarded, ended up here.

Looking about, you see fragments of old statues, made in the days of the old kingdom of Arthedain. You see a long tree trunk, that somehow twisted into the shape of a spiral as it grew. You see the skeleton of a great cat of some sort, with long fangs, partially re-assembled on a wooden frame to support it. Your papa had a lot of projects, only some of which ever get finished, and rarely if ever abandoned enough to be thrown out.

When you were a child here, most of Great Smials was uninhabited, because of some manner of dispute within the Took family during your great grandfather's time, that

caused most of the Tooks to move out of Great Smials to nearby Tuckborough. As your many brothers came to have families of their own, they each took a portion of Great Smials for their wife and children, and it has filled up again. The result, is that a great deal of junk which could not be discarded, ended up in this room. It is sometimes difficult to see your way through it.

Looking about, you try to see if you can tell what he might have been working on most recently. There is a pile of papers, each with a picture of one of the many fruit trees that can be grown in the Shire, and notes on how each one is best cultivated. They are laid out on top of a large wooden crate, as if he were assembling a book of some sort. You notice that he has paid special attention to the many varieties of apples, plums, and cherries.

As you are looking through the papers, gazing at coloured portraits of leaf, blossom, and fruit, you hear a noise from another part of the room. You look over, quickly, but see nothing. There is no light, no candle or lamp, so it is unlikely to be another hobbit; perhaps it is a mouse.


Although...it could be Old Buck.

Bucca of the Marish, also called Old Buck, the first Thain of the Shire, had once lived in Old Smials. His sons lived here as well, eventually taking the family name Oldbuck, until they moved east across the Brandywine River, and changed their name to Brandybuck. The rumor was, that they did this to leave behind the ghost of Old Buck, who still roamed Old Smials. You have never seen him, although you have heard things in the dark, occasionally, that caused you to wonder. When something would go

missing, in Great Smials, some small or valuable object that was not in the place it was meant to be, Took's would sometimes say "Old Buck has it", to mean that it had disappeared but might someday appear again in some other spot. No one is quite certain whether they are joking when they say this.

There it is again. Off in the darkness, outside the reach of your little lantern, the sound of something moving. Not loud, but unmistakeable. It doesn't sound much like a mouse, now that you think about it, it sounds more like one of the larger wooden objects being bumped into and moved slightly.

Time is passing, and your sisters may be ready to read more in your papa's journal. You decide it is time to get out of this part of Old Smials, and hurry back to where other hobbits (living ones) are staying.

In the early days of the Shire, when Great Smials was just called The Smials, from time to time all of the Hobbits of the Shire would meet here. Later, when other villages had been founded, the Shire was divided into four "Farthings", named for the compass points. When it was time for a Shiremoot, a meeting of all the hobbits, they would gather together and discuss whatever crisis or issue required them to meet (or "moot").

But sometimes, each Farthing's hobbits needed to discuss the matter privately first, or while the main meeting was going on in the Old Shiremoot hall a few of one of a Farthing's most prominent representatives would retire to their designated room to discuss the matter on their own. These rooms have not been used for that purpose in centuries, as even the Old Shiremoot hall has been used for different purposes. But they are still called by their old names: "East Farthing Hall", "South Farthing Hall", and so forth.

Adjacent to each one was an armoury for each Farthing, which would theoretically hold armour and perhaps weaponry. This was used even less than the meeting rooms, and in any case were replaced long ago when the new Shiremoot Hall was made in the East side of Great Smials. The armouries now function as just extensions of each Farthing's old meeting hall in Old Smials. But what were either one actually used for in recent years, when even the remote chance of a Shiremoot would take place elsewhere? Essentially, they function as junk rooms.

You find that they are now used to hold that which has been stored here as a favor to some family of Hobbits who are not able to find room in their own smials or houses, but wish not to leave it outside or give it away. Your father, in particular, was sympathetic to anyone who had this particular vice, and was always willing to help out with a bit of extra storage space.

But what would be worth carrying to Great Smials, from one corner of the Shire or another, but not worth finding a place for in your own home? That which was peculiar, even unique, but not particularly useful. The Old Farthing Halls are a sort of oddball museum for the Shire, which no one but your papa ever perused.

Well, no one other than he and you, when you were a young hobbit-lass and still living here. You investigated every nook and cranny of Great Smials you could get into, back then. The contents of the Old Farthing Halls still has a lot of what they did back then, but in recent decades even more has been added.

Taxidermy of animals with peculiar colours or horn shapes, rocks with strange forms, fossils, inconveniently large books that are both old and useless (but, in theory, too valuable to throw away), bizarre shapes in glass from fires in one house or another, and on and on. You see a geode from the North Farthing the size of a hobbit. There is something that looks like a piece of wood, but it is made of stone, that is from the East Farthing. There is an elaborate costume, covered with small mirrors and crystals, on a stand in the South Farthing Hall. Then, as you are in the West Farthing Hall, you see something else that was not here before.

Amidst the same sort of natural and hobbit-made oddities that you saw in the other three halls, you see a skull that would nearly fill the room, were its several pieces put back together. You examine the enormous teeth, the giant jawbones, and the plates of bone the size of your torso that once fit together in the head of a...what? A dragon, perhaps?

How could a dragon skull have ended up in the West Farthing of the Shire? How did they get it from wherever it was found, to Great Smials, without it being seen? You are quite certain no such thing was here when you explored these rooms as a young hobbit-lass.


What was that noise?

You turn around, and as you point the beam of light from your lantern this way and that, you are suddenly aware of how little-used this part of Great Smials is. If you were to call out for help, there would be no one to hear you, most likely. Cautiously, you peek out the door, into the Old

Shiremoot Hall, where the sound came from. You see nothing moving.

Wait, there it was again! Is something moving around, in the dark?

You decide it is probably time for you to head back to your papa's chamber and see how he is doing, and if your sisters are back yet. You cast many glances back over your shoulder to left and right as you hurry back, but never see what it was that made the noises you heard.

You sit quietly in your chair, after telling Isengrim that he can go back to his work in the office. Your father sits up a bit, and looks over at you. He smiles, weakly, and you smile back. It is good to see him with his eyes open. When you showed up here not so many days ago, it was unclear that you would ever see him open his eyes again, since he seemed to be on death's door.

He looks around the room, with a bit of a confused expression on his face, and then looks over at you again. He gives the impression of feeling a bit helpless, desperate even.

"It's all right," you say, "you are just weak from being sick in bed for so long. Now that you're eating properly, your strength will return."

Of course, as soon as you say this, you realize that you don't really know it to be true. But you hope that it's true. Your papa does not seem convinced, but he says nothing.

Something about his eyes gives the impression that he is wanting you to do something, perhaps asking for help. What could he want?

"Would you like a drink, or something to eat?" you ask gently.

He shakes his head 'no', and then looks down at his hands, a bit sadly.

"Would you like to play a game?" you ask.

He says nothing, but looks up at you. You are not quite sure what his expression is trying to tell you.

"Does your voice hurt?" you ask, because he seems to have stopped talking. "Would you like something to write with?"

He nods.

You get him some paper and a pen and inkwell from his office nearby. He starts to write.

In the town of Michel Delving,
Came a hobbit who sold shelving,
And in every nook and cranny,
Nursemaid, beggar, lord and nanny,
Needed shelving from his stocks,
Owing to his grandiose talks,
Telling of his polished blocks.

Since he soon had sold so many,
People gave him every penny,

Even to the brink of madness,
And eventually sadness,
Kept on buying shelves to put on,

Heaps of books of times long bygone,
Ends and odds and stuff and so on.

Stop this business! cried the mayor,
Though he was the lone naysayer,
One or two shelves more is fine,
Perhaps three is still benign
Surely no more could be needed!

Mayor's talking went unheeded,
Even though it's truth conceded.

Be of good cheer, said the fellow,
Rouse your spirits, but stay mellow,
I see no need for such barking,
No one to your command's harking,
Get your shelves with custom marking,

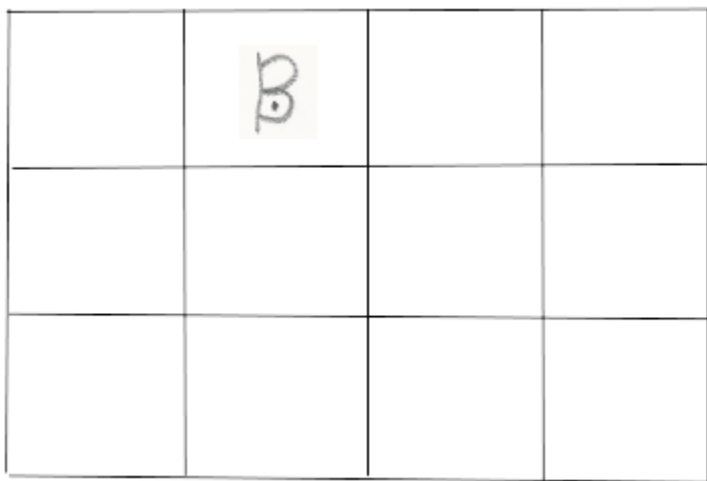
Fear of shelving is not needed,
Lots of warnings went unheeded,
Only when his sales exceeded,
What they could pay, said he, no more,
Each smial was from top to floor
Remarkably organized, but poor.

You smile a bit as you look down at his poem, and then
look over at your father's expression. You see that he, on
the other hand, looks very somber, perhaps even a bit
desperate. You look at each other for a few moments, in
silence.

"It's very well done, Papa," you say carefully, and take the paper from him and fold it up. "I will keep it to reread again later, all right?"

He nods vigorously, still looking at you intently.

Shortly after this, your sisters return.



At the right times of the year, as the sun sets in the west, it will sink down between two hills and its last rays will flood this gallery with rose and orange light. That time of year, is not now, however; during the winter the sun is too far south, and its last light is blocked by one of the hills to the west of Great Smials. No matter; the gallery is called the "Sunset Gallery", and it is where your father keeps a collection of curiosities.

There is a set of antlers here that is twisted and asymmetric, the left antler much larger than the right. There is a snake with two heads, stuffed and posed in a position where it is coiled and ready to strike (with both mouths open to show two sets of fangs ready to bite). There is a tree trunk that grew in a spiral, now hanging from the ceiling as a sort of mobile. There are fossilized shells, skulls, and leaves, some of them of strange shapes you have never seen in life. There is a beetle carapace as large as a small bird.

These curiosities are arranged for the most part on small shelves attached to the walls all around the gallery. Some, such as those made of crystal or glass, are arranged so that the evening light will fall on them to best affect; others are in darker corners of the chamber, to add to their ominous or unsettling appearance. You have seen your father, in his younger days, take great satisfaction from showing the curiosities to new visitors, often the young hobbits of the Shire. He had polished stories to introduce each one, and knew just what path to walk along to introduce them in the right order or from the right perspective.

Walking through it, you can almost hear his voice as he introduces each one. Then, you come to one you do not recognize, apparently a new addition. It is a long spidery creation of silver, many long strands of it connected together in a tangle that looks like part spiderweb, part tangled bush. You stare closer at it, wondering what it could be. You wonder if you should ask him when you get back.

With a shock of recognition, you realize what it is. This is the shape that is made when you pour molten silver into an ant mound, and it cools and solidifies in the shape of the ant colony's tunnels and chambers. You cannot imagine your father doing this intentionally; he must have found it somewhere. Perhaps a fire melted a pile of silver, and resulted in this oddity, a kind of inverse sculpture. What could have been the cause?

Unbidden, you get an image of a dragon. They sometimes breathe fire, and they often sit on mounds of treasure. Did your father find this in some dragon's lair? But what

manner of ant would make its mound inside a dragon's lair? There is clearly a story here that you don't know.

Come to think of it, you have been gone from your papa's chamber for long enough now, perhaps if you get back before your sisters are done in the kitchen you can ask him to explain. You turn, and walk with quickening pace back the way you came.