

This story takes place two years after the first book.

Little Isengar, youngest of the Took's, is now 6 years old

Mirabella (normally called just Mira) is 8

Donnamira (normally called just Donna) is 12

Belladonna (normally called just Bella) is 16

Hildibrand, who often teases Bella, is 19

Isembard is 21

Hildifons, who is a bit adventurous for a Hobbit, is 24

Isembold is 26

Hildigrim, who is a very stern and sometimes argumentative, is 28

Isumbras is 30

Isengrim, the oldest brother in the Took family, is 36

# *From Solstice to Equinox*

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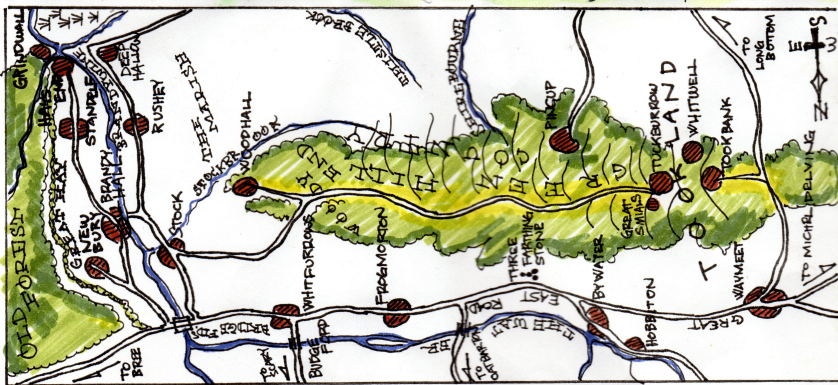
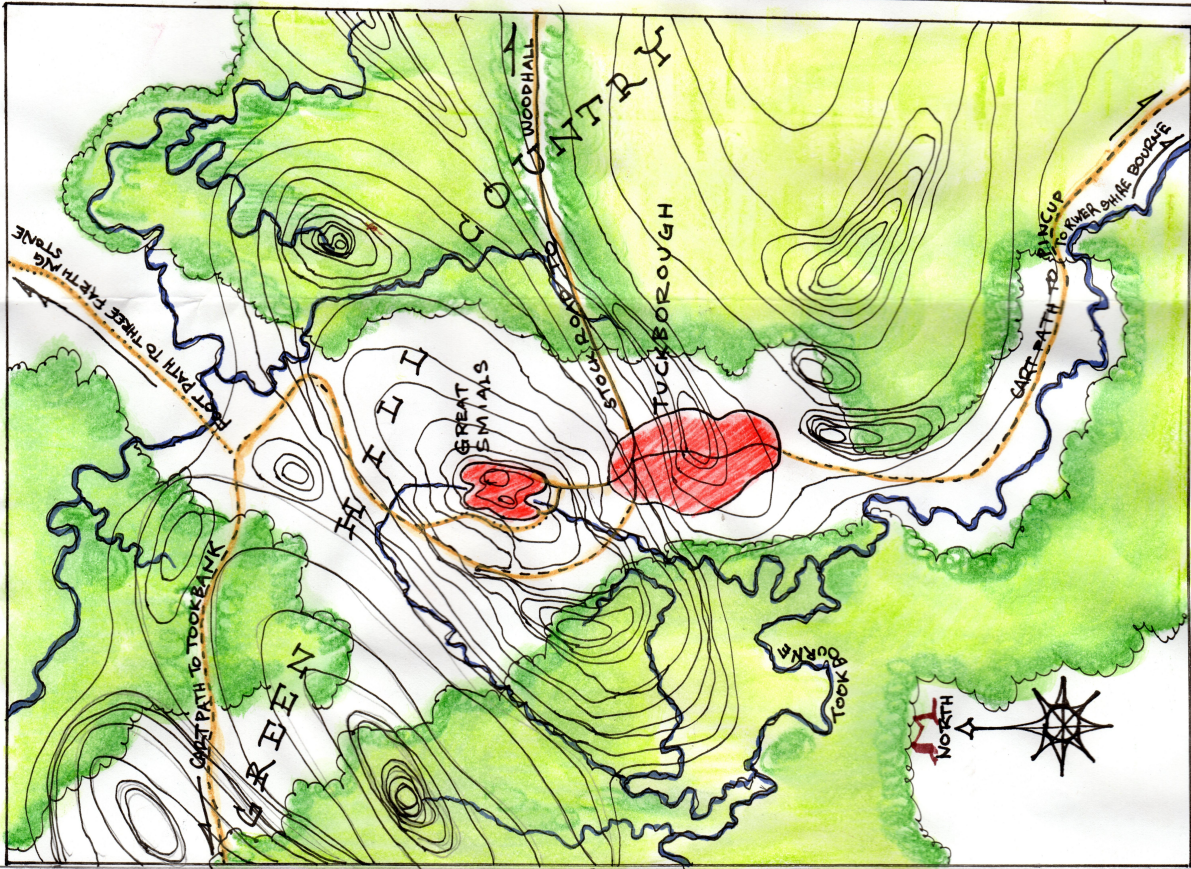
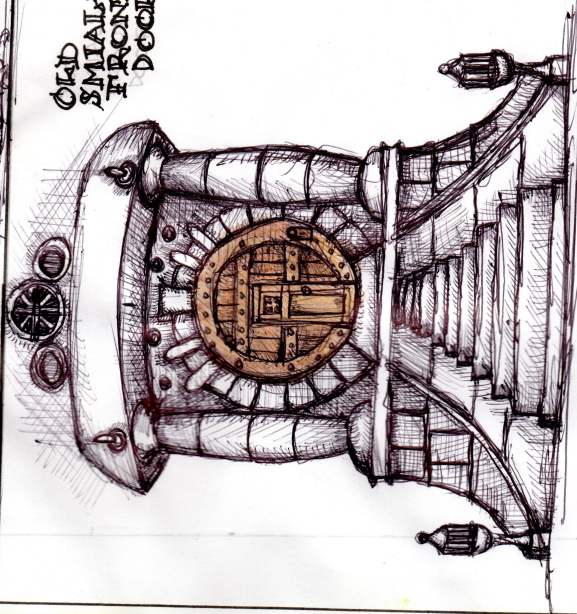
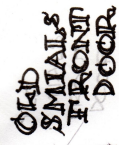
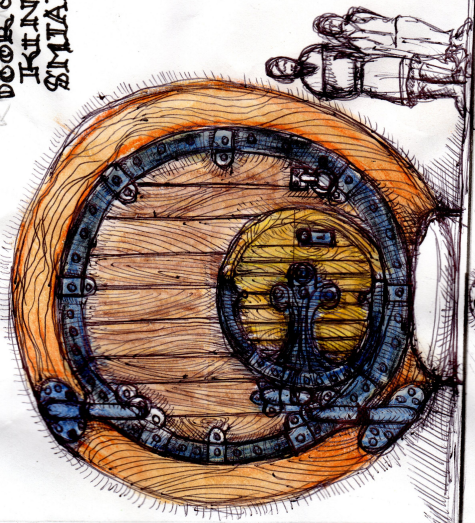
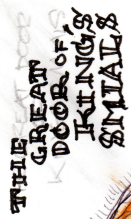
based on original characters by J.R.R.Tolkien



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## Chapter 1 - Old Friends Return

Mira was taking the vegetable scraps out to the compost heap beyond the garden, when she met the talking crow again. She had been only 6 years old the last time she had talked to him. She had been imprisoned in a tower with her younger brother Isengar and her older daughter Donna. After they had escaped and been reunited with her family, she had often wondered about the crow, but had no idea of how to find him. She was 8, now, two years older than when she had last seen him.

"Are you going to eat that?" it asked, from its perch on a tree branch just above the compost heap.

"Oh! I know you! You're the talking crow!" said Mira, with a grin on her face as she looked up.

"I'm not the only one," said the crow, "lots of crows talk. Say, it looks like you aren't going to eat that, maybe."

"This?" asked Mira, "It's just a bunch of vegetable scraps. We throw them into the compost heap and cover it with straw, and by this time next year it'll be good food for the garden."

"It looks like good food for me, now," said the crow. "It would be harder to get to if you throw it in that heap and cover it with straw, though."

"Oh, well, I suppose there's some pieces in here you might like," said Mira, looking into the old pot with the vegetable scraps to see what a crow might like. "Do you like apple cores? I'll put them to the side on the ground, here, and you can have some of them if you like."

This was agreeable, and soon the crow was on the ground, pecking through the apple cores and saying nothing. Mira threw the rest on to the compost heap, covered it with straw, and then thought about what to say. Normally she would just head back to the kitchen, where her mother Adamanta would have more chores for her to do. She had not seen the crow in a long time, though (two years is a long time to an 8-year old Hobbit lass).

"Where have you been?" asked Mira. "How did you find my home?"

"You told me where it was, remember?" said the crow. "You gave me a message to take

to your hen, saying where you were. I stopped going to the tower, it seems like no one lives there any more, so there's no one throwing out food."

"Oh!" said Mira, "I'm sorry! That was probably because they rescued us. The troll got killed, and Cedric became a cook for the Rangers, up in Norbury. Where did you go?"

"Lots of places," said the crow, "but mostly around the big lake. There's been a lot of rain, and the lake is quite high. It's also meant there are lots of green plants for crickets to eat, so there are lots of crickets. I've been eating a lot of crickets, lately. In fact, I'm tired of cricket. I don't think I could eat another cricket."

"But you can still eat," said Mira with a grin, because she knew that for this crow at least, food was never far from his mind.

"Of course!" said the crow, pecking at another apple core. "But not the same thing every day."

"Well we have lots of different food at Great Smials," said Mira. "Maybe you could meet me here, around this time most days, and I'll see what we can get you. To make up for the tower not being a good place to get food any more."

"I always liked you best," said the crow, "better than all the others. How are your nestmates, anyway?"

"Oh they're all fine," said Mira. "I'd better get back, my mama will be missing me. Will you be here tomorrow?"

"Will there be more food?" asked the crow, looking up from the apple core it was pecking on.

"Oh, sure, lots!" said Mira with a smile. "We're having the Midsummer Festival at Great Smials this year. There will be all kinds of visitors, and lots of food. I'm sure there will be a lot of scraps to throw out, and I'll sneak you some. Do you still like rolls?"

"Anything but cricket," answered the crow, turning back to his apple cores. Mira walked back to her home, looking back over her shoulder at the crow a time or two.

The Midsummer Festival was a great party that was hosted each year by the Took. They invited relatives and friends from all over the Shire, and even further abroad, and threw open the doors to their home, Great Smials. Once, hundreds of years before,

Great Smials had been the place where all the Hobbits of the Shire lived, when the Shire was a much smaller place and the Hobbits were far fewer. Now, it was still the place in the Shire where the largest number of Hobbits could gather together, and Midsummer was one time when a great many of them did. There was a great feast held out of doors with lanterns hanging from the trees and many long tables arrayed with every imaginable kind of food. Hobbits were rather fond of food, many meals a day, and most of their social life revolved around it. There was one other attraction of the Midsummer Feast at Great Smials: it was the only time of year when they could expect to see fireworks.

"Gandalf!" cried Mira, and she dropped her empty pot and ran down the road to greet the oldest friend of the Took family. Gandalf was dressed, as always, in grey clothes, with a broad-brimmed blueish hat that had a pointed crown. He was walking, and carried a long staff which he always carried with him. At the sound of Mira's voice, he raised a hand in greeting. Mira stopped a few feet in front of him and looked up with a grin. She was hardly able to contain her excitement, but unsure as to whether one was allowed to hug a Wizard.

"Hello, little Mirabella," said the wizard, "and how are you today? Is Adamanta working you to pieces to get ready for Midsummer Festival?"

Adamanta was Mira's mother. She did not exactly seem to approve of Gandalf, for reasons Mira never had heard explained.

"Oh, not so bad," said Mira, and she grinned a great smile up at Gandalf. "Will you do fireworks for us this year?"

"Perhaps, I might," said Gandalf, "but perhaps not. Do I look like I have any fireworks on me?" he asked.

"Oh no!" said Mira, an expression of alarm briefly crossing her face. Then she saw a gleam in Gandalf's eyes as he feigned an expression of seriousness, and she guessed he was joking. "You will! You will do fireworks!"

"We shall see, we shall see," said Gandalf. "Now I must be on my way. Where is your father, Gerontius, do you know?"

"In the cellars, last I knew," said Mira. "I think he was headed to the old Shiremoot."

Mira ran back to fetch her pot from where she had dropped it, and then on to the kitchen

where her mother Adamanta did indeed have more chores waiting for her. Gandalf walked around the hill that Great Smials was dug into, and approached the Great Door of King's Smial. This was once the front door of Great Smials, back in the days when all the Hobbits of the Shire could gather together within it in times of crisis. Gandalf, being a Wizard, was actually old enough to remember that long ago, though it was many times the life of any Man or Hobbit. He stopped for a moment in front of the door, a circle of polished oak twice as tall as he was. There was a look in his eye as if he were remembering. Then, he stepped up the few steps to it, pushed it slowly open, and went in.

In fact, there was someone there to see the old Wizard as he stopped in front of the door. After the door closed, she came over from where she had been, if not exactly hiding, then in any case not making any effort to be seen. Donnamira, usually called just Donna, was good at seeing, and she was not usually seen. Just now, she had been in the Orchard, picking a few of the early apples to make pies for the party. She carried a bushel basket half-full of them, and she stopped to look again at the great door, as if trying to determine what Gandalf had seen. But, while she was older than Mira, Donna was still just 12 years old. Such a young Hobbit-lass cannot see the ghosts of the past that a Wizard can, when her ancestors had streamed in to seek shelter from winter or invasion. She went up to it and opened the smaller door-within-a-door (also round, but hobbit sized) and stepped quietly inside.

She saw Gandalf's receding figure as he went through the Front Stoop into the Great Parlor. Like most of the rooms in Great Smials, this was now seldom used. Once, it had been the place where visitors would come to speak with the Thain of the Shire (the Thain being a sort of governor). Gerontius, Donna's father, was the current Thain, and in generations past it had been his forefathers. Gandalf had known the Tooks for many years, but most of Great Smials had been empty since even before he had taken an interest in Hobbits. Long before, many folk from far and wide had come here to speak with the Thain: Dwarf, Man, Dunedain, and even the very occasional Elf. In recent years it normally stood dark and empty. Once a year though, in preparation for the Midsummer Festival, it was cleared out, swept, and bedecked with ribbons and hanging lamps.

Gandalf walked through this to the next room, the Hearth Hall. This room had been used to cook food in vast quantities during Shire Moot. When the Long Winter had forced many Hobbits to take refuge once in Great Smials, this had been used again. Every Hobbit had contributed what little food they had into a common great pot that they all ate from. Gandalf had been there, then, and always remembered that time when he walked through this room. It was used now only once a year, at Midsummer Festival,

when a great pot of soup was prepared once again. The great pot that sat there on the still-cold hearth might not be the same one that was used in the Long Winter, but it looked the same. It occurred to Gandalf to ask Gerontius where it had come from, and if it had been here before him.

Gandalf walked on past the Hearth Hall to the King's Parlor and beyond that the King's Hall. Ever since Great Smials was first made, the Hobbits who lived there had to keep rooms ready for the occasional visit from the King of Arthedain. The kingdom of Arthedain was now long gone, but the Hobbits still remembered the King who had given them the lands of the Shire to live in. The King's descendants, now called Rangers, still visited from time to time to talk to Gerontius. In recent times, however, he was more likely to talk to them in his kitchen or office than down in the old King's Hall. For Midsummer Festival it was cleaned out as well. Had Gandalf looked about, he would have seen again the ancient mosaics on the wall. These showed the day when the King of Arthedain gave the lands of the Shire to the Hobbits, Marcho and Blanco. After learning that they had been given a land for their people to move to, they had danced a jig for him (to the likely horror of his dignified Dunedain courtiers). But Gandalf did not appear to look either right or left, and continued on to the Great Shire Moot Hall, where he found Gerontius Took.

Gerontius was on one knee, looking into an opened chest of decorations that sat on the polished wooden floor. He was looking at each one, and deciding which would be put up in the Shire Moot Hall this year for Midsummer Festival. Gandalf saw a brightly painted bird with long tail feathers made out of cloth, a rainbow candelabra made out of colored glass, a hanging mobile of small bells made of silver, and a number of others. Gerontius handed them one by one to his oldest daughter, Belladonna (usually called just Bella), who picked a place for them to hang. In theory, she was assisted in this by her brother Hildibrand. In practice Hildibrand mostly occupied himself by hanging the decorations from his own ears, or attempting to hang them on the back of Bella's hair. Bella and Hildibrand did not usually get along very well.

"Gandalf!" said Gerontius as he looked up. He stood and came over to shake hands with his old friend.

"Gerontius, I am glad to see you," said Gandalf. "I am glad to see the preparations for Midsummer Festival are going well, but I wondered if I might have a word with you, in private?"

Gerontius arched his eyebrows a bit in surprise. Then, he turned to his son and daughter and said, "Bella, Hildibrand, can you go upstairs and see if your mother needs any help?"

We can finish this later."

Turning back to Gandalf, Gerontius did not see Hildibrand hand the pile of ribbons he was holding to Bella. Hildibrand then turned and bolted out of the room, back towards the kitchens. Bella grimaced, and found a safe place on a table to put all of the decorations in her hands, including those Hildibrand had dumped on her. She nodded greetings to Gandalf before following her brother out. Gandalf smiled and nodded back at her, then turned back to his conversation with her father.

"Gerontius, I have just come from talking with Cirdan and the other elves at the Blue Havens."

"Aha," said Gerontius. "This is about the interrogation of Maeweth?"

"It is," said Gandalf. "It appears that it was not she who wrote the letter threatening revenge against you. She says it was written for her by someone else, and she just left it here when she came to abduct Isengar."

Then he leaned in closer and spoke to Gerontius in a very low voice, barely above a whisper.

Gerontius listened intently to what Gandalf said to him, with an occasional grimace. He looked down at the ground with a worried look on his face, as he listened to Gandalf for several minutes. Then, he looked up again, nodded, and the two of them left through a side door, to head towards a part of Great Smials which was no longer used.

Donna emerged into the Moot Hall, having been standing in the shadows in the south entrance for some time. She had not heard much of her father's conversation with Gandalf. She had heard them mention "Cirdan", the lord of the Blue Havens elves. She had also heard "Maeweth", the elf who had abducted her little brother and sister (and her as well) two years previously. If Maeweth did not write the letter, then did that mean she was working for someone else?

Was that 'someone else' still looking for revenge? No one had tried to kidnap any of her brothers or sisters since then, and it had been two years. She had thought that Gandalf had come back just to help them celebrate Midsummer, but maybe he had another reason? Donna wondered if she should be worried.

She also wondered what Gandalf and her father had gone off to look at, but she knew better than to try to follow them. In the parts of Great Smials they were going to, no one



ever went normally, so if she were caught following them, there would be no excuse. Donna's face rarely showed her emotions, but her mouth twisted into a very slight grimace now, and she gave the slightest shrug of her shoulders. Then she turned to go on up to the kitchen with her basket of apples, to help to bake pies for the Festival.

Before she reached the kitchen, she encountered her older brother Hildifons. He was walking with a couple other Hobbits, one boy and one girl, both around 20 years old or so. Not exactly family, and not exactly NOT family, they were the Tooks of Long Cleeve, who lived several day's walk north of Great Smials. Their great-grandfather was "Bullroarer" Took, brother of Hildifons and Donna's own great-grandfather. The boy was named Bredegar, and the girl was named Pearl. Bredegar was stocky and muscular for a hobbit. His sister Pearl looked tiny next to him, with big eyes in a small body that made her look even younger than she was.

"Is Lake Evendim high, now, what with all the rain?" asked Hildifons.

"Oh yes," said Pearl, who was the more talkative of the two. "It's not been so high in years. The land all around is almost soggy. The bigger animals sometimes sink into it, you can see their tracks like it was pressed in clay."

"Oh? What kind of animals?" asked Hildifons. The game near Tuckborough, where Great Smials was, were all smaller, like deer or rabbits.

"Well, there are bears, and elk, and we did actually see a few that looked like...they MIGHT be the footsteps of giants."

"Giants?" asked Hildifons, sounding especially interested. "You see giants up there?"

Pearl looked over at her brother Bredegar, as if she were uncertain how much she should say. Bredegar spoke up, his voice much deeper and slower than Pearl's.

"We don't SEE them, usually," said Bredegar. "It's best to give giants a wide berth. They usually do the same with us, and we've had no trouble in a long time. But there seems to be an especially big one visiting the lake, lately. I think he might be fishing. There are bigger fish in the lake than you'll find in the river."

"Do you worry that he'll take too many?" asked Hildifons.

"No," said Bredegar, shaking his head slowly. "If it isn't the giants taking fish from the lake, it will be the bears, especially where the river empties into it. But the bears seem

to stay away when the giants are around. It's probably not really any more fish being taken, just giants eating them instead of bears."

They turned then, at the sound of another group of Hobbits coming in from the direction of the seldom-used front door. It was Hildigrim, an older son, giving a tour of Great Smials to two Hobbits who had never seen it. Hildigrim was 28 years old now, nearly old enough to be considered an adult by Hobbit standards. With him were Bungo Baggins, who was 22, and Rosa Baggins, his cousin, who was only 12.

"This is the Great Shire Moot Hall," said Hildigrim to his guests, talking in a very important-sounding voice like a teacher or a guide. "It was used when all the Hobbits of the Shire would gather together to make decisions."

"Why didn't they just have the Thain decide it?" asked little Rosa.

"Sometimes they would, but at times of invasion or disaster you need to have everyone in agreement. The moot could go on for days. It still could happen again, theoretically, if the need arose."

"And it's always happened in your home?" asked Bungo.

"Yes, it's always happened here in Great Smials," answered Hildigrim.

"That's quite a responsibility," said Bungo. "Makes the Midsummer Festival almost look small."

"It wasn't always the Took home," interrupted Hildifons, who loved to correct people (and especially his older brothers). "It used to be the Oldbucks home"

"The Oldbucks?" asked Rosa. "Who are they? Are they all dead now?"

"No," said Hildifons, "they moved across the Brandywine River. They're called the Brandybucks now. But before they moved, they were called the Oldbucks, after Old Buck, the founder of the family."

"Old Buck?" asked Rosa. "What a funny name."

"His actual name was Bucca of the Marish," interrupted Hildigrim. He frowned at his younger brother with a look that said he would rather Hildifons left. Hildifons often got that look from his older brothers.

"Some say that Old Buck is the reason the Oldbucks left Great Smials," said Hildifons, ignoring his older brother's expression, or perhaps secretly delighting in it.

"What do you mean?" asked Bungo. "They left him here?"

"Oh he was long dead by then," said Hildifons, "it was several generations later. But, you know, Old Buck's ghost still walked the halls of Great Smials, and rumor has it they left to get away from him."

"Ghost!" squeaked Rosa with alarm. "There's a ghost here?"

"I have lived here all my life," said Hildigrim reassuringly, "and I have never seen or heard a ghost." He frowned again at Hildifons, disapproving of him scaring Rosa.

"But things go missing," said Hildifons, "and they say that Old Buck took them. When he was alive, he was worried about thieves, and was constantly hiding his things in different spots. He would go around taking things out of hiding in one spot, then hiding them again in a different spot. After he died, things kept getting moved around, they say. We still say 'Old Buck has it', when we mean 'It's not where it should be and I don't know where it is or why'. There are also parts of Great Smials we don't go in much. For example, just through those doors is a part of Great Smials that hasn't been walked in by living Hobbits in years."

"Not true," said Donna, interrupting, "I just saw Papa and Gandalf go that way a few minutes ago."

"Really?" asked Hildifons, frowning, with a bit of worry in his voice.

"If you saw that several minutes ago, then maybe you've been here long enough," said Bella, who had returned from the kitchen. "Donna, you and I (and those apples you're carrying) are needed in the kitchen."

In the kitchen, there was a great deal of noise from the bustling of many cooks at once, and many smells of food ready or nearly so. Donna smelled savory pies, rabbits still cooking over the fire, baked potatoes, fresh baked bread, and a great pot of stew. In addition, Donna could see that the crusts for the apple pies were nearly made. Her younger sister, Mira, was showing her younger cousins Cinquefoil and Daisy Brandybuck how to roll out the dough. Cinquefoil was just 5 years old, usually called just "Sink", and her sister Daisy was just 2. Sink was having some trouble, and Daisy

did not seem to understand even what was being attempted. They both, though, seemed very interested in anything Mira had to say or do. For her part, Mira liked being the older one for once, and clearly enjoyed her role as teacher.

Their mother, Adalrida Brandybuck, was helping Adamanta Took with the stove fires, and the two of them were chatting away as they did so. Donna noticed that Adalrida looked like she might be going to have another child later in the year. Donna and Bella knew that Adalrida was not so proud or steely-willed as their own mother. On occasion they wondered what it might be like to have a mother so relaxed and (seemingly) undemanding. This was in part due to the fact that they only saw the Brandybucks at times like these, when there were great parties with many families present at once. Even Adamanta's typical tight control of her household always relaxed a bit at such times. The kitchen was filled with laughter, happy conversation, the sounds of good food cooking, and the smells that would melt the heart of the sternest Hobbit matriarch. Plus, there was just too much going on to keep an eye on all of it.

Donna and Bella began coring and peeling the apples that Donna had brought. They worked for a few minutes in silence, until they were certain that the older Hobbits were too busy talking to each other to overhear.

"Bella, did you hear what Hildifons said?" whispered Donna.

"Which part?" Bella whispered back. "Hildifons says a lot of things."

"The part about no one going into the eastern rooms. It's not true. I've been there."

"Really? Why?"

"Just looking around."

"Did you see anything interesting?"

"Not much, it's mostly all empty, or stuff left there years ago because no one cared about it. But there is a vault, down there, still locked. Also..."

"Yes?"

"I heard someone else there. Walking around."

"Someone? Who?"

"I don't know."

"Did they carry a lamp, or a candle? If it was a candle, it was Papa. Everyone else carries a lamp if they're moving around at night."

"No, neither one."

"What? Someone was just wandering around the east rooms in the dark? Who would do that?"

Bella and Donna looked at each other then, still hunched over the bushel of apples they were working on. Their hands and faces froze for a moment as Bella tried to figure out what Donna was saying.

"I think...I think maybe it was the ghost of Old Buck."







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

OLD  
SMIALS

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

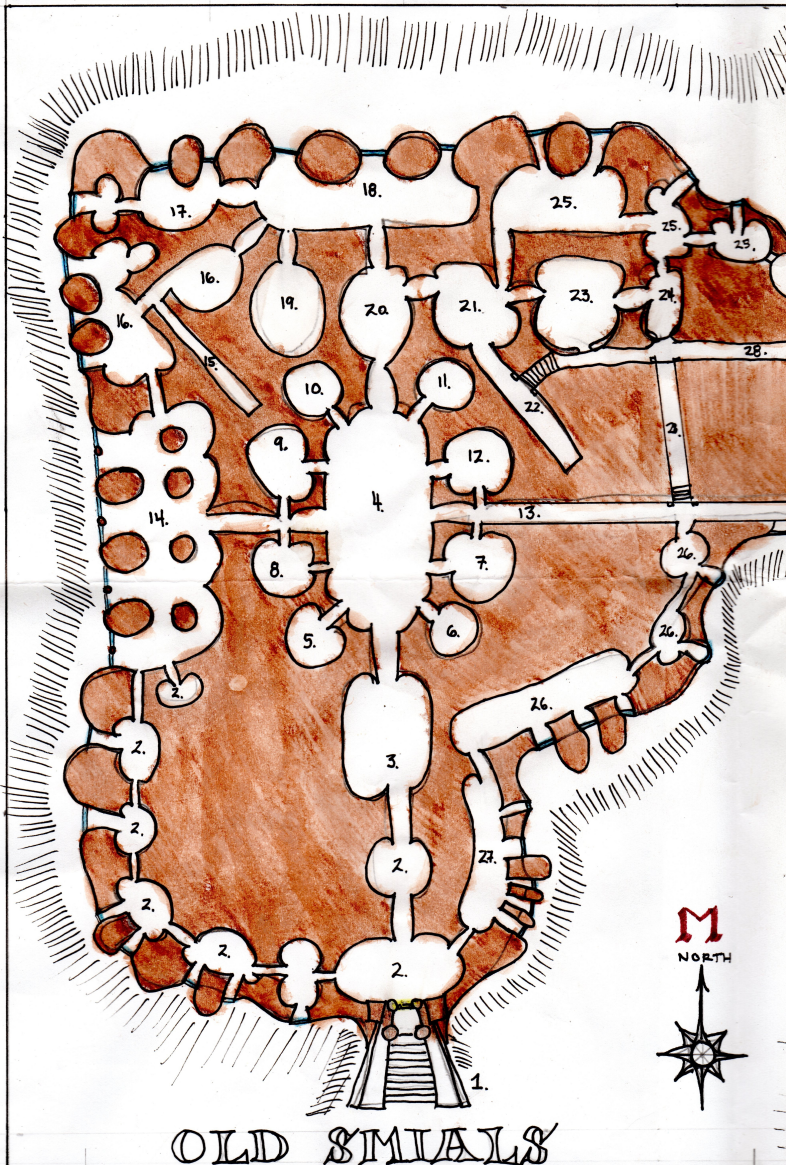
"OLD TOOKS"  
ROOMS

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

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

# THE MAIN HOLES OF THE GREAT SMIALS ♦ The GREAT PLACE OF THE TOOKS

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

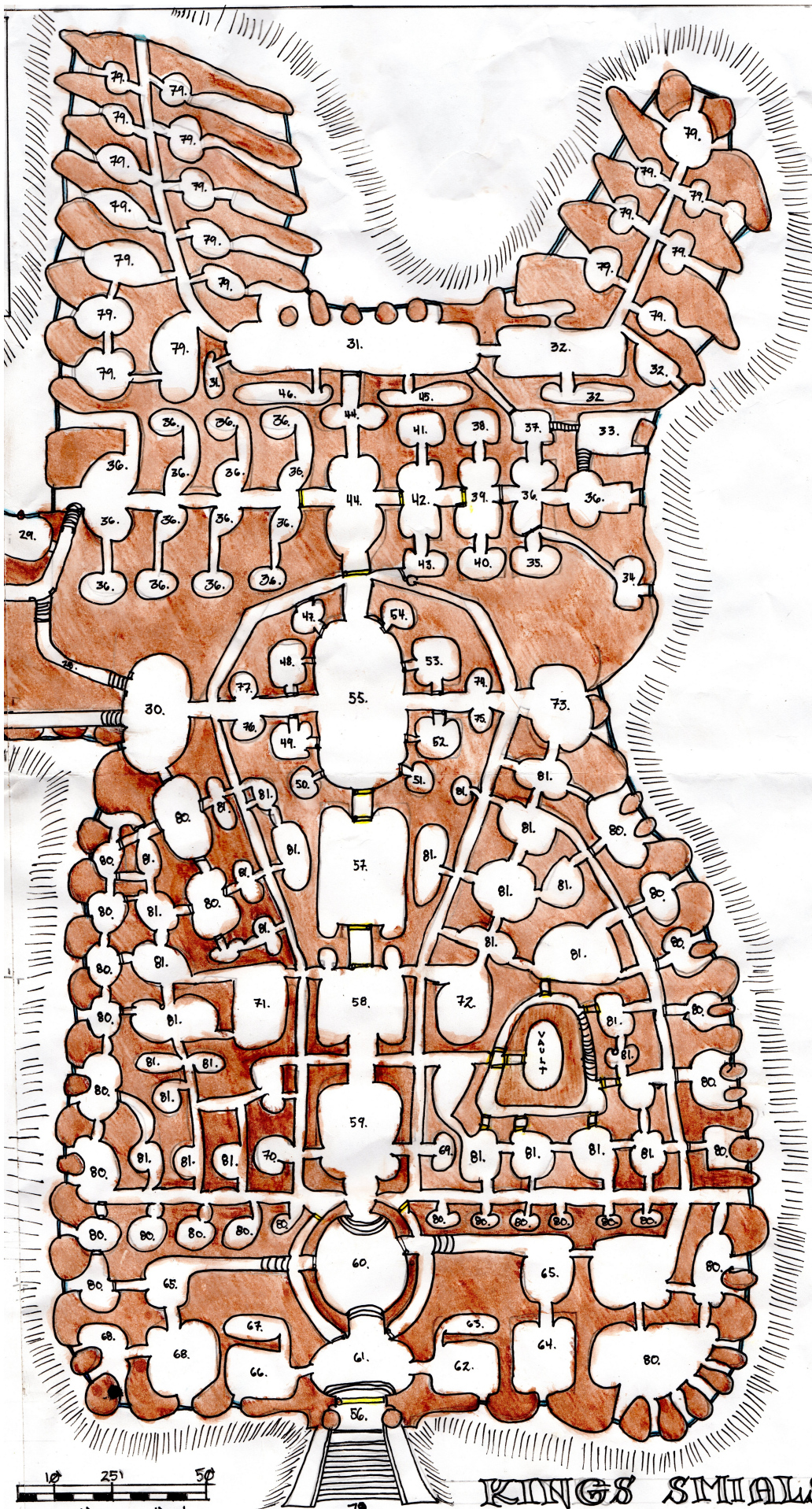


OLD SMIALS



THE GREAT SMIALS WERE BUILT OVER MANY YEARS. KING ARGELES OF ARTHEDAIN SURVEYED THE LAND & LAID DOWN AN ARMOURY FOR HIS HOBBIT SUBJECTS & ASSIGNED A THAIN TO WARDEN THE SITE IN 1630 OF THE THIRD AGE. IN 1978 THE FIRST ELECTED THAIN EXPANDED THE ARMOURY INTO THAIN'S SMIALS. IN 2340 THE TOOKS BECAME THE THAIN'S, REPLACING THE OLD BUCKS & SOON EXPANDED THAIN'S SMIALS, BUILDING THE LARGER KING'S SMIALS





10' 25' 50'  
SCALE 10' = 1cm 1" = 1mm

KING'S SMIALS



## Chapter 2 - Midsummer Night

In the Shire, where most of the Hobbits lived, seeing a non-Hobbit visitor was unusual. In some parts, such as the nearby town of Hobbiton, it was downright rare. But in Tuckborough, the area around Great Smials, it did happen from time to time, and Midsummer Festival was such a time. Many years, Gandalf would visit. Sometimes, there were other visitors.

Coming over the hill towards Great Smials was a wagon, pulled by a horse. It was a much larger beast than Hobbits were used to seeing. Hobbits, as a rule, preferred ponies. This wagon was not steered by a Hobbit, however, but by a Dwarf. Two dwarves, in fact, sat on the seat at the front, their wagon piled high with boxes. One wore red, the other wore dark green, and they both had long yellow beards that were starting to be mixed with white. Riding alongside of them, or in front in those places where the road was too narrow, was a Ranger. He rode a horse that appeared to be giant-sized to the Hobbits. He was tall, long-legged, with straight black hair and a close-cropped beard. He wore tall boots and clothes of dark green, and looked about him as if he were familiar with the place. In fact, he had been to Great Smials on several occasions before. The dwarves, however, looked about them as if they were seeing things they had never seen before.

They stopped their cart a few hundred paces away from the front doors of Great Smials. There, they unsaddled their horses and let them begin to graze on the lush green grass that grew on the hillside. As they did this, they were met by Bella and Donna, who had been told by Gandalf to look out for their arrival.

"Hello, Arador," said Bella, and the Ranger smiled and raised his hand in greeting.

"Hello Bella; is that a tankard of ale you're holding there for me?"

"It is," answered Bella, "and two more for your companions. Gerontius thought you deserved it after your journey here, all the way just to help with our Festival."

"It's not just to help with the Midsummer Festival," answered Arador, "but that's reason enough. Bella, Donna, may I introduce the dwarves Balin and Dwalin. They will be staying with the cart, here, to make sure that no curious Hobbit smoking pipeweed decides to come poking around. We don't need anyone accidentally setting off the fireworks."

Bella and Donna handed the tankards of ale to the dwarves, who took them with a grunt

(in Dwalin's case) and a smile (in Balin's). Other than that, they said little, but took a long drink and then set about organizing the contents of the cart.

"We'll send some food out for you, then," said Bella, "if you're set on staying here."

"They will get their chance to see Great Smials in a few hours," came the voice of Gandalf behind them. "Arador, I am glad to see you, but was thinking perhaps your father would be here as well."

"He intended to," said Arador, "but events called him away at the last minute."

Donna noticed, then, that Gandalf and Arador were both silent for a moment. They looked at each other with an expression that told her they had a lot to talk over. She wondered if it were possible to arrange to be within earshot when a Wizard and a Ranger want to have a private conversation. Maybe...

"Donna, Bella, perhaps instead you can take Dwalin and Balin for a meal now, after all," said Gandalf, as if he could read Donna's mind. "Arador and I will watch the wagon until they get back."

Donna and Bella walked back to Great Smials, with the two dwarves, feeling a little awkward and uncertain about what to say. What did dwarves like to talk about? In such situations, Hobbits tend to fall back on the one topic that they think everyone is interested in: food. They listed every type of food made for the Festival. The dwarves (especially the one in the red cloak, named Balin) asked questions about what those were. Before they knew it they were laughing together and felt comfortable. They told the dwarves the story about their brother Hildibrand eating too many seed cakes. He could not move from the table, and fell asleep in his chair. He woke up to find that his older brothers had used charcoal from the stove to draw a picture of a pig on his belly. Even the one in the dark green cloak named Dwalin was chuckling at that one.

They fetched the dwarves some food and more beer, helped with more kitchen tasks that Adamanta set them about as soon as she saw them. Before they knew it, the time had come for setup of the banquet. The sons helped take tables and chairs outside, since the weather was fine. The latest arriving guests were straggling in, and going directly to their chairs at one of the many long tables.

Appetizers were served, tankards and wineglasses were filled, and the sun set behind Tuckborough in the west. There were lanterns set out on the long line of tables, and hanging from poles nearby. Donna, Bella, and their mother Adamanta were sitting at

one end. They were hurriedly eating a small meal, so that they would not be hungry while serving food to all the guests. For the guests, though, the main meal would not begin yet, but they did not mind. The time had come for something so rare and fascinating to Hobbits that they looked forward to it even more than food.

The time had come for Gandalf's fireworks.

In the Took garden, one could find many types of flowers: peonies, chrysanthemums, dahlias, roses, daisies, columbines, delphiniums, foxgloves, hollyhocks. That night, in the sky above Great Smials, Gandalf recreated all of those flowers with fire, spark, and smoke. The hobbits looked up in amazement as they saw one magical flower bed after another appear in the sky above them. Each would appear with a boom, vanish into the night, and be quickly replaced by the next. Pinks, reds, oranges, yellows, greens, blues, and purples replaced one another like walking through a rainbow. The Hobbits lived in a world lit at night only by starlight, moonshine, candle, and fireplace. To see this bouquet of multicolored explosions above them, was as magical for them as anything else the wizard could have done.

Donna was one of the only hobbits to look at the wizard himself as he was doing this, instead of just looking up at the explosions. He was assisted by the two dwarves who brought the individual fireworks from the wagon to where he stood on the hillside. Donna noticed that Gandalf did not appear to need to use flint, tinder, candle, or anything else to light the fireworks. He just pointed at them with his staff, and they would erupt in sparks and shoot up into the night.

Why, Donna wondered, was Mira taking advantage of the distraction to hide rolls in her dress?

Isengar, Donna's only younger brother, would jump up with excitement and shoot 'hooray!' with each new explosion. He kept getting closer and closer to the fireworks, until his older brothers had to hold him back for his own safety.

Donna noticed that one of the little Brandybuck sons, Gorbodoc, was also up with Isengar, as near to the fireworks as he was allowed. He was about 8 years old, and didn't seem to talk to the other children much. A broad smile spread across his upturned face as he watched the sparkling colors fill the sky. The loudest booms of the fireworks exploding seemed to be his special favorite, sending him into odd-sounding laughter. Donna remembered then being told that Gorbodoc Brandybuck could not hear. She wondered if maybe he could just barely hear the loudest explosions. He seemed as happy as Isengar, although he ran around in circles less.

The rest of the Hobbits stayed back at a respectful distance, but laughed and clapped as well. Then, as a grand finale, Gandalf sent up dozens of fireworks at once. As soon as their noise had subsided, Gerontius stood up on a chair and loudly announced, "That is the signal for dinner!"

For Mira, Donna, and Bella, of course, it was the signal that their dinner was over, and it was time to serve the guests. They were kept busy for the next half an hour bringing food to table after table, along with their mother Adamanta and several serving maids hired for the occasion. To Donna, it was all a bit of a blur afterwards, hearing just small snippets of conversation as they went from table to table.

"Bungo my lad, you should come with me to try fishing at Lake Evendim," said Hildifons. "Bredegar here says that there's good fishing right on the south bank, near where they live at Long Cleeve."

"Oh, my, well, I suppose we could try that," said Bungo Baggins, sounding a bit uncertain about venturing so far from his home at Hobbiton.

"Bella, tell Bungo he will enjoy fishing with me," said Hildifons, as Bella was putting their plates down. Bungo made sure to mumble his thanks, unlike Hildifons.

"Bungo, I'm quite sure Hildifons won't be allowed to go to Lake Evendim without someone responsible going along. Maybe you should go with him," said Bella. "Do try to keep him from hooking his own self."

Isembold Took, one of Donna's older brothers, was talking with a Hobbit lass of about his own age, Rosemary Goldworthy.

"Isembold, sweetie," said Rosemary, leaning over towards Isembold, "tell me, do you think the Took family has the most money in all the Shire?" Rosemary smiled her most innocent-looking smile, and opened her eyes wider. Donna thought that Isembold looked like a fly headed for a spider's web.

Sometimes, their friends wanted to catch them for a quick conversation as they bustled back and forth. It was hard to avoid being caught up in the fun, but their mother Adamanta made sure to keep a sharp eye on them. With so many tables to serve and only a few of them to do it, there wasn't much time for talking.

"Well Rosa," said Bella, "I can't tell you just now how to make the rainbow bird you

saw, but I'll make you one and send it along later. All right? No, I have to go now, other folks want their mince pies as well!"

Their father, Gerontius, sat at the head of the first table. There he was surrounded by the heads of other families, such as Marmadoc Brandybuck (known as "the Masterful") and Otto Boffin (known as "the Fat"). Donna brought her father his plate last of all, according to his custom, making sure that all his guests were fed first.

"Papa, is anything wrong? Did you find something wrong in the east rooms?" asked Donna.

"What? No, no of course not, child. Everything is fine," he said with a smile.

Not a very happy looking smile, Donna thought.

After a few hours, the Hobbits had all eaten. They had also eaten second portions, and then eaten dessert. At last the Took sisters and the other serving maids were allowed a break. It was Mira's first year to be helping, and she was feeling quite exhausted, and laid her head down on Bella's lap and closed her eyes. Donna was sitting next to them, and she and Bella were sampling some of the apple pie they had made. The guests had mostly all drifted back into Great Smials, but a few conversations were still happening in the dark, by candle or lamplight. Donna heard Rosemary Goldworthy giggle loudly, along with Isembold's low chuckle, and saw her older sister grimace.

Gandalf and Arador had sat at a taller table, in taller chairs brought out of storage for the occasion. They were somewhat off to the side of the others, along with the two dwarves.

"The rains have swelled the rivers and lakes all throughout the North," said Arador. "It has made it impossible to cross many of them. There may be too much rain for the crops to be harvested, here in the Shire or among the Men of Bree or further south. It could be a harsh winter this year."

"The Hobbits will do all right, I think," said Gandalf. "They can cooperate well enough to handle the floods, if they come. The Men of Bree can probably survive well enough, as well. I am worried for the Men of Tharbad and other areas in the south, though. They are not so quick to cooperate, with each other or anyone else. One Man cannot hold back a cresting river, however strong he may be. It takes a whole people able to work together."

"You're right as usual, Gandalf," said Arador. "That's why I worry about..." but he was

cut off in mid-sentence by Gandalf.

"Hello, Donna, what would you be needing?" he said, not too gruffly but with a hint of suspicion in his eyes. Donna tried to keep her face from showing any expression.

"Do any of our guests need any more ale?" she asked.

"I could use another tankard," said the dwarf Dwalin without looking up from his plate. "I'd not say no to another," added Balin, smiling in Donna's direction.

Donna took their tankards and headed back to Great Smials, regretting a little that Gandalf had seen her so quickly. She thought Arador the Ranger had been about to say something about what was happening outside the Shire, maybe something important. He was not a person to worry very often, and she would have liked to know what he was worried about.

She went into Great Smials by the old Front Doors, since they were open for the Midsummer Festival. She went past the Front Stoop (full of Hobbits chatting to one another as they drank apple cider), and the Great Parlor (almost as full of Hobbits). She was about to go on to the next room (the King's Parlor), when she paused in the hallway. To her right was a passageway that went off into the unused east rooms of Great Smials. There was no one in the hallway with her, so with a quick glance behind to make sure no one was looking she slipped off into the darkness.

The hallways quickly became pitch black, when she was only a few steps in. Not the kind of darkness that you get in your house. There was no starlight through the window, or little blinking lights from something left plugged in. This was the kind of real black darkness that you can only get underground. Great Smials was a wonderful home to grow up in, and it was usually cozy and warm and full of Hobbit comfort and light. But, it was underground. If you went off down an unused hall without so much as a candle, you would soon be unable to see your own hand if you waved it in front of your face.

Donna walked quickly and quietly to where the hallway opened on the right. There she turned into an open space that she knew had once been an office of some sort. She set down the tankards she was carrying as quietly as she could, and started to open the small bag she kept hanging from her belt. Inside was a small lamp, given to her two years before by the elf Calpatan, that could give off light without wick or oil. She didn't know how it worked, and assumed that elven magic was involved, so she had rarely used it up until now. Hobbits are, by and large, cautious people about things which are magical, and prefer to use tools that they understand. But she needed to have enough light to look

about, and hadn't wanted to go fetch a lamp or candle before ducking into the hallway.

What Donna wanted to do, of course, was look at the dust that was on the floor in this seldom-used part of Great Smials. She wanted to see if she could tell where her father and Gandalf had been to. She had a suspicion that they might have been headed to the Vault, the only part of that area which she thought could hold anything of value. The other rooms all seemed to be piled up with junk from many years ago. But, before she could get out her light and start looking, she heard a 'click' noise, and she froze in fear.

The noise was not loud; you or I might not have heard it at all. But Hobbits have sharp eyes and sharp ears, as a rule, and Donna's were even sharper than most. She could hear a pin drop on soft earth, and inside the dark hallways of Great Smials she could hear that 'click' as plain as a dog barking. She also thought she knew what it was; it was the sound of a door opening. Not loud; the person who opened the door was trying to move quietly, and there were probably other doors between it and Donna. But she crouched back into a corner of the pitch dark room she was in, and held her breath.

'Click'. 'Click'. There, the sound of a door softly closing, and then another door opening, closer than the first. Someone was going through a series of doors, and they were moving closer to her. A series of doors, like those that led to the Vault. Someone was coming out of the Vault, and was headed towards her in the dark.

'Click'. The second door closing. 'Click'. The third door opening. 'Click'. The third door closing. Now it was in the same hallway that led to the room she was hiding in. But who was it?

Donna heard nothing, and wondered what could be quiet enough to move without her hearing it. Then, she felt it, the presence of another soul nearby in the dark, by what intuition she did not know. Did it sense that she was there? Was it moving towards her? She felt it pause, as if uncertain. Donna was still holding her breath, now as much out of fear as caution, but her heart seemed to be pounding inside her chest. There were no more doors between her and it. Donna wondered if it could hear her heart beating, whoever it was.

Or whatever it was.

She heard it moving things, then, in the same room with her. Still softly, but not so quietly that she couldn't hear the slight creak of a wooden lid being lifted, then put back in place. The sounds were not five paces away from her.

Donna was considering whether or not she ought to scream. She wondered if she could still manage to do it after holding her breath for so long. Then, she felt it leave. Again, it was not something she could hear, but with absolute certainty, she knew it was gone. She waited a minute more, now letting herself breathe as softly as she could manage. Then, she picked up the tankards and prepared to go, before she remembered she had been about to get out Calpatan's light. She quickly set her tankards down again and got out the lantern. The light from it pushed back the darkness to reveal old boxes and crates, piled up without much order or method.

But the dust on one box had clearly been disturbed recently. Donna went forward cautiously, as if she was afraid a snake would jump out of it, and lifted the lid. Inside, she saw nothing. Who would have crept around in the dark just to open and re-close an empty box?

Unless it wasn't empty until a minute before, and someone had come there to take something out of it. Someone who wanted to hide things, and then move them about to different hiding places.

Someone like the ghost of Old Buck?



### Chapter 3 - Cleaning Up

"Hildifons, are you going to be seeing Bungo Baggins soon?" asked Bella. They were in the kitchen, Hildifons eating a snack and Bella cleaning dishes. Their mother, Adamanta, was behind them, tending a great pot over the fire.

"Sure will, sis, I'm going fishing up in Lake Evendim with him next week."

"What?" came Adamanta's voice from behind them. "It's far too dangerous to be going up there, with as much rain as we've had this summer! You'll drown yourself."

"I won't!" said Hildifons, trying to make his voice sound reassuring. He was in that awkward age where he thought he should be free to do as he pleased, but his mother disagreed. Bella regretted asking her question with her mother nearby, and was afraid now that it would provoke an argument. But then, her mother was certain to find out about Hildifons' plans at some point. Just then, her father coming walking in from his work in the garden.

"Gerontius," said Adamanta, perhaps sensing that she needed help in controlling her son now that he was taller than her, "tell your son that he's not to go up to Lake Evendim with the streams and lakes all so full. He'll get caught in a rainstorm and washed away."

Gerontius, sensing that he was about to get caught up in a tangle of arguments, looked for a way out.

"Hildifons, why don't you take someone with you?" he said. "It's always safer to go with a friend, to help you out if you're in a tight spot."

"Of course I will!" said Hildifons, with a tone of triumph in his voice. "I'm going with Bungo Baggins!"

"He's even younger than you are," said Adamanta angrily. "I doubt he can even swim."

"He can throw me a rope! Anyway, I'm not going swimming, I'm going fishing. I won't fall in the water!"

"You look for trouble everywhere you can find it," said Adamanta, waving a finger at Hildifons.

"Look," interrupted Gerontius, before Hildifons could respond, "this Bungo Baggins

fellow seems to be sensible, if you stay with him you can go. Now, I need your help in the garden, Hildifons."

With that, Gerontius turned and walked quickly back the way he had come from.

"Help with what?" asked Hildifons as he followed after his father.

Bella heard no answer. Bella thought that her father did not actually know what he needed help with yet. He just knew that it was time to get Adamanta and Hildifons separated before their argument got angrier. Bella kept her head down, looking at the dishes she was cleaning, and heard the sounds of her mother muttering angrily to herself. The older sons, like Hildifons, were getting too big for her to order around any longer.

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"Wow, lots of rolls today," said the crow, when he and Mira met by the compost pile. It was the day after the Midsummer Festival. The guests were all gone, and the great old doors had been closed again. The Took family was back to their normal routine, using the smaller cellar doors to go in and out.

"Yeah, you said you liked them, so I hid some and saved them for you," said Mira, looking up with a smile. The crow promptly fluttered down to the ground next to her. "It's not easy hiding food from Hobbits."

"How was the roost yesterday?" asked the crow, as it started pecking at the food, one piece from each roll.

"Roost? Oh, you mean the Midsummer Festival. Yes, it was fun! There were fireworks. Did you see them?"

"No, I was up north again, I couldn't find a good roost near here last night, and it seemed like there could be owls so I didn't want to sleep somewhere alone. So I ended up by the lake again. I saw the giant."

"Oh, really? My goodness! I've never seen a giant."

"Often we roost near a giant sleeping, they seem to scare off the owls even when they're sleeping, just by being there. He's not always there, but he seems to be coming more often lately. I think he's eating the fish. He's not eating the crickets, I'm pretty sure of that."

"No, it would take a lot of crickets to feed a giant."

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There was a lot of cleaning up to do in the big rooms by the old entrance (the Great Parlor, Hearth Hall, King's Parlor, etc.). Donna was at it most of the morning, while Bella was upstairs helping her mother wash dishes. She spent several hours putting things away, cleaning up spills, and taking dirty dishes up to the kitchen from where they had been left by their guests the night before. She didn't really enjoy the work, but it did give her time to think about what she had seen (or rather, heard) the night before.

When she had finished cleaning up downstairs, she paused for a moment and stared down the dark side hallway that led towards the Vault. On the one hand, she was curious. On the other hand, she was a little afraid. Eventually, she knew that she was going to go there again. Going back upstairs to wash dishes, or cook dinner with her sister and mother, was not very tempting. She stood for a minute longer, still a bit scared. Then she gave a small, quiet sigh and walked down the hallway.

This time, she took an oil lamp with her.

She entered the dark, unused rooms where discarded furniture and other odd junk was piled up on all sides. The flame from the lamp threw odd shadows on the walls. She was suddenly aware of how quiet it was back here, with no sounds of family members talking in the next room. She looked around, trying to see if there was any sign in the dust on the floor that would show where people had walked recently. She saw the spot where she had hidden in the dark the night before, and the trail where someone else had entered the same room, then left.

She followed the trail down the hallway until it came to an intersection and then turned left. She passed by a broom closet and turned left again. Finally she turned right into one of several (long-abandoned) guest rooms. There was a small bed in one corner, piled high with boxes and surrounded by trunks. Donna wondered for a moment how much of what was stored in Great Smials had actually ever been seen by a living Hobbit. Were there things stuffed away in the dark that would sit there, undisturbed, all her life?

Or, sometimes, did something other than a living Hobbit come along and move them?

She stood in the doorway to the guest room and looked around, trying to see evidence of something that was disturbed recently. There, the trunk in the corner. She saw the

tracks in the dust on the floor go up to it, turn around, and return. Would a ghost leave tracks in the dust? Maybe not. But then, she had heard of ghosts making papers or hair blow in a breeze as they went by, so maybe they could. She didn't really know much about ghosts, and she wasn't even sure who she could ask about them.

Donna looked at everything carefully before she moved over to the trunk herself and disturbed the tracks, then knelt down next to it. With the lamp held in her left hand, she struggled with her right to try to open the trunk lid. It was too heavy. She carefully set the oil lamp down nearby, then turned back and used both arms to force the trunk lid up.

Donna looked into the trunk for some time without moving, just looking. Then, she reached in and picked up a metal circle, too large to be a bracelet or anklet, and turned it around to look at it from every angle. It looked to be made of iron, with silver tracings on it made to look like ivy. She wondered what it was for. Perhaps it might fit around a person's neck, but she didn't see how you could get it on. The inside of it was flat, while the outside was rounded, as if it were made to fit around something.

Quietly, Donna put the metal circlet back into the trunk, and closed the trunk. She suddenly felt the urge to run away, to get back to where there was more light, and more people she knew, as quickly as possible. It was not safe to run with an oil lamp, though, and there was no way she would leave it behind and run into the dark. She forced herself to breathe more slowly and walk instead of run.

At one point, she was nearly certain she heard movement in the hallway behind her.

She did not stop when she got back to the Hearth Hall. Instead, she quickened her pace until she was all the way back to the Great Kitchen, in the part of Great Smials which was used every day.

"Is the Hearth Hall and the rest all packed away, then?" asked her mother, who was chopping carrots.

Donna nodded.

"Is everything all right, Donna?" asked Bella, who was working with her mother to cook soup. "You look a bit upset."

"Yes, everything's all right," said Donna.

"Not everything," said Adamanta, "there's a ton of washing to do. All the table linen

from the Festival. It's in a basket by the door, take it outside and get started. We'll be helping you as soon as this soup is going."

Donna nodded. "By the door", normally meant by the Cellar doors, that led to the gardens outside. For a couple days, before and during the Midsummer Festival, the old doors were used. Now that the festival was over, they had been closed and locked again. The much smaller cellar doors were how they went in and out of Great Smials. She headed down the stairs to the cellar doors.

She got to the door and blew out the oil lamp, and set it down in the doorway. She picked up the small wheelbarrow loaded with laundry, and headed down the path towards the stream. The sun was still up, but in about an hour it would be too dark to see, so she knew that she needed to hurry if she was going to get back before dark. The woods around the stream were, in theory, cleared of anything dangerous long ago. Great Smials lay in the midst of the Shire, the area that the Hobbits called home, and there were no large predators in it any longer. Any Men, Orcs, or other brigands were kept away by the Rangers. Still, she felt nervous to be out of doors after dark, so she decided to hurry with the laundry and be back before then.

She reached the spot where the road crossed the stream. It was not itself in the woods, but they were as close to where she was as the doors to Great Smials. She put the first of the laundry into the stream, on top of a smooth board. Then she began banging on it with a small wooden bat, which was how they removed the dirt from most laundry. She had been at it for a minute or two when she became aware that she was being watched.

If it was an animal, then looking up at it might cause it to stop stalking, and begin sprinting towards her, so she did not at first change her posture. She did, though, look out of the corner of her eye to see if she could see what it was. Perhaps she was imagining things? She had been rattled by her time in the dark in the old guest room, just a few minutes ago. Perhaps she was thinking she felt watched when there was nothing. She looked carefully, but secretly, at the edge of the forest, from one edge to the other, still keeping her head facing down as if she were looking at the laundry she was cleaning. She dreaded to think what might happen if she saw a large cat there. There had been big cats that had lived in this region before Men, Dunedain, and Hobbits had come. There were still, from time to time, great cats that came wandering down from the north, but it had been many years since one had been seen in the Shire. Still, she had the strong sense that something was watching her.

There.

Not a cat, but too tall for a Hobbit. It was dressed in dark robes, maybe grey, and stood near the edge of the forest. With a rush of relief, Donna realized that it must be Gandalf, and she straightened up and looked openly in his direction. To her surprise, the figure disappeared back into the woods in an instant. She stared after him for a while, wondering what that meant. Why would Gandalf be hiding in the forest?

She got up, leaving the laundry behind, and walked over to the spot at the edge of the woods where she had seen him last. The light had started to fail as the sun dropped behind the hill to the west. She stood for a minute just under the shadow of the trees at the edge, listening to the sounds of frogs and crickets chirping in the woods. She tried to see where the Wizard had gone, but could not tell. Did she hear the soft sounds of boots? It would be hard to move through the litter of dead leaves and twigs on the forest floor, without making noise. Donna could not be sure if she was hearing footsteps or imagining them, and she could not see much through the shadows of the trees overhead.

"Gandalf?" she called. No answer came back. It was very odd of Gandalf not to respond when called.

She thought for a minute about going further into the woods to investigate, but turned around instead and began walking back. After a few steps, she started running instead, and did not stop until she was back in the kitchen with her mother and Bella.

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A letter from Bella Took to Bungo Baggins:

"Dear Mr. Baggins,

Please give this rainbow bird decoration to Pearl at Long Cleeve. I would send it with Hildifons, but he isn't always very reliable for things like this. I hope you and he have fun on your fishing trip. Do try to be careful! I'm sure you'll be a good influence on him.

best regards,  
Bella Took"

Dear Mr. Baggins,

Please give this rainbow bird decoration to Pearl at Long Cleve. I would send it with Sildifors, but he isn't always very reliable for things like this. I hope you and he have fun on your fishing trip. Do try to be careful! I'm sure you'll be a good influence on him.

Best regards,

Bella Took











## Chapter 4 - Whispers in the Dark

A letter from Bungo Baggins to Bella Took:

"Dear Miss Took,

I successfully delivered your rainbow bird to Pearl at Long Cleeve. She was delighted, and ran around their home with it for nearly an hour. She was showing it to everyone, with a lovely bright smile on her face and a dance in her step. You can really see the relationship between you and her.

Your brother Hildifons is certainly an exuberant fellow. I'm sure I shall never forget our fishing trip together. You should probably keep an eye on him to see that he doesn't get himself into more excitement than is good for him.

Rosa and I look forward to our next opportunity to visit the Took household. Your family are all in our thoughts always.

regards,  
Bungo Baggins"

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The Shire, where the most Hobbits lived, did not usually get large rainstorms. It got rain often enough, but most often it fell gently from the clouds, enough to water the plants but not cause a bother. Occasionally, though, one would come in from the West, passing right through the gap in the Blue Mountains, to deliver all its water from the Sea in a huge downpour. This was rare in most years, but this year had happened more than once already before the Midsummer Festival. Now, only ten days after, it happened again.

Hobbits who looked west saw the great, dark clouds of the storm rolling in, and most knew what was coming. They brought their children in, and put away their farm tools and stabled their ponies and other animals. Soon, the far-off sound of thunder could be heard, a barely perceptible rumble. The clouds came closer, and the winds began to stir the tallest trees. Adamanta called to her sons and to Gerontius. They came reluctantly in from the garden where they were working (or, in the case of Hildibrand and Hildifons, pretending to work while throwing dirt clods at each other when Gerontius and their brothers were not looking).

The Hobbit men and boys had tramped noisily through the kitchen, agitating their

mother and delighting their youngest sister Mira, and then gone off to other parts of Great Smials, when there came a ringing of the doorbell. The sisters and Adamanta, all working in the kitchen, looked at each other in surprise.

"Mira," said Adamanta, "go see who it is."

Mira ran down and opened the cellar door, and found the mailman standing there. He smiled and handed her an envelope.

"Hi Largo. Do you want to come in? It's going to rain!"

"No, Miss Mira, thank ye kindly, but I think I can make it to Tuckborough before it breaks. Wish me luck!"

With that, he ran off, and Mira watched him go, down the path and around Great Smials towards the south. She was just about to turn to go back inside when she caught a glimpse of a figure dressed in grey, just inside the edge of the forest to the north. She looked at it for a few seconds, trying to see more detail, but the gloom of the oncoming storm made it hard. She closed the door, the letter clutched in her other hand, and ran back to the kitchen where her mother and sisters were.

"Here, Bella," she said, "it's a letter for you from Bungo Baggins."

Bella turned and took it from Mira. Donna noticed that Bella turned away from everyone present when she opened the letter, so that no one could easily see what was written in it. Adamanta was suddenly suspicious. Turning away from her work peeling vegetables, she narrowed her eyes slightly and stared at Bella's back. Donna thought she might be about to march over and grab the letter away from Bella to read it herself.

She was interrupted, though, by the sound of Gerontius coming back.

"Bella, can you help Isengar? He's torn his breeches and is about to show the world his backside if the tear gets any larger."

"Yes, Papa," said Bella, and she nearly sprinted out of the room, before her mother had a chance to demand to look at her letter.

"I'm starting to wonder about this Bungo Baggins fellow," muttered Adamanta to Gerontius. "He's writing letters to our Bella. She's too young to be getting letters from suitors."

"I don't know if I'd count Bungo Baggins as a suitor, exactly," said Gerontius. "Anyway, Bungo is as Baggins as Baggins can be, and I've known a few Bagginses in my time. It will take him twenty years to get up the courage to propose, even if that's his intention."

"I think I saw Gandalf in the woods," said Mira to Donna, far enough away from their parents that her mother wouldn't hear. "I guess he went into the trees to get away from the rain. It's silly; I don't know why he wouldn't just come knock on our door. We'd let him stay inside."

"Gandalf was hiding in the woods again?" asked Donna. "How odd. It's almost like he was spying on us."

"Why would Gandalf be spying on us?" asked Mira.

"I don't know, but if he wanted to, it would seem like he could do it better if he just came inside."

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"I have rolls again! And apple cores. Are you hungry?" asked Mira.

"Of course," croaked the crow. "Did your nest stay dry last night?"

"What? Oh, you mean Smials. Yes, it's quite dry, even in a rainstorm. What about you?"

"Soaked to the bone," said the crow mournfully. "I should have stayed up north by the lake. Oh, I saw a couple Hobbits up there a few days ago."

"Oh, really? That must have been my brother Hildifons and Bungo Baggins. They were fishing."

"Is that what you call it? There seemed to be a lot of sitting around."

"Yes, fishing is like that, sometimes. Did they give you anything to eat?"

"One of them did, while the other one was gone. He seemed to be lonely, sitting there for a day on his own."

"Really? Why would they be separated?"

"I don't know, but the one that was left there was too neat and tidy. Kept picking up all the bits of food when he was done eating, instead of leaving them. Then he saw that I was wanting to eat, and gave me something."

"Hmmm, that's odd. Say, do you ever see someone in the woods outside our doors?"

"Sometimes. Which ones do you mean, the little doors on this side or the big ones on the other side?"

"The little ones on this side. We hardly ever use the big ones, just for Midsummer Festival. Otherwise they're kept locked."

"Are they? I see a Hobbit going in and out of the big ones at night, sometimes."

"You do? Who is it?"

"I'm sorry, you Hobbits all look more or less the same to me. It was a male."

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It was a few days before Donna found another opportunity to go down into the abandoned east wing to explore. Adamanta usually kept her busy, and when she wasn't, Mira often wanted her to play, or Bella wanted her help with something. Eventually, though, there was a time when Bella and Mira were keeping each other occupied with making Mira's doll a dress. They were sitting in the Children's Solar, which had many windows to let in great sunbeams that made it easy to see their sewing work. Donna got up, not too abruptly, so that it seemed she was just bored or tired, not eager to slip away. She wandered slowly over towards her room, then quietly turned and went towards the stairs down.

She exited the stairs near the Great Kitchen, and ducked into it quickly to grab an oil lamp. She could have used her magic lantern from Calpatan the elf, but she preferred to save it for times when nothing else would work. Something told her that if her mother found her using a magic lamp, she would confiscate it. There was no rule against using magic things in the Took family, but then there never was a need. No one had anything magical (as far as she knew). Since the sisters' adventure two years before, they had all agreed to keep their gifts from Calpatan secret, just in case their mother frowned on it as too much of a link to the world outside. Their mother was a suspicious person. All the

sisters knew that she loved them very much, but she was not one to think kindly on anything from the world outside of the Hobbits' Shire.

The light from the oil lamp lit her way through the large rooms nearer the center of Ground Floor, and then she took the hallway towards the east. She made her way to the abandoned guest room where she had found the curious items before. She found the same chest, set the oil lamp down carefully, and lifted the heavy lid with both hands.

Empty.

Donna stood there, kneeling by the chest, with both arms straining a bit to hold the lid up, and blinked at it for a few moments. Totally empty. She slowly closed the lid, not wanting to make any more noise than she had to, and sat there for a moment thinking. Then she got up and studied the floor. She held her lamp high up so that the light from it shone on the floor before her but the flame itself was out of her field of vision.

The dust on the floor had been disturbed numerous times recently, in part by Donna the last time she had visited. But when she got to the door out into the hallway, she could see other tracks. One went east, further into the dark, unused parts of Great Smials. She followed it down the hallway, and into another unused room. This one had broken furniture stored in it, put there with the idea that it would be someday fixed. Donna wondered idly how many years, or perhaps generations, they had been waiting for someone to get around to repairing them.

She found the stash of odd items in a back corner, which she had to crawl under a table to get to. She wondered at what they were, and what they could have in common to be stored together. A thin piece of wood, about a foot long, pointed at both ends. Beautifully decorated padlocks that had odd fasteners and no apparent keyhole. A two foot long complex metal rod with elaborate flanges. The circle of metal that she had looked at before. A foot-long sharp spike with a loop at one end. Lastly, she saw a horn with beautiful and delicate tracery in silver around the outside. She reached for the horn, and held it close to her to look at it in the light of her small lamp.

As she lay on the ground under the broken, tilted table, with the horn held close to her face, Donna realized that she could hear whispering. She froze with fear, thinking there was someone else in the room with her. Then she realized that the sound was coming from the horn. It was too quiet to hear what it was saying, so she held it up to her ear.

"...want to get away from here, want to see the world, want adventure, don't want to live in the Shire, want to see the Sea and the Mountains and distant shores, want to feel

excitement every day and never have to work at chores again, want..."

Donna snatched it away from her ear, even more alarmed than when she had thought the whispering was coming from a person in the room. She stared at the horn, in a mix of fear and fascination. For a few moments she lay there, unsure what to do. Then, she dropped the horn back with the rest. The loud clattering noise startled her even more, and she scampered away as fast as she dared with the oil lamp in hand. The pitter patter of her footsteps sounded in her ears all the way back. When she got back to the solar she realized she still had the oil lamp in her hand.

"Donna? Why do you have a lamp in the middle of the day?" asked Bella, with a look that showed she knew exactly why.

"Um, I, was just looking around downstairs. It looks like all the cleaning up from the Festival is done."

Mira giggled. "It's been done for a week, Donna. What's wrong?"

Donna said nothing, and went quietly into her room, where she set down the oil lamp and blew it out. She lay on her bed and tried not to hear the whispering voice in her ear, but it was a long time before it went away.

Dear Miss Took,

I successfully delivered your rainbow bird to Pearl at Long  
Creeve. She was delighted, and ran around their home with it  
for nearly an hour. She was showing it to everyone, with a  
lovely bright smile on her face and a dance in her step. You  
can really see the relationship between you and her.

Your brother Hildifons is certainly an exuberant fellow. I'm  
sure I shall never forget our fishing trip together. You should  
probably keep an eye on him to see that he doesn't get himself  
into more excitement than is good for him.

Rosa and I look forward to our next opportunity to visit the  
Took household. Your family are all in our thoughts always.

regards,

BB



## Chapter 5 - Baggins Pays a Visit

It was nearly fall when Bungo Baggins came back to Great Smials for a visit. He did not stay long, just a few hours, but he did sit with them for lunch. Adamanta tried to make sure that Bella had no time to talk to him, by giving her task after task in the kitchen where lunch was being prepared. Bella normally had to help Adamanta, Donna and Mira serve everyone food before they sat down. When it came time to serve, though, Gerontius asked both Bella and Bungo to sit next to him at the head of the table.

While bringing food to their places, Donna's brothers all had something to say to her, each in their fashion. From Isengrim, the oldest, it was simply "Thank-you, Donna", with a smile. Isengar, the youngest, began devouring the food off the plate almost before it touched the table. After a few bites he gave Donna a huge, toothy grin, showing half-chewed food as he did so. Hildifons had a riddle for her: "what sounds like a bell, backwards?"

"Bella," said Donna, with a slight smile on her lips.

Hildibrand tried to match his older brother, but couldn't think of a riddle, so he settled for teasing Bella. "I've got another riddle. Who tries to impress visitors, but ends up looking foolish?"

"Hildibrand," interrupted Bella, and Gerontius gave a bit of a chuckle, along with several of the other Took. Bungo Baggins looked embarrassed. Donna realized that he probably didn't know about how Hildibrand and Bella had been teasing each other for ten years or more.

"Do you have any brothers, Bungo?" asked Bella, before Hildibrand could have a chance to think of a reply.

"Um, yes, a couple," said Bungo. "They're both much younger than I." He smiled at Bella, but had nothing else to say.

Silence.

"How is Rosa doing, anyway? It was really nice of you to bring her here to see us at Midsummer. She's a cute little Hobbit-lass." Bella smiled encouragingly at Bungo.

"Oh, yes, she's great. Doing fine, really! Just fine." Bungo looked up, smiled, then looked embarrassed again, and looked back at his plate and resumed eating.

Silence. The conversation moved on without Bungo's involvement. Gerontius and Bella and Hildifons discussed the weather, Gandalf's fireworks, what work would be needed in the fields soon, and a dog of the Bolger family. It had ended up at the doorstep of Great Smials, reeking of skunk and howling in dismay.

"I think we were all ready to send him on his way and let him get over it himself," said Hildifons, "but Bella took him to the creek and washed him until he was just tolerable."

"Bella has a soft spot for the incompetent," said Hildibrand with a smirk. Bella shot him a look that could have made a troll pause in its tracks, but Hildibrand knew better than to look up from his plate just then.

"Oh nonsense, Hildibrand," said Gerontius, "it was a good deed on Bella's part, the poor dog was miserable."

"Yes, yes it was," said Bungo, finally finding his tongue again. "Uh, very good of you, Bella."

"It wasn't so bad," said Bella, "and I hated to see him suffer."

"It must have taken quite a while to get all of that skunk scent washed out," said Bungo. "I admire your kindness for doing so much work on the poor thing's behalf."

"I can be very patient," said Bella.

Donna noticed that Bungo often seemed to be trying to think of something to say to Bella, but could not. Bella asked him about his parents, about other friends in Hobbiton, and eventually about the weather. Bungo seemed eager to talk, but unable to do anything but answer Bella's questions with the shortest answer possible. Donna thought she saw on Bella's face a mixture of amusement and exasperation.

Later, after lunch was over, Bungo and his friend Hildifons went for a walk around the orchard. Donna watched them from a window in one of the old guest rooms in the southwest corner. These rooms were seldom used, but not so thoroughly abandoned as the ones in the east wing. She could see the two of them, and although she could not hear them, she tried to guess what they were saying from the way they acted.

Bungo was speaking earnestly, although softly, and he seemed to have a worried look on his face. His shoulders were tense, and he turned often to look at Hildifons as he

walked. Sometimes he gestured with his hands to emphasize some point he was making. Hildifons, for his part, looked utterly relaxed, with a bit of a smile and a sparkle in his eyes. He strolled with his hands in his pockets, and shrugged his shoulders more than once, as if expressing his unconcern with whatever Bungo was saying. Donna wished she could hear what they were talking about, but Hildifons was more alert and his hearing more sharp than her father or mother. Donna knew if she tried to creep closer, he would probably catch her at it.

After his walk with Hildifons, Bungo Baggins left, after saying an awkward and stumbling goodbye to Bella. Donna thought he looked even more worried than when he arrived.

The rainstorms continued through the last part of the summer. It would make it difficult to harvest the crops from their fields; for once it seemed that the sons were going to be working harder than the daughters. The Took had money enough to hire help, but Gerontius made sure there was enough work left to do that his sons knew the value of it.

Donna looked again for the horn and the circlet and the other curious objects, but they had moved again. She could not find where they had gone. Perhaps back in the Vault? Donna wondered if she should tell Bella about it and see if she had any ideas. She considered it for a few days, and finally decided to talk to her about it. Perhaps Bella would have an idea how to get into the Vault, or some other idea of where it might all have gone. She went towards her room and was about to enter, when she heard the sound of her mother there. It sounded like she was asking Bella questions, and not very happy with the answers.

"I don't know what he was doing," said Bella, "I don't even know if it was Gandalf."

"Of course it was," said Adamanta, "who else could it be? Grey robes, taller than a Hobbit, sneaking around at dusk. He's up to no good, I'll warrant."

"Gandalf has helped this family before," said Bella. "If it was him, I'm sure he's got a good reason."

"Don't you contradict me!" said Adamanta, low but fiercely. "You don't know what mischief he's made."

"No, I don't, Mama, because you never tell me anything!" said Bella, talking back to her mother more than she would normally dare. Donna hung back in the shadows, certain that she did not want to intrude on such a tense conversation. She didn't move out of

earshot, though.

After a long silence, Adamanta said, "I tell you enough."

"You didn't even tell me," said Bella a little bit angrily, "that I was not your first daughter. You never told me about Hildigard."

"Who..." started Adamanta angrily, but then her voice broke a little, as if she were about to sob. Donna held her breath in the hallway, afraid to breathe. She had never heard her mother sound so shaken before.

"I'm sorry, Mama," said Bella softly. "I didn't mean to upset you. But you could have told me, you could have..."

"You want to know why I don't trust that Wizard?" interrupted Adamanta. "Since you know so much and want to know everything, well know this. He's the one who took your father away on one of his foolish adventures. That's when...that's when..."

"Mama, I'm sorry," said Bella, and Donna could hear the sound of her moving to give her mother a hug. "It's not your fault, Mama, it's not anyone's fault but the bad Men who killed little Hildigard. It's not your fault, or Gandalf's fault."

"I don't like that Wizard," said Adamanta, her voice a bit muffled. Perhaps she was burying her face in Bella's shoulder?

"I don't like him, and I don't want what follows him," she said. "He took your father away, and bad things happened while your father was off adventuring instead of protecting us. I don't want that Wizard around."

"He saved little Isengar, Mama," said Bella gently. "Two years ago, he saved little Isengar, and Mira, and Donna, and me, and who knows how many others. If Gandalf had not helped us, we might all have been taken."

"If your father had never met that Wizard, neither Isengar nor any of you would have been taken in the first place," said Adamanta.

After that, Donna heard nothing more said for a while. She decided it was not the time to ask Bella for advice, and slipped quietly away back to other parts of Great Smials.

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"Hildifons?" Bella poked her head in to her brother's room one morning in early September.

Hildifons looked up from the pile of things on his bed. Bella saw blankets, a small knife, dried fruit, and a dozen other small items.

"Yes, Bella?" Hildifons' voice was low, barely above a whisper.

"What are you doing?" asked Bella, also lowering her voice, although she was unsure why, yet. Was Hildifons not wanting anyone else in the family to hear what they were saying?

"What does it look like I'm doing?" answered Hildifons, still speaking softly. "I'm packing things for a little camping trip."

Hildifons looked back at the pile on his bed, and resumed putting them into his pack.

"I see a fishing line. Are you going up to Lake Evendim again?"

"Oh, I hadn't exactly decided yet." Hildifons kept his voice casual, but still very soft. Bella could tell that he actually had very definite plans, even if he was not sharing them with her.

"When is Bungo arriving? I hadn't known he was going to visit again so soon." Now Bella was glad they were speaking softly. She didn't want anyone else hearing her ask about Bungo. Especially not Hildibrand or her mother.

"Oh I don't think Bungo is going to make it this time, Bella." Hildifons looked back at Bella with a sympathetic smile. "Sorry. He was not too enthusiastic about the idea of going again this year."

"Really? And you're going anyway? Who are you going with?"

"Not sure, to be honest. Care to come along?" Hildifons was smirking a little bit as he turned back to his packing. He finished stuffing everything in, and tied it up tightly, then slipped the pack under his bed, out of sight.

"You know Mama would never let me," said Bella. Then, she narrowed her eyes and added, "I'm surprised she's letting you."

"Mmm," Hildifons mumbled, indistinctly, as if not wanting to say anything but not wanting to provoke suspicion by being silent.

"..."

"Bella," said Hildifons, turning fully towards Bella and standing up at his full height, "don't you have something else to be doing now?"

"Wait, DOES anyone know you're going?" Bella asked, although she already knew the answer now.

"Yes," answered Hildifons.

"Who?" asked Bella.

"You do," said Hildifons. He had a look in his eye that said he wanted to keep it a secret between them, and would be angry at Bella if she told anyone else.

"Do Mama or Papa know you're going?"

"Not sure, really."

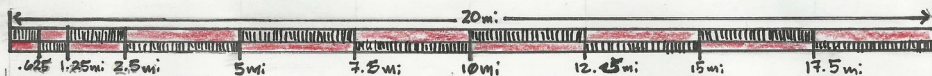
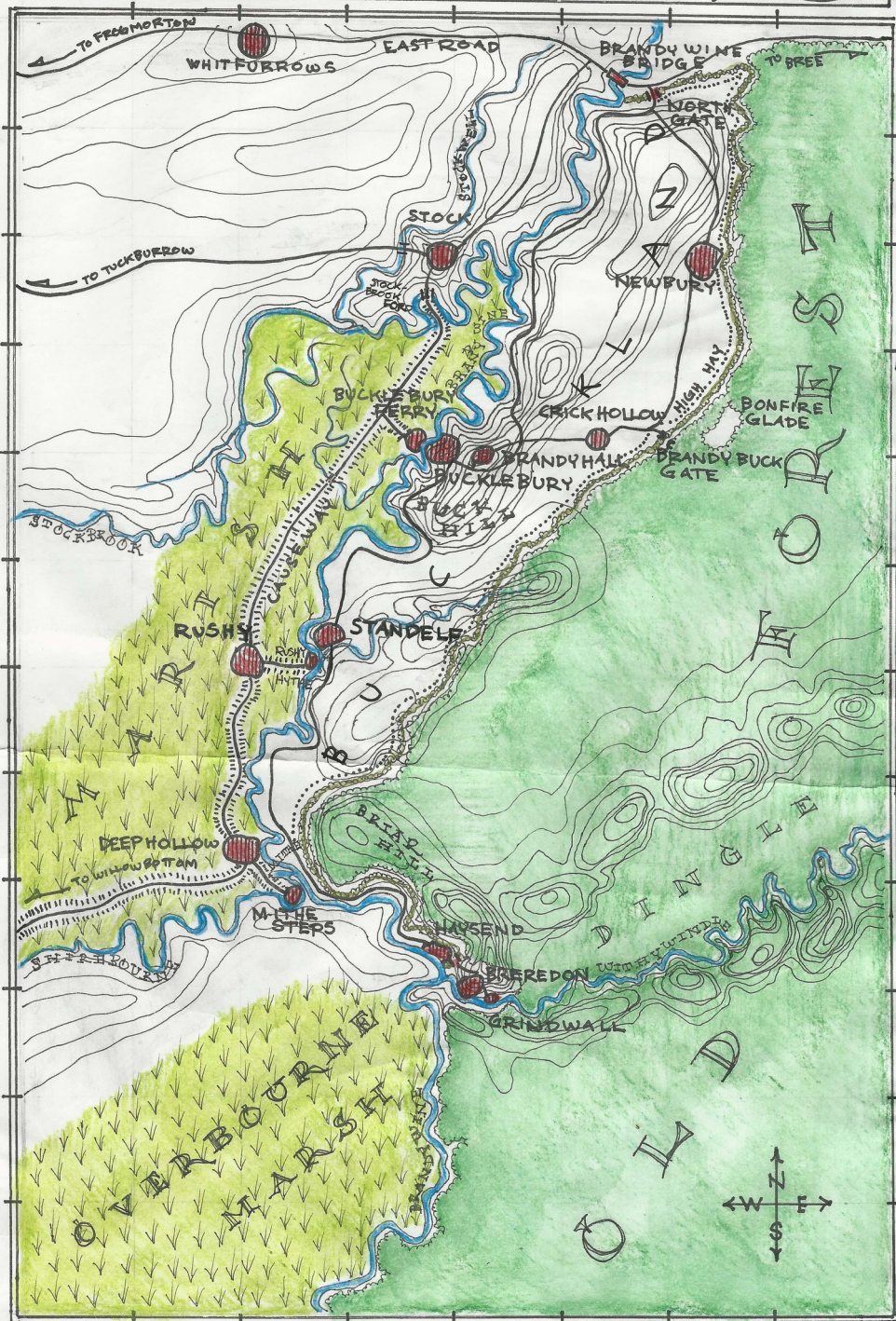
"Hildifons!" said Bella, her voice rising. She was becoming alarmed. Travelling alone outside the Shire, with the streams and rivers still swollen by the rains, was dangerous.

"Keep your voice down, Bella, you'll get someone excited. You never know when Donna's going to be around the corner listening."

Uh oh, thought Donna, who was, in fact, around the corner listening. She was starting to get a reputation. Hildifons seemed to be more suspicious than most of the family.



# Buckland



## Chapter 6 - Autumn Equinox

A letter from Bella Took to Bungo Baggins:

"Dear Bungo Baggins,

I am sorry to have to write to you with worrisome news. Hildifons disappeared a few days ago, and has not been seen or heard from since. We are all very worried. Hopefully he has simply gone gallivanting about without regard for the fact that his family will worry, but we are very concerned. If you should happen to see or hear from him, please let us know.

We will be at the Autumn Equinox Festival at Brandy Hall. Will you come? I suppose the travel with this weather might be too much for little Rosa, but it would be nice to see you again. Gandalf will be there, although I don't know if he will do fireworks or not. He also does some amazing tricks with pipe smoke rings, that are delightful to see. Do come if you can, I would very much like to see you.

your friend,  
Bella Took"

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"Hey, crow, I've got some more rolls. Do you want them? Plus some potato skins, I'm not sure if you like those."

"I'll take a peck," said the crow, and it fluttered down out of the tree to land on the ground. "Not bad, but the rolls are better. Let me take a bite of each one to make sure."

"Why do you birds do that, anyway? When we harvest from the orchards, there is always just a single peck out of each apple or peach you've gotten to. It wouldn't spoil as much if you stuck with one piece of fruit at a time."

"What, you don't want to eat an apple that a bird has taken a single peck out of?" asked the crow.

"Well, um, not really no. Sorry."

"It's all right, neither do we."



"Oh, I see. Hmmm. Hey, can I ask you another question? Remember what you said about seeing Hobbits leaving through the big doors at night sometimes?"

"Yes?"

"Do you think it could be a Hobbit ghost?"

"How would I know?"

"Oh. I don't know. Don't ghosts look different?"

"I'm not sure, I've never seen one. Or maybe I have and just didn't know it. See what I mean?"

"Oh, right. Well, neither have I. I think. Are there ghosts of crows?"

"If there are, they probably spend their time tormenting owls. By the way, I think I like the rolls better, but thanks for bringing choices."

"Oh, sure. See you tomorrow! Oh, wait, no I won't. We're going to Autumn Equinox Festival, over in Buckland. I'll be gone for a few days."

"Back up north for me, I guess. There are probably some animals getting drowned by the floods, so maybe I can eat some tasty carcass."

"Oooh, ugh. Well, if that's what you like. Good luck."

"Thanks. Be careful crossing the river, though, I'd hate to see YOU floating in the water."

"How would you know? You said we all look the same to you."

"Not you, though. I'd recognize your corpse for sure. It would make me sad."

"Aww, thanks, crow!"

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The night before they all left for the Autumn Equinox Festival in Buckland, the three sisters sat in their room and held a whispered discussion. They all had been thinking

about Hildifons' disappearance, and decided to pool what they knew.

"I think he might have gone north to the Lake again," said Bella. "I don't know what has gotten into him, that he's so eager to do that with the weather like it is."

"I think the crow saw the two of them up there the first time," said Mira.

"Who?" asked Bella.

"The crow," answered Mira.

"You mean the crow we talked to at the tower two years ago?" asked Donna.

"Yeah. He said he saw one of them without the other for a while. I think Hildifons left Bungo behind to go do something."

They all sat in thought for a bit, wondering about that.

"He also says there is someone who goes out the back doors at night, sometimes. A hobbit. He didn't know if it was a ghost or not. Do ghosts look different than other Hobbits?"

"It depends on what stories you believe," said Bella. "In the oldest stories they look just like living Hobbits, but you can't touch them. Why did you ask if it was a ghost?"

"Old Buck," said Donna. "I think he's back, too. I think I've heard him in the old east rooms that aren't used any more. I think he took something out of the Vault. Maybe several things. Papa and Gandalf were looking for something at Midsummer, and couldn't find it. I think Old Buck has been moving things around again."

"I wonder," continued Donna, "if that is what Gandalf has been looking for. If that's him sneaking around and hiding at the edge of the woods? Maybe he's trying to see Old Buck, and figure out what he's up to."

They were quiet again for a bit.

"If it's Old Buck," said Mira, "where would he be going when he goes out the doors of Great Smials?"

"His family is all in Buckland, now," said Bella. "Across the Brandywine River. Maybe

he's taking things there, now."

"Could he cross the river?" asked Mira. "I thought the Brandywine River was hard to cross."

"I don't know much about ghosts," said Bella, "but maybe he can't. I think rivers are hard for magical things to cross, anyway. But maybe he doesn't know that. Maybe he tries to cross it and can't, and all the things he's carrying end up at the bottom of the river."

"Where does the Brandywine River come from?" asked Mira.

Bella and Donna looked at each other, then answered together.

"Lake Evendim."

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Gerontius Took went to Autumn Equinox Festival every year. With him went some of his sons and daughters, though not the same ones every year. Adamanta usually stayed home; with Hildifons missing, she was staying home again this year, and did not approve entirely of Gerontius going. For his part, Gerontius thought it the best way to spread the word that Hildifons had gone missing. Donna also suspected that her father knew Hildifons had gone off on his own free will, and as he was now 24 years old, thought there was little he could do to force Hildifons to stay home if he chose not to. Adamanta's ideas on how a Hobbit should spend his "twens", the years between 20 and coming of age at 33, were very different than her husband's.

The oldest son, Isengrim, also stayed home, to help out Adamanta, as did the youngest, Isengar. Donna thought it was mostly to keep her company, so that she did not sit in the vast emptiness of Great Smials with only her own worries to think on. Great Smials had rooms for servants to live, but it had been many years since they had been used. Nowadays the help which Gerontius hired mostly lived in nearby Tuckborough, and they were all on vacation for Equinox, one last time before the big push for harvest.

Still, this left 8 brothers and sisters to accompany Gerontius on his trip to Brandy Hall, in Buckland. They travelled in two large wagons, pulled by two ponies each. They were going on a good road, but it had rained a lot and some parts were still muddy. They also did not wish to be cruel to their ponies, who were pulling several well-fed Hobbits each, even if some of them were still small. Gerontius decided they could make

it in four days, if they left early each day. They turned north at one point to use the Brandywine Bridge. This was part of the ancient East Road which had been built long before the Shire was settled by Hobbits.

The reason they did this was that the Ferry, which is where they would normally cross the Brandywine river using a raft, was closed. The rains were so great that year that the river had spilled over its normal banks, and was held back from flooding all of the surrounding land only by the levees built for the purpose years before. They were great mounds of packed earth, high enough to hold back the largest flood Hobbits expected to see in their lifetimes. Still, this year the Hobbits of Buckland had added more to the top. When a temporary extension on top of the levee was made, this was called a "cradge". The Bucklanders had not needed to make a cradge since the time of the oldest living Hobbits, but they had needed to this year.

Brandy Hall was not as old as Great Smials, but it was very old. When the Oldbuck clan left Great Smials, they moved across the Brandywine River and began settling in areas that had not had Hobbits living there before. The area was now called Buckland, and the Oldbuck family changed their name to Brandybuck. The hobbits in that area often lived in houses, instead of below ground, in part because much of the area was low-lying and too often muddy to burrow into. Brandy Hall, though, was a proper smial, and it burrowed through almost all of Buck Hill by the time of our story.

Buck Hill was crowned on top by the Oversmials, a building above ground like the halls of Men. Underneath it were four levels of burrows, more like Great Smials of the Tooks. On the southeast side of Buck Hill was a long stairway up, with a grand porch at each level of the smials. The Tooks stopped their wagons at the base of the hill, handed them over to the Bucklander Hobbits who would stable them in nearby Bucklebury, and began the walk up to the Oversmials Front Porch. In preparation for Autumn Equinox, the Brandybucks had put out hundreds of colored glass lamps, hanging from hook-shaped poles set in the ground along the side of the long stairway. Donna saw them sway gently in the breeze, like a rainbow of giant fireflies, as they climbed up the stairs to Brandy Hall in the last light of dusk.

Marmadoc Brandybuck was out greeting guests as they arrived, along with his wife Adaldrida. Donna guessed from the way she looked, that Adaldrida was so pregnant that she wasn't going to want to be standing very much for this Festival. She was standing now, though, and had a smile for everyone who arrived. They could see other Hobbits both before and behind them, walking slowly up the great stairway (both to savor the view, and so as not to become too tired). When she saw Mira, Adaldrida turned to her son Gorbodoc, and wrote something with chalk on a small tablet of slate that he carried

with him. He read what was on it, then ran inside. Within less than a minute, his two younger sisters (who were called Sink and Daisy, if you recall) came running out to greet Mira. With smiles and giggles, they took her each by one hand and pulled her into Brandy Hall, to show her everything about their vast home all at once.

Gerontius stayed on the porch to talk to Marmadoc and Adaldrida for a bit, while the rest of his sons and daughters went inside. Donna and Bella were looking around for someone they knew, when an elderly (and grumpy-looking) Hobbit came up to them brandishing a hatchet.

"Axes! Get some axes, every one of you! Did you bring any?"

Donna and Bella stood very still, wide-eyed but polite, while they tried to figure out what exactly was happening. The older Hobbit wandered off then, and Donna felt a tug at her sleeve. It was Gorbado, and he was showing Donna and Bella his slate tablet, on which he had just written in chalk, "That is Grandad Madoc. We call him 'Proudneck'."

Bella took the slate tablet, and wrote on it, "Is he all right? Is he dangerous?"

Gorbado read what Bella had written, then erased it with the sleeve of his shirt and wrote his reply:

"Not really, and not really. I'll get the hatchet away from him."

He showed what he had written to Bella and Donna, and then he was off. Bella said, "oh, be careful," but then realized that Gorbado wouldn't be able to hear what she had said. No matter, she thought, he was unlikely to listen anyway, if he was at all like every other little boy she'd known. She stood there, wondering if she should do something, but then Marmadoc came in from outdoors.

"Marmadoc, sir!" said Bella quickly. "I think your son is about to try to get a hatchet away from your father. Do you suppose he needs help?"

To Bella's surprise, Marmadoc did not seem very surprised or alarmed, and he smiled faintly as he shook his head, as if it were a story he had heard before.

"He knows how to handle Dad pretty well, actually," said Marmadoc, "but I'll go see if he needs any help." With that, he shuffled off in the same direction as Madoc and Gorbado had gone.

"Don't worry too much about old Proudneck," said Adaldrida, who took Bella's hand reassuringly. "He's a bit of a crazy old coot, now, but he loves his family, and we love him. Even if he makes it hard to remember that, sometimes. I think maybe Gorbado is able to empathize with him better than the rest of us, because part of Madoc's problem is he doesn't hear very well any more. Of course, little Gorbado knows he can't hear, whereas Proudneck is still in denial. But he can still read, so he and Gorbado communicate better than the rest of us. I expect what Gorbado will do is ask him a question using his little slate tablet, and Proudneck will put the hatchet down to scribble out an answer, and after a few minutes writing back and forth that way, he will have forgotten all about the hatchet."

"Why did he want us to get axes?" asked Donna.

"Oh, who knows, sweetie," said Adaldrida. "I don't think I understand much of what goes on in Proudneck's head anymore. But he's harmless, really, once you get used to him. Why don't you two come in and help me with putting out some of the party treats in the Great Hall upstairs, we're starting to get a lot of guests now. Of course, you'll need to try a treat off of each tray yourself first, just to make sure they're good enough."

That sounded agreeable, so Bella and Donna followed Adaldrida around for the next hour or so, as the Great Hall got steadily more full with guests. Many would not show up until the following day, but already there were dozens. Some of them were more distantly related Brandybucks, while others were members of other prominent Hobbit families. There were also some who had simply come along with other, invited guests. Rosemary Goldworthy was there, and hanging on Isembold's arm.

"Ugh," said Bella at the sight of her, "who invited her? I bet Isembold just snuck her in."

"Oh, it could be," said Adaldrida, "but her aunt Hanna is Proudneck's wife, so she might be here by invitation. I don't really keep track of all that, too much. If a few sneak in, as long as they cause no trouble, I don't worry about it particularly. Most of Buckland will be here at the height of things, tomorrow night."

Mira came running through, pulled by Sink and Daisy, all three of them giggling. They paused long enough to scoop up a small fruit tart each, then went on their way again.

Donna thought about that for a minute. She tried to picture her own mother taking the attitude that any uninvited guests who showed up were not a problem, as long as they caused no trouble. She just couldn't imagine it. She was also pretty sure Bella would

not have allowed Rosemary Goldworthy in, if she could have done anything to stop her.

"My goodness," she heard Rosemary say, "Brandy Hall is so magnificent. Do you suppose the Brandybucks have more money than the Tooks?"

Donna couldn't hear her brother Isembold's reply.

By the time they were all seated around tables and eating (indoors, because it had begun to drizzle outside), Donna noticed that Mira was sitting next to Gorbado, and they were passing his slate tablet back and forth, and scribbling messages to each other on it. Mira was the sort to think that all the world was friendly if you smiled at it, and it seemed to make her less unsure than other people about how to react to Gorbado. They were soon both laughing. Donna noticed that Gorbado's laugh could be very loud, and it made some other people at the table nervous.

A mighty clap of thunder sounded outside, and even inside Brandy Hall it was alarmingly loud.

"Sounds like Gorbado," joked his father, and several of the guests chuckled. Gorbado, for his part, had apparently written something funny on his tablet which he did not want others to see, because as soon as he showed it to Mira (who broke up in fits of giggles), he quickly erased it.

Madoc "Proudneck" came walking unsteadily in, looked around, and declaimed loudly, "Where's my axe?" Hearing no reply, he turned around and shuffled out again, looking left and right as he went.

A party at Brandy Hall was certainly a different experience than one at Great Smials.



Dear Bungo Baggins,

I am sorry to have to write to you with worrisome news. Lildifons disappeared a few days ago, and has not been seen or heard from since. We are all very worried.

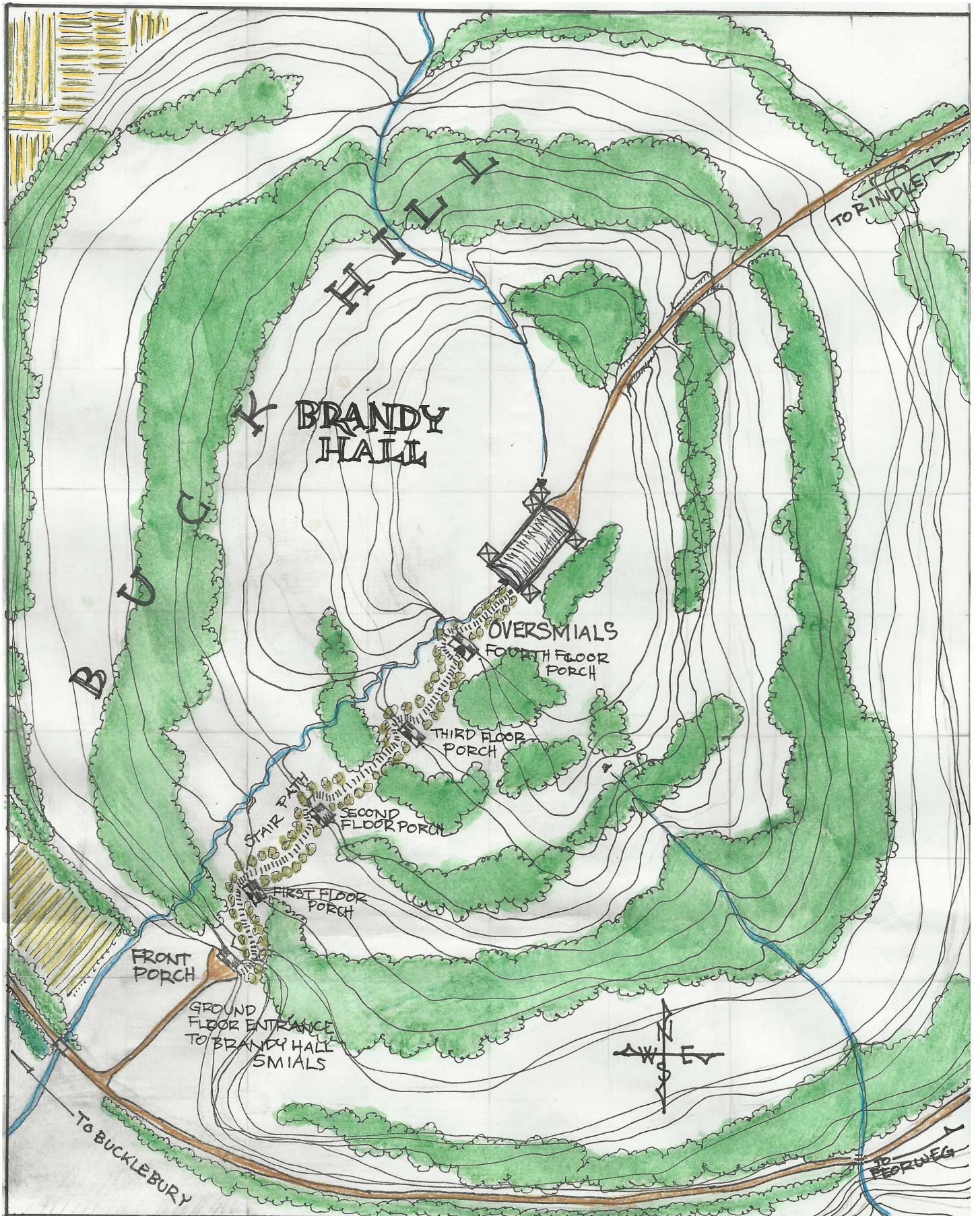
Hopefully he has simply gone gallivanting about without regard for the fact that his family will worry but we are very concerned. If you should happen to see or hear from him, please let us know.

We will be at the Autumn Equinox Festival at Brandy Hall. Will you come? I suppose the travel with this weather might be too much for little

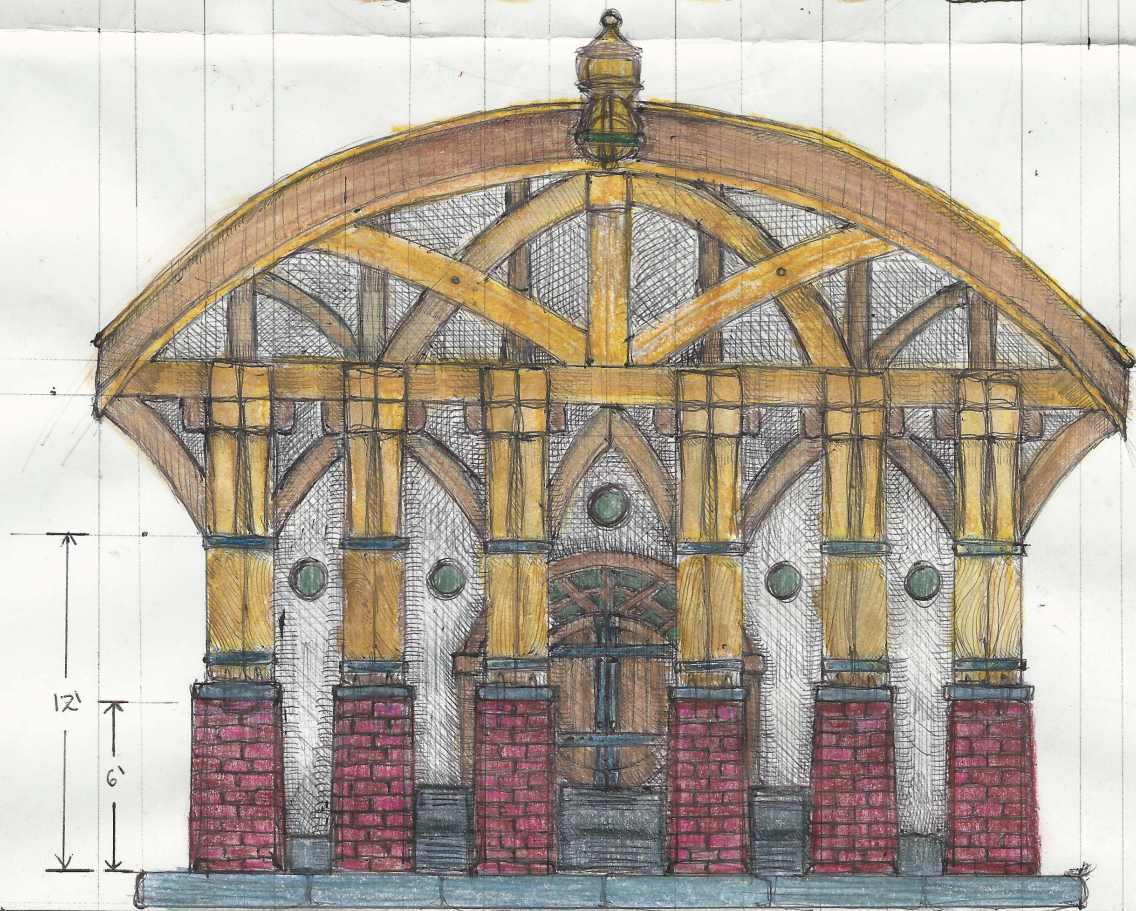
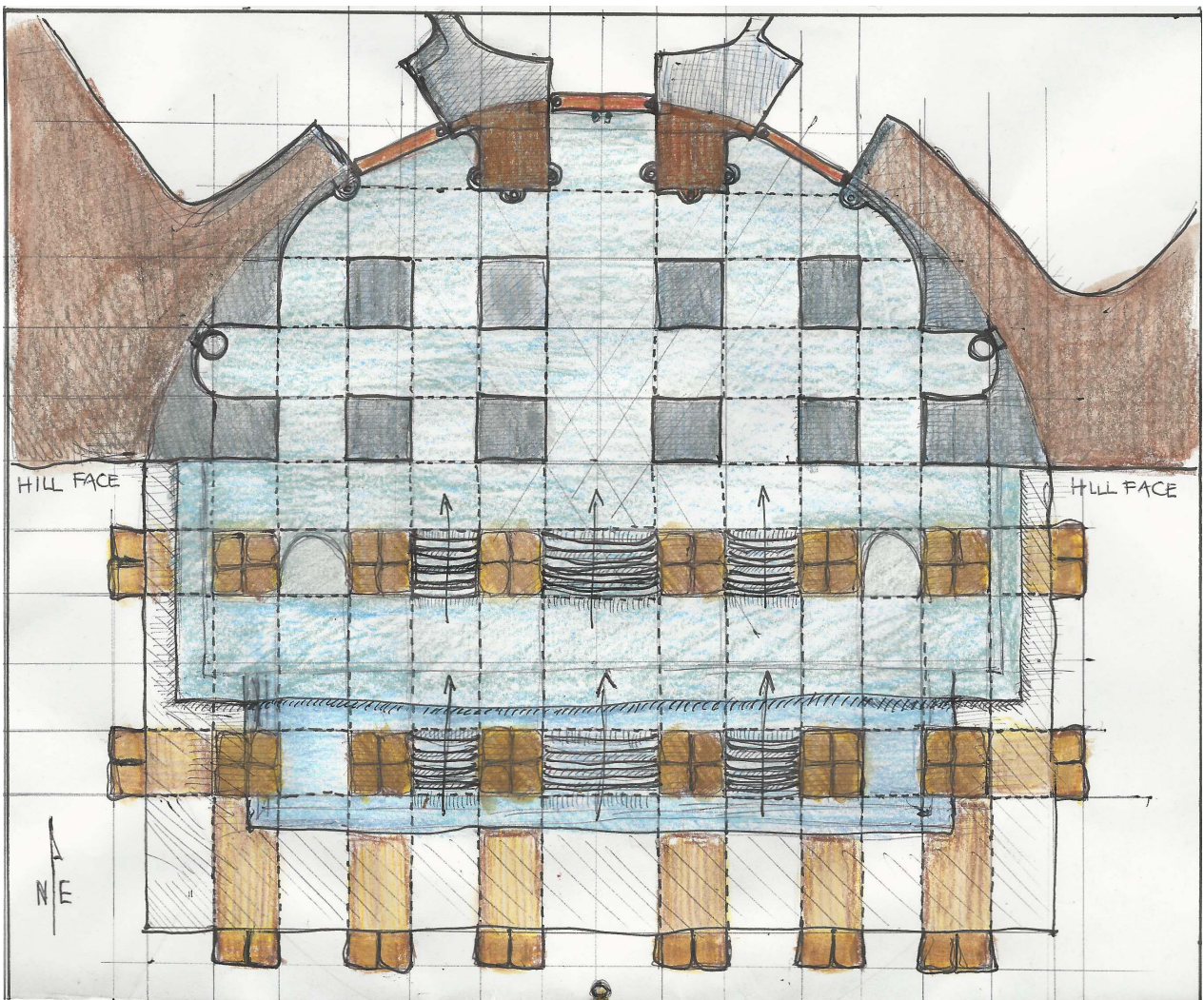
Rosa, but it would be nice to see you again. Landall  
will be there, although I don't know if he will do  
fireworks or not. He also does some amazing tricks  
with pipe smoke rings, that are delightful to see. Do  
come if you can. I would very much like to see you.

your friend,  
Bella Took



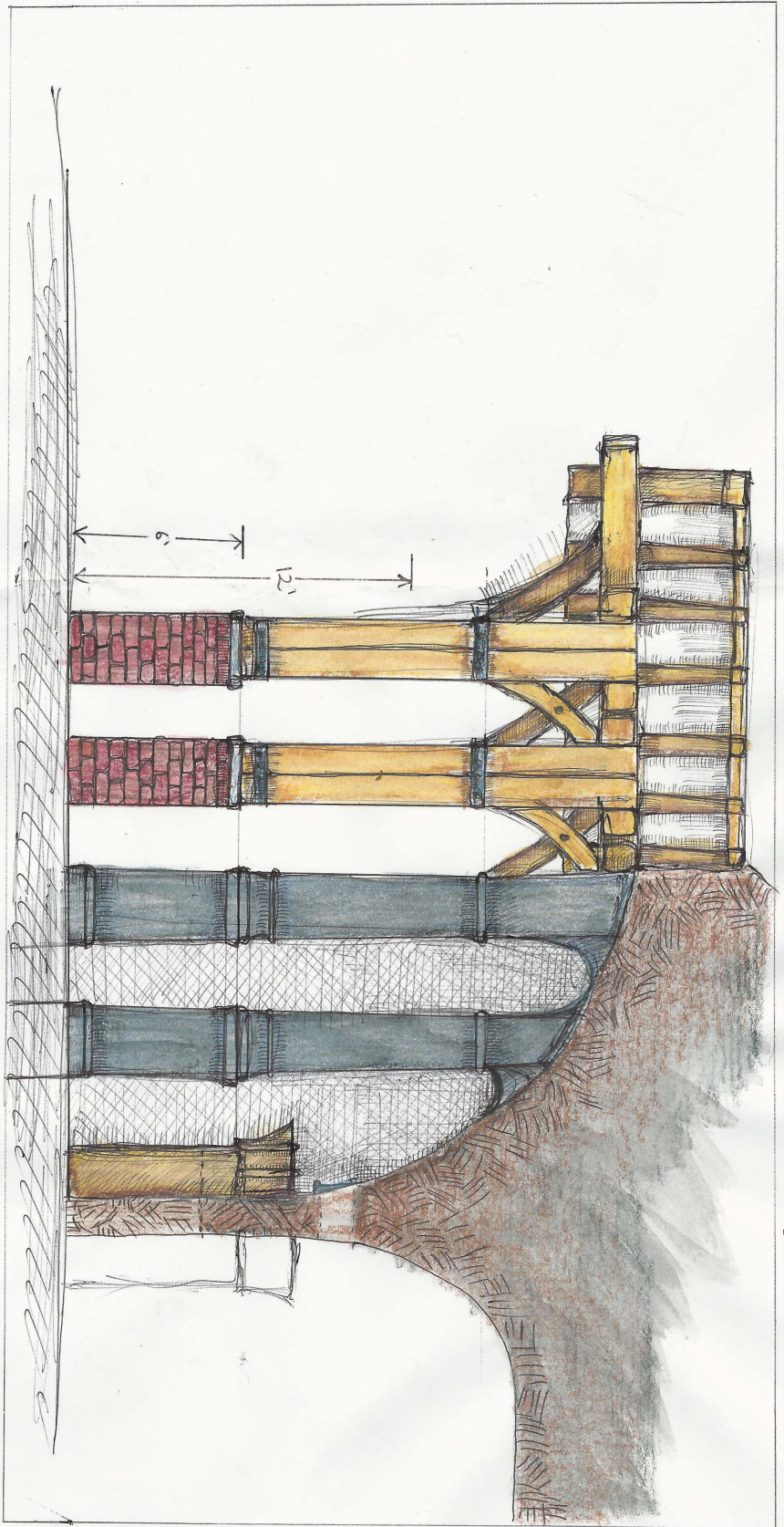
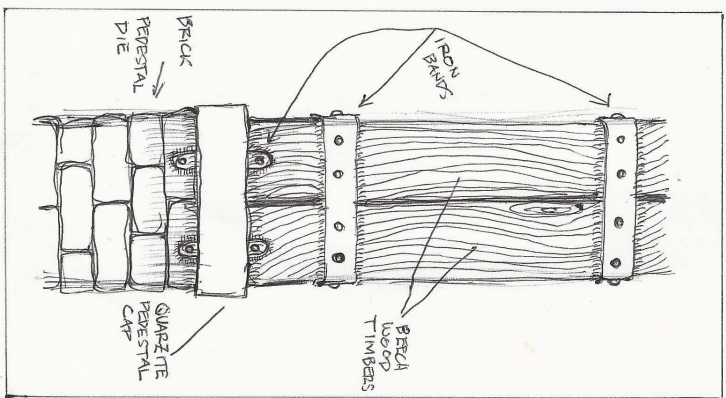




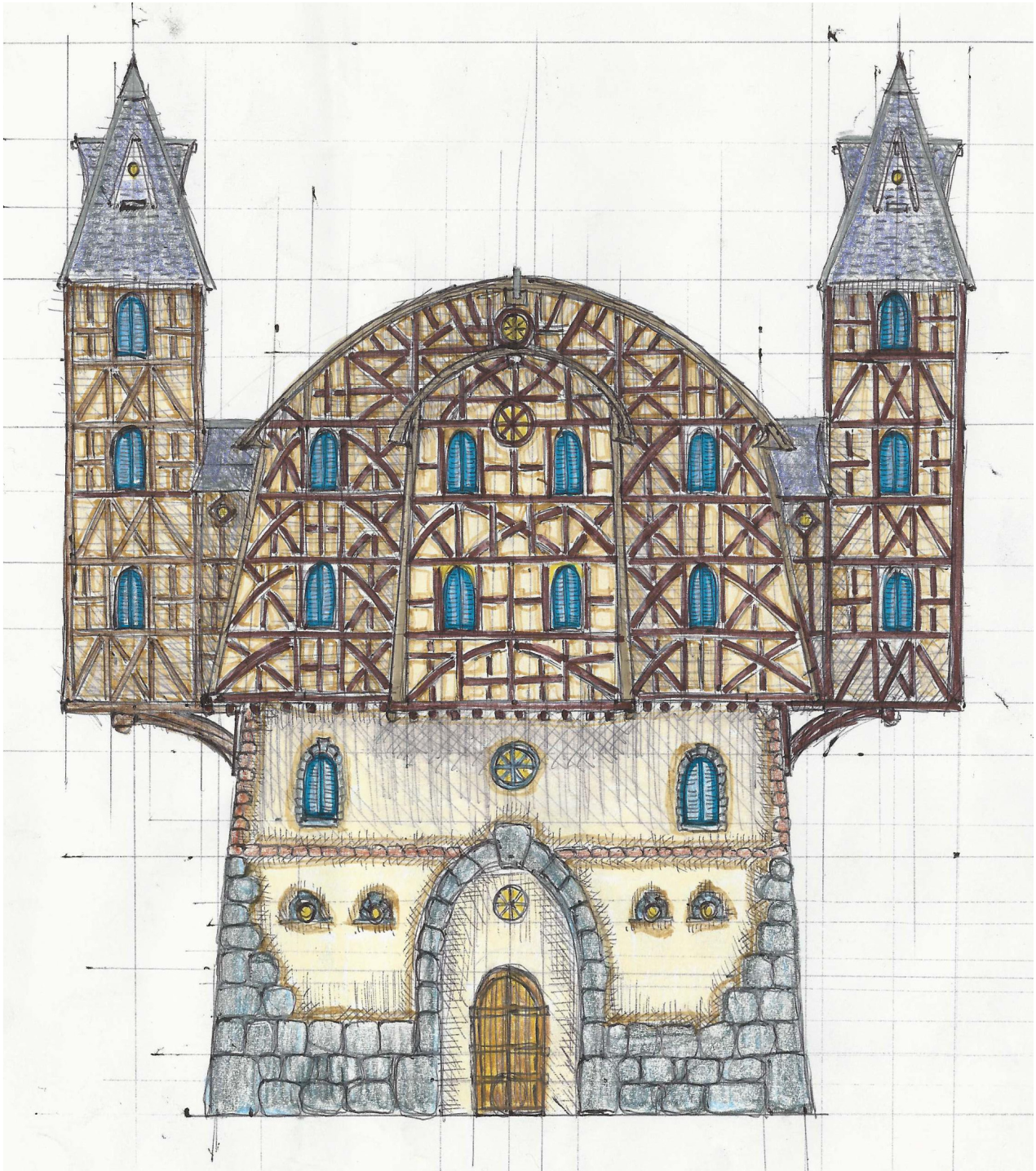


BRANDY HALL • FRONT PORCH

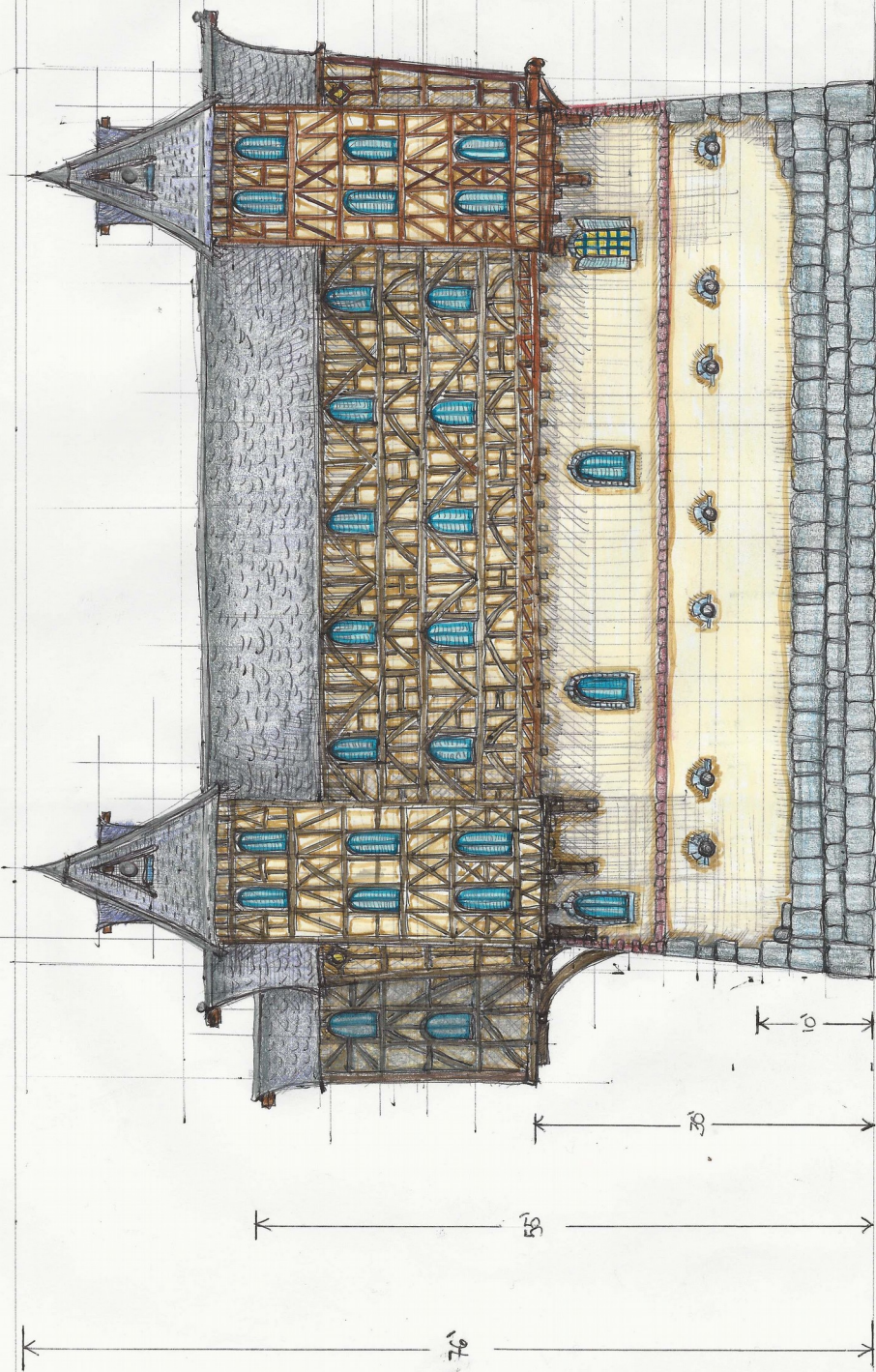






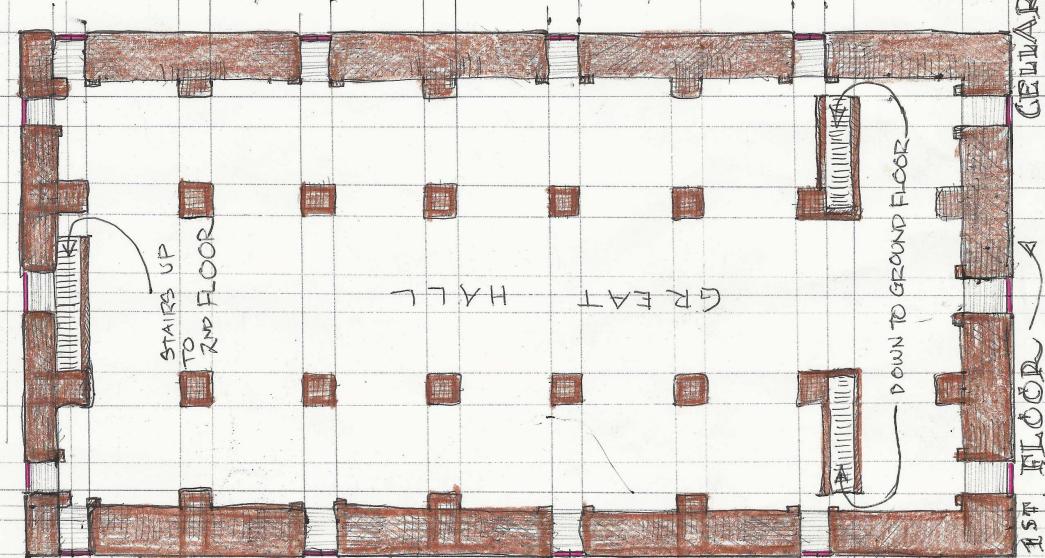
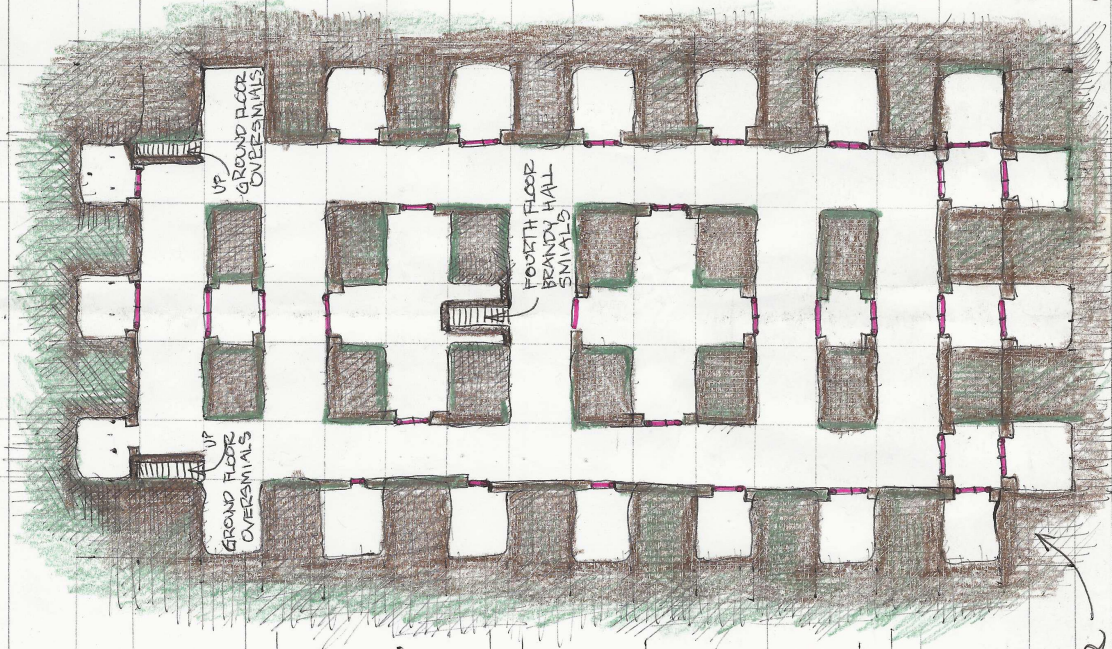
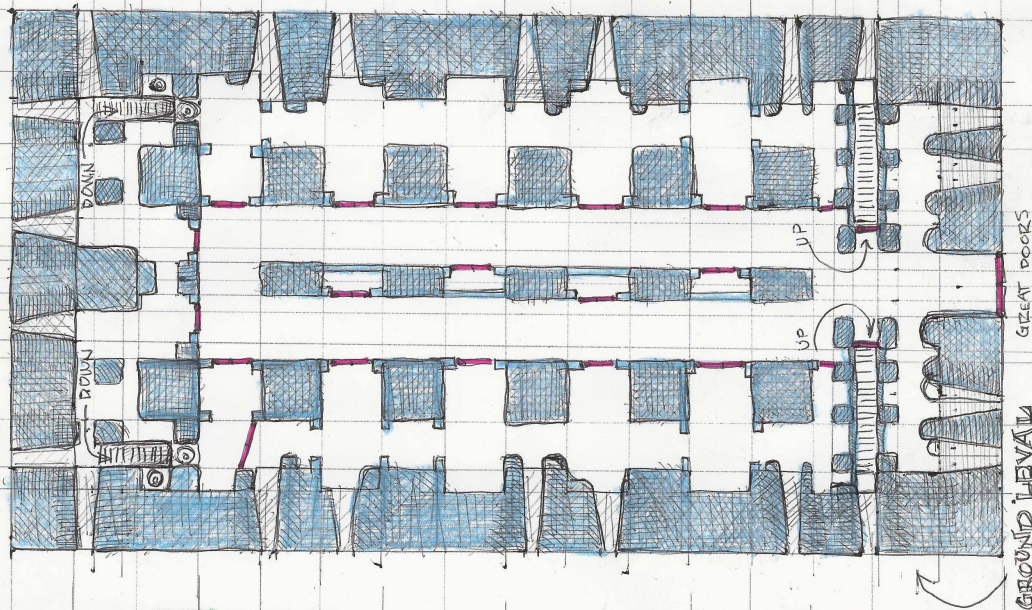




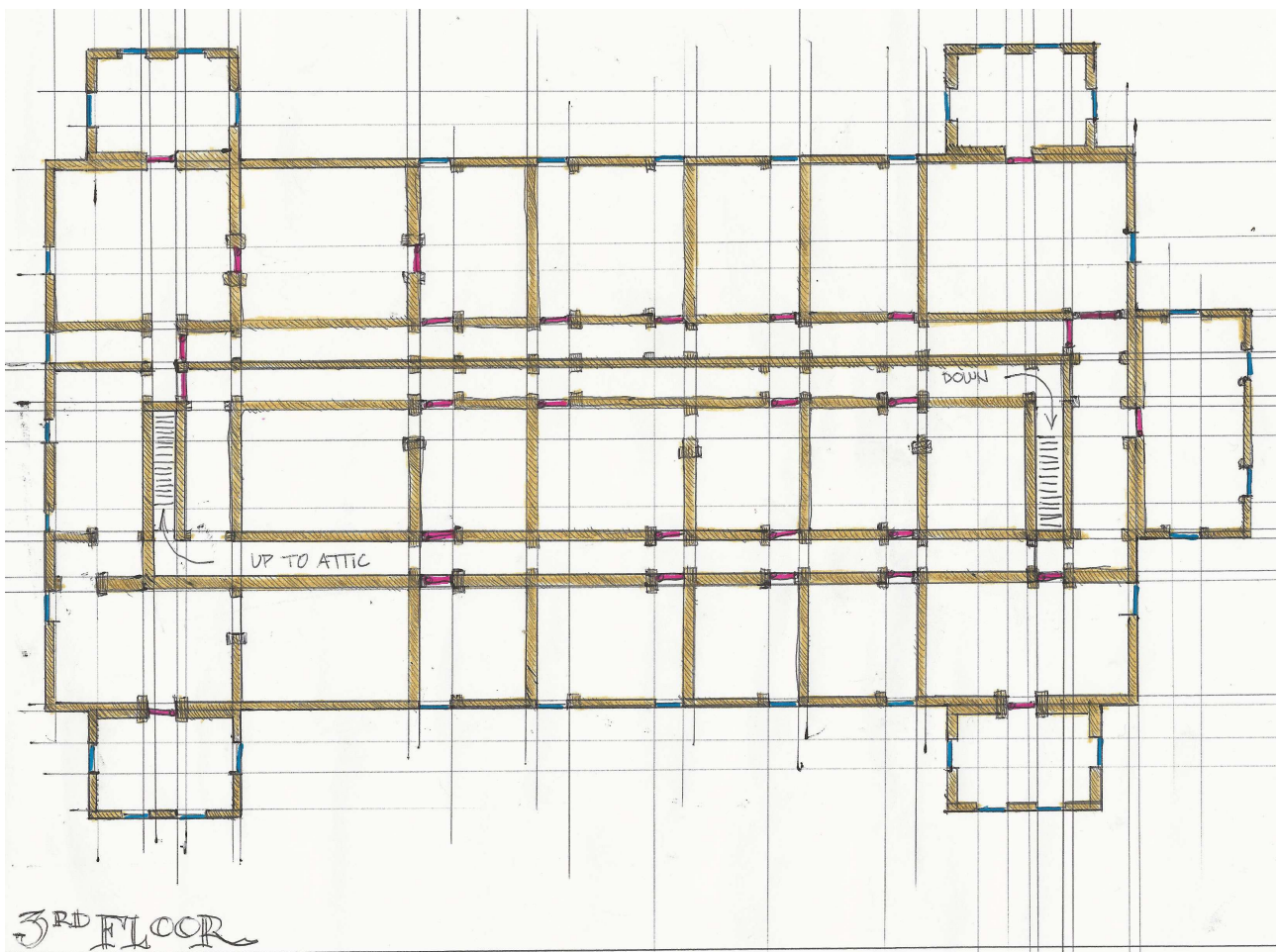
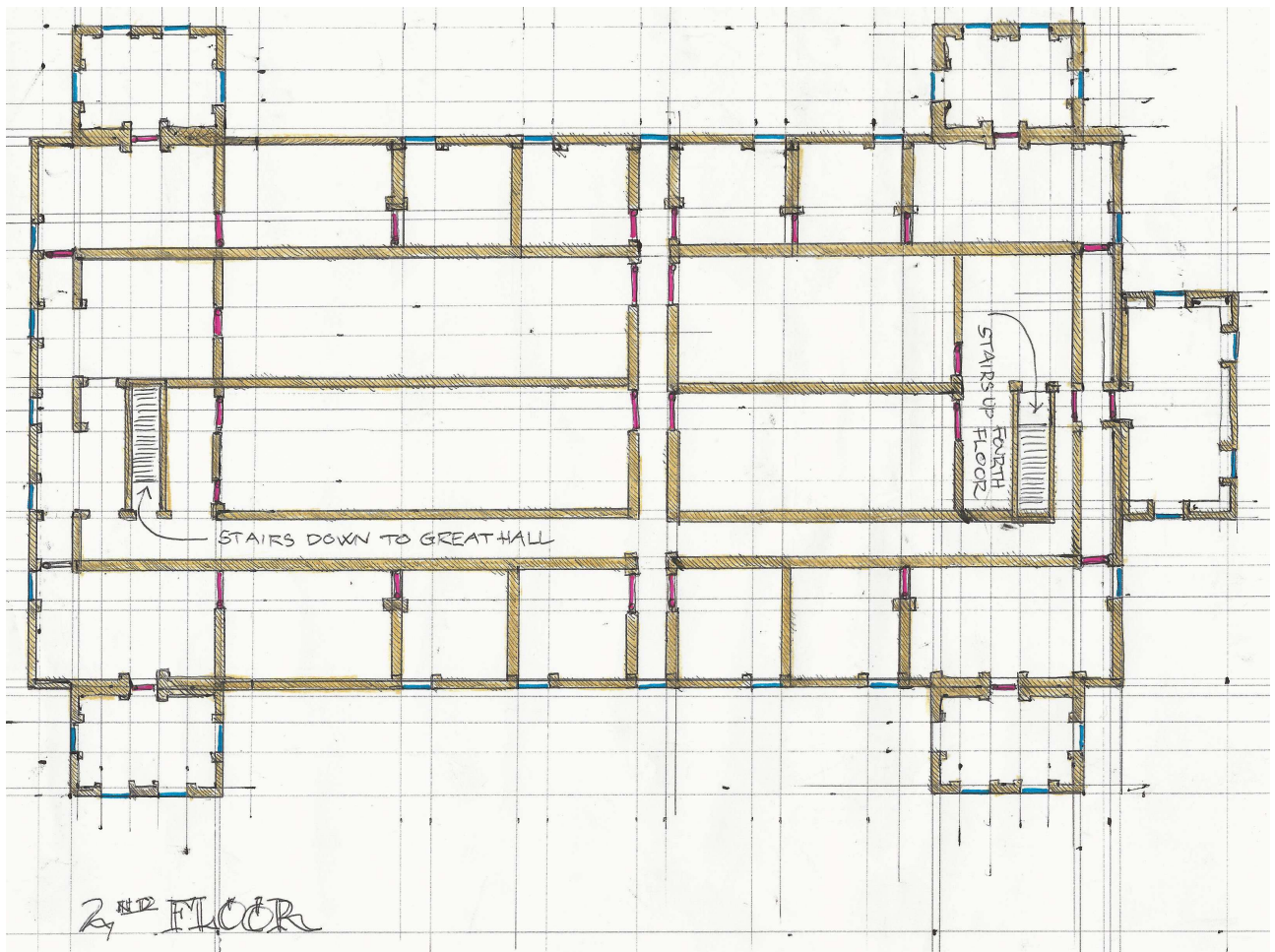


THE OVERSMIALS HALL FROM THE SOUTH EAST

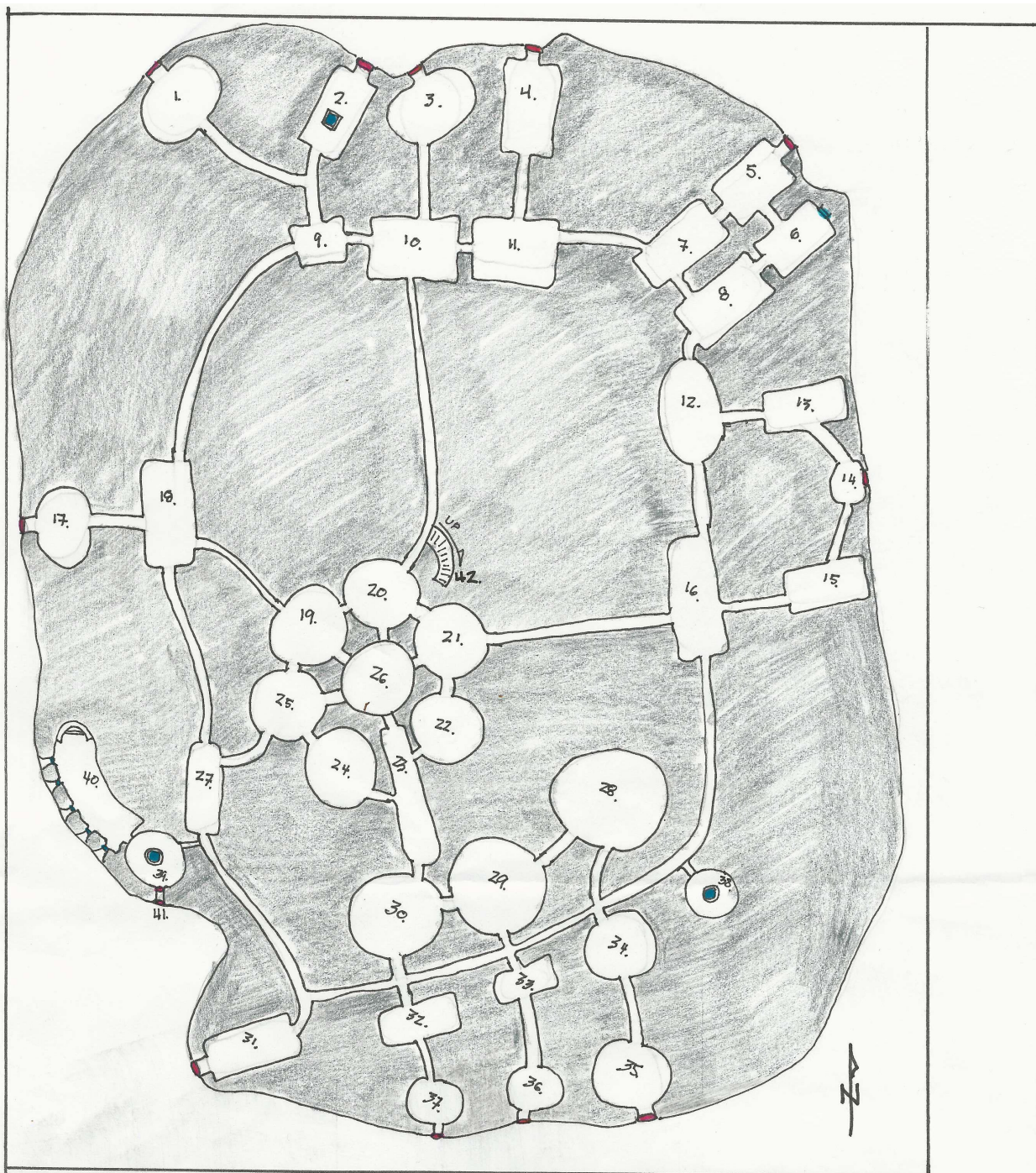








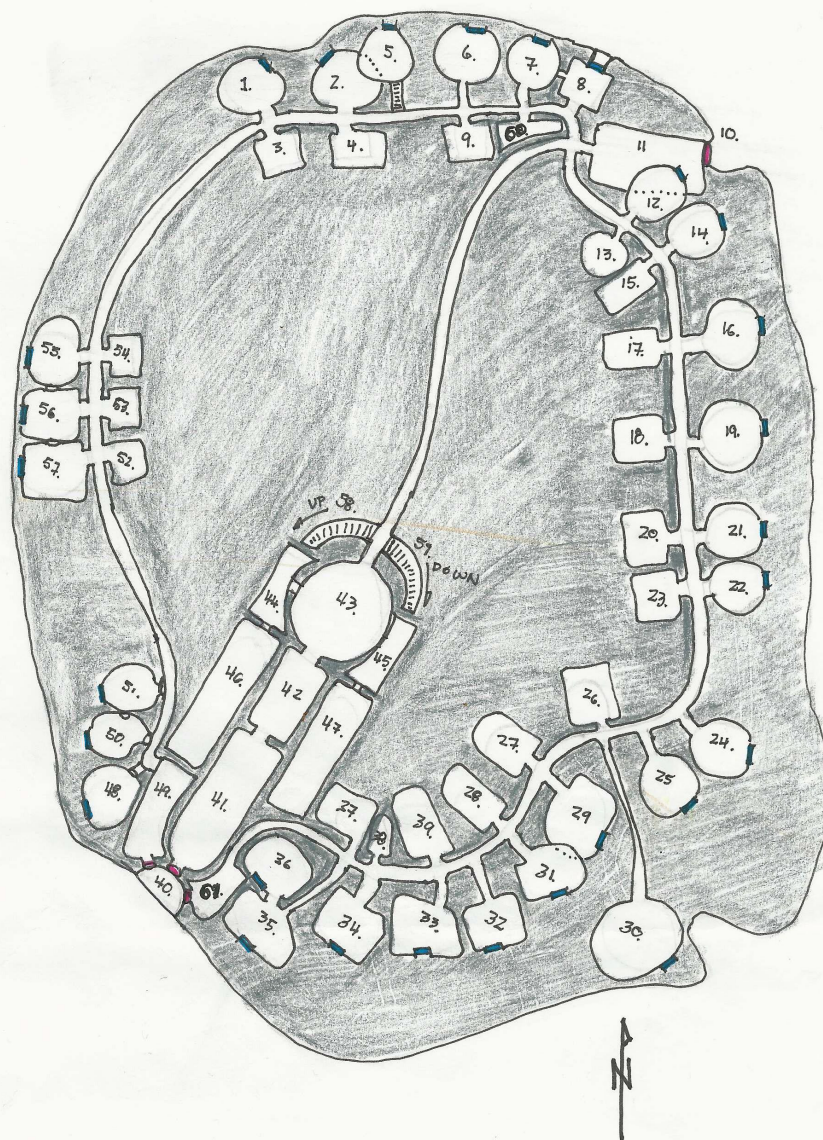




## BRANDY HALL SMIALS • THE CELLARS

- |                              |                                     |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. WATER BARRELS             | 23. WORKSHOP • BARREL ROOM          |
| 2. CISTERN                   | 24. DRY CELLAR                      |
| 3. GRAINERIES                | 25. BROKEN VESSAL ROOM              |
| 4. WORKSHOPS, REPAIRS, CARBS | 26. TASTING & PREP. ROOM            |
| 5. WORKSHOP } LUMBER         | 27. TEA ROOM • WARMING ROOM         |
| 6. " } FINISHING             | 28. SUPPLY & STORAGE ROOM           |
| 7. " } CARPENTRY             | 29. ARMOURY • HUNTING • FISHING RM. |
| 8. " } FASHIONING            | 30. FOOD PREP ROOM                  |
| 9. BOTTLE ROOM               | 31. CLOAK ROOM                      |
| 10. FLOUR GRINDING • PREP    | 32. BAKER'S ROOM                    |
| 11. CURING ROOM              | 33. GARDENER'S ROOM                 |
| 12. BAKERY                   | 34. SEEDS, GARDEN SUPPLYS           |
| 13. SMITHY                   | 35. GARDEN TOOLS                    |
| 14. IRON & CLAY STORAGE      | 36. GARDER'S CHAMBER                |
| 15. KILN                     | 37. BAKER'S CHAMBER                 |
| 16. CERAMIC ROOM, TOOLS      | 38. CISTERN                         |
| 17. FRUIT STORAGE            | 39. CISTERN • MUDROOM               |
| 18. CIDER PRESS              | 40. BATHS • WATER WARMING           |
| 19. CIDER CELLAR             | 41. MUDROOM DOORS                   |
| 20. BEER CELLAR              | 42. STAIRS UP                       |
| 21. WINE CELLAR              |                                     |
| 22. CHEESE CELLAR            |                                     |

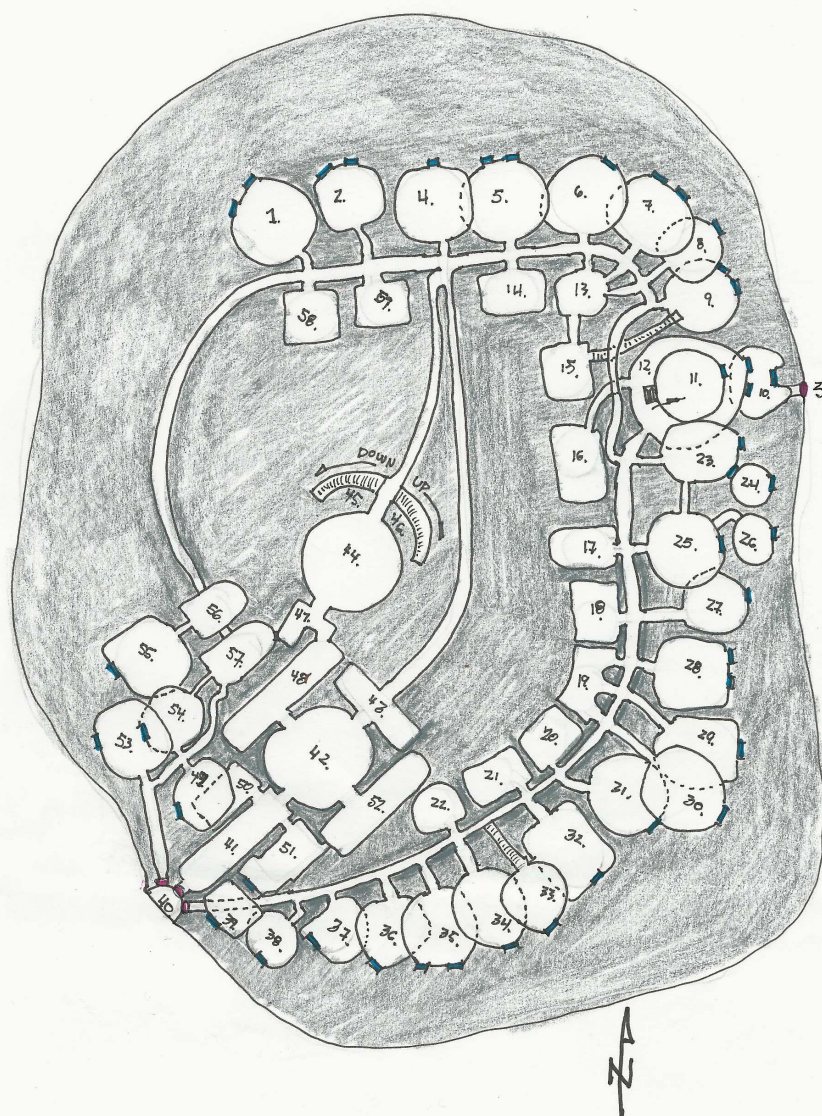




## BRANDY HALL SMIALS • GROUND FLOOR

- |                                 |                                 |                                 |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. CHAMBER                      | 23. OFFICE • WORKSHOP • STORAGE | 45. PANTRY                      |
| 2. CHAMBER                      | 24. CHAMBER                     | 46. SERVICE KITCHEN             |
| 3. OFFICE • WORKSHOP • STORAGE  | 25. CHAMBER                     | 47. SERVICE ROOM                |
| 4. " " "                        | 26. OFFICE • WORKSHOP • STORAGE | 48. CHAMBER                     |
| 5. CHAMBER                      | 27. " " "                       | 49. PARLOR                      |
| 6. CHAMBER                      | 28. " " "                       | 50. CHAMBER                     |
| 7. CHAMBER                      | 29. CHAMBER                     | 51. CHAMBER                     |
| 8. CHAMBER                      | 30. CHAMBER                     | 52. OFFICE • WORKSHOP • STORAGE |
| 9. OFFICE • WORKSHOP • STORAGE  | 31. CHAMBER                     | 53. " " "                       |
| 10. SIDE DOOR                   | 32. CHAMBER                     | 54. " " "                       |
| 11. TOOL SHED                   | 33. CHAMBER                     | 55. CHAMBER                     |
| 12. CHAMBER                     | 34. CHAMBER                     | 56. CHAMBER                     |
| 13. OFFICE • WORKSHOP • STORAGE | 35. CHAMBER                     | 57. CHAMBER                     |
| 14. CHAMBER                     | 36. CHAMBER                     | 58. STAIRS UP                   |
| 15. OFFICE • WORKSHOP • STORAGE | 37. OFFICE • WORKSHOP • STORAGE | 59. STAIRS DOWN                 |
| 16. CHAMBER                     | 38. " " "                       | 60. WORKSHOP                    |
| 17. OFFICE • WORKSHOP • STORAGE | 39. " " "                       | 61. MUD ROOM                    |
| 18. " " "                       | 40. PORCH                       |                                 |
| 19. CHAMBER                     | 41. GREAT HALL                  |                                 |
| 20. OFFICE • WORKSHOP • STORAGE | 42. LIBRARY • STUDY             |                                 |
| 21. CHAMBER                     | 43. KITCHEN                     |                                 |
| 22. CHAMBER                     | 44. PANTRY                      |                                 |

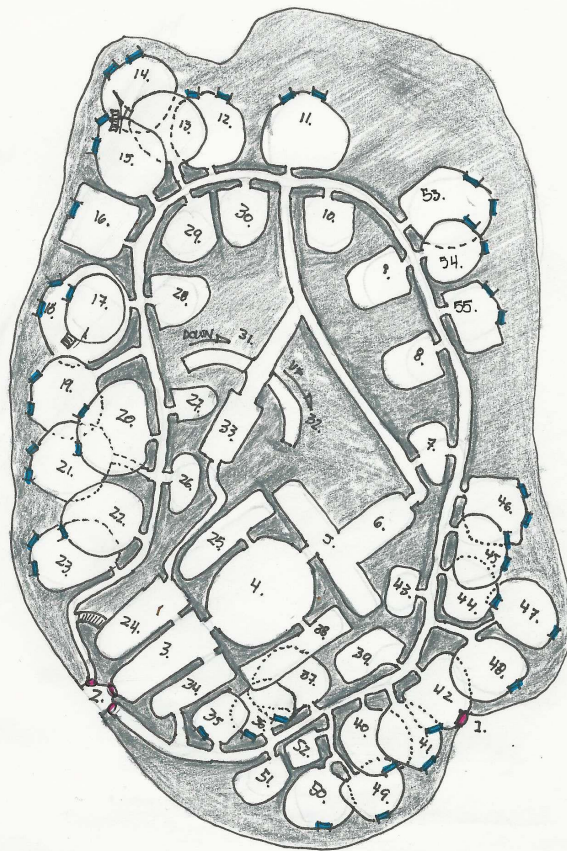




## BRANDY HALL SMIALS • FIRST FLOOR

1. CHAMBER	23. CHAMBER	45. STAIRS DOWN
2. CHAMBER	24. CHAMBER	46. STAIRS UP
3. SIDEDOOR	25. CHAMBER	47. KITCHEN CLOSET
4. CHAMBER	26. CHAMBER	48. PANTRY
5. CHAMBER	27. CHAMBER	49. CHAMBER
6. CHAMBER	28. CHAMBER	50. PARLOR
7. CHAMBER	29. CHAMBER	51. PARLOR
8. CHAMBER	30. CHAMBER	52. PANTRY
9. CHAMBER	31. CHAMBER	53. CHAMBER
10. CHAMBER	32. CHAMBER	54. CHAMBER
11. CHAMBER	33. CHAMBER	55. CHAMBER
12. CHAMBER	34. CHAMBER	56. OFFICE • WORKSHOP • STORAGE
13. OFFICE • WORKSHOP • STORAGE	35. CHAMBER	57. " " "
14. " " "	36. CHAMBER	58. " " "
15. " " "	37. CHAMBER	59. " " "
16. " " "	38. CHAMBER	
17. " " "	39. CHAMBER	
18. " " "	40. PORCH	
19. " " "	41. GREAT HALL	
20. " " "	42. KITCHEN	
21. " " "	43. SERVICE ROOM	
22. " " "	44. LIBRARY	

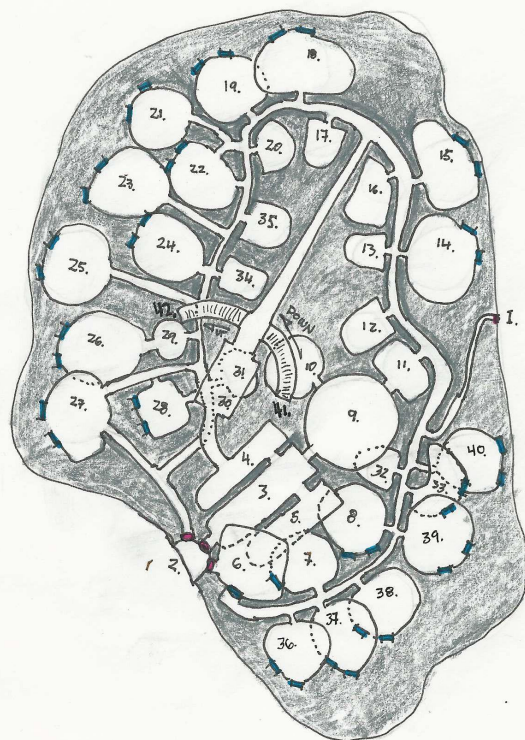




## BRANDY HALL SMIALS • SECOND FLOOR

1. SIDEDOOR	23. CHAMBER	45. CHAMBER
2. PORCH	24. LIBRARY	46. CHAMBER
3. GREAT HALL	25. PANTRY	47. CHAMBER
4. KITCHEN	26. OFFICE • WORKSHOP • STORAGE	48. CHAMBER
5. SERVICE KITCHEN	27. " " "	49. CHAMBER
6. PANTRY	28. " " "	50. CHAMBER
7. OFFICE • WORKSHOP • STORAGE	29. " " "	51. OFFICE • WORKSHOP • STORAGE
8. OFFICE • WORKSHOP • STORAGE	30. " " "	52. " " "
9. OFFICE • WORKSHOP • STORAGE	31. STAIRS DOWN	53. CHAMBER
10. OFFICE • WORKSHOP • STORAGE	32. STAIRS UP	54. CHAMBER
11. CHAMBER	33. READING ROOM	55. CHAMBER
12. CHAMBER	34. LIBRARY	
13. CHAMBER	35. CHAMBER	
14. CHAMBER	36. CHAMBER	
15. CHAMBER	37. CHAMBER	
16. CHAMBER	38. OFFICE • WORKSHOP • STORAGE	
17. CHAMBER	39. " " "	
18. CHAMBER	40. CHAMBER	
19. CHAMBER	41. CHAMBER	
20. CHAMBER	42. CHAMBER	
21. CHAMBER	43. OFFICE • WORKSHOP • STORAGE	
22. CHAMBER	44. CHAMBER	





N

## BRANDY HALL SMIALS • THIRD FLOOR

- |                                   |                        |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. SIDE ENTRANCE (CONCEALED DOOR) | 23. CHAMBER            |
| 2. PORCH                          | 24. CHAMBER            |
| 3. GREAT HALL                     | 25. CHAMBER            |
| 4. FAMILY HALL                    | 26. CHAMBER            |
| 5. LIBRARY                        | 27. CHAMBER            |
| 6. PARLOR                         | 28. CHAMBER            |
| 7. CHAMBER                        | 29. WORKSHOP - STORAGE |
| 8. CHAMBER                        | 30. STAIR - PALOR      |
| 9. KITCHEN                        | 31. WORKSHOP - STORAGE |
| 10. PANTRY                        | 32. WORKSHOP - STORAGE |
| 11. PANTRY                        | 33. CHAMBER            |
| 12. WORKSHOP - STORAGE            | 34. WORKSHOP - STORAGE |
| 13. WORKSHOP - STORAGE            | 36. WORKSHOP - STORAGE |
| 14. CHAMBER                       | 36. CHAMBER            |
| 15. CHAMBER                       | 37. CHAMBER            |
| 16. WORKSHOP - STORAGE            | 38. CHAMBER            |
| 17. WORKSHOP - STORAGE            | 39. CHAMBER            |
| 18. CHAMBER                       | 40. CHAMBER            |
| 19. CHAMBER                       | 41. STAIR - DOWN       |
| 20. WORKSHOP - STORAGE            | 42. STAIR - UP         |
| 21. CHAMBER                       |                        |
| 22. CHAMBER                       |                        |



1. SIDE DOOR
4. LIBRARY
7. CHAMBER
10. OFFICE
13. CHAMBER
16. CHAMBER
19. MUD ROOM
22. STAIR DOWN
25. OFFICE
28. OFFICE
31. CHAMBER

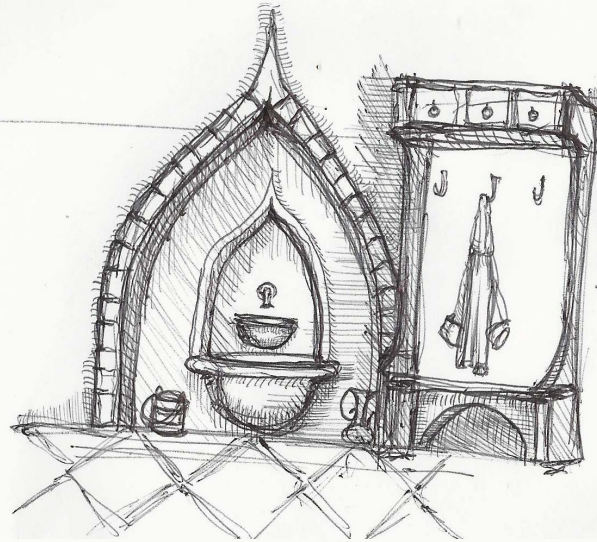
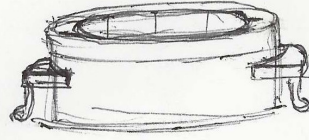
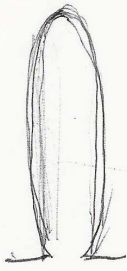
2. FRONT PORCH  
5. LIBRARY  
8. CHAMBER  
11. OFFICE  
14. CHAMBER  
17. CHAMBER  
20. WARMING ROOM  
23. STAIR TO OVERSIALS  
26. OFFICE  
29. CHAMBER  
32. CHAMBER

3. GREAT HALL  
6. CHAMBER  
9. OFFICE  
12. CHAMBER  
15. CHAMBER  
18. CHAMBER  
21. STAIR HALL  
24. OFFICE  
27. OFFICE  
30. CHAMBER

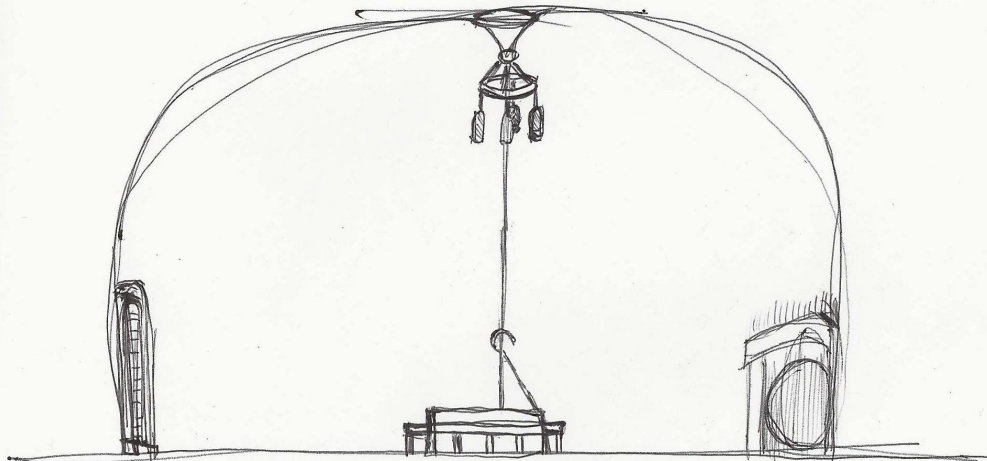
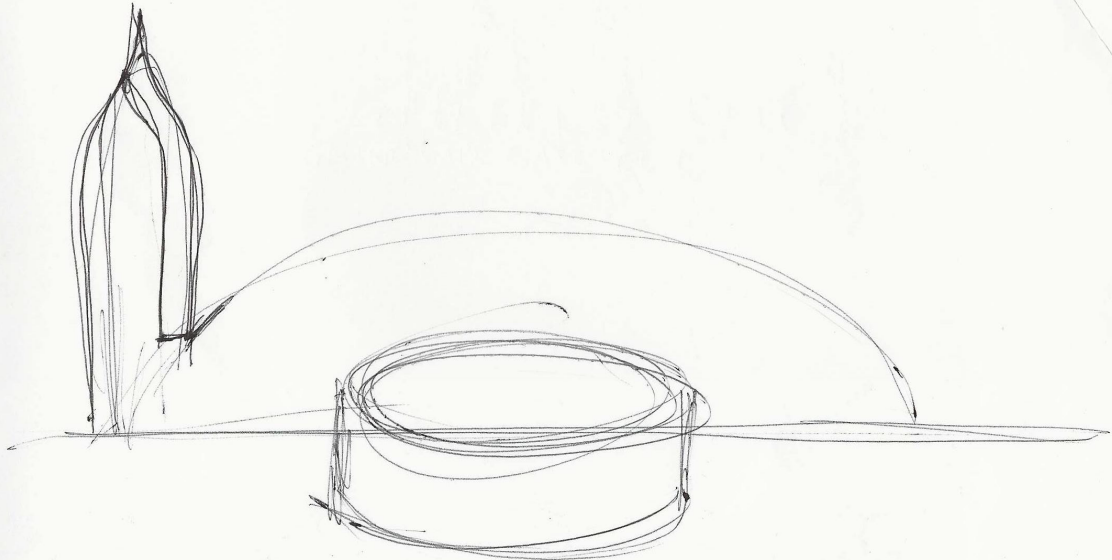
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ATYPICAL  
FONT AND  
BENCH IN  
THE MUSEUM



## Chapter 7 - Chasing a Wizard

The next morning, Donna and Mira went out with Gorbado to run around on top of Brandy Hill. In the distance to their east, they could see the High Hay, a dark green line off near the horizon. This was a hedge, but it was a very old and well-tended one, and it stretched for miles. They sat in the grass and 'talked', using Gorbado's slate. Gorbado explained that the High Hay was meant to keep out the Old Forest, which came up close to it on the other side.

"What do you mean, keep out?" asked Donna with a scribble on his slate tablet.

"Keep the trees from coming too close to Buckland," Gorbado scribbled back.

"How can trees 'come close'? Do they move?" wrote Donna.

"Yes," came the answer.

"How?" asked Mira this time.

"They just do. Don't know. Usually only at night though," answered Gorbado.

One time, in fact, the trees of the Old Forest had attacked the High Hay, planting themselves next to it and leaning over it. Had they been allowed, they would have eventually broken it down. The Buckland Hobbits had chopped down many of the trees then, and burned them in a pile. The Bucklanders did not much like the Old Forest, and it did not very much like them. Still, going into the Old Forest (during the day) was a kind of dare that they would engage in from time to time. When Donna was pulled off for a game of tag by Sink and Daisy, Gorbado sketched on his slate a picture of a little girl and boy standing between the hedge and the trees.

"Who are they?" scribbled Mira in one corner, not wanting to disturb his picture. Gorbado had to erase her question to make a space for the answer.

"Us," came the answer.

"Who is 'us'?" asked Mira. "Brandybucks?"

"You and me," wrote Gorbado.

"You want us to go past the High Hay?" asked Mira, then realizing she was talking out

loud. On the tablet, she just wrote, "Why?"

"Adventure!" he wrote.

Mira giggled, but shook her head no. She had never been to the Old Forest, but she had heard stories enough to tell her it was not a place she wanted to go, even during the daytime.

"Who is that?" wrote Gorbodoc. Mira looked around to see who he meant, then saw that there was a figure in a grey cloak, off in the distance. He was standing behind a shade tree in the field, partially hidden, but to the sharp eyes of the Hobbit children he was not hidden well enough. They could not see his face well, though.

"Gandalf?" wrote Mira.

They had played long enough to be hungry and thirsty again, and walked back to the Oversmials front doors at the top of Buck Hill.

"Look!" cried Donna, and Mira saw that she was looking off across the river.

"Oh!" said Mira. "There's someone trying to use the Ferry to get across. He must not have heard that it was closed until the floods end. I'm surprised no one in Bucklebury Ferry has told him."

"Most of the hobbits in Bucklebury and Bucklebury Ferry are staying in Brandy Hall for the Equinox," said Sink. "There's probably no one down there to see him."

As they watched, they saw a young Hobbit get out of his wagon and look across the river. He was full-grown in height but not in girth yet. In horror, Donna and Mira realized two things at once. One, this was none other than Bungo Baggins, and two, he seemed to be considering rafting across the Brandywine River himself. What could have possessed as cautious and softspoken a Hobbit as him to consider attempting such a thing, was beyond them. They knew for certain, though, that if he tried it, bad things might happen. The Brandybucks were the only Hobbits around who knew much about boating; certainly no Baggins from Hobbiton could have ever attempted it before.

"Run!" said Donna, and they ran up through the entrance to Oversmials. They found Marmadoc, and breathlessly explained what was about to happen.

"What?!" said Marmadoc with an expression of doubt and dismay. "A Baggins?"



Rafting? He'll drown himself for sure."

"Can you stop him?" asked Donna. "Maybe shout at him to go north to the Bridge."

"Well, we'll see," said Marmadoc, and he ran off. Donna and Mira ran to find Bella and tell her that Bungo Baggins had unexpectedly arrived, but she seemed to be unsurprised. Donna thought she also seemed to be pleased, though.

"But he's going to try to raft across," said Mira. "Why is he in such a hurry?"

"He may not know about the Bridge at all," said Donna. "He's probably never been to Buckland before."

Bella's expression turned from happy to alarmed, and the three of them ran off after Marmadoc. Little Gorbodoc ran after them. By the time they got to the top of the levee, and the cradge on top of that, they saw that Marmadoc was too late. Bungo had already loaded his wagon and two ponies onto the raft and pushed off. Marmadoc was shouting instructions from the shore, but the currents in the water were beginning to turn the raft in circles, and it began to tip alarmingly. Both ponies began to neigh in alarm, and Bungo tried to pull them back towards the center of the raft so that it would stay level in the water and not tip over. It did not appear that Bungo had any clear plan for how to steer the raft, or what to do when he came to the levee on the other side. Marmadoc ran to a much smaller craft which he had tied up on the Brandy Hall side of the river.

With swift strokes of the small paddle, Marmadoc pushed his little boat out to the middle of the river, and brought it expertly alongside the raft that poor Bungo was struggling with. He lashed it alongside, and then climbed on board and helped guide them steadily towards the bank on the Buckland side of the river. Still, they had gone half a mile downriver before Marmadoc could bring them to shore. It took Marmadoc and Bungo some time before they could safely bring his wagon and ponies onto dry land. The ponies and Bungo seemed equally relieved to be done with the raft.

"Well, Mr. Baggins," said Marmadoc with a chuckle, "you've a fine nose for a good party. If I had known you wanted to come, I would have warned you to take the Brandywine Bridge way."

"There's a bridge?" asked Bungo, wide-eyed and breathless. "Oh bother. I am sorry to have caused you this trouble, Mr. Brandybuck."

Marmadoc laughed, and clapped him on the shoulder.



"Not to worry, young Baggins. Give us a ride back to Brandy Hall and we'll call it even."

This they did, and saw that guests were arriving again. It was late morning now, and those who did not make it yesterday were hurrying to make sure they did not miss lunch at Brandy Hall. Some of them had seen Marmadoc's rescue of Baggins and his wagon, and were smirking about it. Bungo flushed red, but Marmadoc told him not to worry.

"Nothing a good spot of lunch won't fix, Baggins. Ask one of the wagonhands there to stable your ponies, and come on in!"

With that, Marmadoc hopped down from the wagon and walked up to greet the newcomers as they ascended the stairs. Bungo, however, stayed seated on his wagon. Donna noticed that he still seemed worried. Bella noticed it as well.

"Is everything all right, Bungo?" Bella asked.

"Well, uh, that is, I'm not sure. Is Gandalf here?"

"No, not yet I'm afraid," said Bella.

"I think we saw him earlier," said Mira.

"What?" asked Bella and Donna together.

"He was watching Brandy Hall from the fields to the south," said Mira. "We saw him hiding behind a tree. Or at least it looked like it was him, the robes were grey."

With that, they were running as a group around the side of Brandy Hill, where Mira pointed to where he stood in the distance. When they saw him, though, he seemed to start a bit, and then turn and begin walking away quickly further south.

"Gandalf!" shouted Bungo, but the figure kept walking. He was at least half a mile away, walking with long strides, and they realized they would never catch him.

"Did he not hear us?" asked Mira.

"I think maybe he doesn't want to talk to us right now," said Bella, but Bungo seemed determined. He ran back to his wagon, and set the ponies into a trot. The Took sisters

and Gorbado piled on to the back. Donna wondered whether or not two ponies could actually go any faster than Hobbits if they had to pull five Hobbits along, but after the wagon was moving it did seem to be a little faster. Hobbits have short legs, after all. Whether or not it would be faster than a Wizard, though, was yet to be seen.

They tried calling to him, but the wind had picked up, and apparently it kept their voices from reaching him. They hurried on, pushing the ponies as fast as they could, but it seemed difficult to get much closer to the receding gray figure. Bungo would occasionally call out, but there was never an answer.

"Why doesn't he answer?" asked Mira.

"I'm not sure, but I don't think he wants to talk right now," said Bella, looking at Bungo instead of Mira as she said it. Bungo looked worried, and kept the ponies moving forward. Bella opened her mouth as if she was about to ask him a question, then thought better of it, and said nothing.

Mira and Gorbado entertained themselves with drawing pictures on his slate. They continued on through the small villages of Standelf, Haysend, and Breredon without stopping. Gorbado sketched a quite good likeness of Standelf's little white stony houses, their chimneys smoking with the promise of warm food inside. It was getting well past lunchtime now, and all the Hobbits were thinking thoughts of food. Except for Bungo, apparently, who continued to try to catch up to Gandalf, without a thought of turning back. The road was now little more than a track, and the ponies were having some trouble. Still they kept going, never quite catching and never quite losing sight of the swiftly walking gray robed figure in the distance.

When they came to the end of even the track, they were at a spot called Grindwall. This was not really a village, but just a place where one or two Hobbit families lived, by the best spot for crossing the river named Withywindle. Once you crossed the Withywindle it was no longer considered quite civilized. Certainly it was not part of the Shire anymore. There was a small boat, barely more than a canoe, that Gandalf had presumably just used to cross the river, but it was on the other side of the river now. None of the hobbits who lived there seemed to be home at the moment.

"Bungo, I think you need to tell us what's going on," said Bella, seeing that he was looking at the river as if he meant to find a way to cross it.

"I think I must cross the river, Bella. You should take the children back with you. I'll just catch up to Gandalf myself."

"You can't be intending to cross the river yourself, after your...experience this morning." said Bella. She didn't want to embarrass Bungo by saying that he knew about as much about crossing rivers as he did about flying through the air, and had nearly gotten himself drowned until Marmadoc rescued him.

"Well, Bella, I'm not quite sure what to do otherwise. I really need to talk to Gandalf."

"About what, if I may ask?"

Bungo was quiet for a few moments, then finally said, "About Hildifons."

Suddenly, everyone was quiet. Donna and Mira were now paying close attention to the conversation.

"What?" asked Bella. "Do you know something about Hildifons?"

"I...I don't know for sure, but I think maybe, perhaps I have a guess, yes."

"And you think Gandalf needs to hear this, so he can rescue him from some danger?"

"Yes," he said.

Bella looked out across the Withywindle. It was not nearly so large as the Brandywine River, but it was too large to hop across, and with all the recent rain it was larger than usual.

"What is it you need to tell him, if I may ask?"

"I'm...I'm afraid he made me promise not to tell anyone," said Bungo.

"But you're going to tell Gandalf," said Bella.

"Well, yes I...I mean I don't want to, but after I got your letter I decided that maybe I must. I don't know what to do, exactly, but it seems like I ought to do something. It seemed like maybe telling a Wizard might be a different thing than telling his family, because..."

After a pause, Bella finished his sentence for him.

"Because it was probably us he was thinking about, when he made you promise not to tell anyone."

Bungo sighed. "Yes, I'm afraid maybe it was. I'm sorry, Bella, I am not quite sure what the proper thing to do is, in this situation. I want to keep my promise, but I can't just do nothing, and..."

Bungo's voice trailed off, and he turned back to look at the river in front of them. It seemed to Bella that he was contemplating his own death. She realized that he knew as well as she did that he was hapless with water, but he had determined that his friend needed help, and Gandalf was the only one who could give it. Therefore, regardless of the risk, he was going to try somehow to get across the river and reach Gandalf. She thought he must be, beneath his quiet and humble demeanor, a very loyal friend. They were both quiet for a few moments more, when Mira's voice broke the silence.

"Gorbadoc says he knows how to swim, and he can go bring the boat back if you want. He's had lots of practice handling a boat, and he says Brandybucks learn how to swim before they learn how to walk."

"What?!" said Bungo, Bella, and Donna all at once, just as they heard the splash of Gorbadoc diving into the water. The young Brandybuck had, of course, not heard the conversation, but he had seen enough to know that Bungo and perhaps Bella were wanting to cross the river, and didn't know how. He quickly emerged on the other side and climbed into the boat, then expertly paddled it back to their side.

Bungo agreed to letting Gorbadoc paddle him across the river, and Bella insisted on going with him. They both insisted that Gorbadoc, Donna, and Mira stay with the wagon.

"We shall be back in an hour or two at the most," said Bungo. "If for some reason we're not, take the wagon back to Brandy Hall yourselves. But we really should be back soon. I think we've almost caught up to him, or would have if not for this blasted river, and I'm prepared to run to catch up to him before he's off into the Wilds."

So, after Gorbadoc ferried Bungo and Bella across the Withywindle in the small boat, the three Hobbit children sat in the wagon and waited. They took turns drawing each other's picture on the slate, and played riddle games. Aside from the lack of food it might all have been a pleasant enough time, if it had not been for the enormous thunderstorm that blew up almost as soon as Bungo and Bella were out of sight.

It was, perhaps, the loudest and fiercest thunderstorm that Donna had ever witnessed. Then again, she had never stayed out in one for very long before. At first it was just a few drops, but within minutes it had become a downpour. The ponies were not happy, and neither were the Hobbits. All of the buildings in Grindwall seemed to be locked. The buildings in Tuckburrow near Great Smials were usually left unlocked, but Bucklanders were different about that. There was little they could do about it, except huddle under the wagon next to the dock, and hope that it didn't wash them away entirely.

Within a few minutes more, it had gotten so dark that they could scarcely see one another. The water rushing through the river threatened to overflow its banks. An inch or so of water moved across the spot where their wagon stood. Donna thought that they must move the wagon and ponies back away from the dock, before they were swept away. Unfortunately, she had little or no idea how to manage a wagon, or ponies. Since she was older than Mira and Gorbado, she thought perhaps it was up to her to do something, but she wasn't sure what to do.

Miserably, she told Mira and Gorbado to get out from under the wagon. They gave little complaint, as it was no longer much protection from the water, which was splashing or running in from all sides. She took hold of one of the pony's bridles and attempted to push it backwards, but the ponies either did not understand or did not approve, and she could not get them to budge. The sound of the rain falling was like a roar in her ears, and between the raindrops and the heavy clouds she could see almost nothing. She tried to think of what she had seen her father do to get a poney-drawn wagon backed up, but she couldn't remember him having to do anything special. Maybe he did something she hadn't seen, or maybe the ponies were just frustrated and upset at being out in the pouring rain.

Suddenly, the rain above her stopped, and she heard a kindly voice behind her say, "Let me help you out with that, Miss."

A hand appeared over her shoulder, and gently took hold of the reins of the pony she had been struggling with. Donna turned around, and saw a figure a few feet taller than her, although not as tall as Gandalf. He was dressed in blue, except for his boots, which were a bright yellow, and he had a single feather in his tall hat. He smiled down at Donna out of a great mass of a beard, and despite many reasons why she might have been afraid Donna smiled back up at him.

"Perhaps you should get the other two out of the way while I back these fellows up out of the water so they don't wash downriver," he said. He nodded in the direction of Mira



and Gorbodoc. Donna left the wagon with him, and walked over to lead Mira and Gorbodoc away from the river. With a shock the assault of the rain returned, and she realized that it had not been raining right where the odd fellow was, but it was still raining everywhere else. The three of them got back out of the way, and turned back to watch the wagon. Tom guided the ponies to move it back off the dock and uphill to ground less likely to flood (although still thoroughly muddy).

Then, the odd figure unhooked the ponies from the wagon, removed their reins and bridles, and with a heave turned the wagon upside down. He waved the three Hobbit children over to it, and indicated they should take shelter underneath it. The ground was still running with water, but it was a bit better to at least not have the rain pouring down on them. Once they were all underneath it, he stuck his head, hat and feather and all, under the edge of the wagon to talk to them briefly.

"Howdy folks. Tom Bombadil is my name. Nice weather for a walk and a song, eh?"

"Um, please Mr. Tombadil," began Mira.

"Tom Bombadil, Miss," said Tom with a smile and a wink. "Watch out, I might call you Biramella."

How did he know her name? thought Donna.

"Oh, Tom Bombadil," said Mira correcting herself. "Sorry. But our sister and Mr. Baggins went on past the river, and now they're caught in the rain, and I'm not sure if they can find Gandalf with it raining so hard, and maybe they can't even find their way back."

"What? Hobbits going on past the Withywindle? It's not the weather for Hobbits to be exploring. I'll just take them these ponies, then, and help them find their way back. Going after Gandalf, eh? Well, I doubt they'll find him if they're headed that way."

"We think we saw him headed in that direction, but we couldn't catch him," said Donna.

Tom gave her a queer look then, still smiling but with a doubtful look in his eye, but said nothing directly in answer to her.

"Let's get you three somewhere better than this wagon, then," said Tom. "It's better than nothing, but it's not made to be a house, and I'm not sure it will be safe if this storm really gets going. You ever stay in a badger sett?"

The three of them looked at each other, and then Tom reached over and scribbled on Gorbado's tablet.

"Badger sett?" he wrote.

"Let's go," wrote Gorbado, and with that they all scrambled out from under the wagon and followed after Tom. It was a difficult task, not least because he rarely travelled in a straight line. He stomped about in a peculiar fashion, something between dancing and jumping. Donna found he behaved in a way that was an odd mix of a small child and a very old man. The whole time he sang, apparently to himself, in a manner that seemed mostly to be nonsense.

"Hey Tom Bombadil, Tom Bombadillo; wetter than a crocodile, plumper than a pillow; Tom does just what he will, Tom's a merry fellow; Tom sings fairly shrill, when he doesn't bellow!"

(stomp, stomp, turn in a circle, stomp, stomp, turn around again)

Mira was grinning like Donna had rarely seen before, which was quite something since Mira grinned much of the time. Gorbado, though he could not hear what Tom was singing, was smiling at his curious jumping about. It occurred to Donna for a moment to wonder if they had taken off in the company of a madman, as he turned and headed uphill into the forest. The two younger Hobbits followed him without hesitation. With some misgivings but no idea what else to do, Donna came after them up the hill as well. They appeared to be walking along a small path. Soon, Tom was sticking his head into the entrance to an underground burrow.

"Hey! Hey Badger folk! Tom's here with a few guests, who need a dry place out of the rain! Come poke your nose out and make them welcome!"

That's it, thought Donna, he's crazy.

But soon, there was the nose of a large badger that did poke out. It sniffed Tom, then looked over at the three Hobbit children and blinked.

It turned to Tom, and there came forth a series of growls, squeaks, chirps, barks, and other noises.

"Now be a better host than that, Tadg, you know Hobbit-folk can't understand your

language. Speak the Common Tongue!"

Then, to the Hobbit children's amazement, they heard the badger, who was apparently named Tadg, speak in a throaty growl that they could nonetheless understand.

"Oh, you know I don't speak it good, Tom. Why I will let Hobbits in my home?"

"Why?" asked Tom, "well why not? They are Hobbit children, and they're caught out in this rain! Let them in, and treat them kindly, or I'll sing you a mess of trouble you'll not want to face, Tadg. I've done you favors enough afore now."

"All right, all right," said Tadg, and he turned and crawled back into his hole. Tom turned to the three Hobbit children, and waved them in.

"In you go, then," he said. "It's a tight fit for me, but it should be roomy enough for you. Badgers are who your kind learned to burrow from, long ago. Tadg has one of the grandest setts there is, and it's dry anyway. He's grumpy sometimes, but he won't do you no harm, not now I've told him not to. I'll just go find your lost sister and Baggins, and bring them back to you before they lose their way in this downpour. It's not fit weather for a Hobbit, and if they get much further they'll be beyond my reach. Quickly now, in you go."

There was nothing for it, so Donna ducked down and crawled in. Almost immediately it became very dark; not enough light came in from the opening to see well. She remembered her magic lamp from Calpatan the elf, and brought it out. She saw that the tunnel was broader than it was high; it looked a bit like a capital letter "D" on its side. This made sense for the badgers, but meant it was too low for the Hobbits, even though they were children, to stand up. They had to crawl through it on all fours, as if they were badgers as well.

After they had crawled into the hill for a dozen yards or so, they came to a larger chamber. It was further across than two of the Hobbit children laid end to end, and tall enough to sit up in. There was another entrance to the aboveground world besides the one they had come from, and it let in a little light, but Donna kept out her lamp as well. They sat there, looking at each other, and also at the badgers. The badgers sniffed the Hobbits, growled to each other, and crawled over and around everyone. The chamber was lined with dried grass and dead leaves, and warm enough that they felt comfortable despite being soaked by the rain. The largest badger, the one named Tadg, looked at them and croaked out some words in the Common Tongue again.

"Well here you are, Hobbits, and this is our home. We have been in this sett for more years than I know; I was born here, in this very room, and so was my father."

It does rather sound like Great Smials or Brandy Hall, thought Donna. Did Hobbits really learn to make smials from badgers?

"You'll get sniffed a lot by the young ones," continued Tadg, "they've never smelled Hobbits up close before. Mostly we try to stay away from Hobbits, though your pastures are good for finding worms. Just stay here and dry off, and we'll see if we can get you something to eat."

"Oh thank you, but we don't eat worms," said Donna, trying to sound polite.

"Of course not, I know that," said Tadg, "but I think we've got some fruit. Probably took it from a Hobbit's field in the first place. We've been storing it for a while, and it's getting pretty good."

Uh oh, thought Donna. Gorbodoc and Mira were busy scribbling back and forth on his slate. Donna could not see what they were writing but it must have been silly, because Mira was giggling even more than usual.

Donna later learned that it is not particularly uncommon for badgers to eat fermented fruit, and end up getting drunk. She did not know much about badgers at the time, though, so she did not know what to expect. The peaches and apples they were offered were clearly past the point of fermenting. The children did not eat more than a bite or two, even though they were Hobbits and very hungry by then. The badgers, however, gorged themselves.

Within half an hour, they were treated to the sound of a chorus of badger voices, singing in their odd voices. Tadg's singing voice was a low growl, whereas his wife's voice was more like a purring noise, and the youngsters cooed and squeaked. It was an odd mix, but it seemed to be a favorite song of theirs, because they sang it several times. Tadg ended up on his back at one point, his eyes closed but still singing, his legs waving about in the air as he tried half-heartedly to get himself righted again. The young ones crawled over him, occasionally, and the mother badger came over and sniffed him. None, however, seemed to think he particularly needed to be put back on his right side, so there he lay, singing and waving his legs in the air. The badgers sang a few other songs, if that's what they were. For some of them the three Hobbits could detect enough of a beat to clap along, which seemed to amuse the badgers as well. Finally, they came to the end of their last song, and returned to eating their fermented fruit, and it was quiet for a few

moments.

Then, suddenly, Mira was singing.

"Oh I love being in a badger sett,  
it keeps you warm when you are wet,  
the nicest hosts you ever have met,  
singing at a party in a badger sett;  
I like singing and so do they,  
though we each do it in a different way,  
even on a day that's soggy and gray,  
I like singing and so do they;  
badgers like to eat their fruit,  
about that fact there's no dispute,  
so if you're at a badger moot,  
serve your badger friends some fruit;  
now my badger song is done,  
singing with badgers is lots of fun,  
badger parties are second to none,  
but now my badger song is done."

The badgers, who became quiet when Mira started singing, then exploded into grunts, whistles, howls, and squeaks. Donna thought it was probably the badger equivalent of applause, although it was hard to be sure. Tadg had become motionless and stared at Mira while she was singing. Once she was done, he closed his eyes and threw back his head, and let out a long, throaty growl as his legs spun in four small circles in the air. The little badgers tumbled over one another and over the Hobbits, and then they ran after one another in tight circles inside the chamber. The mother badger picked out the least fermented apple and brought it over to Mira and Gorbodoc, who found a few bites in it that were still fresh enough to eat.

Then, from just outside the badger sett, came the sound of another voice singing.

"Tom's come back, and he's brought friends,  
Tom sings a song that never ends,  
makes demands, and makes amends,  
thanks his badgers for watching his friends;  
Tom wears blue, and yellow boots,  
brings his badger friends no fruits,  
but he's got time for no disputes,

takes his Hobbit friends and scoots;  
come now Hobbit lad, come my Hobbit lasses,  
time marches on now, time so swiftly passes,  
away you go down muddy trail, sticky as molasses  
come now Hobbit lad, come my Hobbit lasses!"

The three Hobbit children sat up straight at the sound of this, and turned to crawl out into the light. For it was light outside! The rain had stopped for a time at least, and as they emerged above ground they saw Tom, Bella, and a very downtrodden looking Bungo Baggins waiting for them. Bella looked amused and appalled in equal parts to see her sisters and Gorbodoc come muddy and wet out of a hole in the ground. Bungo looked as if he felt he was to blame for everything bad that had happened that day.

For her part, Mira could not wait an instant to start telling the three of them what a party in a badger sett was like. She talked as fast as she could draw breath, until Tom tipped his head back and laughed so loud she was startled into silence.

"Well, my friend Tadg, I see you've been a good host, although I think you may have slipped your young guests a bit of the fruit you folks like so well. Come along now, say your goodbyes to Tadg and the rest, and let's get you all back to your own sett before the next stormcloud comes to wash away stray Hobbits."

They turned then, and shouted their thank-you's and goodbyes to the badger folk in their sett. Then they followed Tom back to where he had their ponies and wagon waiting to go. The ponies looked happier than when they had last seen them. Although drenched and then muddy, the youngest three were in a good mood from their time underground. Bella was amused to hear Mira telling the tale; only Bungo Baggins seemed inconsolable. As they got back into their wagon and prepared to go, Tom tried to cheer him up.

"Look more alive there, Bungo, you've not lost hope yet! Wizards are peculiar folk, and if you chase after them when they don't stop to listen, you will have a hard time. But you may find Gandalf somewhere you don't expect him, before all is said and done. But back to Brandy Hall with all of you, now! If you hurry you can make it before dark."

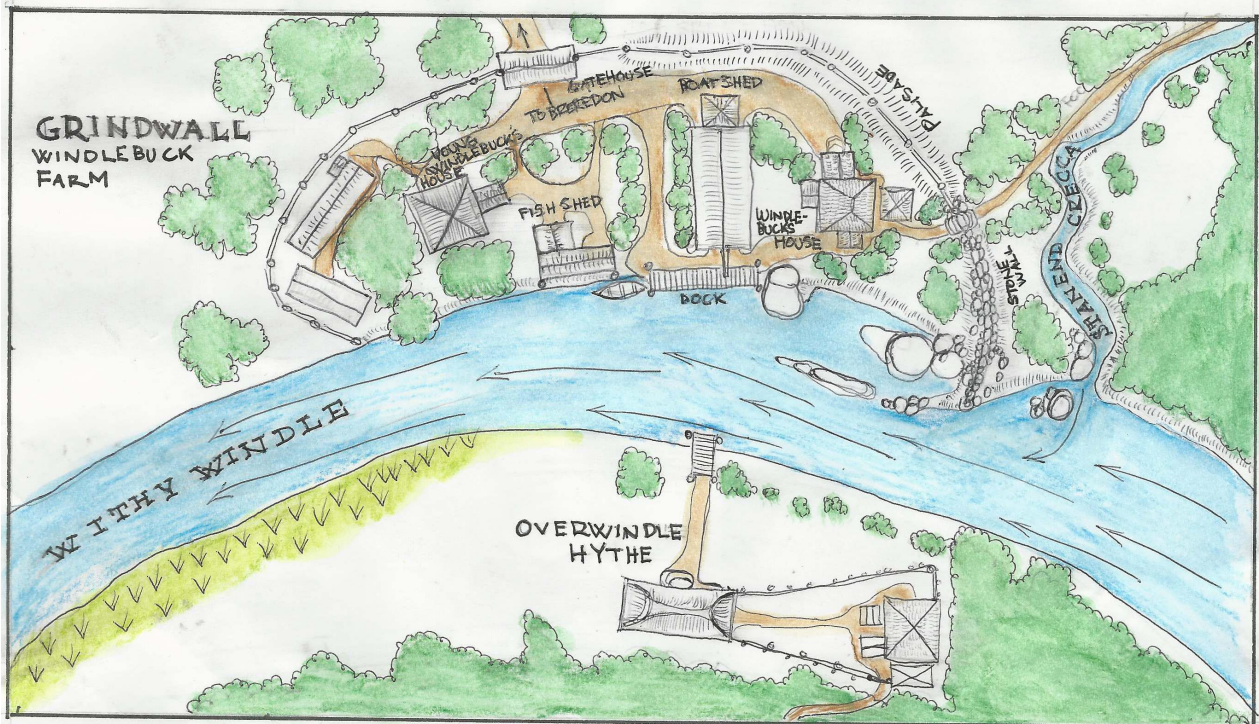
With that, Tom turned and began galloping away, and the ponies began pulling them back to Brandy Hall at a good clip. They arrived back at Brandy Hall just before dusk, to discover that Gandalf had just been there, but had left an hour before.







# GRINDWALL

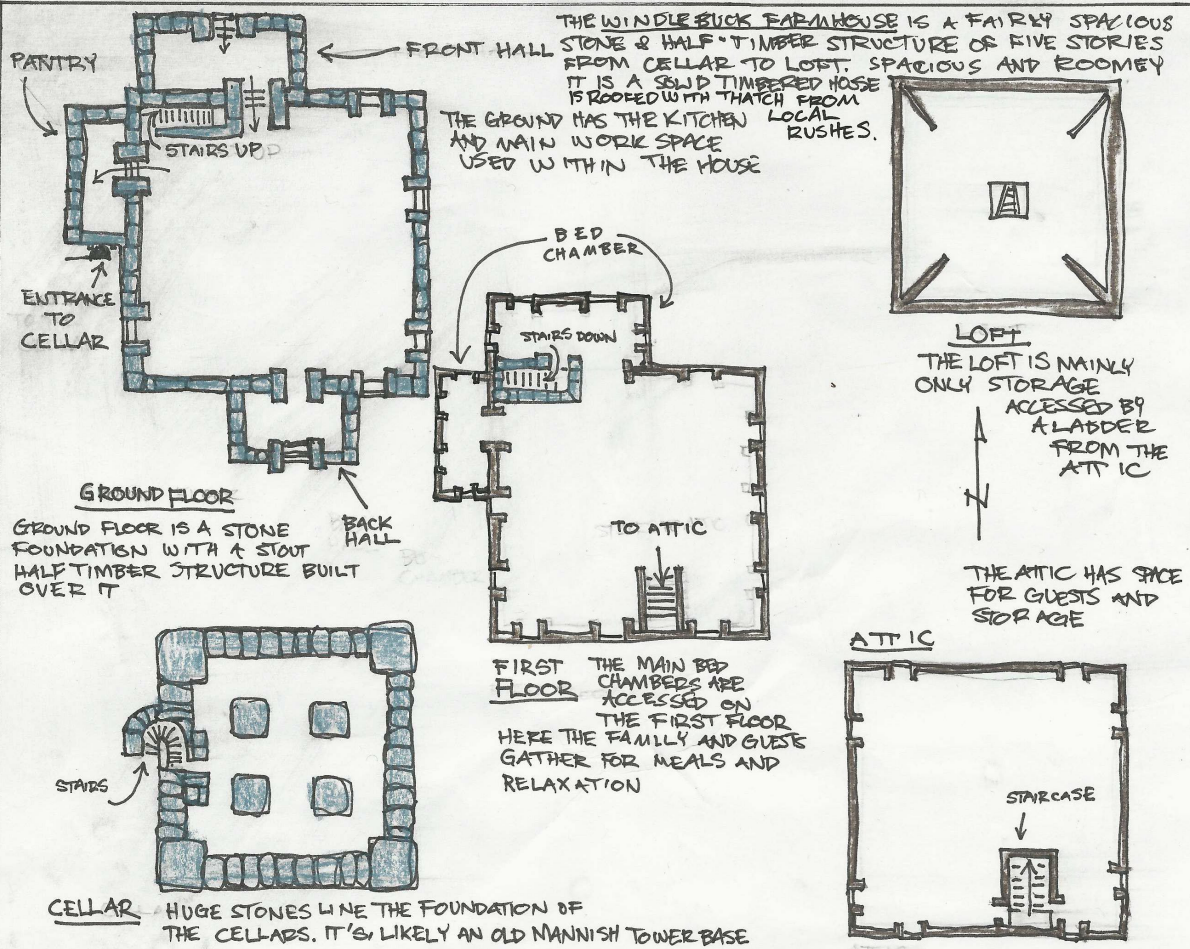




# GRINDWALL ♦ The Windleback Farm



VIEW FROM THE NORTH  
TO THE FRONT PORCH







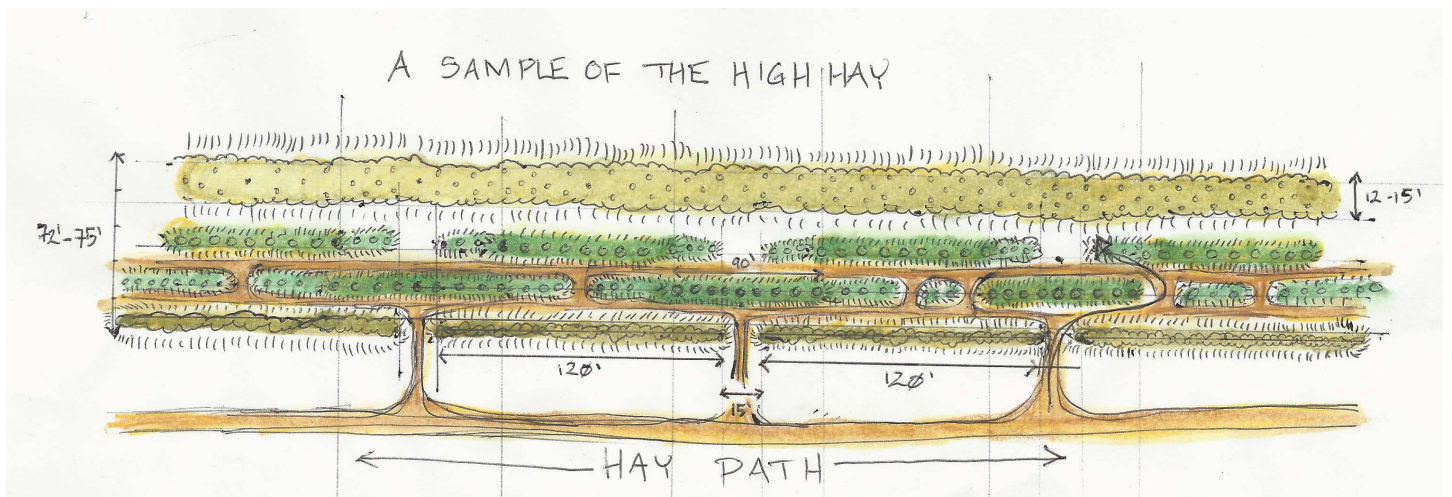
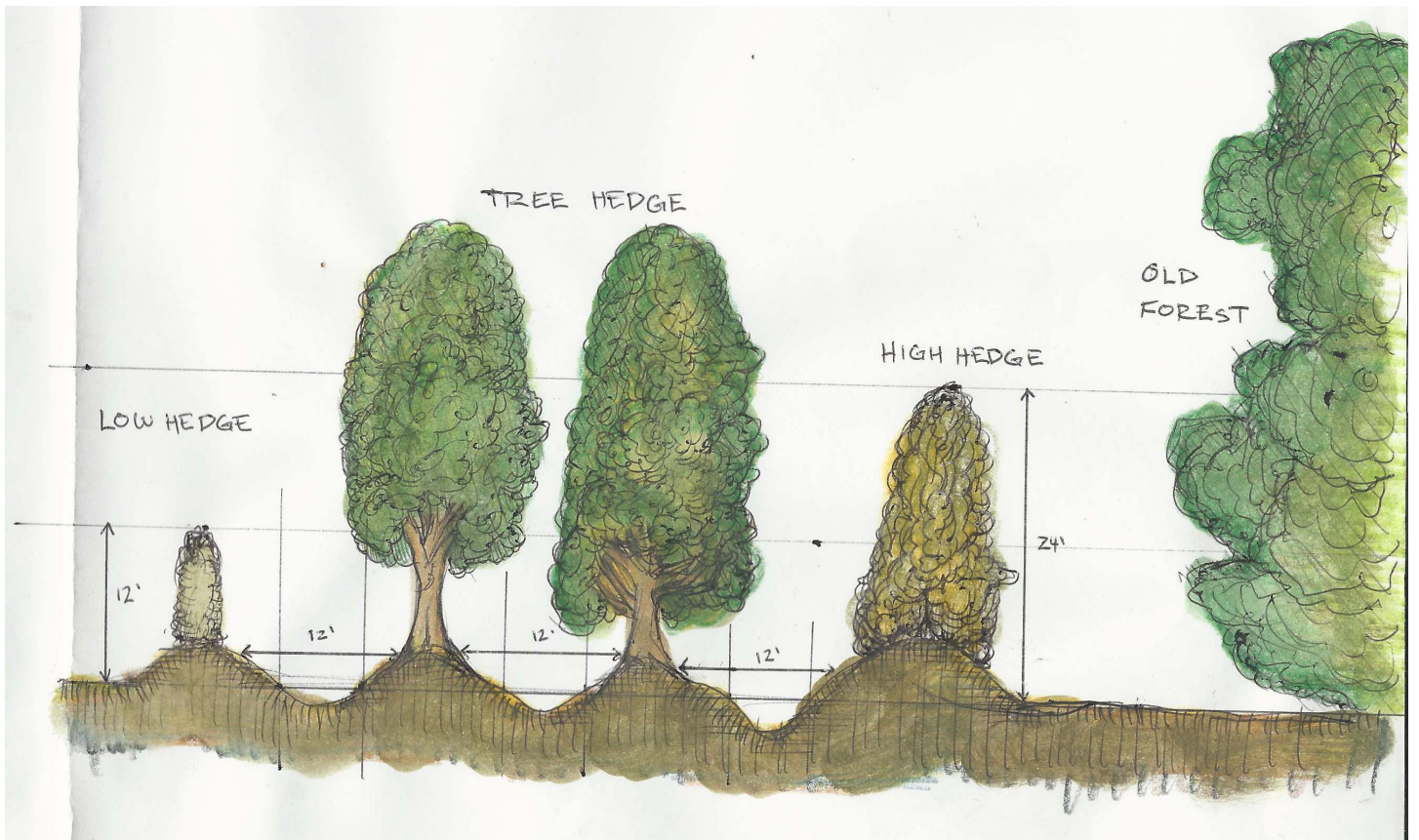
GRINDWALL GATEHOUSE, "HEORDRED"



LITTLE SHED

12' 24' 36' 48' 60'





## Chapter 8 - Bungo Speaks and Donna Sneaks

Gerontius met them on the front porch of Brandy Hall. The lamps were hung out, and Marmadoc stood by the front door to meet the last straggling guests who were arriving that evening. They were a short distance away from the others, so that their conversation would not be heard. Donna could see that many of the guests were looking over at them slyly, though, as if they were trying to figure out what was going on. That's when Gerontius told them that Gandalf had left an hour before.

"What?!" said Bella, her voice a mix of surprise and exasperation. "But we just spent all day trying to catch up to Gandalf! He is several hours south of here!"

"I don't know what you girls have been doing today," said Gerontius, "but it certainly was not chasing Gandalf." His voice showing more than a hint of disapproval. "I have been talking to him for some time today. We discussed everything we knew about Hildifons, as well as a great many other matters of course. He's a Wizard, after all, he has more to do than to run about after Hobbits all the day long. But he decided to head back to Great Smials to take a look...to look into some things. I sent a message with him to tell your mother and Isengrim to treat him hospitably."

To tell them to let Gandalf go look in the east rooms, thought Donna, and maybe to look in the Vault again. They're still looking for something that's missing.

"If I hadn't needed to stay here to look for you three, I would be going with Gandalf myself," said Gerontius. "Now I'd like to know what got into you to take off all day long like that."

"Master Took, it's my fault actually," said Bungo Baggins. "I desperately wanted to talk to Gandalf about something, and we thought the figure we saw was Gandalf. It looked like him from a distance, anyway, as tall as a Man and with grey robes. But I should have made sure the young ones stayed here. I thought we were only going to be a few minutes. Then once I realized he wasn't stopping, I thought we would catch him in only a few minutes more. By the time I realized we weren't going to catch him quickly, we were too far away from Brandy Hall for me to let them off the wagon. But I should have given up and taken them back here. I'm very sorry."

There was a moment of silence then. Bungo's apology had interrupted the argument between daughter and father that had been building up. Gerontius had an expression that was a mix of annoyance, disappointment, and maybe a touch of anger. He was, however, placated enough by Bungo's apology to hold his tongue for a few moments and



consider. Bella was the first to speak, and her voice was gentle but directed at Bungo.

"Bungo, I'm sorry, I know you don't want to break your promise. I think after all, though, it is time for you to tell us what you know about Hildifons."

"What? You know something about Hildifons?" asked Gerontius.

"Hildifons made him promise not to tell us anything, and that's why he was desperate to find Gandalf," said Bella. "Now, Bungo, what is it you know?"

Bungo Baggins gave a great sigh, and he buried his face for a moment in his hands. Then, he looked up again, and straightened his back, as if he had made his decision.

"Well, all right then, I suppose you're right. Hildifons will just have to forgive me, or maybe he won't, but one way or another here's what I know. It's about the fishing trip that he and I took to Lake Evendim earlier this year. When we got there, well, we saw something. Or rather, someone."

"Who?" asked Gerontius. "Who did you see?"

Donna thought that perhaps her father had a guess, but he didn't want his guess to be right.

"It was, well, it was a...giant."

Gerontius let out a sigh. Yes, thought Donna, that was what he was afraid of. She remembered hearing rumors that her father had an adventure in his youth, that had something to do with a giant.

"Did it see you?" asked Bella.

"No, no I don't think so. We hid, obviously, and watched it for a while. I wanted to just sneak away, but Hildifons wanted to get closer. We argued in whispers for a while, crouched behind a tree, until we realized that the giant had fallen asleep. It looked like he was actually there to fish as well, but he had fallen asleep. Then Hildifons decided to go up and look into the giant's enormous bag, that he carried. I couldn't figure out how to stop him. He went up to the bag, and he, well, he climbed inside it."

"Did the giant notice him?" asked Gerontius.

"Not that I could tell. But he did wake up soon after that, and he pulled in his line, and then he picked up his bag and walked away, with Hildifons still inside it. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't keep up with the giant, and so I stayed there for a few days, hoping that somehow Hildifons would make it back. Then, instead, the giant came back. He came back to fish again, I guess. Anyway, he set down his bag, threw out his fishing line into the water, and after a few minutes he was asleep again."

"Then, to my enormous relief, Hildifons came climbing out of the bag. He snuck away, and I couldn't believe our luck. We immediately left, of course, and headed back south again."

"Unfortunately, it doesn't seem like Hildifons believed it was luck. He thought the giant was rather near-sighted, a little bit hard of hearing, and not especially quick thinking. He claims the giant never did figure out that he was there. He said he spent the days he was gone at the giant's cabin, and seemed to think the whole thing was very exciting and interesting. I'm...I'm afraid he might have been thinking of doing it again. I tried to talk him out of the idea, but...when I got Bella's letter that said Hildifons had gone missing, I knew he had decided to try it again."

All of the Hobbits were quiet for a moment then, thinking over what had just been said.

"Papa, do you think we should go to Great Smials now?" asked Bella. "Do you think we should go after Gandalf?"

"Yes," said Gerontius, "yes I think we should. Well, young Baggins, I'm very thankful for your telling us this, but I wonder, can you come with us and tell it to Gandalf yourself? He will have questions, I'm sure, so I'd rather you be there in person to answer them."

"Well," said Bungo, "I have tried to catch this Wizard twice already. Third time pays for all. Let's go. I'm afraid we'd better use your ponies and wagon, though; my ponies may not have much left in them today."

"That's fine," said Gerontius, "mine have been resting and eating in the Bucklebury stalls all day. Let's go get them and take off now. We can make it a fair distance before it gets dark."

"I want to go with you," said Bella.

"Well enough," said Gerontius, "but the littler ones stay here. Donna, Mira, you stay

here and mind your older brothers, do you hear me? No causing trouble. Go on into Brandy Hall, now, we're heading to Bucklebury."

The three smaller Hobbits went into Brandy Hall, which was full of light, noise, and the smell of another feast being prepared. Adalrida Brandybuck saw them, smiled, and then came over to write on Gorbador's slate.

"Where were you?"

"Wagon ride," answered Gorbador.

"Hungry?" wrote back Adalrida.

"YES!" answered Gorbador, Mira, and Donna all together (two of them out loud).

"Clean up first," wrote Adalrida. Turning to Donna and Mira, she said, "I guess rolling in the mud is hungry work, then? Well, here come Sink and Daisy, they'll be able to show you where to clean up. Don't dawdle, now, or we'll not save anything for you to eat!"

As they trailed along after Sink and Daisy back out the front door, they made their way around Madoc in the front porch.

"Where's my axe?!" he shouted. "Do you have yours?"

They avoided making eye contact and maneuvered around him, then followed Sink and Daisy down the stairs to the mudroom and bathing chamber entrances below. The Brandybuck rooms for cleaning up were much fancier than at Great Smials. The Took just pulled water from the cistern or the stream outside, and had a tub that was moved from room to room based on where it was needed. After they were done, they had to dump it outside. During the summer, when they needed to bathe more often, the boys usually just waded in the river.

Perhaps because they lived nearer a large river, and more often got muddy, the Brandybucks had special rooms set aside for bathing. Each station had a place to hang their clothes, a bathrobe, a font to wash their face in, a boiler to heat water, and a large bathtub. There was a fountain in the middle, filling the room with the sound of running water at all times, and a great fireplace at the end to heat the room somewhat in the winter. The whole room was elaborately decorated, and the walls were covered with ceramic tiles that showed fish and other water creatures. Donna thought that perhaps



she would never leave, but then her stomach rumbled and she made haste to get cleaned up so she could get to the banquet.

Gorbadoc had already started the fires to heat water, and was inside the bathing chamber at the end. Donna and Mira were a little suspicious of Gorbadoc being in the same room, even though each bathtub had a wraparound curtain; in their experience with Took brothers they missed no opportunity to play pranks. Sink and Daisy said they would stay and keep an eye on him, though, so the two Took girls made haste to wash the mud off. After half an hour or so, they had cleaned up and changed into new outfits. They had been intending to stay for a week or so at Brandy Hall, and had brought a change of clothes. This meant Mira didn't have to try to squeeze into one of Sink's outfits, or else wear something of Gorbadoc's. By the time they were done, the evening's banquet was in full swing. Gorbadoc, of course, had finished in half the time, and was already there, attacking the food on his plate with abandon.

There had been quite a few people there the night before, but there were over a hundred for this night's meal. The meal was served inside, as it had begun raining again. The noise from laughing, talking, and the clink of cutlery on plates was nearly too loud to talk over. Donna decided not to try, and Mira and Gorbadoc didn't have to, as they used his slate to communicate. She saw her father sitting with Marmadoc Brandybuck, and a few of the other heads of the more important families. The gatherings at Midsummer and the Spring and Autumn Equinox were primarily social affairs, but they did also serve a serious purpose. They brought together many of the largest and wealthiest families to share what they knew and what their plans were. Hobbit government was mostly run by voluntary agreement, without needing to force most Hobbits to help out with things like building roads or maintaining levees. However, getting people to work together takes a lot of time talking things over together. Hobbits found this worked better if everyone was eating while they did it.

Most Hobbits, of course, weren't there to discuss the state of the roads, the levees, the number of reeves minding the borders, or anything else of that sort. They were just there for a big party, and several big meals. The poorer families of Buckland were nearly all present, and the Brandybucks made sure to send them all home with plenty of extra food for later. Spending some time in a smial as roomy and warm as Brandy Hall was also an occasion all the Hobbits in Buckland looked forward to. The houses of the poorer Bucklanders were mostly dry and snug, but also small.

There came a rumble of thunder, and then another, and then another. One of the lightning strikes was close enough, and loud enough, that even Gorbadoc heard it, and he looked up with a huge grin on his face. Most of the other Hobbits were not as

pleased.

Then, word came that the waters were rising higher. They were not high enough to top the levees quite yet, but they would be soon. Worse, patrols had found that part of the cradge had washed away in the rain. If water got through in that spot, it would quickly erode away the cradge on either side, and soon there would be water pouring over the levees.

"They'll top the levees, for sure then," said Marmadoc. "I wonder how soon before we have to evacuate the Bucklebury and the lower levels of Brandy Hall. It would be better if we could move everything in the morning, but I'm not sure if we have that much time."

"Nonsense!" said Isumbras Took, the oldest Took now present. "We'll not let Brandy Hall and the rest of Buckland wash away, not when we've got this many Hobbits here to help out. If every able-bodied Hobbit lends a hand, minus a few staying here to look after the children, we can build this back up enough to keep the waters out. I'd rather get wet shoveling in the rain than get wet fleeing in the dark and letting the Brandybucks, and all the rest of Buckland, go under. Come on, now, let's get a move on!"

With that, there was an eruption of voices, as Hobbits who lived in Buckland ran to fetch their shovels and other tools. Within a couple minutes, Brandy Hall was empty except for the children and a few adults. Adaldrida Brandybuck had stayed behind on account of her condition, and to look after the children. Rosemary Goldworthy was also there, although the reason why was not entirely clear. She was talking to her aunt Hanna, old Madoc's wife. Madoc himself was too frail to help shovel, but he continued to wander from room to room.

"There's not any of the more valuable things on the lower levels, are there? Do you suppose we should pack up anything?" asked Rosemary. "You know, just in case?"

"Madoc wouldn't hear of it," said Hanna, who was nearly as old as her husband but easier to talk to and be heard.

"I doubt he hears much of anything now, does he?" asked Rosemary.

Donna left the rest of the Hobbits in the banquet hall and moved off to one of the great windows that looked out over the river. It was dark, and she could not see much. The hanging lamps along the stairs outside had nearly gone out, but a few of them still swayed in the darkness. She sat there in the space of the large round window for over an

hour, looking out into the dark at the wind and rain. The Hobbits working on the levees had finished topping up the area right in front of Brandy Hall, and were making their way slowly south. Hobbits are not strong folk, but they can work hard when they need to, and they are able to cooperate well (especially in the face of a threat like a flood). There was a long night of work ahead of them, but Donna was confident they would find every spot in the cradges that had eroded, and rebuild it high enough to keep out the extra water. There was an occasional flash of lightning, which showed her where they were working. Eventually, though, they had gotten so far downstream that they were out of sight even when lightning turned night to day.

She turned to look the other way for a while, then, thinking about the wagon that her papa, Bella, and Bungo Baggins had left in. Had they gotten across the bridge before the heavy rain started? Would they find Gandalf? Would they be able to find Hildifons? If they did, would he still be alive?

She wondered whether her papa had done something similar, in his youth. Had Hildifons also heard rumors of it? Their mother tried to make sure that her papa did not talk about his youthful adventures; perhaps this was why she didn't want him talking about it. If Hildifons had not known that his father had adventured in his youth (somehow related to giants), would he have been rash enough to sneak into its bag? Maybe not. But then, Hildifons was also overconfident, sharp-eyed, and quick-thinking; maybe he would have tried it anyway. She wondered if her papa, when he was younger, had been more like her brother Hildifons.

She had been lost in her thoughts, but still staring out the window into the darkness, for quite a while when there came another lightning flash. The Hobbits working on the levee were now quite some distance away, out of sight to the south. But there was something there, off to the north, and it was coming closer. Donna had only seen it out of the corner of her eye, and for a long time there was no more lightning so she couldn't tell what it had been. When another flash of lightning finally did show her what was there, she felt a giddy mix of excitement and fear.

It was the giant.

She had never seen a thing so large that could move; it was the size of a building. Only the dark and the roar of the driving rain had kept it from being noticed by the rest of the Hobbits still in Brandy Hall, she was sure. Now that it was coming closer, she could just make out the dim outline of it through the gloom and the rain. It stopped, not far from Brandy Hill, and looked around in all directions. It seemed confused. Then, it sat down.



Next to it, on the ground now, rested its enormous bag.

Donna's heart thumped heavily. She knew that she was supposed to go back into the banquet hall and tell the adults. But what would they do? They would stay there and wait, and tell the children to hide with them. Soon, the giant would get up, and move on, and be gone. There was no time to go and get Gandalf, or Gerontius even. She headed quietly to the front door. She slipped on a dark hooded cloak there, oiled to make it waterproof, and slipped it on. Then, she went out into the rain.

Most Hobbits are able to move quietly, and it was so dark and so noisy with rainfall that even you or I could have snuck unseen to the giant's bag. Nonetheless, to move closer to something so obviously able to crush you, if it decided to, is not an easy thing. Donna thought at one point that she might be crying quietly, although it was hard to know for sure with so much rain coming down. She made her way to it, though, and crouched there under the edge of the bag, hidden from the giant. She calmed herself as best she could, and then considered what to do next. In order to get into it, she would have to climb up to the top. Once up there, if the giant turned to look in her direction, what should she do? She decided that if it happened, she would just jump into the river, which was not far away. She didn't know how to swim very well, but she thought it was better to try her luck at that than to just get swatted like a fly. Hopefully, he would keep looking the other way.

The bag was made from heavy cloth, that was not easy to get a grip on, but she managed it after a few tries. It took several long minutes for her to climb up the side of the bag, and over to the top. She paused for just a moment, at the top. The giant was looking the other way, and the rain was starting to lessen a little. She saw the moon reflected off the Brandywine River, and the tops of the houses in the villages of Stock and Newbury, to the north. She dared not take time to look further, and slipped noiselessly into the giant bag, out of sight.

It was filled with all manner of odd bundles, tools, and boxes. She did not want to be buried at the bottom, but being right at the top seemed more likely to get the giant's attention. In any event, when he grabbed the bag again he would squeeze the topmost part of it, and she didn't want to get squished by a giant's hand. She slipped down below the topmost layer of the bag's contents, and found that there was a sort of metal cage there, with a door in it that she could open. Before she did that, though, she thought it would be prudent to take a look at what it might contain. She took out her magic lamp from Calpatan the elf, and took a look.

"Oh," said Hildifons, blinking his eyes sleepily as he adjusted to the light, "hello there,

Donna. Fancy meeting you here."

## Chapter 9 - Return to Buckland

"Hildifons!" exclaimed Donna, unable to keep her voice down as much as she'd wanted to. "You're alive!"

"Of course, Donna," said Hildifons. He sat up and looked at her. She realized that the cage was actually just a sort of protection, to keep him from being crushed by the other things in the giant's bag as they shifted about. She open the door of the cage and joined him inside it.

"How did you end up here?" asked Hildifons, as he gave her a hug.

"The giant sat down next to Brandy Hall," said Donna. "It was dark and rainy, and no one else saw it."

"Oh, dear," said Hildifons, with a tired smile. "Gilim must have gotten lost. Hold on, I'll go have a talk with him and be back."

He exited the cage and squirmed up through the bag, and Donna lay there in the light of her lamp for a few long seconds, wondering. Hildifons knew the giant by name, and seemed to think that he could give him directions. He must have been a not entirely unfriendly giant, then. Before she had time to think much more, Hildifons came crawling back into the cage they sat in.

"What is this thing?" asked Donna, meaning the metal cage.

"I don't know what it was meant to be originally, but Gilim puts it into his bag now for me," said Hildifons. "It is better than jostling amidst the all of his stuff, and it feels better than being shut up in a box. I like it even better with that light of yours, though. Where did you get that? Is it magic?"

"Oh," said Donna, suddenly nervous about revealing her secrets. It was too late now anyway, though, Hildifons had already seen it. "It's a lamp that the elf Calpitan gave us when we were leaving the Grey Havens, two years ago. I don't know if it's magic; the elves don't seem to use the word 'magic' to describe anything."

"I wish I'd seen the Grey Havens," said Hildifons. "I really envied you girls your trip there."

"We were being stalked by someone, and didn't even know who," said Donna. "Mira

disappeared without a trace in the night. It wasn't all that much fun."

"Maybe not," said Hildifons, "but it sounds better than staying in the Shire all your life."

"Is that why you hitched a ride in a giant's bag?"

Hildifons was quiet for a moment, thinking. The bag was swaying gently now, probably because the giant had picked it up and started walking again. It felt to Donna like how she imagined it might feel to be in a ship on the ocean.

"I suppose so," he said. "Really, I just did it, and I wasn't sure what I thought would happen. I was lucky; Gilim is a good-hearted giant, and not all of them are, I'm led to believe. But I just acted without thinking about it much, at the time."

"Bungo Baggins was really worried about you," said Donna. "So was Mama. So was I."

"I'm sorry to worry you," said Hildifons. "On the other hand, why are you here? I doubt you told anyone where you were going."

Donna was quiet, and couldn't think of anything to say to that.

"Where are we headed?" she asked at last, to try and change the subject.

"Well right now we're headed back to Gilim's cabin in the North Downs," said Hildifons. "But in a few days we're headed to a bear moot. That's sort of like a Shire-moot, where all the Hobbits get together to decide what to do about something, except it's for the race of great northern Bears. Gilim has been invited."

"So bears and giants get along?" asked Donna.

"No, actually, usually not," answered Hildifons. "Apparently the great bears used to live up in the Misty Mountains, where most giants are nowadays. They didn't get along with the giants, and the giants more or less drove them out. Not Gilim, he's a friendly sort, but some of the others. But now there's someone trying to get the bears and giants to make peace, and so Gilim and a few others have been invited to the bear moot."

"Is it a bear or a giant that's trying to make peace?" asked Donna.

"Well, neither one, I think," said Hildifons, "although who exactly it is, is not clear to



me. Some sort of elf or wizard, maybe? Not a bear or a giant, anyway. This person, whoever it is, came to Gilim's cabin in the hills when I was there hiding in his bag. I heard him talking to Gilim, but I didn't see him, because I was still hiding at that point. Whoever it is, he's quite persuasive, quite a good talker. Not that it's very hard to talk Gilim into things; he's a little bit simple. I think maybe most giants are."

"Why are you going? You're not a bear or a giant."

"You are sharp-eyed as always, Donna," said Hildifons with a smirk, "I am neither a bear nor a giant. But I'm curious about this bear moot. I've never seen such a thing. Actually, I've never seen bears in person at all, and certainly never seen or heard them talking to one another."

"Don't you think it could be a bit dangerous?" asked Donna.

"Not with Gilim there," said Hildifons. "I couldn't be safer. Anyway, they're there to make peace. I think it would be good if Hobbits were in on that. We're peaceful folk, usually."

"Usually," said Donna. "But we did drive out the Old Forest trees, I think."

"What?" asked Hildifons. "Well that's different. They're just plants."

"They tried to take Buckland back, though," said Donna. "Or so the Bucklanders say. Hobbits chopped down trees and burned them in a pile. Plus, we don't have bears or wolves in the Shire. I bet we used to."

"Well," said Hildifons, "you are certainly a ray of sunshine, Donna. Fair enough, Hobbits did make room for ourselves. But there's plenty of room for everyone. I don't think Hobbits want to clear the whole Old Forest, or drive all the bears out of the north. No reason we couldn't have peace."

"Well that's true," said Donna, and she was quiet for a minute, listening to the muffled sound of the rain outside, and feeling the gentle swaying of the bag as the giant walked.

"What will the giant say when he sees me?" asked Donna.

"He isn't great at math," said Hildifons. "He will probably just think he miscounted how many Hobbits there were in the first place."

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Bella was riding on Gandalf's horse. They had caught up to Gandalf not far past the bridge over the Brandywine River, and had headed east towards Bree. From there they had gone north, and then split into two groups and try to find the giant in two different ways. Gerontius Took and Bungo Baggins were riding on ponies towards Lake Evendim, the place where Bungo had seen the giant fishing before. They hoped to be able to pick up the giant's tracks and follow them back towards wherever the giant lived. Gandalf and Bella were going a different way, towards the North Downs, a series of hills where they guessed the giant's cabin was, based on what little Hildifons had told Bungo about it. If they had guessed right, this would be the quicker way to find the giant, and hopefully find Hildifons with him. If they were wrong, they would wait at Norbury, for word from Gerontius and Bungo as to where the giant's tracks led.

It was no longer raining, but Brandywine River was swollen. Gandalf and Bella had camped on the side of the road. Gandlf's ability to start a fire in almost any conditions came in very handy. Bella had her lamp from Calpitan in her small bag, but she didn't like using magic (if that's what it was) without a good reason. She didn't know why, exactly, but using something that she didn't understand how it worked, made her nervous. In any case, she wanted the fire more for heat than for light. It was not winter yet, but it was still cold and wet, and having a fire to look into, and lie down next to, was worth a lot.

Bella hadn't seen Gandalf much in the last two years, and it was always intimidating to talk to someone so much older and wiser. She wasn't going to let herself completely waste the opportunity, though.

"Have you ever met a giant?" she asked.

"I have," said Gandalf, but little more. He looked into the fire, and puffed on his pipe.

"Are they wicked?" she asked.

"Some," said Gandalf. "Most of them are just simple, though. They don't understand the damage they do, blundering about, and they don't always see very well. There are many giants whose own feet look fuzzy and out of focus to them when they are standing up. If they trample some village or copse of trees, they usually don't know that it's happened. Not that this is much consolation to the ones getting trampled."

"Has...has my papa ever met one?" asked Bella, trying (and failing) to sound nonchalant.

Gandalf arched an eyebrow at Bella, but did not entirely hide a slight smile.

"I think you already know the answer to that one," he said. "I also think your father doesn't much want me to answers questions along this line, and I know your mother doesn't."

"Was he with you when he did?" she asked.

"Enough, enough," said Gandalf, a little sharply. "Ask your father himself, and if he does not wish to answer, I've no reason to meddle. Let's just say it's a dangerous thing, to spend time around giants, even when they don't mean you harm, and especially if they do."

Bella was quiet for a while, then, staring into the fire. Eventually she got tired, and lay down on the ground on her bedroll. Her dreams were confused, and she did not remember much of them later, but there was a persistent sound of her mother calling for her from the next room. She went from place to place, never quite able to find her.

When she awoke, Gandalf was already up and moving about their small campsite. Bella was not sure that she had ever actually seen him sleep. Their horse had slept, that was certain, and it was ready again to bear the two of them. They rode along the road north towards Norbury, the ruined city where the Rangers sometimes stayed. They camped near there; Gandalf said there were no Rangers there just then, and he didn't want to camp there with no Rangers present.

"It's a quite safe spot if you've Rangers with you," he said, "but not at all safe if you don't. We'll stay near enough, though, that no trouble is likely to come looking for us; any such creatures steer clear of the Rangers, so they will steer clear of Fornost Erain, that you Hobbits call Norbury."

"What kind of creatures do you mean?" asked Bella. "Goblins and wolves, that sort of thing?"

"Perhaps," said Gandalf, "but not just them. They do not come so far west of the Misty Mountains very often. There are other creatures, wild things that do not love anyone who walks on two feet and builds houses and makes roads. They will not hesitate to try to make a meal of us."

"I have a hard time thinking any wild animal would make a meal of you," said Bella.

"No beast I know of has yet feasted on Wizard, that is true," said Gandalf. "But just because it wouldn't succeed, doesn't mean it wouldn't cause us trouble by trying. If we stay close to places they don't go, you're more likely to sleep peacefully."

Bella did sleep peacefully, but awoke at dawn. Gandalf was sitting on the ground and staring into the campfire, puffing on his pipe, and frowning in thought. When Bella and the horse were ready to go, they rode north along the edge of the hills. As they were reaching the end of those hills near the end of the day, Gandalf stopped and peered off into the distance. He seemed to be peering at a small copse near the base of the last hill.

"What is it?" asked Bella. For a while, Gandalf said nothing, and she thought that maybe he was not going to answer.

"There is a bear moot going on," said Gandalf.

"A what?" asked Bella. "How can you tell?"

"There is a spot on the northernmost hill of the North Downs, a place where the ancient race of giant bears has met for centuries. It is rare, but it happens. It is happening now, if my eyes and ears do not deceive me. I wonder why."

"What do bears do when they meet?" asked Bella.

"They may dance, or they may feast together on honey and berries, but most often they come together to talk. They have only rarely something to talk to each other about; they are more often solitary. So, I wonder what they moot tonight."

After a few long moments more, Gandalf tugged on the reins and urged his horse forward. But Bella saw that they were no longer headed north. Now they were headed to the spot at the base of the hill where Gandalf had been looking, the place where the giant bears came together.

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Bear speech, thought Donna, sounds a little bit like Papa when he snores. It seemed to be a combination of snorts, of different pitches and duration. It seemed like it would be a difficult language to learn, if you were a Hobbit who wanted to know how to speak with bears. She was sitting on the ground next to Gilim the giant, and her brother Hildifons. They had spent a day at Gilim's crude cabin in the hills, then come down to



the traditional bear gathering spot at dusk. The moot had been going on for an hour, and more bears were still arriving. The sun had set, and it was hard for Donna to stay alert.

Hildifons, it seemed, had no such trouble. He sat up straight, peering intently at the bears as they spoke, and seemed almost to be trying to understand what was said. Donna was certain he did not know anything more of bear speech than she did, but perhaps he thought he could tell something from their tone. She yawned, leaned her head on his shoulder, and closed her eyes.

After what seemed only a few minutes, she was awakened by Hildifons gently tapping her forehead.

"Wake up, Donna, just for a little bit," he said.

"Hmmm?" she answered sleepily, and tried to open her eyes.

"Since you're falling asleep, they were wondering if they should take you somewhere more comfortable. There's a mama bear here who said she would look after you. Her name is Byrene."

Donna looked up, and saw a towering mountain of fur looming over them in the moonlight. Her heart beating faster, and she felt a little thrill of fear.

"Ummmm..." she said, trying to think of how to say no without offending anyone so much bigger than her.

"It's all right, Gilim knows her," said Hildifons. "Apparently she lives nearby, not far from Gilim's cabin. We'll come get you when things are done here."

Donna looked up at the enormous face of the giant, who was smiling down at her reassuringly. She looked over at Byrene, who now did not look quite as large when compared to a giant. Donna stood up, and found that even though Byrene was standing on all four legs, Donna still had to look up to her. The bear named Byrene said something, then, in the peculiar bear language.

"She says you can climb onto her back," said Gilim the giant. Donna jumped a little; she had heard the giant speak only a few times, and the sheer power in his low rumbling earthquake of a voice still startled her. She wondered how a giant came to learn bear speech. Perhaps from having one as a neighbor? It would explain why he was the one invited to a bear moot. Donna took a deep breath, and then began to climb up onto the

mountain of fur in front of her. She tried not to pull too hard, since it would not do to make a bear angry at you by hurting it. Byrene did not seem to mind. Byrene's fur had two layers. The outer layer, with longer hairs, was coarse, and felt a little like straw. Under that, though, was a shorter, very soft layer. Donna sprawled across its back, her face buried in its fur, and felt suddenly very warm and safe. With a low rumble, Byrene began to walk uphill, away from the moot. Donna heard the voices of the bears begin again behind her.

A few minutes later, Donna was sleeping in a pile of leaves. She was dimly aware of the sound of Byrene moving nearby, doing whatever a mother bear does to make her den the way she wants it. The bear's den appeared to be dug into the side of the hill, partly obscured by hanging vines from above the opening. It was fairly dark inside. Donna took out her lamp from Calpitan and looked around. Byrene, noticing the light, paused for a moment and looked over at her. Then, with a grunt, she turned back to whatever it was she was doing.

Eventually, having satisfied herself at the state of the den, Byrene came over next to Donna and laid down. Uncertainly, Donna relaxed, and then put away her lamp. The den was dark again, and quiet except for the sound of Byrene's gentle breathing. The air was cold, so Donna snuggled up a bit against Byrene's fur, and suddenly felt very warm and safe. Within moments, she was asleep.

The sound of a bear roaring, is extraordinarily loud, and in fact a horribly frightening way to be awakened. The sound of more than one bear roaring, is not only frightening, but also confusing. Donna lay on the ground, curled up in a ball with her hands over her ears, and waited for the end to come. After a second or two more of cringing and shuddering with fear, she began to notice things. For one, Byrene was standing over her, with her head pointed towards the entrance to the den. For another, there were several other bears outside the den, and they were roaring at Byrene, who was roaring back, and swiping with her massive front claws at any of the bears who attempted to enter her den. She wondered what could possibly be happening to cause them to fight each other like that. Then, the answer came to her with a force like a smack to the side of the head.

The other bears were trying to kill Donna, and Byrene was defending her.

What could cause them to want to hurt a little hobbit girl, she wondered? It wasn't like they were just hungry, or they would have looked for something (or someone) easier to eat, that wasn't defended by a mama bear in a bad mood. They must have come here to get her knowing that Byrene would be with her. She tried to think of what she might have done to anger them, or what she could do to help Byrene, but the terrifyingly loud

sound of the bears roaring back and forth at each other was too much for her. She closed her eyes again and lay there curled up in a ball, and hoped that Byrene could keep them out.

The roaring and the sound of the bears biting and clawing at each other, Byrene snapping at the others as they tried to reach into the den to get her, went on for what seemed to Donna like a long time, although it may have been only a few seconds in reality. Then, suddenly, it was interrupted, as Donna heard the sound of bears howling in pain and running away. She caught the scent of burning fur, and peeked out from underneath Byrene to see what had happened.

She saw the fading embers of sparks, and walking through them and across the clearing in the forest, she saw a figure in grey robes with a tall pointed hat and a staff. This time, there was no question as to who it was.

"Gandalf!" she cried out. Byrene, also, said something that sounded like recognition, although it was in the bear language that Donna could not understand. Gandalf, however, seemed to know it, although apparently he didn't speak it. He bowed his head.

"Hello, Byrene. Hello, little Donnamira, if that is really you under there? I can hardly see you under all that fur. Byrene has been taking good care of you, it seems. I am very glad of it."

Donna scurried out, on all fours at first, and then ran to Gandalf. Not until she was almost to him did it occur to her that perhaps one was not allowed to hug Wizards. She stopped just in front of him, looking up with shining eyes and smiling. He looked down at her, his face grave but also with a hint of a smile.

"I'm glad you're here," she said finally, not sure what else to say.

"I am glad I am here as well," said Gandalf, "although I am even more glad that Byrene was here."

Donna then saw that there was a horse, and on it was Bella. Her sister scrambled down off the horse, and ran up to Donna. Sisters, she knew with certainty, it was perfectly allowable to hug.

When Bella finally let go of her, she looked down at Donna with a mix of affection and frustration.

"What?" she asked, "are you doing here? You're supposed to be in Brandy Hall!"

"I saw the giant," said Donna, "and I thought he might take me to Hildifons. I was right."

"Hildifons?" asked Bella. "You've seen him?"

"I expect we're about to see him again," said Gandalf, looking off to his right.

Everyone (including Byrene) turned to look downhill, towards the sound of a giant's heavy footsteps coming closer. When they finally saw Gilim's head come into view, however, they saw Hildifons at almost the same time, perched on the giant's right shoulder.

"Hildifons!" said Bella excitedly. Hildifons waved and smiled at her.

"Hullo, Bella! Good to see you! And glad to see Donna's all right, as well. I was beginning to get worried. Things turned a bit argumentative back at the bear moot. Some folks seemed to think Hobbits were not to be trusted, I take it. Once I figured out what was going on, I told Gilim maybe we should pop back and take a look. But it looks like everything's all right, I guess?"

"Now it is," said Gandalf, "but Byrene had a great deal of trouble defending Donna here. I wonder, was it one of the bears who got them into a surly mood? Or someone else?"

"Someone else, I think," said Hildifons. "But I couldn't tell you who, exactly. He kept to the shadows, and had a big hooded cloak on. He was persuasive, though. I think he was the same fellow who convinced Gilim to come to the bear moot in the first place, wasn't he Gilim?"

"Yes," said the giant, in a calmly thunderous voice. "He didn't say anything before about driving out Hobbits. Just wanted to bring peace between giants and bears, he said. Didn't seem to like seeing a Hobbit at the bear moot, though. Said a lot of awful things about them in bear language."

"What did he look like when you saw him before?" asked Gandalf.

"Never saw him up close," said Gilim. "He had that hooded cloak on, and my eyesight's not so great for seeing little folks."



There was a silence, then, as everyone thought about what had just happened, and what they had seen and heard. Then, Bella walked up to Byrene, and looked at her.

"Thank-you, for saving my sister," said Bella.

Byrene apparently understood, but answered in bear speech. Gilim translated.

"She says she is a mother, and would not let a little one under her protection come to harm."

Bella nodded. "I know a little bit about how mothers feel about that," she said.

Quickly, then, they split up and went separate ways. Gilim agreed to take Hildifons and Donna back to Brandy Hall, so that their family would know they were safe. Bella and Gandalf rode north towards Lake Evendim, to find Gerontius and Bungo Baggins, and tell them that Hildifons was found. Byrene stayed in her den. Gilim said she was likely to be into hibernation by the time he returned.

"I won't have a neighbor to talk to until spring, then," he said.

Donna and Hildifons decided to ride in Gilim's bag, rather than sitting on his shoulder. It was getting cool out, and looked ready to rain again. Donna also was worried that she might fall asleep, and fall off his shoulder, if she tried to sit there all the way home. Gilim could move much faster than ponies or even horses, over a long trip, but even he would take most of the night to get them back south to Brandy Hall. She and Hildifons sat up in the light of her lamp for a little while, but quickly they began yawning. They had brought bedrolls to lay on, which were nice, but not as soft as having a mother bear to curl up against. The gentle rocking of the bag as Gilim walked was comforting, though. Hildifons said that Gilim used to swing his bag about as he walked, until he found out that this was frightening to Hildifons. Now he tried to carry it in a way so that it didn't sway back and forth too sharply. Donna fell asleep to the sound of rain starting to patter against the outside of the bag.

She woke with a start many hours later. The rain had stopped, and she realized that there was no sound of motion. She looked around, then poked Hildifons in the shoulder to wake him up.

"Mmm?" he asked sleepily.

"We've stopped," she said.

"Oh dear," said Hildifons. "Do you think we're there yet, or do you think Gilim's lost again? I guess I'd better check."

Donna watched Hildifons climb up out of the cage and clamber out the top of the bag. On an impulse, she followed him up. When they poked their heads out of the bag, they realized that it was still night, although the clouds had parted and the scene before them was bathed in moonlight.

"I'm not sure, Hildifons," said Gilim in his deep rumbling voice. "I don't recognize it."

Hildifons and Donna, looking out over the river from their vantage point atop the bag, both frowned in confusion.

"I...I'm not sure I do either, Gilim," said Hildifons. "Are we still south of Buckland? The forest is pretty close to the river, here."

"I've been walking along the river for a while," said Gilim, "and we already passed the spot where it's close to the river. Now it comes up to the river again. Did I get turned around somehow?"

They were all quiet for a minute.

"But there's the dike," said Donna. "The Buckland dike doesn't go that far south."

They were quiet again, looking across the river. Hildifons looked up, studying the stars. Then, he pointed up at a constellation he recognized.

"Look," he said, "there's the Sickle. That means that way is south. You're headed the right way, Gilim."

Several minutes later, they were back down in the cage inside the bag, trying to sleep. Donna could not, and she sat up and took out her lamp. Hildifons, who was not asleep yet either, noticed the light and sat up as well.

"What's wrong, Donna?"

"Something's wrong."

"We probably just went somewhere outside of the Shire. I'm sorry, we'll probably get

back late. But we're headed the right direction now."

"No," said Donna, "I saw the dike. So we're not in the Wilds, we're in Buckland."

"Well then," said Hildifons, "so the forest grew up closer to the dike there. I guess they didn't maintain the High Hay in that section."

"No," said Donna, "I just rode all the way along the Brandywine River to the end of Buckland, when we were trying to catch Gandalf. There were no places where the forest came up that close to the dike."

"So what are you saying, Donna?" asked Hildifons, as he stifled a yawn. "Are we in Buckland, or not?"

Donna sat for a minute, frowning in thought. Then a memory came floating up out of her sleepy mind, like a bubble rising to the surface of the lake. She remembered old Proudneck Brandybuck, shouting at his family and everyone else to try to get their attention. He couldn't hear well, and his mind didn't work well enough anymore for him to make himself understood. But there was something he wanted people to know, and it was something important. She felt like part of her own mind were like that now, shouting at her that there was something wrong, but unable to say what.

Axes.

Proudneck wanted them all to get axes. Why? Because they needed to defend themselves. From the trees? But the trees would not try to attack again. When they had attacked the Hobbits many years before, the Hobbits had driven them back and chopped many of them down, and burned them in a glade that the trees still stayed away from. They would not try that again.

She remembered the scene with Maradoc Brandybuck, and her brother Isumbras, and all the other Hobbits rushing out together. She wondered if it had looked something like that, when the Old Forest trees had attacked the High Hay many years before. Maybe Proudneck had known that they were threatened, and he was just confused, thinking that a threat to them from the dike crumbling, was actually a threat from the trees. But this had been a different kind of threat, one that called for shovels, not axes.

Unless...

Suddenly, Donna understood.

"We've got to stop," she said. "We've got to go back! Hildifons, tell Gilim to stop!"

"What?" he asked, confusion on his face. "Go back? Why?"

"Just do it, and I'll explain," she said, suddenly desperate. "There might not be much time."

Hildifons shouted to Gilim, and he stopped and opened the bag. The two Hobbits scrambled up to the top of the bag to talk to him.

"We have to go back!" shouted Donna.

"Back where?" asked the giant.

"To the trees!"

"Which trees?" asked Gilim, confused.

"The trees we saw near the dike," she said. "They're moving."

"What?" asked Gilim and Hildifons at the same time.

"The trees of the Old Forest," said Donna, "they can move sometimes. The Brandybucks told me. They're moving tonight. They circled around the end of the High Hay, and now they're headed north."

"Why?" asked Hildifons. "Are they going to attack Brandy Hall?"

"No," said Donna, "they're going to drown it. They're going to tear apart the dike in the night, when the Hobbits don't see them. That way they won't have to drive the Hobbits out themselves. The river will do it for them, and they will have all that land back again, like they did before the Hobbits came."

Hildifons and Gilim were quiet for a moment, wide-eyed, thinking about what she had said. The dike, which was very hard-packed, lined with stone, and had been there for centuries, might not be possible for the trees to tear down in a night, before the Hobbits could see them at it and stop them. The cradges on top of it, though, which were not nearly as hard, they could dig into with their roots and branches, and once the river started to crest across it the rush of water would slice through the rest in minutes. The



homes of the Hobbits in Buckland were sturdy enough, but they could not stand up to the force of a raging river when it smashed into them. The hobbits inside would be overwhelmed before they knew what hit them; the river could move much faster than the trees, and once it crested over the dike it would drown all of Buckland before they had any chance to get shovels, or axes, to defend themselves. Hobbits could fight an onslaught of trees, or maybe even goblins or Men or bears or giants, but there is no fighting a flood. Once the dike was breached, and the river rushed through the cut the trees had made, all of Buckland east of the river would be swept away.

Then, Gilim stood up.

"Not if I have anything to say about it," he said. "You two stay here. This won't take long."

"Be careful!" said Hildifons. "There are a lot of them. Can you fight so many at once?"

"I won't have to," said Gilim. "I've weeded their type from my garden before. They start running once they realize I'm serious. I'll be back in a little while, and have you two to Brandy Hall by dawn."

By the time he got them there, it was dawn, and not even the appearance of a giant could distract the Brandybucks entirely from their excitement. Orgulas, the long awaited new Brandybuck child, had arrived during the night.





## Chapter 10 - Return to Great Smials

"Papa?" asked Bella.

"Yes?" answered Gerontius.

"Do you think we will ever see Hildifons again?"

Donna looked up from where she was sitting in the lead wagon, to see what her father's answer would be. It was several days later, and they were all riding in their two wagons, headed home to Great Smials again. All, that is, except Hildifons. Gerontius didn't answer right away. Sometimes that meant he was trying to decide how much to say, but Donna thought in this case it meant he was trying to decide what he thought the true answer was.

"I'm not sure, Donna," he said at last. "You heard what Gandalf said. Gilim saved Buckland by driving the trees away from the dikes, and I don't think we'll have much trouble from the Old Forest for a while. But someone put them up to it, probably the same someone who tried to get the bears to make an alliance with the giants, against Hobbits. Whoever it is, will probably try again."

"Wouldn't it be safer to have a giant around, especially a nice one?"

"It would, as long as he was able to. But Gilim is a bit...simple. With Hildifons there to help him think through things, he does well enough. But there is someone out there now who has seen two of his plans for trouble frustrated in the same night, and he will likely blame Gilim. Probably, that means he will blame Hildifons as well. They are safer elsewhere."

"Elsewhere?" asked Bella. "Where is that?"

Gerontius was quiet for a few moments, thinking. Donna noticed that not only her, but also all the other Tooks in both wagons were quiet, listening to what he was going to say.

"Gandalf and I decided it would be best to keep that secret," he said at last. "There seem to be spies nosing around the Shire, lately. The fewer who know where Gilim and Hildifons have gone to, the better. Gandalf's taking them to the Grey Havens, and from there the Sea Elves can take them to nearly anywhere."

"Spies?" asked Bella. "You mean like Gandalf? He's the only one I saw nosing around

the Shire."

"I asked him about that," said Gerontius. "He was confused at first, and then he started laughing, quietly. It wasn't him, just someone dressed like him. He knows who it was, I think, but won't say. In any event, the spies you actually catch sight of nosing around, are the ones you have the least to worry about."

They were all quiet then, listening to the sound of the horses and the wagon wheels. It was odd, to think of anyone outside the Shire caring about Hobbits.

"I also think," said Gerontius, "that wherever Hildifons and Gilim go to, they will probably move on again soon. Hildifons has grown up, too soon for his age I think, but there it is. He's grown tired of the Shire. It happens even to Hobbits, occasionally. He's wants to see other lands. I doubt he'll ever be happy staying in one place. I worry about him, but it's hard to imagine a better travel companion than Gilim. With Hildifons' quick wits and Gilim's size and big heart, they should do ok. But I'm not sure if we'll ever see him again. It will be hard to tell your mother, even though I think she knew it was coming."

For a few moments, there was no sound but the creaking of the wagon wheels. Then, Bella said, "She won't be the only one. I think Byrene will miss having Gilim as a neighbor."

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"You're back!" said the crow.

"Crow!" Mira smiled up at the crow, perched in the tree near the compost pile. "Yes, I'm back. I've got gourd rinds, do you like those?"

"We'll give it a try," said the crow, and it fluttered down to land next to her. "How was your roost?"

"Oh, it was really crazy. So much happened."

"Did you find a mate?" asked the crow.

"What?" asked Mira, taken aback by the question.



"We sometimes find mates at our roosts."

"Oh. Uh, no, I didn't. I'm too young to...to find a mate."

"I see. What about your sisters, are they old enough?"

Mira thought for a moment. "One of them might be getting close, but not yet."

"Well, no worries then. There'll be other roosts."

"Um, Hobbits don't find mates at our festivals, that's not what they're for. Wait, is that true? Now that I think about it I'm not sure."

"Maybe you could ask your mother how it works for Hobbits," said the crow, in between nibbles on the gourd rind.

Mira laughed so hard she fell down. The crow, alarmed, fluttered back to land on the fence around the compost pile.

"What is it? Are you all right?" asked the crow.

"Yes, yes I'm fine," said Mira, as she tried to catch her breath. "Oh, crow, you say the funniest things sometimes. I cannot imagine asking Mama about that kind of thing."

"Well she must know something about it," said the crow, "she has a lot of nestlings."

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The three sisters were sitting in Bella's room, the day after their return to Great Smials.

"I still don't feel like I understand everything that happened," said Mira.

"Which part?" asked Bella.

"Was Old Buck really haunting Great Smials again?" asked Mira.

"I don't think so," said Donna. "I think it was actually Hildifons sneaking around."

"So what were all those things you found in the east wing," asked Bella, "that then

disappeared?"

"I was thinking about that," said Donna. "I think they used to belong to a giant. One was a giant-sized ring, another was giant-sized cufflinks, another was a giant-sized key, another was a giant-sized pin. I think one was even a giant-sized toothpick. I just didn't recognize them because they were so oversized, and kind of crudely made. But there was one thing in there, that didn't look like it was made for a giant."

"What was it?" asked Bella and Mira, at the same time.

"It was a little horn, too little to be a giant's. It also made this weird whispering. When I think about it now, I think it was telling me what the person it was pointed at really wanted. I didn't know it, but I think Hildifons was hiding, watching me go through his stuff. That's why he moved it later, because he knew I had found his hiding spot."

"What did the horn say he wanted?" asked Mira.

Donna looked down, quiet for a moment.

"To leave the Shire," she said.

"So that must have been magical," said Mira. "Where did that come from? For that matter, where did any of that stuff come from? And where did it go to?"

"Hildifons told me where it went to," said Donna. "Right before he left with Gandalf and Gilim, Hildifons gave me a message to tell Papa, but he didn't want me to tell Papa until after he was gone. The message was, 'I put it all back in the Vault'. So I think he knew how to get into the Vault, and he put it all back there because both me and Papa and Gandalf were looking for it."

"So there never was a ghost of Old Buck moving things around," said Bella. "It was actually Hildifons, hiding things from you and Papa."

"Well, maybe. I still don't know where Papa got it from in the first place," said Donna.

"Or who it was that the crow saw going out the old front doors at night," added Mira.

"Or who it was that we thought was Gandalf, standing at the edge of the woods and spying on Hobbits," said Bella.

They sat there for a while on the bed, thinking about all the things about the world around them that they still didn't understand.

"Papa thinks Gandalf knows who it was spying on Hobbits dressed like him," said Mira. "Do you think Gandalf knows those other things, too? Or maybe Papa?"

"I don't know," answered Bella. "I think maybe there are some things that even Wizards and fathers don't know."

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Letter from Bungo Baggins to Belladonna Took:

"Dear Miss Took,

Thank you so much for sending me the message from Hildifons. I worry about him, but it is good to know that he is travelling with a friend, at least. I don't suppose I shall ever understand him, entirely, for leaving such a charming and wonderful family to go outside the Shire. But he's a great fellow, for all that, and I do hope he finds whatever it is that he is looking for. I will miss him.

I recently travelled back to Buckland, to thank Maradoc (for helping me with the ferry) by bringing him a barrel of top-notch cider. I went the way with the bridge, this time. He seemed happy, and the waters are starting to recede now that the rains have stopped. All the Brandybucks seemed to be doing well, actually, including baby Orgulas and his mother.

Little Rosa Baggins says to say hello to you, and wants to know if we are going to Great Smials again for Midsummer Festival next year. I should very much like to.

best regards,  
Bungo Baggins

p.s. unless you don't want me going to Midsummer Festival, of course. I don't mean to invite myself. But perhaps I could, if it's not too much of a bother."

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