





# *Friends and Enemies, Lost and Found*

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# Chapter 1

Dearest friend,

Remember the Ranger Argonui? Gandalf has gone north to see

him. I hope to see Gandalf when he returns.

In a hole in the ground, there lived a family of hobbits, including a mother and father, three daughters, and seven sons. On the day our story begins, there also was in that "hole" (which was none other than Great Smials) a guest hobbit. He squirmed uncomfortably under the unfriendly stare of Adamanta Took, the mother.

Bella Took, the oldest daughter (now 21 years old), did not often have guests. Not because she didn't like them, generally, but for the most part because of her mother. Her mother was basically a good person, but she did want her daughters to be kept busy with work, and she kept a close eye on them. When her sons had friends come to visit, they would soon be running about outside, out of her sight. She did not let her daughters stray so far, so her daughters did not get friends visiting very often. Few other hobbits would put themselves under Adamanta Took's stern gaze for long. There was one hobbit, though, who occasionally did.

"Bungo Baggins sweats more than any other hobbit I have ever seen," said Mira in a whisper, and then giggled. She was talking to her older sister, Donna. Donna was 17 years old, and Mira was 13. They were in the root cellar, collecting vegetables to take back in to the kitchen where Bella and her mother were working. Winter was coming on, and all of the roots had been collected from the gardens already and placed in the cellar where they would remain cool but not frozen.

"He's sitting in the kitchen, and it gets kind of warm in there when the fires are lit," said Donna. "Plus he insists on wearing that waistcoat."

"Plus," said Mira, "Mama is glaring at him and he's trying not to notice. I think sitting under Mama's stare for that long would make me sweat, too. I'm surprised he's stayed so long."

"I think he really likes Bella," said Donna. "Mama puts her to work the moment he shows up to visit, so talking to her while she works is the only way he's going to get to talk to her. I think

Bungo is not so soft as people think. He's just nice. It's not the same thing."

"He may not be soft," said Mira, "but right now, he's melting."

They gathered their baskets of carrots, onions, and potatoes, and headed back up to the kitchen. Once there, they began cleaning and slicing them for the soup.

"How is little Rosa doing, Bungo?" asked Bella. Rosa Baggins was Bungo's younger cousin, and one of the only safe topics to discuss in front of her mother.

"Oh, she's just fine, just fine," said Bungo anxiously.

"Home helping her mother, probably," said Adamanta icily. "As a proper hobbit-lass should be. Probably not being distracted by strangers, either."

Just then, Gerontius (the father) came up the stairs from the level below.

"Who's a stranger?" he asked. "Hullo, it's Bungo Baggins! Good to see you again, lad. How's old Mungo doing? Haven't seen your father in ages."

"Oh, he's just grand, really!" said Bungo, relieved to have someone give him an excuse to ignore Adamanta's remarks. "He told me to send his regards, Master Took."

"Probably wishing he had a son at home to help him with his work," muttered Adamanta.

"Oh he's got plenty of other sons, I'm sure Mungo can spare one of them for a few days," said Gerontius lightly. Then, before Adamanta could object to the idea of Bungo staying for 'a few days', he looked back from Adamanta to his daughters in the other part of the kitchen. He raised his hands and his voice with excitement.

"Speaking of a break from work, let's all go outside to welcome another guest. I think I saw Gandalf coming this way!"

"Oh! It's bad to worse," muttered Adamanta, but her voice was lost in the chorus of excited shouting from her daughters. Even Bungo, not prone to shouting much, gave a little cheer. They all shuffled out to the seldom-used Great Door. No hobbit would come to see Gerontius from that direction, but then, Gandalf was not a hobbit visitor. Gandalf was a Wizard.

Standing just outside the large round door, they saw the figure of a rider in the distance to the south, coming up the hill towards them. The rider wore a grey cloak, and wore a broad brimmed hat with a tall point. He rode a white horse. At the sight of the Took family assembling near the Great Door to meet him, he gave a single wave with his right hand.

"Will Gandalf be going with us to Michel Delving?" asked Isengrim, the oldest son. The next day, he and the rest of the sons were due to leave with Gerontius to a Midwinter celebration,

this year to be held in the town of Michel Delving.

"That's still to be determined, Isengrim," said Gerontius, a little quietly. Donna noticed that he didn't say, 'I don't know'. So, it wasn't just that Gerontius didn't know, but perhaps that Gandalf had likely not decided yet. She wondered if Gandalf and her father needed to talk about something, some business they didn't want to decide by letter.

"Gerontius, your family of happy Took's is a pleasant end to a long journey," said Gandalf as he approached closer. "No snow yet, this winter, but the wind is cold enough to make one think it's coming soon."

"Well hand your horse over to my sons then, Gandalf, and come inside and warm yourself!" said Gerontius.

There followed a great deal of talk, laughter, telling of stories, and drinking and eating. Gandalf was an old friend of the Took family, but he was not seen very often. Every time he came to Great Smials, it was as if all the Took sons competed to tell him the most about what had happened in the months or years since they had seen him last. Gandalf listened as he ate, nodding and interrupting only occasionally with a question or comment.

Adamanta and her daughters were kept busy serving dinner for a while, but soon enough they were also able to sit and eat. Bella quietly fumed about the fact that all of her brothers were able to spend so much time talking to Gandalf, while she was kept busy bringing everyone their food and drink. However, there was one advantage. After all of the food was served, Adamanta stayed in the kitchen. She did not entirely approve of Gandalf, and didn't want to see all the rest of her family taking such delight in seeing him. While Adamanta was in the kitchen, Bella and Bungo Baggins were in the dining room with the rest of the people eating. That way, the two of them could talk quietly to each other without much notice from anyone else.

Mira, for her part, was in between Gandalf and her father for much of the dinner. She was too old, now, to sit on her father's lap (though he probably would have let her try it, because fathers often like to think of their daughters as younger than they really are). She was still young and small enough to squeeze between them, though. That way, she could hear every story that was told, at least until it got late. Eventually, though, Gandalf and Gerontius went off to speak in private about more important matters than the tales of her brothers.

When they did go off to speak of more important matters, of course, they made sure that neither Mira nor anyone else could follow them. Gerontius was Thain of the Shire, the hobbit most responsible for knowing about the world outside of the Shire's borders. Gandalf, for his part, was a Wizard, and while not many people seemed to know where Wizards came from or what they were up to, it was clear that they traveled a lot, and saw a great deal. When Gandalf and Gerontius needed to talk together, in private, they knew enough about the curiosity of young Took's to make sure no one followed them to the Thain's Study.

However, while they did know a lot about young Took's, at least one of those young Took's also knew a lot about them. Donna Took had made sure to slip away quietly during the after-meal chatter and find her hiding spot in the Thain's Study, well before Gandalf and Gerontius walked into it. Thus, while they looked behind them to make sure the hallway behind them was empty, they did not look before them to make sure that the furthest corner of the Took's library were empty. Donna sat quietly in the furthest nook of the Shire Records, a part of her father's library which was very seldom used. It was, however, within hearing range of her father's favorite chairs in the library. More importantly, by sitting on the floor behind a pile of books, she could peek through and see the entrance to her father's Vault.

Ever since her brother Hildifons had gone off, several years ago now, Donna had wondered what had become of the things he and she had both found, that her father had taken from a giant sometime in her father's youth. Great Smials is a large home, and it took a long time to search it all. Donna, however, was a curious and persistent hobbit-lass, and she had convinced herself that there was nowhere else it could be, except the vault in her father's library. There was another, larger vault in the east wing, but it now sat empty (and unlocked). Thus, this had to be her father's new hiding place. If Gandalf was here, she thought, there was a good chance he was going to open it.

She saw the flicker of lamplight as she heard her father and Gandalf walk into the next room. Gerontius sat down in his favorite reading chair, and indicated a much larger chair for Gandalf to use. The wizard sat, but did not relax as much as Gerontius. He remained sitting up straight, and leaned forward a bit on his staff, looking out at her father from under his bushy eyebrows.

"Gerontius, I wish my business took me here more often, but I must leave soon," said Gandalf. "I came here to talk to you in person, because I think it would be best if you came with me."

"Came with you?" asked Gerontius, sounding surprised. "To where? I don't go travelling outside the Shire so much anymore, Gandalf. Adamanta worries, and there's a lot to attend to here."

"I'm sure there is," said Gandalf, "and I'm sure Adamanta has reasons for her worries. But I am worried as well."

"Whatever for?"

"For you! You have something here, my dear hobbit, which I think you should be returning."

"My souvenirs?" asked Gerontius, sounding disappointed, but not surprised. "Is that old giant even still alive anymore? I'm not sure he even ever missed any of those things."

"I'm not talking about the giant's things," said Gandalf. "I'm talking about the Horn."

Donna knew immediately what Gandalf was referring to. The Horn, which she had managed

to briefly get her hands on the year before, had a disturbing magical power. If you put your ear to it and listened, you would hear the whisperings of what the person it was pointing at really wanted, even if it was something they would never have said out loud.

"Oh, that," said Gerontius, and he let out a tired sigh. "Yes, I suppose you're right. I never look at it anymore, anyway. I've been wondering what to do about it, since it seems to cause trouble; I think it was part of the reason Hildifons left. But I wasn't sure exactly what to do with it, and it seemed a shame to just destroy it."

"Yes, I quite agree on that," said Gandalf, "in any case things of that sort may cause trouble if they are destroyed."

Gerontius looked at Gandalf in confusion.

"How do you mean? How could it cause trouble if it were destroyed?"

"Never mind how," said Gandalf, "just believe me that it could. I am a Wizard, you know, it is my business to know about such things. But I think I know where it belongs, and I think we should take it there."

"The Giant's home?" asked Gerontius. "That's where I found it."

"That's where you found it, but that is not where it belongs," said Gandalf. "The giant you took it from, who probably died long ago by the way, took it from someone else, who probably took it from someone else before them. The place it actually belongs, is Fornost Erain."

"That ruined city?" asked Gerontius. "How do you know?"

"It's my business to know such things," said Gandalf a little sharply. "Also, I have found some descriptions of it in a catalog of the royal inventory of Arthedain. The last King of Arthedain had ordered such a horn from the dwarves in the Grey Mountains."

"How did it come to be in the giant's house, then?" asked Gerontius. Donna thought his voice sounded worried. "Did he go and plunder the King's Vault after the kingdom fell?"

"No, I doubt it," said Gandalf, in a more reassuring tone. "That giant rarely left the mountains, I think. The Horn never made it to Fornost Erain, anyway. It has an interesting history."

"What history?" asked Gerontius. Donna, who had been listening closely with her eyes closed, opened them and peeked between two stacks of books that covered her hiding place. Her father had sat up in his chair, while Gandalf was now leaning back in his, relaxed and clearly enjoying that he had his listener's full attention.

"It comes from a dragon's hoard," said Gandalf. "It was almost certainly from the hoard of Scatha, a dragon in the Grey Mountains. Scatha the dragon attacked a dwarven city in the

Grey Mountains, and the dwarves who lived there were either killed or fled. Not long after, the Witch-King of Angmar led an army to attack Arthedain, and the King was driven from Fornost Erain. The Witch-King was eventually defeated, but by then the kingdom of Arthedain was broken. Too many people had been killed in the war, or had fled when it was overrun and never came back. The Dunedain became Rangers, and the line of Kings became the Chieftains of the Rangers. Our friend the Ranger Arador is from that line."

There are a lot of names to remember in the world outside of the Shire, thought Donna. She couldn't keep up with it all.

"As for the dragon Scatha, she was eventually killed by a warrior Man named Fram. Scatha had taken most of her treasure from the dwarves, and after they heard that the dragon was dead, the surviving dwarves wanted their treasure back. Fram sent them a necklace made of dragon's teeth, instead, and a message that said 'Jewels such as these you will not match in your treasuries, for they are hard to come by.' From the treasure that Scatha had taken from the dwarves, he would not return anything."

"Proud words," said Gerontius. "This Fram fellow must have been brave, to kill a dragon, but maybe not very wise."

"No," said Gandalf, shaking his head slowly, "no, he was not wise. In any event, not when his pride was stirred. If the dwarves had been wiser, and Fram had been wiser, they might both have profited from their friendship. Fram's people could not make weapons or armor half so good as that which the dwarves made, and the dwarves could not keep a dragon such as Scatha from attacking them and stealing their treasure. If the dwarves had made weapons and armor for the Men, and employed them to defend them from dragons, they both could have been better off. But Fram and the dwarves quarrelled, instead of trading, and some say he was killed by them."

"Hmmm...well anyway, how did this Horn get in the giant's house?"

"It's hard to say for certain, but I think that it was taken by thieves from among Fram's people. There's a curious disease, called the dragon-sickness, that often comes to people who gain possession of a dragon-hoard. They become greedy, and quarrellsome, and fight amongst themselves, and often resort to theft, or worse. Some of the Men among Fram's people stole pieces of treasure from the dragon hoard, and left in the night. They were tracked, and their bodies were found a few days ride away. They had been attacked by goblins from the mountains, and all their treasure taken, along with their lives. So goblins from the Misty Mountains got the Horn, and that is the last we hear of it until it ended up in your giant's house, also in the Misty Mountains. My guess is that the goblins either sold it to him, or more likely attempted to sneak into his house to steal from him, and he caught them and took it. Either way, it has passed through many sets of hands to get here: Dwarves, Men, Goblins, Giant, and now Hobbit."

"My goodness," said Gerontius, "it seems like a lot of bad things happen to whoever has it. Is it

cursed?"

Gandalf frowned a bit in thought, and puffed on his pipe. "No, not exactly, but it is probably not wise to keep it," he said. "It is always dangerous to keep something which is not rightfully yours. I'm not saying you did anything wrong to take it from the giant, Gerontius, since he clearly did not have a right to have it and you had your reasons at the time. But it would be better to give it back to those who deserve it."

"Who would that be?" asked Gerontius.

"The heirs of the King of Arthedain, who paid the dwarves for the making of it in the first place," said Gandalf. "Their capital was at Fornost Erain, and your friend Argonui, Arador's father, is their current chieftain. He is at Fornost Erain now, actually, although the city is a ruin; he camps there for a time almost every winter."

"Whatever for?" asked Gerontius. "We hobbits call it Norbury, or sometimes Deadman's Dike. It doesn't sound like a fun place to visit."

"It is not, if you are not welcome there," said Gandalf, "but if you are there with Argonui, I think there is little to fear. You should go there, with me, Gerontius, and with the Horn. I think you should give it to Argonui. We should leave tomorrow."

Gerontius sat back in his chair again, thinking about what he had heard. Donna knew, before her father said anything, that he would agree. Gerontius respected Gandalf a great deal, and if he said something was a good idea, it usually was. Donna saw her father look over to his right, towards the library vault, and then he stood up and walked over to it.

"Wait," said Gandalf, "don't get it yet. The vault is probably the safest place for it. We'll get it tomorrow morning, just before we leave."

Gerontius turned backed towards Gandalf, shrugged, nodded agreement, and then they both walked off the way they came, leaving Donna alone in the dark again. She waited a few minutes, until she was certain they were not coming back, before she took out her small magical lamp, and made her way quietly out. She couldn't help looking toward the vault as she went out. She regretted the fact that she wouldn't, she thought, ever get to see the Horn again.

She had no idea how wrong she was about that.

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The next morning, after Gandalf and Gerontius had departed at the break of day, and all the family had said their goodbyes, the daughters returned to their chores. For Mira, this included taking vegetable scraps out to the compost pile. This morning, as with many others, she found her friend the crow sitting on a branch of a tree nearby.

"Hello, crow!" she called up to him with a smile. She set down the pot she was carrying, and fished out of it the vegetable scraps she thought he would be most interested in. The crow cawed appreciatively and flapped down to begin pecking at them.

"How are your nestmates?" asked the crow, in between pecks on an apple core.

"Oh, my brothers and sisters? They're all good. The brothers are all going to Michel Delving; that's where the big Midwinter Party is this year. They'll leave in about an hour. My papa was going to go with them, but he went north to Norbury with Gandalf instead."

"Do they get food, at this party?" asked the crow. Mira smiled. She knew he was just trying to make conversation, and food was his favorite topic.

"They do, they have a big feast. That's part of why they move it around, so nobody has to feed so many every year. This year the Bunce family is going to host, and they live in Michel Delving. It sounds fun, but mama wants us girls to stay home and help her here at Great Smials. How is the winter going for you? Did you find a warm place to stay last night?" asked Mira. She thought it would be uncomfortable to be outside at night instead of in her family's warm and comfortable smial.

"Warm enough. We were roosting over by Tuckborough. The hobbits all seem to go inside earlier during the winter, so we don't have to worry about the boys throwing rocks."

"I'm sorry the boys throw rocks at you. They shouldn't do that. Wouldn't it be warmer to be deep in the forest, where the wind is not as strong?"

"The hobbit boys aren't as bad as the owls. In Tuckborough, we can see in all directions pretty well, and there's a lot of us together so they can't sneak up on us. If you're in the deep forest, an owl can swoop up on you before you know it, and then you're worse than cold. You're an owl's breakfast."

"Ouch! It sounds like a scary life, being a crow."

"Not if you know what you're doing," said the crow, and he took more bites of the food scraps. "I was taught well by my parents, so I knew what to look out for. Owls and hobbit boys, especially. What do hobbits have to look out for?"

Mira, who had been putting straw on top of the compost pile, stopped to consider, frowning and leaning on her pitchfork for a moment.

"I'm not sure, really," she said. "We don't seem to have anybody trying to eat us, around here. I guess maybe there used to be, a long time ago, but we drove them out. Or maybe the Rangers did. I think maybe there are Men, sometimes, who try to come up this way and do bad things, but even they aren't really trying to have us for dinner. Trolls might, but the only



Troll I ever saw was Grendel, and he's dead now. I guess we owe the Rangers a lot, for that."

"Sounds like a nice setup," said the crow, as it finished picking at the food scraps on the ground. "See you later!" it cried, as it flew off.

"Goodbye, crow!" said Mira. She remembered, as she often did right after it had left, that she wanted someday to ask it if it had a name other than "crow". She thought it might, but then maybe it would be a name which only a crow could pronounce. Turning back towards Great Smials, she walked slowly up the hill, swinging the empty pail idly back and forth as she went.

What she did not see, after she and the crow had both left, was a peculiar kind of darkness creeping up from the forest. It came just to the edge of the woods, and sat there, under the branches of the trees, and waited, and watched. It was older than Hobbit-lasses, and older than crows, and older even than the trees it hid amongst. It was old, and patient, and quiet, but it was also angry. It had come at last to see Great Smials for itself, and it was waiting for the right moment to gain its revenge. It had waited many years to come here, and it would wait for the right moment to strike. It stayed there, at the edge of the forest, like a patch of shadow that would not give way to the lamplight. Eventually, the sun was high enough to shine straight down over the hillside and into the forest's edge. Then, it withdrew, but only for now. It would be back.



## Chapter 2

The next morning, Mira went outside to take vegetable scraps to the compost bin. She was hoping perhaps to see the crow again, but he was not there. She guessed that he had headed towards Michel Delving, to see what foodscraps might be available with such a big Hobbit feast happening. It was very quiet and still, and there was a light dusting of snow on the ground that had fallen the night before. She worked quickly to empty the pail and cover the pile with fresh straw, then turned to head back to return to Great Smials.

With a shock of fear and a tiny shriek, she dropped the pail and stepped back. Between her and Great Smials, the path was now blocked. It appeared to be trees, but there had been no trees there a minute before, nor had there ever been so long as she had been alive. They were covered with a sort of gloomy darkness, like a dark cloud that wrapped around them. She also felt a sudden wave of suffocating stillness, as the air stopped moving, and it became hard to breathe.

She backed up, wide-eyed, and looked for a way to get around them and back to the safety of Great Smials. With a shock of fear, she realized that the strange copse of trees was moving towards her. She turned and ran away, headed down the foot path that led away from Great Smials. When she came to the small stream that crossed the path, she tripped over a rock and fell, landing hard on her outstretched hands. She got up and began running again, with a quick glance back over her shoulder showing that the dark copse of trees was moving towards her, down the path, like a tidal wave of shadow. She heard the dim sounds of murmuring from it, and of crunching and breaking. She looked back ahead and kept running.

She continued sprinting downhill, to a point where the path came close to the forest. She felt another wave of fear grip her heart, as she saw another shadowy copse of trees begin to slowly move out of the forest, towards the path ahead of her. She ran faster, getting to the place where it turned left just ahead of them. She thought she saw a glimpse of dimly glowing eyes from inside the mass of trees, but didn't dare to look directly at it. The path turned away from them, and ran parallel to another little stream for a while. She sprinted hard, but her lungs were beginning to hurt and her legs were beginning to tire. She knew she could not sprint forever.

Up ahead and to her right the path split, with the left fork diving into the woods again. She saw a Man come out of the woods on that cart path, and she gave a tiny whimper of despair. He did not run, but walked calmly and purposefully up, then stopped and put his hands out in front of him, palms up.

"Get behind me," he said.

Mira didn't know what to do, so she ran up to the man and got behind him. She turned around, and saw that the shadowy copse of trees had stopped advancing. The man stepped backwards slowly, towards Mira, and still the trees stayed where they were.

"Stay behind me; I'll keep them away, but they'll attack if they can get to you," said the man. Mira did as he said, and they backed down the cartpath as it went into the woods. Then, he turned around to face her, and said one word.

"Run."

They ran. The cart path went towards Took Bank, a nearby hamlet, but they didn't take it the whole way. Mira found she could run faster than the man, but decided not to get too far in front of him, in case those strange moving, shadowy trees were coming from more than one direction. She wondered why he couldn't run as fast as she could, when she was a Hobbit, and not even a grown one. At one point he stopped entirely, and seemed to be listening. Then, he waved Mira after him, and plunged into the forest, off the path.

"Follow me," he said.

Mira hesitated. Where were they going? Was it safe to leave the path?

"Gandalf sent me to save your family," said the Man. "I got them out before the attack, but you were cut off, so I came to get you. We'll meet them further south. This way!"

With that, he turned and plunged into the woods, and Mira followed after him. They ran for several long minutes. Here the man seemed to be able to move more quickly than she. The forest was thinner, in the winter, with less undergrowth, but it was still hard to run through. Mira was no longer a little girl, but she was still small enough to have trouble getting over some of the larger trees that had fallen down. The man stopped to lend her a hand, and when she had run long enough, he told her they could slow to a walk for a while.

"They cannot move as quickly as we can," he said, "but they never tire, so we'd better keep walking for a while. We need to put a lot of distance between us and them, before we can stop to sleep."

Now that she had a moment to look around, she looked closer at the person she was walking with. She had assumed, because he was too tall to be a Hobbit, that he must have been a Man, but upon closer inspection she wasn't so sure. He was lean, with sharp chin and short dark brown hair on his jaw and the top of his head. His skin was tan, and covered with callouses, spots, and scars, as if he had lived a hard life outdoors. His eyes were brown, and slightly askew in a way that sometimes made it hard to tell what he was looking at. His movement

was calm but brisk, as if he never hesitated or was uncertain what to do. He was dressed in rough clothes of brown and dark green.

"You know Gandalf?" asked Mira.

"Yes," he said. "My name is Renshaw. Gandalf and I first met many years ago."

"Are you a Wizard?" asked Mira. She was thinking that Renshaw didn't seem to be a Man, exactly, but he didn't look like a Dunedain or Elf, either.

Renshaw smiled slightly, and shook his head. "The Wizards came from over the ocean, long ago. I was already here at that time. I was here before the Wizards, or Hobbits."

"Do you know Tom Bombadil?" asked Mira. He was the only other person she could think of that didn't seem to fit into the list she knew of the different kinds of People.

Renshaw turned then to look at Mira, one eyebrow arched a bit, as if slightly surprised. He did not answer right away.

"I do," he said, "and if you're wondering if I'm like him, you're a wiser Hobbit-lass than your youth would suggest. But I cannot claim to be as old as he. Tom Bombadil was here before any of us."

They continued walking through the forest for a while, until Mira thought of another question.

"Where did you say my family was?" she asked.

"We are going to meet them," said Renshaw. "I barely arrived in time to get them out of Great Smials before the shadow trees you saw, came to get them. Your family are circling around, now, and we will meet them further south. The shadow trees are following us, not them, so they should be safe until we meet."

"What about Bungo Baggins?" asked Mira.

"Who?" asked Renshaw.

"Bungo Baggins. Another Hobbit who was at Great Smials, visiting."

Renshaw shook his head. "He must have left. I didn't see anyone like that. But then, I don't know everyone in the Took family. Perhaps he left before I arrived. In any case, we got everyone out of Great Smials, and they said you were the only one left for me to get. But we will have to go by a different route, to avoid running into those shadow trees again."

Mira walked on with Renshaw for a while in silence then. At one point she glanced backwards, and saw her and Renshaw's tracks in the thin layer of snow. They led back to where they had come from, but not far behind they were out of sight, blocked from view by the forest undergrowth. She had a momentary urge to sprint backwards, following those tracks back to Great Smials. But then, she thought of the shadow trees between her and there, and she turned and kept walking by Renshaw's side.

## Chapter 3

*How is Tharbad?*

*It has been so many years since I saw it, but I still remember my first glimpse.*

They walked on the rest of the day, staying in the forest. When they came to camp, Renshaw gathered only dead wood from the forest floor to make a little fire; he cut no living wood. Mira had on only a light jacket, and the winter night was cold (even in the Shire, which was having a mild winter up to then). She huddled close to the fire, and warmed her hands and toes by it. Renshaw took a small blanket from his pack and gave it to her to help warm herself. She looked up and around, and was uncomfortable seeing all the shadows from the fire that danced amongst the trees. Renshaw seemed to notice her discomfort.

"Don't be afraid," he said, "I know this forest well. It is not the one which once stood here, but it is a fair enough forest. Many animals live within it, all their lives. This is home to them, their entire world. Squirrels, deer, foxes, rabbits. There are also some birds which spend almost their whole life here. It is a good place to be."

"Oh, I believe you!" said Mira, although she was thinking that many of those animals got eaten in this forest as well, but it didn't seem polite to say so. Renshaw seemed very fond of the forest. "Wait, this is not the forest that used to be here? What do you mean?"

"These trees are much younger; none of them are more than a few hundred years old. This entire area was once cleared away by the Dunedain, in their greed for lumber. Then the Dunedain declined in numbers, and they were too few to keep everywhere cleared away. Eventually they gave this land to the Hobbits, because there were too few Dunedain to keep it settled. The Hobbits cleared away some of it to be the Shire, but some of it they did not settle either, since there were not many Hobbits at first. So, the forest grew back. But it is not the same forest as before."

"In that forest, there were trees older than the entire Shire is now. Some of those trees were so grand they contained whole worlds. Animals would live in them, and other plants would live on them, all their lives. The canopy was so thick, the sun never touched the floor in some places. It was like living inside a sort of enchanted palace, cool and calm."

Then Renshaw's head drooped a bit, and Mira could not see his expression very well. His eyes were still barely open, but his eyelids were drooping, as if he were sleepy, or thinking about something far away. Then, she heard him begin to sing, in a low rumbling voice, very slowly and sad.

"Once throughout this wild land,  
towering trees did silent stand,  
beneath their boughs was moss and fern,  
none would dare their boughs to burn,  
squirrel, deer, and rabbit played,  
on leafy floor or forest glade,  
trees through untold years had grown,  
never need or fear had known,  
growing grand since days of yore,  
now those trees stand here no more,  
felled by heartless Dunadan,  
greedy Dwarf or heedless Man,  
trees that once would overwhelm,  
ash and aspen, oak and elm,  
stand no more where they once stood,  
mourn that murdered ancient wood,  
tall and mighty they stood then,  
field where forest once had been,  
turned to bridge or house's walls,  
no more forest songbird's calls,  
silenced by the axe's blade,  
forest's chorus now unmade,  
timeless shadows cleared away,  
forest's woes no man would stay,  
but in the nightly wind you hear,  
ghostly whispers give men fear,  
murderers' axes will be stilled,  
vows of vengeance all fulfilled."

Renshaw chanted the last few lines in an even softer voice, slowly, and it sent a bit of a shiver down Mira's spine. It made the forest seem like an angry, resentful place, and she wanted to do something to cheer up Renshaw, or perhaps the forest itself. So, since it was her way, she thought a little while (Renshaw was sitting in brooding silence), and then lifted up her voice in a song of her own, quicker paced than Renshaw's.

"I like walking on a forest trail,  
every morning without fail,  
don't like people being mean to trees,  
tell them act more nicely, please,  
like hearing songbirds sing their song,



sing back to them all day long,  
I'm sorry forest, but let us make amends,  
I'm sorry forest, but we can still be friends,

like seeing rabbits and badgers there,  
killing all trees is just not fair,  
like seeing squirrels jumping branch to bough,  
like being in this forest right now,  
Hobbits don't like being mean,  
plant more trees than you've ever seen,  
I'm sorry forest, but let us make amends,  
I'm sorry forest, but we can still be friends,

we plant trees that grow us fruit,  
take care of them branch to root,  
cover them up when there is frost,  
keep them growing at any cost,  
give them water when there is drought,  
we and trees help each other out,  
I'm sorry forest, but let us make amends,  
I'm sorry forest, but we can still be friends!"

She smiled over at Renshaw, a little desperately, and was dismayed to see him frowning.

"Fruit trees in your orchards," he said evenly, "are not a forest, Mira. They are more like slaves."

Mira was surprised at this. She had never thought of the fruit trees in her family's orchards as being like slaves. The hobbits were the ones doing the planting, pruning, and watering for the trees. She didn't say anything, though, because she was not sure where her voice had gone to, and was then relieved to see him give the barest of grins.

"I liked the rest of the song, though. You are different, Mira," he said in a queer voice, "I wish there had been more like you back then."

Mira almost asked 'back when?', but some instinct caused her to choke off that question, and try to move on to another topic. She pursed her lips and looked around in the dark nervously, and tried to think of something to say.

"It's good fruit, too," came the crow's voice. "I've had plenty of it!"

"Crow!" cried Mira in relief and surprise. She looked up to see him perched on a nearby branch, looking down at them, the firelight reflecting off his shiny black feathers and tiny black eyes.

"Cawwww! You forgot to mention the pile where you put all the food bits. That's the best part." He rubbed his beak briefly on the branch he stood on, then looked around him in all directions. Mira remembered he usually liked to sleep in the company of many other crows, to help keep a lookout for owls or Hobbit boys.

"Oh, crow! This is Renshaw. Renshaw, are there any owls nearby? There aren't, are there?"

Renshaw looked up at Mira and gave a full smile, this time, but with his eyes narrowed in a slightly surprised look, as if he hadn't expected Mira to know about crows and what they might be afraid of.

"In this forest, there are some, but they will not come here if we do not wish them to. Is this a friend of yours?"

"Oh yes!" said Mira. "This crow helped to rescue me from a tower, by taking a message to my family."

"I see," said Renshaw, still smiling, and then looking very closely at the crow. "You are an unusual crow, to be sure. Well, we wouldn't want you two to be separated, now that you have gone so far together. I will make sure no owls come near our campfire."

"Uh, that's all right, really. I was just checking if she was lost, she's normally not out this way at night. But you don't seem lost."

"No, I'm just going south to meet up with my family. Renshaw is taking me there. We were attacked by these shadowy trees that moved."

"Cawww!! I thought you said nobody attacked Hobbits anymore," said the crow.

"I haven't seen or heard of these kind of trees before," said Mira. "Although they sound kind of like the trees from the Old Forest, near Buckland, but that's too far away. I don't know where they came from."

"They are not from the Old Forest," said Renshaw, "though they are somewhat like."

"Cawww!! I'd better go then," said the crow, "if you're not lost."

"You should stay here with us tonight, I think," said Renshaw. "There are owls in this forest, and once you leave this campsite I cannot help you. It would be dangerous to fly alone, at night."

"I'll be all right," said the crow, looking over at Renshaw. He looked back at Mira, and cawwed again. "Say hello to your nestmates and your hen for me!"

With that, the crow flew off, into the night. Mira wondered if he could avoid the owls on his way out; she would be very sad if he got eaten by an owl.

Renshaw stoked up the fire, and gathered a pile of dry leaves for Mira to sleep on, so the cold ground wouldn't be quite such a problem. Mira was worried about bugs, but one good thing about the cold was that it had solved that problem for the most part. Mira curled up in a ball, and closed her eyes, listening to the soft crackling noise of the fire. She imagined the crow, flying through the dark night, looking over its feathery shoulder for owls, and thought how sweet it was of the crow to come check on her. He needn't have bothered, she thought, I'm perfectly safe here with Renshaw, he seems to be quite at home in the forest.

The next several days, they traveled mostly through the forest, only crossing open ground in the early morning or dusk. Renshaw said that this way they had better protection from unfriendly eyes.

"Spies can be anywhere," he said. "Even in the Shire that you feel so safe in."

That sounded awfully suspicious, to Mira, to believe that there were spies in the Shire. But then, the shadowy tree creatures who had come after her, were found right outside her home. She didn't especially like the thought of staying in the forest, since it was hard to tell if a tree was the normal kind, which would give you shade and not hurt you, or the odd kind that were chasing them. But then, Renshaw seemed to know about everything in the forest and what it was doing, so it made sense to her that he wanted to stay there as much as possible. In any case, he seemed quite determined.

"In any case," he said, "roads are not always good things. They bring evil with them. Roads bring trouble, from anywhere in the world, right to your doorstep. Roads are not always to be trusted. The forest is more trustworthy than any road."

They came eventually, though, to a place called Sarn Ford, which they had to get to by a road. Sarn Ford was where they needed to cross a large river, the Baranduin. It was a rocky ford, meaning that you would still get your feet wet (and maybe your ankles and knees, if you were a Hobbit), but it was better and probably safer than trying to swim across anywhere else. Renshaw said that there were Rangers who watched the ford, to keep out goblins or evil Men from the south.

"Should we warn them about the shadow trees?" asked Mira.

"Those will not come here to cross the river," said Renshaw. "They did not come here to get into the Shire in the first place, either, or the Rangers would have raised the alarm."

When they came to the ford, a Ranger came up to them. He was a tall, dark-haired man, with a close-cropped beard, dressed in rough clothes in dark shades of green and brown. He held up a gloved hand, to indicate that they needed to stop.

"Leaving the Shire?" he asked, looking at Renshaw rather than Mira.

"Yes," said Renshaw.

"Is everything all right, Miss?" he asked, looking down at Mira.

"Yes," said Mira. "Renshaw is taking me to meet my family."

The Ranger looked back up at Renshaw, who nodded but said nothing. The Ranger looked like he was thinking of asking another question, but then did not. He was there to stop danger getting into the Shire, after all, not to keep people getting out. Renshaw took Mira and placed her on his shoulders, so that she would not freeze her feet in the almost icy water.

"What about your feet?" she asked. He had on only thin-soled moccasins. "Won't you be cold?"

"I can take the cold much better than Hobbits," said Renshaw. "Especially young hobbit lasses. Also, you are not so heavy for me to carry, but it would not work well the other way."

"No, I don't think I could carry you across," said Mira with a laugh. "But I hope you will not get sick from splashing through the water in winter. Even if the day is fine, it is still cold."

"I will build us a fire tonight, and we will be warm enough," said Renshaw.

He did that, but Mira thought later that something had changed with Renshaw after they crossed the river. He, too, became cold, and not just in the ordinary sense of the word. He became cold towards Mira, less friendly and less helpful. Mira wondered at first what she had done to make him angry, but could think of nothing. With each day that passed, he spoke to her less, and her anxiety became greater. She began to wonder why they had left the Shire. Couldn't her family have just met her at Sarn Ford? Or maybe just somewhere else in the Shire, away from those shadowy tree creatures? She wanted to ask Renshaw these questions, hoping that he had a good reason to tell her, that would cause her to stop worrying. But she said nothing, because she was also afraid that perhaps he did not have any answer.

The day after they crossed Sarn Ford, they came to the remains of a great road that ran from north to south. They took it south. Mira wondered why they were taking this road, when Renshaw had wanted to keep to forests before, but she said nothing. Perhaps he thought it was all right to take this road, because it was so overgrown in parts that it was almost not a road anymore. Renshaw said that it was called the "Greenway".

A week after they had started travelling south on the Greenway, late in the day, they came over a small hill and looking down, saw a city of Men on the banks of a large river below. Mira had never seen a city of Men before. It was large, and smoke came from hundreds or maybe thousands of chimneys. Their buildings were all above-ground, and there was a wall

around it, that made it look almost like a fortress. Hobbits made their homes underground, when they wanted protection; apparently Men instead made big walls.

The sun was low on the horizon now, and it cast a pink and orange light over the west side of every building, with the east side covered in shadow. A few lamplights were twinkling in the dark there, and she could imagine sitting around a hearth and eating well. They had only been eating roots and leaves since she had left with Renshaw, and it kept her going but it was not satisfying, not the sort of meal she was accustomed to. She imagined that she could smell bread and pies and hearty stews coming from the city, although she knew it was too far away for her to really be smelling what they were having for dinner.

"We will camp this way," said Renshaw, and abruptly led her off the path, and into the brush on one side. She took a last, longing look at the city below in the distance, and followed Renshaw into the dark.

## Chapter 4

"Where is Mira?"

Donna looked up from where she was cleaning the unending flow of dirty dishes, and frowned slightly at her mother's question.

"Um, I'm not sure Mama, should I go look for her?"

"Yes, get her back in here to help. We have a lot of cleaning to do." Adamanta didn't look up from where she was mopping the kitchen floor. Donna put down the plate and brush, dried her hands quickly on the towel, and walked downstairs to the cellars, then out the cellar door to where Mira would have gone to empty the compost pot. Donna had noticed before that Mira sometimes took a long time to do that, for some reason, but it had been even longer than usual.

"Mira?" she called. Her own voice sounded small and weak to her, in the cold air. She arrived at the compost bin, and stared carefully at the tracks in the dusting of snow there.

She frowned, not quite sure what to think of what she was seeing. Then she walked slowly west, towards the woods, never taking her eyes off of what she was certain were Mira's footsteps. When she got close to the forest, she paused, and looked into the darkness under the trees.

"Mira?" she called again.

Back in the Great Kitchen, Bungo was helping Bella with the cleaning of the stairs. Bungo would sweep up the dust and dirt from each step before Bella would scrub it with water, and he would periodically fetch her a fresh bucket of water from the cistern. Adamanta did not particularly like that Bella was getting help from her guest in cleaning the stairs, but then she couldn't exactly figure out a good reason for her to object to it. It put them close enough together to talk to each other, and far enough from Adamanta and everyone else to keep them from being overheard. Periodically, the sound of Bella giggling would mix with Bungo's light chuckle, and Adamanta would poke her head in at the top of the stairs to see what was going on, and usually to frown at it.

When Donna came in and appeared at the bottom of the stairs, though, Adamanta forgot whatever cutting remark she was going to make. All three of the Hobbits on the stairs looked down at Donna, whose face showed plainly that she was worried.

"I...I don't see her. But I saw her tracks. She...she went into the woods, with someone. Somebody else, bigger, maybe a Man."

"Oh no," said Bella in a low, worried voice.

"Oh dear," said Bungo at the same time, in a tone just as concerned.

No one heard either of them, however, as the sound of their voices was drowned out by the shriek from Adamanta at the top of the stairs. She stormed down, eyes wide and teeth bared in anger. The other three Hobbits all followed her, almost as alarmed by Adamanta's reaction as by Donna's news, and the four of them went back outside to look at the tracks in the snow that showed what had happened.

Little Mira's footsteps were plain to see, and also the footsteps of someone bigger. As Donna had said, it looked large enough to be a Man. But what was harder to make sense of were the other tracks, crossing over and partly obscuring Mira's and the other person's.

"What kind of tracks are those?" asked Bungo, saying out loud the question they were all thinking.

"It looks as if someone dragged a few dozen heavy branches through the snow," said Bella. "But why would they do that? And why would Mira run that way instead of towards Great Smials?"

"She was cut off," said Adamanta. "Whatever those tracks are, they came from the woods and circled around between her and Great Smials. She was driven into the woods. Probably too frightened to scream, even. Oh, Mira," her voice trailed off, and she covered her face with her hands.

"Well let's go get her, then," said Bella.

"No, we cannot fight one of the Big Folk, not if they're expecting trouble. We're also too far behind to catch up, she's been gone for a while now. We need Rangers," said Adamanta, shaking her head and gathering herself together. "We will go to Bree and find a Ranger, and they can pick up the trail. In the meantime, Baggins, you will keep on her trail."

"Me?" asked Bungo with wide eyes, surprised.

"Yes, you," said Adamanta. "Someone needs to go after her directly, and I won't take another of my girls into danger, or leave them. I will take them with me to Bree, and you will go after Mira. Her track is plain enough in the snow, anyway. I'm not expecting you to rescue her, just keep on her trail."

Bungo stood for a moment, mouth agape, and looked like he might have been about to shake his head, and explain that he was a Baggins and not an adventurer, and surely could not do such a thing. But then, he looked over at Bella, who was standing next to Adamanta and looking at him wide-eyed, and he closed his mouth and grimaced.

"All right," he said with a nod, "I'll do it."

Quickly they returned to Great Smials, to put on warmer clothes, grab a bit of food to bring with them, and to lock it up.

"Bella," said Adamanta, "go grab some clothes for yourself and Donna. I'll get some quick food together for us to take on the road. Donna, go into your father's armoury, and find a rucksack there hanging on a hook. It's already packed. Here's the key to the armoury. Go on now, and be quick about it."

Donna nodded, and without further comment hurried downstairs. She had rarely seen into the armoury, which was normally kept locked. The one time she had gotten a look into it, a few months previously, she had mostly just been looking to see if there had been any sign of the Horn or her father's other souvenirs from the giant's home, and hadn't had time to do anything else. She remembered seeing the pack and looking in it hurriedly, but hadn't paid much thought to what she found there since it wasn't what she was seeking at the time. As she hurried downstairs and through her father's library, she wondered why he would have a fully packed rucksack in his armoury.

She put the heavy, black iron key her mother had given her into the hole in the round door, and turned it. She could feel the tumblers shift reluctantly, as if the door were not often opened. Inside, she saw dozens of different items on the walls, most of them bows, quivers of arrows, or small helmets. In theory, this room was for storing weaponry which the Thain of the Shire could distribute to other hobbits in the case of invasion.

She set her candle down in the middle of the floor and took the rucksack down from its hook on the wall. She set it on the floor where there was enough light, and knelt down next to it. Quickly, she opened it up and looked at what was inside, making sure she could remember where everything was so that she could put it back.

She found a ring of other keys, a bedroll, camping supplies for cooking and making a fire, a small hatchet, and a number of other tools she didn't recognize. She also found a leather tube, about as large around as her forearm. She untied the lace that held the cap on, and pulled out the rolled up papers inside. She found maps, one after another. Some referenced places like Bree that she had at least heard of. Others were of places she had never heard, like a city named Tharbad that was by a river, another named Carn Dum that was a fortress on the edge of a mountain range, and another named Belegost that seemed to be partly, underground. These maps were covered with notes, and it occurred to Donna to wonder if this meant her father had actually been to all of these places.

Not wanting her mother to realize she had taken the time to look through the pack, she hurriedly put everything back where it had been, and slung the rucksack onto her back. She picked up the candle and left the room, using the key her mother had given her to lock the Armoury behind her. She went upstairs and handed the pack to her mother, who gave her a sack of food and clothes that she and Bella had gathered in the meantime.



It occurred to Donna, then, that Great Smials would be empty, without a single Hobbit in it. How long had it been, since that was true? She couldn't ever remember it. Most of the doors were bolted from the inside, and then her mother used a large and very ornate key to lock the Old Smials Front door. The King's Smials Great Door, the other of the two oldest doors to Great Smials, was already locked; it was used even less than the Old Smials Front door.

Then, they turned, and made ready to go. Donna saw Adamanta looked at Bungo Baggins, her mother's eyes narrowed just slightly, and her mouth a straight line. Then she saw Bungo, eyes widening a bit and eyebrows arched just slightly, looked over at Bella. Bella looked back at Bungo, with an expression that Donna thought was equal parts desperate and encouraging.

With that, Bungo Baggins turned, and went off in the direction of where they had last seen Mira's tracks in the snow. Donna wondered briefly why he was taking a hooded travel cloak of Mira's with him; it wasn't big enough for him, and he wasn't wearing it anyway, just carrying it with him in a cloth sack.

Unknown to Donna, or Bella, or Adamanta, the apparently unadventurous and unsurprising mind of Bungo Baggins had come up with a plan. He followed Mira's tracks (and Renshaw's, though he didn't know who or what those tracks were), until he had gone right through the woods, headed south and east across the Shire. Then, he turned aside from them, for a little while. He went north instead, to his home town of Hobbiton, not far away, and he knocked at the door of a friend he knew there.

"Well hullo, Master Baggins!" came the voice of an older Hobbit after he opened the door. The Hobbit was dressed in the plain and comfortable (but always soil-stained) clothes of a gardener.

"Hullo, Holman," said Bungo, smiling politely but also looking somewhat embarrassed. "Look, I hate to bother you, but I was wondering if I could ask rather a favor of you."

"Why sure, Master Baggins, anything I could do to help," said Holman (known as "the greenhanded" for his skill at gardening), although his expression did show a bit of surprise. Bungo Baggins did not often ask anyone for anything; it was not the Baggins way.

"Well, I hate to impose, and if you cannot then certainly it is no problem, but it's just, I was wondering if I could borrow Snuffler for a few days? I could pay you, of course."

"My bloodhound? Oh, sure, no need to pay, just take care of him. How long do you think it would be? Have you lost some livestock?"

"Not exactly, but it's rather urgent and I don't know exactly how much time it would take. So, if you're able to part with him for a few days, I promise to take good care of him and return him just as you give him to me. I'd be ever so thankful."

Holman looked as if he had a question to ask, but then paused, and shook his head ever so slightly, as if he had changed his mind. He knew Bungo was not telling him all the details, but decided not to ask.

"Sure, Master Baggins, you can borrow him for a while, I know you'll take care of him."

A few minutes later, Bungo had left with Snuffler, who was a medium to small dog with wiry hair, black on most of his body and head but white on his shoulders, chest and snout. Bungo had given him a few treats and introduced himself before they left, so Snuffler was happy to walk along with him. Once they got to the place where Bungo had last seen Mira's tracks in the snow, he took the travel cloak of Mira's out of the sack at his side, and let Snuffler smell it. The dog sniffed it thoroughly, wagging its tail with excitement, and then after a minute it began sniffing around in the snow. It didn't take long for it to find Mira's trail, and it let out a loud howl and began running.

"Hullo there, Snuffler, wait for me!" said Bungo with a bit of a gasp, and he struggled to hold onto Snuffler's leash and keep up with the now eagerly-running dog.



Meanwhile, Adamanta, Bella, and Donna were walking as quickly as they could towards Bree. The road took them north, and by nightfall they had reached the small river that ran through

the Shire, which they called simply The Water. The second day they stayed in the town of Frogmorton, and the third day they stayed at a town called Budgeford. The next day, they made it as far as the Brandywine Bridge, staying there for the night. There were no hostels or other places to stay there, so they stayed in an empty gatehouse building by the bridge. Once upon a time it might have been used by guards, but now it was empty except for the occasional travellers like themselves. They slept in sleeping bags, Bella and Donna together in one for warmth, and Adamanta in the other. They made a fire in the morning to heat their tea, and warm their stiff legs enough to walk again.

The fifth day they were even further from civilization, and had to camp at the edge of the Old Forest, near the road. Bella and Donna had camped outside of the Shire before, but they had been with Gandalf then, and sometimes also with their father or Arador, a Ranger who knew how to survive in the wild. They didn't know if their mother, who rarely left Great Smials, would be able to keep them safe outside of the Shire.

To their surprise, she knew how to camouflage their campsite with brush and dead leaves, so that they could all sleep together inside a small tent, close enough together to keep warm, but their tent could not be seen from the road. None of them needed to say that they obviously could not hide in the Old Forest. It was one of the last pieces left of a great forest that once stretched overall all the lands that now made up the Shire, and much else besides. The trees of the Old Forest were not friendly to any Hobbit, Man, Dwarf, or anything else that walked on two legs and chopped down trees for wood.

In the middle of the night, Donna lay in her sleeping bag, and had trouble getting to sleep. She thought she heard rustling, and holding her breath, she peeked out of the tent. There was a bit of moonlight, but not enough to see more than shadows and the indistinct shapes of trees and the road.

"What is it?" asked Adamanta, her voice a low hiss.

"I thought I heard rustling," Donna whispered.

Adamanta sat up quickly, and listened intently for a few moments. Then, she leaned over Donna and closed the tent flap again.

"It is nothing to worry about," she whispered softly. "They will not cross the Road to our side."

Donna lay back down again, and closed her eyes and tried to sleep. It was some time before she could stop thinking about what her mother had said. Not "it", but "they". She also could not imagine how her mother could know anything about whatever it was. Donna had always seen her mother as an absolute queen within Great Smials, but rarely if ever willing to leave it.



She could not imagine her having camped so far from home before. But then, how did she know the way? Perhaps she was using the map in her father's pack?

In the morning, Donna could see no tracks. They started a small kindling fire to help warm up, and then were on their way again. They stayed near the road again on the sixth night, and then late on the seventh day they walked, footsore and tired, into the town of Bree.

Like nearly any visitor to Bree, which was a town where Man and Hobbit lived side by side, they headed to the inn called the Prancing Pony. It had rooms sized for either Hobbits or Men, and it also had dwarves and Rangers staying there from time to time. It was in hope of finding one that they had come, and Adamanta went straight to the innkeeper, Barnabus Butterbur, to ask if he knew of any in town just then.

"What, Rangers? Oh, well, we've been thick with them all week," said Barnabus. "They nearly filled the common room some nights, nearly drove out the other guests. Rangers are serious people, they don't have more than a mug or two of ale, and they rarely join in on the songs. Makes other folks nervous, sometimes. I'm always polite to them, of course, but I have to admit I was not entirely disappointed when your husband showed up with that Gandalf fellow, and they all took off with them."

"What, all of them? When did this happen?" asked Adamanta impatiently.

"Oh, yesterday around midday," said Barnabus. "They all took off, Master Took and Gandalf and a pack of them Rangers, headed north on horses and a pony for your husband."

There followed a long silence. Bella and Donna looked anxiously at their mother, wondering what she might say. Belle feared she might scream in anger, or worse yet, break down crying. Donna noticed that her mother looked like she was trying to do math in her head, as she usually did when trying to decide whether or not to buy something. Donna wondered if she was getting ready to hire someone to send a message north to her father and Gandalf and the Rangers.

"I will need to purchase some ponies, Mister Butterbur," said Adamanta. "We will need them in the morning. Please see to it; I can pay you in advance, of course."

"Absolutely, Mrs. Took," said Barnabus with a bow of his head. "I'll see if I can find black ones, like you prefer, as I recall."

In the middle of their surprise that their mother was going to have them ride ponies north into the wilderness, Bella and Donna both were also shocked that the innkeeper knew their mother well enough to know what color pony she preferred to ride. Obviously, she had done more travelling in her youth than they had been told.



# A PATH BOOK

Showing paths  
from  
**THARBAD • BREE • ATHELFAST**  
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- main road, road
- foot path, deer path
- water flow, fleet, spring
- cliff, clude edge, burlack
- gleet
- holt
- camp site
- clude, hill, mound
- standing stone
- broeth
- meox
- mead

This map was made at the behest of Gerontius Took in SR 1255 using the other books of Adalbart the book-writer showing known and reported paths, sites, and remarkable features of the direct path from Tharbad to Athelfast known also as Fornost. This book was made as directed by G. Took and includes his personal remarks on the roads and battles taken in the Thains early years in that position.

GABRIEL BOOKMAKER THARBAD TA. 2858







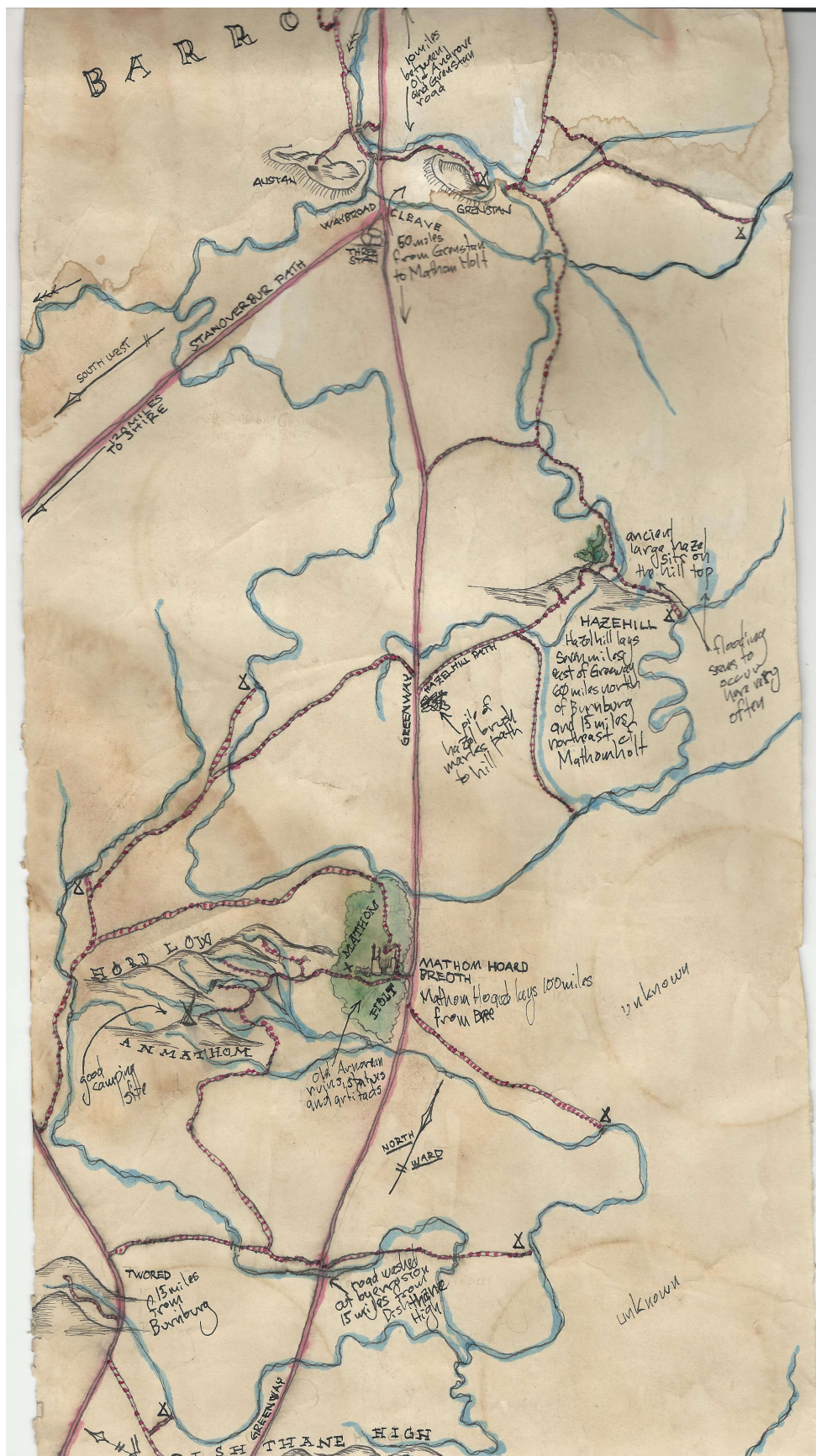












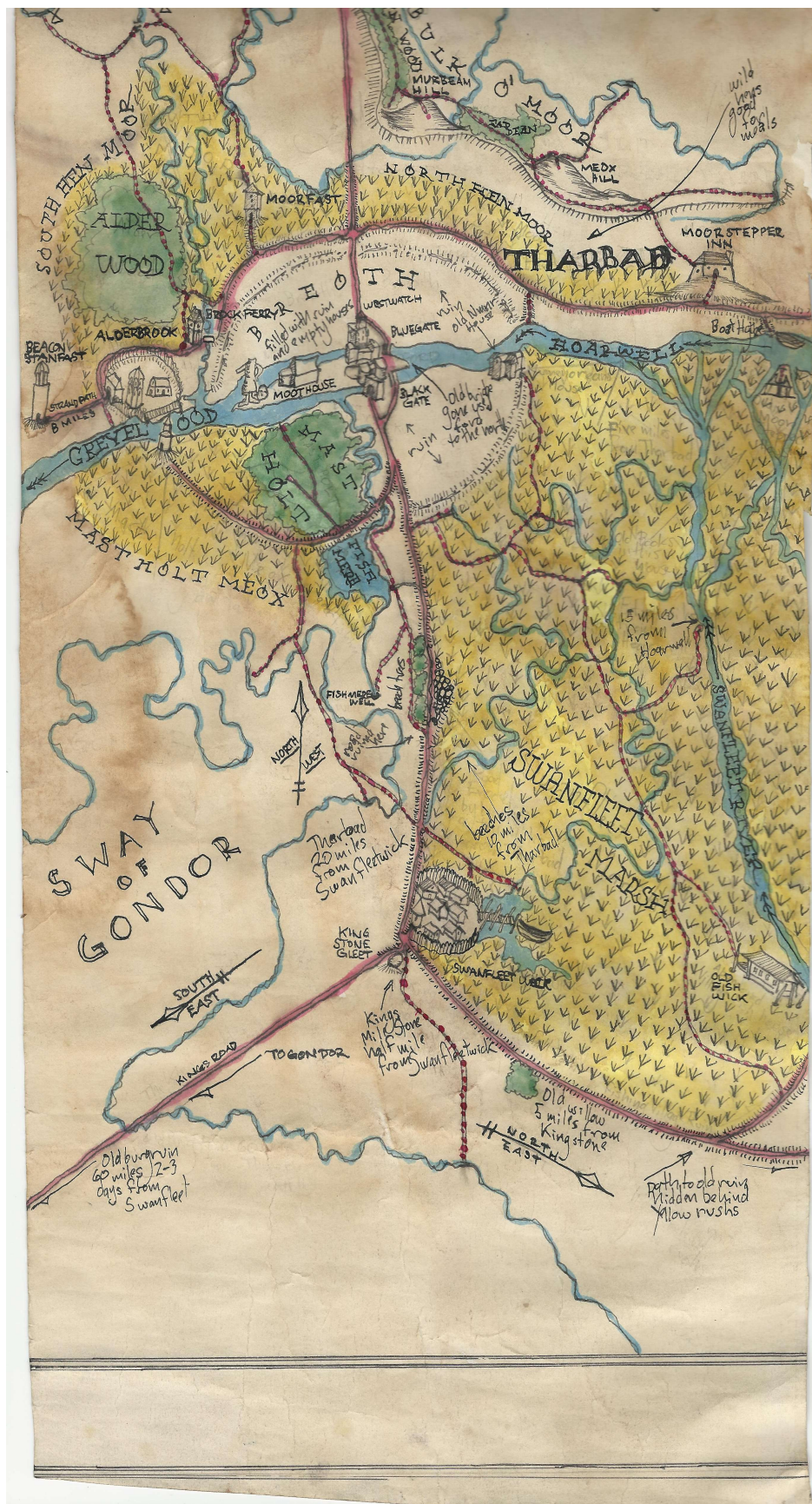












## Chapter 5

*I hear that Cedric may have seen you recently, when  
Arader was down your way. He is such a good cook.*

"Miss Donna? Is that you?"

"Cecil!"

They had not been at Fornost Erain five minutes, when Donna heard the sound of Cecil's voice behind her. He, in turn, because he did not see well at all, had noticed her only from the sound of her voice. They had not heard each other in several years, and Donna's voice probably had changed a bit since then, less like a little girl's, but Cecil still recognized it.

"It is Miss Donna! Bless me, I never expected to hear your voice here in Fornost Erain!"

They had been on the road for six days, riding as fast as their ponies would take them. They had not caught up to Gandalf and Gerontius until they had all reached the ruined city (which the Hobbits called Norbury, but was more properly known as Fornost Erain). There had followed a few minutes of confused questions and explanations. The adults were still discussing it, trying to determine what to do about Mira's disappearance. Bella and Donna had been sent to get some food from the camp cook, who turned out to be Cecil.

"I had heard you were cooking for the Rangers now, but I didn't know you'd go with them to Norbury!"

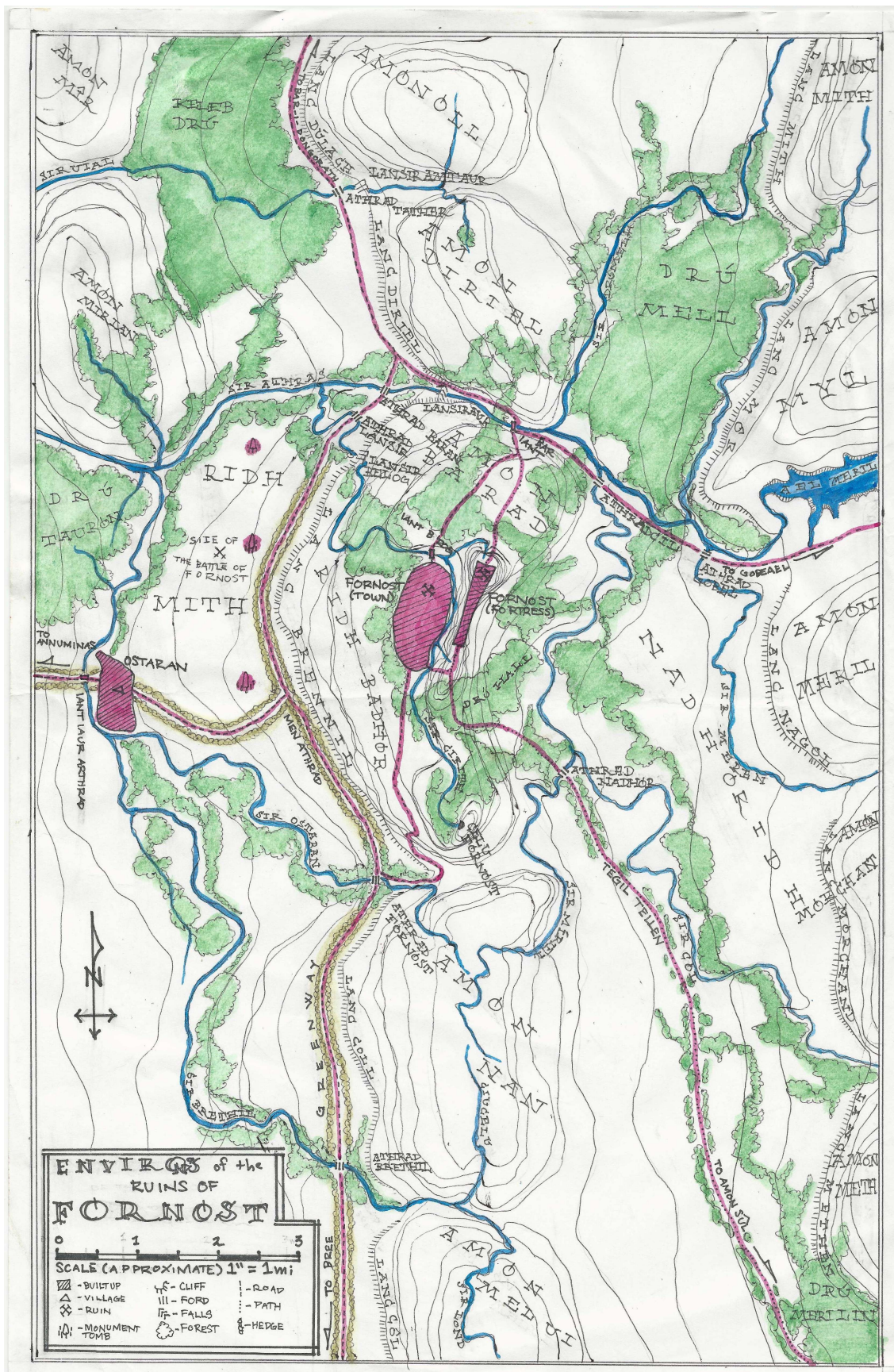
"I'm happy to go wherever the Chieftain of the Rangers sends me," said Cecil, as he accepted a hug from Donna. "He's a much better boss than I had before. Say, do you care for any stew, after all that travelling?"

"Of course! Oh, and my sister Bella is here as well."

"Hello, Cecil," said Bella.

"Hello Miss Bella. Come on, there's plenty of food for everyone."









It is a common feature of nearly all Hobbits, that regardless of what frights they have had, or how tired or worried they may be, a proper meal will focus their attention and put them back into better spirits. They still didn't know where their sister had gone, and they were a bit saddlesore from days of riding, but they gave the stew their full attention. It was warm, and that felt good after days of being cold on the road. It was hearty, and they felt the need for more than the same hard bread, cheese, and dried fruit they had been eating for days. It had the scent of herbs in it, found by Cecil even in the cold at Fornost Erain, or perhaps he had packed them from further south where the Rangers lived normally. They looked up rarely, and spoke not at all, until they had two bowls' full each.

"I had nearly forgotten how nice it is cooking for Hobbits," said Cecil, "they know how to appreciate their food."

"It's very good, thanks," said Bella.

"Here's a pack of snacks for each of you," said Cecil, handing two sacks in their general direction. "You may find meals here aren't as often as Hobbits like. This will give you a bit to nibble on during the night. Keep it tucked away, though, there are a few animals that like to come into camp at night and steal food. They've learned that this time of year there are often Rangers at Fornost Erain, and they show up expecting a meal."

"What kind of animals?" asked Bella. "Are they dangerous?"

"Oh, no, nothing big enough to worry about in that way," said Cecil. "The bigger animals are not going to try to take on a group of Rangers. Bears and Rangers, for example, tend to live and let live, and give each other a wide berth. But the smaller ones, squirrels and such, they might try to sneak into your bag of food and have a nibble. Just keep it tied up tight."

Just then, the girls' father and mother came to find them, along with Gandalf and several Rangers.

"Come along, girls, Gandalf says you might want to see this," said Gerontius.

"See what?" asked Bella.

"We're about to give the Horn to its rightful owner. We need to do it at sundown."

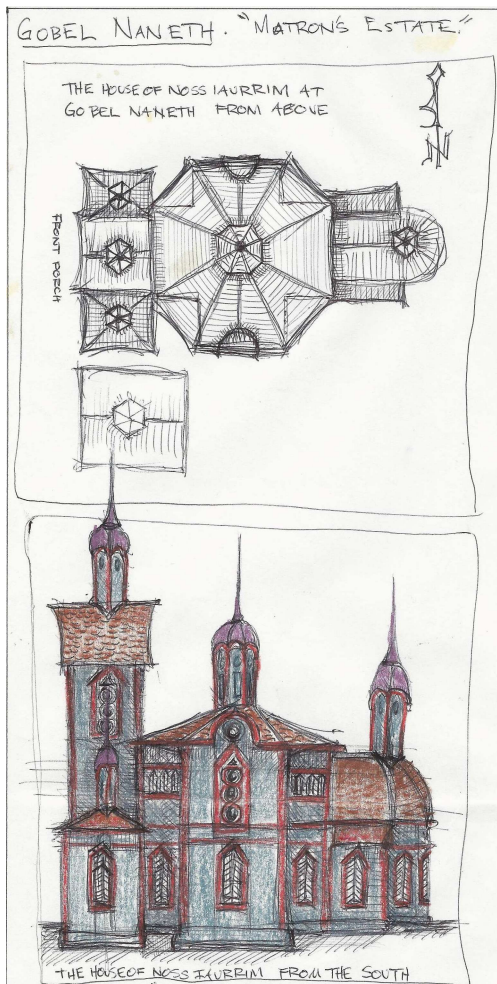
"Why?" asked Bella.

"The owner died centuries ago," said Gandalf, "and we can only open the crypt in which he lies, when the sun is touching the horizon."



They walked on, then, after saying their thanks to Cecil. Most of Fornost Erain was ruined and overgrown, but there were a few spots that were still maintained, and one walled complex called Gobel Naneth that was still occupied throughout the year. The mother in each generation, who was called the Matron, kept this small village within the ruined city alive, with a large garden to eat from along with what they could hunt from the surrounding wilderness. The story was that when Fornost Erain fell in war, and then the Witch King who had conquered it was driven back in turn by an army from the south, the matron of Gobel Naneth had refused to abandon the ruined city when everyone else did. She and her family and their servants' families continued to live there, and hosted the Rangers each year when they came to Fornost Erain for a few weeks. Most of the Rangers who were there now were camping inside the walls of the complex, rather than further up the hill in the actual ruined castle.

The hobbits walked up the winding road towards the castle; it was lined on both sides by tall trees, mostly pine. They passed over a stream on a stone bridge with three graceful arches, covered with red lichen that stood out in the dark green, grey, and snowy white landscape. They heard the rushing of the water over the rocks below as they walked across it. As they neared the castle, they saw there at the outer gate a tall Ranger who looked a lot like Arador, who they had met before, but somewhat older.



"It's Argonui, Arador's father," Gerontius whispered to them. "Chieftain of the Rangers."

When they reached the spot next to Argonui, he walked with them through the ruined gatehouse. This had been broken during the long-ago war, and never repaired since the castle was no longer normally occupied, but it still stood high and imposing, despite visible cracks and crumbled edges. They walked in silence through it and into the outer courtyard of the castle, and Bella and Donna had the feeling that they were entering a cemetery. Argonui, Gandalf, and Gerontius walked quietly, so the girls did as well, and looked around them and wondered what it had been like when it was full of people.

They came to another wall, and another gatehouse with crumbled corners, cracks, and a pile of broken stone in front of it. They stepped over the stones gingerly, and went through this gatehouse as well. It was dim and cold and quiet inside the gatehouse, and Bella and Donna were glad when they stepped out of it into the bright snowy inner courtyard.

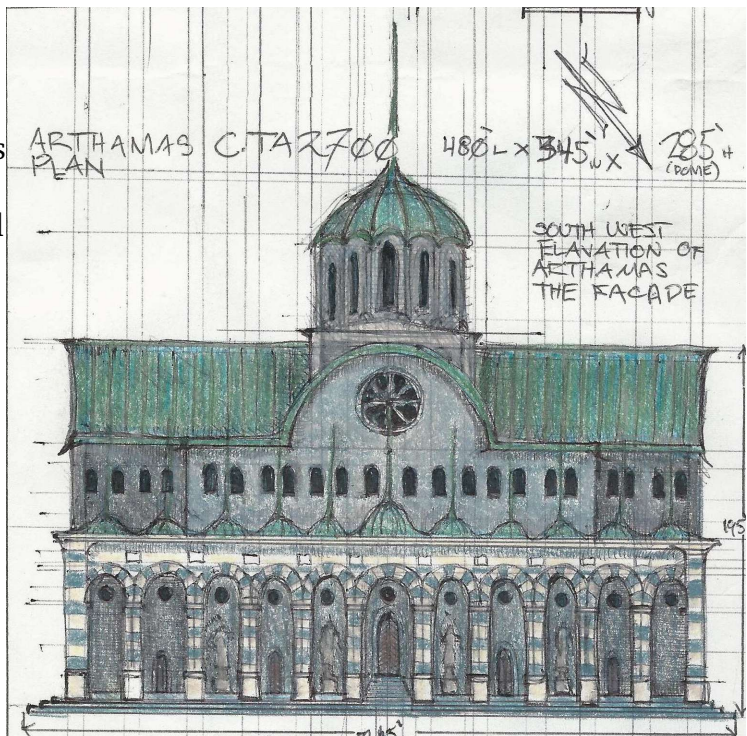
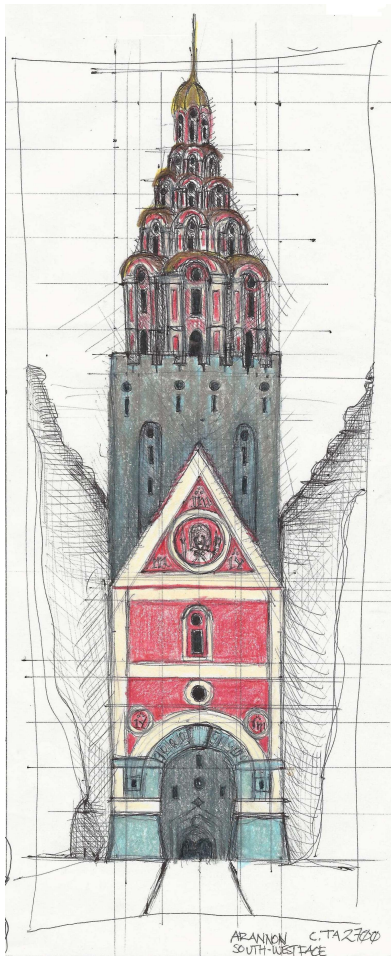
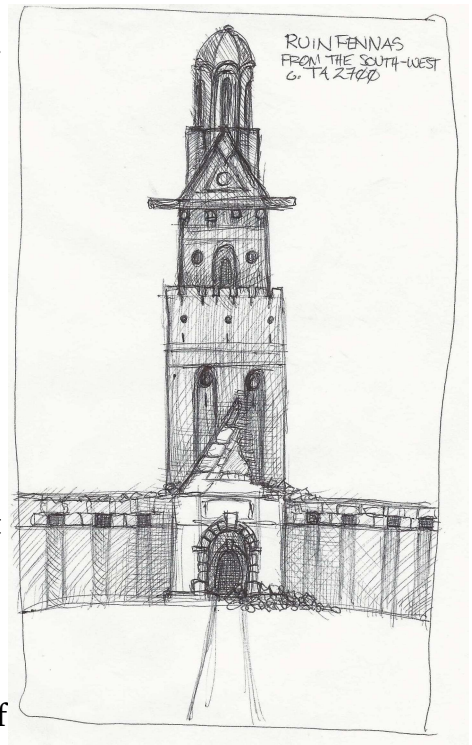
They saw in front of them a yet taller gate tower, built into a narrow spot in the natural rock cliff of the mountain, blocking the passage uphill. The bottom portion was blue with cream-white trim that was covered with minute details of lettering and pictures. Above, the midsection was orange with yellow

trim, and in the midst of this there was a portrait of an ancient king. Further up beyond that was a section of darker greys and shades of red, with many small slitted windows that looked down on them. The full height of the gate tower seemed to be

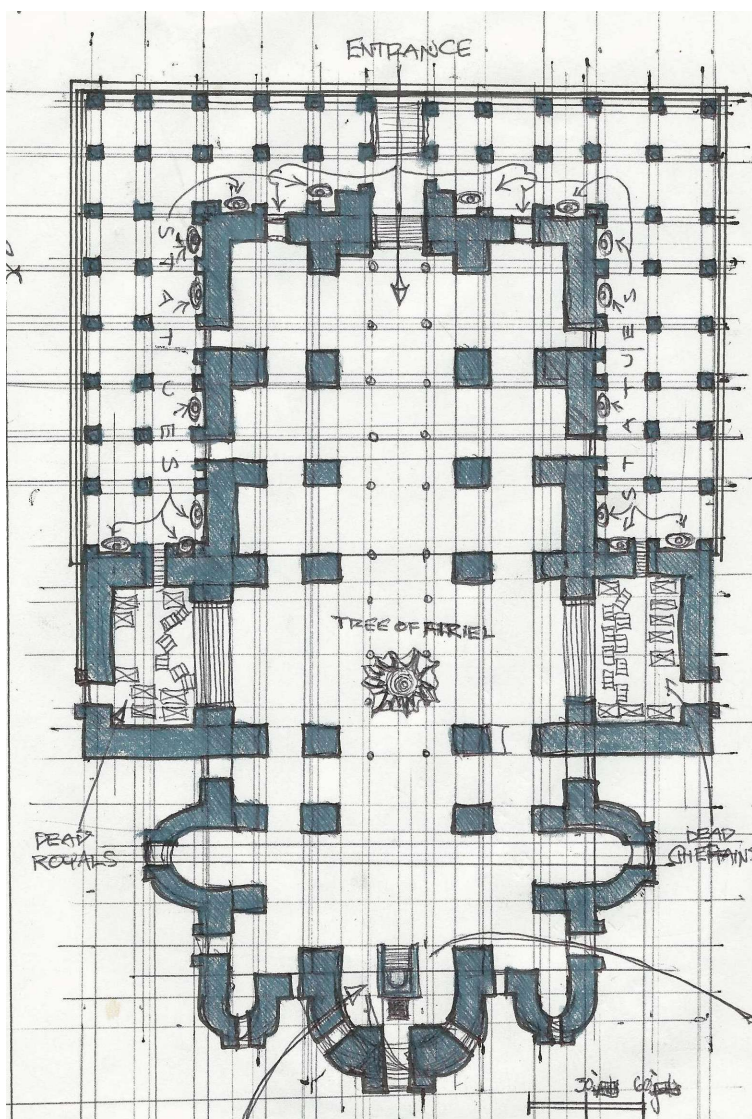
perhaps 150 feet, and it seemed to have been repaired much more than the rest. The gate itself opened onto a ramp down into the dark, and they walked into that darkness without lamp or candle, only the faint glimmer of daylight from the other side to guide them through. Their feet echoed softly on the smooth stone

floor, and Donna wondered how it was that the downward slope of the tunnel they were in did not result in an

accumulation of leaves and debris over the many years it had sat deserted. She thought that it must be that someone, perhaps the Rangers, came to clear it out and restore it from time to time.







Dominating the view, however, was a giant tree that reached from the center of the great chamber up through the windows in the dome above. Its bark was smooth and it had many intertwining trunks, reminding Bella of the flames of a fire. They all looked up to where its branches shot out of the windows in the domed roof.

"The Tree of Firiël," said Arvedui. "She was the last Queen of Arthedain, originally a princess of Gondor. She planted it here."

Arvedui pointed to a mosaic on the northwest wall of the chamber, showing a succession of royalty looking out at them.

They passed up into the light on the other side, and saw before them a great row of blue and cream colored arches spread in front of them from left to right, with doors within, and a great blue-roofed palace above it. There were numerous small windows high up, and many doors past the arches before them. Bella found it a bit dizzying and intimidating, but tried not to show it as they walked forwards towards the central door. Donna again wondered how this was still standing after so many centuries, and who or what had kept it from crumbling or being covered with dirt and debris.

They quietly walked up the steps to the door, and Donna saw Arvedui put one hand lightly on the hilt of his sword as he used the other to push the door open. To their surprise, the inside was not dark, and they saw scattered sunlight inside. They realized that there were parts of the domed roof which were open to the air, and a few beams of sunlight came down, reddish yellow as the sun was setting.



TREE OF FIRIEL IN ARTHAMUS LOOKING NORTH WEST



"That is her as a child with her father, Ondoher, King of Gondor," he said, "and that is her as Queen of Arthedain, with her husband Arvedui."

Bella looked over at the picture of the daughter, standing by her father's side, looking out at her. She wondered what it would be like to be a princess. It seemed to involve getting sent many hundreds of miles away to marry someone in a foreign land, and perhaps never returning home. She was suddenly glad she was not born a princess.

They turned to their right, going partway around the giant tree, and then over to a short flight of steps up. They had come to the crypt where the Kings of Arthedain had been laid to rest. They looked up at the tall, broad, iron door that led to the crypt. Donna and Bella could see that it was covered with thin writing, in silver, in a language they didn't know, and had a tree and several stars in the sky above it. Donna noticed that the silver lines appeared to have been touched up several times, which explained why it was still here when so much else was ruined, even overgrown.

Argonui looked over at Gandalf, who nodded as if to say that they should begin. Bella wondered if Argonui had ever gone here before, or if it had been shut so many years that Gandalf was the only one here who had seen the inside. Argonui then put his hand to the door in front of him and pushed it open. Donna noticed that it did not open until Argonui put his other hand on the hilt of a sword which he carried in a sheath at his side.

At first, they saw nothing beyond the door but dark, but after a while they realized that they could see dimly the figure of a Dunedain, just at the edge of their vision in the shadows. He was standing, and he had on a crown that glinted silver in the darkness. The Hobbits all felt a thrill of fear, as they realized they were standing in the presence of a ghost.

"Who disturbs my rest?" came the voice, thin and distant sounding.



"Your heir, and Chieftain of the Rangers, Argonui," said the Ranger, holding the Horn in one hand, with his other on the hilt of his sword. "We are here to give you something which was rightfully yours, but never delivered, so that it will trouble the living no more."

There followed a long pause, as everyone waited for a reply. Donna was pretty sure she was not the only one who was holding her breath. Eventually, Argonui made a move to step across the threshold of the doorway, when it spoke again.

"You cannot give it to me," said the voice from inside the crypt. "It rightfully belongs to the youngest heir in my line. Put it in the hands of that one, and it will signal that it is in the hands of its rightful owner."

And with that, the figure which had been seen only dimly, disappeared from view entirely, and the door swung slowly closed again. Everyone present, Hobbit and Dunedain alike, turned to look at the Wizard, Gandalf.

"It seemed too easy," said Gandalf, "but it was worth trying. Well, we will have to get your heir, the youngest in your line, Argonui. Is your son Arador nearby?"

"Not at all," said Argonui. "He is back south."

"Keep it with you, then," said Gandalf, "and when you return there you can give it to Arador. It will not cause much mischief, I think, if you keep it only for that purpose."

"I hope you are right," said Argonui, "because 'tis said that any thing held, not rightfully yours, will find a way to cause grief to its owner."

"That is true enough," said Gandalf, "but not when you keep it only to find its owner and return it."

"Why didn't we ask the ghost what it was like to be dead?" asked Bella. "I can't believe I didn't think of that at the time."

"That would have been foolish," said Gandalf, a little sharply. "The ghost of the last King of all Arthedain is not there to answer quizzes from young Hobbit-lasses. In any event, no ghost will tell you that. Some, like Arvedui, linger in our world to fulfill some last bit of business, some duty or vow that was unfulfilled. Arvedui has some such task still ahead, probably to do with the time when a King comes to this land again. Other ghosts don't even realize that they are dead, and remain here in a mix of confusion, fear, and anger. In neither case will they tell you what you wish to know."

Bella looked a little chastened, but also a little annoyed, and Donna could tell she was going to have an argument, even with a Wizard. Donna decided not to stay to hear it, and went back the way they had come as quickly as she could, getting a little ahead of the others so she

would not have to hear Bella sulking or Gandalf rebuking, or even her father trying to mediate. She found it much quicker and easier to find her way back than it had been to go there, and realized that although it had been impressive, she found the ruins all a bit depressing, or at least intimidating. She was happy when she got back to the compound at Gobel Naneth, where there were still at least a few people living.

Just as she pulled the door flap of her tent aside and entered, she realized she had heard an animal moving inside. She stood, blocking the entryway, as she looked around to every corner, trying to spy the intruder. She recalled Cecil saying that small animals would try to steal food, and looked over at the bag of food she had left on the floor near her cot.

"You can come out now," she said, more for her own amusement than because she thought she would be heard. "I see you there, hiding under my cot behind the bag of food."

To her surprise, a fox head poked out from behind the bag.

"Oh, hello there Miss," said the fox. Donna arched her eyebrows but otherwise tried not to show that she was surprised. She hadn't known that foxes could talk.

"Hello," she said instead, and "What is your name?"

"I am called Reynard," said the fox. "I am so sorry to have blundered into your tent by mistake, Miss. I was looking for my own tent, which I now realize this is not. I'll just be going, if it's alright with you."

"There are no foxes with tents in this encampment," said Donna, holding back a smile. "I am quite certain that the Rangers would have mentioned it."

"Really?" asked the fox, with feigned surprise. "Oh, I must be very lost if I'm in the wrong encampment, even. I'd better hurry if I am to get home before sundown. Well I must be going then!" With this, the fox picked up in his jaws the sack full of food that Cecil had given to Donna, and tried to dart past her. Donna moved to block his way.

"That is my sack, actually," she said.

"What, is it?" asked Reynard in surprise after he dropped the sack from his jaws. "Oh my goodness, I am a mess today. You're quite right. My mistake."

He went under the other cot and picked up Bella's sack. He dropped it, as if by accident, next to Donna's, and then picked up Donna's sack again instead, and again tried to dash around Donna and out the door. She blocked him again.

"That was my sister's sack, and now you have mine again," she said. "I am fairly certain that you did not bring a sack with you when you came. In any event, you have no thumbs, and the sacks are strong, so I don't think you would be able to get to the food inside of it."

Reynard dropped Donna's sack then, and immediately plopped down on the tent floor and began to cry and wail.

"Oh, I am so worthless!" he said. "I can't even find food enough in this camp to feed myself! I probably couldn't even get myself out of this sack if you were to open it and put me in it! Oh please don't put me in a sack, have mercy!"

Donna smiled a little at the fox's obvious attempt to get her to open the sack for him. He couldn't open the sack, but he knew how to try to manipulate people to do what he wanted. She wondered if he was normally dealing with stupider people.

"I don't want to give you everything in that sack, Reynard, but I could give you some of it if you're hungry. Hold on, let me open it."

Donna reached carefully for the sack, making sure she didn't get close enough to Reynard so that he could bite her if he turned out to be mean. The fox backed away in surprise.

"What? Oh no, there's no need, I'm not hungry right now, I..."

But it was too late, and Donna had already opened the sack, and looked inside. She saw that there was about twice as much food in it as Cecil had given her. She looked back at him in surprise.

"You CAN open the sack!" she said in surprise. "And you've already stolen someone else's food! In fact, this must have been Bella's food. You put it all in one sack to make it easier to carry!"

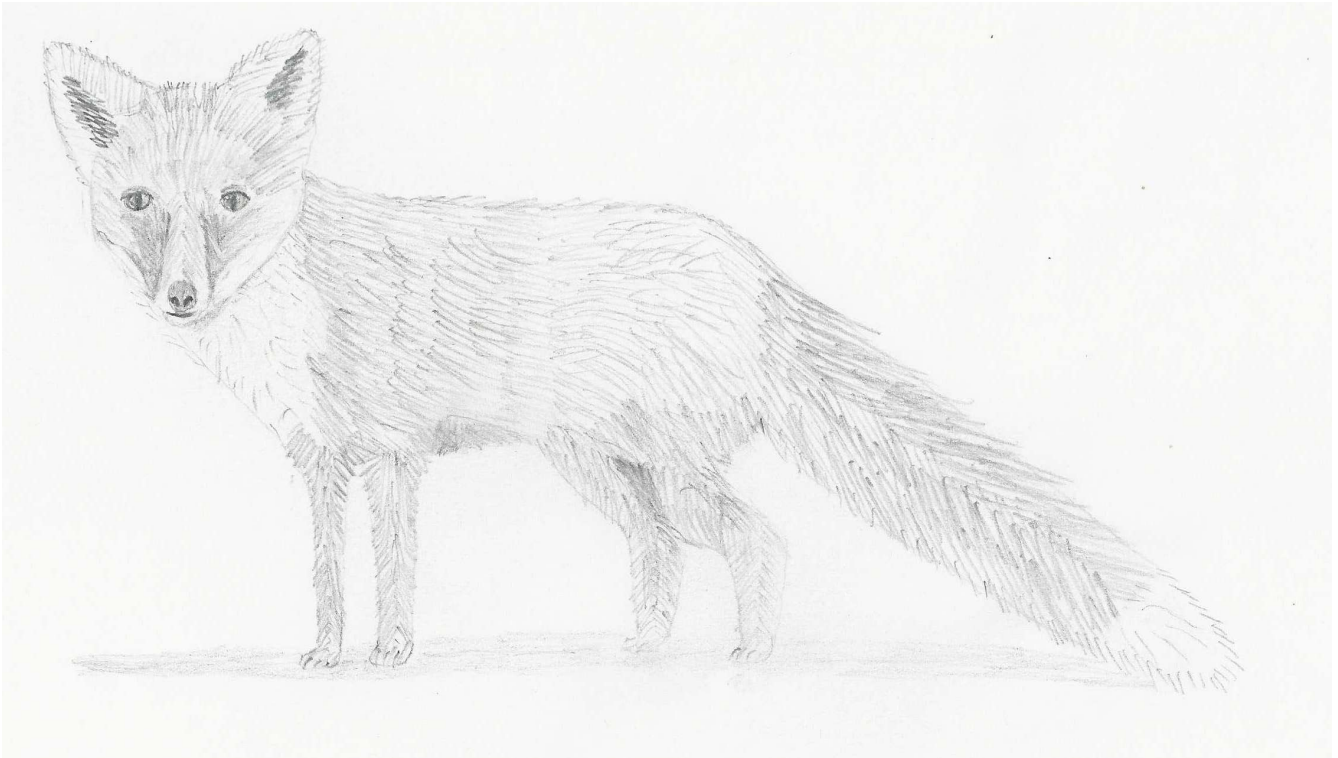
Reynard was crouched down, looking for an opportunity to dodge around Donna and get out of the tent, but she wouldn't let him.

"You were only pretending to trick me into opening the sack," said Donna. "You were actually trying to trick me into NOT opening the sack. If I thought you wanted me to open the sack, you thought I would refuse to do it. Plus, if I thought you were trying to get me to open the sack, I wouldn't think you were wanting to get out any more, and I would let my guard down. Clever. Unfortunately for you, I am nice enough to give a starving animal some food. Not that you are probably starving. I think you probably eat pretty well."

Donna took a piece of dried fruit out of her sack and threw it to Reynard, then stepped aside to give him a path out of the tent.

"You can have that, but Bella and I need to eat as well," said Donna. By the time she was done saying it, the fox (and the fruit) had gone out the tent flap and were gone. Donna shook her head.

"Not even a thank-you," she said. "Not good manners."



A few moments later, Bella came into the tent with Donna.

"Did I just see a fox run out of this tent?" she asked.

"Yes," said Donna. "I rescued your food from him. Somehow he is able to untie the knot. You might want to have some now." She handed the bag to Bella, who looked inside.

"It looks like more than before. Did you put all our food into one bag?"

"Not exactly," said Donna, "but anyway I can take mine out again." She took the bag back from Bella and started separating it.

"Never mind, we can just keep it all together," said Bella. "What I came to tell you was this; there's been some bad news."

"What is it?" asked Donna.

"Mother is taking us back to Great Smials starting tomorrow," said Bella. "Plus, she thinks it could be dangerous."

"She might be right," said Donna. "Perhaps we could ask the Rangers for an escort?"

"Too late," said Bella, "Gandalf has already volunteered. But Papa is going to go with Arvedui to try to find Mira."



Donna and Bella were quiet for a few moments, imagining days on the road with Gandalf and Adamanta in close company, and no one else but Donna and Bella to try to keep them from arguing.

Gandalf was a good person, but he was a Wizard, and could have a sharp temper. Adamanta Took was a good person, but she had an even sharper temper, and she had a problem with Gandalf that went back to before either of the girls were born. With days to get on each other's nerves, it seemed inevitable that they would clash. Either one could be frightening if angered, and the thought of being present for a clash between them was an awful prospect.

"Maybe we'll get lucky," said Bella, "and goblins or wolves or something will attack, to keep them from going at it."

## Chapter 6

*I hope*

*Gandalf and Adamanta are going to get along all right. They  
have always been prone to disagree.*

They nearly made it to Bree before the argument between Gandalf and Adamanta finally started.

Several days had passed in icy silence, with Bella nervously making conversation with her mother whenever it seemed that she was about to become angry at Gandalf. For his part, Gandalf said little, and seemed to take no notice of Adamanta's foul mood. Donna could see, though, that when he looked at her, there was a mixture of annoyance but also somewhat pitying affection in his eyes. Gandalf knew that Adamanta was angry at him, knew that there was nothing he could (or at least nothing he would) do about it, but also had sympathy for what she was feeling. Donna didn't know how old Gandalf was, but she knew he was older than her mother. It was odd to see her mother as the younger, more emotional one in an impending argument. It was sort of like seeing Bella and Adamanta when there was an argument brewing between them. Everyone in Great Smials could tell, and they would either try to distract them or break the tension, or just get out of the way before the storm broke.

"Thank you for coming this far with us, Gandalf," said Bella. They had just seen the first signs for Bree, and she knew that this was the point where they would part. The three Hobbits would go west back to Great Smials and the Shire, and Gandalf would go further south, to try to catch up to Gerontius and Argonui as they searched for Mira.

"It was no trouble, Bella, I am happy to do it. I will head south, and see if we can find young Mira. I will not rest easily until she is found. You Tooks do take some looking after."

"Looking after? Do we?" said Adamanta, her voice sharp. "The Tooks take looking after? That is rich, coming from a, a Wizard. What have you ever brought us but trouble? The Tooks have done quite enough for Gandalf the Grey, and maybe if you kept further away we would not need so much looking after!"

"Mama!" whispered Bella with a gasp.

"Mrs. Took, I will do you a favor and take no offense, and attribute your words to nothing more than the anxious ravings of a distraught mother. But you should..."

"OH WILL YOU!" roared Adamanta. She tugged on her pony's reins to bring it close up to Gandalf's horse, and stood up in the stirrups to get as close as she could to him. "WILL YOU INDEED! Perhaps you will discover that I am not unable to find something to say that you will NOT do me the favor of taking no offense at!"

Donna, while alarmed, was also in some part of her mind trying to figure out her mother's last statement, to see if she had said what she thought, or perhaps said the exact opposite by mistake. Bella just turned pale, and tried to think of something to do to break up the argument.

Gandalf's eyes narrowed, and he leaned down a bit to glower at the unbowed Adamanta.

"Mrs. Took," said Gandalf, "you know no more of what I have done to or for your family, than you do of the world outside the Shire, but you knew enough to know when you married the future Thain of the Shire that it involved more responsibility than the average Hobbit. Someone needs to look after the Shire, and if not the Thain's family, then no one will do it, and I don't bring trouble, I bring warning of it. You had no problem moving into the largest Smial in the Shire, I notice."

Even Donna was alarmed by this and what her mother might say to it, since it seemed to suggest that their mother might have married their father just for his wealth. It flashed through her mind that her mother might try to hit Gandalf, and she wondered if Gandalf would turn her into a toad or strike her with a lightning bolt or something awful. She tried to think of something to say to interrupt, but before she could say anything, she saw Bella jump off her pony and land roughly on the ground with a cry. Neither Gandalf nor Adamanta saw it happen (they were too busy glowering at each other), but they heard her scream in pain, and quickly moved to see if she was all right.

"Bella, are you badly hurt?" asked Adamanta, and she rushed to get down from her own pony and kneel at her side. Gandalf quickly did the same.

"Owwwww, ow ow ow!" cried Bella, and she clutched at her ankle and rolled on the ground in pain.

"Let me feel if it is broken," said Gandalf, and he gently felt around her ankle to see how bad the damage was, while Bella sobbed into her mother's arms. After a few long moments, he looked up at Bella sympathetically, and Donna thought with just the tiniest hint of secret amusement in his eyes.

"It will be all right, Bella," he said. "But let's get you to a room in the inn as quickly as we can, so you can put your leg up and rest after this long journey. I can tell that it has started to wear on you."

Adamanta had Bella put on her own pony, and then led it by the reins towards Bree.

"Come on, my little one, we'll be there soon," she said comfortingly to Bella as they went, Bella still sobbing and clutching her leg.

Donna, wide eyed, looked over at Gandalf, who was standing next to Bella's pony. The pony was standing placidly, with only a slight swishing of its tail to indicate that the screaming and crying had upset it. He took hold of its reins, and handed them to Donna.

"Here, Donna, can you please lead this rampaging beast to the stables?" he said dryly. "It is clearly ready to buck another rider off, as it apparently just did."

Donna tried to show as little emotion on her face as possible, and nodded yes. Gandalf got back onto his horse, and then looked down at Donna again.

"I believe I will ride directly on south, Donna," he said. "Perhaps I can catch up to your father and Argonui. I'm sure your mother will forgive me not saying my goodbyes in person. Also, I expect your sister will recover surprisingly quickly once her mother and I are safely apart."

Donna nodded, and watched as Gandalf rode on south, and then she turned her own pony and Bella's towards the little road to Bree. She wondered, briefly, if Bella had actually hurt her leg in the fall, or if it had all been acting. And, if she did really hurt her leg, did she nonetheless think it was worth it?

Donna had just taken her and Bella's ponies to the stables, and was walking back out to go to the inn called the Prancing Pony, when she was startled by a crow that fluttered down to land on a fence nearby.

"Cawww," said the crow.

Donna stared at the crow. Something about this one seemed familiar.

"Hello?" she said, phrasing it like a question.

"Don't you remember me?" asked the crow.

"Oh, you're the talking crow from the tower," said Donna. "I'm sorry, I didn't recognize you at first."

"It's all right, you Hobbits look mostly all the same to me as well, but you look a little like your sister, and I can recognize her by now."

"My sister?! Do you mean my older or my younger sister? Have you been spying on us?"

"Your younger sister," answered the crow, ignoring the accusation of spying. "I've seen her lots of times. She usually has food."

"Have you seen her recently?" asked Donna, with suddenly even greater interest.

"Yes, but she didn't have any food," said the crow mournfully. "The fellow with her didn't seem to have any, either."

"Who was she with?" asked Donna. "What did he look like?"

"Like a hobbit, only taller," said the crow. "Brown hair, I think. Arms, not wings. No feathers."

"You aren't very good at telling us apart, are you," said Donna. "How long ago was this?"

"Several days. Five, maybe? Say, do you have any food? Your sister usually had food."

"Crow, do you know where they were headed?"

"Probably south. I followed them for a few days, because it seemed like she was headed the wrong way, even though she said she wasn't lost. They got to that big long thing, the rocks all laid in a row? Then they went south. That was earlier today. I figured if they had found it they really weren't lost, so I came back this way."

"The road? The Greenway, that must be it."

"Probably. Say, did you know you sometimes drop food?"

"You have been spying on us! When did you see that?"

"Just a few minutes ago. Right before the other one jumped off her horse. You dropped what looked like a bread roll. I really like those. I was going to get it, but you know what happened?"

"A fox came out of the bushes and beat you to it?"

"Yes! Did you see it?"

"Not that time, but he's been following us for days now. I give him a little bit to eat every now and then."

"Do you have any more?"

"I suppose maybe a little," said Donna, and she dug into her pony's bags to find a bit of roll for the crow, and put it on the ground, near the fence, then stepped back so the crow would not be worried about taking it. She found that the crow had fluttered down to take it before she had moved away; apparently this crow had become quite accustomed to being fed by Took Hobbit lasses.

"Say, crow, could you do me a favor?"

"Maybe, what do you need?"

"Did you see the person with us who was wearing a long, grey cloak, with a tall pointed hat?"

"Sure, even I know that one. He never drops food, though."

"Could you go tell him what you just told me?"

"About the fox eating your food?"

"No, not that," said Donna, trying not to sound annoyed, "I mean about Mira and the other person going south on the Greenway."

"No problem," said the crow, and (having finished its snack) it flew off.

"Now," said Donna to herself, "there is only one problem. When she hears this, Mama will probably insist on us going after Mira ourselves. If we are too quick about it, we might catch up with Gandalf. Then how will we keep him and Mama from arguing again? I don't want to jump off a pony."

## Chapter 7

*How are your family doing? I remember meeting you all for the first time, as if it were yesterday. Not getting into too many adventures, I hope?*

Mira awoke to the sound of birdsong. Blinking, she realized that she was not at her bedroom in Great Smials. Waking up in any place that was not her room sometimes confused her, but after a few seconds she would remember where she was and how she got there, and the feeling of strangeness would go away. She closed her eyes again, resting, not quite ready to wake up, but the feeling that something wasn't right would not go away. It's all right, she told herself, she knew she was not at Great Smials; nothing to worry about. Then, it hit her, and she sat up straight and opened her eyes wide in fear.

She was alone.

Not just away from home, she was also alone. In fact, she realized with a start, she didn't really even know where she was. Where had Renshaw gone to?

Mira stood up, and looked around her. Renshaw was gone, and he had left nothing behind. The fire had burned out, and she was cold. She stamped her feet a few times to try to wake up. She turned slowly around the little clearing she was in, looking and listening for any sign of movement, but there was nothing. She had the uncomfortable feeling that something was going to sneak up on her from behind, so she kept turning slightly to look back over her shoulder, and it sent her slowly in circles until she became a slight bit dizzy. She was breathing fast, as if she had just been running, and her heart was thumping hard in her chest. She forced herself to breathe deeply but slower, and tried to calm herself down.

As much out of instinct as from any plan, she moved over towards the largest shrub at the edge of the clearing, and crouched down next to the base of it. The bush was large, so she felt hidden, a bit less exposed. She wondered where Renshaw had gone to and why. She realized that the burned out fire made it pretty obvious to anyone who came along, that someone had been here recently, and she wondered if she should move away to a better hiding place, but she didn't know where else she should go. She stayed low, and hid, and waited.

After an hour, she had to admit to herself that Renshaw was gone, and not coming back. The sun was well up in the sky now, and she was starting to get hungry. At first, she began to get panicky, because she didn't know what to do. Then, she realized that she was not going to be able to figure out the right thing to do if she didn't calm down. She decided maybe it would be easier to figure out what to do if she talked out loud. This, it turns out, was a good idea. It is often not quite as hard to figure out what to do, if you talk to yourself out loud. When you are just listening to your own thoughts, they can race ahead faster and faster and never come together on a plan of action. If you talk to yourself out loud, it helps you to slow down a bit and think things over more properly.

"Maybe I could look for Renshaw's tracks, and follow him?" she asked herself, in a whispery, quavering little voice. "No, that won't work," she answered herself, a little miserably. "I'm no good at tracking, and I'm not sure I could even catch up to him anyway. Why did he leave?" she asked, a bit of a whine in her voice, but then she made herself stop, and think again about what to do.

"If I can't track him," she said, "then I have to go somewhere on my own. I can't go home, it's too far, and anyway those Shadows were that way. If I go east or west, along the river, I don't know where to go, and I don't know how to find any food in the wild, so I would get very hungry."

As she kept talking, Mira's voice, while still a whisper, became a little bit calmer. She was still frightened and uncertain, but she was figuring it out, and hearing herself figure it out made her just a little calmer.

"So really, there's only one choice: I need to go into that city, Tharbad. We saw it before the sun went down yesterday, so I can find my way to it, and they must have food there. I don't know anyone, but maybe I can find someone to help me. At least those Shadows probably wouldn't go into the city, with all those people."

She sat there crouched down in the shade near the brush for a few seconds longer. Her breathing had slowed down a little, but her heart was still beating very loud in her chest. She stood up again, then, and realized she did not know for sure which way to go to get back to the road.

Mira had spent most of her life in Great Smials and the area right around it, and there she would never be lost, since she knew every stone and tree. Here, she had not paid too much attention the night before, when she had just followed Renshaw, almost too tired to keep her eyes open. She had the idea that she should go south, though; which way was south?

Stepping out into the clearing, she waited for the sun to peek through the clouds, so she could see where it was coming from. The sun was still not too high in the sky yet, so the direction it was coming from must be east, because the sun rises in the east. She turned to have the sun on her right, so that she was facing north, like when she looked at a map where north was up.



That meant the direction behind her was south. There, not so hard if you thought about it for a bit, at least as long as the sun was out and it wasn't close to noon. She walked back through the little clearing, and continued on through the brush; after a few moments she found the footpath that led to the big Road. Once she stepped onto the road, she could see the city of Tharbad again below her. She heaved a big sigh of relief, and started walking along the road towards it.

As she got closer to the city, she began to see other people on the road. They mostly did not take much notice of her, glancing briefly in her direction if at all. She had thought she would stop the first people she met and ask for help, but none of these people seemed friendly enough, and she stayed quiet and kept walking. They were mostly walking fast, or riding on carts, and seemed to be busy people, mostly headed away from the city. The few who did look in her direction, had a mean and cruel look on their face, like they were considering whether it was worth stopping to bully her for a bit. She hurried on, thinking about the crow's story of Hobbit boys who would throw rocks at him for sport.



Looking down at Tharbad, she saw immediately the thing it was most famous for: its broken bridge. The River Gwathlo ran through the city, split in two by a islet in the middle of the river, and Tharbad was once the only place it could be crossed with a wagon. Long ago, a horrible wave of disease had swept through, killing a lot of people and convincing some of the rest to leave, and the bridge had no longer been repaired. Eventually, parts of it collapsed, and the pieces of it lay on the bottom of the river, with a few pillars still sticking up out of the water to show how great it had once been. Some of the breaks in it had been crossed with wooden beams, but it was no longer nearly so good for crossing with wagons, and every few years the wooden planks across the gaps would become weak and break, sometimes as someone was crossing them.

Mira wondered why, with so many people left and so many years passed, they had not simply repaired the bridge. The bridges and roads in the Shire sometimes needed repair, and the Hobbits had to have great work parties where they gathered together and all pitched in, to set things right. Keeping the road and the bridge over the Brandywine River were promises they had made to the Dunedain King back when he gave them the Shire to live in. Mira understood Tharbad to be a city of Men, not Hobbits, and they were bigger and stronger; she wondered why they didn't ever repair the bridge.

There were also the remains of great walls around the city, but it took Mira a minute to realize that's what they were. Tharbad had shrunk in size, and as its population dwindled the walls were too big for it. She saw large portions of it were missing. What she did not know, was that those missing sections were mostly where stones had been taken from the walls by the people who lived there, to use in making their own buildings. The outer section of the city had been mostly abandoned, and only the parts nearest the river were still occupied. As Mira crossed the point where the city walls had once stood, she looked curiously at the rubble which marked that line now, wondering what giant or monster could have brought low such thick, once-strong walls.

There were large parts of the former city that were now covered in standing water, more marsh than ruins, with the crumbled remains of building walls sticking out of the shallow water. There were also large sections which were now overgrown with brush, although Mira saw few if any trees big enough to be worthy of the name. The brush and marshy grass looked from a distance like a fungus which had overgrown the city, creeping over street and house alike.

As she got close to the part of the city that was still occupied, she saw that there was a gate across the main road, and there was a relatively crude wooden fence on either side of it, to discourage any attempt to go around the gate. The gates were open, and people were going in and out. There were a few farmers going in, to sell their food to the people of the city, but mostly there were people leaving, headed out to begin their day's journey to wherever they were going. There was one wagon with dwarves, and Mira saw someone who looked like he might have been a Dunedain, but mostly they were all Men.

Mira wondered when someone was going to talk to her. She expected the guard at the gate to say something to her, but he just looked in her direction for a half-second and then looked away, not interested in asking why a little Hobbit girl would be travelling alone. She walked into the city, and wondered where to go. At least it was a little warmer, with smoke coming out of chimneys on every block and the press of horses and people, all making the street a little less chilly. Plus, she was out of the wind now, and the sun was getting higher in the sky. She was, however, very very hungry.

Then, she came to the first former bridge across the river. Tharbad had a large island in the middle of the river, which was where most of the people still lived. The bridge which once stood there had spanned the entire river, islet and all. On the northern side, now, the pillars were all fallen into the river, and the remains of the bridge were used like giant flagstones to hop across. The river north of the islet was also much shallower than the south side, and some people with wagons simply drove their wagons across the river, whenever the water was low enough. Mira was not happy to get her feet wet in the freezing cold, but there didn't seem to be anybody who looked like they might be helpful here, so she lifted up her skirts and hopped as best she could from stone to stone to get across.

Once on the islet, she turned to her right to go down the main street, which seemed to be where most of the people were. She stopped at a wagon that was pulled up on the side of the street, and was full of warm meat pies. The smell of it was enough to make her tremble, and her mouth began to water. She looked up at the Man who was selling them; he was dark haired, with a face made of sharp angles, and his eyes looked out from under bushy eyebrows.

"Excuse me, sir," she asked, using her most polite voice and brightest smile, "could I have something to eat, please?"

He looked down at Mira, narrowed his eyes, and after a long pause he said, "three coppers."

"What?" asked Mira, confused.

"The cost is three coppers," the Man repeated, with a stern look.

"Oh," said Mira, disappointed. "I don't have any money. I was just thinking maybe you could give me something to eat, since you've got a lot of food. I'm really hungry."

The Man let out an exasperated noise, something between a snort and a sigh, and looked over Mira's head out at the crowded street, as if she were not there. After a few moments, Mira realized he wasn't going to say anything else.

"Oh, I see, uh, sorry to bother you," she said, and walked slowly away.

After another block, she came to another cart selling food, this time apples. He was an even larger Man, with a bushy black beard that stuck out below a broad, round face. He had arms

as big around as Mira's waist, and his voice boomed out over the street as he hawked his wares.

"Excuse me, excuse me sir?" asked Mira, trying again to smile brightly, which she normally found helped her to get what she was asking for.

"Fresh, juicy apples! Finest in all Tharbad! Buy three and I'll give you a fourth one for free!" His voice roared across her like a wave from the Sea, and she stepped back a half step in shock.

"Excuse me, sir?" she asked again.

"Eh, what?" he asked, looking down at her and frowning.

"I was wondering, could I have an apple, please?" she asked. "I don't have any money, but I'm really hungry, and I was wondering if you could give me one?"

The Man looked down at her, his eyes narrowed a bit, and then he got a little smile on his face that was not at all kind looking. To Mira's surprise, though, he said, in a very low voice so she could barely hear it, "Go ahead."

"Oh, thanks," she said, and reached up and grabbed an apple.

Quick as a snake, the man reached out and grabbed her by the wrist. Mira gasped, as he pulled her up by the arm, so she was dangling in the air.

"Thief!" he bellowed out, loud enough for everyone in the street to hear, "I've caught a thief!"

"What? No, you said I could..." said Mira, but her voice was drowned out in the roar of voices, shouting.

"Thief! Thief! Hobbit thief!"

Mira stretched her legs out to try to make contact with the street, but the Man had lifted her several feet up into the air now. Looking around in fear, she saw the faces of the people around her. They looked excited, like they were about to see a show, but they also looked at her with a cruel expression.

"Put her in the pillory!" came the shout from the crowd. Mira wondered what the pillory was, and she looked up at the Man holding her with pleading eyes.

"Please, sir," she managed to get out, "I thought you meant I could have one, I didn't mean to take anything you didn't want me to have," but she could see he was smirking, and enjoying his moment of power over someone smaller.

"The pillory! The pillory!" came the cry, from more people now.

But then, there came another cry.

"Tax assessor!" came a clear shout through the din.

Immediately, the crowd began to disperse. Mira was dropped to the ground without warning, and the apple vendor quickly threw a tarp over his wares and began to pull away his cart. Mira was left on the cobblestone street, her arm still hurting from where the Man had grabbed it, and her tailbone bruised from being dropped. She looked around, and saw the Big Folk all around rushing away, suddenly uninterested in her, and focused on getting away quickly.

"Come on!" said a small and quiet voice next to her, and she looked over to see a small Hobbit boy crouched down next to her.

"What?" asked Mira, but he simply waved for her to follow him, and he began to scamper away, crouching low or sometimes on all fours to run underneath tables or carts in his way. Mira struggled to keep up with him. After she had followed him down a side alley and onto another street, they came upon three Hobbit children, two boys and a girl. One of them, a Hobbit lass of about her own age, used two wooden crutches to help her walk; she looked at Mira and smiled, but spoke in a low and urgent voice.

"Come on, let's get you away from here. They'll figure out pretty soon there is no taxman coming, and then they may go looking for you again, only this time angry at being made a fool of. Come along now, and keep up!"

Then, all three Hobbits turned and hurried off into the city, only occasionally looking back to see that Mira was keeping up with them. Mira found that she was not as good at moving fast through crowded city streets as they were, and even the girl with the crutches was able to move faster than she was, and that girl was also carrying a bag with her. But after a few minutes, they came near the river on the south side of the islet, and they seemed to relax and slow down, as if they had left most danger behind. The girl with the crutches turned to look at her, and smiled.

"Hello, my name is Amaranth," she said. "Who are you? You must never have been to Tharbad before."

"My name is Mira. No, I've never been to any city before. I'm not sure I know how you're supposed to act. Was there really a tax man coming?"

"Oh no," said Amaranth, "that was just me yelling something to distract them all and send them running. They're supposed to all pay taxes to the City Guard, but they never do if they can help it. Taxes on having a cart to sell things, taxes on having a horse carriage, taxes on having clothes made of expensive cloth, taxes on having fancy jewelry on. There's enough

different taxes that the City Guard can always think of something, if they want to, so people just try to stay away from them."

"Oh," said Mira, who thought it sounded rather like how the crow described his life, always looking out to make sure someone didn't come to get you. "Why did that Man think I was trying to steal his apple? I thought he said to take one. I tried to tell him, but he wouldn't listen."

"He knew you weren't trying to steal," said Amaranth, and her eyes flashed a brief look of anger, "he just knew people would believe him over a Hobbit. They were going to put you in the pillory, to have a bit of fun at your expense."

"What is the pillory? How could they have fun at my expense? I don't have any money."

"Not that kind of expense, silly," said Amaranth with a laugh, and she reached over and patted Mira softly on the shoulder. "You are going to take some looking after. The pillory is like a couple boards with notches in them, that they lock around your neck and wrists, connected to poles set in the ground so you can't move. Then they throw mud or worse at your head. Sometimes they throw rocks or bricks. If it's a Hobbit in the pillory in Tharbad, then there won't be anyone to stop them if they decide to play rough, unless there just happens to be a Ranger come along. But the Rangers aren't in Tharbad all that often anymore."

"Oh! That sounds cruel! Why would they do that?" asked Mira.

"Why do Men do any of the things they do?" said Amaranth with a shrug. "They do cruel things for fun, that's the way they are."

"Are we going to the south bank, Amaranth?" asked one of the Hobbit-lads who was walking with them.

"Yes, if you please, Barco. We need to give the Big Folk some time to calm down and start thinking about other things than putting our new friend Mira here in the pillory. Anyway, we have bought enough of what we need that we can leave now if we have to."

"Leave for where?" asked Mira. She had assumed that these Hobbits lived in Tharbad.

"For our home," said Amaranth. "We don't live in Tharbad, we just come here occasionally to buy things like metal knives, that we can't make ourselves."

"Oh," said Mira. "Do you live in Bree?" she asked. It was the only place she had ever heard of Hobbits living outside of the Shire. Amaranth just smiled.

"No, we don't," said Amaranth. "Where do you live?"

"I live near Tuckborough, in the Shire," said Mira. "I thought my family was going to be here in Tharbad, but the person who told me that disappeared, and now I'm not so sure."

"How far away is that?" asked Amaranth. "Do you have enough food to make it back there?"

"I don't have any food, I'm afraid," said Mira, and her stomach growled a little bit as she said it. She put a hand on her belly and grimaced. "There were these...things, that were chasing me, and I ran away from them, and then I met Renshaw and he rescued me from them and took me with him here. Now, I'm not sure, maybe I should go back, but it's a long way, and I haven't quite decided what to do. I thought I could get some food by going into the city, but as you saw that didn't turn out too well."

"We should take her with us, Amaranth," said the boy named Barco, as they approached the bridge across the river. "She won't be safe in Tharbad on her own."

"She's not one of us!" said the other boy.

"She's a Hobbit, though!" said Barco.

"But she's not one of Grandmother's Hobbits!" said the other boy.

"Hush, Venido," said Amaranth, with only a trace of annoyance. "We cannot take outsiders to our homes, but that rule's not meant for other Hobbits."

"Is your Grandmother back at your home?" asked Mira.

"Oh no, that's not what we mean," said Amaranth, and she smiled at Mira again. "My grandmother is, yes, back at our home, but that's not what Venido was talking about. We're not Shire Hobbits, or Bree Hobbits. That's what we call ourselves, as a group. We call ourselves Grandmother's Hobbits."



## Chapter 8

"Grandmother's Hobbits?" asked Mira, confused. "Whose Grandmother do you mean, if it's not yours?"

"It's just our name for ourselves," said Amaranth, and she smiled and shrugged her shoulders. "There are Shire Hobbits, Bree Hobbits, and a few other smaller groups. We're 'Grandmother's Hobbits,' that's our name. There aren't nearly as many of us as you. You must be a Shire Hobbit?"

"Yes," said Mira, uncertainly. Hobbits in the Shire didn't call themselves "Shire Hobbits"; they just called themselves "Hobbits", and rarely ever remembered that there were any Hobbits in the world who didn't live in the Shire. Bree Hobbits, who lived in the village of Bree or very near to it, were the only other ones she had ever heard of.

"We're an older group than you. We used to live in a place called The Angle, where two rivers meet. That's where the Rangers live now, and their families. Then we went over to the other side of the mountains, and stayed by a river there. But an old wise Hobbit matriarch, our leader at the time, decided that it was time to move back over the mountains. Since the Angle was taken by the Rangers, she led us to another place to live, nearer to Tharbad."

Mira was going to ask why they didn't just live in Tharbad, but she quickly realized that it was obvious why not. It didn't seem like a very friendly place for Hobbits.

"Why did you want to live near Tharbad?" she asked instead.

"We need to go into the city every once in a while to buy things, like metal tools, that we can't make ourselves," said Amaranth. "We can grow our own food, and make our own clothes, and build our own homes, and all of that. But metal takes a smithy, and coal to fire it, and ore to work, and we don't know how to do any of that. Besides, it would be hard to hide all of that from Big Folk."

"Do you need to hide from the Rangers?" asked Mira. The only Ranger she had ever really talked to much was Arador, but he seemed nice enough, and he had helped to rescue her when she was kidnapped. She couldn't imagine a Ranger putting Hobbits in the pillory for fun.

"The Grandmother told us to hide from the Big Folk," said Amaranth, and her expression turned from smiling to a very serious look, like she was reciting something from memory that she had been told was important. "She said that The Gollum would bring bad folk to look for us, Big Folk who would be merciless and cruel. She said we had to cross the mountains, and hide where we lived from any of the Big Folk, even the ones who seemed good."

"Oh," said Mira, and she frowned a bit, trying to take it all in. She had more questions, but they were interrupted by their arrival at the bridge over the river. It was not, of course, still a



bridge really. The pillars that had supported the old bridge were still there, and there were planks of wood that had been put across some of the gaps. It almost looked like a proper bridge, still, until you got close to it.

They walked across, and Mira tried not to look down through the gaps between the boards, at the swirling water below; it made her feel a little queasy. In some spots the planks were either never nailed down properly, or they had come loose, and while they could still be used you had to be careful how you stepped on them or they could come loose. Amaranth used extra care in these sections, and Mira realized that if any of the planks did give way or turn under her, she might not be able to jump to the side as quickly to save herself. It made Mira as queasy watching Amaranth cross as it did when she crossed over those sections herself.

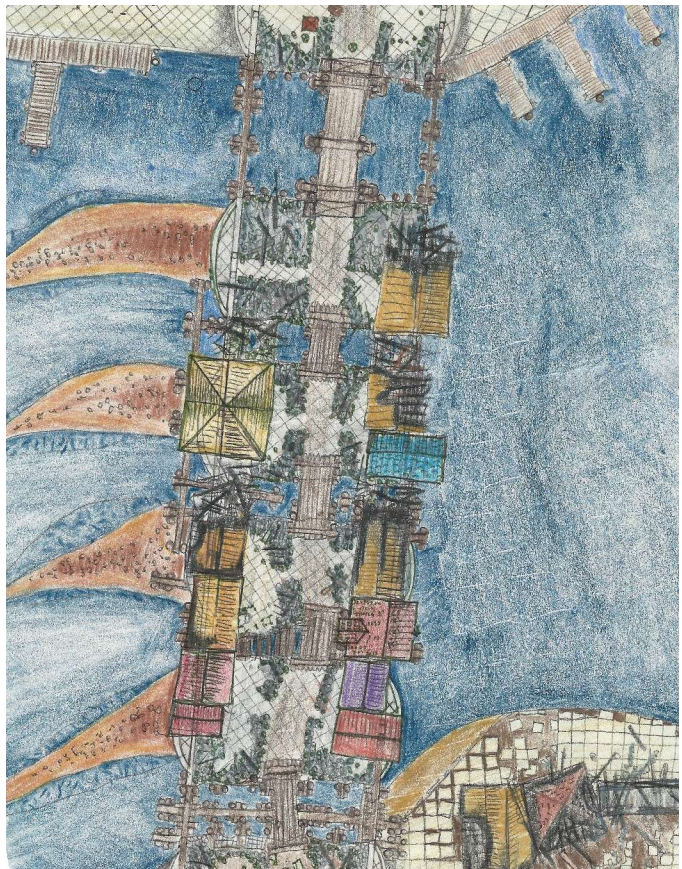
There was also another Hobbit there, on the end of the bridge near the south bank, a grown Hobbit, and he was dressed like the others, in simple, rough but neat clothes. She noticed now that their clothes were all natural browns and greens, without any bright colors or shiny buttons. It occurred to her that their clothes would make it easier for them to stay hidden, once they were out of the city. Even when they were in the city they would attract less attention than if they wore something more brightly colored.

The Hobbit raised his arm in greeting, and smiled. Mira could tell that he was probably their father; he had the same broad face and narrow chin as Amaranth's brothers, and the same wide smile and big ears as Amaranth. He was obviously noticing Mira, who he could not have expected to be with them, but was too polite to stare.

"It's Papa," said Amaranth, "let me do the talking at first. He's fine, really, but we do have to be cautious, so he may take a little convincing."

"Hullo, Amaranth," said the grown-up Hobbit standing there waiting for them, once they got close enough. "Who's your friend?"

"Papa, this is Mira," said Amaranth. "We found her being bullied by the Menfolk, so we got her out of there and took her with us. She is a long way from her home, in the Shire up north, and she's been abandoned, and she's out of food. If we leave her here, I think the Men of Tharbad



will do cruel things. I know she's not one of Grandmother's Hobbits, but she's still a Hobbit, not one of the Big Folk. I think we should take her with us."

"Hmmm...", said the Hobbit slowly, with a slight frown on his face. Then, he turned to Mira and asked, "What is your full name, miss?"

"Mirabella Took, at your service," said Mira, with a slight curtsy, trying to be on her best behavior.

"Ottaviano Argine, at yours," said the Hobbit, with a nod of his head. "Mirabella, it is not our custom to have visitors at our home. Where is your family?"

"I'm not quite sure," said Mira, "I thought Renshaw was taking me to them. But then he disappeared, and now I'm thinking maybe he wasn't telling the truth. They might still be up at Great Smials, wondering where I went, or maybe those shadow things did get to them?" Mira's voice got more worried as she talked.

"Renshaw?" said Ottaviano with a deeper frown. "Hmmm...I have met this fellow, although it was a long time ago. Miss Mirabella, I believe you should come with us after all. And perhaps we should hurry."

"You know Renshaw?" asked Mira, surprised.

"Not well, but well enough, and I would not wish to know him any better," said Ottaviano.

"Amaranth," he asked his daughter, "how did the shopping at the smithy go?"

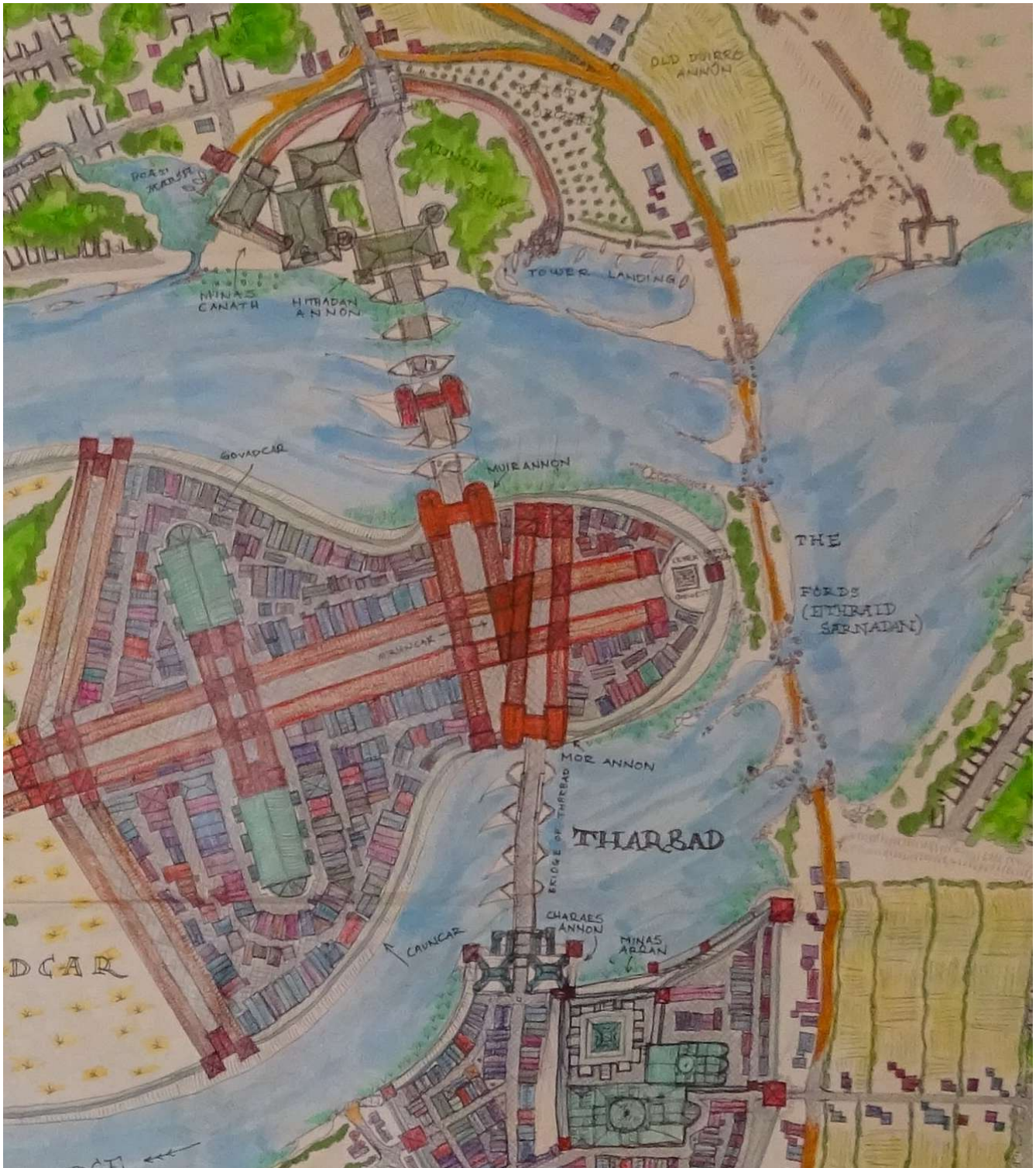
"Well enough I think, Papa," said Amaranth. "We got all the cutlery we wanted, and the axehead, and two billhooks. They didn't have any small augers but you said that wasn't as important this time."

"Yes, we still have two left, and they are in good enough shape if we are careful with them," said Ottaviano. He turned and motioned for them to follow, and they left the bridge, walking past small groups of the Big Folk on the bridge or in the street who paid little attention to them. Mira was not accustomed to being ignored, but she found that here in Tharbad she quite preferred to be ignored than to get the kind of attention the Big Folk seemed to want to give.

Mira saw that there were still buildings standing there, on the southern bank, but some of them looked to have been abandoned for many years. Mira could see the thin wisps of smoke curling up into the sky from the chimneys of a few, though. Amaranth said there were still people living in the buildings right next to the bridge.

"The bridge? You mean that fallen down thing that used to be a bridge?" asked Mira.





"We still call it a bridge," said Amaranth with a laugh. "It's always been partly fallen down, as long as we've known. It's still the easiest way to get across the river; easier than the ford, especially in the spring when the river is high. So there are still people using it if they're

headed south or coming up from that way, and there's a few shops right by the bridge that sell to them. Not as many as there used to be, in the old times, but still a few."

"Why are there not as many as in the old time?" asked Mira.

"There's no King," said Amaranth, as if that were obvious. "When there's no King, there's nobody to make everyone cooperate, and the roads get unsafe. The Rangers do what they can, but there's only a few of them, and the roads go on a long way. Bandits sometimes attack people who still try to use the roads, if they look like they have a lot of money and not too many guards, and there's no Rangers about. So it's best to not look too well-to-do, but look mean enough to fight off bandits, if you can. Hobbits won't look mean enough to the Big Folk to keep them from attacking, so we have to travel in small groups and try to be quiet and hard to notice."

"Let's start with the being quiet now, actually," said Ottaviano, a little sharply. "Boys, you too, quietly now."

They walked down into the part of the town on the south bank,. There had once been a small fortification on the south end of the bridge, and it was still mostly standing, so they had to walk a short distance further south to get around it. Once they could, they turned east, and walked along a dirt road next to some farmland, still partly used, until they came to the river's edge just upstream of the ford. There was a good deal of brushy plant life down by the water, and Ottaviano went up to one of the bushes and reached into it, motioning the boys to help him.

Then, they slipped into a couple small wooden canoes, carved out of tree trunks, and before she had quite realized what she was doing they had pulled Mira into one as well and pushed off into the river. Mira did not know how to swim very well, and she had little experience with boating. What experience she had, though, told her that this was not a boat, it was a canoe that would not stay upright if she leaned the wrong way. The day was clear and the sun was bright, but it was still cold, and she shuddered to think what it would be like if she tipped the canoe over and they fell into the frigid water. She sat upright, and tried to be very still. She was in a canoe with Barco, who began paddling their canoe out into the river, and Amaranth, who was sitting in the canoe facing her. Amaranth smiled again, trying to make Mira feel at ease without saying anything. It occurred to Mira that none of the Big Folk had probably even noticed that they had gotten into canoes and paddled off; there were none close at hand and they were making very little noise.

They all became as quiet as Hobbits can be, which is rather quiet compared to you or I, and they paddled in silence, making as little splashing noise as possible, and staying close to the southern bank. This meant the current was slower there, and less effort to work against, and it also meant they were partially obscured from sight by brushy plant life near the water.

Looking over at the south bank, Mira could see streets that had not been used much in many years. Plants were starting to grow, thrusting up between cobblestones or just growing out of

small piles of old leaves and dirt that were on the road, since no one cleared it away and not enough people went this way to keep it from growing up. Mira was reminded of the Greenway. She thought about how the Hobbits of Tuckborough spent a day every spring repairing and clearing the road to Woodhall, that ran past Great Smials. Even the rest of the year, if after a big storm there was a tree fallen across the road or a drift of leaves, they would stop on their way and clear it aside before they went on. She had assumed that everywhere they did something similar, to keep their roads passable. It wasn't that much work, if everyone helped out, and in the Shire nearly everyone did.

Why didn't they do it in Tharbad? Maybe there just weren't enough people? But there seemed to be a lot of people on the islet in the middle of the river. Mira thought, a little bit angrily, that if they were as interested in clearing things up and repairing them, as they had been in putting a Hobbit girl in the pillory, their city would look a lot better than it did.

They paddled on past the edge of the city. There was a light snow falling, white flakes falling from a grey sky into water that looked nearly black. They stopped briefly to get cloaks out of their packs, since the wind blew much colder outside of town, with no buildings to block it and no fires from nearby buildings. Mira noticed that their cloaks were a very light grey, which blended in well with the dirty snow and dark brown branches of the winter landscape. She felt like she was standing out horribly in her bright blue dress and yellow winter cloak; at least the blanket she had around her shoulders was not such a bright color. She also wished she had boots. Most Shire Hobbits did not wear shoes, with the Buckland Hobbits being the only exceptions, but she noticed that Grandmother's Hobbits all seemed to wear boots. Hobbits have broad, thick-soled feet, and she did not suffer as much as you or I would to sit, in bare feet, in a canoe while it was snowing, but it was still not at all comfortable.

They paddled in silence, and did not stop until lunch. They had to take turns paddling. Mira took a bit to learn how to paddle, and at first was not able to make much progress, but after a while she did better. Her only consolation was that by going so slowly she was actually giving Mr. Argine (who was paddling the other canoe just then) a bit of a rest, since he slowed down to wait for her. They ate snacks that Mr. Argine had bought in the bakery on the south shore in Tharbad, some sort of fruit-filled bready pastry that Ottaviano handed out, including to Mira. It was only after she had gobbled hers up that she realized that he had not eaten.

"Aren't you hungry, Mr. Argine?" she asked.

"Not just now, Miss Took, not to worry," he said softly. "Let's keep the talking to a minimum, though, please."

Mira sat in silence, a bit chastened at having made too much noise. It was some time later before it occurred to her that he probably only had one pastry for each member of the family, since he had no reason to think they would have shown up with a guest, and the reason he was not eating was that he had given Mira the pastry he had intended for himself. This made her feel a bit guilty as well, and she sat for a while with her head sagging a bit.

They stopped again at dusk, and made camp near the river under a tree for camouflage. The area near Tharbad had few if any trees left, but they were a fair distance away now, and the countryside looked more wild. Mr. Argine made a small fire to warm up some sort of meat pies, of the sort that Mira had seen being sold in Tharbad. Mira noticed that at least Mr. Argine was eating as well this time, so he must have brought a little extra food. The canoes were useful for keeping them up off of the cold ground, and Mira and Amaranth shared one, sleeping under the same blanket. It was crowded and not especially comfortable, but Mira was glad of having a bit of warmth from having Amaranth in the same canoe. Barco and Venido shared a canoe, and Mr. Argine slept on a pile of leaves and twigs on the ground in between them. Mira noticed that the rough appearance of the canoes, made them still look a lot like fallen tree logs when viewed from a distance. Anyone passing by their campsite, unless they were very near, would see only a few fallen logs, with the light gray color of their blankets looking like a coating of dirty snow unless they looked very closely.

They continued on for several days like this, paddling slowly upstream and camping under cover of some small copse of trees each night. Amaranth and she would whisper to each other in the dark sometimes, for a little bit; Amaranth would ask her questions about the Shire and Mira would try to answer them. She realized she didn't actually know that much about many parts of the Shire, and felt a little awkward about that. Amaranth was amazed when she described how big Great Smials was, and sounded a little envious. Mira tried to stress how much work it was to clean it all the time, so that it didn't sound like she was boasting.

"How do you get the money for the things you buy in Tharbad?" asked Mira in a whisper at one point. As soon as she asked it, she wondered if maybe it wasn't something she was supposed to ask, but Amaranth didn't seem to mind.

"We sell them coal," said Amaranth. "There's a huge pile of coal in a ruined building. It's falling down, and not safe for any of the Big Folk to go into, but we can because we're small enough. We take out enough coal to sell to them for money, and then give the money back to them for metal tools. Sometimes we can also buy a bit of food for the journey back; it's not like the food we have at home, so it's a nice change. We also sell them baskets we weave from marsh grasses, or some herbs that they can't get around Tharbad."

They camped three nights in the wild. By this point, Mira felt like she was able to paddle the canoe well enough to be of some use, and felt a little better about that.

About midday on the fourth day, Amaranth said "Home at last," and Mira was surprised to see all of them stop paddling. Mira looked around, but saw nothing, just the same snow-dusted riverbanks they had been paddling past for several days, with a thin margin of trees next to the river. They pulled their canoes up onto the banks of the river, turned them upside down, and kicked some dried leaves and mud over them so that they looked just like fallen logs. They walked a few yards further on uphill away from the river and then, Ottaviano took a key from his pants pocket, reached down into the snow, and pulled up a trap door, revealing stairs going down into the ground. Barco, Venido, and Amaranth all descended, and Ottaviano gestured for Mira to follow.



"In you go, Miss Took," he said, "it's not like your homes, I'm sure, but it's cozy enough. Surely better than sitting and sleeping in a canoe for days."

She looked down at the stairs into the darkness, and slowly stepped into the dimly lit opening. The stairs descended steeply; it was more like going down a ladder than going down the stairs in her home. There was dim light coming from below. When she came to the bottom of the stairs, she was pleased to find that it was warm, although very dim, the only light coming from the glowing coals in the fireplace and a single candle in the middle of the room. The room was oval-shaped and rounded on the top and bottom, as if they were inside of a giant egg. Barco and Venido were already slouching against the sloping sides of the room; it was not exactly clear where the floor stopped and the walls began. There were several other Hobbits who looked at her as she entered at one end; Amaranth was still standing, and she stood close to Mira and put a hand on her shoulder as she introduced her.

"Everyone, this is Mira Took. She's a Shire Hobbit, and she was lost and alone in Tharbad and being picked on by the Big Folk. We're going to help her out for a little while, and then find someone to take her back to her home up north."

"She's not one of us," said a little girl who was sitting near to Barco and Venido.

"No, Ivy, she's not one of Grandmother's Hobbits, she's a Shire Hobbit, like I just said. But she's a Hobbit, just the same."

"She was taken from her home by Renshaw," said Mr. Argine. He spoke while stooping to get some sort of food from a bag on the floor; a root of some kind. His voice, though, was clear, and it was immediately followed by a silence from everyone in the room. It seemed to Mira that the other Hobbits had heard of Renshaw, and also that they were frightened of him.

"Have you met him?" asked Mira, in a voice that sounded tiny and uncertain all of a sudden.

For a moment, no one spoke, and most of the Hobbits looked down at the ground.

"Dear, why don't you come in and have a bite to eat," said a Hobbit who looked like an older version of Amaranth, without the crutches. "You've had a long journey and a fright or two, I'd wager, and that needs food to recover from. We've got some mangelwurzel, some turnip, and some burdock roots, all cooked and ready to eat. Would you like some?"

Mira didn't even recognize what any of that was, but it seemed impolite to turn her nose up at her hosts' food. In any event, she was very hungry.

"Yes, please, thank-you," she said.

Amaranth took her to a spot on the floor. The Argine family, at least, did not seem to have much in the way of furniture; there was a small fireplace in the side of the wall with a fire-

ring, and a large metal pot suspended over where the fire had been. There was no smoke now, but the roots had been put into a metal box that was stored inside the ashes of the fire; Mrs. Argine expertly removed it and took off the lid using wooden tongs, and then put a few of the roots into a clay bowl and handed them to Mira, along with a small wooden stick and a wooden spoon.

Mira looked down at her bowl, with the odd-looking food and the mysterious stick and spoon poking out of it, and wondered what to do. Thankfully, after a few moments Mrs. Argine gave a similar bowl to Amaranth, and Mira could watch her.

"You hold the bowl in one hand, and the spoon and stick in the other. You can use the stick to spear anything too big to use the spoon for. You just hold the foodstick and spoon in the same hand like this," said Amaranth, and she reached over to adjust Mira's grip. Amaranth's hands felt warm and strong, and Mira couldn't help noticing also very calloused, as if she had done a lot of rough work. Mira tried to pay attention to what she was being told, but there were so many strange things at once that it made it difficult. Strange ways to sit, strange food to eat, strange ways to eat it, strange room to eat it in.

She held her face directly over the bowl, since she was nearly certain she was going to drop her food the first time or two. She did manage to get one end of a root into her mouth, and slurped a bit to get the rest of it in. She looked up, a bit dismayed, thinking perhaps she would be thought rude.

Around her, all of the other Hobbits who had showed up with her were being given bowls, and were slurping like mad, and more or less shoveling the food into their mouth. She looked over at Amaranth, who was looking back at Mira with a slightly worried look. Mira realized that, while she was worrying if she looked rude to them, Amaranth was worried that her family looked rude to Mira.

Mira smiled a big smile to Amaranth, and then ate some more. Amaranth smiled back, and they spent the next several minutes gobbling up their food.

"I wish you were visiting in summer," said Amaranth after they had nearly finished eating. "We spend the winters underground, but we spend the summers up in treehouses. It's a lot more comfortable."

"Oooh, a treehouse!" said Mira, appreciatively.

"I like the treehouse better than the sett," she said, "but during the winter there's no leaves on the trees, and they're too easy to see. So we have to take them apart and move underground for the winter. It's also warmer than being up in the tree would be when the cold wind blows, of course."

"That sounds like a lot of work, moving everything every year," said Mira. Then, looking around her briefly, she realized that the Argine family didn't actually seem to own very much

in the way of stuff. She was so accustomed to living in Great Smials, with centuries of accumulated possessions sitting in room after room, that the thought of moving your entire household twice a year seemed daunting. She realized that the Argines might not have enough belongings to make it much trouble.

She looked over at Amaranth, a bit wide-eyed, wondering if she had just said something wrong. Amaranth did look a tiny bit flushed, as if she were feeling a bit embarrassed at seeming poor compared to Mira's family, but at the sight of Mira's expression she smiled and chuckled a bit.

"It's not actually all that bad," she said.

"It sounds nice, living in a treehouse during the summer," said Mira. In reality, the thought of climbing that far up made her a bit queasy, but she didn't want to say so.

"It's good, as long as a sabre-toothed cat doesn't get you," said Venido, who was sitting near to them.

"What's a sabre-toothed cat?" asked Mira, looking up from her bowl. Amaranth grimaced.

"It's a cat as large as a big horse," said Venido, "and it has two fangs that are so long they stick out of its mouth longer than a hobbit's forearm. They can climb trees, and they won't say no to a bit of hobbit to eat."

"Venido, you're just trying to scare her," said Amaranth crossly. "The sabre-toothed cats mostly stay in the mountains, now. They don't like to cross the Angle, where the Rangers live, so they don't normally get over to where we are."

"Sometimes they do, though," said Venido, "if there's too many of them in the mountains, some of the young males will start coming down to look for food, and the Rangers don't catch all of them. If they miss one, it will come down to where we are. Then, look out! We've had to post a guard all night sometimes to watch for them."

"What do you do if you see one coming?" asked Mira.

"He wouldn't know, he's never seen one," said Amaranth.

"But the Cuocco family did, and now they are all gone. We found..."

"That's enough about that, Venido," said Mr. Argine, a bit sharply. They were all quiet for a few seconds, with only the sounds of the last bit of their food being eaten.

"Anyway, that's mostly a winter problem," said Venido. "That's another reason we move houses. During the summer, there's fewer sabre-toothed cats, probably because they have food enough in the mountains. But then, you have to worry about the river dragons."

"Dragons!" squeaked Mira.

"Venido, quit trying to scare the poor lass," said Mrs. Argine.

"Don't worry, Mira," said Amaranth, "they're not really dragons. Just big lizards. Crocodiles."

"Big enough to eat a Hobbit, though," said Venido.

"But they sleep through the winter, so there's no need to be talking about them now!" said Amaranth. "Anyway, it is true that it's another reason we move homes. During the winter, you want to be underground, so the sabre-toothed cats can't get you. During the summer, you want to be away from the river, so the river dragons won't get you. It's all fine as long as you know their habits and how to stay away from them. And we do."

"Oh," said Mira, and she finished the rest of her food in silence.

## Chapter 9

Bungo is much the same as ever. He has finished his smial. You can count on him to do things right.

Mira awoke once during the night, and saw that Mrs. Argine was stoking the fire in the fireplace. It was underground, so she couldn't tell what time it was, but it seemed very late (or perhaps very early). The room was full of many Hobbits sleeping on thin pallets on the ground, and Mira could hear the soft sounds of their breathing. Mrs. Argine heard Mira stirring, and looked over.

"Nothing to worry about, dear," she whispered. "We just like to cook when it's dark, so the smoke doesn't attract as much attention from anyone above ground who might be nearby. You can sleep for a few hours more."

Mira smiled, and then closed her eyes and tried to get back to sleep. She tried to imagine, for a little while, what it would be like to live a life of almost constant hiding. They all seemed used to it, but Mira thought it might make them all fearful of strangers. She wondered why Amaranth had decided to help her, instead of running away.

She also wondered how they had met Renshaw before, and what they knew about him. Mira realized she didn't know all that much about Renshaw. Maybe she shouldn't have trusted him. But what else could she have done? She fell asleep again, and then awoke with a start to the sound of a dog barking outdoors. She sat up sleepily, as Mrs. Argine lit the candle again, and was surprised to see that everyone around her was acting as if something horrible had happened.

"What's wrong?" she asked, but Mr. Argine waved her silent. Mira looked around, and saw all of the others were looking at him. He gave a signal with his hand, a sort of circling motion, and they all began quietly picking up their things and preparing to move.

He moved to the back of the room, on the opposite side from the entrance, and opened a small round door there. Beyond, there was a small tunnel, barely large enough for a Hobbit to crawl

through. He motioned with his hand held up flat with the palm towards them, and they waited.

Mira recalled a time when she was smaller, when her older brother Isengrim told her that there were tunnels in Great Smials that had been filled up or blocked off long ago. They were made in the early days of the Shire, as secret evacuation routes if they were ever under attack. After the Shire became much larger, the escape tunnels were no longer maintained, and eventually they were filled up and sealed off as a safety measure, before they collapsed. Mira realized that the Argines were getting ready to evacuate, and this was an escape tunnel. But Mr. Argine was going to go first, to see if it was safe, or if the escape tunnel had been found as well.

"Hullo?" they heard from above.

"Bungo!" said Mira with a gasp of surprise. The Argines all looked at her.

"You know this person?" asked Mr. Argine, in a whisper.

"Yes, it's Bungo Baggins! From the Shire!" said Mira, keeping her voice down this time.

"Another outsider?" asked Venido. Ivy began to snuffle as if she was going to cry.

"Is he a Hobbit?" asked Amaranth.

"Yes, he's a Hobbit, a quite respectable and trustworthy one," said Mira, anxious to reassure them that Bungo was not going to be a problem. "I'm so surprised that he is outside the Shire."

Then, she realized that what she had just said reflected the common Shire opinion that it was disreputable to be outside the Shire, and she was talking to a family of Hobbits who had never been to the Shire. She winced a bit; she seemed to keep saying things to offend the people who had rescued her.

"I mean, he's not a very adventurous sort, and it's odd that he's so far from his home," she added, anxiously.

"No doubt he's here because he's tracking you," said Mr. Argine, in a low voice, nearly a whisper. "Quite a coincidence otherwise. The question is, does he come alone, or with anyone else? Miss Took, I'm going to have you speak to him through the door, if you would, but don't say anything about being with anyone else, if you please."

"What about the rest of us? Should we start to leave?" asked Mrs. Argine.

"Not just yet," said Mr. Argine. "Let's see what his voice sounds like when he talks to Miss Took. Mira, is this Baggins fellow a good liar? Can he mask any nervousness in his voice?"



Mira chuckled. "Oh my goodness, no. He's as clear as a bowl of spring water."

"What if she's a good liar?" asked Venido, but Mrs. Argine hushed him, and Mr. Argine guided Mira over next to the trap door that led above ground, and nodded to her.

"Hullo, Bungo?" she said.

"Mira, is that you?" came Bungo's voice, as well as a great deal of barking.

"Yes, it's me. Is that dog with you?"

"Yes, this is just old Snuffler, I borrowed him from Holman to help find you. Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Is there anyone else with you?"

"No, just me, but your mother and sisters went to go find some Rangers. They asked me to follow you in the meantime, while they went for help. Are you able to get out of there? Who put you in there?"

Mira was wondering what to say to this question, when Mr. Argine suddenly opened the door.

"She's staying with us," he said. "Pray come in, Mister Baggins. Bring your dog with you, but keep it on a short leash, if you would."

Bungo's eyes went a bit wide, and he looked over at Mira for a moment. Mira tried to smile in as encouraging a way as she could, but she was worried that she would look worried, and he would think that meant they were keeping her captive. She didn't WANT to look worried, but worrying about worrying might look the same as worrying. She grimaced.

"Please come in, Bungo, they're good people," she said.

"Oh, certainly Miss Took, never a doubt about that," said Bungo, in a voice that suggested he very much had a doubt about exactly that. But he picked up Snuffler, and descended down the steep stairs into the Argine home.

Once down in the Argine home, seeing the many members of the family crowded around and only a single candle to light it, Bungo's face had a slightly stunned expression. He looked as if maybe he had half a mind to climb back up the stairs. Mira wondered miserably if her face had looked like that when she first came in.

"Bungo, these are the Argines. They saved me from some of the Big Folk in Tharbad, when I was all alone there."

Bungo broke his gaze away from the room and looked over at Mira, taking a second to take in what she had said. Then, his expression took on a more polite tone, his eyebrows went up, and he mouthed a silent 'oh' of appreciation.

"Well, um, my goodness, that was awfully nice of them. We're very much indebted to you, Mister, um..."

"Argine, Ottoviano Argine," said Mr. Argine, who looked like he knew exactly what was passing through Bungo Baggins' mind, and what he thought of the room he found himself in. "And who are you, again?"

"Bungo Baggins, at your service. I am a friend of the Took family, and when Mira here went missing, they were all in a flutter, as you can well imagine. We saw tracks that looked like it might have been a Man who took you away, Mira, and I guess it was one of the ones from Tharbad? I've just come through there a few days ago, and I'm not exactly sure I can say that they liked me very much."

Otto, Mira, and Amaranth all chuckled at that, and that seemed to lower the tension in the room a little bit.

"No," said Mr. Argine, "they have their own ways, the Big Folk of Tharbad, and their ways don't always include hospitality. But it wasn't one of them that took your Mira here away. That was another fellow, of another kind entirely, although he is about the size of a Man."

"Oh?" said Bungo Baggins. "Who is he?" He looked back and forth between Mr. Argine and Mira. Seeing that Mr. Argine did not seem to want to discuss it, Mira spoke up. She spent several minutes, telling the entire story of what had happened between when she left Great Smials and when Amaranth and the other Argines had rescued her. The Argines asked a few questions, especially about the crow, but Bungo did nothing but listen, and occasionally pet Snuffler to keep him calm. The story took a while, so partway through they all sat down and got comfortable.

Bungo looked over at Amaranth in wide-eyed admiration when Mira told the part where she had distracted the Big Folk to allow her to escape, and said, "My goodness, young Miss Amaranth, what a clever trick! You are a good friend to have in a tight spot, and no mistake!"

Amaranth blushed just a tiny bit.

When Mira was done talking, there was a moment of silence, as they all sat and thought about what they had heard. Then, little Ivy's voice broke the silence.

"Can I pet your doggie?" she asked.

"What, Snuffler? Oh, sure, he's a friendly dog. Here, I'll sit next to you and hold him while you do, so you'll feel more comfortable about it."

Somehow, the point when Bungo got up from his spot near the door and came into the room, and sat down in the middle of the Argines, who scooted aside to make a spot for him, made Mira's heart leap a little. He talked for a few minutes about how Snuffler had tracked Mira's scent all the way from the Shire, even through the streets of Tharbad.

"Had a spot of trouble at the river, though, I must say," said Bungo, while Snuffler licked Ivy's face and made her giggle. "Even Snuffler can't track across a river. I had to convince him to walk across that thing that used to be a bridge, which he didn't think too much of and I'm not sure I did either. Then we had to look around for a while before he caught your scent again, and then it wasn't clear which way you had gone. I figured that you had gone somewhere in a boat, so I had to make a guess as to whether it was upstream or downstream."

"I wasn't sure, but something told me maybe you had gone upstream, since you had walked around to a spot upstream of the ford before your scent trail disappeared into the water. Anyway, if you had gone downstream I figured you would go far too fast for me to catch you anyway. Every few hours Snuffler would find a place where you had stopped, and he would go crazy, but then it was always a dead end with no scent trail going away from the spot, so I figured you had gotten back onto your boat and into the water again. I felt a little better after I found your old campsite with the covered up ashes from a fire, since then I knew for sure Snuffler was right and not just getting excited about a rabbit or squirrel or something. I must say, I was just about to wonder about Snuffler again, when he stopped at your doorway up there and starting barking like crazy. I couldn't see anything but a spot of ground. But he was right, after all."

"Bungo," asked Mira, a little hesitantly, "why did you track me here, really? You're not even a Took, and we hardly know each other. It was awfully nice of you, but why, really?"

"Oh, well, your mother asked me to, and it seemed important, you know, and, well, that was it really, I guess," Bungo stammered a bit, and even in the dim light she could see him blushing a little. Mira smiled, and looked over at Amaranth, who smiled back a knowing grin.

"Mira," asked Amaranth, "do you have any sisters, by chance? Older sisters, perhaps?"

"Oh yes," said Mira, "two. One of them is 21 years old, now."

"I bet you and your sisters are very close," said Amaranth. "I bet they would think the world of anyone who took a big risk to go off into the Wild to rescue you."

"I think she already does," said Mira. Bungo's face and ears were scarlet, as he blushed from embarrassment.

To try to change the subject, he asked, "So does anyone know anything about this Renshaw fellow?"

A silence fell over the room, and the smiles vanished from Mira and Amaranth's faces. Mira noticed that everyone was looking at Mr. Argine, who was looking down, as if remembering something. Nobody spoke for several long moments.

"Once upon a time," he said at last, "there was a forest that stretched from the Misty Mountains in the east to the Blue Mountains in the west, and from here to north of the North Downs. It was an ancient forest, with trees our entire family could not have stretched our arms around the base of. Animals lived their entire life beneath its leaves, roaming all their life yet never reaching the end of the forest. It was like an ocean of trees."

"There are still a few patches of it left, they say, although none of them are near here. The Dunedain came; the city of Tharbad was one of their settlements. Then, Men came, and later Hobbits. All of them needed wood, and all of them needed land to farm. Bit by bit, they cleared away the forest, chopping down the trees. There are still forests, now, but The Forest, the enormous, almost boundless wood that used to be here, is long gone."

"But, there is a ghost of it that remains. Some say he was there, the spirit of that forest when it was still alive, and some say he only came to be as the forest was cleared away, that he is the incarnation of that ancient forest's rage and thirst for revenge. I don't know the truth of it, but I know that he exists, and he is no Man. He is strong, and patient, and tough, like the trees, but he is also a ghost. That means he is dead, in his heart, and he cannot move on. He is still grieving for a forest that has been gone for countless centuries, and he can never forgive the ones who cleared it away, even though they are all long gone."

"He is a ghost, but he is dangerous. He has powers that I don't understand, and he is able to think long and carefully to plot revenge. Some say he had a hand in the war between the Witch-King of Angmar and the old Dunedain kingdom of Arthedain, helping one side in secret and then the other, so that they would destroy each other. I don't know the truth of that, but I know he bears a lot of hatred in his heart, and he cannot let it go."

"I feel sorry for him," said Mr. Argine, looking over at Mira as he said it, "but I do not trust him. He is not sane, and he is not safe to be around."

## Chapter 10

"Well, my friend, it's a bit of a puzzler, and no mistake," said Gerontius to Argonui, the Chieftain of the Rangers. They had just arrived at Sarn Ford, the stony crossing of the river Brandywine on the south edge of the Shire. They had talked to the Rangers who kept watch there, who told them of Renshaw and Mira crossing at the ford two weeks before.

"It does not sound as if your daughter were being held captive," said Argonui. He looked down at Gerontius with a thoughtful expression, as if trying to solve a riddle. "This would mean that she was deceived by this Renshaw fellow, somehow."

"My lord, there is something else we should tell you about," said one of the Rangers. "The day after their crossing, we found strange tracks in the vicinity."

"Coming in or out of the Shire?" asked Argonui.

"Lord, it is difficult to say, but I think coming out. What manner of thing it was, though, I could not say. I might say it was someone with branches tied to drag behind them, to cover their tracks. We heard nothing during the night, however, and when we searched the next day, could find nothing out of the ordinary, except..."

The Ranger's voice trailed off. Argonui and Gerontius looked more intently at him, waiting for him to finish.

"I know not what to make of it, but there seemed to be a copse of trees there which I had not seen before. Dense, with a shadowy darkness beneath them that made it hard to see anything. Then, the next day, when we went to look at it again, it was gone."

Argonui grimaced, and looked at Gerontius.

"Is it the Old Forest trees?" asked Gerontius. "I didn't know they would ever move so far."

"No, but it might be something like them," said Argonui. "This Renshaw is not someone I have met, but his reputation is strange. Sometimes good, sometimes vicious and cruel. I have a hard time understanding what he wants. I think we do know something now that we did not before, though."

"What is that?" asked Gerontius.

"I think we know who it was that Maeweth was working for when she kidnapped your daughters a few years ago, even if she did not know his name. So he has done it himself, this time."

Gerontius heaved a slow sigh, and then looked up at Argonui and nodded.

"What shall we do about it?" he asked.

"First, we must catch up to him," said Argonui. "He may be tough and patient as trees, but I have not heard that he was fast. If we hurry, we can catch up to him."

"Is that what he wants, though?" asked Gerontius.

"Probably, but we have to do it anyway," said Argonui.

"Shall we go with you, lord?" asked the Ranger they were talking with.

"No, stay here and watch the borders as usual," said Argonui. "He is a subtle and deep thinker. He could well have done this just to distract us, so that we would have no guard if something else should wish to enter the Shire without our knowing of it or being able to stop it. Gerontius and I shall track him."

Now Argonui and Gerontius were, in some ways, old friends. You may have noticed that Gerontius even referred to Argonui as "my old friend" from time to time. But they weren't friends in the same way as you are friends with other children your own age. For one thing, they were both adults, with a lot of responsibilities to people other than their friends. Argonui wasn't just a Ranger, he was Chieftain of the Rangers. He was responsible for all of the Rangers, and more than that, he was responsible for all of the places (like the Shire, and Bree, and Tharbad) which were in lands which the Rangers thought it was their responsibility to protect. He couldn't just drop everything to help any friend who needed it, not if that meant he might leave his duties to others unfulfilled.

Gerontius, though, was also not just any Hobbit. He was Thain of the Shire, and that meant that, while the Shire Hobbits generally tried not to think about the world outside of their borders, he was the one Hobbit whose job it was to do exactly that. If goblins, or wolves, or anything else came from the outside world to threaten the Shire, he was the one Hobbit whose job it was more than any other to see it coming, and get ready for it. This meant that, if you were the sort of person who took notice of Hobbits (and not many outsiders did), he was probably the one Hobbit you would take notice of first.

This was the reason why, although they were both horribly afraid for Mira (especially Gerontius), they were not only worried about her. They were also both responsible for a great deal more than just Mira, or even just their own families and friends. They were both responsible for seeing dangers before they arrived on their doorsteps. When they heard this news of Renshaw, they were thinking about a great deal more than just whether or not he would hurt Mira (although, again, they were very worried about that). They were also trying to figure out what he was up to. And the answer to that question, which was more disturbing than any other answer they could have had, was "I don't know".



It is the unknown which is more worrisome than almost anything else.

For the next six days, Gerontius and Argonui travelled south along the Greenway. Argonui found their campsites each night, and tracks along the way that showed they were still on the right path. Unknown to them, Mira had reached Tharbad the day after they left Sarn Ford, and while they hurried south along Greenway to find her, she was canoeing up the river to the Argine's sett, and then introducing Bungo Baggins to them. Argonui was a skilled tracker, however, and he could tell that, while they were gaining on them, Mira and Renshaw were still several days ahead of them when they camped not far from Tharbad, north across the river.

"From here," says Argonui, "it appears to me that they parted ways." He was standing in the small clearing where Mira had awoken to find herself alone.

"Really?" asked Gerontius. "Did Mira escape somehow?"

"Perhaps," said Argonui, "it does seem that she went over to the edge of the clearing and stayed here behind this bush for some time. But if I read the signs correctly, she went back to the road, while Renshaw went off into the wilds. That doesn't sound much like he was trying to chase an escapee."

"What could explain that, then?" asked Gerontius. "Why bring her all this way just to wander off and leave her at this point?"

Argonui stood for a few moments looking down at the tracks, frowning in thought and pulling distractedly on his short beard. He was trying to imagine the decisions of a Hobbit girl and someone even stranger to him, and it was not easy when you have nothing but their week-old tracks (somewhat obscured by a dusting of snow in the meantime) to go by.

"That I cannot say, but this much is clear; they both walked away from this campsite, but in different directions. I don't like to leave this Renshaw fellow's trail, but it seems that we should follow Mira. She can only have gone to one place, I think. She did not go back north or we would have encountered her, or at least her tracks, and she did not head off into the wilderness."

"No," agreed Gerontius, "she would not do that. Mira is a sociable one, not much for wandering alone in the wilderness."

"So then, she must have gone to Tharbad," said Argonui. "We will go there, and ask after her."

They turned and walked back to the overgrown road called the Greenway, got back on their horse and pony, and began riding south to Tharbad. After a few minutes, they saw it on the horizon, as the Greenway came over the last hill and began its final descent down to the river.

"So, what sort of city is Tharbad, now?" asked Gerontius. "I've not been there in decades."

"Still declining. It was at one time a great city, of Men and Dunedain," said Argonui. "It has been in decline for centuries. With a city as great as it once was, the fall can take many generations. If the walls and roads of Tharbad were washed away tomorrow, but the people were still there, I fear they would not be able to rebuild it. They have little ability to work together, on anything which will not repay them quickly. I think they now all believe that decline is inevitable, and none will work to rebuild what has fallen because they think it is their fate to fall, eventually. I know not how to reverse their gloomy outlook."

"But there are still enough of them, from the looks of it. I see the smoke from many fireplaces coming up, so a good part of the city is still inhabited."

"Yes, it's not the lack of Men to work that is the problem. It is the lack of faith in the future, or in each other. They each think that any effort spent rebuilding is wasted, because they cannot do it alone, and none of their neighbors will help. With nearly everyone thinking that way, I suppose that it is true."

"Can't they just get together and agree to all pitch in? It looks like it was a mighty city, once. Someone must have built it."

"They did, but there was a King then, to make them work together. Now that there is no King, they have lost the ability."

Gerontius and Argonui rode on a bit in silence. Gerontius knew that Argonui was descended from the last King of Arthedain, but it was not something they talked about much.

"As far as we in the Shire are concerned, you are our King, Argonui."

"Thank-you, Gerontius, but I am no King, I am only Chieftain of the Rangers. We gave up that title when we failed to stop the Witch King from destroying our Kingdom." Argonui's voice sounded a tiny bit choked, like he was upset thinking about it. "Also, I don't think most Hobbits think about Kings, much. You don't need a King to keep the bridges and roads in good order."

"It helps, though, to know that there was one, and will be, again. It's what we say about people who live in the Wilds with no laws, 'They've never heard of the King.' It means they live like it's everyone against everyone."

Gerontius looked over at Argonui, who was looking straight ahead, his jaw clenched, and a somewhat pained look in his eyes. He realized that Argonui felt it was his family's fault that places like Tharbad could no longer cooperate. He hadn't meant to make his friend feel bad, but there had not been a King in this part of the world for generations, so he didn't think about it before he talked. Argonui was a strong man, in mind as well as body, and he never seemed to be upset or hurt by anything that happened to him, so Gerontius was a little caught off-guard at seeing signs that he was upset.

"Argonui, you know, it's not your fault. This all happened long ago. Anyway, look at the Shire; we have kept things together. We keep the roads and bridges in good repair, we keep the dikes along the rivers maintained, we keep law and order. All we need is a little help with the borders, and the Rangers give us that. People can sleep comfortably in their homes, without fear. It's not your fault if Tharbad can't do that."

"Whose fault is it, then?" asked Argonui.

"Well, it's their own fault, isn't it?" asked Gerontius.

"I'm not sure, Gerontius," said Argonui. "If you or I were born in a place like that, where everyone tried to take advantage of anyone who wasn't big enough to stop them, I wonder. Wouldn't we just end up behaving the same way?"

There didn't seem to be anything to say to that, so they rode on in silence for a little while, until they came up to Tharbad's north gate. When Mira had gone through that gate, a week and a half before, the guards had given her no notice, and it had been the same when Bungo Baggins had entered the next day. Now, with a Ranger on a horse approaching, the guards looked on with interest. Argonui rode up to one of them, and nodded in greeting. The guard saw the hilt of the sword at Argonui's side, and his eyes opened a little wider in surprise.

"Hello," said Argonui to the guard. He had looked a little bit upset, a tiny bit off balance just a few minutes before, but now he looked calm, and firm in his manner. Argonui knew that Tharbad was not the sort of place where you could afford to look vulnerable in any way.

"We are looking for a Hobbit girl, who came this way perhaps ten or eleven days ago. She had dark, curly hair, and was not yet full grown, even for a Hobbit."

The guard nodded, and then waited, as if he expected Argonui to say something more. When he realized that this was all, he shrugged his shoulders.

"I couldn't say, really. We have a lot of people come through the gate, and we don't ask who they are or where they are going."

"Really? I had heard that when a merchant with goods comes through here, you show a great deal of interest. In any event, there cannot be that many Hobbits coming to Tharbad."

"Perhaps, but it happens. Usually they come by boat from somewhere upriver, I think, we don't really know where from exactly. But if one came through the gate, it wouldn't require me to do anything about it. Perhaps you should look in the city jail, or maybe the pillory." Then he looked over at Gerontius, the Hobbit who was riding a pony alongside Argonui, and his eyes narrowed a bit. "You should stay next to your Ranger friend, here. Tharbad can be a rough town for the Short Folk."

Argonui grimaced, and Gerontius looked worried at the thought of his daughter being in jail or worse. They turned to ride in, and the guard called out.

"Ho there! There's a copper tax on any steed that's ridden through the city gates!"

Argonui held up the hilt of his sword, still in the sheath, and said, "As Chieftain of the Rangers, I and anyone travelling with me are exempt from all city taxes."

"I've never heard that!" protested the guard.

"You have now," said Argonui.

For a moment, Gerontius was worried that the guard might call for his comrades and attempt to force them to pay at swordpoint. But, whether it was because of the sign of his rank or the manner in which he carried himself, something about Argonui told the guard that he should shrug again, and let them go. Argonui rode on in silence for a short time, and Gerontius decided to take the guard's advice, and stay close to the Ranger. Once they were far enough away so as to not be overheard, he asked Argonui:

"The Chieftain of the Rangers is exempt from all Tharbad city taxes?"

"The Kings of Arthedain were," said Argonui, "and the Chieftain of the Rangers is the heir. But it matters little whether it was true or not, because the guard knows there is no law taxing every steed through the city gates. There was a law that taxed every wagon carrying goods in for sale, at the price of one copper per steed used to pull the wagon. Then the guards expanded who they charged that tax to, until it became one copper for any steed, and kept the extra for themselves. Sometimes they make it one copper per leg, steed or person. He knows no more of the laws of Tharbad than any newborn child, nor does he care."

Gerontius rode on beside Argonui for a while in stunned silence. In the Shire, there were not many laws, and not very many rules, but those which they had were all respected. On occasion, of course, someone would break a rule or even a law, but then they would be fined, or shamed, or perhaps even made to spend a night in the Stockholes. The idea that the city guards would make up laws on the spot, and neither know nor care what the laws truly were, was so different from his experience that he had some difficulty imagining it.

They spent the rest of the day going to the city jail, the pillory, and even the cemetery. There was no record or memory of any Hobbit girl being in any of these. Gerontius was, on the one hand, glad of that.

On the other hand, after they had spent the next several days looking through Tharbad and the immediate vicinity, asking around and looking for clues of where Mira had gone, they had to admit there didn't seem to be any sign of Mira anywhere else in Tharbad, either.

## Chapter 11

"Mama, it's Otto," said Mr. Argine through the hole in the ground.

"Otto? Is that you?" came the voice of an elderly hobbit from below.

"Yes, mama, it's me! I've brought some visitors. They're hobbits, but you don't know them."

The door, which looked from any distance away like a featureless piece of ground lightly dusted with snow, opened up. Mira and Bungo saw the grey hair and wrinkled face of an older hobbit lady, looking up at them with a squint.

"Strangers! Otto, what are you thinking?"

"They're hobbits, mama, it's all right. The Grandmother didn't say anything about Hobbits, just Big Folk."

"Hmmm..." she murmured, thinking it over.

"Hullo, Grandma, it's me, Amaranth!" Amaranth leaned forward so that she could be seen from below, and gave her brightest smile.

"Amaranth, are you the one convincing my son to bring strangers to my door? This smells like your work."

Bungo arched his eyebrows just slightly, and Mira tried to hide a smile. It was, in fact, Amaranth who had insisted that they must visit her grandma before they left. Mr. Argine had at first been unwilling, but then he seemed to change his mind when they had begun plans for how and when to return to Tharbad. Mira had the impression he had thought of something he wanted to ask his mother about, something that he needed to know for their journey.

Their grandma lived not far away, but they had to go at dusk, and moved quickly. Mira realized that it was a lot like how deer moved in the forest, always moving under cover of darkness or thick underbrush to hide them, ever worried about being seen by a wolf or big cat or other hunter. She realized that in the Shire, they never had to worry about that, but hobbits here did.

On the the other hand, parents in the Shire did scold their children if they made too much noise out of doors, and they all became expert (compared to Big Folk like you or I) at moving quietly. She had never known why, and she thought probably they didn't either. Indoors you could tromp about, but outside, whenever they were not in a large group, one was supposed to be quiet. Mira wondered, if this was a custom left over from when hobbits had to be that way,

to keep safe. Sometimes being with Grandmother's Hobbits felt to her like they had gone back in time, to the earliest days of the Shire or before.

"Well let's get you all indoors, so you're not just standing out in the open like that," said Grandma Argine, and motioned them all down the steep stairs into her sett.

After their eyes adjusted to the dim candlelight, they saw that it was a similar shape to Otto and Amaranth's home, but it seemed much tidier (perhaps because there was only one hobbit living in it). Mira also saw that there were papers tacked up all around, with drawings on them. She looked closer, and saw that some of them were of Otto, his mother, Amaranth's siblings, or other hobbits she didn't know. Others were of trees, sunsets, the river, or birds.

"Did you make these drawings, Amaranth?" asked Mira.

"Yes," said Amaranth, "how did you guess?"

"You're the only one not in one," said Mira. "They're very good."

"It's not easy to keep a mirror out here," said Grandma Argine. "We buy only what metal and glass things we need, and mirrors are mostly not necessary. It's one more thing to carry back and forth from sett to treehouse and back again every year."

"Your mother had one, though," said Otto, sitting down with his back against the curved wall, in one of the only spots not covered with drawings.

"My mother was vain," said Grandma Argine, "and she ended up dropping it from her treehouse and it broke into a hundred pieces."

"You've never seen yourself?" asked Mira.

"Oh, I've seen my reflection in the river," said Amaranth. "I know what I look like well enough. I'm not as pretty as you, but I'm happy with how I look."

"Oh you look very pretty," said Mira, suddenly embarrassed at being complimented. "You should get someone else to draw a picture of you, so you can see yourself like we do."

"We don't have anyone else who draws as well as Amaranth," said Grandma Argine.

"I don't know about that, Grandma," said Amaranth, blushing just a bit. Mira noted that Amaranth was also uncomfortable with people complimenting her. "Buck is getting better, he's going to be better than me soon."

"You certainly are impressed with that Buck fellow," said Grandma Argine.



"Grandma, I want to introduce you to our new friends," said Amaranth quickly, trying to head off any questions from Mira about who this Buck fellow was. "This is Mira Took, and this is Bungo Baggins. They're from the Shire, up north."

Mira curtsied, and Bungo Baggins bowed and muttered a quick, "at your service, ma'am."

"Ricarda Argine, at yours," said Grandma Argine. "What brings you two so far south? We haven't seen Shirefolk in decades."

"We've seen Shirefolk here before?" asked Otto softly, sounding surprised, but no one answered his question as Mira and Bungo spent the next several minutes trying to explain everything that had happened to bring them to where they were. Grandma Argine listened closely, only occasionally asking a question, until they got to the end of their story, and then there were a few moments of silence as they all thought over what had been said.

"So you see, mama," said Otto, "this fellow Renshaw is up to something. I can't say for sure what, but he didn't bring Mira all the way here just to abandon her as a prank. He wanted her in Tharbad, for some reason. I think those shadowy ghost trees are under his control, and probably wouldn't have gone after Mira in the first place if he hadn't wanted them to."

"I think you're right about that," said Grandma Argine, nodding her head.

"I would like to get Miss Took and Mr. Baggins back on the road to the Shire, as soon as we are able," continued Otto. "Amaranth would probably be happy for Mira to stay here forever, but she's wanted back with her family, that's where she needs to be. But I don't know enough about Renshaw to know how to deal with him, or get around him, and I believe you know more about him than any of us. So, when Amaranth mentioned bringing Mira here to meet you, I thought maybe that would be a good idea. If you have any advice to give us, we'll be sure to listen closely."

For a little while, Grandma Argine didn't say anything; she looked off to the side, as if she were looking back into her own past. When she finally did speak, it almost sounded as if she hadn't heard her son's question.

"Otto, is it dark outside yet?" she said. "I need to do a spot of cooking tonight."

Otto cracked the top door open and looked out. Almost no light came in.

"Dark enough," he said.

Grandma Argine went to the hearth, then, and began to work on getting the fire started. After a few moments, she looked over at Bungo and said, "Come over here, young lad, and help an old lady out a bit."

Bungo got up and shuffled over to the hearth, where he helped with assembling a pile of tinder and, after lighting it with the candle, stoking it up to a hot little fire inside the hearth. The opening was low, so that the smoke would stay inside the chimney and not come out into the room, so they had to lean down to see what they were doing inside the hearth. They worked mostly in silence, only occasionally saying a word or two to each other about what they were doing. After they had been working at this for a couple minutes, and Grandma Argine began adding ingredients to the pot on the stove top, she finally spoke again.

"He is strong, and he is tough, and he is subtle," she said, while peeling and slicing root vegetables of some sort and tossing the pieces into the pot. "He is not easy to understand, and once you know what he is after, it may seem to be too late. But every worm has its weak spot."

"What?" asked Mira. She didn't understand why they were talking about worms.

"Worm is another word for dragon," said Grandma Argine, "although they don't like it much."

"Once upon a time, there was a hobbit named Gregorio. He was friends with a Man, one of the Big Folk named Fram. This was in the time when we had left the Angle, and gone back over the mountains, but before The Grandmother told us to come back here and to hide from the Big Folk."

"Gregorio and Fram were very different in stature, but sometimes they would go hunting together. Gregorio was the more stealthy, but Fram was the more mighty, and when Gregorio found big game, he would creep back quietly to Fram and tell him where and what they were."

"Sometimes, if it was a large predator, Gregorio would let them spot him, and run away, and they would pursue him and come right up to Fram's hiding spot without seeing him, and Fram would run them through with his spear, and then Gregorio and Fram would cook their catch and split the food."

"One day, though, Fram's people were troubled by the coming of a dragon, a worm named Scatha. Fram's father, Frumgar, the leader of his people, went to fight it, and was killed, along with his bodyguards. Fram, still a young man, was now leader of his people, and the dragon was still to be dealt with, because it was attacking his people in their fields and eating them or stealing their livestock."

"Fram met with Gregorio one last time, to say goodbye, because he thought that he would probably not survive, but knew he had to at least try to kill the dragon and defend his people. But Gregorio said he would help his old friend on this hunt, the same as they had done before."

"Fram at first said 'No, there is no use in that. I can find the dragon well enough myself, and I think it will just get you killed along with me. I must fight this dragon, as that is the way of

my people, to fight danger and not flee from it. You, though, can go south, to where others of your people live, and far away from the dragon.' But Gregorio said he would come anyway."

"And anyway, you never know,' Gregorio said. 'I have heard that every worm has its weak spot. I may see something you don't know about.' So Fram agreed, and Gregorio went with him, and he snuck into the worm's cave in the mountains first, to see."

"He crept quietly through the cave, which turned out to actually be an underground city built by dwarves, who Scatha had killed or driven off, taking their treasure for her own. When he got to where she was sleeping, on a pile of her treasure, he saw that she was covered in armor, even her eyelids, even her nose and tail. However, underneath, she was not completely armored. I suppose because she was not a winged dragon, she had armor underneath only in the front half, which was likely to be exposed when she reared up her head, or her tail, which would sometimes lash around and so the bottom would be seen. The back part of the body, underneath, was never exposed, and so had no scaly armor. Gregorio only could see this because he crept up very close to her, and she rolled over just a bit in her sleep."

"Gregorio crept back quietly to Fram, and told him what he had seen. Now Scatha was a large dragon, as long as four men laid end to end, and strong as a troll, with long sharp teeth and long sharp claws. But now, Fram knew how to attack. So, he and Gregorio laid a trap."

"They made their plans, and then when Scatha came out of her lair in the morning, she looked down to see a hobbit, sleeping, on top of a large boulder not far down the hill from the entrance to her lair. She narrowed her eyes and licked her lips, and began crawling down the hill to have this tiny morsel. But, just when she was about to pounce, the hobbit opened his eyes and jumped off the boulder on the side downhill from her. He was only pretending to sleep!"

"Scatha was enraged, and let out a roar, and then leaped up onto the boulder and leaped off it, meaning to pounce on the Hobbit like a cat on a tiny mouse. But in her haste, she did not see Fram, crouched down just on the downhill side of the boulder, with his spear in his hands. As Scatha passed over him, he plunged his spear straight up into her unarmored side, and cut right through Scatha, killing her just before she could snap her jaws shut on Gregorio."

"Scatha was big, and she was strong, and she was fast, and she was tough, but even Scatha had her weak spot. Every worm has its weak spot. And not only worms."

There were a few moments that passed in silence, then, as the other Hobbits in the room thought about the story that Grandma Argine had just told them. Finally, Amaranth spoke.

"What is Renshaw's weak spot, Grandma?"

Grandma Argine didn't answer right away. She continued to stir the food she and Bungo had put into the pot on the stove. The only sound was the soft crackling sound of the wood burning in the fire inside it. Finally she spoke again.

"Renshaw is strong, and tough, and subtle, and he can plan far ahead, and he can speak persuasively. But Renshaw takes his spirit from the old trees of the ancient Forest. He is strong like they were, and tough like they were, and patient like they were. But he is not fast. He is not quick. If things change quickly, he can stay calm, and he can stay focused, but he cannot change his mind, or his plan, quickly. He cannot respond quickly to surprises. Trees are not fast, and very old trees like the trees of the ancient Forest are not flexible. Renshaw is neither fast nor flexible."

"I think," said Grandma Argine, looking up from her cooking at first Mira, and then Bungo, "that if you try to outsmart him at planning, you will fail. But if you keep your wits about you and do something he does not expect, he will not be quick to react to it. Hobbits are not strong, compared to the Big Folk, and we are not as clever as Wizards or Elves, but we can be surprising to them. If you can avoid Renshaw, do so, because he is dangerous. But, if you find yourself face to face with him, remember not to do what he expects."

"Oh dear," said Bungo, looking worried, "I am not very good at being surprising." He looked over at Mira. "Fortunately, the Took sisters are much better at it."

Grandma Argine looked over at Bungo and said, "You never know, you may end up surprising yourself, as well."

Then, while they waited for the food to cook, Amaranth made a drawing of both Mira and Bungo. They sat there, trying to be still enough that she could draw them, but also smile a little.

"I need a picture of you," said Amaranth, "because once you go, it won't be easy for us to see each other very often in person."

Mira knew that what she really meant was, "I'll never see you again," but that sounded too sad.

"Maybe we can write letters," said Mira, trying not to move too much as she said it, and hoping she put her smile back in place in the same way afterwards.

"We don't get deliveries here too often," said Amaranth with a giggle. Mira had forgotten that it was a special favor to her that they had allowed a stranger to find where they lived.

"You can send them to the smith, Arvin, in Tharbad," said Mr. Argine. "We see him once or twice a year, and he will hold it for us and give it to us when we come there."

"Oh," said Amaranth, "that would be nice. I've never had anyone to write letters to before. Papa showed me how to write, but I don't get a chance to practice very often."

After Amaranth was done, the food was ready, and Grandma Argine gave them each a bowl of hearty stew, with broad wooden spoons plus the odd stick to eat with. Bungo Baggins mostly

used the spoon for everything (he never quite got the hang of using the stick for spearing chunks of food), but Mira found that eating this way now seemed quite natural. She kept looking at the pictures of herself and Bungo which Amaranth had made. She found herself wanting to have a picture of Amaranth to take with her.

"So Amaranth," she asked at last, "tell me about this Buck fellow. Do you think we could get him to make me a picture of you before we go?"

"All right!" said Amaranth, very quickly. Mira looked over at Mr. Argine, and saw him looking a slight bit annoyed, while Grandma Argine was trying not to smile.

"It doesn't take much to convince our Amaranth to go visit Buck," she said. "He's not quite as good as Amaranth with the drawing, but I guess he is probably the best one besides her. His sett is just a little ways down the bank from mine, so it won't take too long, I guess."

A few minutes later, after they had said their goodbyes and thank-you's to Grandma Argine, they emerged up into the now-dark aboveground world, and quietly trotted about a hundred yards further down the bank, before knocking on another snow-covered, earth-covered, round door in the hillside. Mira found herself wondering how many other setts of Grandmother's Hobbits they might have passed over in the night, without her ever seeing the entrances.

After whispered introductions through the door, they were let into the home of a family whose name was Fiore. There were half a dozen of them, from the aging Grandpa Fiore to his son Blanco and her wife Marigold, and their three children Buck (the oldest, in his late teens), Wolf, and the youngest, Holly, who was several years younger than Mira. The Fiore family was mostly darker haired than the Argines, black hair instead of brown, and they had slightly more angular features, but their home and their clothes seemed much the same as the others they had seen among Grandmother's Hobbits.

After introductions had been made all around, and food had been offered and thankfully declined, then offered again and just a little bit accepted and eaten in order to be polite, they got down to business.

"Mira and Bungo will have to be going tomorrow, and she was...well, she was just," Amaranth stammered a bit, uncertain. Mira had become accustomed to seeing Amaranth always self-confident and ready to take action, and she was surprised to see her suddenly bashful.

"Buck, I would like you to draw a picture of Amaranth for me, if you could," said Mira brightly, with her nicest smile. "That way I could have one to remember her by when we're gone."

"Oh sure," said Buck, "that's not a problem. Let's just put the candle a bit closer to you, Amaranth, so I can see you just a bit better."

Buck set up the lighting and got his drawing materials together with quick, expert movements. He looked at Amaranth then with the intense look of someone getting ready to draw, and

started sketching. His face was broad, with a strong jaw, and his eyes were big, brown, and very kind looking. He looked back up at Amaranth frequently, and Mira saw that she was blushing just a tiny bit, but her eyes were shining. Mira scooted over next to Buck so that she could watch as he drew.

"It'll be a tricky journey at this time, I think," said Grandpa Fiore, who spoke in a slightly louder voice than the rest of them. He looked like a thinner, greyer, more stooped version of Buck. "We've had a mild winter up until now, but I think there'll be rough weather coming on soon. You'd best pack warm clothes, and plenty of extra food."

"Maybe you should stop at the coal bin, Otto," said Blanco, the father. "You could trade a bit of that for extra food and maybe a heavier cloak. Coal should go for a good price in Tharbad in the winter."

"We weren't planning on going into Tharbad exactly," said Mr. Argine. "Just close enough to put Mira and Mr. Baggins on the right path around it."

"Coal bin?" asked Bungo Baggins.

"It was a depot where they put coal in the old days of Tharbad," said Blanco. "The building collapsed, and they never repaired it, nor cleared it away. It's not possible for the Big Folk to get into it nowadays, buried under the rubble. Hobbits can, if we're careful about it, and if we take a bit of coal out then we can sell it to the Big Folk for whatever we need. It's not enough money to be worth it, if the weather is warm, but when the cold wind bites the Big Folk suddenly remember that coal is worth something."

"Then why don't they fix the building, so they can get to the coal themselves?" asked Mira.

"The people of Tharbad just don't do that kind of thing any more," said Mr. Argine. "They only repair the things that belong to themselves, as individuals. It would take a lot of work to repair or clear away the old building that the coal depot is buried under. Whoever did that work wouldn't be able to get much for it, because they wouldn't own the building, and everyone else in town would come take some of the coal without having done any of the work to get to it."

"Why don't they just do it as a group, and split the coal?" asked Mira.

"That's a Hobbit thing to do, not a Big Folk thing to do," said Mr. Argine.

Mira wondered about that. Who built the coal depot building in the first place? Or the bridge? Or all the other big buildings in Tharbad, or the road between it and Bree? She was pretty sure Hobbits didn't build all of that. But she didn't want to argue with Mr. Argine, so she let it go.

"You're very good at drawing, Buck," said Mira.



"Thanks," said Buck, "but I'm not as good as Amaranth. She's been teaching me, though, and I'm practicing. Here you go!"

Mira looked at the drawing that Buck had just handed her. It didn't look exactly like Amaranth, but it had her broad face and big smile, her curly hair, and her bright eyes. She carefully folded it up, and put it in the pocket in her dress, close to her heart.

"Now," said Mr. Argine, "I think it is time for us to say goodbye. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow."

## Chapter 12

I hope that Tharbad's folk have been nice to each other. Is the store of fuel for the winter good, this year? I don't suppose they'll let that go low again.

"So, that is what the Big Folk's cities look like, then," said Adamanta. They had just come over the crest of a hill, and although they still had some distance to go, they could see off in the distance the city of Tharbad on the banks of the river. It didn't look at all like the villages of the Shire, where Hobbits lived, and not only because all of the houses were aboveground. Tharbad had a few old buildings that still retained a bit of grandeur, but the entire city looked like it was falling apart, the old outer stone walls and the bridge especially.

"They do not all look like that, I'm sure," said Bella, eyeing Gandalf uneasily to see if he took offence. Then she remembered that Wizards were apparently not considered Men, even though they were also not considered elves or dwarves and certainly not hobbits. Bella had never met any other Wizard than Gandalf; like Tom Bombadil he seemed to be some entirely other type of person all his own.

"What happened to it?" asked Donna. All three hobbits looked to Gandalf for an answer, but he did not appear to be listening, and was looking off into the distance as if he were thinking intently about something else.

"Like as not it's just how everything is," said Adamanta, "things fall apart and get dirty if you don't fix them up and clean them off. If we didn't do our work at Great Smials, think what it would look like in a year."

"Especially with our brothers tromping through it," said Bella. "Tharbad looks like Hildibrand's room."

While they were riding slowly down towards the city, they heard a deep, low noise that was more felt than heard. Their ponies whinnied, and the hobbits looked at each other in alarm. It was not immediately obvious what could have caused such a noise.

"What was that?" asked Bella. "Is that what an earthquake sounds like?"

"No," said Gandalf, who was apparently the only one of them who had ever experienced an earthquake, "no, that was not an earthquake. But there is something wrong, no doubt."

"What's happening to the city?" asked Donna. "It's starting to smoke more."

For the next half an hour, they rode on down the road towards Tharbad, and watched it begin to pour forth smoke from hundreds of different points in the city. The sky above the city became dark, as all of the different plumes of smoke began to join together in the sky above. Bella had heard that the cities of Men often were sometimes so large that they chopped down every tree around it for firewood, and the longer the city was there the further away from the city the clearing would be, until there was no wood left within a day's journey. She wondered if this was just how smoky Tharbad normally was, and if the sound they had heard was something that happened every morning, when they all lit their fires at once for some reason.

As they rode closer, it became clear that there was quite a bit more smoke coming from the city than there should be. The chimneys were all spewing forth black smoke in great billowing clouds, and in some places it had started to pour out of the windows and the doors as well. Some people were running into the streets, and running to the wells to fill buckets with water. Many of the people, though, seemed stunned, confused as to how nearly every building in the city (that was still occupied) could have an out of control fire at once.

The hobbits and Gandalf rode slowly up to the open city gates, but there were no guards there to greet them. Some of the people were starting to run out, thinking the city was doomed. Donna noticed that not only her older sister Bella, but also her mother, looked over at Gandalf, hoping he would know what to do.

Gandalf, meanwhile, was muttering softly to himself, his brows fiercely furrowed. He seemed to be looking past the people and buildings around him, as if he was trying to see something through the smoke and the uproar. Then, he stood up in the stirrups on his horse, and held his staff up high above his head.

"Luithia naur os-caras!" he shouted, in a voice which carried clearly through the tumult and uproar and the sound of the many fires.

It was followed by an immediate and almost eerie silence, as every fire in the city of Tharbad was extinguished at once.

With very little delay, that was followed by an explosion of voices, questions, shouts, crying, and chatter. Everyone in Tharbad was talking, and it did not appear that anyone was listening. Gandalf rode his horse slowly through the city, still scanning around him as if he were trying to see something hidden. Bella, Donna, and Adamanta followed close behind him, a little stunned by what they had seen but quite certain that they did not want to be in this city of Men without Gandalf nearby.

The Big Folk of Tharbad paid little attention to them, no more than they did to anything else. Nearly everyone in the city was exclaiming over what had just happened, waving their arms and gesturing as they talked. When they would look at Gandalf, they sometimes stopped in mid-sentence, for just a moment, to see what he might do. But Gandalf looked right past them, still trying to find something he could not. Bella was about to ask him what he was looking for, when she realized what the answer had to be. Someone or something had made this happen, made every woodfire in Tharbad blaze up uncontrollably, and it could not have been an ordinary Man. Gandalf was looking for who had done this, and he was not yet able to find him.

"Gandalf!" came a cry through the hubbub, and they all turned to look where it had come from.

"Papa!" cried Bella, and they rode their ponies swiftly over to him. Gerontius Took was there, on his own pony, riding beside Argonui the Ranger. Donna noticed that Argonui looked nearly as relieved as her father to see Gandalf.

"Gandalf, what has happened here?" asked Argonui. "Did you quench the fires? Buckets of water did not seem to work, even on the fire in a small hearth."

"I did," said Gandalf, "but I fear I may not have done enough. Did you see what began it?"

"We were here when it started, and we saw nothing, just every fire in the city blazing up at once. Even the woodrooms of the houses, where the firewood is stored for the winter, were ablaze. It was a fire that would not be quenched, no matter the water that was poured on it."

While the adults talked, Donna looked around her at the people in the street. She saw them go through stages. First, there was relief that the fires were out. Then, as they talked with each other, all amazed at what had happened, they lamented the wood lost. More than one mentioned that they had lost the entire contents of their woodroom. Some said they would have to buy more firewood. Then, just as it dawned on them that, if everyone in the city needed to buy firewood, there would not be enough for everyone to buy, the first few snowflakes of an oncoming snowstorm began to fall down.

Donna hadn't seen much snow in her life; it only occasionally snowed in the Shire, and it was usually an occasion for laughing and playing. It was magical to see the snow as it came softly down. But, in a city that had just lost almost all of its firewood, and where many of the buildings had just been damaged by the fire, it was going to be difficult to make it through a snowstorm, if it were a big one. Donna had seen how the adults in the Shire reacted when there was bad news, a flood or a fire. They huddled together, with concerned expressions, and talked about what was to be done. All squabbling was dropped, for the moment, though they might quarrel enough normally.

The adults in Tharbad, however, did not react like this at all. As they began to realize that, even though the fires were out, they still had a great problem, they became stone-faced, and stopped talking much. They retreated to their homes, and the streets became empty. The city turned quiet. Gandalf, Gerontius, and Argonui looked up from their huddled conversation.

"That's not a good sign," said Argonui.

"What happened?" asked Gerontius.

"They have realized that they have no fuel for fires, any more, or at least not enough for the winter."

"If they moved together, into fewer buildings, they wouldn't need as many fires to keep warm," said Bella. "Plus, being closer together would keep them warmer."

"That would work, if they would do it," said Gandalf. "But I fear that is not the solution they are thinking of."

"What are they thinking of?" asked Gerontius.

"They will think of taking the wood they need from the little that's left in someone else's store," said Argonui. "Or, if they are not, they are worried that their neighbors are, and they are preparing their house to withstand a siege."

"There will be trouble," said Gandalf, "and we need to get the Took's to a safe place before it starts. Argonui, is there any place in this town you would consider safe?"

"Not right now," said Argonui. "I would advise they head back out of Tharbad, and camp to the north."

"Just us?" asked Gerontius. "Where are you going?"

"Nowhere," said Argonui. "I am going to stay here, and attempt to keep this town from tearing itself apart."

"I will stay with you," said Gandalf. "Gerontius, take your family back north, and then get off the road, out of sight. I will return when I can."

"What about Mira?" asked Adamanta. "Is she somewhere in this city?"

"I believe not," said Argonui, "although she almost certainly was, at one time. Your husband can tell you the details. For now, I would take Gandalf's advice, and leave as quickly as you can."

Bella thought for a moment that her mother would erupt at the idea of taking advice from Gandalf, but then Argonui added something.

"Gerontius, why not go to the last campsite we saw your daughter's tracks at? It was off the road, and out of sight, and we can find you there."

At the mention of finding any trace of Mira, Adamanta relented, and the four Took were quickly headed back out of Tharbad as quickly as the three of them had come in. Gandalf and Argonui went back into Tharbad hurriedly, and the four Took and their ponies went slowly up the hill and away from Tharbad. It was over an hour before Gerontius saw the place where they were to leave the road. They found the cold and blackened remnants of the campfire that Renshaw had made, over two weeks before. The snow was starting to come down thicker now, and they hurried to start up the fire again. There wasn't much firewood to burn, this close to the city, but there were sticks from brush and small trees, and they huddled around the tiny fire they could manage to make. The ponies huddled together unhappily.

"Could we make a lean-to?" asked Bella.

"I'm not sure there's enough long branches to make one, but we could try, I suppose," said Gerontius. Gerontius and Adamanta set about getting longer branches, ranging a bit further away in order to gather them, while Bella and Donna sat by the little fire and tried to keep warm together. The snow began to come down faster, and the landscape turned to white. The ponies were staked nearby, and they huddled close together as well.

Out in the darkness, near the edge of the campfire light, Donna saw a familiar outline.

"I can see you, you know," she said.

The fox, Reynard, came creeping a bit closer, and settled down close to the fire (although not within reach of the Hobbits).

"It's almost like he heard you," said Bella, looking at the fox in amazement.

"He did, I'm sure," said Donna, and she thought about getting him something to eat. On the other hand, if she gave it to him right away, he might just disappear. She wondered if she could get him to talk more.

"How do you stay warm, during a winter snowstorm?" she asked.

"I have fur, of course," said the fox, "so I have an advantage there."

Donna heard a little gasp of surprise from Bella. Apparently she wasn't used to foxes being able to talk, either.



"But then, you have clothes," continued the fox. "This fire is nice, if you can keep it controlled like that. It all comes down to one of three options, for staying warm. One, keep in the heat you have. I curl up and cover my nose with my tail. Two, make more heat. You can stomp around and shiver, to make more heat, and your ponies there eat more food. Three, take somebody else's heat."

"Or four, make some more heat by starting a fire," said Donna.

"No, that's still taking somebody else's heat. But in this case, you're taking it from a tree. It's not a problem, especially if the tree is dead already. But still, it's the tree that grew all that wood, not you."

"Gandalf seems to have another way," said Bella. "He made every fire in Tharbad go out at once, and he can set off fireworks without touching them."

"Wizards are tricky," said the fox, "I don't pretend to know how that works."

"Does that mean it was another Wizard that made them all blaze up like that in the first place?" asked Donna.

Bella frowned for a bit, thinking, then shook her head, "I don't know. Gandalf is the only Wizard I've ever talked to."

"I've talked to one named Radagast," said the fox, "but I doubt it was him. I think, though, if somebody made all the fires in the city blaze up, they must have either been a Wizard, or someone who knew how to communicate with trees."

"There are people that can do that?" asked Bella.

"I don't know if 'people' is the right word," said the fox, "but there are a few who exist. If the trees give up their heat all at once, it makes a fire. But to get the wood to do that, you'd have to have someone who can do more than communicate with trees. They would have to be able to communicate with ghosts, as well."

"You seem to know a lot about magic for a fox," said Bella. "Did you learn all that from this Radagast fellow?"

"Perhaps a little bit of it," said the fox, "but I'm no user of magic, and I don't know much about it. But those piles of wood, they aren't living trees, after all."

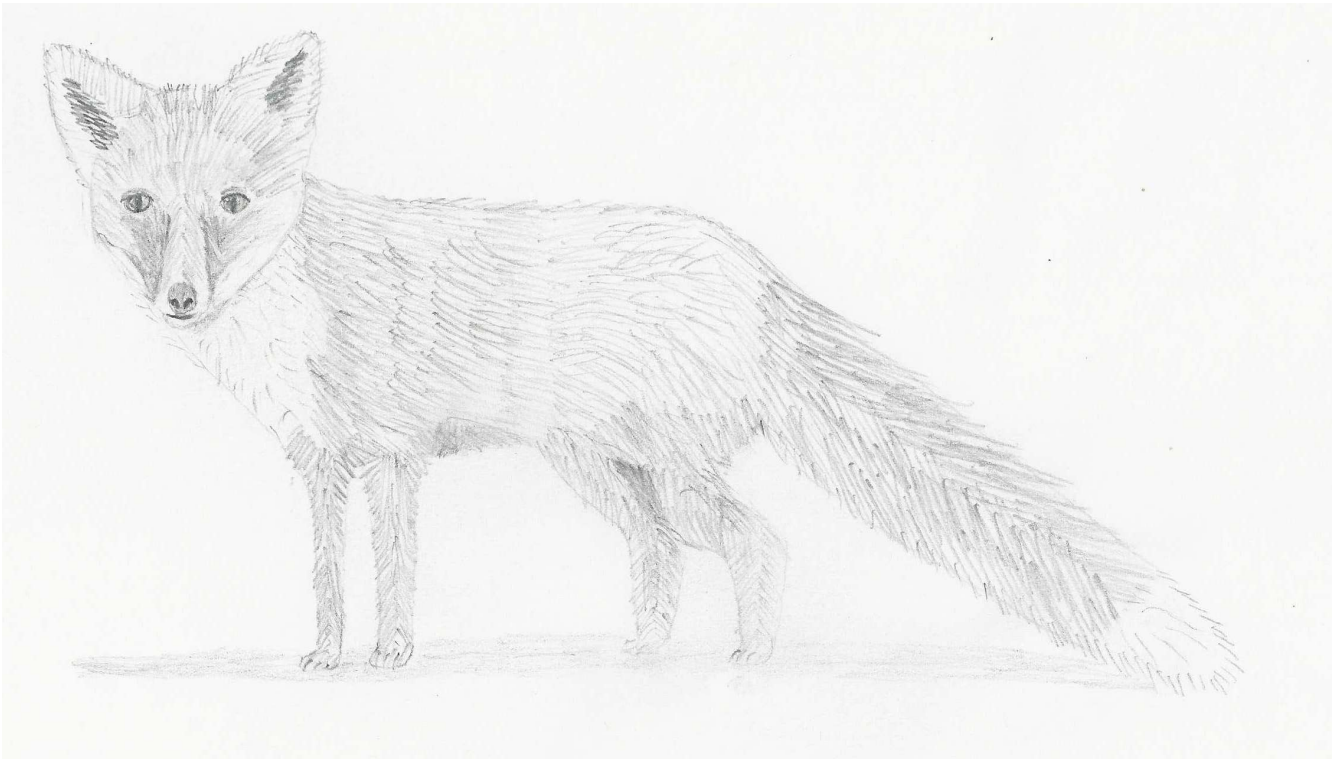
"Do trees have ghosts?" asked Donna.

"Sometimes," said the fox. "Usually they just fade away, absorbed into the rest of the forest, just like the log of a fallen tree turns to soil eventually. But if it's an evil tree, or an entire forest is cut down at once, you may have the angry ghosts of those trees hanging around."

That's not good, especially if there is no forest with new trees for them to get absorbed into again."

The ponies, who had been watching the fox with suspicious eyes from the other side of the fire, gave a little whinny, and the fox disappeared into the darkness just ahead of the return of Gerontius and Adamanta. They had gathered enough branches to make a lean-to, just barely big enough for the four of them to huddle together under. It wasn't warm, but it kept the snow off, and most of the wind. They wanted to huddle close to one another for warmth, anyway. The ponies were just on the other side of the fire, with their backs to the wind, huddled close together, and eating out of their feed bags.

As she dozed off, Donna found herself wondering about the fox. Was he really warm enough without any shelter, like that? She wished they were able to stay in the city, Tharbad, with walls around them and a roof above them. Sometimes, though, the Big Folk were more dangerous than any storm.



## Chapter13

*Be careful about the Big Folk, though.*

"Oh, well, look, they're all right here," came the voice of Bungo Baggins, waking them from a restless and uncomfortable sleep.

The four Took who had been sleeping huddled together in their fragile lean-to opened their eyes, saw Mira Took standing there next to Bungo, and erupted in shouts and exclamations. Adamanta gave a scream and ran to her daughter, Gerontius let out an enthusiastic yawp, Bella gave an excited squeal, and Donna made no audible noise but her face lit up brighter than the shiny new snowscape that surrounded them all. Bungo (and Snuffler the dog, who was walking with them on a leash) stepped quietly aside and let the Took engage in a noisy and jubilant family reunion.

After a minute, Bella broke away long enough to give Bungo Baggins a hug as well, which caused his ears to turn red.

"Thank-you, Bungo," she said.

"Oh, don't thank me," said Bungo. "It was Snuffler here who did the work. He and Grandmother's Hobbits, who found her in Tharbad. Nice folks, even if they aren't from the Shire."

This, of course, led to a hundred questions about who Grandmother's Hobbits were, what had happened in Tharbad, what had happened to get her to Tharbad, who Renshaw was (no one really had an answer for that one), and they soon moved back into the little lean-to (even more crowded now that they were six plus a dog). Bungo got the campfire going again, and started cooking up some food over it. Mira did most of the story-telling, from when she had been cut off from Great Smials by the shadow trees up until their bidding Grandmother's Hobbits a fond farewell just outside of Tharbad, and heading north. They decided to stop at her old campsite, because the snow had started up again and they weren't sure if it would be good weather for travelling today.

"I'm ever so glad we did," said Mira, "because otherwise we might have gone right past you and had to go all the way back to the Shire before we saw you again."

"Plus," pointed out Gerontius, "it will be safer to travel back with Gandalf and Argonui, if they are done in Tharbad by tomorrow and can come with us."

About the time they had run out of questions, the aroma of Bungo's stew had begun to remind them that they had not eaten yet today. They circled around the campfire and dug in, also putting more oats into the ponies' feedbags so that they could eat as well. After a while, the older hobbits began to roam further away from the campsite, to gather more fuel for the fire. There weren't really any trees, but there were woody bushes here and there. Bungo took Snuffler with him, and Bella walked with Bungo, so therefore Adamanta followed them both to make sure they weren't enjoying themselves in any way. Mira and Donna stayed in their little lean-to, and fell quiet, looking out at the snow which was still falling softly down. Even the ponies looked unhappy with the cold.

"I think I've seen this Renshaw fellow before," came a voice behind and to the right of them.

"Reynard," said Donna, "are you getting cold?"

"I must admit, I am starting to feel a bit chilled."

"You could come over here by the two of us," said Donna. "Mira and I are cold, too, but we're warmer here, next to each other, than if we were sitting alone. It would be even nicer if I had a fox next to me. You might find it a little warmer as well."

"I am afraid that's not the sort of thing I do," said Reynard as he came up alongside the lean-to, although he looked as if he were thinking about it. Donna looked over at him, thinking about what he had said.

"Wait, you have seen the person who took Mira?"

"I believe so. It sounded a lot like the fellow I saw. He is a crafty one. He was trying to get the bears together in some sort of alliance, five years ago or so."

"That was him? He wanted them and the giants to drive out the Hobbits. Oh, and now that I think about it, the trees of the Old Forest tried to tear down the dike on the Brandywine river then, too. Was that the same person, getting them to do that?"

"Probably. But it's hard getting different groups to work together. It's much easier to get them to fight."

"I suppose so, but what use is that? You don't get anything done by fighting."

"It depends on what you want done. I remember when I was having a lot of trouble with a wolf named Isengrim..."

"That's my brother's name!" said Mira.

Reynard narrowed his eyes. "Isengrim is your brother?"

"Yes."

"Grey fellow, hairy ears, tongue hangs out of his mouth a lot?" asked the fox.

"Uh, no, my brother doesn't look like that."

"Huh, probably not the same one then. Anyway, I was having some trouble with him, always having to run under thornbush thickets to keep him from making me into dinner. So, I started sneaking back after the wolf had left, and collected the bits of wolf fur that he had lost in the thornbushes when he was trying to follow me. Then I took it to the henhouse, and left it on the fence right outside it, and dug a hole under the fence. I kept digging until it was a big hole, much larger than I needed to get under the fence, and then I crawled under the fence and snuck right up to the henhouse. The hens started making a huge noise, and the dog came out thinking to catch whoever had tried to get into his henhouse. I ran away, and ran towards the wolf. The dog saw wolf fur on the fence, followed me through the hole under the fence, and followed me right into the path of the wolf."

"Then, while the wolf and the dog were fighting each other, I stole back to the henhouse and had some eggs. So, you see, sometimes it can be quite useful if you get two of your enemies to fight each other."

"That was mean," said Mira.

"So was the wolf," said Reynard, "and the dog would have been happy to crunch me to pieces in his jaws, as well."

"Hmmm," said Mira, looking unhappy. "I suppose so."

"Reynard," said Donna, "are you telling us this story for a reason?"

"Oh, hard to say for sure," said Reynard, "maybe I am just hungry and told a story to take my mind off of it."

Just then, they heard the sounds of the older Hobbits coming back towards their camp. Donna reached in her bag and pulled out a bit of food to throw to him, without looking to see what it was. Reynard grabbed it in his mouth and was gone from sight, off into the snow-covered brush behind their lean-to.

Gerontius, Bungo Baggins, Adamanta, and Bella came back, each with a small bundle of sticks and branches they had collected for the fire.

"It's not a lot of fuel," said Gerontius, "but it will keep us through the storm, I think. There's not a lot of wood left around here, the big trees have all been cleared away. Too close to Tharbad, I suppose. They've long since burned all the big trees that are close enough to get to quickly, it seems."

"Argonui!" said Donna suddenly. "Argonui is Isengrim."

"What?" asked Bella, sounding confused. "Argonui is Chieftain of the Rangers, a Dunedan, and Isengrim is your brother."

"No, that's what Renshaw is up to," said Donna. "Either way, Renshaw wins. Either Argonui is killed by the people of Tharbad, or he fights his way out, but either way the Rangers and Tharbad are enemies afterwards. That's what Renshaw really wants. It's like the wolf and the dog!"

"Oh!" said Mira, suddenly alarmed, even while the rest of the hobbits still looked confused. "But Gandalf is with him. They can't kill Argonui with Gandalf there, can they?"

"Can a Wizard stop a whole city?" asked Donna. "Anyway, it doesn't really matter who wins, as long as they fight. That's what Renshaw is after. He took Mira here to the edge of Tharbad, and then abandoned her. Why? Because he wanted us to get the Rangers to help track her. Then once he learns that Argonui is here, he makes all the firewood in Tharbad burst into flames. It happened right before Gandalf showed up, so they probably even think Gandalf caused it; they saw him stop it, after all. So the fact that Gandalf is with Argonui might even make it worse, by making the people of Tharbad more suspicious of him and Argonui."

"What can we do about it?" asked Bungo.

"I need to warn him, and get him out of there," said Gerontius.

"Bungo should go with you," said Adamanta. Bungo Baggins' eyes went very wide, at the thought of returning to Tharbad. He looked over at Adamanta, mouth slightly agape, and looked as if he were trying to think of something to say.

"We'll all go," said Bella.

"Why would we do that?" asked Adamanta, annoyed.

"Bella is probably right," said Gerontius. "Dangerous as it is, it is probably not any better to split up into smaller groups. The Big Folk are less likely to pick on a group of hobbits together, that doesn't seem to be their way. It might not be a good time to be there alone, though. They like picking on people in ones and twos. All right then, let's get going. Ladies on the ponies, and Bungo and I will walk."

"And Snuffler will walk, too," said Bungo. Donna saw that Snuffler was sniffing the air keenly, and making the beginnings of a low growl in his throat. She wondered if he was smelling the scent of a fox on the cold air.



They threw dirt and snow on their campfire to smother it, and then made their way down the long hill towards the city. As they got near to Tharbad, they saw that the city gates were unguarded, and standing open. The still-falling snow was starting to pile up around the gatehouses.

"Just as well for us," said Gerontius, "or the guards would be taxing us for riding in on ponies, or whatever else they could think of. But not a good sign. When a city of Big Folk doesn't even keep the gates guarded, it can mean one of two things. Either everything is so peaceful they don't see a need, or things have gotten so bad inside that the guards are needed elsewhere."

It was soon clear that there had not been an outbreak of peace and trust in Tharbad. There were sounds of angry shouting coming from a couple different points in the city. After they had passed through the gates, they continued on for a bit, slowly, trying to guess where in all the city Argonui and Gandalf might be.

After a few minutes it became obvious where the most noise was coming from. They made their way there, as quickly as they could without drawing too much attention to themselves. Mira noticed that her father had been right, and the people of Tharbad did not seem as anxious to bully a group of half a dozen hobbits (plus ponies and a dog), as they had been a solitary hobbit-lass like herself when she came here before. But then, they also had a lot more on their minds, wondering how to get enough fuel to last the winter, or even just through the current snowstorm. As they got nearer the source of the largest amount of noise, though, they saw someone in the crowd they recognized.

"Arador!" called Gerontius. The Ranger, son of Argonui, looked back and arched his eyebrows in surprise at seeing the group of Hobbits on the streets of Tharbad.

"Gerontius, what are you all doing here?"

"I was looking for Mira," said Gerontius, "but now I'm worried for your father. We need to give him a message, quickly. Do you know where he is?"

"I'm looking for him myself," said Arador. "I received a message telling me that he was here in Tharbad and needed my help."

"Who sent the message?" asked Gerontius.

"It's not clear, one of the other Rangers said a stranger brought it to him and then disappeared into the forest again. I was suspicious, but I came here anyway, and it looks like there really is a problem." He lowered his voice a bit and added, "the whole town seems ready to burst. I need to go investigate that shouting over there, it sounds like things might be getting close to blows."

"We're coming with you," said Gerontius. Donna noticed that Arador seemed surprised at that, but said nothing, perhaps because he had no time to discuss it. They all hurried as fast as possible towards the sounds of angry argument, Arador in front with his long-legged stride.

Once they came around a corner and could see the confrontation, they realized it was happening outside of the shop of a smith. Argonui and Gandalf were standing there at the side of a tall, muscular man who wore the thick leather apron of a blacksmith. There were a couple dozen others of the Big Folk gathered around them in a half-circle, and there was the sound of angry voices. The hobbits hung back a little, trying to see what was going on before plunging in, while Arador shouldered quietly up to the front and walked over to stand next to his father, Gandalf, and the smith.

It soon became apparent that the other folks present wanted the smith to hand over his supply of coal.

"I need that coal for my smithy," said the man. "Any who are without fuel, can come here at night and we can make room on the floor for as many as will fit. If we all stay together, no one will freeze."

The crowd seemed angry at being told they had to sleep on the smith's floor, instead of getting coal to burn in their own hearths. Mira heard the name "Arvin" used for the smith, and realized this was the man who Grandmother's Hobbits traded with. Mira looked anxiously around, and realized that the crowd was getting larger, as people were drawn towards the noise of the arguing.

"You need to buy ironwares from my smithy as much as I need to make them," said Arvin, frowning angrily.

"We care more about not freezing to death than we do about your iron!" came an angry cry from the crowd.

Argonui stepped forwards and held up his hands, palms out, trying to calm the angry crowd.

"It won't do anyone any good to split the little amount of coal Arvin has up into a hundred different households. It wouldn't last more than a couple nights that way, and then we'll just be back where we were before, but with no coal, and all the rest of the firewood in the city burned up as well. To make it through the winter, people will need to move together into the fewest number of buildings possible. Then, there will be fewer fires needed, and being together will help to keep everyone warmer. If the stables and the fewest, largest houses are kept warm, and full, then the fuel left will be enough. Ransacking Arvin's smithy for coal won't solve anything for more than a day or two, and then everyone will just be worse off than before."

There were angry noises from the crowd, but there seemed to be a few who were at least thinking about what Argonui had said. Mira squirmed through the crowd, stood up in front of the smith, and spoke up in her loudest voice.

"I know where more coal is!" she said.

"What?" responded several dozen voices at once, including several hobbits.

"I know where we can get more coal, but you have to be as small as a hobbit to get to it. But we need some Big Folk to help carry it back. If hobbits and men work together, we can get more coal, and that will help everyone stay warm enough through the winter. We hobbits can go there and get some, but we need some strong men to help carry it back. Who wants to help?"

The effect of Mira's words was twofold. Some of the people who were angrily threatening to force Arvin to hand over his coal, decided they could help to carry coal from somewhere else. Others, decided that they weren't really interested in doing anything that sounded like work, and at the threat of being drafted into a work party, they began drifting away. After a couple minutes, the crowd was about half its previous size, and much calmer, now ready to do work together instead of fighting.

"Gandalf," said Argonui, as they prepared to leave, "can you stay here in Tharbad? I am worried about leaving the city to tear itself apart."

"I will stay," said Gandalf, "and let people know that you are returning with coal. If they know that there is fuel coming, then I can keep them from tearing each other's houses apart while they wait for it."

They went down to the river, five Hobbits, two Dunadan Rangers, and half a dozen Men led by Arvin the smith, and got into a few large boats which they sailed upriver to where Mira had seen the Argive hobbits find coal to sell. The coal there had been mined in the mountains upriver in ages past, and then brought down to a depot just upriver from Tharbad, where it was dumped into a huge heap inside a large stone building. From there, it had been taken into Tharbad for sale. Most of the coal mining had been done during the warmer months of year (when working in the mountains was not so difficult), but most of the demand for it was during the colder months of the year. Thus, the building in which it was stored was large enough to hold a great deal of coal, enough to supply the entire city through a long winter, even when the city of Tharbad held far more people than it did now.

Once the city had begun to decline, though, the great stone building in which it was stored was no longer maintained, and one day years before, it had collapsed. Not long after, the coal mines in the mountains were closed, and there the coal sat under the rubble for many years, until Grandmother's Hobbits had discovered that they could still get to it. The rubble of the great stone building, now overgrown with vines and weeds, still held narrow passages which Hobbits could crawl through. The hobbits could quickly find the signs of the path through the

rubble, and one by one they went in with large empty sacks, and returned with those sacks filled with coal. These they gave to the Men and Dunedain, who carried them over the rough snowy ground down to the river where the boats were.

On her third or fourth journey up from below with her sack full of coal, Mira was just standing up to begin her walk down to where she would hand it off to the Men when she was suddenly grabbed from behind. One hand was over her mouth so she could not speak, and the other lifted her up off of the ground.

"So, I was right," came a voice from just behind her that she recognized as Renshaw, "the Chieftain of the Rangers will go just about anywhere to rescue a daughter of the Thain. Well, let him come up this way, and see how he fares in this forest."

Mira, wide eyed and struggling, saw that the shadow-trees were all around them now, encircling the two of them.

"Back away," said Renshaw to the trees, "wait until the Chieftain comes. I will call you then."

Mira tried to pull Renshaw's hands away from her mouth, so she could shout, but his grip was as hard as an old oak root, and she could not budge it. Looking up at him, she realized that he really was going to try to kill Argonui, and as many other Men and Dunedain as he could, and maybe Hobbits as well. She had always known that there were angry people in the world, but she had always found that she could melt their angry hearts with a bright smile and a kind word. Even in Tharbad, with an angry mob ready to attack the smith, she had found a way to convince them all to cooperate, instead of fight. But Renshaw's anger was deep, and ancient, and even if she could talk, she knew there was nothing she could say that would sway him. He was in the grip of old and painful memories, and they mattered more to him than anything in the world around him.

At that moment, Bella came up from below with a full sack of coal, and saw Renshaw with her little sister in his grip. Now Bella, unlike Mira, had grown up in competition with those of her brothers who were close to her in age. Whereas Mira had always charmed her older brothers with a smile, and was so small compared to them that they never competed, Bella had often fought with them, especially her brother Hildibrand, who was closest to her in age. There were many times when her younger sister Mira was able to make her way with charm and kindness, when Bella could not. But, there is one advantage for a girl who has often quarrelled with her brothers as a youngster. When faced with someone who would not listen to a kind word, Bella had no hesitation in deciding what to do.

She tackled him.

She flew at him headlong, catching him right around the knees from behind, and knocking him off balance. The three of them went down in a heap, Renshaw, Mira, and Bella. It took some time for Renshaw to regain his balance, but he never let loose his grip on Mira. He did,

however, have to shift one hand, the one that was clamped over her mouth, to try to fend off Bella, and Mira took the opportunity to shout for help.

"Help!" she yelled. Immediately afterwards, she wondered if she should have yelled instead for Argonui to run away, since maybe yelling for him to come and help her is what Renshaw wanted. But, in the grip of fear as well as Renshaw, her voice seemed to have its own opinions of what to say. "HELP!"

Next up from below, bearing a bag of coal, was Adamanta. Seeing two of her daughters in a tussle with a stranger, she did not for a moment consider a kind word, or yelling for help. She and Bella, it turns out, had both grown up in competition with brothers near their age, and while it had been many years since she had been forced by events to wrestle, she had no trouble remembering. Just as Renshaw had regained his footing, one hand clutching each of Mira and Bella, he was hit in the midsection by a large sackful of coal, propelled by a very angry hobbit matron who put all of her weight behind it. They fell to the ground again, now four in a heap plus a sack of coal, and Renshaw found that he had more foes than hands.

He did, however, have allies, and if they did not have hands exactly, they did have limbs. The shadowy trees that had been forming a ring around them, began to close in on Renshaw's command. Soon, Adamanta and Bella both found that they were suspended in air, hooked from behind by splintery branches that held them up far out of reach of the ground or their captors. Renshaw stood up again, this time with Mira firmly in his grip, and grinned angrily.

"Well, it couldn't be more perfect," he said. "Not one but three Took lasses, and so near to the Chieftain of the Rangers and the Thain of Hobbits, all in the company of Men from Tharbad. When your bodies are all found, it won't take much imagination for every side to blame another for treachery."

"Argonui, stay away!" shouted Mira, finding control of her voice at last. "It's a trap!" But just after she said it, Renshaw had clamped her mouth shut again, and he only chuckled softly.

"Nice try, but there is no chance that he will just turn tail and run at this point," said Renshaw. "It won't be long now, you'll see."

Just at this moment, Bungo Baggins came quietly up from below, also bearing a large sack full of chunks of coal. He crouched near the entrance, looking out on the scene with the shadowy trees, Renshaw, and three Hobbits all taken prisoner.

"Oh, dear, this looks bad," he whispered to himself. "What am I to do now? Something fast and surprising, said Grandma Argine. Oh, bother, I'm not sure I know how to do that."

"Why don't you throw rocks?" came the voice of the crow, from not far above him.

Bungo looked up, boggled for a moment at the fact that the crow was talking to him, and then whispered, "What?"

"You Hobbit boys seem good at throwing rocks," said the crow, in as much of a whisper as it was capable of. "Maybe that would work."

"Ow!" said Renshaw, as a fist-sized hunk of coal came flying out of the darkness and pegged him right in the face. He shook himself, and looked around for the source of the flying objects.

"Ow!" he said again, as another chunk hit him in the right ear. He spun about, and looked angrily about for who had thrown it.

Although Bungo Baggins was not the sort to throw rocks at birds, as some other Hobbit boys did, he had definitely spent a good part of his childhood getting better and better at throwing rocks at anything he was aiming at. He also was, being a hobbit, fairly small, and still young enough to be nimble and quick at dodging from place to place. Neither Renshaw nor the shadow trees that surrounded him were half so nimble, and they found it very difficult to even see where he was before he had thrown his next hunk of coal and moved again. He went in a jagged circle around Renshaw, pegging him in the face or the side of the head with one hunk of coal after another, until Renshaw was quite enraged.

"Now what is all that commotion, I wonder?" asked Gerontius down at the boat.

"I've a good guess," said Argonui, and he grabbed one of the thick staves from the barge and hopped ashore.

"She says it's a trap," said Arvin, the smith from Tharbad and one of the Men who had come with them.

"It probably is," said Argonui, "but we have to go see for ourselves."

"Is it this Renshaw fellow again?" asked Gerontius. "What does he want with us, anyway?"

"Who can say?" asked Argonui, as he walked with long, quick strides up the hill. "I only know one way to find out."

"Well actually," said Gerontius, "there is another way I can think of. Do you still have the Horn on you?"

Back up at the top of the hill, Renshaw was finding it difficult to figure out what to do about his mystery opponent, who threw chunks of coal at his head with great accuracy, but never seemed to stay in the same place long enough to be seen. He bellowed at the shadow trees to attack, but they had some trouble understanding who or what it was that they were supposed to attack. They were, after all, trees, and ghostly trees at that, so quickly grabbing hobbits as they dodged and weaved between their trunks was not what they were good at.



Bungo Baggins, however, had worries as well. He could keep Renshaw distracted and occupied, but that was all he could do, and he was running out of coal. He didn't know what would happen once he had no more to throw. He thought perhaps he could run up and grab some of the chunks of coal that now lay scattered on the ground, but that might give Renshaw a chance to grab him. On the other hand, if he went back below ground to fill up his sack, it might take too long, and he didn't know what Renshaw might do to the Tooks once he wasn't being distracted by chunks of coal hitting his head every few seconds. He knew that tackling Renshaw wasn't likely to work, if it hadn't worked for Bella or Adamanta.

"Inziladûn!"

It was Argonui, Chieftain of the Rangers, calling out a strange name that none of the hobbits had ever heard before. But the effect on Renshaw was dramatic. He stopped moving as if stunned, and stared at the Ranger as he walked up towards him. After a few moments, the hobbits (including Bella and Adamanta, still suspended from tree limbs) saw that Argonui had the Horn in his hands. That Horn, you recall, if you listened closely to it, could whisper to you what the person it was pointed at secretly wanted, their innermost thoughts.

"Inziladûn, Royal Forester of the Kingdom of Arthedain," said Argonui, with one hand holding the horn, and the other on the sword hilt at his side. Renshaw dropped Mira Took to the ground, and stood dazed. The shadow trees dropped Adamanta and Bella to the ground as well.

"Mira, come here," whispered Gerontius, who was standing next to Argonui. All three Tooks scrambled quickly over to be next to him.

"Inziladûn, you took an oath," said Argonui, walking carefully up to stand directly in front of Renshaw. "You took an oath to preserve and protect the forest. You swore that oath to the King of Arthedain."

Renshaw winced, as if he had been hurt physically by the mention of an old wound.

"Then, when the Witch-King of Angmar led his armies to attack Arthedain, you could not protect the forests. You could not stop the Witch-King of Angmar. And, Inziladûn, you died."

Renshaw swayed back and forth a little, as if he were weak.

"Then, Inziladûn, an ancient ghost, thirsty for vengeance, possessed you. You couldn't leave, because of your vow, and it used that fact to keep you bound here, and use your form to fulfill its desire for revenge. But you don't have to stay here, Inziladûn. You tried your best. You tried to protect the forests, like the King of Arthedain tried to protect his kingdom. You swore your oath to Arvedui, the last King of Arthedain. I am his direct heir and descendant. Inziladûn, I hereby release you from your vow. You can rest now."

In the moment before Renshaw toppled to the ground, and faded into mist and then into nothing, Mira saw an expression on his face that she had never seen before. In all the days she had travelled with him, she had never seen him close his eyes to sleep, never seen him rest. In his final moment, he closed his eyes, and she thought he looked finally at peace. A few moments later, and there was nothing left where he had stood before.

Looking around, they saw that the shadow trees were still there, encircling them. The Hobbits looked at each other, and at Argonui, and wondered what to do.

"Is it safe to walk through them, do you suppose, Argonui?" asked Gerontius. Argonui was looking at the shadow trees with narrowed eyes, as if he were trying to evaluate their intention. He did not answer.

"Why didn't they go away when Renshaw did?" asked Mira.

"Because," said Donna, who had been quietly watching from the entrance to the coal depot, where she had just arrived from below, "there are two reasons why a ghost lingers here in the world of mortals. Gandalf told me when we were at Fornost Erain. The first, is when they have some unfulfilled vow. That was the case for Inzilahûn, the last Royal Forester of Arthedain. But there is another reason, and that's what holds back these ghosts of trees, I guess."

Donna walked over to the center of the ring of trees, and looking around her, spoke in a strong, clear voice.

"You are dead! You died a long time ago, and it is time to depart. You can find another seed of a tree to give you form, living form. You're dead now. You can go."

"My goodness," said Bungo Baggins softly, "it's like clouds parting to let through the sun."

The shadow trees had faded away, and the hobbits and Argonui looked around to see that the spot they stood was in a clearing once again. They also saw Argonui's son, Arador, coming up the path with Arvin the smith and several other Men from Tharbad. Argonui walked over to meet his son Arador.

"Here," he said, and handed him the Horn. "You are the latest in our line. I am supposed to give you this."

Arador reached out, and took it, and held it in his hands.

"Hmmm," said Gerontius. "Nothing happened. I thought the ghost of Arvedui said something would happen? We'll have to ask Gandalf what that means."

Arador looked at the Horn, and then looked up with a smile on his face.

"I think I know what that means," said Arador. "I am no longer the latest in our line, father. It means my son has been born."

That news was greeted by a round of happy exclamations, as all the hobbits congratulated Arador on becoming a father, and Arvedui on becoming a grandfather. It was Adamanta who brought them back to the present moment.

"The snow is still falling," she said, "and we need to get this coal back to Tharbad before they all freeze to death, or start fighting amongst themselves. Let's get it done, so Arador can get back home to his newborn!"

They spent the next hour hurriedly bring sackful after sackful of coal up from the rubble of the depot, and the Men of Tharbad (and Rangers) took it from them and hauled it across the open ground to dump onto the boat. When they had filled up both boats, and thought they had enough to keep panic at bay in Tharbad, they pushed off. The hobbits left the steering of the boats to the Men, and collapsed in an exhausted heap on top of the pile of coal they had helped to bring out of the collapsed depot. For a few minutes, they said little, as they were all catching their breath and resting. Then, they broke open the food they had brought with them from Tharbad, and began eating. Eventually, Bella broke the silence.

"Bungo, thank-you again for coming along on our little adventure. I really appreciate your help."

Bungo's eyes got wide, and he looked a little worried.

"Oh, I wouldn't call it an 'adventure'," he said hurriedly, "it was just a little trip I took, that's all. I didn't do anything, really. Pray don't mention it."

"Oh I'm going to mention it, all right," said Bella proudly. "Everyone in the Shire is going to know how you helped rescue my sister."

"Oh no!" said Bungo, now clearly alarmed. "I don't think that would be a good idea. I think you're really exaggerating, Bella. I didn't do anything much, really, I just..."

"Nonsense," said Bella, smiling at Bungo, and misinterpreting his worried expression for modesty. "You were clever, and steadfast, and brave, and everything an adventurer should be. A Took or a Brandybuck couldn't have done any better."

"Now Bella," said Adamanta, "you're forgetting that Bungo is not a Took or a Brandybuck. I don't think he would like to have it said that he went adventuring. Tooks and Brandybucks can sometimes get away with that sort of thing, because they are very old families, not to mention well off, but it's not the way of most Shire hobbits. Bungo has a reputation to think of."

"But I want him to get credit for what he did!" said Bella, frowning, and also looking a bit confused.

"He gets credit from us," said Adamanta, and she nodded in approval in Bungo's direction. "That's all he needs, or wants. No talk about this whole adven...this whole expedition, to anyone outside of our family."

"Don't worry, Bungo," Adamanta said, smiling reassuringly in Bungo's direction, "your secret is safe with us." Bungo heaved a sigh of relief, and smiled gratefully back at Adamanta.

Bella, still annoyed but also noticing that her mother and Bungo were getting along for once, continued frowning but shrugged her shoulders.

Their thoughts were interrupted by the noise of a crow flying down to land on the boat, near to Mira. Snuffler looked up from where he lay on the boat near Bungo, and started to bark at it, but Bungo hushed him and petted him until he quieted down.

"I think that's the crow that talked to me," said Bungo. "I never heard a crow talk before."

"Yes, I know this one," said Mira. "Crow, I keep forgetting to ask you, do you have a name that we can say?"

"Tiecelin," said the crow, "but when I'm the only crow around, I answer to 'crow' just fine, too. So, you found your family, I see."

"Yes," said Mira, "and we're headed back to our home soon."

"Me, too," answered Tiecelin, the crow. "It's a long way to fly. See you there!"

With that, he took to the air, and the hobbits watched him fly off to the north.

"I have a question," said Bella. "But I might be afraid to hear the answer."

"What is it?" asked Gerontius. "Knowing the answer to a questions is almost always less frightening than not knowing."

"If there was an ancient spirit of vengeance that took over Inziladûn's form when he died, but now Inziladûn's spirit has gone to rest, does that mean the same spirit of vengeance is looking for a new home?"

"Hmmm...you might be right," said Gerontius, sounding a bit worried.

"Not necessarily," said Donna. "Usually, the spirit of a dead tree gets absorbed into the forest, just like the log of a tree gets turned back into soil eventually. Maybe that old spirit will get absorbed into the forest again, this time."

"How do you know so much about the spirit of dead trees?" asked Adamanta.

"Well, that's what I heard, anyway," said Donna. "From someone who seemed to know a lot about Renshaw. So, I think, the more new trees there are getting planted, the better our chances. For every tree you chop down, plant several new ones, and you improve your odds. Chop down trees and don't plant any new ones, and you might leave an angry ghost in the world."

Looking out over the river to the bank, they saw that they were approaching Tharbad. It was easy to tell, because the area around the city had been almost entirely cleared of trees.

## Chapter 14

Well, I need to wrap this up. Gerontius and Gandalf will be meeting us at Bag End, which is the new smial that Bungo and Bella live in now. I will give this letter to Gandalf, he is headed south and can find someone to take it to you, if he doesn't pass that way himself. Did you know Donna has a little hobbit-lad now? We'll see how Bella's son Bilbo handles not being the only little one getting attention. Please write soon, and I hope all of Grandmother's Hobbits are doing well!

Love from your friend,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Mira Brandybuck', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Mira Brandybuck



Twenty-one years later Mira, now a full grown Hobbit, looked up from her letter to Amaranth, which she had just finished. She was staying in one of the guests rooms of Bella and Bungo's new smial, Bag End, and was sitting near the round window of her guest room to get the best light for her writing. She looked out the window then, into the town of Hobbiton down the hill, but really she was looking back to her own past, when she had last seen Amaranth. They still exchanged letters, but it was difficult and dangerous to travel in those days, and they had not seen each other in person since they were children.

She had laying on the desk, next to where she was writing, the portrait that Amaranth had sent her recently. It showed her next to her husband Buck, and holding their little baby, who was named Mirabella. Mira smiled, and folded it up and put it away carefully. Then she took her new letter to Amaranth and folded it up and put it into an envelope, but she did not seal it yet. She had a few things to add to it first. She went out into the long hallway of Bag End, and down to where Gorbado Brandybuck was just finishing a portrait.

She went up to him, where he sat at an easel using his pen to put the finishing touches on a portrait of Bella, Bungo, and a little Hobbit boy who was about four years old, all standing in front of the door to the master bedroom of Great Smials. Mira gave Gorbado a light kiss on the cheek, careful not to bump him and disturb his work, and then looked down at the little Hobbit boy, who was staring mesmerized at his own portrait. Gorbado had finished that part of the picture first, because sitting still is a difficult thing for little Hobbit-lads to do for long.

"Well, Bilbo," she said, "how do you like it? I think it's a pretty good likeness. He's even gotten the sparkle in your eye."

Little Bilbo looked up at her, and grinned, but ignored the question.

"Aunt Mira, are we really going to see a Wizard today?" he asked.

Bungo made a small noise, disapproving, but did not actually say anything for fear of disrupting the picture which Gorbado was still working on. Mira smiled; Bungo didn't entirely approve of his son's interest in stories of adventure, and suspected (correctly) that Bilbo mostly wanted to see a Wizard because he thought this meant stories.

"It may be that we shall," said Mira, trying not to offend Bungo. He was nice enough to pose for a portrait to send to her friend, after all. "But you never know for certain; Wizards are busy people."

Just then Gorbado looked up and gave the signal to Bella and Bungo that they could move now, he was done with their portrait. He picked up his slate and scribbled on it for Mira, "done?"

"Done" scribbled Mira back, and "good!" She looked at the other portraits sitting on the table next to the easel. One Gorbado had done using a mirror, and it showed him with Mira in their home in Brandy Hall, under two wooden birds he had carved out of wood. It was wood

from a tree that had fallen down; Mira had convinced him to avoid chopping down living trees when it wasn't absolutely necessary. Another portrait showed Donna, her husband Hugo Boffin, and their baby son Jago, standing in the room in their home where Donna kept her small library. Just then, Hugo Boffin came in from outside, and fairly shouted.

"He's here! He's coming!"

It was Gandalf, arriving after all, busy as any Wizard but willing and able to come see his old friend, Gerontius Took, and his daughters. Mira's father was getting older, and stooped just a little as he walked, but he came quickly out of his guest room to the front parlor, and was there to greet Gandalf as he appeared at the door.

"Old Took," said Gandalf with a hint of a smile and a gleam in his eye, "your family are ever fond of impressive homes. Your daughter and son-in-law have made a splendid smial for themselves, I can tell even from the outside. Where is Bella?"

"Here I am, Gandalf," said Bella, stepping forward from the crowd of Hobbits, holding her little son's hand as he tried to hide behind her. "And here is my son, Bilbo, who you have never met yet. Bilbo, say hello to Gandalf."

The wizard looked down at the tiny Hobbit boy, his eyes sparkling under his bushy eyebrows and broad-brimmed hat. "Hello there, little one."

"Hullo!" said Bilbo brightly. "Do you know stories? I'd like to hear a story."

"Bilbo!" said Bella a little sharply, "our guest hasn't even come in yet! Let him stow his things and have a drink of tea first, at least."

Little Bilbo frowned, but said nothing. In any event, his father Bungo was pleased enough to show Gandalf every room of his grand new smial, all wood paneling and round windows. There were plenty of guest rooms, including one with an extra-large bed for Gandalf. Little Bilbo's face sagged into disappointment as the tour dragged on and on, and then more time was spent getting everyone seated in the parlor and served with tea, beer, or wine, as they preferred. To a little Hobbit-lad, it seemed hours, and he tried his best to be patient but it was very hard.

"Well, Gandalf," said Gerontius after his first sip of wine, "this Old Took is happy to see you again. Especially since you have no bad news to bring me about any of my possessions, I hope?"

"Not at all," said Gandalf, and he reached into the pouch at his side. "In fact, I have something for you. I was recently at a place where they make the most marvelous cufflinks, and I thought of you. Try them on!"

Gerontius unclipped the cufflinks he had on, and then reached for the new ones Gandalf was giving him. They were very impressive looking, with diamonds set in them, but more impressive was that they seemed to magically fasten themselves on their own, and never came undone until ordered to. Everyone was delighted, and asked him to demonstrate again and again. Little Bilbo was interested in that at first, but after a little while not even magic cufflinks were enough to keep his attention.

Finally, when there seemed to be a moment's pause in the conversation, he slipped up next to Gandalf, who was seated in his chair and puffing on a pipe.

"Can you tell me a story?" he whispered.

"You are Bella's son, I see," said Gandalf with a hint of a smile. "Well, I suppose I could think of one."

The other Hobbits in the parlour, Took and Boffin and Baggins and Brandybuck, all stopped what they were saying to each other and looked over. Well, all except for Gorbodoc, that is, but Mira quietly scribbled on his slate what was being said.

"In a hole in the ground," began Gandalf, "there lived a family of Hobbits..."



*Gorbadoc and Mira Brandybuck*





*Hugo, Donna, and Jago Boffin*





*Bungo, Bella, and Bilbo Baggins*