

Greenway and Fell Winter

text by Ross Hartshorn

maps by Patrick Rollinson

*illustrations by Cassandra Davis, Ross Hartshorn,
and Patrick Rollinson*

based on characters and settings by J.R.R. Tolkien

for Juliet, on her 13th birthday

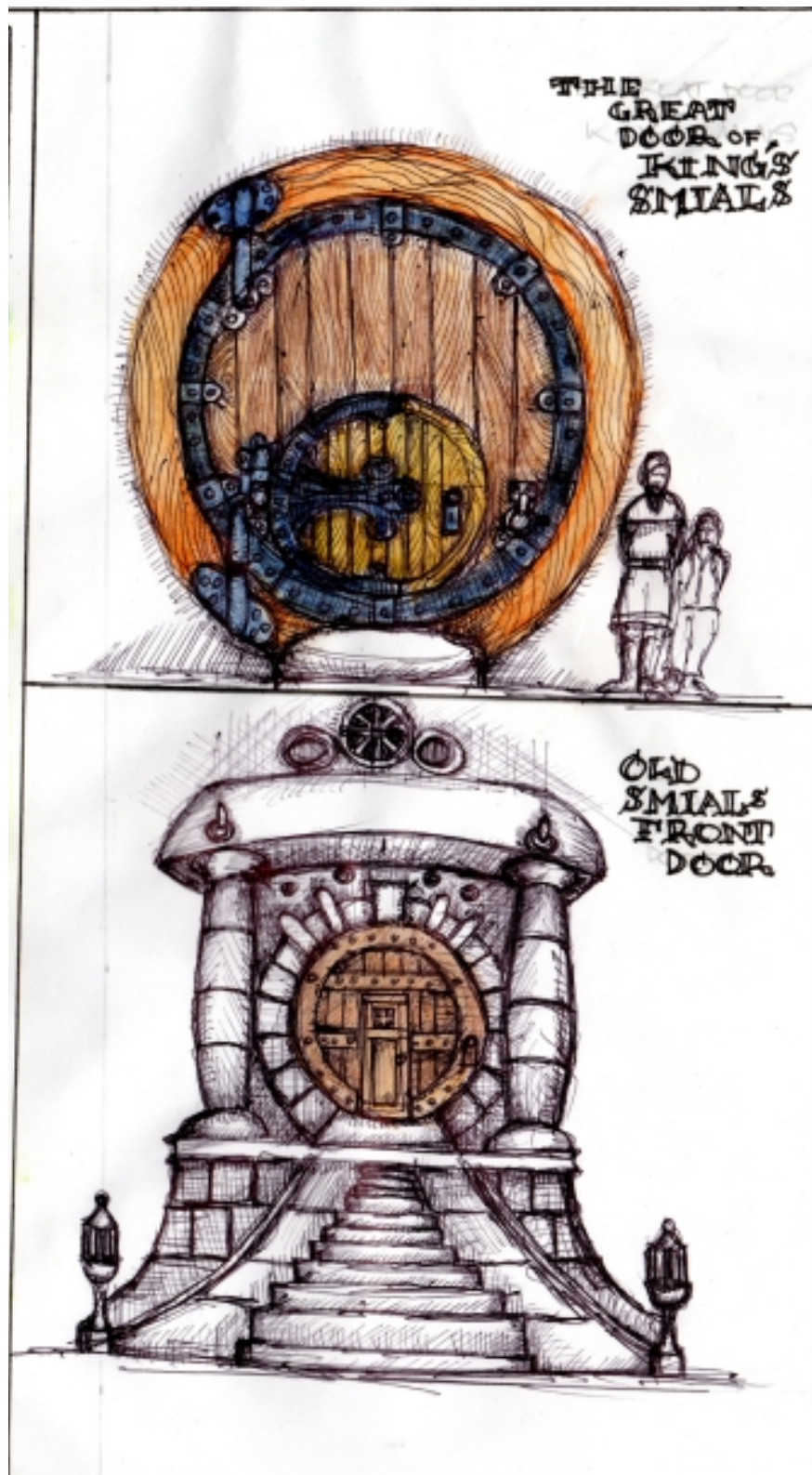


Gerontius Took at age 22

Greenway and Fell Winter

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 – An Unexpected Package.....	1
Chapter 2 – Father’s Journal.....	13
Chapter 3 – Uncle Bullroarer.....	21
Chapter 4 – Curse of the Underhills.....	31
Chapter 5 – Bedbugs and Packhorses.....	41
Chapter 6 – Turp Hay House.....	59
Chapter 7 – Folkstead.....	75
Chapter 8 – Matron, Chieftain, Wizard.....	87
Chapter 9 – Plans Made and Remade.....	117
Chapter 10 – Cooking.....	139
Chapter 11 – Tharbad.....	151
Chapter 12 – Swanfleetwick.....	175
Chapter 13 – One Thing and Another.....	191
Chapter 14 – The Key.....	207



Chapter 1 - An Unexpected Package

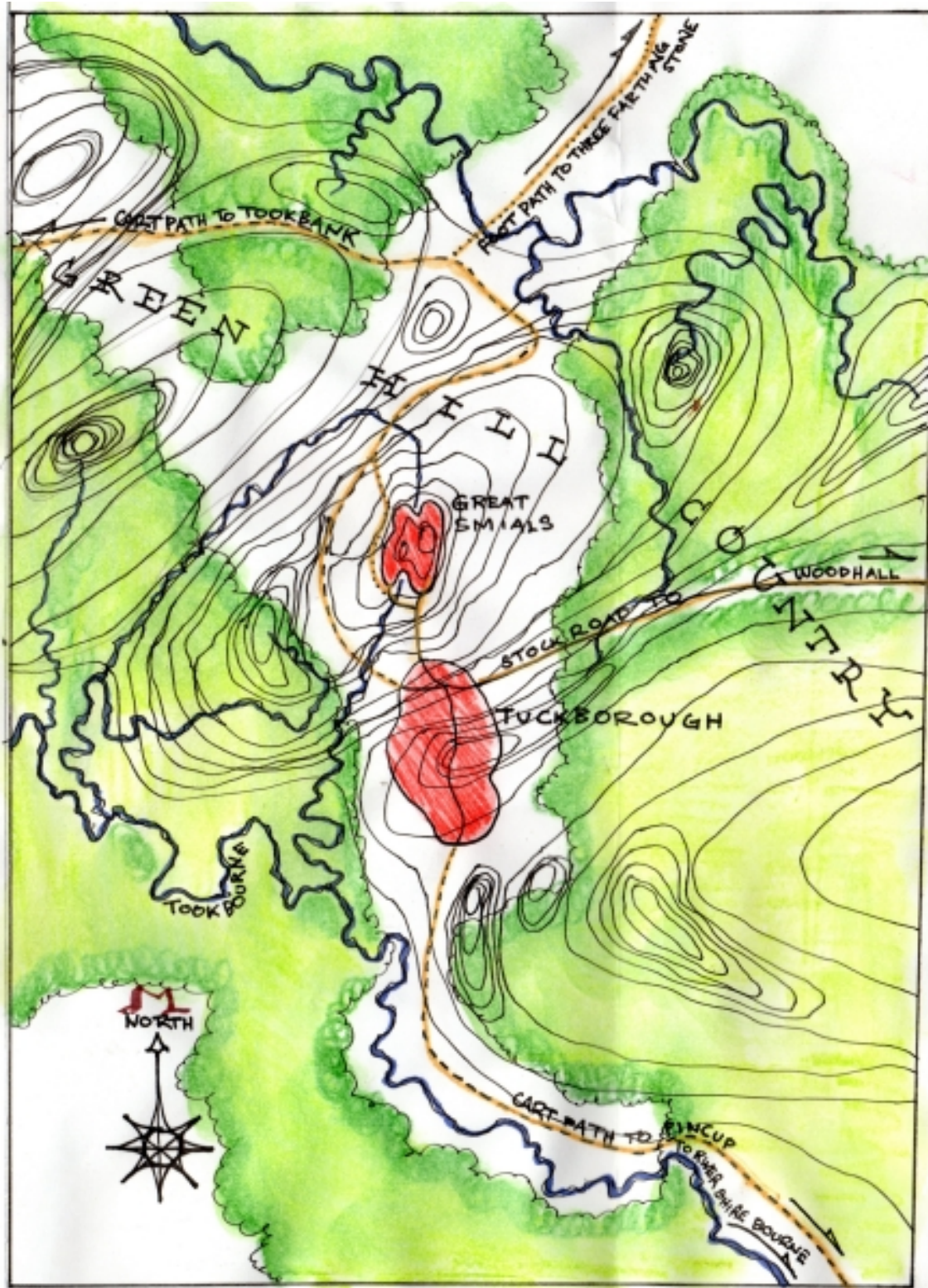
When Gerontius Took, who was 122 years old, fell ill, lying comatose in his bed, his sons were obviously very worried. They sent word to their sisters, the Old Took's daughters, that they should come quickly to his bedside, as there was a good chance that it was their last opportunity to see him while he still lived. Belladonna Baggins, Donnamira Boffin, and Mirabella Brandybuck all came quickly from their homes where they lived with their husbands and children, and gathered together at Great Smials one more time to see their father, expecting that it would be their last.

As curious as the onset of the illness was, however, it was even more curious in its progression. He could still just manage to eat a bit of soup, if helped, but never seemed to really fully wake. That a hobbit so old could fall ill was no surprise, but as one day stretched into the next, the many children and grandchildren of the Old Took began to wonder what sort of sickness it was that could hold him so long in its grip, but not finish him off.

In some ways, it seemed that all of the Shire was in the same predicament, because that was the year of what would become known as the Fell Winter. It was still only late November, and the Hobbits did not yet know how truly awful that winter would become, but they knew that it had started early, and with a blast of brutal cold. Snow fell, and then stayed, which was unusual in most of the Shire, where snow was often a sort of surprise holiday that came and went quickly. The first few days had been the occasion of happy sledding, snowball fights, and the building of snowhobbits and snowsmials, but as the weeks went on they began to wish for a break. No break came, and even in the middle of the day it was well below freezing.

It was not just cold and snowy, it was bitterly cold and often very windy. The ponds and watering holes froze over, the Hobbits who lived aboveground began to dig their homes out of so much snow that they seemed almost like smials, and it was not yet even December. The older hobbits, or at least those who knew their history, began to mutter to one another about the Long Winter, that had come about 150 years before, when the Shire had run out of food and many had died. Word went out that people were advised to cancel Midwinter banquets, and the food on hand used only sparingly, in case it needed to last longer than expected. The Shire hobbits were uncommonly fond of banquets, so this was hard news. It was one of the Old Took's last acts before he fell ill, and could speak no more.

The Old Took's daughters had been at Great Smials for a week, when an unexpected visitor knocked on the door. It was the Great Door, now once again used routinely as the entrance to Great Smials. Seven of his sons lived there with their families, and many of them had children of their own, so Great Smials was bustling now. When the three sisters had lived there, it had been like a single family's home, but with countless unused rooms from olden times. Now it was like a small village unto itself, with multiple kitchens in use. Many rooms which had fallen into disuse, were now moved into again and filled with light and the sound of boisterous hobbit children and their parents. This much coming and going had caused the formerly



seldom-used Great Door to be put into daily use once again, and so it was that when the postman delivered a package to Great Smials sent by Gandalf the Grey, a Wizard, he knocked there.

Isengar (the youngest son of the Old Took but now a fully grown adult) smiled at the hobbit, and waved him in.

"It's a package for Mrs. Brandybuck," said the hobbit, "the first postal shipment we've had from Buckland in a few days, and maybe the last one for a while unless the snow lets up."

"Come on in out of the cold," said Isengar, as he took the package, "and warm yourself. I'll take it to her."

"Mira," he said, as he came to where his three older sisters sat talking to each other (in Bella's old room, as it turned out, which was still reserved for her family to use when she visited from Bag End), "you have a package here. It says that it comes from Gandalf."

"To me?" asked Mira in surprise. Wizards did not normally send packages. She opened her eyes wider as she opened the package, to reveal something that looked to be a metal lockbox. There was a letter, and a note as well, in what they all recognized as Gandalf's handwriting.

"I send to you this letter and package from Amaranth," said Gandalf's note. "I came upon her in Tharbad, trying desperately to find someone who could take this north to you, the letter and the box. Given the severity of the winter already, none were willing to. I thought perhaps it was time for me to visit the Shire in any event, so I agreed to take it. I am in Buckland now, and cannot leave to take this to you, so I am sending it by post."

Isengar, seeing that there was no more to be heard from Gandalf, turned and left. Mira stood looking at the unopened letter from Amaranth, her old friend from the south, and wondered, then she looked up and noticed that Bella and Donna were both sitting and staring at her, quietly but with no hint of leaving to let her read it alone. Seeing the look in their eyes, she took the hint, and pulled it out to read aloud.

Ground Floor of Great Smials (foldout)

"Dear Mirabella,

I am sorry to say that this may be the last letter I am able to send you. You mustn't think that my feelings of friendship to you are ending; I will always remember your bright smile and happy voice. But our people, Grandmother's Hobbits, are moving; to where, I am not allowed to say. We have seen omens that this winter will be cruel, and dangerous visitors may come our way. Perhaps it will be the year that the Gollum brings bad people to our doorstep, as the Grandmother foretold, but I cannot say for sure. Regardless, we must go, and tell no one where it is we go to.

I have other bad news; my grandma has passed on. She lived a very long life, but we will miss her. Before she died, though, she told us where this box was hidden, buried underground for years. She said that your father had buried it there, long ago when she was young, and asked that it be kept there secret and make sure no one found it. Now, she said that she had received word that it was time to send it north to him.

Perhaps your father can explain how it came to be here, so far from his home, and what it is. I can only assume that he has the key which will open it. Perhaps this will be the year that the Gollum returns, and tries to lead evil people to find us, and after he is gone we will no longer need to hide, and I will be able to see you again, but if not, know that I will remember you always and wish you and your family all the best.

fare well,
Amaranth"

There was a moment of quiet after the Mira had finished reading the letter. Mira frowned, partly out of sorrow that she could now not even expect to get letters from her old friend, and partly out of confusion as to what it all meant. She looked up at her sisters, and then they all three looked at the metal chest. It was very tarnished, but still it was obvious that it had been very finely made, and there were intricate designs on the top and all sides of it.

"We cannot expect to get an answer from Papa, until he recovers," said Bella. She did not say, but they all thought, that he might never recover enough to tell them.

"It is very odd that it should show up just now, when we are all here, and Papa is not able to talk to us," said Mira. She did not say, but they all thought, what if it were not just a coincidence? Why did Amaranth's grandma pick this time to send it north to the Shire? Why did her people, called "Grandmother's Hobbits" after a long-past, but not forgotten matriarch, have to move now from the hidden homes where they had lived for generations?

"I have seen a lockbox that looks like this one," said Donna. Her sisters looked at her in surprise.

"You have seen this box before?" asked Bella.

Upper Storey (foldout)

"No, not this box, but one very like it," said Donna. They all turned to look more closely. They could see fine tracery, with stars and trees and other symbols. Hobbits, though they could and did make many pretty things, did not craft anything in such a style.

"It looks Dunedain," said Bella. "Where have you seen one like it?"

Donna hesitated a moment before answering, long enough that both her sisters turned their heads from the chest, to look at their sister. She wore a somewhat guilty expression.

"There...is a lockbox that looks very much like that in Papa's Vault," she said at last, in an even quieter voice than was her custom. Donna heard Bella make a shocked sound that matched her worried expression, while Mira suppressed a bit of a smirk. Obviously, no one but the Thain of the Shire was supposed to be getting into his Vault.

"It was a long time ago, and I used to do a lot of sneaking around when I was a little hobbit-lass. I was curious as to what Papa had in his Vault, which was so important. It turns out that he kept the key hidden, but near to it, so that when he needed it he could just reach under one of his stuffed armchairs and get it. I waited until he was gone, and then I looked under the armchair and saw the little hook it was hanging on, dangling down from the bottom of the chair where no one would see it if they weren't looking."

"Wait, how did you see this?" asked Bella. "Surely Papa wouldn't have reached under the chair for the key if he knew you were there."

There was a brief silence, and Donna looked as if she felt a bit awkward about answering.

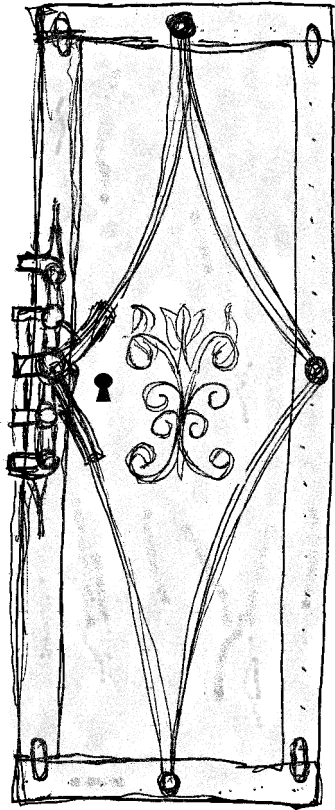
"She was hiding, of course," said Mira. "Come on, Bella, you're not the big sister any more, we're all grown-ups here. Go on, Donna."

"Well anyway, I looked in his Vault, and I didn't see much, mostly just papers that look like they related to business. But, I did see a box, that looked just like this one, except much cleaner. This one looks like it has not been polished in a long, long time. The one in Papa's Vault, though, had been taken care of."

"So do you think he has the keys to it?" asked Mira.

"Why else would he keep it?" asked Donna.

"He's the Thain of the Shire," said Bella. "There are a lot of things here which have been passed down from one Thain to the next for centuries, since the days of the Oldbucks. Some even go back before Old Buck, to when the King of Arthedain first gave the Shire to the Hobbits. He cannot just toss it out into the rubbish heap, even if the key has been lost for centuries."



"Perhaps. But I think he must have been paying attention to that box, all these years. It looks like it's been handled, polished even. If it's just something he keeps because he has to, but he cannot get into it, why would he do that?"

"Also," said Mira, "why would he have hidden an identical looking lockbox with Grandmother's Hobbits, past Tharbad? How is it he even knows about Grandmother's Hobbits?"

"You told him, for one thing," said Bella. "When we all came back from Tharbad, years ago, he sat you down and made you explain the whole thing from start to finish."

"Yes," said Mira, "but he must have left this with them long before that. He's never been gone from home long enough to do it since then. Anyway, Amaranth said in her letter that he took it there when her grandmother was young. Actually, now that I think about it, when she first saw me and Bungo she said that it had been decades since they had seen a Hobbit from the Shire. Amaranth's father was very surprised to hear that it had ever happened before. She must have been talking about Papa, and it must have happened before Amaranth's father was born. That means Papa was a young Hobbit, perhaps in his tweens even. Strange that when I told him about meeting them, he didn't say anything about having been there."

"If he does have the key, I know where it would be, I think," said Donna. Bella gave a small sound of exasperation.

"The next time you visit Bag End, I am never letting you out of my sight," she said.

"Bella, please! Go on Donna, where do you think it would be?"

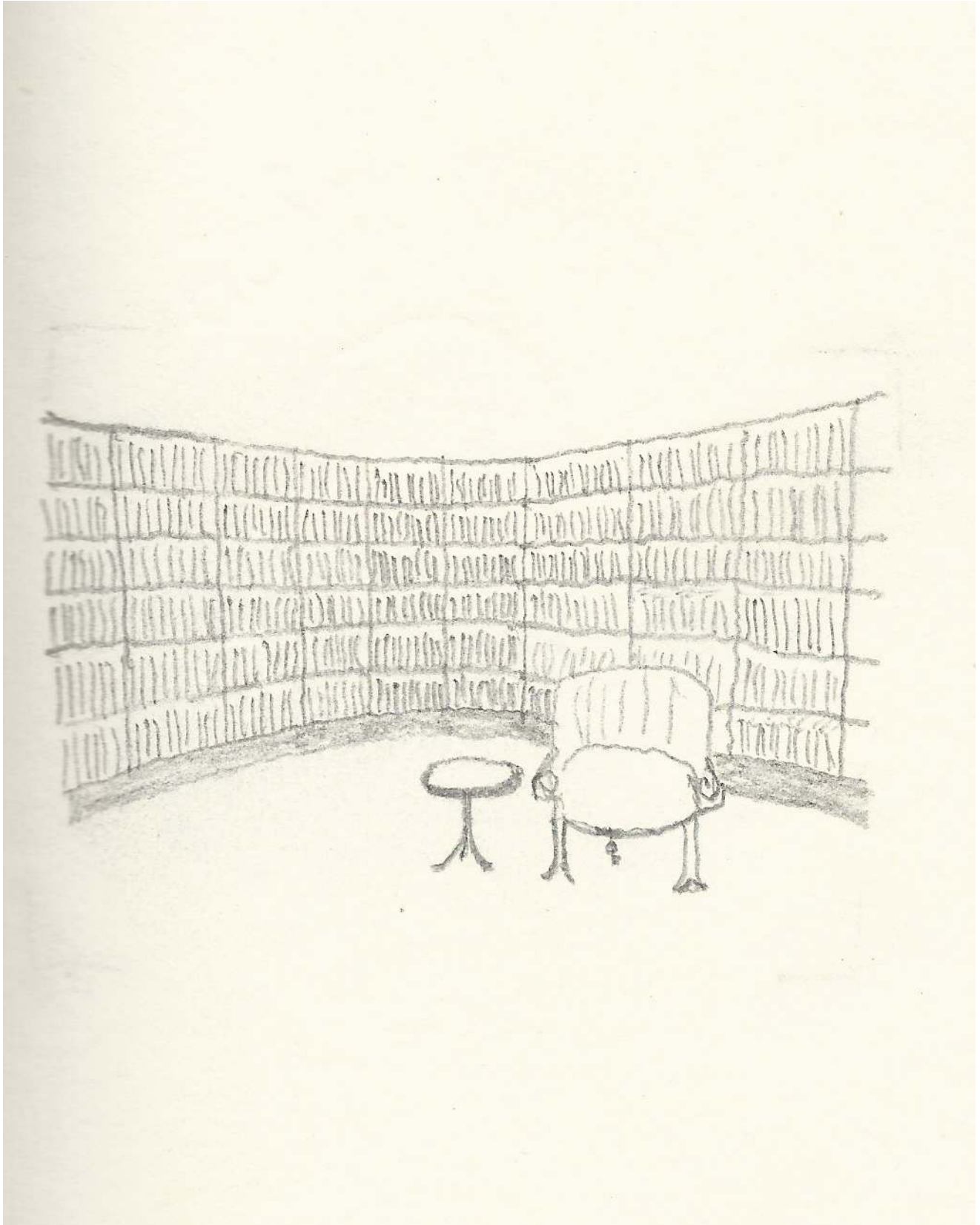
"He has a whole board of small hooks, in his vault, with keys on them," said Donna. "There must be at least forty. I don't think any of them are keys that he has to use very often, or he would have them with him. These are the keys he cannot lose, but rarely if ever needs, I think. If he has the key to this lockbox, it would be on that board."

"Why would you keep the keys to a locked box right next to the box?" asked Bella. "It doesn't make the locks very useful, does it?"

"The whole thing is inside his library vault," said Donna. "It probably seems safe enough."

"If he keeps the key to the vault in the same room as the vault," said Mira, "I don't see why he would not keep the keys to the lockbox in the same vault as the lockbox. Anyway, he probably isn't too worried about thieves or spies in Great Smials, anyway."

"What about his middle daughter?" asked Bella, with a barely concealed smirk mixed with a slight frown, but Donna and Mira just frowned back at her and got up to visit their father's library. Bella did not follow them right away, wrestling with her thoughts for a few moments, but eventually shrugged her shoulders and followed. After a moment, she returned briefly, to



grab the lockbox with both hands and carry it with her, with a shawl thrown over it to discourage questions.

They glided past the various brothers, sister-in-laws, nephews, nieces, and assorted hangers-on, as they ran back and forth through the chambers and hallways of Great Smials, without arousing too much curiosity as to where they were going or why. Donna had noticed on more than one occasion that whereas, when she were a young hobbit lass or in her tweens, it took great care and caution to avoid notice, now that she was in her 50's she could do so without any great effort at all. It may have helped that at least the young ones were mostly trying to avoid being noticed by her, as well, on their way to causing mischief of some more youthful variety.

Soon, they came to the Thain's Library, and the sounds of other Took's talking and running about receded behind them. The walls were covered with bookshelves, curved to match the shape of the rooms they were made for, and running from floor to as high as an adult hobbit (with a stepstool perhaps) could reach. The wood of the shelves was stained a dark brown, and reflected the amber glow of the sisters' candle-lamps as they entered. There were a few stuffed armchairs in this room, placed near to wall brackets that held (currently unlit) oil lamps, convenient for reading. In recent years, their father had spent less and less time in his gardens, and more and more in his library, reading books about faraway places, and scanning maps, venturing with his imagination now that his body was no longer limber enough to take him there.

Donna crouched down to look under one of the stuffed armchairs, with her candle-lamp down low so she could see under the chair to the space between its short, stubby legs. Then, she put the candle-lamp down on the floor for a moment and reached under the chair, and soon pulled back a brass key. She picked up the lamp again, and walked over to the Vault door.

"I guess he never found a reason to change where he hid it," said Donna. "It was a long time ago, I was a little worried he might have."

Bella silently made a note to herself to change where she hid the extra key to Bag End (under the welcome mat) as soon as she got home.



Chapter 2 - Father's Journal

The key slid easily into the vault keyhole, and they pulled together to open the door. It was heavier than the normal interior doors of Great Smials, but it swung open easier than they expected, as if its hinges were well oiled and well made. Donna remembered, as a hobbit-lass, having to heave on it with all her might to open it; it was much easier to do now that she was grown, with her sisters to help even.

The vault was a narrow room, with shelves lining the walls, so that there was not much space between them to move about. It was clearly not made for many people to be in at once. It was long enough, though, that there was a lot to look at, if you needed to take a full inventory. The sisters did not, they saw almost immediately what they were looking for. On the wall was a board with dozens of keys hung on it. They were of all shapes and sizes, some apparently newly made, others obviously very old. Some had tags on them: "Michel Delving Fairgrounds Ballot Box", "Padlock for Livery Stables Fancy Saddle Room", "Whisky Cabinet", and so forth. Some, did not. They looked at the many keys, and the keyhole in the lockbox. They looked back at the board with its dozens of keys.

Mira grabbed one, more or less at random, and tried it in the lockbox keyhole. No luck. She tried another, then another.

"Wait," said Bella, "we will lose track of which ones you've already tried."

"Then I'll just not put them back on their hook until I've found the correct one," said Mira, as she grabbed a fourth key to try. No luck.

"But then we won't know how to put them all back where they go. Please, Mira, wait, we should just try them one at a time, starting from the top left, and working our way down, putting each one back as we go."

"The one in the upper left is too small to be it," said Mira.

As the oldest and youngest sister continue to squabble, Donna was looking at the board with all of the keys, with slightly narrowed eyes, and then leaned over to look closely at the lockbox, including the tracery designs on it. She picked one key, which had the closest design to those tracteries, and tried it. No luck.

Bella eventually prevailed, and all of the keys were put back in their original place while they could still remember which spot that was. Then, they tried, in quite orderly fashion, from top left to bottom right, every key on the board. Eventually, they came to the last one, in the bottom right.

"I knew it," said Mira. "I was going to try this one next, before you made us use your silly system."

"You were not," said Bella. She was probably going to say something more, but when that final key also failed to open the lockbox, they all fell silent. They had tried every key, and none of them had opened the strange box which Amaranth had sent to them, the lockbox that their father had hidden decades before.



Donna looked around the Vault. "I don't see the other lockbox here," she said. They looked around, at the hundreds or thousands of boxes, chests, tools, scrollcases, books, and assorted other valuables. It was true, there was nothing here that looked especially like the one they had.

"I wonder," said Bella, "if there is any chance that Papa has recovered enough to tell us anything. In any case, we should check on him."

They filed out, and Donna closed the door to the Vault, used the key she had taken from under the chair to lock it again, and put that key back on its hook under one of the chairs. Then, they walked quietly to their father's bedroom, where he was being watched over by different members of the Took family in turn. Isengrim was there, and it did not take long for the three sisters to convince him to leave his post to them. Once he was gone, they all looked for a few long moments at their father, old and somewhat shrunken, breathing softly in his bed.

"Papa," said Mira gently, "we got a package. From south, near Tharbad. They said it was something you left there, a long time ago. Can you wake up, maybe, and tell us about it?" She set the small lockbox gently on her father's chest, so that he might be able to see it under his faintly fluttering eyelids.

They all jumped slightly when, unexpectedly, the box lid of the tarnished lockbox popped open. They looked at each other in surprise.

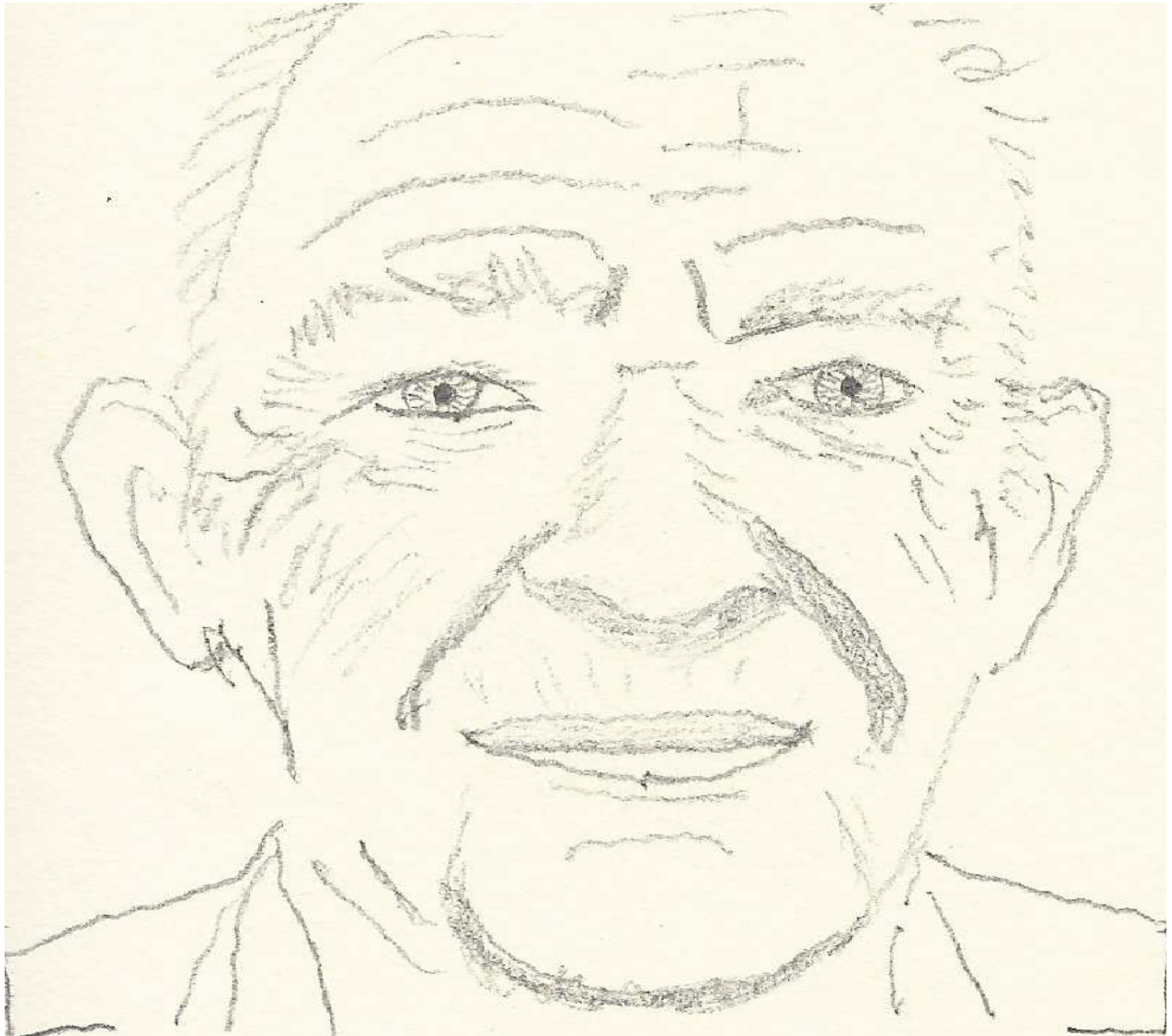
They looked in, and found three small journals, each of them well made but showing the signs of long wear. They had stout leather covers, but had clearly seen a great deal of travel. The faint smell of campfire and dusty road came off of them, and the small room deep in Great Smials was suddenly filled with a hint of a life of adventure, lived outdoors. On the cover of each, was a large capital "G", written in their father's style.

The one on top looked to be the oldest. Mira looked up at her sisters, with a hint of hesitation in her eyes, as she slowly reached for it. It was as if she were giving them a few moments to tell her NOT to open it and read what was inside, if they thought she shouldn't. Donna was quiet, waiting expectantly. Bella frowned, drew in a small breath as if to say something, and then grimaced, and said nothing.

"I think," said Mira, "that it's not a coincidence that the lockbox Papa left with Grandmother's Hobbits, came back here just when it did, when he was too sick to speak. I think we need to figure out what's going on. Or, at least, what went on. I think we should read his journals."

"All three of them?" asked Bella. "This could take a while. But who knows, hearing it read out loud might help bring Papa out of his sleep, or whatever it is. It's worth a try."

Bella and Donna sat back in their chairs, and Mira sat up straighter on the edge of hers, with the first of the three journals on her lap. She opened it up, adjusted the position of the lamp on the small table next to her, and began to read.



Bandobras "Bullroarer" Took

"The Diary of Gerontius Took. First entry, 15 Rethe, Year 1212 of the Shire Reckoning. Goodness, that was nearly 100 years ago!"

"Papa is very old," said Bella. "He is 122, perhaps the oldest hobbit in the history of the Shire. So he was young then, just entering his 'tweens'."

Mira sat, looking down at the book in her lap, perhaps a bit stunned to imagine her father, now so old, was ever so young.

"Go on, Mira," said Donna quietly. "Read it out loud."

I suppose it is time for me to start writing in this journal. I meant to start writing in it back when Papa gave it to me, but it never seemed safe to write something important here, in case he got a peek at it. Then later, when I was on my own on the road, there wasn't time. Or I didn't think there was. Maybe, if I had written things down as they happened, I would not have made such a mess of it all; I might have thought out what I was doing better than I have. Well better late than never.

It is night, and I am sitting at the campfire. Willie and Flora are asleep, I think, and Corliss as well. Digby is guaranteed sleeping, his snoring never leaves any doubt. Hildigard is staying up, though, she's always the one on guard. I hope she sleeps sometimes. It's hard to tell; she'll lay her head down and close her eyes, but then her ears will prick up at the slightest noise and she will look into the dark, sniffing the air. Maybe she is just a light sleeper.

I think it was easier when everyone thought I was just a young Hobbit who did not know what he was doing, and needed looking after. Now that they all look at me as if I am the one with the plan, I feel a lot more pressure. It's why I ran away from Great Smials, really, because Papa always had some plan that we all were supposed to go along with. Now, it is the same thing, except I am even supposed to come up with the plan.

The day before yesterday, we started heading north again, after I realized that I had misread Uncle Bullroarer's treasure map. The others did not seem as upset about it as I thought. I was worried that they would be angry about turning around, having gone the wrong way, but they were not. I think they have more confidence in me than I do.

Looking at that map again, I'm not sure if it is goblin blood on it after all. Maybe it is just a foodstain of some sort. Uncle Bandobras said he found it on the body of Golfimbul, but that was all many years before. He might have been looking at the map over breakfast every morning for decades, for all I know.

[Who is Uncle Bandobras? asked Mira, stopping her reading of the journal for a moment.]

[That's our great, great uncle Bandobras, said Bella, but no one calls him that any more. His nickname was "Bullroarer". He was actually Papa's great uncle, but he probably called him just 'uncle' for short.]

[Oh, Bullroarer, I've heard of him, said Mira. Aren't we related to him?]



Hildigard

[Yes, Mira, I've just told you, he's our great, great uncle. Honestly, if you ask the question you at least have to listen to the answer.]

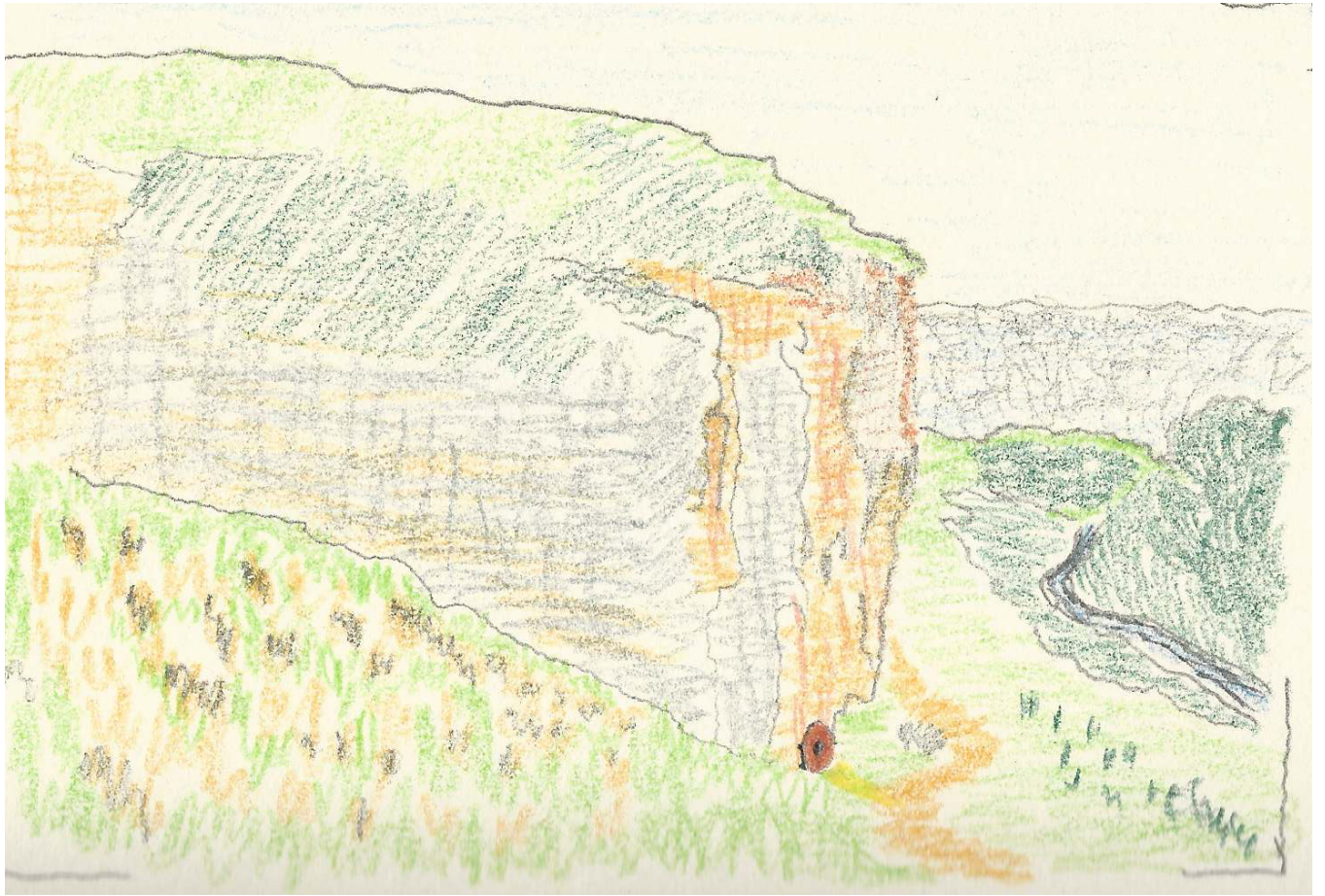
[Sorry, said Mira. Who was Golfimbul? I feel like I've heard that name before as well. Are we related to him?]

[Mira, Golfimbul was a goblin. No, I do not believe he was a particularly close relation. Golfimbul led a band of goblins from Mount Gram, who invaded the Shire. Uncle Bullroarer was big enough to ride a horse, not a pony, and he knocked Golfimbul's head off his shoulders. The rest of the goblins scattered and ran. Did you pay no attention to history lessons?]

[What does he write next, Mira? asked Donna. Mira and Bella both looked over at Donna with slightly annoyed expressions, vexed at having their bickering interrupted, then glanced at each other sympathetically, before Mira continued.]

...for all I know. Plenty of time for him to have spilled jam on it. Now that I've seen what my own blood looks like when it stains a map, I don't think it looks quite the same as this. But then, this is a lot older, and it was goblin.

Hildigard seems to have put down her head again to sleep, even though her ears still twitch occasionally. I suppose that means she doesn't smell any danger on the wind. I think I will try to sleep as well.



Long Cleeve

Chapter 3 - Uncle Bullroarer

Well we are stuck here for a while, until the Lamplighter comes, so I am going to take the opportunity to catch up a bit in this journal. I think maybe it would be good if I went back to the beginning, and got all my thoughts in order by writing down what has happened, and why. I suppose I will need to explain myself to the Lamplighter, when she comes, so it may help me to do that.

I first seriously started thinking about leaving the Shire when I was 16 years old, at my great-uncle Bullroarer's funeral. But before I get to that, I should go back to the very beginning. When I first met Uncle Bullroarer, I was about 10.

He was so different than my father, or his brother, my grandfather Fortinbras. My father is very serious, about everything, and very wary of anything new or exciting. As best I can recall, so was my grandfather, although grandfather died when I was just 6. My uncle's actual name was Bandobras but no one called him that, and he was actually my great-uncle, but I always just called him "Uncle Bullroarer". He was always full of excitement and curiosity, wanting to look under every rock and over every hill. He was my hero, from the first day I met him, which is perhaps why my father tried to keep me from meeting him for as long as he could. My father never quite approved of Uncle Bullroarer.

Uncle Bullroarer lived at North Cleeve, in the North Farthing of the Shire. He had gone there to build a home for himself, away from Great Smials, and I think maybe some of the family was glad to see him go, although they would never say so. North Cleeve is cut into the side of a rocky hill, and is nearly the northernmost inhabited spot in the Shire. I believe now that Uncle Bullroarer may have decided to dig his smial there because he wanted to be on the northern frontier, on the watch for trouble from the north.

Whether that's what he intended or not, it's what happened. I heard tales all my youth of the time when the goblins of Mount Gram invaded the Shire, and it was Uncle Bullroarer who saw them coming. He rode his horse (he was the only hobbit in the Shire who rode a horse instead of a pony) to one smial after another, telling the hobbits to grab their pitchforks and bows, send their hobbit-lasses and children to safety, and follow him. Then, he led them into battle, a mass of pitchforks in front of the hobbits who had bows and arrows, and him on a horse.

I know now that it was not really an army of goblins, more a band, maybe a few score. But it was more than the Shire had seen in many years, and there was no hobbit alive at the time who had ever fought in a battle. I think the goblins thought they would simply run in and take what they wanted, and kill or chase off any hobbit that tried to stop them. If Uncle Bandobras had not been there, that might have been what happened.

As it was, between the arrows, and the mass of sharp pitchforks pointing at them when they tried to reach the archers, they were quite enraged. Whenever they looked ready to break



through the line of pitchforks, Uncle Bullroarer on his horse would charge at them with his club swinging, and they would fall back. Finally, the head goblin (named Golfimbul) came charging, and Uncle Bullroarer charged at him, and then Golfimbul's head went sailing through the air, and the rest of the goblins ran back north and never bothered the Shire again.

They say that Golfimbul's head landed in a rabbit hole, and that's how the game of golf was invented. I'm not sure that I believe that part. But when I was a little hobbit-lad, I believed it all. I never heard these particular stories from Uncle Bullroarer, and I didn't hear them from my family either. I heard them from other hobbits, both in Tuckborough and Long Cleeve, and everywhere else in the Shire. Uncle Bullroarer was a hero, especially to the young and the poor.

What Uncle Bullroarer told me about, though, was that he thought they were coming back. "Gerontius, my lad," he would say, "the goblins of Mount Gram, they thought they could come in and plunder our smials like wolves taking sheep, because we had become soft. But I had gone adventuring, outside the Shire, and so I was ready."

That word, "adventure". My Uncle Bullroarer was the only one who said it like it was a good thing. Everyone else said it in a hushed tone, like it was a scandal, something to cover up. My father told me not to listen too much to my Great-Uncle Bandobras (he never called him Bullroarer, even though everyone else did).

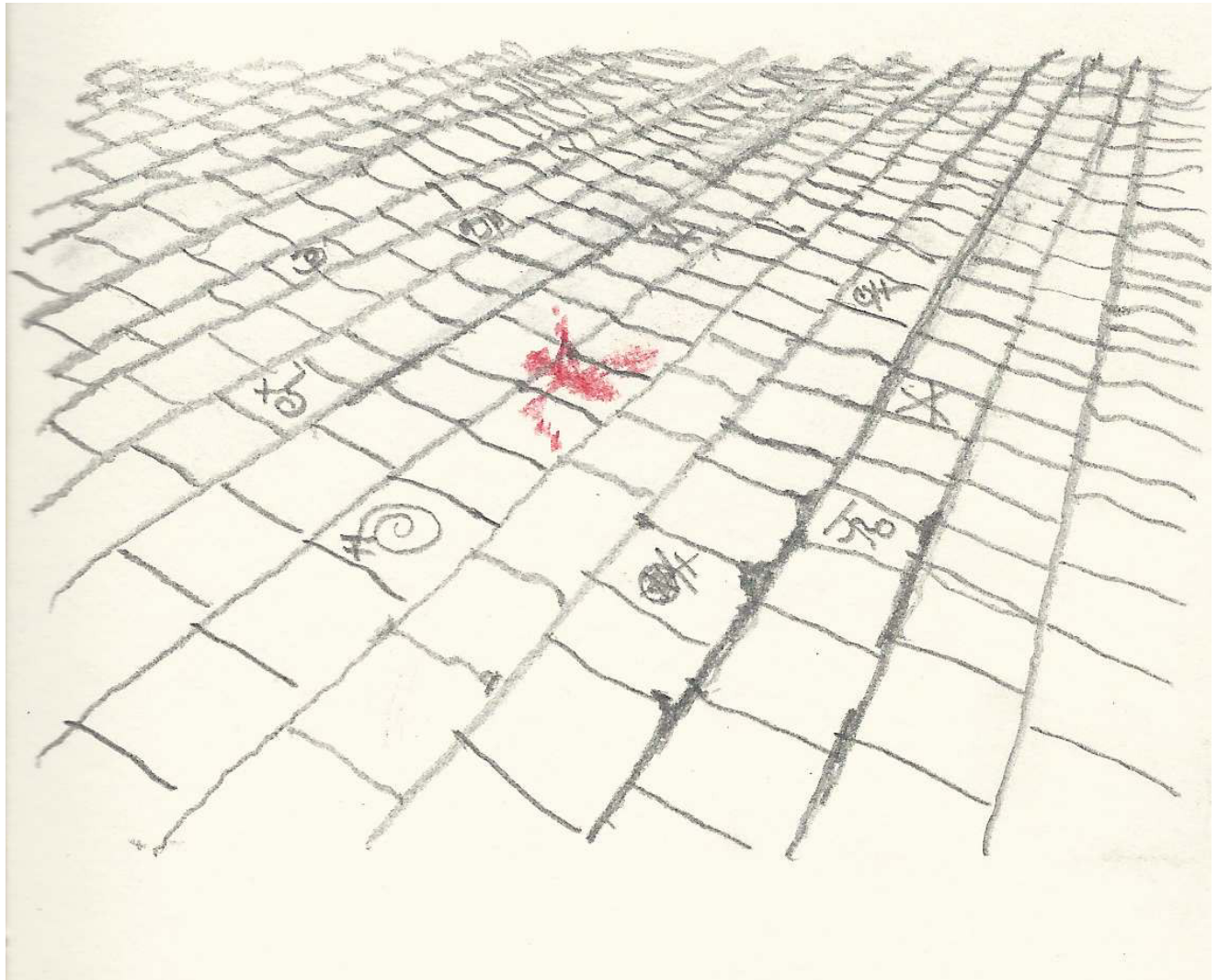
"He was a great hobbit, for sure," he would say, "but he is getting on in years, and he is not quite in his right mind, anymore."

Sometimes it seemed like maybe Papa was right, but I liked Uncle Bullroarer better than all of the hobbits around me who were in their right minds. He told me stories about his expeditions up north. He would sometimes go in the winter, when it was cold. I think he was a bit daft, for doing that; winter's a time to bed down in a warm smial with a cozy fire and a mug of something warm. But, Uncle Bullroarer said you needed to travel a bit in winter to really know the value of your smial when you got back home to it.

"I remember one time," he told me once, "when I went all the way up to the ruins of Annuminas, on the shore of Lake Evendim. I had been looking out for signs of goblin raiders, as usual. I came upon some tracks in the snow; it was just a dusting, so it was easy travel, but it was clear it was no hobbit nor man nor dunedan. It was an odd sort of shuffle, as if it had something wrong with its legs, if I read the tracks right."

"I followed it into the ruins, keeping quiet and leading my horse. Then, all of a sudden, I felt a sort of creeping cold. It was cold enough anyway, but this was an intense chill that seemed to suck the life out of you. For a few moments, I could not move, like I was frozen to the spot. My horse neighed, like he could feel it too, and did not like it any more than I did."

"I shook it off, and got out a torch from my saddlebags and lit it, just to give a bit more light and heat, but it didn't help much. We kept going for just a bit, but then we came to a place in



the ruins where someone had been writing on the paving stones, and recently, too. It was none of it clear to me, but it was obvious that they were up to no good, as there was a pool of dried blood right there in the middle of the circle on the stone with all that writing around it."

"Well I never did see what it was that had done such a thing, but I knew enough to say that it was no goblin or even goblin band that I was dealing with. Eventually I got back on my horse and turned him around, and never I think did that horse ride as fast as he rode for me to get away from there."

"There are strange things out there beyond the Shire, young Gerontius, and not all of them mean well. We enjoy a warm fire in a cozy smial with food to eat and something warm to drink, and I am glad that we do. But I think we take for granted, too much, that what is out there beyond the Shire will not come for us some day. Hobbits have grown soft, and if we grow too soft then the next time goblins (or worse) come, we will not be able to face it."

There was a lot of division among the Tookes, when I was a young hobbit-lad,

[When he 'was a young hobbit-lad'? asked Mira. He was 22 when he wrote this. He was STILL a young hobbit-lad.]

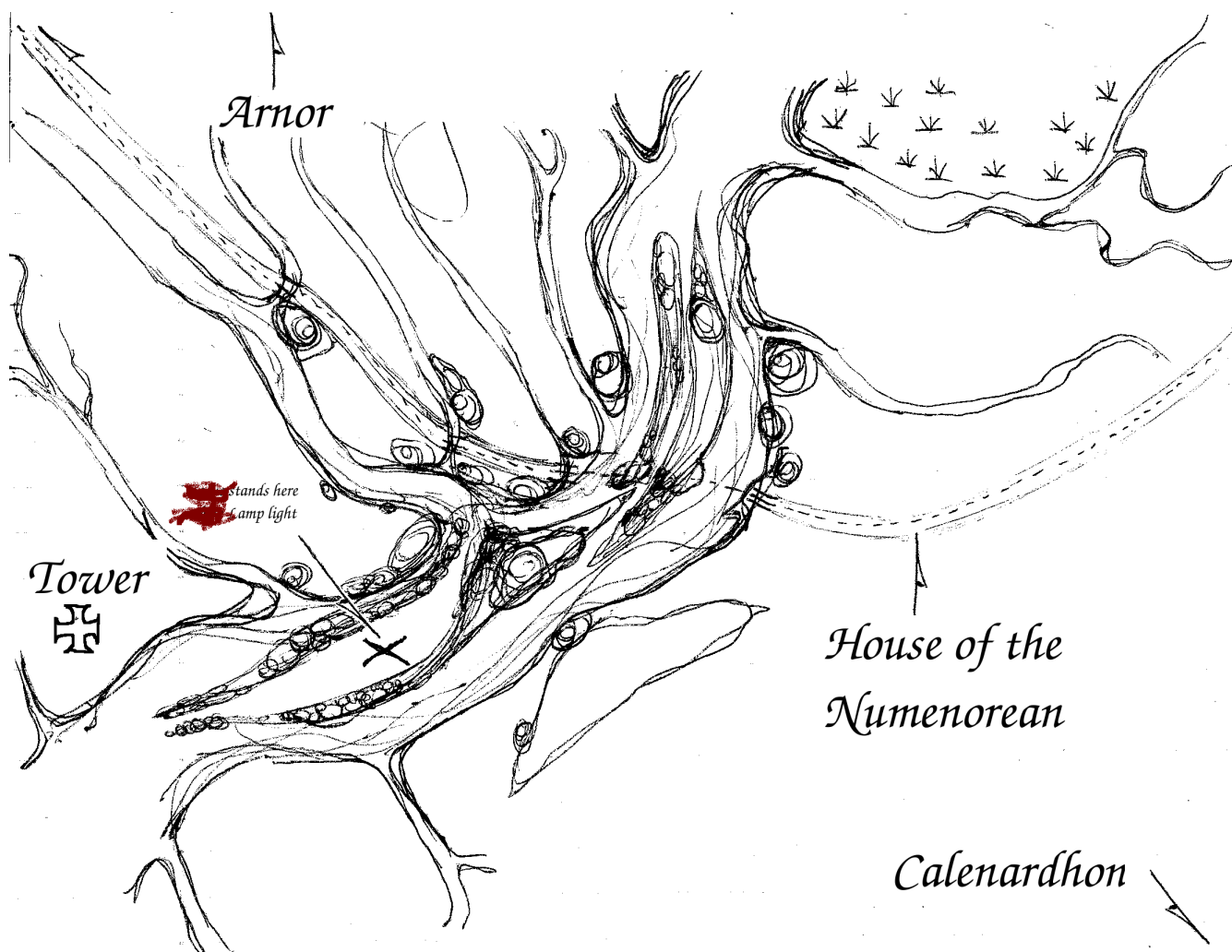
[That is the way tweens talk, said Bella, I have heard Bilbo say similar things. Go on, read what comes next.]

[I hope we hear more about Uncle Bullroarer, said Mira, I knew Papa liked him but he never told us all this.]

[Well we will not hear more about him if you do not read it to us, said Bella. Mira frowned at her, but turned back to the journal and resumed.]

...when I was a young hobbit-lad, and I think some of it before I was born as well. Great Smials used to be full, and now it's only got a few of us left, because the other branches of the family all moved out. I think it all dates back to the split between Uncle Bullroarer and his brother, my Grandpa. Grandpa wanted to do things the quiet way, and Uncle Bullroarer wanted to do things big and loud. Grandpa wanted to do things the way they had been done before, and Uncle Bullroarer wanted to try new things. It's why he moved out of Great Smials, and ended up in Long Cleeve, I think. A lot of other branches of the family ended up in Tuckborough; close by to Great Smials, but out from under Grandpa's thumb.

It was actually a little bit of an improvement when Papa started letting me go up north to visit him, and I think it would never have happened if Grandpa had still been alive. The first time Papa took me there himself, but Uncle Bullroarer and I got on so well that after that he would come down from Long Cleeve to fetch me himself. Riding on the horse with him back north was frightening at first, but also grand. Uncle Bullroarer never seemed afraid; he said horses could smell fear.



"It's important to treat your steed well," he would say, "so they like you, but you also have to be sure of yourself. If you act nervous, it makes them nervous. It is a lot like people, Gerontius; they won't follow you if you don't act confident. It's one thing to not be sure what you're going to do, before hand; it's another to not act confident while you're doing it. If you're wanting somebody else to go where you say, whether horse, pony, dog, or hobbit, you cannot act timid or nervous."

One of the last times I went there, when I was maybe 15 years old, he showed me a map. It was in a little hidden drawer in the backside of his desk, up against the wall, a drawer you wouldn't find if you weren't looking for it. He brought it out to show to me; it was old and stained with dirt and maybe also a bit of blood. He said that he had gotten it from the body of Golfimbul the goblin leader.

He didn't know where it was a map of, but it had a few things on it you could recognize. A tower, an island in the middle of a stream. There was an "X" marked on the map, near the islet. Uncle Bullroarer thought it was a treasure map.

"Those goblins under Golfimbul," said Uncle Bullroarer, "they were plundering wherever they went, but they were travelling pretty light. Maybe they buried some of their loot, so they wouldn't have to carry it with them, but they meant to come back and get it later. Or maybe they had been given the map by somebody else, and told to go there, but stopped at the Shire for a bit of easy pickings on the way. I cannot say for sure."

Uncle Bullroarer always thought that somebody else had been directing Golfimbul and his goblin band. Papa thought he was too caught up in his memories, too obsessed with his great moment of fame when he led the Shire hobbits against the goblins. Papa thought they were just crude raiders, and now they were gone, and there was nothing more to it than that. But Uncle Bullroarer thought differently.

"You just wait, young Gerontius," he would say, "they will come back some day, and we will need to be ready."

They never did come back, not yet, anyway. I was 16 when he passed away. We all went up north, to the funeral. His wife had passed long before, but he had children who lived up there nearby, and they were all there to greet us. Papa was at his best, then, going from one to the next, with a kind word and a consoling thought, sometimes a short story about Uncle Bullroarer to tell, that cast him in the best light. I heard him say more kind things about Uncle Bullroarer then, than I ever heard him say while he was still alive. I was standing off to the side, feeling awkward, when I had a thought, and slipped into Uncle Bullroarer's smial.

When I first stepped in it was just with the idea that I would look at Uncle Bullroarer's things one last time, but then once I was in there I had another idea. Straight to the little drawer in the backside of his desk, and I grabbed the map, and a couple other papers, and stuffed them inside my waistcoat, then slipped back outside before anyone noticed me gone.



[So, said Bella, this is where you get it from. Your father was a burglar as well.]

[Donna is not a burglar! said Mira, a little crossly. Also, Papa was not burgling either, Bullroarer was dead.]

[If he was not burgling, why did he not want anyone to catch him at it? asked Bella]

[There followed a few moments of sullen staring.]

[Oh, all right. Donna, I apologize, I did not actually think you to be a thief, nor Papa neither. Mira, please continue.]

...slipped back outside before anyone noticed me gone. I don't think anyone else even knew the map and the other papers existed, or at least no one said anything about them being gone.

For the next few years, I would take the map out and look at it every once in a while, whenever I was feeling cross with Papa for being so uptight and proper all the time. I daydreamed about going off to find the treasure, but I didn't know where it was a map of, or how to get there. It showed a little stream, and a little islet in the middle of it, and it had marked on it where you should stand to light a lamp. But that could be almost anywhere. There is a note about a tower, though, and it says there is a house nearby called the "House of the Numenorean". I did not know what that meant, but I knew that the old Kingdom of Arthedain had a capital at Fornost Erain, and they were descended from Numenoreans. I did not know if the library was still there, or if there was anyone still there to talk to, but at least it was a place to start. So soon after I turned 22, I packed my things in secret and told Papa I was going to Bree (which was true). What I did not tell him was that after I left Bree I was not coming back, but going north.

Enough for today. I am going to poke around the lower part of the thing a bit, and see if I see any way to move it. Perhaps if we dig under it? Plus, I think I hear Digby and Corliss arguing again. We are not a great group for waiting, we get along better when we're on the move together.



Chapter 4 - Curse of the Underhills

Rivers are peculiar things. They are always there, in the same spot, but always moving. Also, they are often markers, and divide different lands. When you cross a river, you are often going to someplace very different. I have crossed a few rivers, now, and they still seem peculiar to me. When I am going over them, on bridge or ferry or ford, I wonder about where the water came from, and where it is headed. I can look out from where I am writing in this journal now, to see the river on both sides of our island, and see water that came down from the Misty Mountains. I know that it is too soon to see the Lamplighter, yet; the Lamp is still full of fuel, she won't come here to refill it for days. But I keep looking, because rivers are peculiar things, and you want to keep an eye on them. It feels odd to stay in the middle of one for so long.

I crossed the Brandywine River at the bridge, instead of using the ferry further south. Too many questions if I were to go through Buckland, all the Brandybucks would want to know where I was going and why. I was not especially sure what the answer even was, except that I was going to Fornost Erain to see if there was still a royal library there after all these years, and if it showed anything that looked like what was on Uncle Bullroarer's treasure map.

About the time I got across the bridge, a dog came out of the woods and looked at me, like it was trying to size me up. I was a little bit frightened, then, but I remembered what Uncle Bullroarer said, and I tried to act confident. I even whistled to it, and clapped my hand on my leg, as if to call it over. I was hoping that the dog would think that anyone who tries to call it nearer, is not someone they can safely attack. I had no idea if it was a mean dog anyway, but I was all alone and no pony, so there was no way I could outrun it. I did have a walking stick, though.

Well, the dog came over close to me, and I stopped walking and held my left hand out, palm down, for it to sniff. It took a bit, but eventually we became friends. I found a bit of food, dried meat, that I thought a dog might like eating. I camped by the side of the road, with a little fire, and the dog lay down next to me. I named her Hildigard, and decided it would be good to have a dog on the road, if she was willing to stay with me.

[Oh, said Bella, Hildigard! I thought I had heard that name before, I've heard about her! She's who my older sister was named after!]

[What? asked Mira. You don't have an older sister.]

[Not now I don't, but before I was born there was a hobbit-lass in our family, born between Isengrim and Isumbras, who died before I was born. I didn't know about her until long after. Papa named her after a dog he had, but did not want Mama to know that's where the name came from.]

[Why not? asked Mira. Dogs are nice.]

THE PRANCING PONY



by Bainbridge
Butterbur

[Oh, you know how Mama was. Some people think you should not give a hobbit a dog's name or vice versa, and she was sometimes worried about being proper.]

[Yes, said Mira, I know the kind of thing you mean. Some people are like that, getting upset and fussy about silly things.]

[There followed a moment's awkward pause, with Bella narrowing her eyes and giving Mira a suspicious look. Mira, for her part, was suppressing a smirk, and just as Bella was about to say something Mira began reading again.]

I arrived at Bree the next night, and stayed at the "Prancing Pony", the main inn. The innkeeper, Bainbridge Butterbur, seemed like a nice enough fellow, for a Man. He leans down a bit when he's talking to Hobbits, which makes him less intimidating to talk to, and he let me put Hildigard in a stable in the barn, where she would not get into trouble and would be warm at night. Then he showed me in to the common room and introduced me to some of the Hobbits who were having a drink there and singing songs.

After about an hour, most of them left to go home, but I ended up having a long talk with a brother and sister, named Willie and Flora Underhill. They were about my age, maybe just a little older. We had been chatting for a while, sipping ale from our mugs and sitting at a Hobbit-sized table near the fireplace, when the conversation turned to their little sister, Hazel. She had apparently recently fallen ill, and they were worried about her, even though she had recovered.

"It's the family curse, there's no denying it now," said Willie.

"Oh, do not say that, Willie," said Flora sadly. "Maybe it's not. Maybe she just got sick. She seems better now."

"But that's the way it always goes," said Willie. "Our cousin Fern, and our uncle Filbert. They seem to recover, but then they get sick again, and it gets worse and worse as they get older. We'll be fortunate if our poor Hazel makes it to her tweens."

"But lots of people get sick," I said. "What makes you think it is this family...problem, whatever that is?"

"Curse," said Willie with a grimace. "She shows all the signs. The way the pupils of her eyes get bigger and bigger, and her scent turns sickly sweet. She's a sweetheart, but she has the family curse, and there's no cure for it known."

"There used to be," said Flora. "Back when there was a King."

"The King knew a cure?" I asked, bewildered.

[foldout of road between Bree and Fornost Erain]

"No, silly," said Flora, "but back when there was a King the roads were safe, and there were wise men at Norbury who you could go to and get medicine. It's been generations since that time, but they say that once, we could get a cure for it, or at least something that would help you survive it, if you kept taking it. But now the roads are not safe, and anyway I don't think there are any wise men at Norbury now to ask for medicine. Poor Hazel. I hope it's not the curse."

I think now that I was a little bit rash, then, not thinking before I spoke, but what I said was, "But the library is still there! We should go there, the three of us. Even if the Dunedain are not there any more, we can look through the books ourselves, and find out how to make the cure for your little Hazel. Tomorrow morning, we should head for the Greenway and take it north to Norbury."

Now really, I was already intending to go there, but I was jumping at the chance to have someone with me on the way besides Hildigard. I had been all for travelling alone when I was thinking about it in the Shire, but once I had been on the road alone for hours on end, considering what I was going to do and what might happen, having someone to travel with seemed better, and the idea of being alone in the wilderness for all that time did not seem as grand as it had before. But I should not have told Willie and Flora that the library was still there, so confident sounding, when really it was no more than a guess on my part.

I think also I did not want to mention that I was already wanting to go there, because I was afraid that might lead to questions, and I was not so sure I wanted to talk about why I was going. I had not told anyone in the Shire about Uncle Bullroarer's map, for fear that they would think I was going to go adventuring, which was still looked down on quite a bit. Folks that went adventuring were thought to be unreliable, not the sort of person you could depend on or respect. I was still pretty close to the Shire, and was so accustomed to keeping the map a secret from others that I continued to do so, out of habit.

Willie and Flora were both a bit surprised by my suggestion, but they reacted in different ways. Willie was immediately for it, and took almost no convincing. Flora, on the other hand, was not so sure. She asked what about brigands on the way, or goblins, and I said we are Hobbits and we can keep out of the sight or hearing of Men and Goblins. She asked what would we eat, on such a long journey, and I said we could be there and back before autumn ended so there would be plenty of food to find on the way, and there were plenty of streams for drinking water too. She asked what if someone gets hurt, there will be no doctor. Now I can say that Flora was thinking about travel with a lot more sense than I was, but Willie was able to sway her over.

"What about a doctor?" he asked. "Well, what about a doctor for Hazel, Flora? She ain't got one, and we aim to get her one, or try to find a book written by one anyway. Think of Hazel, she needs a doctor too!"

That pretty much quieted Flora's objections, and she said she would come.

~~tents~~
bedrolls
~~bow drill~~
flint + tinder
waterskins
slings
~~rope~~
twine
good knife
small candle
knapsacks
bread, cheese, carrots, nuts
~~pot~~
~~pan~~

"Anyway," she said, "if I don't go with you Willie, you will end up in more trouble than you can scrape your way out of, I suppose."

"I don't need looking after!" said Willie, but he did not argue much, as I believe he was in fact happy to have Flora come along.

Then we started talking about what to take with us, and whether we needed tents, or bows and arrows, or maybe slingshots. Also, Flora asked how we meant to make fires, and what we would do in a downpour, and many other good and sensible questions which I was rather annoyed by. Thus far I had only been travelling from the Shire to Bree, and if the weather turned foul I could trudge to the nearest Hobbit village and find a place to stay out of it, but we were headed out in the Wilderness, so things would be different. By the time an hour of this talk had passed I was realizing that I would do well to listen to Flora carefully, as she had a good head for imagining trouble before it happened, so that you could be prepared for it. We talked on for a while, after most of the others had left the common room of the "Prancing Pony". Then we moved to my room at the inn, and talked for a while longer.

We would have done better to take a pony, perhaps, but Willie and Flora did not have one their parents could spare. I think also they did not care to tell their parents how long they would be gone. They were both of them in their tweens, their twenties, and in Bree that was considered old enough to make your own decisions, although in the Shire we say that happens when you come of age at 33. So they could decide to head off to Norbury with me if they wanted, but asking for a pony to carry our things would put them in a spot, where they would have to say plainly how long they were to be gone, and how far they would be going. I had done much the same myself, so I did not need it spelled out to me.

"Anyway," I said, "with no pony, we can move quieter, and quieter is safer."

"Do you hear that, Willie?" said Flora. "Quieter is safer."

"Every hobbit knows that!" said Willie in an annoyed tone.

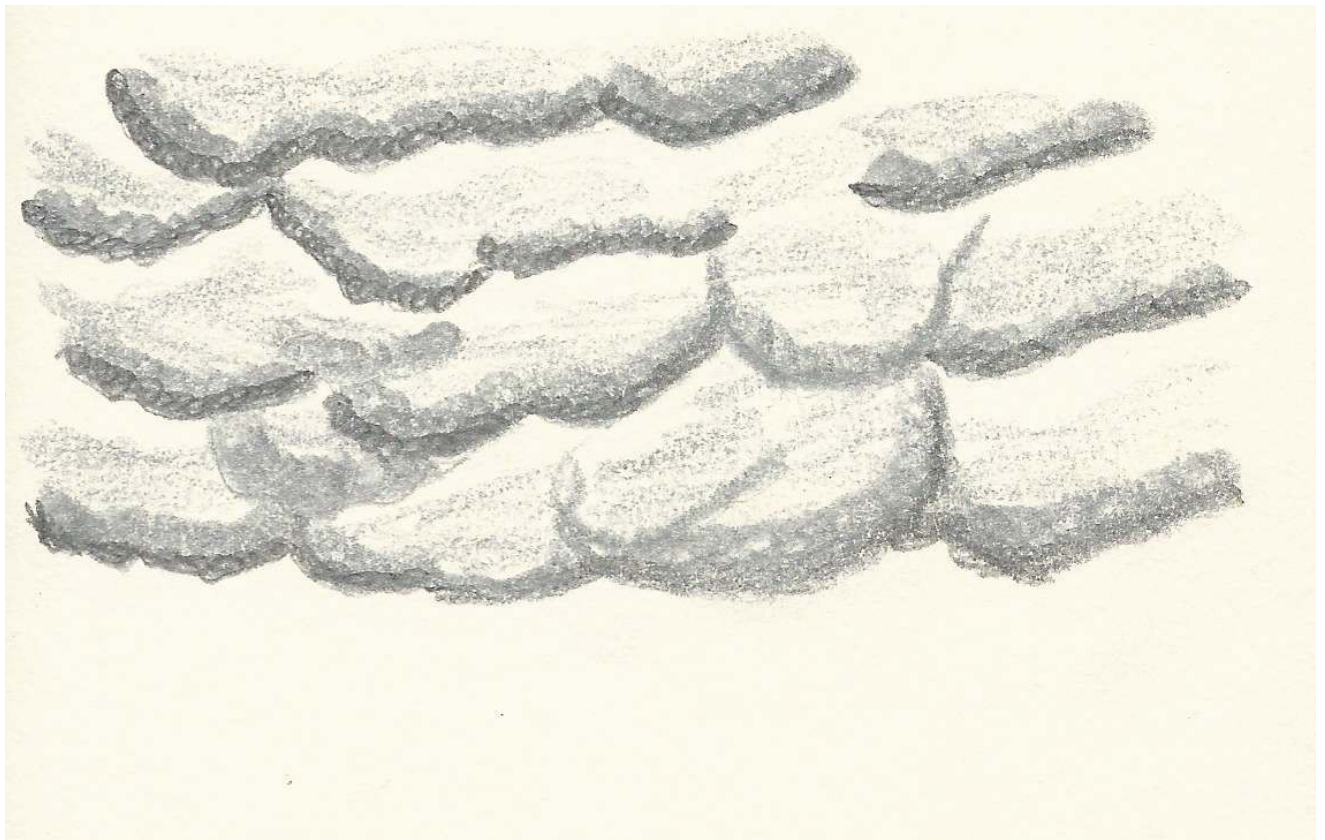
"Oh," said Flora, "are you adopted? I thought you were a hobbit."

"I am a hobbit!" said Willie, his face getting a little bit red.

"But you just said every hobbit knows..." began Flora.

"I AM PERFECTLY CAPABLE OF BEING QUIET!" said Willie.

Finally, Flora said they had better return home and get some sleep, as there was a lot to gather in the morning if we were to be off the next day. Willie grimaced a bit, as I think he wanted to chat more, but I said she was right. After they left, I wondered if they would in truth come with me the next day, or if they were just talking. I hoped they would. I went out into the stables and looked in on Hildigard, who was curled up in some straw and seemed comfortable



enough. She perked up at the sight of me, and came over, so I gave her a treat from my dinner and told her goodnight. She looked at me so big-eyed, though, when I was ready to leave, that I snuck her into my room. It was made for Hobbits, and had a round door to the outside so I didn't have to walk her through the common room to get there. She curled up on my bed for a bit, but then decided that the floor was better, and after she had circled round a couple times she slept there.

I woke the next morning early, nervous and uncertain, but I set about buying some food and other supplies, like a few short candles to help with starting a fire when it was harder to do, and a bit of sturdy twine for...I wasn't sure what. I also made a good slingshot, and found a few round stones of the right size to use with it. It got to be mid-morning, and my pack was full and ready, and I was sitting in the common room of the Prancing Pony again having second breakfast. I was thinking about how long I should wait for them before I gave up and went on my own, when in they walked with full packs on their backs. I smiled wide enough to touch my ears. When it actually came time to step off into the wilderness on my own (except for Hildigard), I was not so keen on it as before, and happy to have some company. The four of us walked out of the Prancing Pony, out through the north gate of the wall around Bree, and off onto the road to Fornost Erain. Within an hour, it began to rain on us.



Flora Underhill

Chapter 5 - Bedbugs and Packhorses

This is Flora writing. Gerontius has taken ill, and he wants me to write for him. But it's Gerontius telling me what to write, so it's his words. We had expected to get rained on, of course, but I don't think we expected it to happen so soon, and it seemed at the time like maybe it was a bad omen.

[Wait, said Mira, does that mean Flora thought it was a bad omen, or Papa?]

[Flora just said it would be Papa's words, said Bella, and she would just be writing them for him because he was sick.]

[Are you sure? asked Mira. I would have trouble, if I were doing that, resisting the urge to add in my own ideas, especially if it was a trip I had been along for.]

[Well Flora seems to be a more sensible and reliable person, said Bella, so I'm sure she's just writing what Papa asks her to write, and can put her own opinions in her own journal.]

[How do you know Flora is so sensible, we've only heard two sentences from her and it was all her making fun of her sibling. Perhaps that's why you think so highly of her, she reminds you of yourself.]

[Actually, said Donna, interrupting them, it was Flora who thought it was a bad omen that it rained so soon.]

[How do you know that? asked both her sisters at once.]

[I read it, in Papa's journal, while you two were arguing.]

[How did you do that? asked Mira, I am holding his journal right here in my lap. It would be upside down for you.]

[I can read things that are upside down, or backwards, said Donna. But it's more convenient if you do it.]

[Her two sisters just stared at her for a few moments. Then Mira resumed reading.]

...it seemed at the time like maybe it was a bad omen. I think Gerontius thought so too, but I did not know him well enough at that time to say so for sure. In any case, now he is ready to dictate, so here we go.

At first we just scampered off the road, which was a very old one called the Greenway, and waited for it to stop. When it seemed like it would not, and the rain had gotten all the way



through the treetops and was dripping down on us anyway, we trudged back out onto the road and began walking in it. There was no need to be quiet about it, of course, the rain made enough noise of its own. I think maybe it turned out to be a good thing, that we hit foul weather so early, and did not quit. I thought it was a good sign, that we would be able to persist even when things did not come easily. We kept on going until near dusk, and then it finally stopped raining, and after another half an hour or so we were not quite so wet anymore. Fortunately it was not a cold night, but we did want a fire if we could make one, to dry out our things. Just off the road we found a fire ring, with a lot of stones piled in a circle, and it seemed worth trying, but I was not thinking we had much of a chance of doing it because all the fuel was so wet.

I learned then that Flora was an expert firestarter. We discovered some kindling that had been under a pile of leaves and had not gotten soaked through, yet, and she was very persistent at searching until she had found enough tiny twigs and leaves that were dry. Then she was very patient and careful at feeding the leaves and tiny twigs to it after we had our first spark, and she got us a little fire burning away. She would not let us try to pile bigger sticks on it too fast, as she said we would overwhelm it and smother it, and it seemed to take a long time. While she was doing this Willie and I were looking at the darkness around us and every hooting owl or crack of a stick in the undergrowth made us nervous. Finally she built it up bit by bit until we had a merry little blaze, and so then we were able to warm up and dry out some. We ate some of the food from our packs, and changed our clothes, and propped the others up on sticks near the fire to dry out before morning (we hoped). While we were doing this Hildigard settled in close to whoever was sitting still just then, and she made us feel more secure. When we fell asleep we were a little nervous as to whether anything would come upon us in the night, but having a good guard dog there with you made us feel a bit more comfortable.

For a few days we were just walking, and camping at night wherever we found next to the road. It was not raining any more, but there was not much moon either, so it was quite dark at night. Not as dark as being inside a smial, though; the stars above were brilliant to look at as you lay there looking up at it.

[Wait, said Bella, I know why you can read upside down or backwards. You used to read Papa's letters, without him knowing, as he was holding them.]

[Oh, that's right, said Mira, that's how you read the ransom letter when Isengar was taken.]

[Donna said nothing, but simply nodded, her face without expression. Bella shook her head disapprovingly, while simultaneously trying to suppress a smile, and Mira began reading again.]

Having Hildigard with us helped again, when we were approaching a place on the road called Gedrinker Haven. I had seen on the old maps at Uncle Bullroarer's that it had been a traveller's tavern in times past. There were not so many people travelling on the road in recent years, though (which was why it was mossgrown and called "the Greenway" instead of "the North Road", as it once was), and I was not sure if it would still be used, or abandoned. It was



getting towards dusk, when we came over a crest in a low hill and saw that it still had lights burning, and that seemed to be a good sign, when there stepped out of the brush near the edge of the road two of the Big People, a man and a woman.

We were a little scared at that, but before we could decide to jump into the brush and disappear the man hailed us and said he had wares to sell, traveller's garments good for keeping off the rain. They seemed not to mean us harm, and anyway carried no weapons that were apparent, so we agreed to look at their wares. When they came closer, we could see that they had been living rough, out of doors perhaps, for a while. No one travelling on the road for any amount of time looks like they are headed to a fancy party, but these two looked like they had been sleeping outdoors for more than a few nights. Their clothes were none too good, and their hair was somewhat tangled, but they smiled friendly and we were not sure.

About the clothes they were offering to sell us, though, we had no doubts; even if they had been sized for hobbits instead of men, we would not have bought them. They looked not to have been clean for a long, long time, and were threadbare besides. We tried to be as polite as possible with our refusal, but they kept offering them, trying to talk us into buying. It came to me that maybe they were simply going to badger us until we gave them money, and the clothes were just to allow us to pretend that we were making a purchase instead of being robbed. Or, maybe, it was to allow them to pretend to themselves that they were selling us something instead of robbing us.

Regardless, they were blocking the path, and would not be dissuaded, until Hildigard had enough and began to growl at them. This seemed to make the man pause, and the woman tugged on the back of his shirt to indicate that they should let us past. They backed away, and we slipped past quickly. I was not really comfortable until we got to the Gedrinker Haven.

Once there, it seemed not too different from "The Prancing Pony" in Bree, at first. The innkeeper was a surlier, and the whole place seemed a dirtier, but I supposed that was because they had less traffic on the road to pay for someone to sweep it clean. We paid for a room, and he told us to have a drink in the common room while he tidied it up for us.

Once we got into the common room, we realized that it was a bit of a different crowd. I know now that the ones who you find in the common room at Gedrinker are not travellers, because not many folk travel that way any more. They are locals, who come to Gedrinker Haven because they are not welcome inside the walls of Southtonburg. Most of them are not so fond of singing or dancing or anything else that hobbits would call fun, and all they seem to want to do is drink. They feed themselves by farming and a bit of hunting, and they spend every hour they're not working or sleeping, at the tavern, giving their few pennies to the innkeeper. On the plus side, no one seemed to mind me having my dog with me in the common room.

"Hobbits." said one of them, a few minutes after we had arrived. We had gotten a beer each and sat in a corner at the lowest table, which was still too high for us. I don't think they get many hobbits at the Gedrinker Haven, and I began to suspect that our rooms were not going to be set up hobbit-sized the way they were at "The Prancing Pony".



Carvell

"Yes," I said to the man, and tried to smile in a friendly way. He frowned down at us, with his greasy black hair all kind of scattered around the top of his head like something that was accidentally spilled there. At first I thought he was angry about something, but then I realized he was just the sort of person who frowns when he thinks, perhaps because he finds thinking uncomfortable.

"Bree?" he asked.

"These two are from very near Bree, but I'm from the Shire, actually," I said. Now I know that sometimes you should just say, 'yes', so that people think they know what is going on. It's not as if the fellow really cared whether Flora and Willie were from Staddle instead of Bree, or whether I was from the Shire. He just wanted to know that he understood what was going on, with hobbits showing up where he was not accustomed to seeing them. Most people don't like surprises, unless they're a gift at a birthday party, where they know they are coming, and they're not so startling. They especially don't like surprises that they worry are making them look slow.

"Huh?" he grunted in confusion, frowning more.

"Flora and Willie are from Staddle, which is very close to Bree," I said, trying to speak a little slower and more clearly. "I am from near Tuckborough, in the Shire."

"What are hobbits doing in Southtonburg, anyway?" he grunted, sounding more annoyed.

"We are going to go up north," I said, "perhaps as far as Norbury."

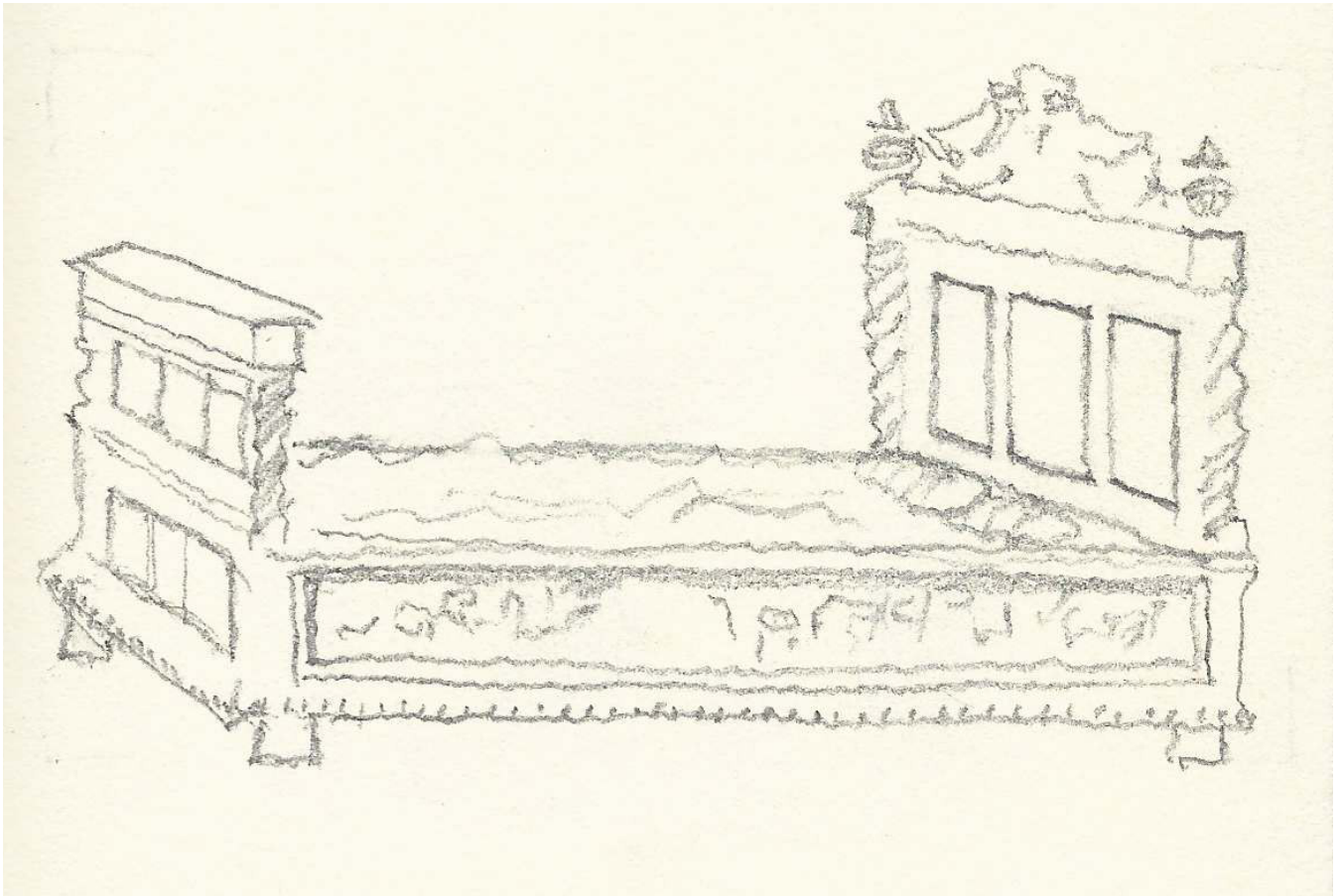
"Why?" he grunted, almost angrily. At the time I wondered why he cared where we were going or why, but now I think he didn't really care, he was just confused by my answers which mentioned so many places he had not heard of, and angry at being made to feel slow, and trying to find an excuse for being mad. Also, some drunks just get mad for not much reason.

"You'd better be careful of that wolfhound, Carvell, he's a beast!" came a voice from across the room. "He will attack with no warning!"

It was the same man who tried to sell us clothes on the road, who had followed us and snuck in after. He was pointing at Hildigard, who was sitting under the table but with her head up and alert, and she looked over at him, and her upper lip began to pull into a tiny bit of a snarl.

"Hildigard is a 'she', not a 'he'," said Flora, "and she's never killed a man who didn't attack first."

Well that seemed to make the man near our table stop and think for a moment, and then while he was doing that the innkeeper returned. He looked angrily over at the man from the road who had said Hildigard was mean.



"Digby, you get out of my inn!" said Marlow. "I told you not to come back unless you have money for the drinks you never paid me for yet."

"I can't get no money, they threw me off my land!" said Digby angrily, but backing up towards the door.

"Well you can't live here neither!" said the innkeeper, and closed the door a bit loudly behind Digby as he scurried out, then turned around towards us, or the man standing next to us.

"Carvell, get away from them and leave 'em alone! I don't need your blood all over the floor from a dog bite! You always leave a mess for me to clean up, and I'm tired of it! Either you sick on the floor or you get in a fight and bleed everywhere or you get too drunk and think you're in the privy when you're in the common room! Can you not sit and drink your pint in peace and quiet for once?!"

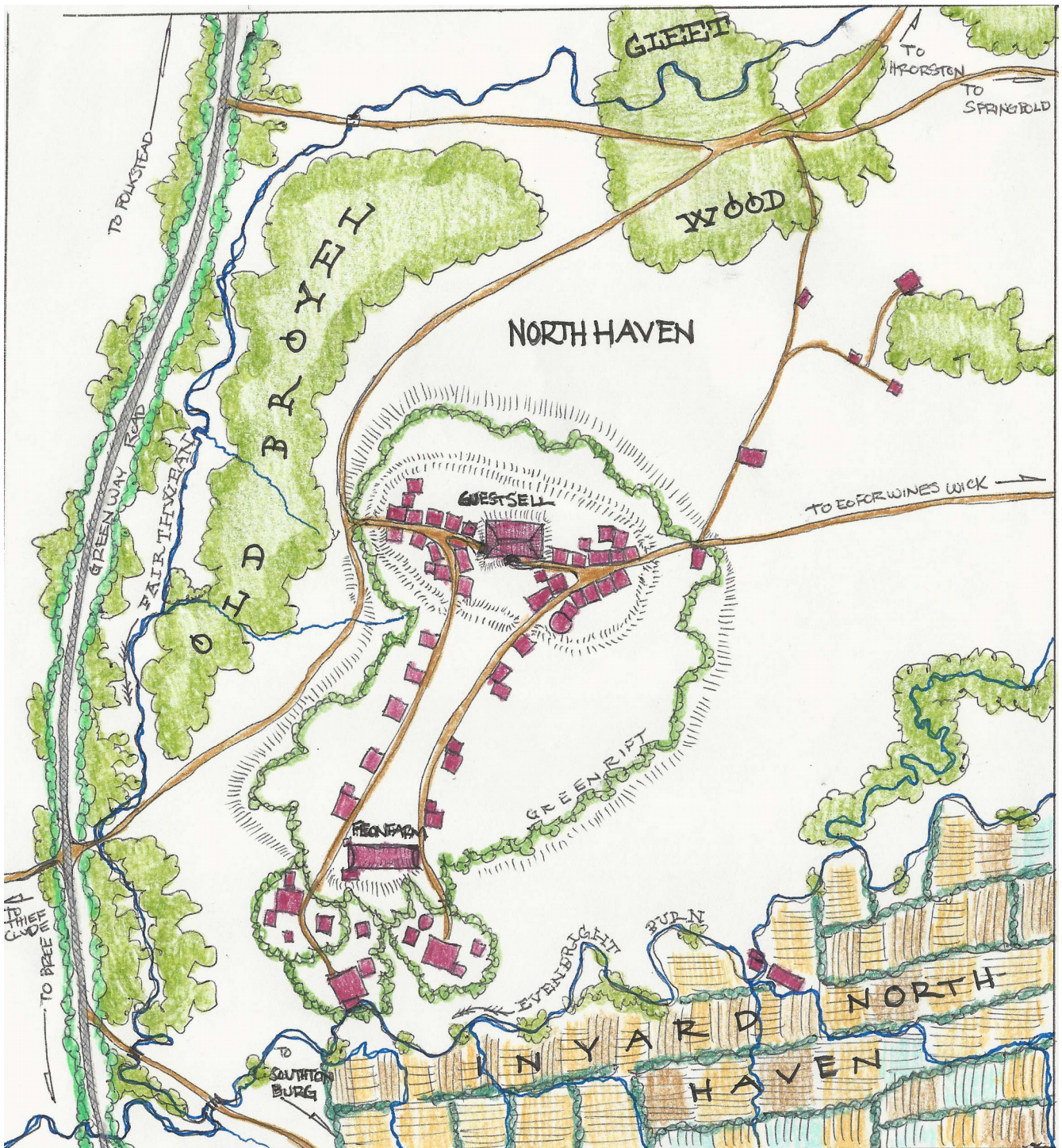
"I wasn't doing nothing!" protested the man, who was apparently named Carvell. But, he moved away from our table, partly because of the innkeeper and partly to get away from Hildigard, who he was now keeping a wary eye on. I was not too fond of the innkeeper's way of speaking, but I suppose that if you wish to run an inn with folk such as that as your customers then you cannot always be too polite. We finished our drinks, and then the innkeeper showed us to our rooms.

It was as bad as I had expected, maybe a little worse, and it passed through my mind that we might find a cleaner spot to sleep outdoors. However, we had already paid for it, and so we felt like we should stay. There were only two beds, too small for more than one man each but Flora and Willie could fit end to end on one of them and me on the other, so that was all right. They were a bit higher than I would have preferred, but we could put our packs on the floor and then climb up onto them. They might have been nice beds at one time, good sturdy wood with carved headboards, and I realized that a lot of the place looked like somewhere that had once been fancy and well appointed, that was long since run down. The basin was cracked, and the windowpanes were either gone or cracked, mostly replaced with wood.

The room had just been swept out, but none too thoroughly, and the cobwebs in the corners and the dust under the beds gave the impression that no one had stayed there in quite some time. I believe Gedrinker Haven was more of a tavern now than an inn. So one might think that, with no one to feast on for months, there would be no bedbugs to worry about, as they should have all starved to death by then. One might think that, but one would be wrong. Within a couple hours, all three of us were sleeping on the floor, which was hard and cold but at least you did not get made a meal of.

This is Flora writing that the beds were really bad, I quite preferred sleeping on the ground outdoors to a bed like that, and I believe I said so at the time.

In the morning, we left pretty early, since we did not like the idea of staying there any longer than we had to, and in particular the idea of eating any food served there was not tempting.



We had brought enough food that we did not have to go hungry, and I thought maybe we could buy some more in Southtonburg. The actual town of Southtonburg had a wall around it, and the Greenway crossed another old road there, so I think it used to be a major settlement. We found it nearly empty, though. There were only a few dozen people there, and most of the buildings in town looked not to have been used in years.

It was strange, to me, that there were people going to a tavern outside of Southtonburg, when there were so many buildings inside town that were not being used at all.

We moved on through, not talking too much to anyone, and no one seemed to have any interest in talking much to us, although they did keep a close eye on us. In the Shire, if a stranger shows up, someone will come out to talk to them, to see if they need directions or help, and maybe also to check on what they are up to. In Southtonburg they just kept an eye on us and said nothing, until we were headed out the north gate. There certainly did not seem to be anyone who we could buy extra food from.

Then, on the road north out of town, we came to a place where a smaller road crossed it. Off to our right, past the tall hedge and trees that were on either side of the Greenway, we saw a small bridge over a little creek, and then on the other side the smaller road went off to a cluster of buildings, most of them up on a low hill. We didn't know it at the time, but it turns out it was called "North Haven". Again I found myself wondering, why do so many people live outside of the city walls, when there are so many buildings inside the walls that are empty? I turned to my right and headed off down the smaller road, over the bridge, to see who lived here in these buildings.

As we got closer, I realized that there were probably as many people living in North Haven as actually lived in Southtonburg, not that this was more than a couple dozen families. The largest building, at the top of a small hill, actually had the little road pass under one corner of it, and I realized it was some sort of common hall. As we got closer, I saw that there were three men sitting on a bench in the corner of the building that the road passed under. They were looking over at us with curiosity, but without the hostile looks of the folks inside Southtonburg's walls.

"I think actually the other way was the Greenway," said Willie. "Should we go back?"

I realized then that Willie had known, of course, that we were leaving the Greenway as soon as we did it, but it was not until now that he had said anything. Perhaps seeing three men there made him feel a bit nervous, especially after the unpleasantness last night and the sullen looks we had gotten walking through the half-abandoned town. Really, I suppose Willie was right, but I was still feeling cocksure and wanted to talk to them. Partly I think it was that I had never really known much about anywhere but the Shire, and I wanted to find out what other places were like. It couldn't all be like Gedrinker Haven, I figured.

"We could use some more food," I said, "maybe we can buy some."



"I see no need to buy more food just yet," said Flora.

I waved to the three men and smiled, and kept walking in their direction. They did not wave back, but they did not seem sullen or angry, just curious. Maybe waving to people is not how it is done here, I thought. Hildigard kept right at my side, but I noticed that Flora and Willie were hanging back a little bit. I walked up into the area under the building, which was still open to the air on two sides, because it was built on a bit of a slope.

"Hello," I said. They nodded, still leaning back on their benches, looking at me but not saying anything.

"My friends and I are headed north, and I was wondering if there were someone here who could sell us some food for the trip. Something that would travel well."

Two of them looked over at the third, a tall and thin older fellow, as if they expected him to do the talking.

"What kind of food are you looking for, little fellow?" he said.

I was not sure that I liked being called "little fellow", it sounded like something you might call a child, but I decided that I was little compared to them, and I was a fellow, so maybe no harm was meant.

"Maybe dried fruits, or hard cheeses, or smoked meats, or something like that?" I asked.

They all sat quietly and looked at us, without any clear expression on their faces, for several seconds. I was just about to decide that they were not going to reply, and maybe it was time for me to leave, when he spoke again.

"I expect we can find something to sell you. What is the color of your money, then?"

"It is copper, but I can pay a good price for decent food," I said. I actually had some fair amount of silver, but I was not sure if it was safe to mention that I was carrying more than copper. They might decide to take it from me, and there were three of them, and they were bigger.

"Well come on upstairs then," he said, and got up and went through a door into the large building we were standing under the corner of. I had a moment of panic, as I realized that it was darker in there and I couldn't see inside, and I wasn't sure if it was safe. But then, I thought that it was pretty normal to go inside to buy things, and I had no excuse really to refuse. I began to wonder why I had come here.

"Willie, Flora, why don't you stay out here with Hildigard," I said. They seemed happy to.



I followed the man inside and he led me upstairs. I realized that the building was a sort of warehouse. There were stores here of barrels and boxes, enough to last many people through a winter.

"Goodness, you have large stores here," I said. "Is this your house?"

"No," he said with a slight smile and a shake of his head. "This is the common hall. During the winter, we live off of the food stored here, eating it together. During the year we have to replenish it. Putting it all together in one place makes it easier to secure it from thieves, who otherwise might pick any unguarded house to sneak into."

"Oh, are there thieves around?"

"Sometimes. That hill across the Greenway, there, we call 'Thief Clude'. It is often a haven for bandits who roam up and down the Greenway, looking for a village that seems to have let it's guard down. Occasionally they will break into a house and take whatever they can find. By putting it all together here, we can take turns guarding it."

"What does 'clude' mean?" I asked. It was not a word I had heard before."

"It is like a hill that has a cliff on one side. That long row of hills that the Greenway runs along, we call them 'cludes'. South of Thief Clude there is Burg Clude, and then south of town there is Throck Clude. There are others up by Folkstead."

"The map I have is rather old, but it shows Folkstead north of here. Is it still inhabited, or is it mostly abandoned like Southtonburg?"

The man looked at me in a curious way, then, and I wondered if I had said something wrong.

"No," he said, "it is not like Southtonburg. It has people who are high and mighty who live in the town, who like to lord it over the rest of us same as the ones who live in town here, but they at least do not try to own everything inside the walls. That is probably why their walls are in better shape than Southton's; there are more people willing to help keep them in good repair. But they also have vineyards, and they sell their wine down south sometimes, and that lets them buy things in Bree or Tharbad."

"No trouble with thieves there, then," I said hopefully. The man looked at me a bit oddly then, but said nothing.

Then he began to show me what he had for sale, and the next thing you know I had bought more than I could easily carry, and then it turned out that part of the building was a stable, and he had sold me a couple ponies to carry it all for me. I cannot say exactly how it happened; he was a good talker but also a good listener, and I was a bit nervous, and once I said that maybe I might like something (such as a small barrel of apples or a wheel of cheese), he seemed to assume that meant I would buy it, when I really just meant that I MIGHT like it.



I mentioned that I was not sure I could carry it all, meaning maybe I should put some of it back, but he took it to mean I needed help carrying it, and then it was into the stables. I said I thought a pony would be very lonely being separated from its friends, meaning I should not buy it and take it away, and he took it to mean I should get two.

I found myself coming back around the corner of the great hall leading two ponies, both piled up with food, and Willie and Flora's eyes just about popped out of their sockets when they saw me. Willie was smiling, but Flora looked worried; neither one of them said much. We walked on, the four of us (well six now with the ponies), and I was waiting for Flora or Willie to ask me why I had bought so much but they never did.

This is Flora again Gerontius was starting to look really tired, he is still sick after all, so I told him maybe he should sleep now. We will write more again tomorrow I think. By the way I should say that I did not realize at the time that Gerontius was not sure if there would be anything at Fornost Erain once we got there. I suppose it is just as well I did not, as I would not have been willing to go otherwise.



Chapter 6

I seem to be feeling better now, so I will do my own writing for a while. Still no sign of the Lamplighter, but I do not think that is a surprise. My guess is that it will be several days more before she arrives. Willie and Digby are fishing, or trying to, and Flora and Corliss are cooking a stew over the campfire. There is a fire ring here that looks like it has not been used in a while; I do not think anyone but the Lamplighter comes to this part of the island very often.

It is a little bit of an odd feeling to have that face staring at me as I write this. I suppose it has seen a lot. I wish it could talk to me, I would have a lot of questions for it.

[Wait, what face are we talking about? asked Mira. Was that Flora or Corliss? Who is Corliss, anyway? Why is it that she cannot talk? Or maybe he is talking about Hildigard?]

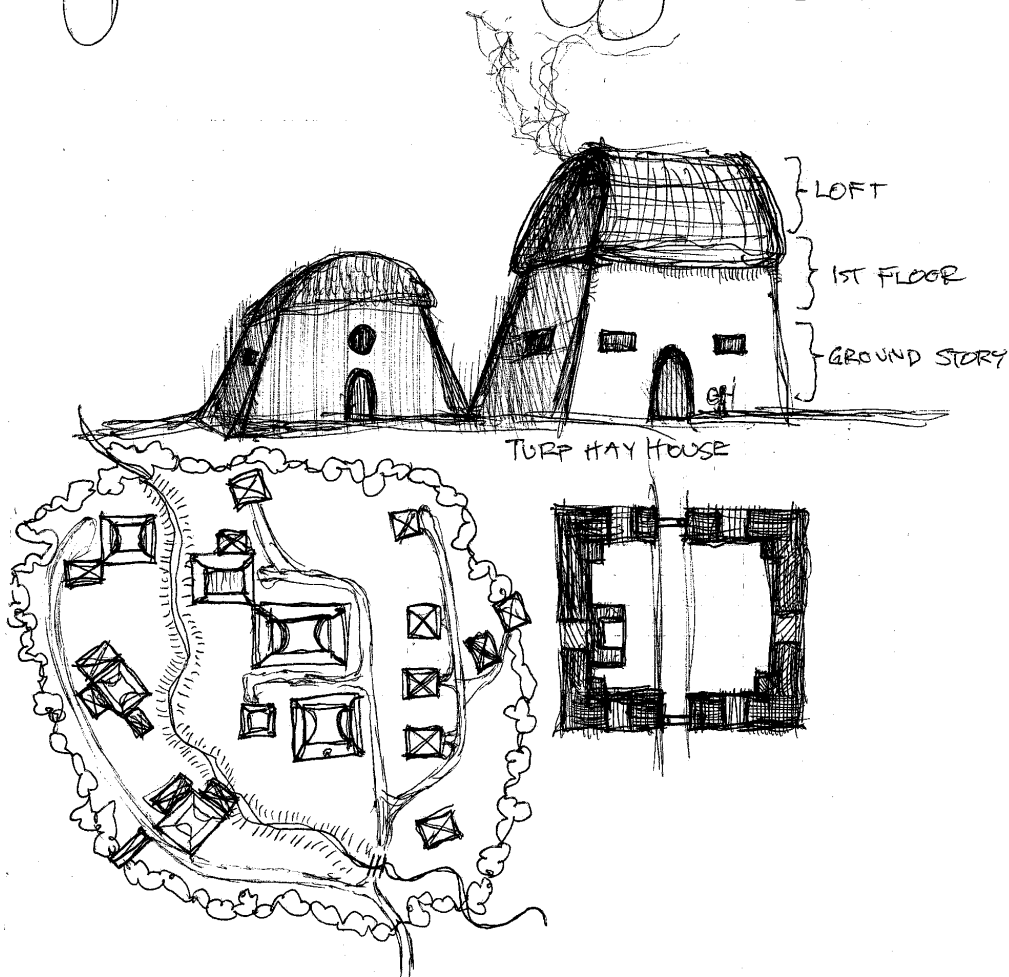
[I am not sure it was any of them, said Bella. He is writing to himself, I think, and not really explaining everything properly. But I suppose we will find out the answer eventually.]

We were still walking, after we left Southonburg and North Haven, even though we had two ponies. There were three of us (not counting Hildigard, who would not have wanted to ride a pony although she did not seem to mind them being around). We could have taken turns being the one to walk, I suppose, but the ponies were also piled pretty heavy with food, so I did not think it would be a good idea to burden them more. It was nice to be able to lighten our packs a bit by shifting some of the weight to the ponies.

We paused to stop and pick some dewberries that we came across, ripening a little earlier than normal, and the second day we found some rose hips. It helped to make our regular food, which was mostly salted meats and cheese and seeds and nuts, last a little longer. Plus, I always found that food picked in the wild tastes a little better to me. At one point Hildigard caught a squirrel and ate that, and she seemed pretty pleased with herself. It reminded me that we were kind of like that squirrel now; dependent on being unseen and unheard, to be safe. I started to wonder if it had been a good idea to buy the ponies, which were convenient for carrying things but did make us a lot easier to see, and somewhat easier to hear.

There were parts of the Greenway where the road almost became a tunnel. People had been walking there for so long, they had worn away the roadway, and over the land on either side continued to build up as the tree roots there kept things from eroding in the rain. It was a little bit of a strange feeling to walk into one of those places where the land on either side rose up to become almost a wall. It was still very green all around, but it was more like a green corridor than a green way. I was coming up in back with the ponies, and Flora and Willie were in front, and it looked at times like they were walking down a long corridor, but the greenest one you ever saw.

The little village of Turp Hay House is one of the best in the Athol area
 region dating back to Arthur and possessing excellent examples of
 old Arundel domestic architecture having slated stone walls
 that taper from bottom to top and have heavy grass thatching
 the roof-cover. The main doors are often arched even on a
 modest house and outbuildings are of the same style. At
 Turp Hay House there are five families in the late 21st century
 with three families working for the Ancient
 Rantaro family. Turp Hay House is known for its
 production of glass and ceramic vessels and as a haven
 for travellers but the ancient decadent dynasty the the
 Sator does not bow to the Mayor's as Folkeston as most
 villages in Athol do — Turp Hay House maintains its
 independence.



The walls blocked some of the sound, and it also just made you think about how long that road had been there, and how many other feet had gone that way. Or, more likely, gone the other way, since most of the Men and Dunedain who lived up north had left for Gondor and other places to the south, long ago. We were hoping they had left something behind, or maybe there would still be a few of them living up north.

We camped a few nights under the trees of the old hedge next to the road. There was still a line of woods just on either side of the Greenway, but beyond that it had become an open meadow. The road ran between two long lines of hills that went mostly north-south, although I guess they would have called most of them cludes and not just hills. It looked like some giant had scraped off the side of the hills as they walked along, maybe dragging an enormous shovel as he went, and it got me wondering if they had hired a giant to make the road we were on. We had not seen or heard any traffic on the road since Southtonburg, but we tried to keep our camp and the ponies out of sight, and it was warm enough so we lit no fire.

The farmers back at North Haven had said that Turp Hay House, just outside of Folkstead, was a better place to stay than inside the old city walls, so when we got to the south end of town we turned left at the big gate and headed along the path west. The town was surrounded by vineyards, and there were thousands of grape arbors in neat rows radiating out like rays of sunshine in all directions. Some of the grape vines were quite old and gnarled, and I wondered how long they had been there. I found out later that grape vines can live to be 100 years old or older. That meant that some of them were planted by people who were not alive anymore. It was interesting to think that the people who were picking those grapes now were harvesting from something started before they were born. I knew that some of the fruit trees around Great Smials were older than I was, but I was younger then, and it was odd to me to think that it would still be the case when I was old, maybe. It would sort of tie you to the land, maybe. I wondered if it would make it hard to leave if you had to. On the other hand, maybe that was why Folkstead was still doing a little better than Southtonburg; more people were willing to stay.

By the time we got to Turp Hay House, it was getting near dusk, and we could see lights in the windows. It was really more of a small village than a house; there were at least a dozen separate buildings. The largest one had several stories, maybe 15 times as tall as a Hobbit, and it occurred to me that even Uncle Bandobras would have thought it was big. The walls were sloped in a bit, and the top was rounded; I found out later it had a loft full of hay. The windows had shutters but some light was still visible, and inside we could hear some gentle laughter and friendly talking, but it was so huge when you are accustomed to Hobbit-sized places. We took a deep breath and walked up to knock on the door.

The woman who came to answer was taller even than most of them, and had dark hair that she kept in long braids. She looked a little surprised to see hobbits, but she smiled, and held the door open for us.



"Well met, little ones, I think you are not children, although you look young enough. Are you what they call hobbits? I have heard that they live further south, in Bree. Are you looking for a place to stay for the night?"

"Yes, please," I said. "Also a place for our ponies to stay, if we could."

"Sure, no problem. Radomir here will take them," she said, gesturing to a young man behind her who came forward and took them off to the stables next door. "My name is Ludmila. How is it with your dog, is she friendly?"

"This is Hildigard, and yes, she is quite friendly," I said. I wondered, after I said it, if I should have pretended that she was a vicious killer, like Flora did at Gedrinker Haven, but the woman Ludmila seemed friendlier than the men back there. Ludmila held out her hand to Hildigard, palm down, to let her sniff her for a few seconds, and then gave her a few pets.

"Yes, she seems to be friendly enough," said Ludmila. "You can bring her in and have her sit by the fire. Would you like anything to eat?"

"Yes, please!" I said, at the same time Flora was saying, "No thank you, we brought our own food."

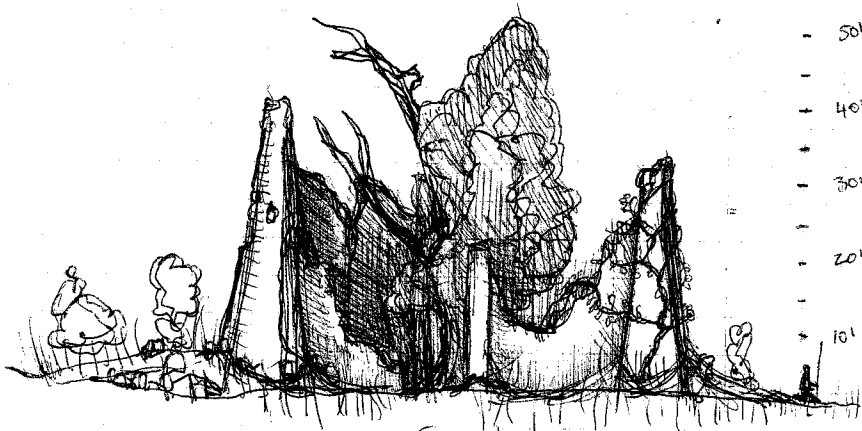
Ludmila smiled a little bit and looked from one of us to the other, and then raised her eyebrows as if to ask a question. Flora and I just looked at each other. Flora was frowning a bit.

"Well I will bring some stew for just you, then, young sir?" she said, and then looked a question at Willie. I think Willie started to say something but then he just nodded.

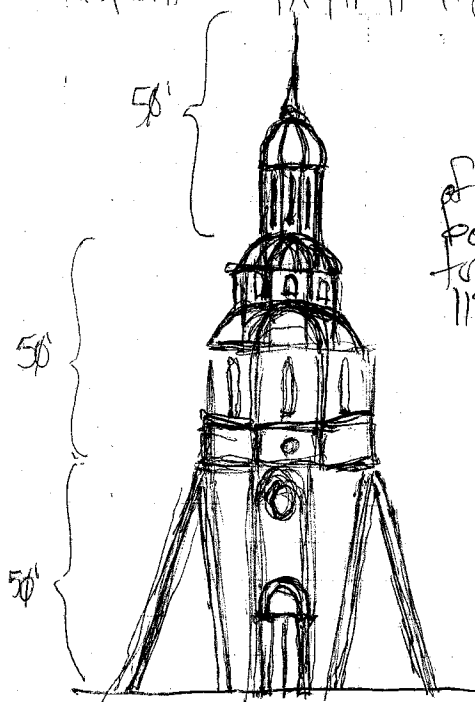
The room was not full but there were a good number of men and women there, at several tables. They found a shorter table and put it near the fire, and I had stew while Willie and Flora ate some from their packs. Ludmila also brought a bone for Hildigard, which I thought was nice of her, and Hildigard laid down next to the fireplace and began gnawing it quite contentedly.

After a little while, I realized that Willie was eyeing my stew enviously, and I wondered why he hadn't just ordered some. I tried to ignore it, but it bothered me a bit. After a few minutes more, I realized that Flora also could tell that Willie was looking over at my stew every so often, and then Willie looked over at Flora abruptly, grimaced, and then stared down at his cold, hard biscuits and beef jerky and cheese and said nothing.

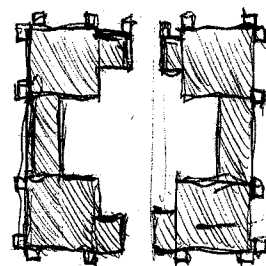
It was a few minutes after that before I realized that Flora must have kicked him under the table, where I couldn't see. It was a few minutes after that before I realized that I had not seen Flora or Willie spend any money so far on this trip.



THE RUIN



This represents an interpretation
of the tower found in an American
book of military architecture as
translated into U.S. steel in the
11th century T.A.



I don't know why it had not occurred to me before that they might not have had as much money on hand as I did. If I had thought of it at all, I would have told them not to worry about it, because I had plenty enough for the trip. But, then, it came clear to me that Flora did not want them living off of my money, and my buying ponies and so much food on the way was kind of throwing in their faces the fact that I had more to spare than they did. I remembered that I had said we would travel light, and live off the land as we went, which probably made it sound as if I was not going to make it an expensive trip. I wished again that I had not bought the ponies, but I did not know what to do or say. We ate the rest of our food without talking.

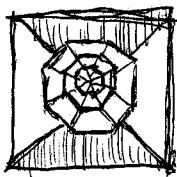
After we were done, I told Willie and Flora I was going to go for a walk with Hildigard, and I would meet them at our room. I checked with Ludmila as to which room would be ours, and then I walked outside with Hildigard. I was feeling somewhat melancholy and sad that I had put Flora and Willie in a position where they felt awkward, and I didn't know what to do about it that would not just make things worse, so I wanted to walk under the stars for a bit and clear my thoughts.

I walked along the path over a little stream that came down from the hills, and then I decided to walk along it uphill. It crossed the little stream again and then went up, and after a bit I realized as I got going that there looked to be a ruins up at the top of the hill. I started thinking about the map from Uncle Bandobras, which had a stream, a bridge, and the base of what looked like a tower, and I began to wonder if maybe this was the spot that was on that map.

I had not looked at the map in a while, or I would have realized that the bridge, stream, and tower were not arranged in anything like the same way, but even with the crescent moon out there was not enough light to really read it by. Anyway, I did not want to go back to Turp Hay House and get in my pack to look at the map, because if Flora or Willie saw me do that they might ask questions, and I wasn't ready to answer any questions about the map yet, mostly because I thought it could turn out to be nothing and I would appear foolish.

I hurried on up the path towards the ruin on the hill, which ended up taking over an hour. At one point Hildigard looked back at Turp Hay House, and I think was wondering why we were not going back to where it was warm and cozy to sleep. But she stayed with me, and I admit I felt better having her with me out alone in the dark.

The path went right up to the ruin, which was just the base of the tower but it was still over ten times my height, even what was left of it. There was a great elm in the middle of the ruin, which had now grown as high as what was left of the walls around it. I wandered around it for a while, trying to find the spot where the tower would have looked down on the little stream. The hill we were on was one of a series that ran north to south, and little streams cut between them, taking water from up north, down south and west. The path had taken us past the hill a bit, and we were actually a little lower now than Turp Hay House and Folkstead, behind us. I realized the stream probably ended up joining the Brandywine River, eventually, and running right past the Shire. I thought that maybe if I got up on top of the cairn, I could



see in the moonlight where the water went to, and suddenly I decided that I would do that. There was no particular good reason why I needed to, of course, but that's what I did.

While I was up there, trying not to dislodge any of the big rocks in the cairn so that I would go crashing down, it occurred to me that sometimes a cairn is a bunch of rocks piled up to mark where someone dead has been buried, and it felt a bit peculiar that I might be climbing on someone's tomb. Hildigard did not seem to be especially happy with my idea, either, and then she made a little whine. Not too loud, but enough for me to hear and look back at her to see what was wrong. I saw that she was not looking my direction, she was looking back at the hill behind us. Then, I realized that there was a cave opening there, in the side of the hill. Then, Hildigard began growling at it.

I managed to get down from the cairn pretty quick, and then whispered "Come on girl!" urgently to Hildigard and started running back down the path the way I had come. Hildigard came running along with me. At first I thought maybe I heard something running behind me, chasing me, but I didn't dare to look back to see what it was, and soon I stopped hearing it and wondered if it had really been there at all or just my imagination. I kept running though, and soon we were headed down the hill towards Turp Hay House again.

I came into the yard outside of the house, with the lights still on inside, and I heard the sound of people singing, and then I felt a little better. Hildigard seemed happy, excited by our little run, and whatever she had been growling about was not bothering her now, so I started to wonder why I had spooked like that. Maybe it was me thinking about the idea that I was standing on someone's tomb, perhaps? Then, I realized that one of the voices I heard singing was Willy.

I went back into the common room, and there was Willie, standing up on the hearth by the fireplace, with a mug in his hands, and a big smile as he was belting out a song. I never did get him to explain where it came from, I suspect he might have made it up himself.

Drink, and a fire, and an emptied bowl,
Fills your belly, and warms your soul,
Walking all day takes it's toll,
Keep your mind on the triple goal,
a drink, a fire, and an emptied bowl.

Drink up! Warm up! Fill up! Hurrah!

Stars in the sky at night are fine,
Tree and brush and flower and vine,
Birds in the air and fish on the line,
But better than all of this is wine,
logs on a fire, and a meal that's mine.



Drink up! Warm up! Fill up! Hurrah!

The song of the bird is sweet it's true,
Clouds are pretty in a sky of blue,
Oak and ash and pine and yew,
But cozier yet when the day is through,
is wine by the fire and a bowl of stew.

Drink up! Warm up! Fill up! Hurrah!

I like walking on a day that's fair,
The sun on your face, the breeze in your hair,
Walk all day with never a care,
But better a bottle or best a pair,
a fire, a pie, and another to spare

Drink up! Warm up! Fill up! Hurrah!

With every chorus, the men all joined in with his "Drink up!" and "Hurrah!" After he finished singing, he tipped back his cup and the little crowd all gave a cheer as he drank. Flora, sitting not far away, did not seem very happy, although everyone else was. When Ludmila came up to refill his cup with wine Flora tried to wave her away, but Ludmila would not be deterred.

"Not to worry, miss, this one is free," said Ludmila. "The gentlemen at the long table bought it for him."

I realized, then, that Willie had probably been spending some of his money on wine, and Flora would be upset about that. I tried to help her to talk Willie into going back to our room, and he collapsed on his bed without washing his face, which still had a bit of red wine around the corners of his mouth. He was smiling, but I was worried about whether he would have a headache in the morning.

"And where were you, then?" asked Flora. She crossed her arms and looked at me with a bit of a frown.

I told Flora where I had been walking, although I decided to leave out the part where I ran away from what was probably just my own imagination. Her eyes got wide nonetheless, and she looked alarmed.

"Oh, Gerontius, that was what they call Thieves' Hill!" she said. "They say that a gang of bandits sometimes stays up there, in a cave, and they will attack travellers and take all that they have, sometimes even their lives! The men in the common room were warning us about them. I am so glad you did not meet with any thieves this night. You must be careful!"



Well I felt a bit uncertain then, and wondered if it had all not just been my imagination after all. It also reminded me that I was acting as if I were still in the Shire, where there are not many bandits nowadays. It did make me feel a bit peculiar, to know that such men were not far outside the Shire. I knew that my father had spent a good deal of his time with the managing of the shire-reeves, who walked the borders of the Shire and watched for ruffians. It all seemed to be a great deal of meeting with other hobbits and talking and talking, and then going from one farthing to another to recruit young lads to join. I had never paid too much attention to it, and it seemed like boring work, just walking the same paths again and again and again. I started to think that I should have done more of my part to help out with it.

"It was all right," I said, "I had Hildigard with me."

Hildigard, who was lying on the floor near us both, looked up at the mention of her name, which was the first time I'd seen her do that. So, I thought, she learned her name rather fast, she must be a clever dog. Then I recalled that she had growled a bit at the cave, and I started to feel more sure that it was not just my imagination I was running away from. Also, that I would do well to pay attention to her opinion of things, whenever I was not sure.

"Well I am glad of that," said Flora, "and I think perhaps she has more sense than you do, sometimes."

It was not so much that I disagreed, but I did think that Flora was being a little harsh, and I suppose I frowned.

"Oh," said Flora, "I'm sorry Gerontius. I think I am really just upset with Willie."

There wasn't much more to say, then, so we found our beds. This time I slept in the one with Willie, so Flora could have a bed of her own. He got up during the middle of the night to get a drink from the pitcher of water by the basin, and then poured some of the rest of it over his head, and I was thinking that probably he was not feeling very well.

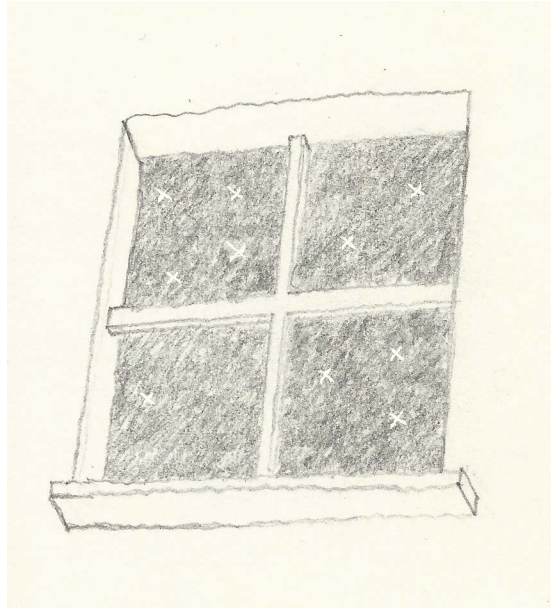
"You all right there, Willie?" I whispered when he came back to bed.

"Ugh," he said quietly. "It may be, that I should have drunk a bit less. Don't tell Flora, she'll be upset."

"I do believe she has guessed it already," I whispered, with a bit of a smile.

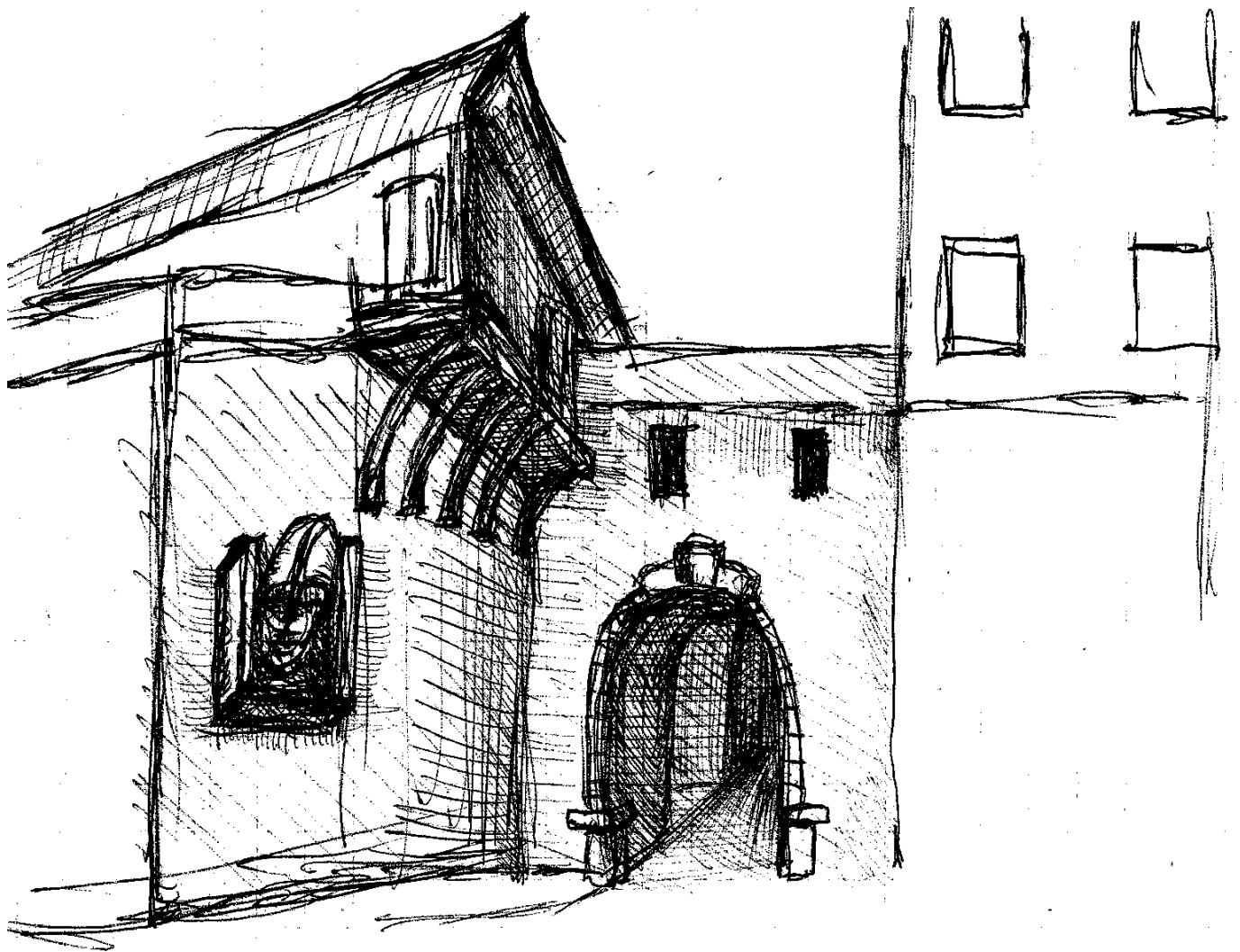
"Ugh," he muttered again. "It is to be hoped that I die in my sleep tonight."

"Oh I do hope not," I said. "I should miss you a great deal."



"Well perhaps I shall try to live through this headache then," he said. "In any event, it would be cruel to leave you to face her alone in the morning."

He did not say anything more, and I lay there smiling in the dark. I realized that I did in fact like being with both Willie and Flora, better than I did being back home. Perhaps part of it was that no one was treating me like the Thain's son, expected to be responsible and ready to take on a serious and boring life. Even Flora, when she was scolding me for being reckless, was just being concerned, not sorrowfully disappointed like my parents often were. But part of it was just that I liked them, both Flora and Willie. I softly hummed Willie's song to myself for a little bit, while I stared at the ceiling in the dark. Then I imagined what it would have been like for Willie and Flora if I had not been alive in the morning, because I had been killed by thieves up on Thieves' Hill. That gave me a lot to think about, and it was a while before I fell back asleep.



Chapter 7 - Folkstead

This is Willie. Flora says I am to write down what happened, when we left Turp Hay House and went into Folkstead. I think I know why she wants me to write this part, as she is still cross with me for what happened then. But I suppose I'd rather tell it myself than let her do it, and write everything down worse than it happened. Which was already pretty bad, to be honest.

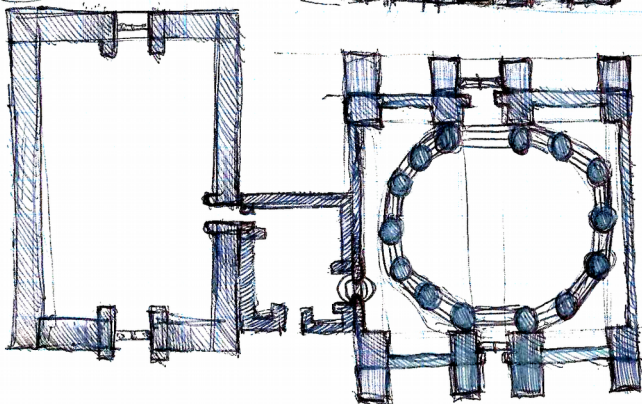
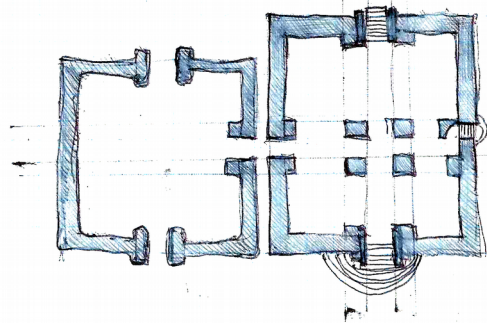
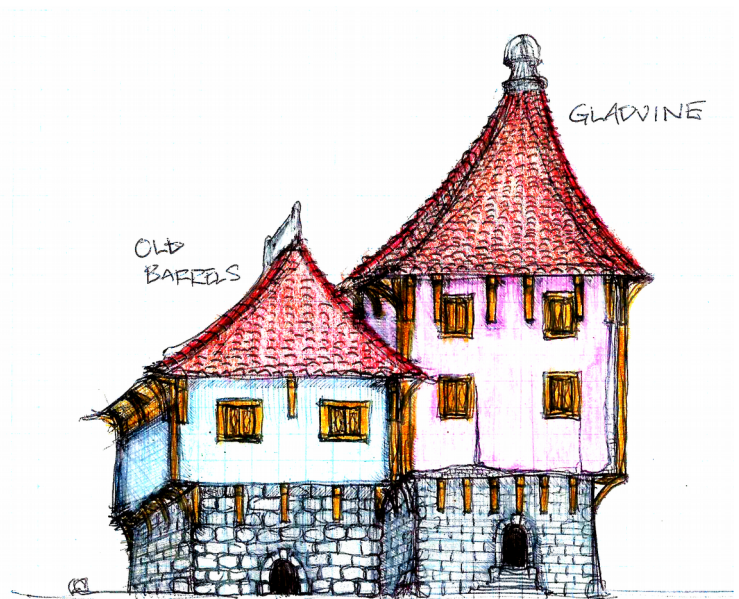
So we woke up in the morning and left Turp Hay House, and headed back towards Folkstead to get on the main road, the Greenway. There was a big gatehouse on the west side of the town, more of a tunnel almost, and it had a great face of stone that looked out at you as you drew closer. I found it a little bit funny, to have a Dunedan knight or whatever he was, staring at me. He was not scowling, but nor was he smiling, and it gave him a bit of a judgemental expression. Looking back on it now, I expect it was just that whoever sat there to model for the sculptor could hardly have kept a smile on his face for long enough for the sculptor to finish. Now that I think of it that away, I have a bit of sympathy for the poor fellow, having to sit there still for so long. At the time, though, it seemed peculiar; if you meet a living person who looks straight at you like that without smiling or anything, it would make you wonder what they were thinking. So that made me nervous.

Then, we entered into the long curving passageway through the walls of the town, and it got almost dark again, and the clip-clop of our ponies hooves sort of echoed on the stones, which felt cool and a bit damp from morning dew. When we came out into the light again inside the town, I think I breathed a sigh of relief. Some parts of the town were a bit run down, but the center square looked nice, and there were four big colorful winery buildings there, facing each other, and also the King's tasting house.

I know now we should have just continued on through, got on the main road and taken it through the north gate, but to be honest I was feeling a bit nervous about going back into the wilderness outside of town. The menfolk back at Turp Hay House seemed nice enough, but Flora had told me in the morning about how Gerontius had maybe almost wandered into the lair of a band of thieves the night before. It should have been a reason to get as much distance from there as we could while the sun was up, but my head was pounding from too much drink the night before, and it occurred to me that another drink might make it not hurt so much.

Well Flora pitched a fit at the mention of that, and I think maybe I could have been talked out of it if she hadn't argued so, but it got my back up, as they say, and then I had to go in and have a drink just to show her that I would not be bossed around. Gerontius just tried to stay out of it, as usual back then when we had just met. Eventually, it was Flora outside with the ponies, and me inside, and then a minute later Gerontius came in.

Now I had by then already gotten the idea that perhaps Gerontius had a bit more money than we did, but I didn't want him to feel that I was trying to live off of him. When he ordered two



glasses of wine, he probably meant one of them for each of us, but I misunderstood and so I ordered two glasses for myself as well, so it was all equal. The wine in Folkstead, I do have to say, is tasty, and soon we were forgetting ourselves, and when the big clock in the town square chimed noon we gasped, and we each drained our fourth glasses and went outside to get going.

We stumbled outside, and it was ever so bright, and the sun might have been hot on our faces but Flora was hotter. So, we got going, and I could feel that fuming anger of hers kind of beating down on me, and put me back into a bad mood again. Plus, after the wine wore off from walking I found that maybe I felt a bit worse than ever. So, when we got to a fork in the Greenway, where the "road" looked more like a path than ever, and the hedge was kind of overgrown, and Gerontius went left instead of right as the map said, I did not notice it. Flora did not notice either, I believe because she was so mad at me that was all she could think about. It wasn't until we found ourselves at that ruin and the path ended there that I realized maybe Gerontius had taken a wrong turn.

"I don't understand," he said. "Obviously we somehow left the main road without realizing it. We went right at the last fork, though, and the map says that is the way the main road goes."

"We went left at the last fork," said Flora.

"What?" said Gerontius, his eyes widening a bit. "No, no, I was sure we went to the right," and he held out his hand to show which way we had gone.

"That is your left hand," said Flora.

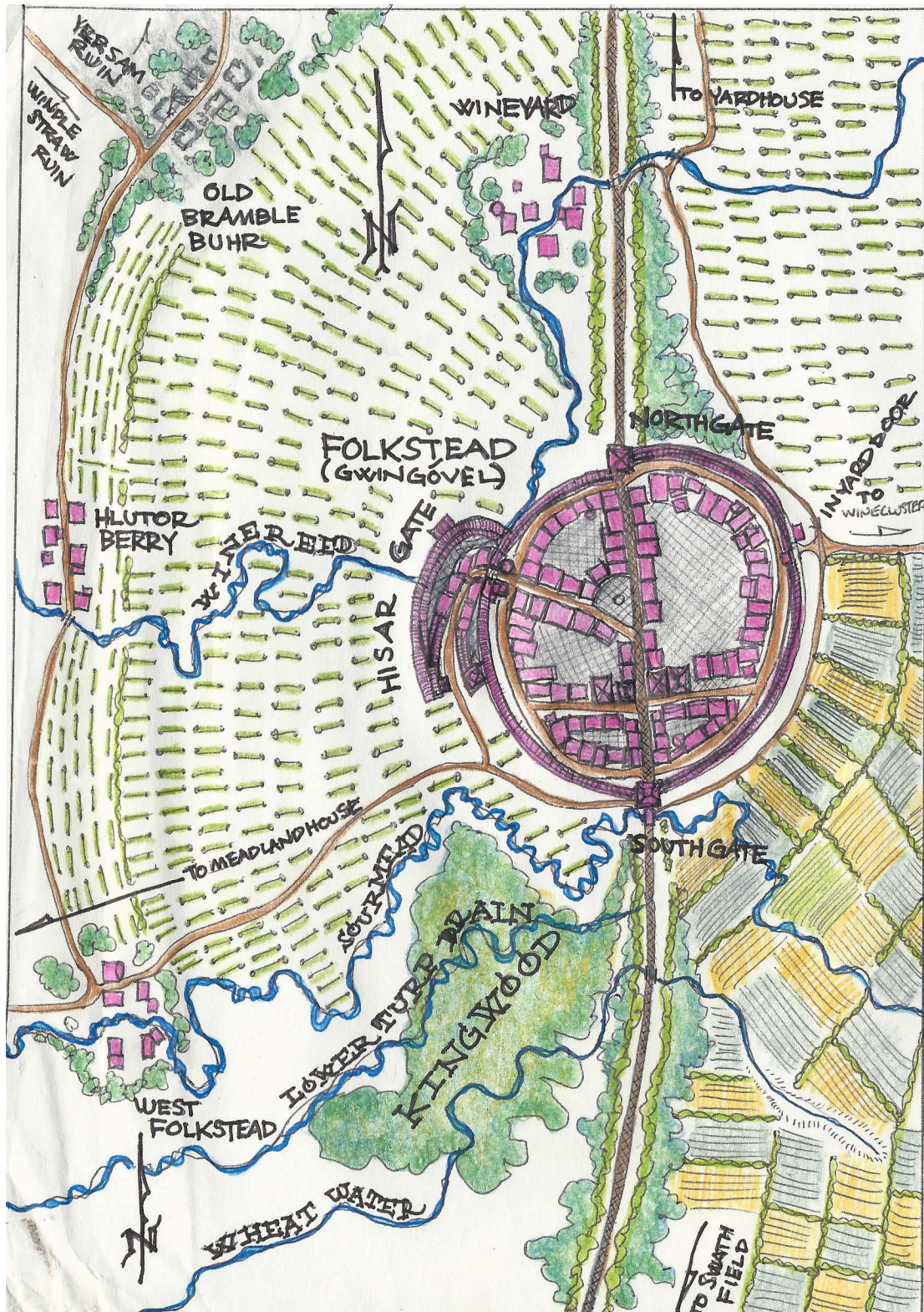
"What?" said Gerontius, and then he compared which hand he was holding out, to the map. "Oh, I suppose it is. Oh. Bother."

We all sat there, silent, realizing that the last several hours of walking had been for nothing. Worse than nothing, really, since it was getting us further away from the road we meant to stay on. The ponies swished their tails to drive away flies, and there was the sound of the birds chirping around us. Then, I realized that some of the sounds were not birds, but insects, and the sun was starting to get kind of low.

"Can we make it back to the road by dark?" I asked.

"No," said Flora, and she buried her face in her hands, I think because she thought otherwise she would end up screaming.

"Well," said Gerontius, "I suppose the best thing is to simply camp here for tonight. We have food, and this ruin still gives us a bit of shelter. We could start a little campfire inside the walls, and it would not be seen from far away. Plus, it would block the wind a bit. Then in the morning, we can head back to the main road."



So we trudged on into the midst of the ruined stone walls. I believe perhaps that is the moment when Flora stopped being mad at me, and I realized that my head wasn't hurting so bad as before, but now we just felt tired, both of us. Gerontius, though, was all energy, seeing to the ponies and gathering tinder and fuel and making the fire, and then getting out his little kettle and fetching some water to start boiling some for soup. He was gone for a few minutes, fetching the water, and Flora and I just sort of sat and stared at the little fire, and each other, and back at the fire.

"I'm sorry I had too much wine," I said finally.

"Well I should think so," said Flora really sharp. We did not say anything more for a bit.

"That's not how I meant it to sound," she said finally.

"I know," I said. We sat there, and stared at the fire some more, and listened to it and the sound of the ponies eating in their feedbags, until Gerontius came back with water in his kettle.

He busied himself getting it set up over the fire, with some sort of iron contraption with stakes that could hold it over the flame, so we did not have to wait for it to burn down to coals before we had hot water. It came to me, then, that he was hurrying around so much, not because he was not just as tired as I was, but because he was embarrassed at taking us off in the wrong direction, and he was trying to make up for it by doing all the work at the campsite. Since I was the one who took us into the wine tasting room that morning, it did not seem fair exactly. I got up and tried to do a bit of scavenging for fuel for the fire.

We were at the edge of a bit of a spur, and it went down pretty steep, and down into a gulch, and then it rose up again to a hill nearly as high on the other side, and you could see on the other side a little spring-fed pool, which was very dark, almost black. I supposed that was where Gerontius had gotten our water, and then he'd had to climb back up that hill, almost a cliff really, to bring it to us. Looking back up, I could see the row of big trees on either side of the Greenway, the hedge that had been planted long ago, and it seemed a bit silly that we had not noticed we were taking the wrong way. I suppose part of it is that it was all overgrown, and not so neat and obvious as it looked from a distance, and the way we did take also had lots of brush on either side, but also I think part of it was that I was thinking about my headache and Flora was thinking about how mad she was at me, and so perhaps it was not all Gerontius' fault that we got lost. Although, I do know my right from my left even when I have a headache, and if he'd told us we were to go right at the fork beforehand we would have done it.

I grabbed a few more branches and brush to burn and went back into the ruin, which looked like at one time it had maybe been a windmill. There was a great deal of wind out here on this spur, and it must have milled a goodly quantity of grain back when it was used. I was glad that part of the walls were still standing, and gave us a bit of a break from the wind, because it

BLOW FERNOST, TO THE EAST OF BRANDYWINE, NORTH OF THE OLD EAST ROAD WEST OF ELYN SUL. THIS REGION OF ARTHEDAIN WAS CALLED VARIOUSLY OVER ITS HISTORY IN ARBOR 2) IN ARTHEDAIN BUT BY THE THIRD AGE IT WAS CONSISTANTLY CALLED IN MANNISH TONGUES THE ROADWIDES, THE NORTHERN PART BEING DOMINATED BY AN AREA CALLED ARTHEL MEAD WHO CENTER WAS THE VILLAGE OF FOLKSTEAD

FOLKSTEAD IN TURN SAT NEAR THE TOP OF A WIDE LOW HILL KNOWN FOR MIN YARDS THE SERVED THE FOUR GREAT WINERIES IN FOLKSTEAD, THE THREE EAGLES, THE GOLDEN DRAUGHT, OLD BARRELS & GLADWINE.

ALL OF THE WINERIES OF FOLKSTEAD ARE OLDER HOUSED IN OVERBUILDINGS. IN FACT THE FIVE BUILDINGS THAT MAKE UP THE CHAPWINE ROW ARE THE OLDEST BUILDINGS IN FOLKSTEAD AND THE LAST VISTAGES OF THE OLD ARTHEDAIN CITY OF GWINGOVEL WHICH WAS LAD TO WASTE IN THE WAR WITH THE WITCH KING. IN THE YEARS FOLLOWING A NEW TOWN WAS BUILT USING THE REMAINS OF GWINGOVEL



A TYPICAL VINE ARBOR FOUND ON WINELAND NEAR FOLKSTEAD

would have been none too cozy otherwise. As it was, hearing the wind blow outside the walls but being tucked away in a corner with our little fire, it felt almost comfortable.

"Gerontius," I said, "don't worry about us taking the wrong turn. It's not so bad. We'll get back on the road tomorrow and be to Norbury before you know it."

"I'm sorry about that," he said quickly. It was almost like he wanted to say something before, but didn't because he wasn't sure if we would forgive him, and once I had said that it was all right it popped out of him immediately because he had already been thinking it. "I get confused about my right and left sometimes."

[I never knew Papa to get his right and left confused, said Mira. I wonder why he said that.]

[Because he just got his right and left confused that day, said Bella. Maybe he did when he was younger. You used to take forever to empty the food scraps on the compost pile, when you were little, and then after the time when you met Renshaw while you were doing that, you were always quicker.]

[Well, said Mira with a bit of a sly expression on her face, I think that was not quite the same. For one thing, I doubt that Papa ever meant to confuse his right and left hands.]

[I just mean, said Bella, that when something unpleasant happens, it can change you, because it helps you to learn things better.]

[I still don't think it's the same, said Mira.]

[Why did you used to take so long out at the compost pile, anyway? asked Donna. But Mira did not appear to notice the question, and began reading from the journal again.]

"...confused about my right and left sometimes."

"Not to worry. You can just tell us what our way is next and we can all keep an eye out."

"Well it will be straight on the Greenway for a day and a half or maybe a full two days now," said Gerontius, "then we will come to a place where a stream crosses the road. Then it will be on to the right and up, and we should come to Fornost Erain, that a lot of Hobbits call Norbury, which will be up a bit on a hill."

We were talking about that for a bit, and then Flora interrupted us.

"What is that?" she asked in a low voice, soft but urgent like. We all got quiet, and Hildigard perked up her ears.

Gerontius and I crept over to the broken walls, and peaked our heads just partway over the top to look out. There was another ruin, maybe a house of some sort, that we had passed on this



road not long after we left the proper path we should have been on. It was maybe six miles back, and halfway between there and where we were, there was a group of Men coming up the road towards us. They were not making much noise, but Flora had heard something, maybe they had been talking to each other, and the wind was blowing this way so it had come to us easier than our sounds would to them. It would also be blowing our little campfire's smoke the other way, away from them and off the bluff towards that black pool below.

"They must be headed here," said Gerontius, and I had to agree. What else would you be coming this way for?

We quick put the fire out, and got the ponies ready to go, all the while expecting to have them come upon us.

"It's clear that we cannot go back the way we came," said Gerontius in a low voice when we were all ready to move, "but I don't think we can take these ponies down that gulch, it's too steep for them. So let's just go as far as we can get them northeast, just a bit down the hill so we're out of sight from where they are, and then turn left and head north towards Fornost, and we'll put some distance between us and them tonight."

"Right," said Flora.

"Agreed," said I.

"No," said Flora, "right."

"What?" asked Gerontius and myself both at once.

"If we turn north, then we are turning to our right," said Flora. "You said left."

"Aha," said Gerontius. "Yes, just as you say. Right."

"Good," said I.

"Agreed," said Flora.

Hildigard said nothing, but had begun to act restless, and maybe gave a tiny bit of a whine, as if she was ready to get a move on, and the rest of us agreed with her so we headed out. The entrance to the ruin that we had come in was facing directly towards those men, whoever they were, so we did not want to go out that way. We stumbled through the ruin in the dark, trying to find a way that our ponies could go, and had to move a few stones so that they could make it. Then we moved off down the hill a bit and the wind blew right through us, it felt like. We could not hear anything but that wind. We worked our way around to the north and kept going, slow enough to be quiet but as fast as we dared, and continued for a couple hours. When we finally got to a point where there was a little stream away to our left, we stopped

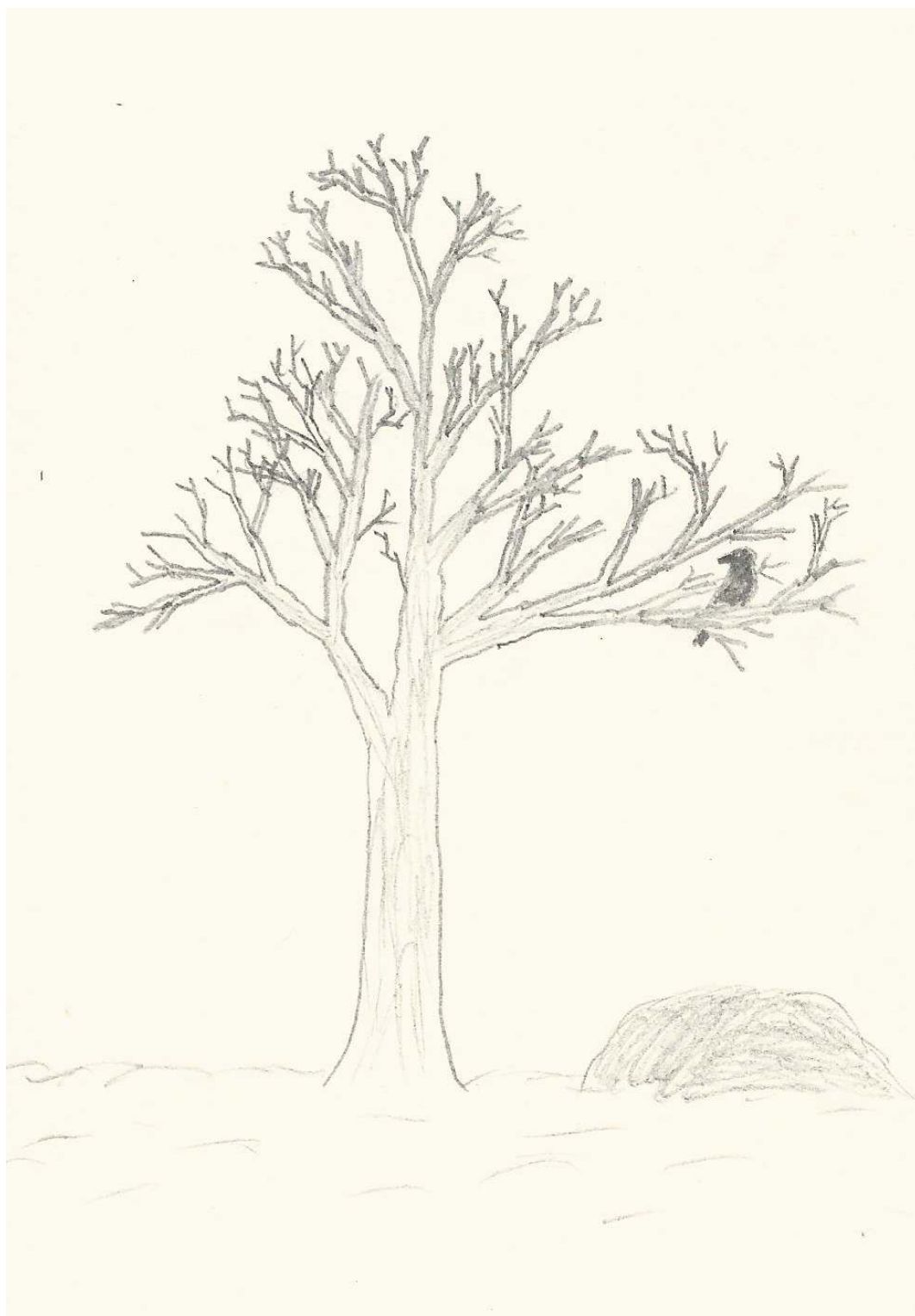


Willie Underhill

there and bedded down again. It was not nearly so comfortable as it had been earlier, and we lit no fire.

When we were finally all laying down, with the ponies not too far away getting drowsy as well, I huddled under my blanket and looked up at the stars, and it came to me that if we had gotten a good start earlier in the morning then even if we had taken the wrong turn, we would have made it back to the Greenway before dark and perhaps we could have found a safer and snugger place to bed down. We did not know exactly what those men would have done had we met them, but they had gone up the hill to that ruin after dark which is not what most folks would do, although I suppose they could have thought the same of us, but more likely they were just not the sort of folks who would be welcome in a Folkstead inn or anything similar. I wondered if they were the same ones that Gerontius had maybe almost met up with the night before, or a different bunch. I began to wonder if it was right of me to talk Flora into us wandering out so far from home, but then I began to remember little Hazel, and thinking that in just a couple more days we might find a doctor who could make something to help her. Then I felt a little better, although I decided not to have any more wine for a while maybe, and I went off to sleep.

There, that's all I'm writing, and Flora better lay off about this now, enough is enough, and I haven't had no more to drink since then, very much. But if we ever get back to Bree I'm going to "The Prancing Pony" to celebrate, and that's final.



Chapter 8 - Matron, Chieftain, Wizard

Mira stood outside, in the evening gloom, by the tree near the compost pile. It was cold, and she was not going to stay outside long, but she could not help staying for just a bit, to look around at the old spot she remembered from her days as a girl living in Great Smials. It was very quiet, with a blanket of snow covering everything around her except the compost pile, which generated enough of its own heat to melt the snow on it, eventually.

She heard a rustle of wings from a bird up in the tree, and looked up.

"Tiecelin?" she asked.

"Who?" asked the crow that sat there.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you were Tiecelin. But then, I suppose he must be dead by now, crows don't live that long."

"I thought you said Tiecelin. That was my great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, grandfather. He was the one who discovered this spot."

"My goodness, that's a lot of 'great's. How do you know so much about your family tree?"

"Because I sit here in it a lot."

"Wait, what? Oh, no, I don't mean a real tree, I mean...um,"

"Hold on, I think I got that wrong. I think he was just my great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, grandfather. My mistake. Say, are you the one who was called Mira?"

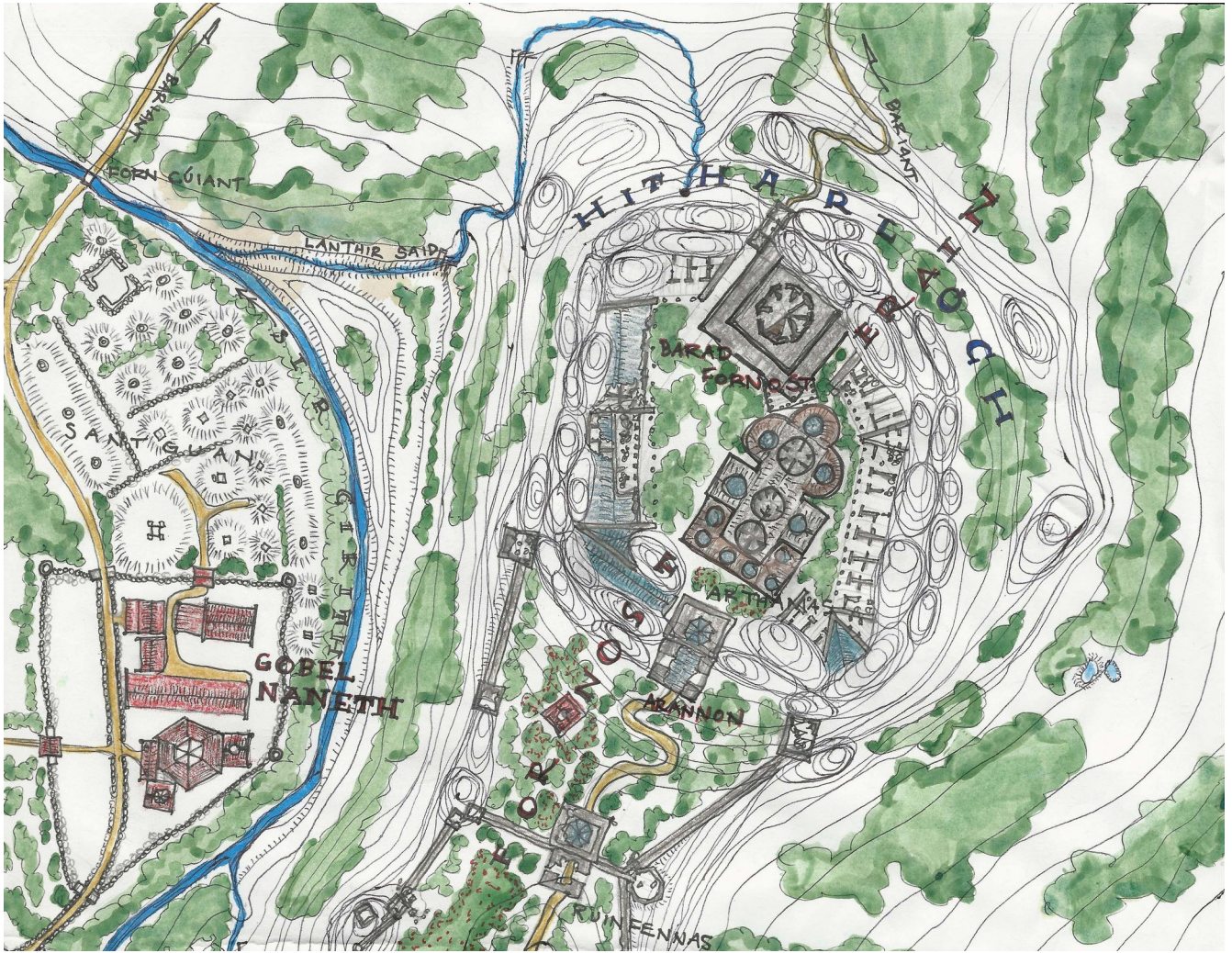
"Yes, that's me! Did Tiecelin tell you about me?"

"No, of course not, he died long before I was born. But the stories my mother told me sound like you, though. I think that means your father is the one with the white hair who lives here, yes?"

"Well that is true. There are other hobbits with white hair, but he might be the only one living here at Great Smials."

"Can you give him a message? I haven't seen him out here by the food pile lately."

"You have a message for my papa? You talked to him?"



"Yes, can you tell him that I delivered his message? To the lady down south. It took a long time, there were a lot of storms, and it is too cold to fly at night. But I got there, and gave her his message. Can you tell him that?"

"Well I will try, he is very sick right now."

"Oh I am sorry to hear that. He always brought out the best food."

"Say, can you tell me again what the message was that you were supposed to give this lady down south?"

"I suppose so. I was told to say, 'He is moving, please send it now.' Say, are those apple cores you have in your bucket there?"

* * * * *

This is Flora again, and I am writing this bit because Willie is in a snit and says that since he had to write the last part I must write this part. Which is fair, I suppose, but he is being a bit of a baby about it, and anyway I already did write one part when Gerontius was dictating. Gerontius is just staring upriver a lot and seems to not mind us writing in his journal, and it does give one something to do, so here goes. It is better than listening to Digby and Corliss shouting at each other. I've learned that when they're shouting at each other, it doesn't particularly mean they are genuinely angry, they just act that way. But it's still hard to listen to. I wonder if Willie and I sound like that. But then, we don't normally shout for very long, before I go silent and fume, whereas I think Digby and Corliss can do it all day if they're allowed. I do believe that's why their voices sound a bit hoarse, normally.

I think maybe we can jump to the part where we met the Naneth. That's what they called her, although in Staddle or Bree we would probably have called her the matron. She was a tall Dunadan lady, very noble looking with dark hair that had just started to silver a bit, all in long braids with silver-blue ribbons at the end that matched her dark dress with it's silver stars and trees on it, and her eyes were silvery blue as well. She lived at Norbury, in a house called Gobel Naneth, even though everything outside the walls of her estate was wasted and ruined. She was the one who came to greet us when we were leading our ponies up to Fornost Erain. I learned since then that there were archers watching, from the walls around her big house, and if we had done anything that alarmed them, we might have ended up with arrows stuck in us. But I expect that she didn't see a danger in hobbits coming to visit, and perhaps it is sometimes an advantage to be less frightening to look at. What would have happened if we'd gone there with Digby and Corliss, I don't like to think. They are not very reassuring to look at, at first glance.

We let Gerontius do the talking, as he seemed more willing to do it, and to be honest I felt a bit funny in front of the Naneth. She was not mean, but when she looked at you she had a lot of wisdom in her eyes, and you sort of felt immediately like you had been doing something



foolish, and I was embarrassed to talk. I notice Willie was happy to let Gerontius do the talking as well.

"My name is Gerontius, from the Shire," he said, "and this is Flora and Willie Underhill from Staddle, near Bree. We came here to look in the library of books that was here, to see if we can find how to make a medicine for their little sister, Hazel. If you could tell us where here we would have the best chance of finding the books of the ancient royal library, it would be much appreciated. We do not wish to take anything, only to look, and we will be very careful. Would that be all right?"

There were a few long moments of silence, when I thought maybe she would turn us away after all our effort to get here. She looked at each one of us in turn.

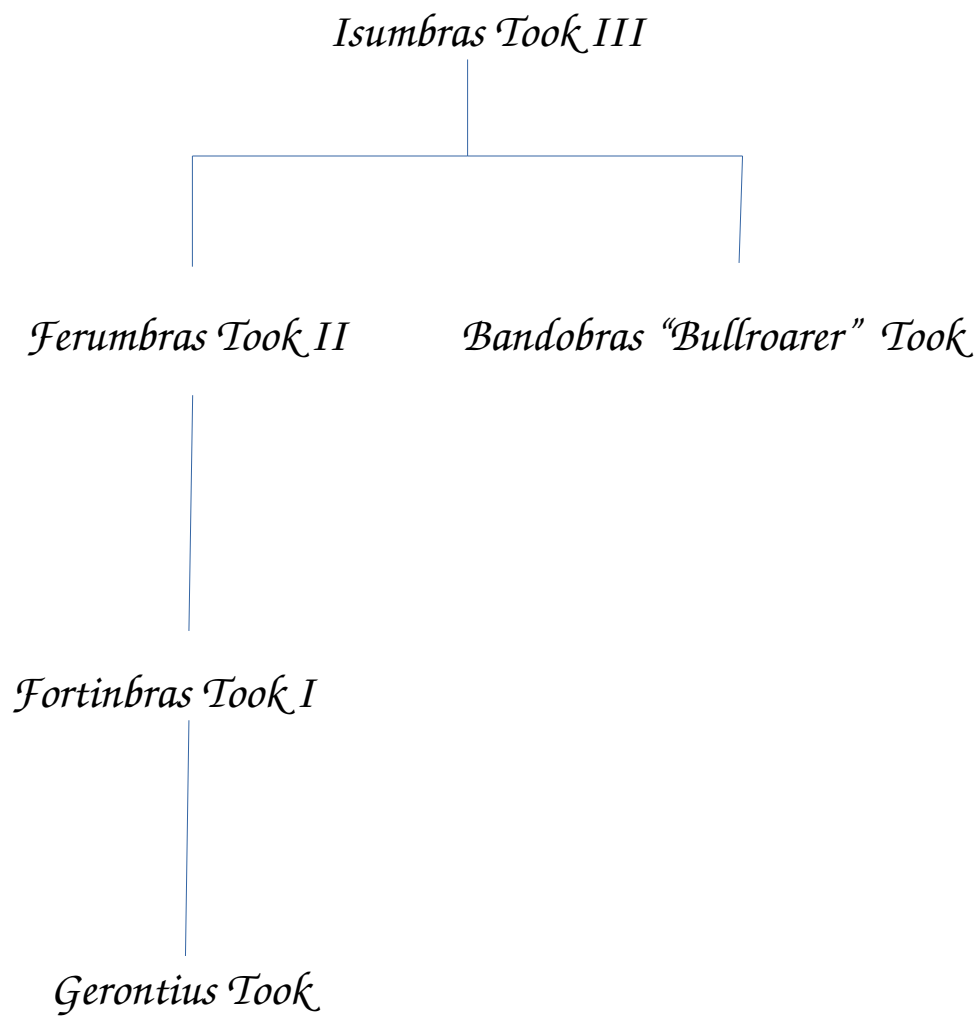
"Perhaps you should come in to my house, and we can discuss this matter further," she said. She turned and walked back towards her house, and we followed her into her estate.

There was a wall around it, and it was only a few buildings but they were fancy, with spires on top and the windows with leaded panes and all. The outside was sort of a sky blue on the walls and dark red around the trim and on the roofs, and I thought that it must have been a deal of trouble to keep that painted proper every few years. Across the stream from the Naneth's estate was the castle itself, Fornost Erain, and it still looked mighty impressive even fallen down and in disrepair. But seeing all of that crumbling as it was, it brought home to a person how much work it must have been over the centuries to keep the Matron's Home from doing the same.

When we came inside, we saw that there were other Dunedain there, and they all seemed to be deferring to her as the lady of the house. There weren't too many, maybe a dozen or so, but some of them gave us looks like they weren't too pleased to have strangers come to visit. I learned later that this is something they do to anyone who is new, just to let them know that they are not to give the Naneth any trouble. But at the time, it made me wonder if we had wandered into a place like Gedrinker Haven that we would not wish to stay at. We had to leave our ponies with them before we entered the house, and I was wondering if we would ever see them or our things again. Hildigard's leash was tied to a stake in the ground just outside the front door, although they did give her a bowl of water.

"This medicine you look for," said the Naneth, when she had taken a seat in her big chair, and gestured to indicate that we should be seated as well, "what makes you think you can find reference to it here?"

"In the days of the Kings," said Gerontius, "it is said that they could send to Fornost Erain and there were healers who knew how to make a medicine, some balm or tincture. Maybe not a cure, but a treatment, so they would stay healthy if they kept taking it. If that is true, then maybe the library here would have a reference to it."



The Naneth listened carefully, and pursed her lips a bit, as if she were thinking it over. But then, she said something that did not seem to relate to the topic.

"What is your family name, Gerontius?"

Gerontius looked a little bit surprised by the question, and it occurred to me that we had never asked his family name, I cannot say why not. Gerontius was an unusual enough name that I guess we never thought we would need to say which 'Gerontius' we meant. When he answered, he was a little bit slow and softspoken, as if he was not certain he wanted to, but dared not refuse the Naneth, she had that kind of presence that made you tend to do what she told you to.

"Took, Gerontius Took," he said.

Willie and I looked at each other. We had heard of the Took before, but we had never met one. Willie looked like he was trying to remember something, as if he had heard the name but couldn't remember where. I knew that the Tooks were the family of the Thains of the Shire. I should have known that any Hobbit going outside the Shire so far would be a Took, I thought to myself.

[Well what does that mean? asked Mira, whose last name was now Brandybuck but who had been born and raised a Took.]

[The Tooks are the only Shire hobbits who go outside the Shire, said Bella. Or maybe the Brandybucks, but I believe that the Brandybucks go often enough to Bree that they would expect to recognize them. So if it was an unknown Shire hobbit in Bree, it would probably be a Took. I think that's all Flora meant, no disrespect intended.]

[Hmmm, said Mira. I suppose so. You really seem to like this Flora person a lot. I think I like Willie better.]

[That's because he has no sense, said Bella.]

[What does it say next, Mira, asked Donna quickly.]

"Yes, I thought so," said the Naneth. "You have somewhat of the look of Bandobras Took. Was he your grandfather, perhaps?"

[Bandobras Took, wait, said Mira, haven't we heard his name before? Bella gave a little guttural cry of exasperation.]

[That's Bullroarer Took, said Donna. Go on, Mira.]

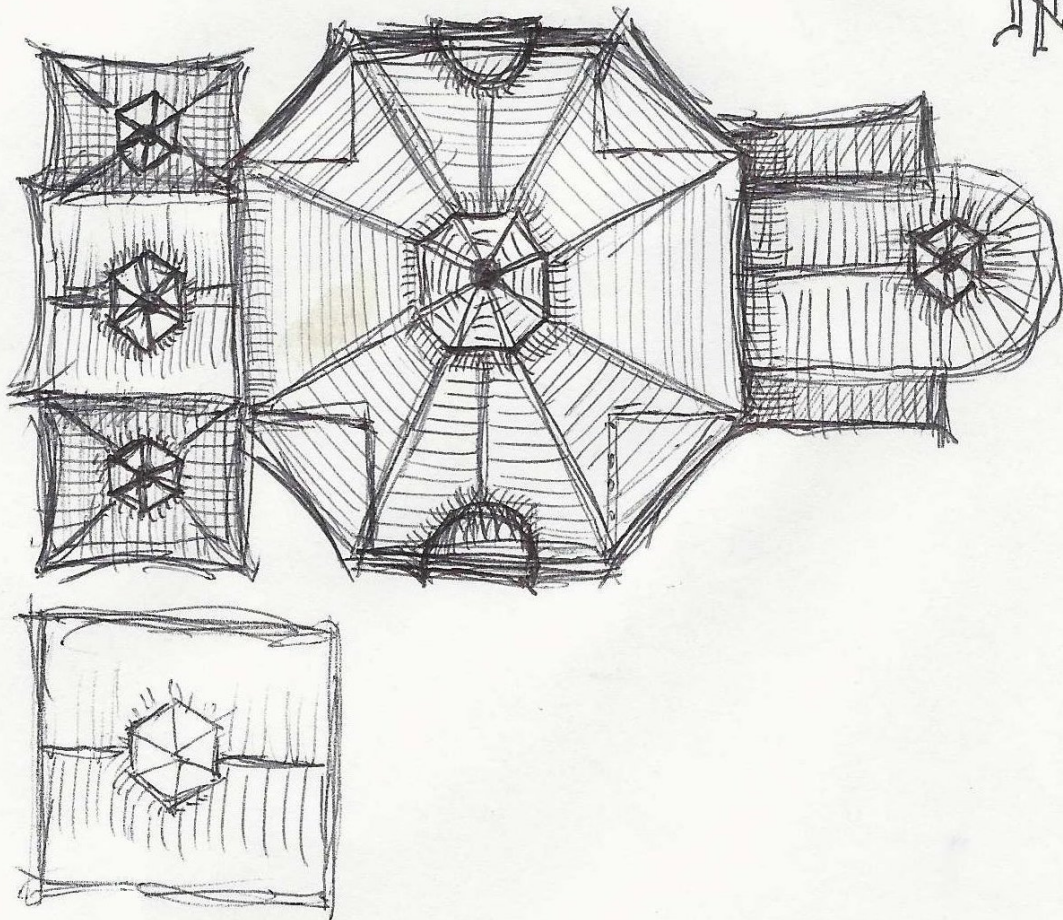
"No," said Gerontius, "he was my great-uncle, though."

GOBEL NANETH. "MATRON'S ESTATE."

THE HOUSE OF NOSS IARRIM AT
GOBEL NANETH FROM ABOVE



FRONT PORCH



"I see. And who is your father?"

Gerontius looked a little shy about answering again, but he knew better than to try to get a lie past the Naneth, she had those eyes that could read you like a book, and she would have known.

"Fortinbras, is his name," he said, a little softly again.

"Mmmhmmmm...", said the Naneth, as if she had guessed it, "and he is Thain of the Shire, is he not?"

"Yes, actually he is," said Gerontius.

"How many older siblings do you have, Gerontius?" asked the Naneth. I had the impression that she was like a cat with a mouse, hemming it into a closed space by blocking every escape, before she moved in for the kill.

"Er, I am the oldest, actually," said Gerontius. We were all quiet for a moment.

"Does your father, the Thain of the Shire, know that his heir is making a journey to Fornost Erain? I am a little surprised to have had no advance notice of it."

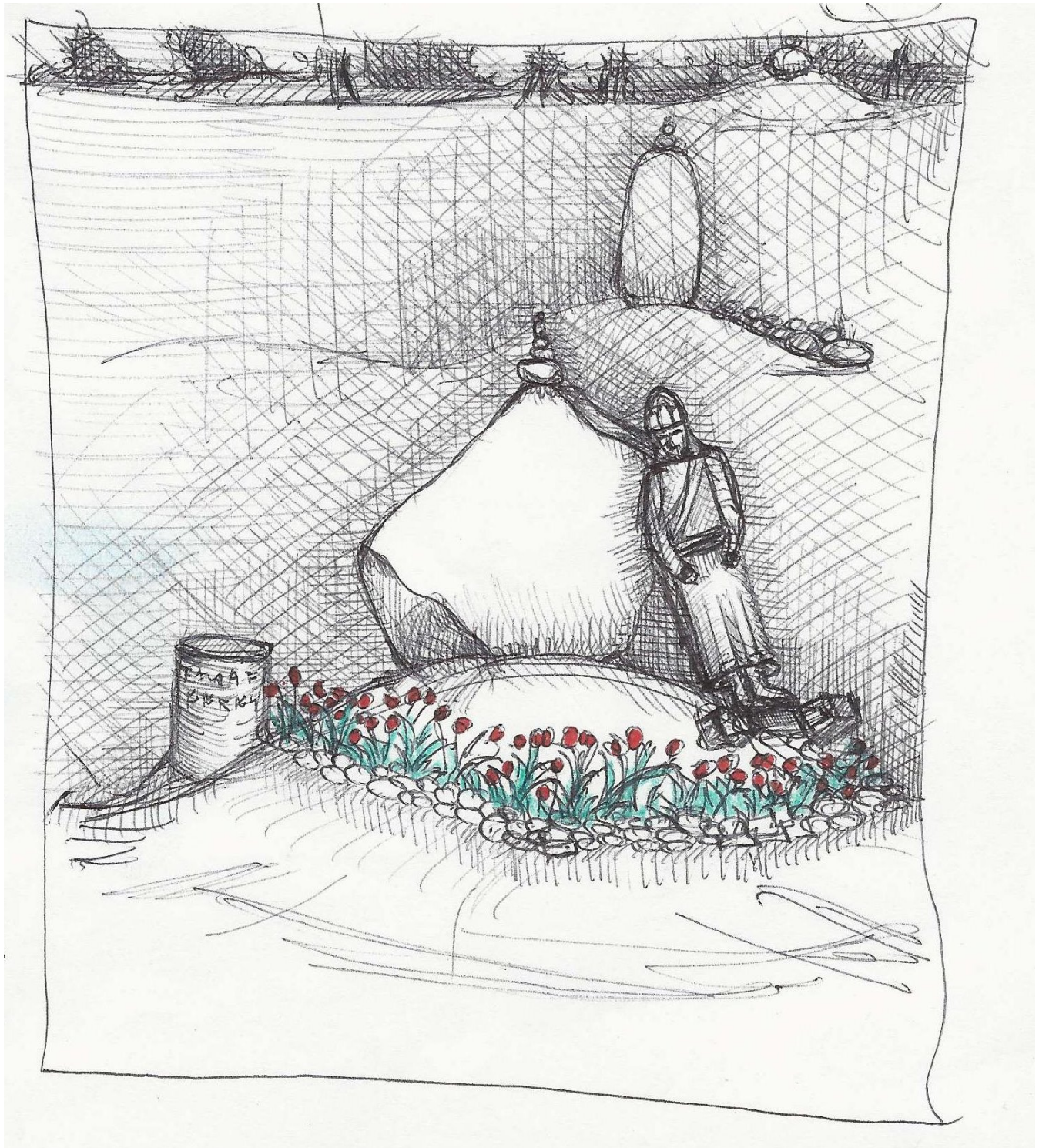
"Er, well, he knew I was going out of the Shire, on a little trip," said Gerontius.

"I will take that to mean no, he does not know," said the Naneth. "Perhaps he took you to mean you were going to Bree, and in fact you have come all the way here to Fornost Erain. Well, you put me in a hard position, Gerontius. We here at Gobel Naneth do not often have cause to interact with the Thain of the Shire, but it does happen from time to time, and we are both among the few who still remember the King's Laws. I would not wish him to think that I encouraged his son and heir to journey far from home on a lark. You are heir to the position of Thain; you have responsibilities."

"Madam, if you please," I said, "it was our fault." The Naneth turned and looked at me with those piercing blue eyes and that face all angles and I nearly lost my voice, but I kept talking. "We met him at Bree and told him the story of our little Hazel and he was just trying to help us out. We didn't know he was the Thain's heir, and we weren't trying to cause any trouble."

"Yes," she said, "I believe you meant no harm, Flora Underhill. But about the other thing you said," and here she turned back to Gerontius, "is he really just trying to help you out? Is that so, Gerontius, is that all you are doing?"

Then Gerontius' eyes got a little bigger, and he squirmed just a bit, and I began to wonder what he was thinking about.



"I knew about the library that used to be here at Fornost Erain," he said, and I thought to myself 'used to be here'?, and then he continued, "and it seemed worth a try to look there for the books that were made for the apothecaries."

It occurred to me that Gerontius had not exactly answered the Naneth's question. There was a long silence, and she pursed her lips in thought, and narrowed her eyes as she looked at him, and arched one eyebrow just a bit. Then, to my surprise, she stopped asking her questions, and I thought of when a cat lets a mouse get away, because it decides it is not hungry.

"So then," she said, and stood up, "we will show you what is left of the libraries of Fornost Erain."

We went outside with her, and then she led us around her big house to a building behind it, which was the size of a barn. It was not nearly so fancy as the house we had just left, but it did look solid, and I found out later it had been there for centuries. She took us up to the big door on the side, but then before she opened it she made us all swear that we would not bring any candle, torch, lantern, nor any other kind of flame inside with us. I guess if you want to keep a library for centuries, you need to have rules like that.

She unlocked the door and opened it, and led us in. I had to gasp at the sight of it all, and I think Willie and Gerontius did as well. There was so much. Rows upon rows of bookshelves, low tables with statues and metal sculpture, painted canvases, scrolls, locked chests with who knows what. It was like a library, and a museum, and a treasure vault all in one. There were high narrow windows that let in sunbeams, but it was still rather dark inside, and it took a time for my eyes to adjust so that I could see it all.

"After the fall of Fornost Erain, of course the Witch King's armies plundered the city and the castle, and much was lost," said the Naneth. "But when Gondor's army came to our aid, and drove the Witch King out, there was much that was still here. Ruinloth, the first Matron of Gobel Naneth, came back here, and waited in the hope that her husband would return. He had been a captain in the service of King Arvedui, who had fled north after the Witch King defeated them. Her husband died in the frozen north, and never returned to her. He died with the king when their ship sank in the icy waters up north."

"She picked through the ruins, and what she could, she rescued. Some of it was returned to the families of those who had died, but in some cases there was no one left to return it to. The Rangers helped to build this building, to house it all. She vowed to keep it here until the time of the King's return, and made her daughters vow the same. Her line has continued down to today; she is my ancestor."

"How long ago was this?" Willie asked.

"Over 800 years ago," said the Naneth. "173 years after the first Hobbits got permission from the King of Arthedain to settle in the Shire."



"I did not think many folks outside the Shire knew much about Hobbits," said Gerontius.

"Not many do," said the Naneth. "But we know our history, in this family."

I felt like she said that with a special emphasis, looking at Gerontius, and then she nodded to us and walked out, closing the door behind her. I knew there was something there that I did not catch, but it was not meant for me anyway, so I decided not to ask. Gerontius looked a little bit troubled, as if he was still thinking about what the Naneth had said.

We stood there quiet for a bit, and looked at each other for a few moments, wondering where to start. Finally, we just sort of shrugged and started wandering around, looking at everything to see if there was any order to it. After a while, we sort of figured out that different sections seemed to be from the same house or mansion. There would be a small bookshelf, a few paintings, a marble bust of somebody, and a small locked chest, all be together in one section, on a single table sometimes. So, we kept looking until we found a table that looked like it could have been things from an apothecary.

We did, eventually, find a table with a bunch of fancy glass on it, in shapes that made no sense to me. I said they were peculiar things to be drinking out of, but Gerontius got excited and said that they were used by apothecaries somehow, and this mean we had found things rescued from an apothecary's home. It was a wonder that any of it was not broken, with the battle and orcs looting the city and all, but I suppose they had no use for fancy glass and anyway there might have been way more that was broken. In any case, there were on that same little table some books, and we started reading.

It had been exciting to actually get here, after weeks of travelling, and know that we were within arm's reach of a book that might have word of a medicine to save our little Hazel. I felt like I could almost see her, right next to me, looking up with those big eyes and that tiny little body. I tried to push aside the memories of her coughing, and wheezing, and remember her when she was smiling and running around and laughing. But, after not too long, we had realized we had a lot of books to read through, and not much idea of how to find the right part, and I had to focus on trying to figure that out. Willie was not quite so good at reading as I or Gerontius, and he had to keep asking one of us what a word meant.

We were not too surprised that Gerontius did not do as much of the searching as we did. He had never said he would, and Hazel was our sister after all, not his. So when he would nip off to check on Hildigard or our ponies, or grab a bite to eat from our things, or what have you, I was not surprised. I supposed that I was going to be the one to need to find it in these books, if it was here, and I was fine with that, so for a time I did not much pay attention to what Gerontius was doing. We read, we went outside to eat occasionally, we read, we stretched our legs or moved to a spot where the sunbeam had moved to, we read some more.

But, after a time, it came to me that Gerontius was looking at books as well, he just was not looking at the ones from the apothecary. This was not a problem really; like I said, Hazel was our family, and he never said he would do the searching for us. It was already enough that he



had travelled with us so far, when Hazel was nothing to him. I had just assumed he was doing it to be helpful, or for the excitement of it, or to see the world outside the Shire. If I thought about it at all, I suppose I just thought he was bored and waiting for us to find what we were looking for.

It got towards evening, and we had pretty much sorted out the apothecary's books into ones that we thought might have what we were looking for, and ones that for sure would not (like the account books or the apothecary's personal books he must have read just for fun). We were running out of light, and the Naneth came out to check on us. It was when he said we would sleep in that building instead of a guest room in the house that I started to wonder what was going on. The Naneth just arched an eyebrow, and maybe smirked just a tiny bit.

"But there's no beds!" said Willie. "We can't read any more anyway, the light's going, and we aren't allowed to have candles here!"

"Oh, but that way we won't cause any trouble for our hosts," said Gerontius, and I thought to myself that he was really quite poor at lying. I couldn't tell what he was up to, but I knew it wasn't worry about the Naneth being bothered at us taking guest rooms.

Then I was surprised again when the Naneth interrupted to agree. "Very well," she said, before Willie could say anything else, "but I will remind you of your oath, Gerontius Took. No flame inside this building."

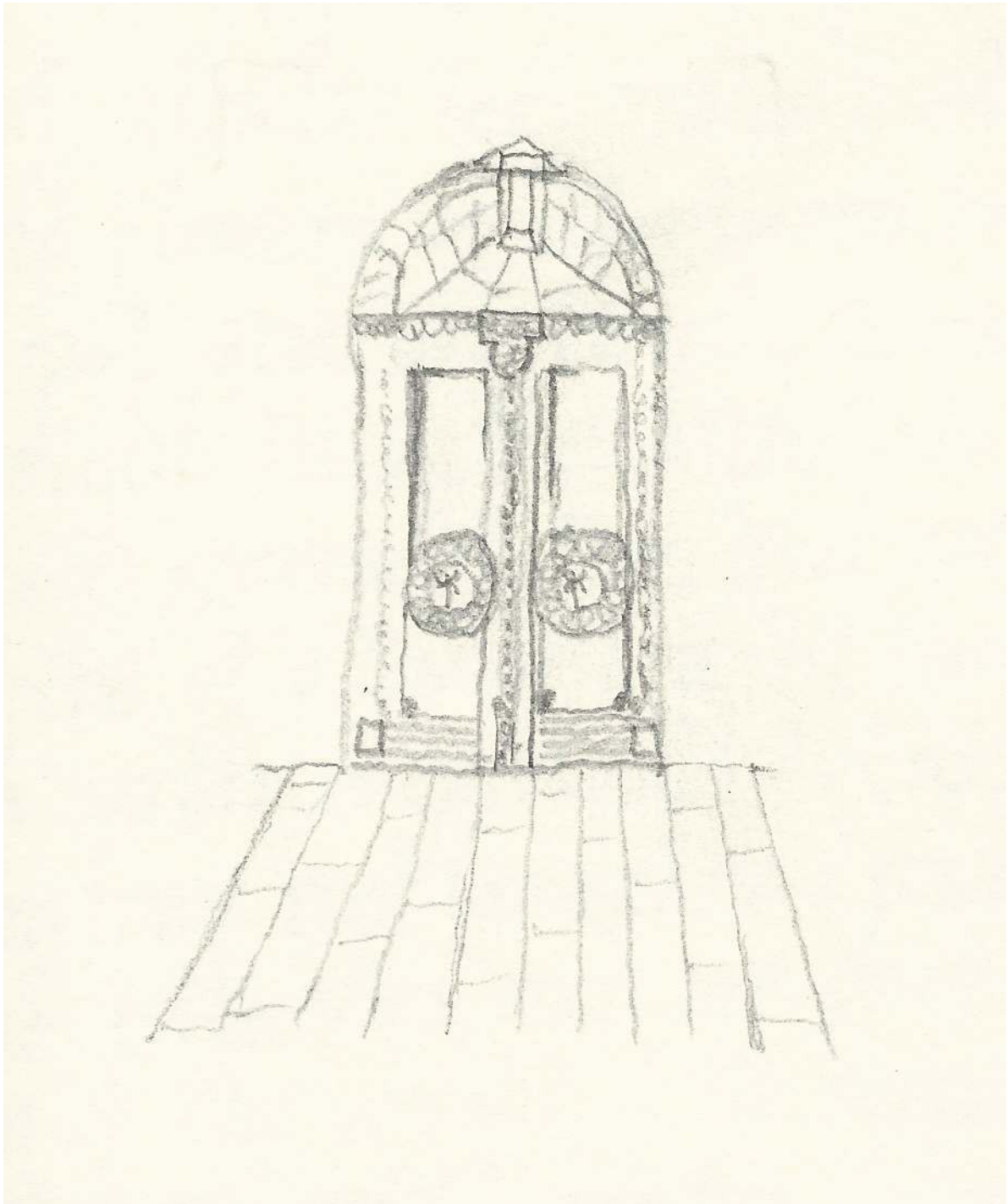
"Yes, of course," said Gerontius. That time, he sounded more like he was telling the truth.

Poor Willie, who did not understand WHAT was going on, just looked back and forth with his mouth hanging open, and then the Naneth had left and closed the door behind her.

"What are we staying here for?" asked Willie, kind of loudly. "We could be sleeping in a soft bed tonight. I bet it's warmer and cozier in that house than out here in this big drafty building, too."

"Oh, you know," said Gerontius, looking sideways a bit, "I kind of don't trust sleeping in strange beds since the bedbugs at Gedrinker Haven. I didn't want to say so in front of the Naneth, though, it would have been rude."

Willie buried his face in his hands and let out a frustrated noise that I can't quite describe. I think he was more frustrated than I was, because he didn't understand any more than I did, but he didn't even catch that Gerontius was hiding something. It just all made no sense to him, and he does quite prefer a soft bed when he can get it. We also all had to eat cold food again, whereas if we had stayed in Gobel Naneth they likely would have given us stew or something else warm to eat. It made no sense to me either, but I knew that if I just waited, sooner or later Gerontius would say or do something that made it clear. So, we ate our cold meals that we had brought with us, and then went to sleep.



I woke up in the middle of the night, and it was a strange feeling. It wasn't really all that cold, actually, since we had bedrolls and we were at least out of the wind. But the statues and the busts sitting on tables and all the rest looked spooky in the dark, and it felt like we were in a house of ghosts. Which, I suppose, we kind of were, since it was all things waiting here for families to come back, who never would. It was like a ghost of Fornost Erain, like the ghost of the whole city, inside this big building. I felt kind of a bit scared, and looked over at where Willie and Gerontius were sleeping, just to sort of reassure myself that I wasn't alone.

Well Willie was there, not snoring too much just then, but I realized that Gerontius was not. I looked around, and then I got up and walked over to the doors to see if he had gone outside.

Gerontius, if you ever read this part, I have to say, you just about gave me the fright of my life coming back inside right when I got to the door. It was so dark and quiet in that big barn of a building, and then you opened the door when I was just about to reach it. I'm sorry I screamed in your face, although I didn't say so at the time.

After I screamed in his face, Gerontius looked a bit startled as you might well imagine.

"What are you doing?" I asked, maybe a bit sharply, but I was still so wound up from being startled.

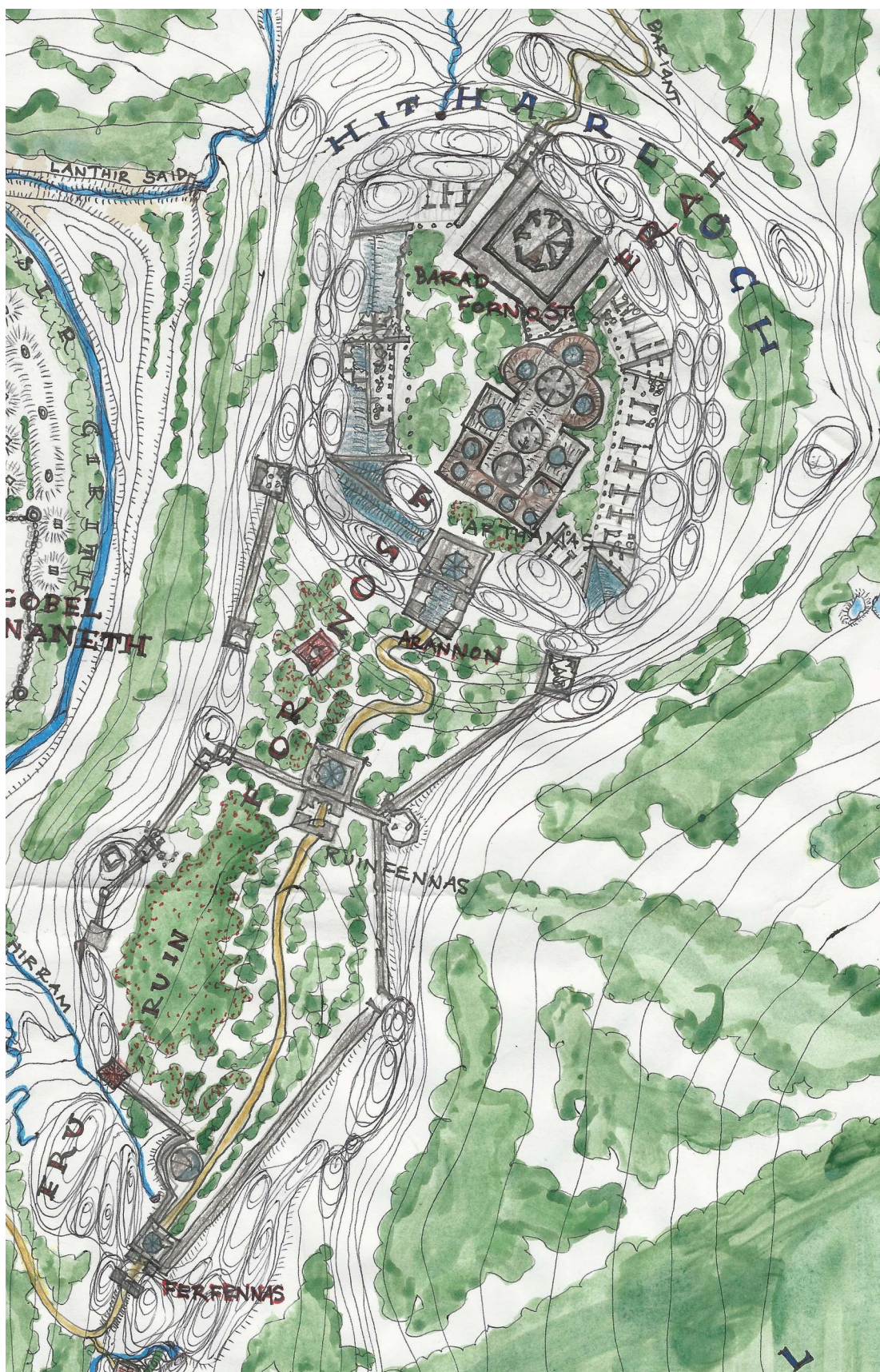
"Nothing!" said Gerontius, and then we both stared at each other, and then I saw that he had a book in his hand. I realized he had a lantern, outside, and he was staying up to read more, but he didn't want to do it inside because of his vow to the Naneth. I couldn't see what it was, but I could tell it was no book of the apothecary's.

I was about to ask him what he was reading, and maybe also ask him why he was reading it at night, but then he walked past me into the building and I didn't. I realized, then, that he was looking for something in the library also, only it was not the same thing we were. As I said before, I did not think there was anything wrong with that, but I did wonder why he had not said anything about it to the Naneth. Then, I realized that this was probably why he told the Naneth we would sleep out here; he wanted to keep searching for whatever-it-was even after it got dark, and he couldn't do that if he were meant to be sleeping in Gobel Naneth and the building we were in was locked up for the night.

The next day we kept looking, and by the evening Willie had lost the will to do it any more. I finally told him that I would find it, and he could see to things like making a bit of stew outside so we didn't have to eat cold food again. He ended up going inside and asking the Naneth if we could eat in there, and then came back to us all excited to say she had invited us to dine with them.

"No thank-you," I said, "I need to keep looking. But you can go."

"Same here," said Gerontius, from the other side of the building, where he was behind another set of tall bookshelves. Willie looked at us like we were both crazy, and went back into Gobel



Naneth to sit at a table with a Dunedain and her retainers and eat warm food. It wasn't until he had been gone for some time that I thought to worry that he might have too much wine again. He came back in rather late, passing Gerontius reading by a lantern outside without even noticing him I think, and collapsed on his bedroll with a smile on his face. I suspected he would not be smiling the next day.

That probably put me in a foul mood, which might have given me uneasy dreams. I woke up with a start when there was a crackle of lightning and a boom of thunder, and it was not a good way to wake up. We had a roof over our heads, a good stout one actually, but it still felt like a barn. I was sitting upright, still breathing heavy from the shock of being woke up that way, when I heard Gerontius.

"Does Willie normally sleep that soundly?" he asked.

I looked over and saw that, with a thunderbolt having hit somewhere on the hill just above us it sounded like, Willie was still snoozing away. I couldn't help chuckling a bit. Gerontius was not far off, also sitting up but on his bedroll, and I thought to myself that he did sleep sometimes anyway.

"All that wine did some good, I suppose," I said.

"I don't think he had any," said Gerontius. "He wasn't walking like it when he came back from Gobel Naneth. I think he did do a great deal of singing, though, I could hear it from where I was."

This told me that Gerontius had been staying outside for a while after the sun went down, still reading away for I didn't know what. I wondered if I should ask him, then, but I didn't quite. I kind of just looked at him, and blinked, and waited for him to explain, thinking it was pretty obvious what I was wondering. He did not take the hint, and laid back down and rolled over on his side. I sat there for a little while as the sound of rain on the roof made it seem peaceful again, and then eventually I went back to sleep as well.

Then I had a dream, which I normally do not remember later but this one stayed with me. I dreamt I was in Fornost Erain, up in the castle on the hill. The whole castle was still there, not ruined, but full of people. There were men and women, and Dunedain, and also a few hobbits, and I was one of them. We all had crossbows, and we were on the outer walls of the castle, and looking out on the campfires of the enemy below us. We were talking about when they would come for the final attack, and whether we should try to escape or if we should stay until the end and die there fighting. I was worried about what would happen with Hazel, if I died there and could not get back with her medicine, but then also thinking that maybe I should stay and fight because if we all fought well enough maybe Fornost Erain would not fall, and then the King would still be there in Fornost Erain, and then we would still be able to send to Fornost Erain for the cure the normal way. Which shows how confused your thinking can be in a dream, since I was thinking I was in the past but also in the present at the same time.

Put equal parts of alfirin leaf, athenas leaf, mallos root, and flowers of elderberry into a pot and add twenty times its weight in water. Allow this to steep overnight, then heat over a fire at a low boil until half the water is gone. Add to this comfrey root (ground to a powder) and bilberries, each one part in ten of the weight of the remaining water, and mix thoroughly. Cut with an equal part filbert oil. If kept in wax-sealed glass, it will remain potent for years. One drop per day at the base of the tongue.

The next day, towards the end of the day, in the middle of the afternoon, I started to wonder if I would actually recognize it if I saw it. I had been looking through page after page of the apothecary's books that I began to wonder if I had maybe skimmed over it and been so glassy eyed that I hadn't realized what I was looking at. It is hard to keep yourself alert when you are looking at page after page of things that do not concern you. So, to keep myself more alert, I started to imagine how every one of them was made for someone, a real person who had lived somewhere nearby.

They came to the apothecary themselves, or maybe someone else came for them like we travelled there for Hazel. They were probably worried, or maybe sad and fearful, or maybe they had been coming for years and it was just part of their normal routine. Every one of them was hoping the apothecary could do something to help them, or someone they cared about. I tried to guess what was wrong with each person the apothecary was preparing things for. Probably lots of people he never wrote anything down about, but these were the ones that he took notes about, notes that were still in his journals so many years later, for us to read. Thinking about that as I read, and trying to figure out what was wrong with each person, helped to keep me focused on what I was reading, I hoped.

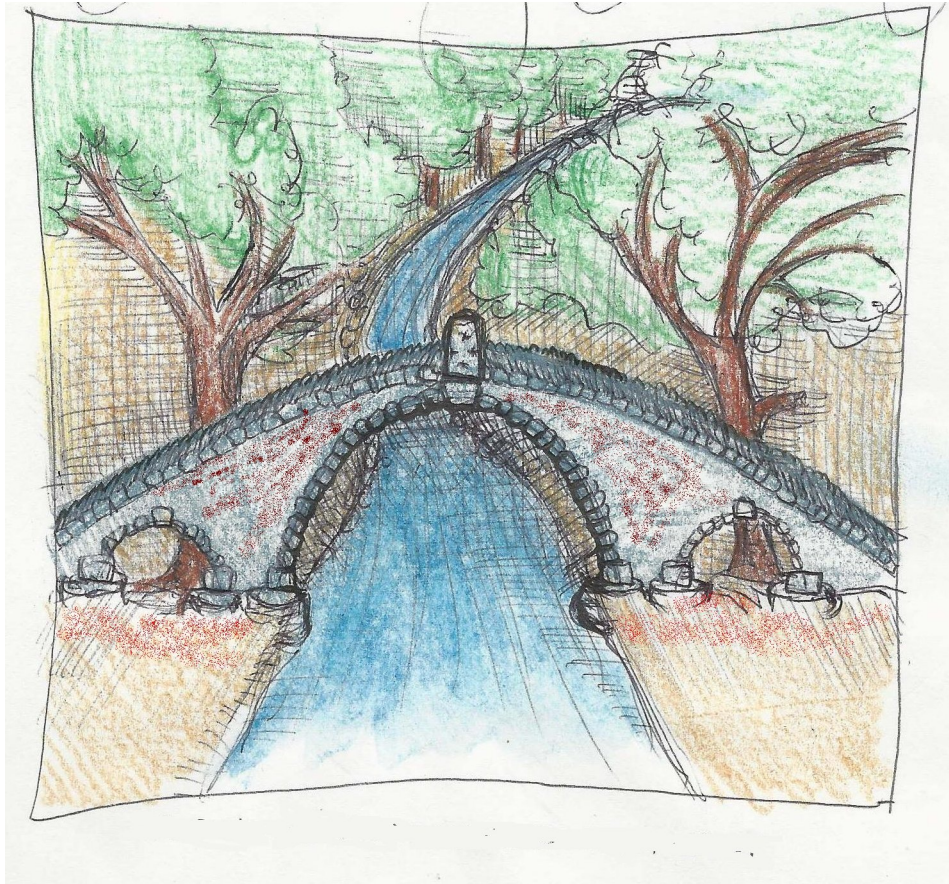
I really, really hoped that I had not already skimmed over it without knowing. I wondered what would happen if we got to the end of the apothecary's journals and notes and there was nothing in there about Hazel's type of condition. I would wonder forever if it had been there and I had missed it. Then, I tried to put that out of my mind and focus more on what I was doing.

It was getting towards evening when I found it.

"There are members of the Periannath that come from the south, near where the Royal Road and the Great East Road cross, that have an inherited condition. Enlarged pupils, an odor like syrup, and a propensity towards sickness that worsens as they mature. A description of their condition was sent to Elrond Halfelven at Rivendell, who sent back this recipe for its treatment, which if taken on a weekly basis should minimize the effects, and greatly prolong life."

I was halfway through it before I realized what I was reading. The word, 'periannath', was an odd one for hobbits that I later found out was from an Elvish language, which the Dunedain often used. Bree was where the Greenway and the East Road crossed, and I could guess that it was Bree he was talking about. The rest was just like Hazel, and other members of our family that we had known when we were younger who had passed away.

He gave a list of fancy names for plants I had never heard of, and some more instructions on what one was to do with them, that did not make a great deal of sense to me, but I was pretty sure they would make sense if we found an apothecary to show it to. I sat there with it in my hands for a little bit, not saying a word, and I started to tear up, I was so relieved. I knew we did not have any medicine yet, but I knew it meant now that we really had a chance of getting it. I realized that in the back of my mind, I had been wondering if this was all just a flight of



foolishness that we were on, with no chance of helping anyone, and now I knew for sure that we had at least a chance of saving our little Hazel, and next thing I know I was starting to sob out loud.

Willie and Gerontius came over in a hurry to see what was the matter, and I just handed it to them to read it themselves, while I went off to find a kerchief to sob into. When I cleaned up and calmed down, I went back to where they were looking at it together, with the book lying open on the table with all the other things from the apothecary. Willie looked over at me and he was grinning bigger than he did that night at the Turp Hay House, when he was singing and the crowd was buying him glasses of wine and applauding. He gave me a big hug and I hugged him back and I felt so happy, and after that I gave Gerontius a hug too just out of high spirits.

He hugged me back and tried to smile about it, but I thought maybe there was something a little bit forced about it. That did not really make any sense to me but I was so happy myself that I did not give much thought to it at the time.

When Willie and I calmed down a bit, we realized we needed to write it down, because we did not want to risk forgetting it, so Gerontius got a page from I think maybe this journal I'm writing in now, and he copied it down for us. Then we started thinking about what we would actually do with it. Then, we got a lot calmer.

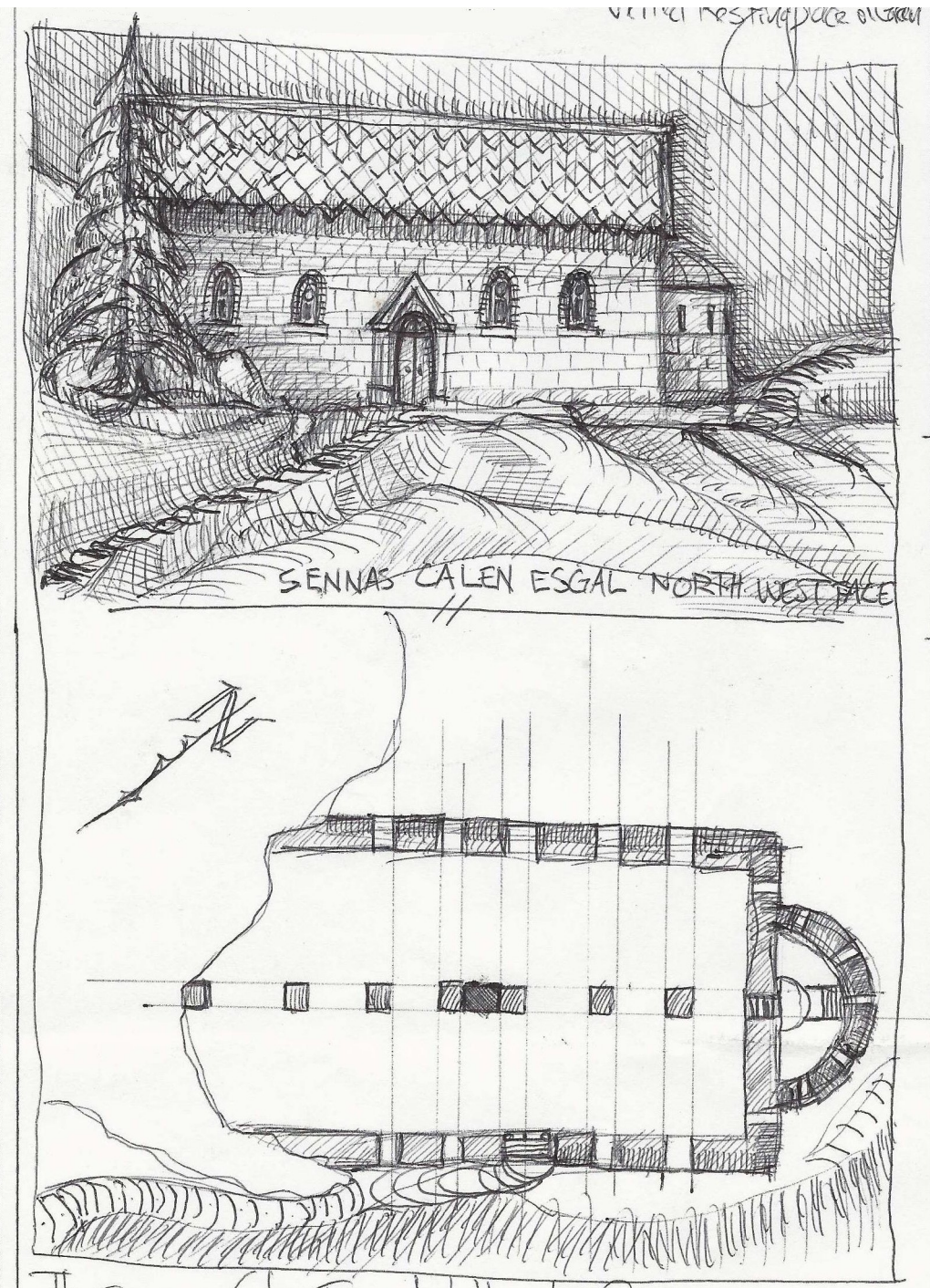
"I suppose we need to find all of these plants, here, that he mentions," said Willie, and his brow furrowed a bit. "Or are these all plants, or are they something else?"

"One hopes a good apothecary would know them all," said Gerontius. "Or we could ask the Naneth, she seems to know a lot."

So we all marched outside and over to her big house, Gobel Naneth, and we found her and showed her the apothecary's notes that we had copied, and asked her if she knew what it all meant. She frowned, like she was thinking hard, and I started to realize that maybe we had not really saved our little sister yet, after all. What good is a recipe for a medicine if no one knows what it means?

"Some of these I have heard of, surely," said the Naneth, "but I am no apothecary. But, fortune shines on you today, as the Chieftain of the Rangers arrived in Fornost Erain this morning. He is widely travelled, and perhaps he will know the ones I do not."

So we went outside, and she agreed to walk with us, and we walked over the little bridge that crossed the stream between Gobel Naneth and the castle. It was stone, and probably blue when it was made long ago, but it was covered in a red lichen, and there were little red flowers that grew on the stream on both sides of it, peonies I think. It was a bright spot of red that we crossed over, and it made me feel a little queer to be going over it onto the side with the castle. Perhaps it was that I was remembering the dream I had, the night before.



Then we started going up the hill on the other side of that stream, and I began to wonder about that apothecary who wrote those words in his book so long ago. He must have had a hobbit from Bree come here, to Fornost Erain, when it was full of people like himself, to ask for it. That meant that probably some other hobbit from Bree had come up this same road, looking for help. It gave me a lot to think about while we were walking.

We came to a point when the road was surrounded on both sides by tall trees that had grown up since the castle was abandoned. Then, it made a sharp turn to the left to go up to the castle gatehouse, but we took a small road off to the right instead. We stepped across a spring-fed stream, and up some stone steps, to a house that was hidden there in a little clearing amidst the tall trees. I had not been able to see it when I looked up at the castle from Gobel Naneth, and I realized that it appeared to be in a lot better shape than the castle that it was just down the hill from. Someone was still living here, at least occasionally.

"This is Sennas Calen Esgal," said the Naneth, "which means the Veiled Resting Place of Green. It is a place for the Rangers to stay when they are here, and do not wish to disturb us at Gobel Naneth, or do not wish to be seen coming and going. I think, also, that they do not wish the Men who live nearby to associate us with Rangers, for our own protection. The Rangers must from time to time intervene to stop banditry or other lawlessness, and this gives them some enemies. We at Gobel Naneth stay to ourselves, for the most part, and thus we make no enemies. If brigands or thieves thought they could attack us as retribution for the work the Rangers do, they would not scruple to do so."

I did not quite understand all of that, but I got the idea that there were Rangers here sometimes, but we were not to talk about it to anyone. Which was fine by me. We have Rangers in Bree, occasionally, but they mostly keep to themselves, even if they are staying at the Prancing Pony. I've never had trouble with them, but then I've never gone to ask them for anything either. I had not known of them stopping banditry or the like. It occurred to me that, as much as I found the Naneth kind of intimidating to talk to, the Rangers might be more so.

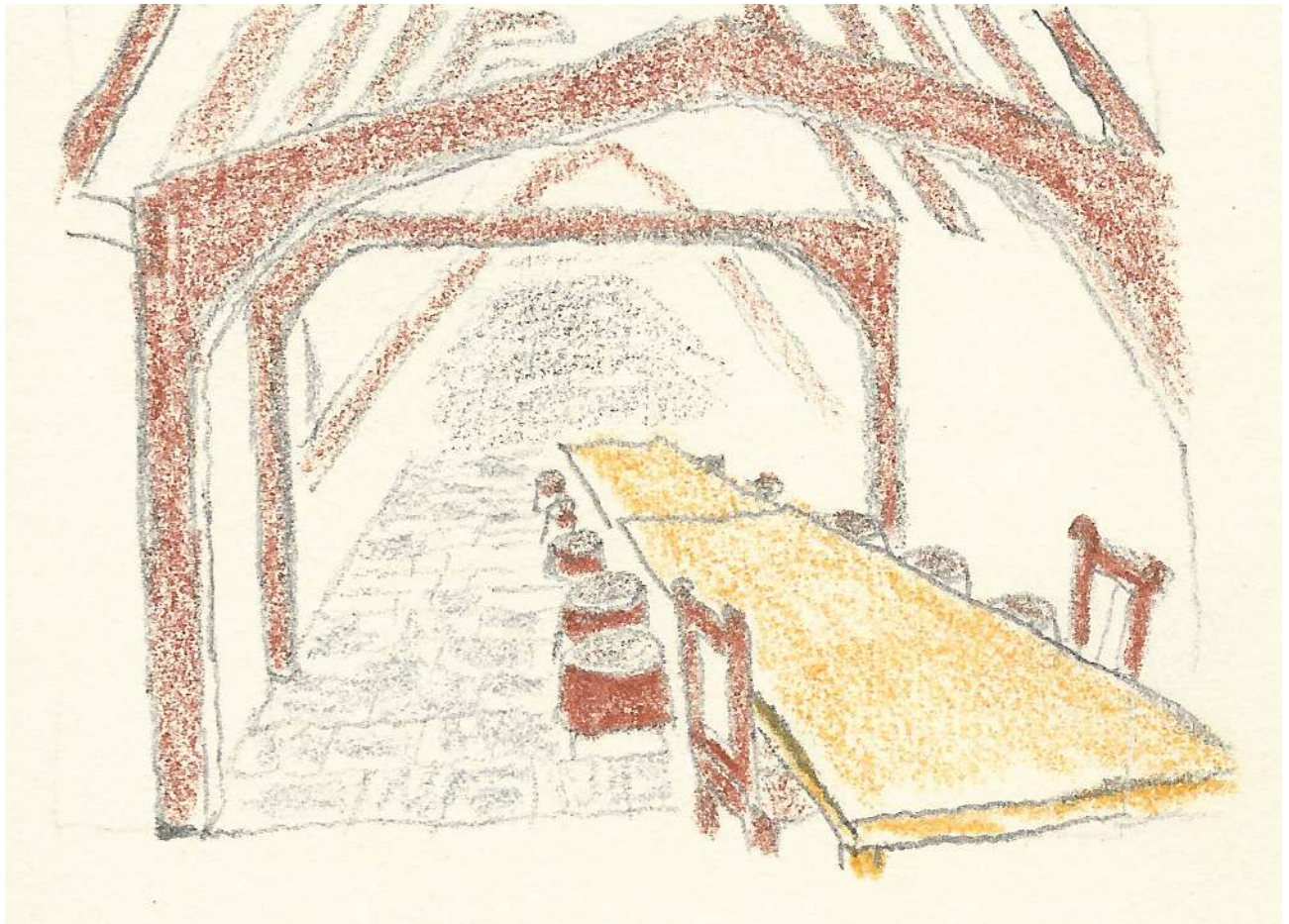
"Is Arathorn here now, then?" asked Gerontius, when we were getting close.

"He is, have you met him?" asked the Naneth.

"No, but my great-uncle like him a lot," said Gerontius. "I think he may have been involved when the Rangers helped to bring us food during the Long Winter. He said he hoped that I would meet him someday."

"It appears that you shall," said the Naneth, as we climbed up the long rocky stairway that was carved into the hillside, and arrived at the door. She stood there, without knocking or saying anything, and then after a moment the doors opened, and a tall Ranger looked out at us.

"Naneth," he said, "you are well, I hope."



"I am, thank-you Argonui. Have you ever met Gerontius Took, son of the Shire's Thain?"

"Not yet, but I am pleased to meet him, I knew his grandfather and great-uncle. Hail and well met, Gerontius. How is your father?"

"Oh, just fine thanks," said Gerontius, a little nervously, "I have some friends here from Bree. They have a question, and we need someone who knows their herblore well, as I believe you do."

He turned around, and introduced Willie and I, and I realized that he was not too keen to be hearing anything about his father, perhaps because his father did not know he had gone so far from the Shire. We went into the building, and saw that the inside was almost entirely wood and stone. There was a long, low stone slab set on tree trunks, and the chairs were made of rough-hewn wood. It looked like a hunting lodge, with furniture and furnishings that were functional but plain, and meant to last many years. There were a number of Rangers, all tall men with close cropped beards, dressed in rough clothes that had seen a lot of wear. They were talking to each other in low voices, and did not appear to look up or notice when we entered. One of them, I learned later, was Arathorn, the Chieftain of the Rangers, and Argonui's father. Sitting next to him was someone who looked to be an old man, with a long white beard, and he wore gray robes. He did look up as we entered.

"Gerontius Took!"

"Gandalf!" said Gerontius, and he brightened up a bit.

"You are far from the Shire, young Gerontius," said Gandalf. "What brings you here?"

Then, all the other Rangers stopped talking and turned to look at us, and I felt a bit shy speaking in front of so many of the Big People at once. Fortunately Gerontius spoke up, and explained who we were and what we were about. Our handwritten recipe for the medicine was passed around for the Rangers to all look at, and they all acted as if they knew their letters well enough to read it all right. The Naneth was given a chair to sit next to Gandalf and Argonui and the Chieftain Arathorn, and they began to chat together like they were all old friends, which I gather they rather were.

Well it turned out that the Rangers knew what the plants listed were, but some of them were not found anywhere near where we were. Back when the apothecary had written it, they had shipments of spices and dried herbs sent up from the south, but that sort of thing had stopped after the Witch King came with his army and wrecked Fornost Erain and all the kingdom. Very little came up or down the great north-south road now, which is why it was overgrown and called the Greenway.

Then I was starting to get sort of sad again, because it began to seem like maybe we couldn't get this medicine for Hazel after all, until Gandalf spoke up.

* Fornost Erain

* Bree

* Tharbad

"Gerontius, you could find all of these in the city of Tharbad, to the south, if you went there."

Well, at that, Gerontius perked up, and started asking questions about the road between Fornost Erain and Tharbad, which was apparently some place even further away from Bree to the south than Fornost Erain was north. I looked over at Willie, alarmed, but he was not paying me any attention, he was just smiling and listening all bright-eyed, and I could tell he was eager to set off, and I knew that's what we were going to do. The good part was maybe we could still save our little Hazel after all. But then I felt so tired I could hardly stand any more, because I knew our travels weren't over yet, they had just started.



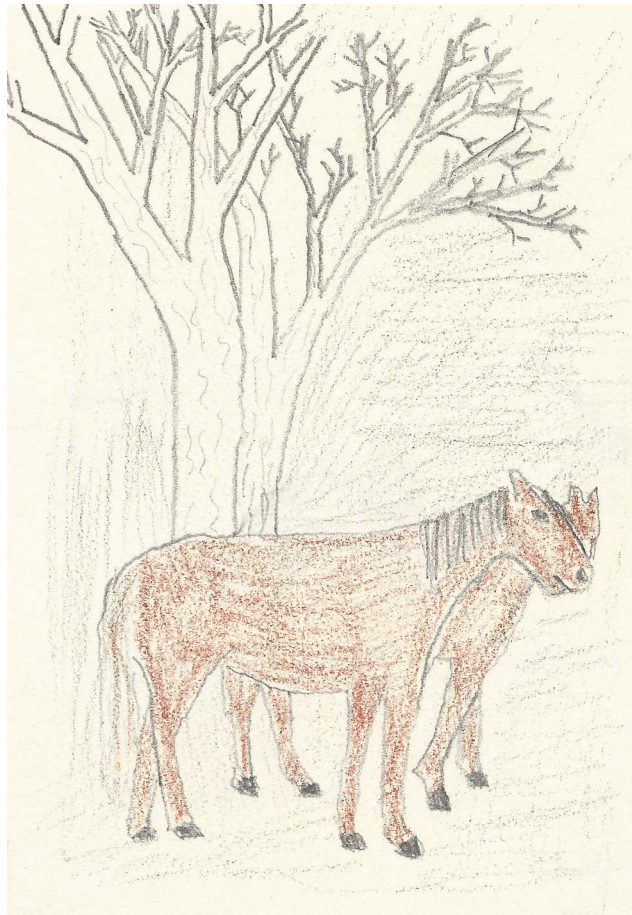
Chapter 9 - Plans Made and Remade

This is Gerontius again. There are a lot of long periods of waiting, when you travel, and then there are a few points where everything happens in a rush. I am waiting, right now, for her to show up to light the lamp, but probably later I won't remember much about this time, even though we've been here for days now. But then there are a few times when every moment is burned into my memory, and I can remember it from heartbeat to heartbeat. I guess it's lucky we don't remember everything like that, it would be too much. But it is more peaceful, just sitting here watching the river flow by. Now, though, I should write about one of those other kinds of times, though I suppose even if I did not write it down I would still never forget.

So we had been headed south for almost a week after talking to Gandalf and the Rangers. We had passed through Folkstead again. Flora didn't let Willie have any wine at the wineries, this time, so he had a good bit at Turp Hay House when we got there, but then he fell asleep right after. In the morning he didn't feel so good, but we were headed south so there was nothing for him but to just walk it off. Then we were coming closer to Southtonburg, and I had the idea that we should circle around it. It had mostly been fallen down, but the people who were there, were not all that friendly when we passed through it before, so it wasn't too hard to talk Flora and Willie into avoiding it. I think also I was a little embarrassed to go too near to North Haven, just north of there, because that's where I had spent all that money on ponies and too much food, and the sight of it would have probably caused Willie to start talking about that and I didn't want to hear it.

So, we took a little path that left the Greenway headed west, which I had seen on a map in the library at Fornost Erain. I had looked at a lot of maps there, trying to find something like what was drawn on Uncle Bullroarer's treasure map, but I had not really found anything that I could say was the spot. I think maybe Flora had suspected that I was up to something, but she was too polite to question me, and I didn't really want to talk about it, not yet anyway. In any case, what was there to say? I didn't know where it was. I suppose I might have convinced them to stay a bit longer in Fornost Erain if I had told them what I was looking for, but after a few days of looking at every map in the library I could find, I had decided that maybe the best thing was just to check out every tower I could that was near to the Greenway, and sooner or later perhaps I would find the right one. I didn't realize how many towers there had been in the old kingdoms, or I would not have thought that to be a good idea.

So we had gotten about halfway around Southtonburg, and it got to be dark, and we made our camp at the base of one of those cliff-shaped hills that they called "cludes". We were right next to a stream, so we had water to make soup with and wash up afterwards, and we made a little campfire. We had our bedrolls, and we tied the ponies to a small tree near to us, and attached their feedbags but took off their baggage and saddles so they would be comfortable. Hildigard laid down next to the little fire, and we hobbits all sat around it, and although we had been on the road again for a few days it was not too bad, even if it wasn't quite cozy. We were all tired from walking all day, so after we had our stew we went to sleep pretty quick.



We woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of Hildigard barking like crazy. I scrambled for my little walking staff, and I could see in the dark there was someone, or maybe more than one someone, not too far off. Our fire had burned down of course but there was nearly a full moon, so we could see the dim outlines. I could tell that they were bigger than us, of course. Hildigard made them stop, I think, otherwise they would have been upon us before we could do anything.

As it was, I was not sure if I should run or stay, but it came to me that if I ran I was not certain Hildigard would follow, she was so worked up, and I didn't want to leave here there to get killed by whoever those Men were. So, I reached into my pack really quick and pulled out my sling, and a good sized rock to fit into it, and I shouted a challenge. We got no answer, so I let a stone fly with my sling, and I don't know if it hit anyone but I did hear an angry voice in the dark. Then Willie let out a yell and threw a rock as well, then another, and then we were both shouting, trying to sound as ferocious as possible, and slinging stones into the darkness as best we could aim them, and all the while Hildigard was barking as if she were ready to tear apart anyone who would come close enough. I was a little bit worried that she was going to take off into the dark after them, and I stayed close enough to her to try to grab at her if she started to. I think, though, for all her ferocity she knew we were better staying here together, in case it came to a close-in fight.

After I slung a few rocks into the dark, and Willie had thrown a few, we didn't see them any more. But, we knew they might be getting bows and arrows, or getting ready to make a charge. We stayed low to the ground and got as much cover behind the bigger rocks and low shrubs as we could, and kept looking into the dark trying to see or hear anything.

"Do you see them?" whispered Willie to me after a bit, as he was lying on the ground but digging through his pack to find his sling, so he could use it if they came back, instead of just throwing rocks.

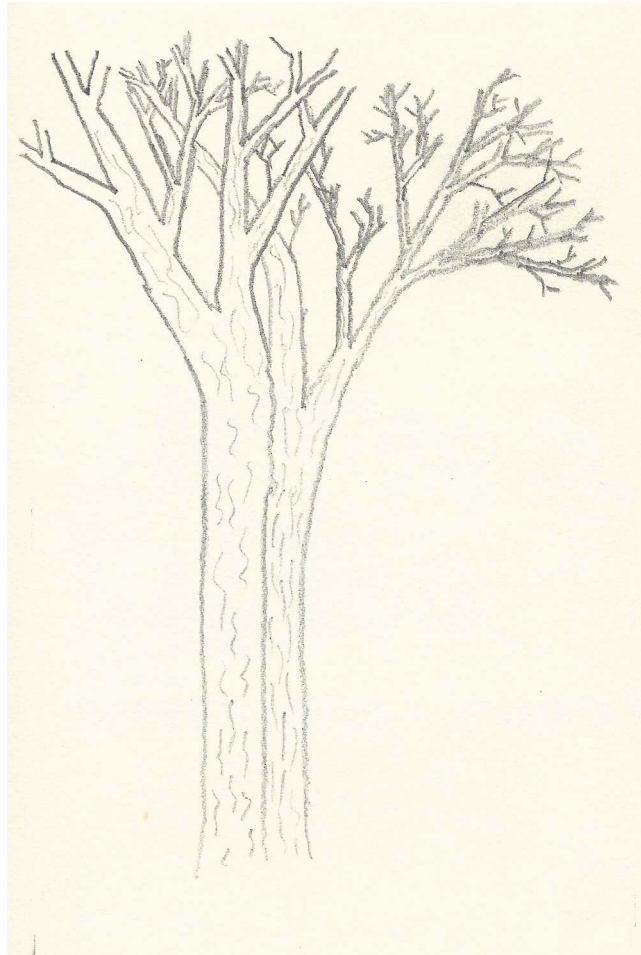
"No," I said, as low as I could, not wanting them to hear me if they were still out there.

"Flora, can you see them?" asked Willie.

Flora was on the ground, covering her head with her hands, and at Willie's question she looked up with big eyes.

"Uh, no, no I don't see them," she whispered.

We kept quiet for a while, and Hildigard stopped barking, although she was still letting out a low growl every so often. After a few minutes, we decided that they were gone, for now at least, and it was at that point that we realized our ponies were gone, too.



We had been facing the other way, and what with all the shouting and barking and rock-throwing and so on, we had not been paying too much attention to what happened behind us. Our saddlebags were gone as well, which had most of our food. I'm not sure if that's what they had been intending the whole time, or if they were just coming in towards us from all sides so we couldn't run off, and then after the stones and the sound of Hildigard barking they decided to just leave. Either way, the ones behind us had the chance to take our ponies and packs while we were looking the other way and making so much noise.

We kind of sat there, stupified, for a few moments. We had been willing, just barely, to stand our ground and not run off when we thought we were about to be attacked, but there was no question of racing off into the dark to try to find the thieves, who were bigger than we were, possibly more numerous, and in any event probably out of reach by the time we had noticed they had taken our ponies. So we just sat there, not saying much. After a while, we were very tired again. It seemed that they had gone for good, or at least for the night, but we gathered up a few more stones of the right size and had our slings ready, and we went to sleep again. Hildigard stayed up, I think, at least for a while, watching and listening and sniffing the air.

When we woke in the morning, we had to confront the fact that most of our food had been stolen. We took stock of what we had, and tried to decide what to do. I took out the notes I had made from various maps I had looked at in Fornost Erain, and was showing them where Tharbad was, where Bree was, and where we were.

"Wait," said Willie. "What did you say this hill is called?"

"This one right here?" I asked. "That's what they call 'Thief Clude'. That word, 'clude', means..."

"You're telling me we decided to camp next to a spot called 'Thief Clude'?" Willie leaned back and covered his face with both hands to stifle a scream of frustration. "WE ARE THE STUPIDEST TRAVELLERS IN THE WORLD! Who camps next to 'Thief Clude'? No wonder we got our ponies stolen."

"It's just the name," I began, but it was clear that Willie was not in a mood to listen. I sat there, silent, while Willie lay on his back and let out a low-level scream.

"Willie, stop it!" said Flora at last. "There's no sense in crying about it now. We have to figure out what to do next."

Willie sat up, still looking dejected but a bit calmer.

"I am not crying," he said flatly. "I am complaining. It's not the same."

"Maybe we're better off without them anyway," I said. "They attracted too much attention, and made us too noisy and visible a target. Without ponies, we'll be able to move quieter and



through tall grass or brush when we want to stay out of sight. Three hobbits moving alone won't make a target for bandits, because they won't even see or hear us, coming or going."

"Yes," said Willie, "it is a rare stroke of luck for us to get our ponies stolen. All that food, as well, it was just extra weight."

"Willie!" said Flora crossly.

"Oh, all right," he said, and heaved a big sigh. "What next, then?"

We looked at our food stocks, and decided that we had enough to make it to Bree again, so we shouldered our packs and headed out. Once past Southtonburg we took the path back to the Greenway. It was just past Gedrinker Haven that it did, and we ran into the same two vagrants that we had before, a man and a woman. They tried to sell us the same clothes they had tried to sell us before, except they were even dirtier now than before. They did not try to block our way, though, perhaps because of Hildigard, or perhaps because Willie and I had good stout walking staves now, and our slings hanging from our waistbelts.

"But we are hobbits," I said, "and those clothes are for Big Folk."

"Oh, well then, 'tis just more cloth for your money," said the man. I remembered, from when the innkeeper at Gedrinker Haven had shouted at him, that his name was Digby.

"Digby, why are you trying to sell to us when you tried to get us and our dog thrown out of Gedrinker Haven? That is not a very good sales tactic."

"Oh, sorry about that," he said quickly. I had not stopped walking, but he was walking along with us, still holding out his dirty rags for sale. "I was just worried about your dog, there."

"Did you really get thrown off your land?" I asked. I was sorry I had said it, when I saw a look on Digby's face like it hurt a little to hear about it.

"I did," he said.

"How can they throw you off your own land?" I asked.

"Them rich folks can do anything they want," said the woman. "Too much money and they get mean-hearted, and don't care nothing about poor folks."

I thought of my own father, who was pretty well off by Shire standards, and I wondered if it was too much money that had made him so stuffy and proper. But then, I could not imagine him throwing a hobbit off his own land.

"If it's money that causes the problem," said Flora, "then why do you want ours?"



Now I knew that Flora was mostly just nervous to have two of the Big Folk so close to us, especially two who looked pretty scruffy and rough, and who had tried to block our path the last time we had seen them. All the same, it seemed a bit hard-hearted to me.

"Can I ask you a question?" I said. "Why do they call that hill up north 'Thiefs Clude'?"

"Oh, that one's easy," said Digby. "That's the favorite place for a band of local thieves. They like to watch for anyone coming and going on the road."

Then I remembered that actually the man at North Haven who had sold me the ponies in the first place, had told me about that. Willie made a little snort behind me, and I felt embarrassed.

"Are there any other spots on this road that are known to be used by thieves?" I asked.

"Oh, lots," said the woman.

"I'm sorry, I believe I missed your name," I said. We were still walking along while we were talking.

"Corliss, pleased to meet you," said the woman. Just then there came a rumble of thunder. We all stopped and looked up at the sky, and saw that there was a big storm rolling in. We all three thought about going back up the road to Gedrinker Haven, before the storm hit, but just as quickly decided that maybe it would not be worth it to have a roof over your head if you were sleeping in quarters so dingy.

"We oughta find a spot under a tree, Digby," said Corliss.

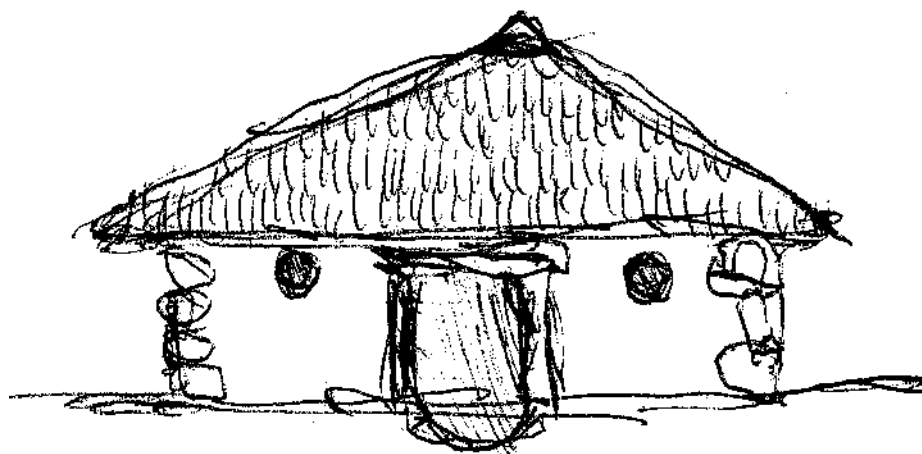
"Naw, I ain't gonna sleep outdoors in the rain," said Digby, "not when I could have a roof over my head for once. We're gonna sleep in my house."

"You have a house?" I asked.

"Digby, no, they'll find us, you know they will," said Corliss, her voice rising.

"They won't be out in the rain to check on us," said Digby, also yelling now. "I ain't a gonna sleep out in the rain and get soaked when there's a cabin not half a mile from here that's mine by rights anyway, I won't do it!"

"Talbot will guess you're going to try to sneak back into our old cabin, and he'll come with his bully boys and give us a beating!" shouted Corliss, her voice getting a little bit hoarse. "Can you not use some sense for once in your accursed life!"



"Not in the rain he won't, woman!" said Digby, his voice also getting hoarse as he raised it louder and louder. "We'll be in and out before he comes to check! He'll wait until after the storm's over!"

Then there was a ferocious crackle of lightning and a rumble of thunder, and we all stopped talking and looked up again. The clouds were getting darker, and it looked to be preparing for a mighty storm.

"I'll give you ten coppers for a night out of this storm," I said. "On two conditions. One, payment half in advance, half afterwards. Two, not if there are any bedbugs."

"Oh there ain't no bedbugs, for sure," said Digby, "on account of we ain't got no beds. It's a roof over your head, though. Come on, follow quick-like now."

I think nobody but Digby had thought it was a good idea just a few moments before, but the sound of the storm's approach was so mighty that none of us wanted to stay out in it, not Corliss and not Flora or Willie either. Even Hildigard seemed happy to go into the cabin, once we ran to it and Digby had pried open the door which had been nailed shut.

"Talbot's doing," muttered Digby. "The man is a villain."

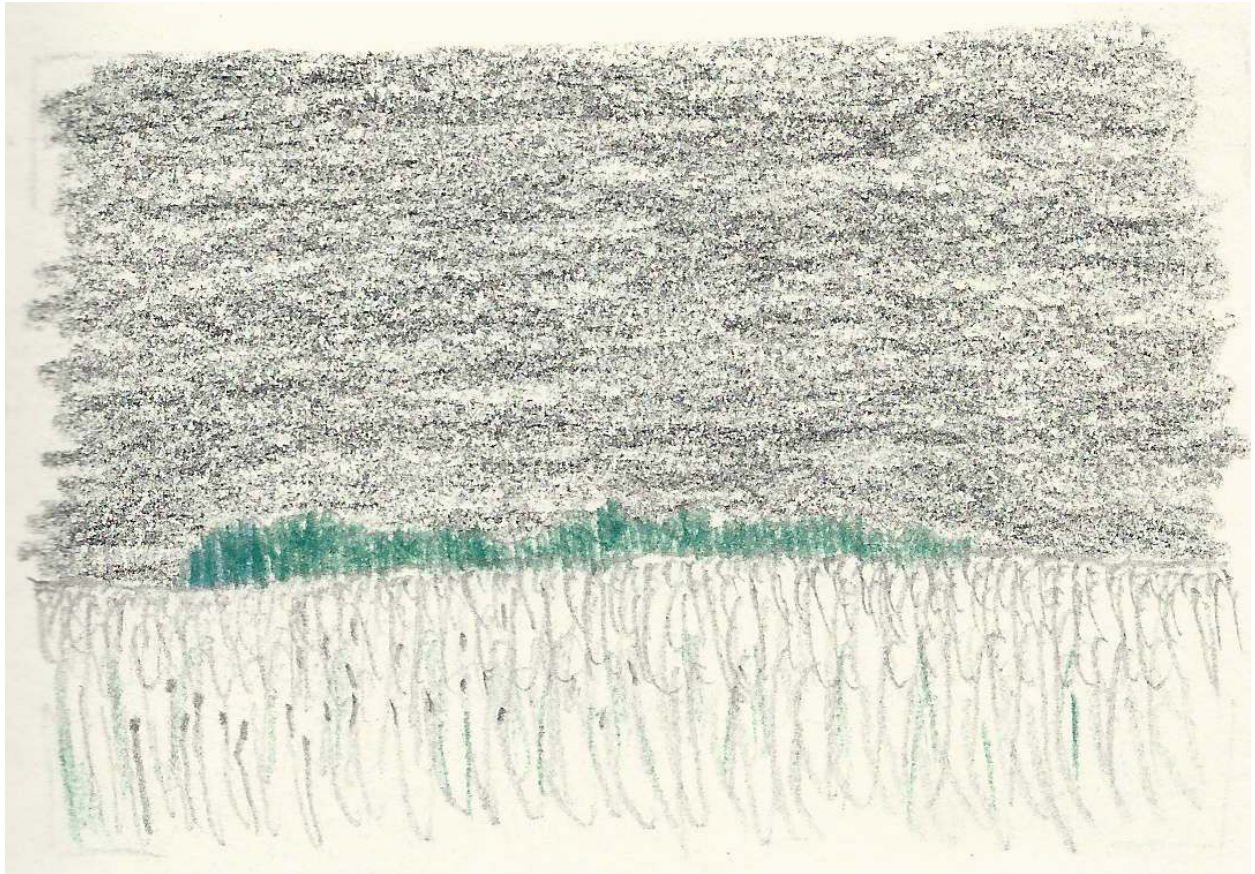
"Why didn't you just crawl in the window, like you did last time, Digby?" said Corliss. "Looks like he ain't boarded it up again yet."

"So what happened, did he loan you money?" I asked, once we had all shuffled in and close the door behind us. Outside, it started to rain almost immediately, and we all sat down on the plain dirt floor of the one room cabin. There was no furniture, and the fireplace had no stone for the chimney, it was mostly just a hole in the roof. The roof still seemed to be in good shape, though.

"Yes, that was the start of it," said Digby. "I should never have taken it, but we had no crop that year, and we needed to buy some food to tide us by until the next year. Then the next year's crop wasn't so good, either, and I got sick for a while, and we didn't have much to sell, and all the while the debt kept getting bigger and bigger."

"It's what Talbot wanted the whole time, I'll warrant," said Corliss.

"Then it was so big that even when we had a decent crop I couldn't do nothing but just pay the interest, and the year after that was another bad crop and it was over. Talbot took me to court and said I had broken my promise to pay. I told the court I had no money to pay, and I was trying the best I could, and I explained about the crops not being good, but they did not listen. They took away my land and my house, and gave it to Talbot to pay my debts. I think maybe it's what he had intended when he first gave me the loan."



I looked around me and wondered about that. From the looks of the cabin, and the overgrown land around it, nobody was getting any use out of either one. I did not see what Talbot would want it for, if not to use it. But, even if he had not planned it to turn out this way, it did seem heartless to throw a man and woman out of their own home. Also, what was the use in it? They would never get the money to pay him back, if they were begging on the roadway.

Willie and Digby started working on getting a little fire in the fireplace, really more of a firepit inside the cabin. I wondered if that would attract attention, but then it was getting dark out rather fast with the stormclouds overhead, so it seemed to me that if this Talbot fellow was watching from Southtonburg, soon it would be too dark for him to see any smoke. Still, I was a little bit cautious, and I found a good spot to peer out between the wall and the door, which did not close too flush with it, and I kept an eye on the road as best one could in the dark.

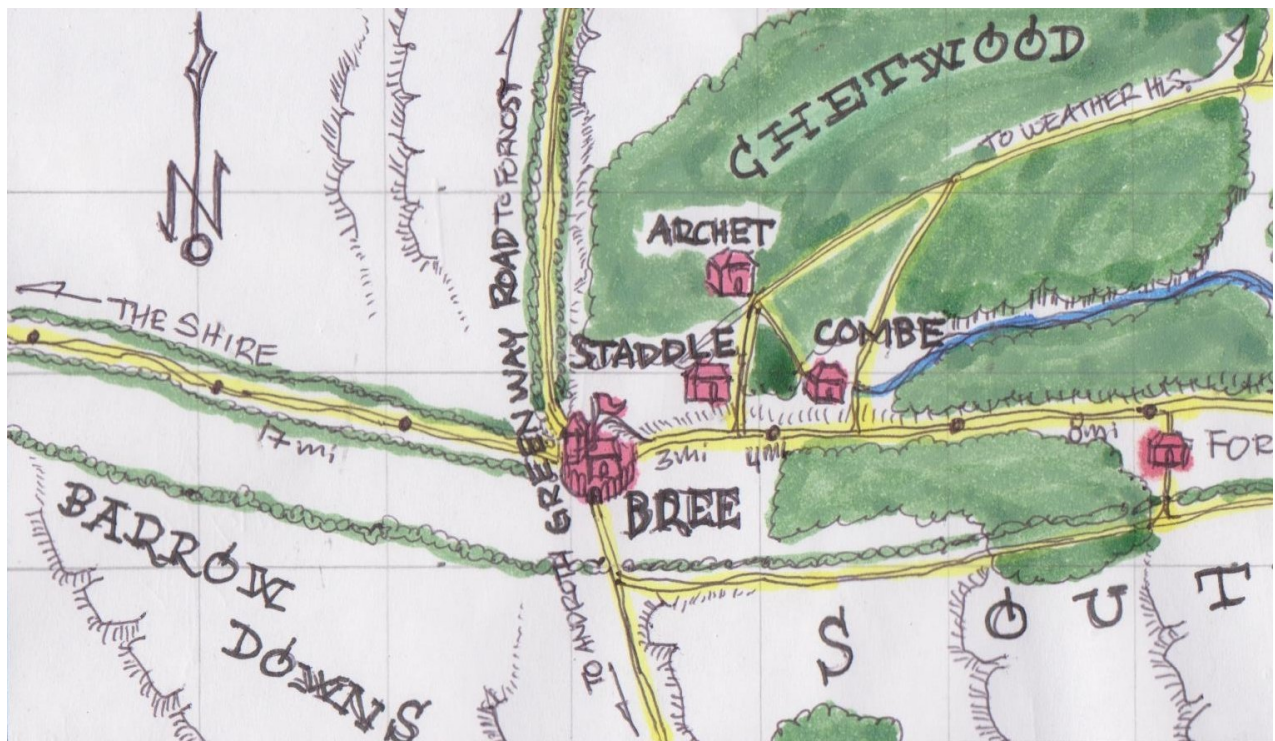
It was the middle of the night when I was awakened by the sound of Hildigard growling. I sat up and looked through the crack between the door and the doorway, and saw five large Men walking towards our cabin from the road. They carried large clubs in their hands, and looked ready to use them.

I woke everyone up as fast as I could without making any noise, and we grabbed our things and bolted out the back window. I had a little trouble getting Hildigard up high enough to get through the window, and Corliss (who was already through it) reached back and grabbed her and helped her through. I was worried that the Big Folk would be too worried about Hildigard biting them to help, and then I was also worried that maybe Hildigard WOULD bite her, but everyone seemed to know that we needed to work together, fast and quiet, to get out of there. We ran off into the rain and dark, and had almost made it to the woods when I heard a shout from behind us, and I knew that we had been spotted.

It was probably Digby and Corliss who had been spotted, actually, since they were tall enough that they could be seen above the grasses that choked the fields. We had a hard time keeping up with them, though, because of their long legs. Corliss and Digby looked back, scared, and I knew we would not be able to keep up with them, and also that we could hide better than they could.

"Just go!" I whispered, and they took off even faster. The three of us, and Hildigard, took off in a different direction, to the side, keeping our heads down and out of sight in the tall weeds. I didn't know if we were going to get seen, but I was hoping that the fact that we had split off in two directions would cause them not to notice us.

"Some of them went that way!" I heard a voice shout, and I knew we were in trouble. We were headed back towards the main road, the Greenway, but I knew if we actually went onto it we would be too easy to spot, out on the open roadway like that, so as soon as we got to a line of brush I took a hard right again. We were now headed back towards the way the Big Folk had originally come from, but I was hoping there weren't any of them there by now. Once I thought our pursuit might be getting to the place we had turned right, I dove through the line of bushes and onto the other side, thinking to keep us out of his line of sight. Or, maybe, their



line of sight; I didn't know how many were chasing Digby and Corliss and how many were chasing us.

Then, there was a flash of lightning, and we could see everything for an instant: the crude cabin, the two Big Folk with clubs standing by the door of it, Digby and Corliss in the distance running away, and the two men with clubs running after them. That left one of the Big Folk who I did not know where they were, and I assumed that one was still running after us. We put our heads down again and started running back the way we had come, only on the other side of the line of bushes, which I think was maybe at one time the boundary marking the edge of the farm's fields. We moved as slow as we could, and at one point I saw the fifth Man, running but trying to be quiet, go past us on the other side of the line of bushes. In the dark and the rain, he didn't see us, but I knew that another flash of lightning at the wrong time and we would be in trouble. So once he was past we went as fast and quiet as we could back towards the Greenway, and we kept our heads down, and after a few minutes I was pretty sure we had given them the slip.

We didn't know what had happened with Digby and Corliss, but it did not seem like we had any choice but to hope for the best for them, and keep going ourselves. We walked on the rest of the night and into the daylight, and then kept going all day headed south. That night we camped away from the road, exhausted and about out of food. It took us two more days to reach Bree, and we were footsore and tired and hungry by the time we got there. I felt like staying at The Prancing Pony again, but Flora and Willie insisted on me going with them to Staddle, nearby, where their family lived.

When we got there, there was a great deal of excitement. There seemed to be quite a few people in the Underhill family, and they all came out once they heard that Flora and Willie had returned. They lived in much smaller smials than Great Smials back in the Shire, but they did remind me a little of Uncle Bullroarer's smial in North Cleeve. Flora and Willie's parents looked like older, slightly greyer and plumper versions of their son and daughter. There had been some uncertainty about how long Flora and Willie would be gone; apparently Flora had left a note explaining that they might be a while, but it had been over three weeks now and they were all quite relieved.

"I did not see your note until you had been gone most of the day," said Flora's mother, while she was hugging her and not letting her go, "or I would have run after you! I was so worried!"

I thought to myself that this was likely the very reason Flora had left a note instead of explaining in person. But, then they introduced me, and everyone was very friendly, but when their father asked whether or not I wanted them to send a message to my own parents, I started feeling a bit awkward.

"I suppose maybe so," I said, "but let me think about what I need to say, exactly."



Eventually things calmed down enough that they could explain, to their parents, about what they had found in the books at Fornost Erain. They all got very quiet, and frowned and read the instructions we had written down, and rubbed their chins and looked thoughtful. I noticed that Flora and her father both got the same expression when they were thinking hard about something.

"Would you go to Tharbad soon, then, do you think?" asked Flora's mother. Flora and Willie both looked a bit surprised; I think they were expecting their parents to try to talk them out of it.

"The sooner the better," said Willie. "Gerontius here has maps on the way there, and he knows a Wizard who says that there will be apothecaries there who will understand this and be able to make this medicine for Hazel. How is she doing, our Hazel?"

Then their parents looked at each other, and did not say anything, and I knew that their little sister must be ill again. Flora and Willie went in to see her, and their mother went with them, while I stayed outside and talked to their father. He eventually talked me into writing a brief note to my own father, saying that I was all right and taking a trip south to help out some friends. He said he would get it delivered to Great Smials.

When Flora and Willie came out again, they were very somber, and I knew that their little sister must have been having a hard time. We ended up going back to The Prancing Pony that evening, so that we could hit the road early in the morning. The fact that we did not spend even one night at their home told me that they were in a hurry. We snuck Hildigard into our room at the Prancing Pony again, and thought about how nice an inn it was, compared to Gedrinker Haven. I think it was probably better even than Turp Hay House, although they were very different so it was hard to compare.

We were about half a day's walk south of Bree when we found Digby and Corliss again. Actually, we found Digby, and it was Flora who saw him first.

"Is that Digby in that tree up there?" she asked, just as we came over the crest of a low hill.

We looked where she was pointing, and saw that it was Digby. He was down by the point where a small stream crossed under the Greenway road, up in one of many birch trees that lived near the stream. He was not looking at us, and it probably passed through all three of our minds to slip off into the tall grass and out of sight before he could see us, but it also occurred to me that I had never had the chance to pay him the second half of the rent for the night. The place he had taken us had, of course, not been safe to sleep for the whole night, but I still felt a bit odd about sneaking away and not giving him the rest of the money I had promised him, since it wasn't his fault that the Big Folk with clubs came to run us off. Or, was it? I decided that perhaps it was not.

In any case, while I stood there and hesitated, he spotted us, and then he did a surprising thing. He waved at us, as if to tell us to get away, and just then I saw an arrow shoot up at



him and nearly pierce him. He dodged, probably too late to help any but fortunately the arrow had missed him anyway, but then he had to catch himself from falling. We did not recognize who had shot the arrow at him, but someone had from near the base of the tree he was in, so we ducked down and snuck off into the grass on the side of the road after all, and thought about what to do.

We left Flora with Hildigard and our packs, since Hildigard might start barking and we needed to be sneaky, and then Willie and I took our slings and some good sized rocks which we had saved up for just such an occasion, and started running towards where we had seen Digby. We kept our heads kept down low and stayed as quiet as we could. When we got there, we were quite surprised to find a goblin among the birches, standing at the base of the tree Digby was in, with another arrow knocked, and circling around it trying to find the best angle to get a shot at Digby again.

We looked around quick to see if there were any others, but it seemed to be just the one goblin, so we whispered to each other just a few words, and then split up. Pretty soon, the goblin was just about ready to try to put an arrow through our Digby when he got a stone in his chest. It didn't kill him, as he had a leather vest on that took some of the shock, but he was quite surprised, and looked over to see the top of Willie's head as he ducked back down into the grass and brush. The goblin was about to run after him when I sent a stone into the back of his right thigh, and fell to the ground, cursing. Then he was up and running again, or trying to, although he had a bit of a limp, but by then Willie had shifted around, and sent another stone into the outer side of his left leg. Meanwhile, I had shifted around too, and we kept this up, pelting him from different sides each time, until he had dropped his bow and arrow and run off as quick as he could, which wasn't too quick with the hits to both his legs but we weren't too worried about him.

Digby came down, and we both came over to greet him, expecting to see him relieved, but he looked as upset as ever, and like he was about to cry.

"We gotta go after him," he said. "They took Corliss. I gotta go after him and try to get her back."

"Who took Corliss," I asked. "That goblin? Or were there others?"

"There were a couple dozen," said Digby, "and they run me up a tree and took Corliss off to make her a slave. I ain't a gonna sit by and let them just do that, I gotta try to get her back."

"But Digby," I said, "if there are a couple dozen, what are you going to do? Do they all have bows and arrows?"

"No," said Digby, who was already starting to run off in the direction that the goblin had gone, "some of 'em got swords."



"Digby, wait!" I said, trying to keep my voice down so that the goblin who had run away would not hear, but Digby would. "We need a plan!"

"Oh, I ain't no good with plans," said Digby, but he did stop and turn half around. "Wait, do you have one?"

[Well whatever else you might say about this Digby, said Mira, he certainly seems to have actually loved Corliss. He must have known he was not going to be able to defeat a couple dozen goblins on his own, when they had weapons and he didn't.]

[I am not sure that I see it would do much good to get himself killed, said Donna. How would that help Corliss any?]

[Oh it probably wouldn't, said Bella, but I think Mira is right. While he was being shot at, he was just trying to stay alive, but once he was safe he realized she was gone, and he was alone. He wanted to run off after the goblins to try to get Corliss, because he would rather die trying, than give up and let her be taken as a slave by the goblins, and live without her. I think she was all he had in life.]

[The three sisters sat there for a moment, thinking.]

[I hope they got her back, said Mira.]

[They must have, said Donna, because Flora said they were yelling at each other while she was writing her part, and that was after this, I think.]

[Oh, you're right Donna, they do get her back. Flora says that it is Corliss who's dictating the next part.]



Corliss

Chapter 10

This is Flora again, writing for Corliss.

So I cannot read or write my letters too well, so Flora is gonna take this down for me. Is that alright if I say that? So then. We are gonna talk about what happened that time when the goblins got me, and what I saw and heard, 'cause it was different from what the rest of you saw, owing to I was on my own for part of it. Well mostly on my own, except for being with the goblins. Anyway, let's begin.

We was running away from Talbot's men, and then the hobbits, that's you Flora and your brother and Gerontius there, all went a different way with Hildigard. We ran off as fast as we could manage, and into a copse of trees we call Gedrinker Holt, and what with the dark and the noise from the rain we were able to give 'em the slip, but we kept on running for a while just to make sure. Eventually we came to a little path running north to south, and we had to decide which way we would go.

Then we wondered if we should go back for the others, that means you again Flora and the rest, but it seemed like maybe we should not, since we didn't know which way you had gone anyway. But we thought maybe you had gone south, and in any case we wanted to steer clear of Talbot and his ruffians for a time, so we just kept on heading south, through Gedrinker Holt and out the south end of it into the open, and then we kept going south through the Chetwood and finally ended up at Bree. This took a night and a day; we slept for a while under a few bushes, huddled up together to stay a little warmer. Digby snores a lot but I have kind of got used to it. Does it bother you still, Flora? Yes, it took a while before I could sort of not notice it. Oh don't write that part down, no one wants to hear that. Oh, anyway.

We tried to get into Bree, thinking maybe we could find some food there, but they did not like the looks of us I guess, and the guards at the palisade turned us away, and would not let us into Bree. So we kept going south, now on the Greenway again, and then we tried to beg some food at Broomquick House, which was a little coachhouse inn, and they gave us a tiny bit but turned us away and would not let us come in either. So we kept on walking for a while south, and then we stopped at a little stream and sat down to eat the food they had given us, and have a drink, and rest a bit.

It was while we were talking there together that the goblins came on us, all at once without any warning, from all different directions. We tried to scamper up trees to get away from them, and Digby made it but I wasn't quite as quick as him and they grabbed me and pulled me back down before I could get away. Then I tried to push 'em away but there was too many of them. I thought about biting one of 'em on the hand, but I was not sure I wanted to make them too mad since it seemed like there were too many to fight anyway, and also to be honest the thought of putting my mouth on one of them, kind of turned my stomach a little.



So then they tied me up and laughed a bunch, and then the leader said they would take me back for a slave, but they left one goblin to use a bow and arrow and shoot Digby, and told him to catch up once Digby was dead. When they dragged me away, slung over one of their shoulders, I looked up at Digby and thought maybe it was the last time I would ever see him, and it made me sad. He was still dodging around trying not to get shot by arrows, but I knew he couldn't keep that up forever, and I started to cry at the thought of Digby dying and me never seeing him again, but then I stopped myself because I did not want the goblins who had me to see me crying because they seemed like the kind who would like that.

So after a while we came to a forest that is called Rich Shaw, and once we got inside of it so we were out of sight, they stopped and threw me down on the ground and sat down to rest for a bit. They were talking to each other in some tongue I didn't know, but it sounded like they were deciding what to do next, once their last fellow got back after shooting my Digby dead.

Then one of 'em came up to me and started talking in a way I could understand.

"So, woman, you can cook? Or should we just kill you now and save the trouble of carrying your useless body back to the mountains?"

I said sure, I could cook, which is not exactly a lie since I do cook from time to time for Digby and I. Not that I would say I am all that 'specially good at it, but I can put things in a pot and put the pot over a fire, and that counts as cooking in my opinion. We don't normally have any call for fancy cooking anyway.

"Then you will cook for us now, and you will have to eat it first, so that we know it is not poisoned, and then we will eat it, and if we think you are no good at cooking we will kill you here and cook you instead, not that there is much flesh left on you." And he grinned real wide and showed his big teeth, all yellow and pointy and his breath was not too fresh neither.

So I had to decide what I wanted to do. It occurred to me that maybe I would rather die than live with these folks, especially as a slave, and maybe I should cook it so it tasted nasty just to make sure they killed me and I wouldn't know anything more. But then I thought that maybe they would be slow about it, or just beat me up for a while and not kill me, and so I decided I would try to live, so I said I needed to get some herbs if I was going to cook in a way that would taste good.

He just laughed at that and said, "You think we are fools, woman? We will not let you wander in the forest to gather herbs, you will run off. Your wandering days are over, you belong to us now."

Well now running off was exactly what I had been planning to do, but it did not seem to me like he had to be like that, so I told myself that once I got the chance I would poison them, and even if they made me eat it first so that I died too, as long as I could keep myself from showing any ill effects until they had eaten their fill I would be satisfied. But I didn't have no poison with me nor no herbs neither, so I just started to cook what they had, which was some dried



meat that was a little turned, and some roots which weren't looking too fresh either. If that was the way they had been eating lately I had a guess as to why they were looking for a cook. I think maybe they had not been expecting to have much trouble taking food from others, but it turned out to be harder than they expected. Bree had that wall around it and a guard, and Broomquick House was made with small windows and thick walls so it would be hard to force your way in even if you came on them by surprise. It was because Digby and I were alone out in the open that they had got us.

After a time that one goblin they had left behind came back, and when the biggest one, who seemed to be the leader, asked him a question, he gave an answer, and I did not understand a word of it but I could tell he was lying from the way he looked kind of shifty and hangdog. I think they were asking if he had killed Digby, and he had said yes, but then I saw that he didn't have a bow or arrows any more, and I was wondering whether or not Digby maybe had managed to live after all, and my heart kind of leapt up inside me.

Then, all of a sudden, I heard Digby's voice, and he was hootin' and hollerin' from outside the forest, and the goblins all went to look except for the one who had been talking to me earlier, who kept an eye on me so I couldn't run away.

"Haaaaaaa! Come at me, you stupid goblins! I'll beat every one of ya! I beat your other goblin, and I'll beat you all next! Come at me, you stupid goblins! You smell bad! I ain't afraid of you! Woooooooooooooooohaaaaaaa!"

Now I was happy to see that Digby was not dead yet, but I thought maybe he had lost his mind and was about to lose his life, because he was standing in the open and hollering like that at a couple dozen goblins. So the goblin leader shouted a question at the one who had just came back, and he was pointing at Digby while he asked it, and he sounded mad. I suppose he was asking why Digby was still there, alive and hollering and having followed him back to their camp. Then the leader took out his sword and so did the others, and they talked among themselves, and it turned out maybe they didn't have too many arrows except what they had left with that other goblin to shoot Digby with, which was all gone now. So, they all charged at Digby, waving their swords and shouting, and then Digby stopped shouting and took off running. Digby can run pretty well when he needs to, and I was hoping that he would make it, but then they were all out of sight and I couldn't tell no more and I began to think about my own situation again.

The one goblin left could kind of tell what I was thinking, and when I looked over at him, he said "Do not think to flee, woman, I am more than enough to kill you before you could make it three steps. I would be quick to catch you, but kill you very slow." And then he grinned again, real evil like, and I was kind of glad because it made me shudder, and that made it easier for me to not show any surprise at seeing Gerontius pop his head up from the bushes behind him right at that moment. If I hadn't been shuddering at that goblin's evil grin, maybe I would have given it away with my expression and that goblin would have looked behind him, but instead he was keeping his eyes on me, to make sure I did not try to bolt. Gerontius held his



sling up with one hand, and held a finger in front of his mouth with the other, so I knew they wanted me to be quiet, and also that they were going to hit the fellow with a rock from a sling.

So I just bent down over my cooking, keeping my head low like I was trying to get a taste of it to see how it was coming along. My thinking was to get myself down out of the way so they could have a clear shot at him, and not have to worry about hitting me since I would be down out of the way because I was bent over. Also that way he couldn't see my face, so it was easier to not give away that I had seen something behind him. Then I heard two rocks go "thud!" into him at the same time, and he fell down, either dead or knocked out I didn't know and didn't much care. Willie and Gerontius came out of the bushes, with Hildigard, and I have never been happier to see anyone but Digby, and then they said we had to move quick, and we ran south as fast as we could. Most of the time we were just on the edge of Rich Shaw, where there weren't enough trees to block our way but still under the shadow of the trees at the edge, where we could move pretty quick but weren't as easy to see from a distance.

Then it turned out that it was all a plan that Gerontius had made up ahead of time, and Digby was to meet us at a tower named Thornfast that had been on one of Gerontius' maps. So we went there, meeting you and Hildigard on the way, and found that the tower was all ruined and abandoned. I think all of us except Gerontius were kind of nervous about going up to it, since it seemed like you could not be sure what might be inside of it. I think you, Flora, asked if maybe we should just wait nearby, and we could see Digby whenever he showed up, instead of actually going into the tower. So we sat down to do that, but Gerontius kept looking over at the tower, and then at the stream away to our north, and then at the other stream away to our south on the other side of the tower.

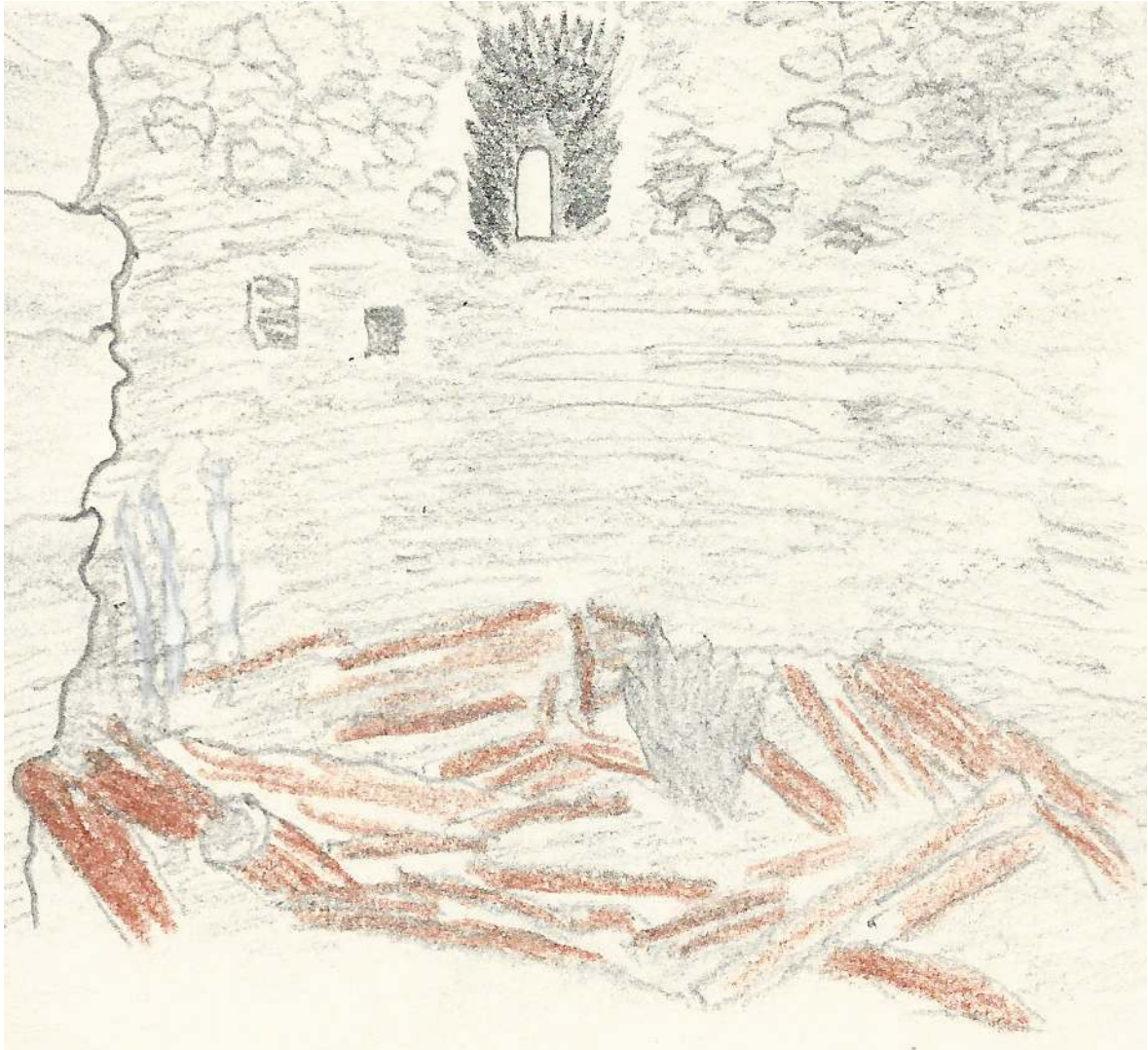
At first I thought he was looking for Digby to show up, but then it seemed like maybe he was more looking at the lay of the land, especially the tower and the streams but also the way the hills were. Eventually he said he was going to go into the tower after all, just to take a look around, but we could wait where we were and watch for Digby. So then he went over to the tower, and looked a bit nervous about going in, but in he went. Hildigard went with him, of course, as she always does pretty much.

Willie said, "Does it seem to anyone else like maybe Gerontius is a little odd sometimes?"

"He is," I said, "but he is a good one to have on your side in a tight spot."

"Oh no doubt," said Willie, "but sometimes I just don't understand how he makes decisions."

Then he told us that sometimes Gerontius would stay and sleep in a library because he was worried about bedbugs in a Dunedain princess' bed, oh sorry Flora you said she was just called a matron but whatever word you mean, one of them high and mighty types that I'm sure have good clean beds with no bugs in 'em. Willie could not understand how he was worried about a princess' house but would wander into a dark tower he knew nothing about, all on his own. But I remember you did not say anything then but just looked over at the tower where



Gerontius had gone with a thoughtful expression, like maybe you knew more than you were saying.

So then we saw our Digby coming running up the footpath from the west, and I was so happy to see him that I got up and ran over to him and I hugged him so long I think he wondered if I would ever let him go. And Willie and you Flora also looked pretty happy to see him safe and sound, and that he had given those goblins the slip, and it was good to have somebody who was happy to see us, because it had been a while since anyone had looked happy to see us, and when you and Willie gave a little cheer it was kind of nice to hear that.

So then we asked him if he had any trouble losing the goblins and he said not particularly, since there were a lot of them trying to stick together, and he was running for his life while they were just running out of anger and spite, and sometimes anger and spite runs out when you get tired but fear for your life keeps going when there are a couple dozen goblins on your tail.

All the same we decided we would go into the tower after all, just to find out if we could see them from a distance, and maybe decide which way to go from here to give us the best chance of not running into them again. Anyway Gerontius had not made any noise, nor Hildigard, so we figured that he hadn't met with any problems in there.

It turned out the whole inside of the tower was fallen in, except for the stone stairway spiraling around the inside of the wall. There had been different levels, but they were wood and were all fallen in long ago, in a pile in the bottom of the tower, but there were still stone stairs, and Gerontius was near up at the top.

He looked down and said hello to Digby, and said he could see the goblins and they were headed off back east, and he thought from the looks of them maybe they had decided to head back to the mountains, or at least to get back into the cover of the trees of Rich Shaw. So I thought maybe that was why he was up in the tower, he was watching for Digby. But then, when we said maybe we should head west, back to the Greenway and away from the way the goblins were headed, he agreed, but he stayed up there a while, looking around, and I wondered what he was looking for.

So then we waited for a few minutes down at the bottom, wondering when we were going to go, but after he had come up with the plan to get me sprung from the goblins I think maybe we had kind of decided Gerontius was the leader, and we sat down and let him look around for a while if he wanted to look. Plus, I think Digby was happy to get a chance to rest for a little while after all his running around.

Hildigard was down there, as I think she was not keen on walking up so many stairs with nothing on the inside to keep you from falling, so I made friends with her a little bit and tried to pet her some, and she decided that was acceptable but she kept looking up at Gerontius. I think she was just making sure he wasn't going to disappear or get in trouble; she didn't like to be separated from him if she could help it. That big crumbly stone staircase was just a little



too much for her, and to be honest I think it was too much for the rest of us, too. Eventually, he came down, and then he got out five copper coins for Digby for the half of his rent for the cabin that night when Talbot's men chased us, which I thought was honorable of him given that it had not turned out so well. But then I wondered if we were all going to split up now, and you folks were going to send us on our way like everyone else did.

We get along just fine now, Flora, but I think maybe you weren't too sure at first, which is fine, I know our looks give some people pause. Anyway at the time I think maybe you and your brother would have been satisfied with us parting ways, but Gerontius said we should all head south on the Greenway, and maybe we could check out a place called Tharbad. Willie also made just a tiny bit of a face, and I think he might have said something, but then he didn't, and so we all got up and started walking together towards the Greenway. And that's how we all ended up together in a group.

And that night we all camped together, and we ate stew out of one pot, and then Willie stood up and sang a little song or two, and all of us sang the choruses with him, and I was thinking how not a day had passed since the time when I thought Digby was dead and gone and I was maybe wanting to die, and now here I was eating my fill and singing with new friends, and it was a wonder how things can turn around in such a short time. I just hoped they did not turn around as fast the other way. And we've had a turn or two since then but we've made it this far, and don't you worry Flora, it is gonna turn out all right in the end I think. I believe that's all I've got to say for now, Flora, and I'm surprised you actually wrote all of that down, it seems like a lot of work. You don't need to write that part. Oh, well anyway.

This is Flora again, I do have to admit I wasn't too fond of Digby and Corliss travelling with us at first because I thought they would be trouble, which I guess they have been but also help sometimes too and now I am happy they are with us. But I am not happy about Digby's snoring and I do not think I will ever not notice that, but at least I am not as close to it as Corliss is.



Chapter 11 - Tharbad

When we finally came over the last hillcrest and could see Tharbad down below us by the river, as we walked down to the city I think at first we all wondered what had happened to it. The outer parts of it looked to be ruins, like the other ruined towers or castles we had seen all along the Greenway. But as we got closer, we saw that the part nearer the river still seemed to have a lot of people living there, and the buildings were in better shape, and we were all happy at the thought of a roof over our heads and a place to sleep.

We walked through the ruined northern parts, and into the part by the river where some folks still lived and things were a bit more kept up. The guards at the gate were rude, and probably would have charged us more money to get in except that after so long on the road and sleeping out of doors, we looked penniless. We probably also got along a little better since there were five of us plus Hildigard, and as a group we were less likely to be picked on or challenged; Tharbad seemed like a rough place to be if you were alone.

There was an islet in the middle of the river, that split it in two, with bridges connecting it to north and south banks (or perhaps it was one bridge in two parts, depending on how you wished to consider it). The northern part had fallen down entirely, and lay in rubble on the bottom of the river. The water was not too high when we arrived, so we could ford it there, although it was not much fun. I think Flora and Willie were more accustomed to swimming than I was; most Shire hobbits don't swim, although Bucklanders often do, and apparently Bree hobbits do sometimes as well. Digby and Corliss were tall enough they could just walk, holding hands to avoid slipping on the pieces of broken bridge that the water was rushing over. Hildigard was able to swim along with Flora and Willie. I thought perhaps I could try wading, but I was not tall enough to keep my head above water in some parts, and eventually I slipped and went under.

The next thing I knew, Digby was pulling me up by one arm, and saying, "Whoa there, master Gerontius! You're a little short to be trying it that way, no offense. Why don't you hold my hand and Corliss', while we get across?"

So, we did that, with Digby holding one hand and Corliss the other, helping me keep my head above water while we made it the rest of the way across. We were all six of us thoroughly drenched, of course, me more than anyone, and I worried about the map in my pack. It was in a tube that was capped with a wax seal, but that was meant to keep out the rain, not get submerged entirely. I was glad to have help from someone taller, though, and not looking forward to repeating the process on the south side. Most of the people in Tharbad seemed to live on the islet, now, and that part of the city was quite lively and bustling. We bought a little bit of food in the market there, and by the time we got across the islet we were feeling better. A full stomach often helps with that.



I think if I ever have children of my own, I will make sure they know how to swim, whether it's normal in the Shire or not.

[What!? interrupted Bella. He never taught us to swim! He only taught our brothers!]

[That's true, said Mira, but you know Mama would never have let him take us swimming. I'm not sure that our brothers were always wearing clothes when they went swimming, for one thing.]

[Well...said Bella, her outrage subsiding a bit, I suppose you're right about that. It still seems unfair. I can think of a time or two when it would have been quite useful to know how to swim. Anyway, please continue, Mira.]

Then, after we asked around for a while, we asked around and found out where on the islet an apothecary was. When we went there, I could tell that Flora and Willie were feeling a bit emotional, having travelled so far to get here. They had the recipe for this medicine that would help their little sister, and we had made it all this way to an apothecary who could make it for them.

It was really difficult to see their expressions kind of fall, as the apothecary himself explained to them that it would take about fifty times as many coins as they had, to pay for enough of it to last her into adulthood.

"Some of these herbs are quite common," explained the apothecary, "but a few of them are quite rare and expensive, I have to get them from merchants who travel far to the south, to Gondor. I believe I do have enough here for the quantity you require, but it would use up my entire stock. It's quite rare."

We considered if we should get just a little bit, but I could tell that Flora and Willie were really dispirited. We decided to think it over, and walked outside to think it over.

"What is the point of giving her enough just for a month?" asked Willie. "That won't really help any. She needs to keep taking it, I guess, and if we don't have enough at least for her to grow up, then I don't see..."

His voice trailed off, as he did not want to finish his thought. I think he was going to say that there was no point in giving her, and the rest of the family, false hope, if it was only for a short time. But then, if they could get her even a little more time, they thought maybe they should, even if it meant spending their life's savings. Their parents had given them what little money the family had, when we had stopped back at Bree. I could see that they felt like they ought to spend it on Hazel, but losing the family savings and not even saving Hazel was a bitter price.

Digby spoke up first.



"Well," he said, "what if we steal it? I mean really, why not? Your sister's gonna die if we don't. I bet if we wait until tonight, we could sneak in there, and get what she needs, and be outta there and gone before daylight. I'll do it. Somebody else will have to show me which things we need to take, though, I don't know my letters too well. What about you, Gerontius, you can read I think. Come on in with me tonight and we'll get this and we can follow the recipe ourselves, probably, to make the medicine."

I was never tempted to try Digby's plan, there were multiple things wrong with it. First of all, what if we got caught; thieves were hanged in Tharbad sometimes, or at least put in the stocks. Second, how likely was it that we would even be able to find what we needed in the apothecary's shop, in the middle of the night, without making much noise (I think his home was right above it). Third, even if we did get in there and find what we needed and got out without being heard, it would not be hard for the apothecary to guess who had stolen it, and we would have to leave town immediately and hope we did not get caught on the road. Fourth, I was not so sure that we did know how to follow the recipe as well as Digby said, even if we had all the ingredients. None of use were trained as apothecaries. There were probably more problems with that plan, but four was enough, and anyway it wasn't the apothecary's fault that we had no money. He probably had to pay a lot of money to the men who brought it from Gondor.

But, it was a generous offer. Basically, Digby was offering to risk his freedom and maybe his life to try to help Flora and Willie save a sister he had never even met. Mostly, he was doing it because he was not great at thinking about consequences. But it was still a nice thing to do, in his own confused, Digby-sort of way.

"Well," I said, "I think there is another way. But let's go look at something else in Tharbad first."

We all got up from where we had sat down, and started walking. I was surprised that no one asked me to explain where we were going. Maybe in Flora and Willie's case, it was because they were too depressed to really care. It turned out that the south side of the bridge was not quite as bad as the north side, with some wooden planks put across the gaps where the stone had fallen in. It was not too reassuring to walk on, but it held, and we found ourselves on the south bank of the river, walking through the edge of the city, and there it was in front of us, the House of the Numenorean.

Having seen that note on old Golfimbul's map for so many years, it was awesome to see the actual building in front of me. I had no idea of this at the time, but it was actually the oldest building in Tharbad, old even when the city was new, older than any other building I had ever seen. It was not as big as the castle at Fornost Erain, but it was still there, still inhabited, not falling down. Something about its age and grace, especially at the edge of a city where so much else had been allowed to fall apart, made us all go silent for a bit. Digby and Corliss even took off their hats, which I could tell without anyone telling me was a thing that Big Folk did as a gesture of respect.



*House of the Numenorean
(inside circular wall,
near the East Gate)*

"How do we get in?" asked Willie at last, breaking the silence.

There was a wall all around it, not too high but it did not seem like the kind of place where you should try climbing it. I was reminded of Gobel Naneth, where the Naneth lived up near Fornost Erain, although this seemed even grander. I wondered what one was supposed to do, to get their attention. Knocking on the door did not seem like it would work, if you had to climb up over the outer wall and across a big lawn just to get to the door in the first place. While we were waiting there, wondering what to do, we got lucky, and there was a sound of trumpets, and then the gates began to open.

At first I thought that we were being welcomed in, as if they had seen us somehow and blew trumpets to herald our arrival, but it was actually just to tell everyone in the area to stay out of the way, because the Lamplighter was coming out. I did not realize it yet, but the Lamplighter was the Dunedan who had the task of refilling the lamp that warned any ships coming up the river during the night that they had arrived at Tharbad, so they would not wreck on the islet instead. There had once been a great statue, taller than any building in the city, of an ancient king named Aldarion, that had held the lamp. That statue had toppled and fallen into the river years ago, although there were still a few pieces of it on the islet. The lamp, however, had been made of metal and had survived the fall; its glass had been replaced, and it now rested on top of a wooden tower built over the feet of the statue that still remained.

When the gates opened and the Lamplighter's carriage came out, pulled by black horses in a harness of polished black leather, we scampered over to the side of the road and watched it go by. I was hoping to find a way to get the Lamplighter's attention, but I could not even see into the carriage, much less make eye contact. So, after it went on down the road, I just started running after it, and the rest started running with me.

It turns out that the carriage went not much faster than walking speed, so it wasn't that hard to keep up, but after we had gotten across the south bridge and onto the islet, it stopped, and the coachman stepped down and came back to talk to us. He was a tall man with a uniform of dark blue and gray.

"Her Ladyship wishes to know why you are chasing her carriage," he said.

"I wish to speak to her, about a question concerning the history of this region," I said, not sure how much detail to give. "She is said to be the one who knows the most about it. I don't think it will take too much of her time, and it would be most appreciated."

The coachman looked at me, and then the rest of us, and then back at me.

"Is this something only you wish to know, or is it a question which concerns all of...your party?"

"It concerns all of us, yes," I said, wondering why that mattered. Then I realized that perhaps Digby and Corliss did not look to him like the kind of people he should be letting in his coach.



He went back to the carriage, and leaned in the window and had a short conversation, then returned to us.

"Her Ladyship says you may sit on the back of the carriage, if you wish, and one of you may sit up front with me. She cannot stay here to talk, but you can ride with us to the Lamp, and discuss this matter with her as she goes about the Lamplighting."

So, we thought that sounded better than walking. It seemed like Flora, Willie, Corliss, and Digby preferred to ride on the back, where there was a sort of bench on the tail end of the carriage. You were still outside, and it was a bumpy ride, but it was easier than walking, and I think perhaps the coachman's uniform, and the sword he wore, and his severe manner, all made them nervous about sitting next to him up front. So, I went up to the front, with the coachman, and Hildigard clambered up with me.

The coachman gave Hildigard a suspicious look, but held out his hand to her, and after she sniffed it he petted her, and then seemed satisfied. He turned back to his horses, and with a sharp, "giddyap", they were trotting away again, and pulling us along with them. Some of the men in Tharbad used whips on their horses at the slightest excuse, but this coachman was an expert handler of the horses, and you could tell that he had no need to terrorize them in order to get them to pull the carriage.

We went along the full length of the islet, to the westernmost point where the giant statue had once stood. The only parts that still "stood", if you could call it that, were the feet. They were each of them larger than the coach, with all its horses. Next to them a large wooden platform had been built, and on top of that platform was the great metal lantern. The lantern must have been large, but it seemed small up there. It still burned, but once a week the Lamplighter came to refill its oil. We had been lucky enough to show up at the right time to see it happen, perhaps the only time in the week when it was possible to gain an audience with the Lamplighter.

[Wait, said Mira, I thought he said earlier they were waiting for days for the Lamplighter to show up?]

[This is earlier, said Bella. I believe it means they came back again, after this time. But it's not totally clear.]

Right next to the platform, lying on its side, was the giant head of the broken statue. It was a bit odd, to see its face staring at us like that, looking past us really. I thought about what it had seen, staring out there for centuries, and then in the hundred years or more since it had fallen. It should have looked sad, I think, but of course it did not, it had the same stern expression that it had always had.

The coachman got down, and opened the carriage door, and out came a tall Dunadan woman, dressed in a long dress with the same colors as her coachman; dark blue and silvery gray. She had her hair in long braids, and she reminded me a little of the Naneth at Fornost Erain,



except she wound her braids around her head like a crown. I suppose she was tall even for the Big Folk, although sometimes it is hard for me to tell; they all look tall to me. She was as tall as her coachman, anyway. It seemed like it would be a good idea to show respect by bowing, so I did.

"Hello," she said, "we do not see hobbits from the Shire here very often, Gerontius Took. Why have you come?"

Well that sort of threw me off the path I was on, where I was about to introduce myself and say where I had come from. So, I think I might have stood there with my mouth open for a moment. She smiled, and began walking towards the platform, gesturing to me that I should come with her.

"My apologies, it must be surprising to you that I knew of your coming. But, while we do not have frequent messages between Fornost Erain and Tharbad, it still happens, and they told me you might be headed our way."

I wondered, messages how? Messenger bird? Horse and rider? We had not seen any riders passing south on the Greenway, but then sometimes we were not on it. It seemed impolite to inquire too much about their business, so I did not ask. I was there to ask other questions, anyway.

"Ma'am, I am here to look for a tower, one that is marked on a map my great-uncle got from a goblin war-chief named Golfimbul. I am thinking it could be near here, but I cannot tell for certain. It is likely to be quite old. I hear that you know the most about the local history."

"Why do you seek this tower," she asked, still looking straight at me while she did, with keen grey-blue eyes that seemed to be good at seeing your thoughts as you spoke. Yes, more than a little resemblance to the Naneth. I felt the urge to look away and try to hide my expression, but I figured she would see through that, so I decided the best answer was the blunt truth.

"I think that the goblins had treasure hidden there," I said, "although I cannot prove that for sure until I find it."

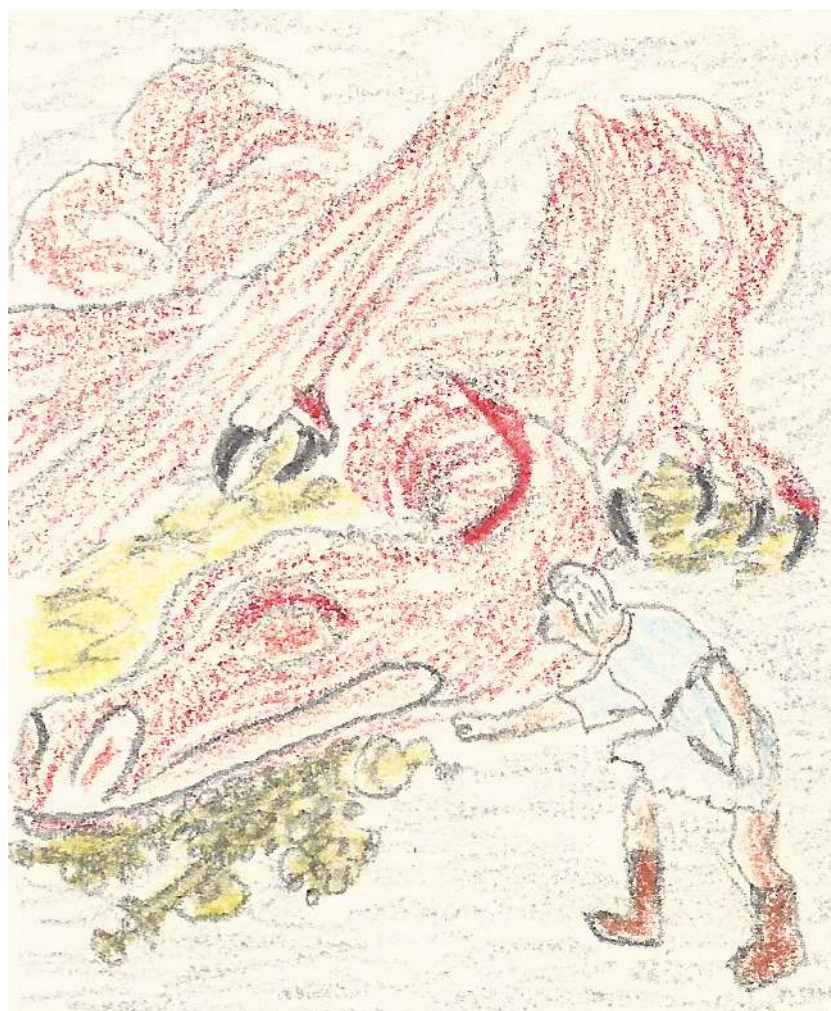
"I see," she said. "If there is such treasure, where do you suppose it would have come from?"

"I...don't know."

"No?"

"I suppose...I suppose it would have come from whoever the goblins took it from. But whoever that was, they would be dead by now, and probably were killed by the goblins before they took it. In any case, I don't suppose it would be possible to find out who it belonged to, by now."

"No," she said, thoughtfully, "no I suppose it would probably not be."



"And it seems like it would be better to find it, than to leave it in that tower, wherever it is, where it would do no one any good."

She narrowed her eyes a bit, and pursed her lips, and said nothing for a few moments as she looked out over the river. Then, she looked back at me again.

"Gerontius Took, have you heard of the curse that can be attached to a dragonhoard, or other such lost treasure?"

"Um, no, I have not," I admitted.

"So much treasure, together in one spot, with no proper owner, it often leads to tragedy for whoever comes into possession of it. Friend turns on friend, family members betray one another, neighbors become enemies."

"Oh," I said. That did seem to remind me of a few stories I had heard, as a child.

"Treasure that no one knows about, left alone in a tower, does no damage, but a treasure that belongs to no one, or rather to anyone who can take it and fight to keep it, can do a great deal of damage. The dragon is probably not even necessary, only that it is a large amount of ill-gotten gain to stir men's greed, with no proper owner so that men who would never steal might still try to get it because they think they have as much right to it as anyone. It does not bring out the best in people. There is a way to break the curse," she continued, "but it is difficult to do."

"What is that?" I asked.

"The person who comes into possession of the treasure, must take only a small amount of it, and leave the rest. Walking away from the greater part of it, breaks the power of the curse. If it is divided many ways, it loses its ability to turn good people to evil."

"I see," I said. I did not say anything for a bit.

"Let me see this map," she said.

I took it out and showed it to her.

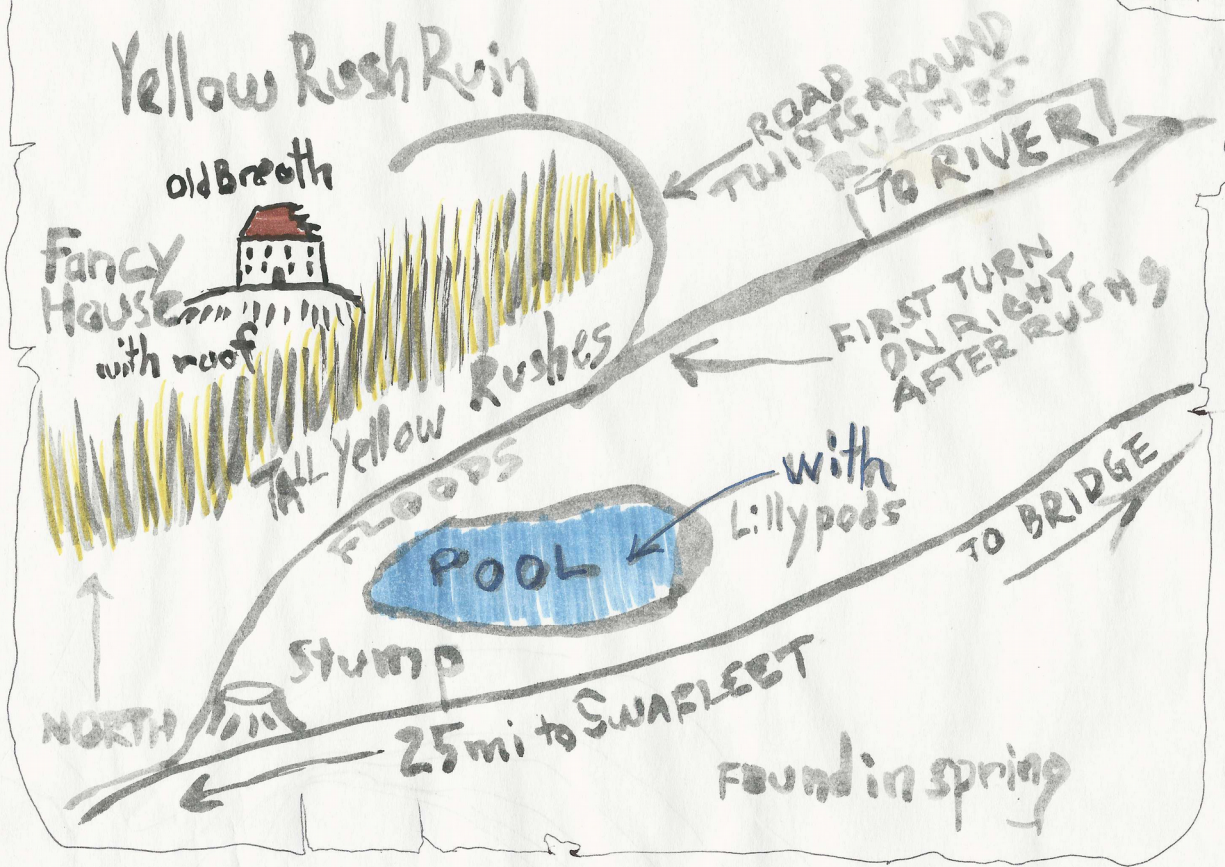
"Well that is not so clear," she said after taking a long look at it. "It is somewhere close enough to the House I live in that they put a note on here pointing to it. But they do not even say which way is north, so we know neither the distance nor the direction. Not much to go on."

"No, I suppose it is not," I said.

"How long ago was this made?" she asked.

GERONTIUS Map TO Yellow Rush Ruin

FOUND AMONG HIS BELONGINGS INSIDE HIS ROLLED
ROUTE MAP FROM FORTNOST TO KINGSTONE.
OTHER NOTES ON YELLOW RUSHES SUGGEST A MEETING
AND OVER-NIGHT SHELTER



"Probably 60 or 70 years ago," I said.

"Perhaps, but it must be copied from one that is far older," said the Lamplighter. "It uses the name of the ancient kingdom, Arnor. Arnor split into three kingdoms, over a thousand years ago. The name was still used for the region for some time afterwards, but no one making a new map as recently as 60 or 70 years ago would use that word. It also points the way to Calenardhon. That region has been given to other Men, and is called by the name 'Rohan', for three hundred years now. The parchment this map is made on does not seem to be nearly so old, but the words it uses are many centuries out of date. It must have been copied from something older. It was certainly not made by any goblin; these are words that only Dunedain would use, I think."

"Oh," I said, recalling that Uncle Bullroarer had told me he thought someone else made this map for the goblins. The longer I spent outside of the Shire, the less crazy his ideas seemed.

"So, you are correct that some of these landmarks may no longer even exist," she said. "You need to look at a more complete map, that would have all of them, in order to find where this tower is."

"I guess I need to look at an old map of Arnor, then," I said. "I thought the ones that were at Fornost Erain would have been old enough, but maybe I need something even older. Do you know where such maps might be?"

"Fornost Erain might have had such maps, once," she said, "but parchment does not last forever. Thousand year old parchment or papyrus will rarely be in good shape, even if it has been handled well. If it was sitting in a city that the Witch King of Angmar conquered with fire and steel and boulders hurled through the air by engines of war, it is all the more likely that anything so fragile was lost. But, I do know of an ancient map of Arnor you might be able to find."

"You do?" I asked eagerly. I had been just about to decide that she was telling me my quest was hopeless, so I was surprised to hear her say something encouraging.

"Yes, it is because it was not made as a scroll of parchment or papyrus; it was etched in stone. There was a house, to the south of here near Swanfleetwick, that had in it a model of all Arnor. From the Misty Mountains to the Blue Mountains, and from the Ice Bay of Forochel down south of the Swanfleet River. It was a wonder that was written about, to see the entire kingdom laid out below you, in stone. It is written that all of the principal fortifications of Arnor were on it, in miniature."

"Would it still be there?" I asked.

"Perhaps," she said. "It was too heavy to carry away, and not worth anything if it were broken up; it was carved from ordinary stone. If it had been studded with jewels I have no doubt that it would have been ransacked by now, but no bandits (goblin or men alike) have any use for



plain stone. Anyway, there is a legend of a curse attached to it, that might have kept it unmolested."

"Oh," I said, my voice dropping a bit. I knew it had sounded too good to be true. "A curse?"

"Yes, by the sorcerer who made it. He was a Dunedan, who became obsessed with the idea that he could find a way to avoid death forever. He once lived in the House of the Numenorean, where I live now. Then, because he did not wish for others in Tharbad to know that he had begun to explore foul sorcery, he moved to Swanfleetwick, a much smaller town where he was too wealthy and from too ancient a family for the locals to dare to challenge him."

"Or so he thought. Ultimately, they did dare to challenge him, and he had a house built outside of Swanfleetwick, where no one could see what he did there. He paid for stonework for the floor that was a scale replica of all of Arnor. Occasionally, he would have guests there, but that happened less and less often as time went by."

"Eventually, rumors in Swanfleetwick spread that he had died. But, when the people went to his house to see, they found him gone, but no body there either. His house was, in time, ransacked, and everything of value was taken. But, everyone who took treasure from that house fell ill, and died. It was called the Sorcerer's Curse, or the Curse of the Yellow Rush Ruin. That was the name they gave his abandoned house, the Yellow Rush Ruin."

"They came to Tharbad, to see if we had a cure for it, but of course we knew nothing."

"What happened? Did they all die?"

"Eventually, everyone dies. Even that sorcerer, I suppose, for all his efforts to cheat death, although his body has never been found. But some took their treasures back to the Yellow Rush Ruin and threw them in there and left, and some of those who did that were eventually nursed back to health. If you go to the Yellow Rush Ruin, do not take anything from it but your knowledge from the map carved in its stony floor. If you still insist on pursuing this treasure marked on the map, at least take no treasure from that house."

I nodded, and looked down for a bit, thinking.

"Gerontius Took, why do you seek this hoard? The Tookes are not likely to starve, I believe, you are not as wealthy as kings but you are not poor."

I heaved a sigh.

"Well, I suppose not, but I don't have enough money to solve everyone's problems," I said, and I briefly explained to her what my plans were if I could find the treasure.

[Wait, said Mira, what plans?]



[We don't know yet, said Bella.]

[Well why didn't he write it down so we could know? Mira asked]

[Because he is writing this to himself, so he can remember how it all happened and get his thoughts organized, said Bella. He probably doesn't need to write that part down, or didn't feel like doing it yet because his conversation with the Lamplighter is what he really wants to remember and write down.]

[Well I find it annoying when he skips things like that, said Mira.]

The Lamplighter tilted her head a bit back, as if looking at me from a slightly different perspective, and was silent for a few moments after I had finished my explanation.

"Well it may be that you will survive this quest with your soul intact, after all, if you stick to your plan," she said. "Come with me, we will ascend to the Lamp together."

She turned then, and started to walk up the stairs on the side of the wooden platform, and her coachman followed with a small keg. We continued up until we were on top of the platform, and then we walked over to the Lamp. Now that we were standing next to it, I saw that it was taller than she was. She took a key from a chain around her neck, a key which was as long as her forearm, and unlocked a large chest that was on the platform next to the Lamp.

She turned a dial on the Lamp to extinguish its flame, and then the coachman refilled it with oil from the keg he had carried. When he was done, she relit it. During the entire procedure, they were silent, so I was too. It occurred to me that this had been done at least once a week for longer than the Shire had existed, longer than the city of Tharbad had existed. Whole Kingdoms had risen and fallen during the time her family had been doing this.

I turned and looked over my shoulder, upriver. The theory was that this Lamp served as a signal to any ship coming up the river in the dark, so that they would not run aground on the islet. I wasn't sure how often it still happened that a ship would even be headed this way, although the docks on the south bank looked like they were still used so I supposed it must have happened occasionally. There was still a great crane tower, which could be used to lift heavy cargo from ship to the riverbank quays. I wondered if they would still come, though, to a town as small as Tharbad was now, if there was a danger they might wreck their ship on the islet in the dark or fog. Perhaps the Lamp staying lit had helped to keep Tharbad from dying entirely, by encouraging ships to keep coming.

Once the Lamp was lit, she spent a few minutes polishing several metal items in the large metal chest. Some of them looked like they might have been tools related to the Lamp, perhaps for doing repairs on it, but others obviously were not. I wondered if I was allowed to ask questions.



"These are items which are associated with either the Lamp, or the statue of Aldarion which once stood here," she said, without me needing to ask. "Some we use when the Lamp needs to be repaired or parts of it need replacing. Some are no longer used, because they were related to the statue, which fell over a hundred years ago. But, it is part of our duties to see that they are free from rust or corrosion regardless, in case it is ever possible to rebuild the statue."

I wondered about that. What would a statue need?

"Did the statue hold a lamp also?" I asked.

"No," she said, and then she said nothing else, but continued with her polishing.

I looked over at the massive statue head, lying on its side.

"Did the head land there?" I asked. It seemed like it would have cracked.

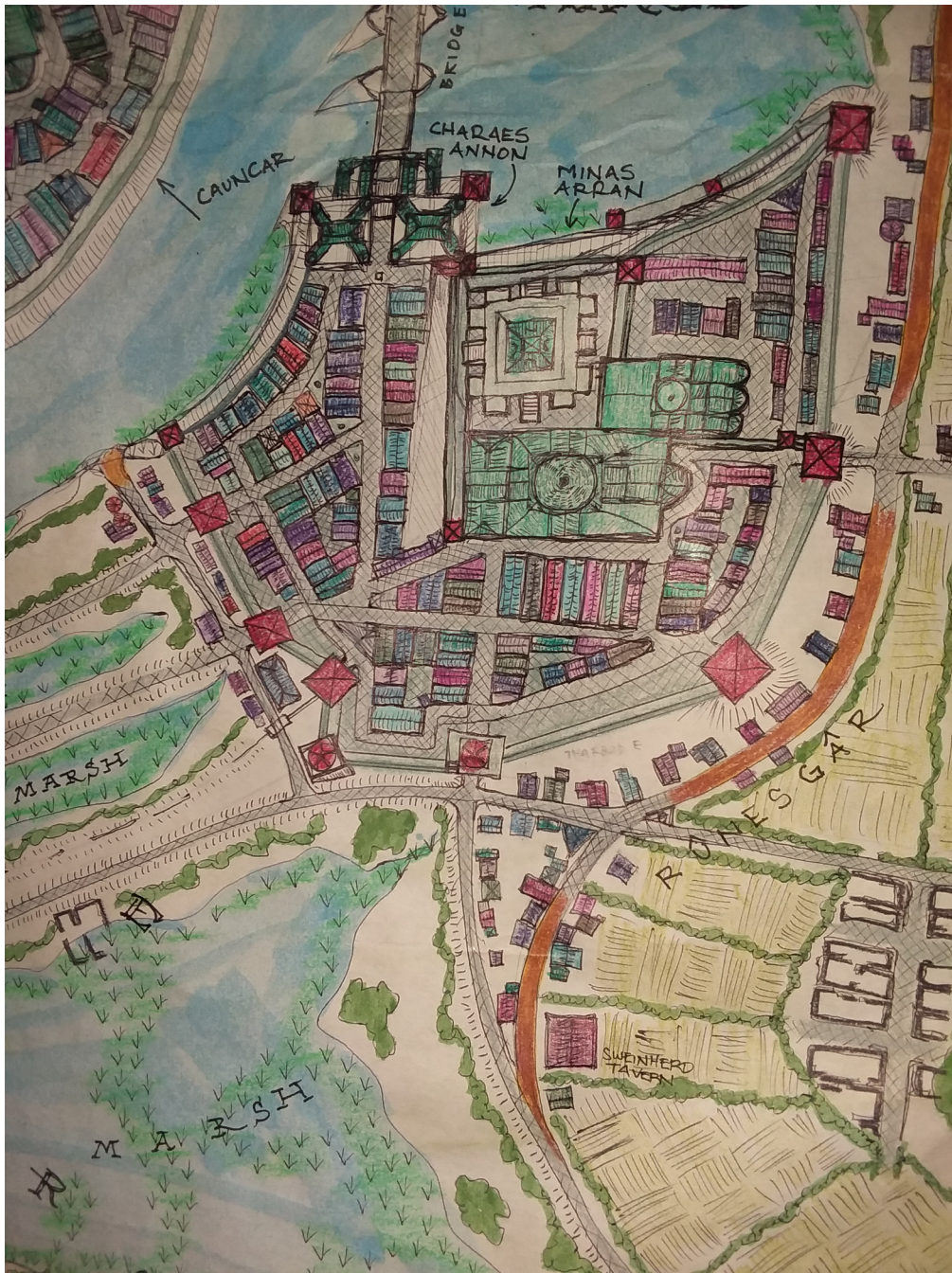
"No," she said, "the pieces of the statue landed in the river. Most of them are still there. The Great Crane, which you see across the river there, was used to pull the head up and to its current position. It took a great deal of time and effort for that to be done. My grandmother was a girl when it was done, and she told me that she watched for weeks as men struggled to attach a harness to it, as it lay on the bottom of the river, and then construct a system of pulleys, winches, and braces to allow it to be pulled up to where it is now. Most of that was disassembled so that the lumber could be used to build the platform we are on, but you can see the last part of it there still, that was used to lower it into place where it has been for the last century."

The passed a few moments of silence, with only the soft sound of the water flowing by. The Lamplighter continued at her work, polishing the tools in the large metal chest. The coachman stood near the top of the stairs, hands behind his back and standing straight, watching with no expression.

"I believe that, coming from the Shire, you have probably not seen much like this," said the Lamplighter, still looking down at her work. "The Shire has seen troubles, of course, with disease and flood and the Long Winter and invasions by Golfimbul's goblins. But, I believe it has never experienced the long decline that we Dunedain have, here in Tharbad and elsewhere."

I did not know what to say to that, so I said nothing.

"It is a splendid thing, that the Hobbits look forward to the future, and enjoy the present when they can," she said. "I think we Dunedain spend too much time thinking of the glories of the past, perhaps. But one advantage of remembering the past, is that it keeps one aware of the fact that things can go wrong. Bad things can happen, and it is well to be prepared for them. When you are among a people who have known growth, and never decline, it may be hard to imagine."



Again, she said nothing for a while, as she continued to work. I tried to think what to say, and again, could not. Then, she stood up, and looked at me.

"But then, that is the point of the Thain, is it not? To think about the world outside the Shire, and what could go wrong? Because the other Shire Hobbits will not be thinking about it."

Now, to be honest, I had never really thought much about what was the point of the Thain. The Thain was my father (and before that my grandfather), and that was not really something I questioned, because I had always known it. It occurred to me then, standing on the platform, on the islet, in the center of Tharbad, a long way away from the Shire, that one day I would be Thain. It's not like I had not already known that; I had always known that. It was that it kind of hit me as a real thing, that would happen someday, instead of merely something people said. It was like seeing the House of the Numenorean in real life instead of just seeing the words on a page. Someday, it would be my job to do what my father was doing now.

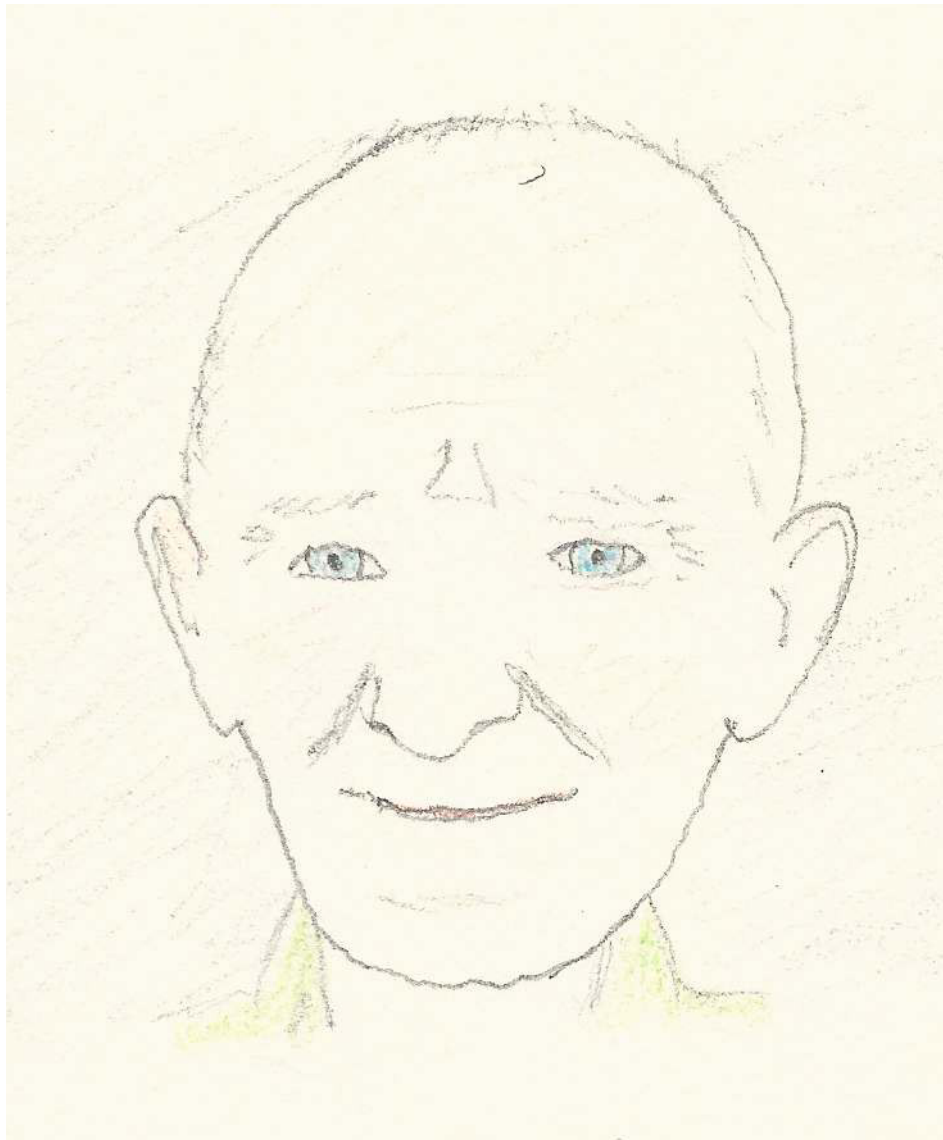
I recalled dimly that he had been telling me, often, what I was supposed to know, and I had not been paying especially close attention.

"Gerontius Took, we will take you on our coach back to the south bank of the Gwathlo River, if you would like," she said. "You can find lodgings there for the night, and set out for Swanfleetwick tomorrow morning, without having to cross the river again."

I agreed, and after she locked the chest again we all descended the steps down to the base of the platform, where the others were waiting for us. Corliss, Flora, and Willie sat in the coach on the way back, while Digby and I sat up front with the coachman. We had to put Hildigard across our laps so that we could all fit. We rode it all the way back, across the south bridge and to the door of a place called the "Swineherd Tavern", which had a few rooms for travellers on the second story. Despite the name, it turned out to be a clean and decent place to stay.

When we got down from the coach, I turned back to it and thought that I should say something or wave goodbye, but the screens were drawn and I could not see inside. It rode away, and I felt a curious feeling, as if I had aged a long time in one conversation. Then we went inside, and I explained to the others what we were going to do and where we were going. If they had any doubts, they did not voice them, which was good because otherwise I probably could have been talked into giving up.

When I think back on that now, I just want to kick myself. We could have saved a lot of time if I had been more alert. But then, I guess if even the Lamplighter didn't want to point it out I shouldn't blame myself too much. But I had just passed by the treasure, close enough to touch it almost, and not realized it.



Digby

Chapter 12 - Swanfleetwick

So, here we go. This is Digby. Is it all right if I say that, Flora? Wait, you write even that part? Ha! Well, hmmm. All right, anyway.

So, about that time when we went to Swanfleetwick. What a funny name. Swan-fleet-wick. It's like three names. Just pick one, why not just call the place Swan, or Fleet, or Wick? But anyway, that's the name, and we went there together.

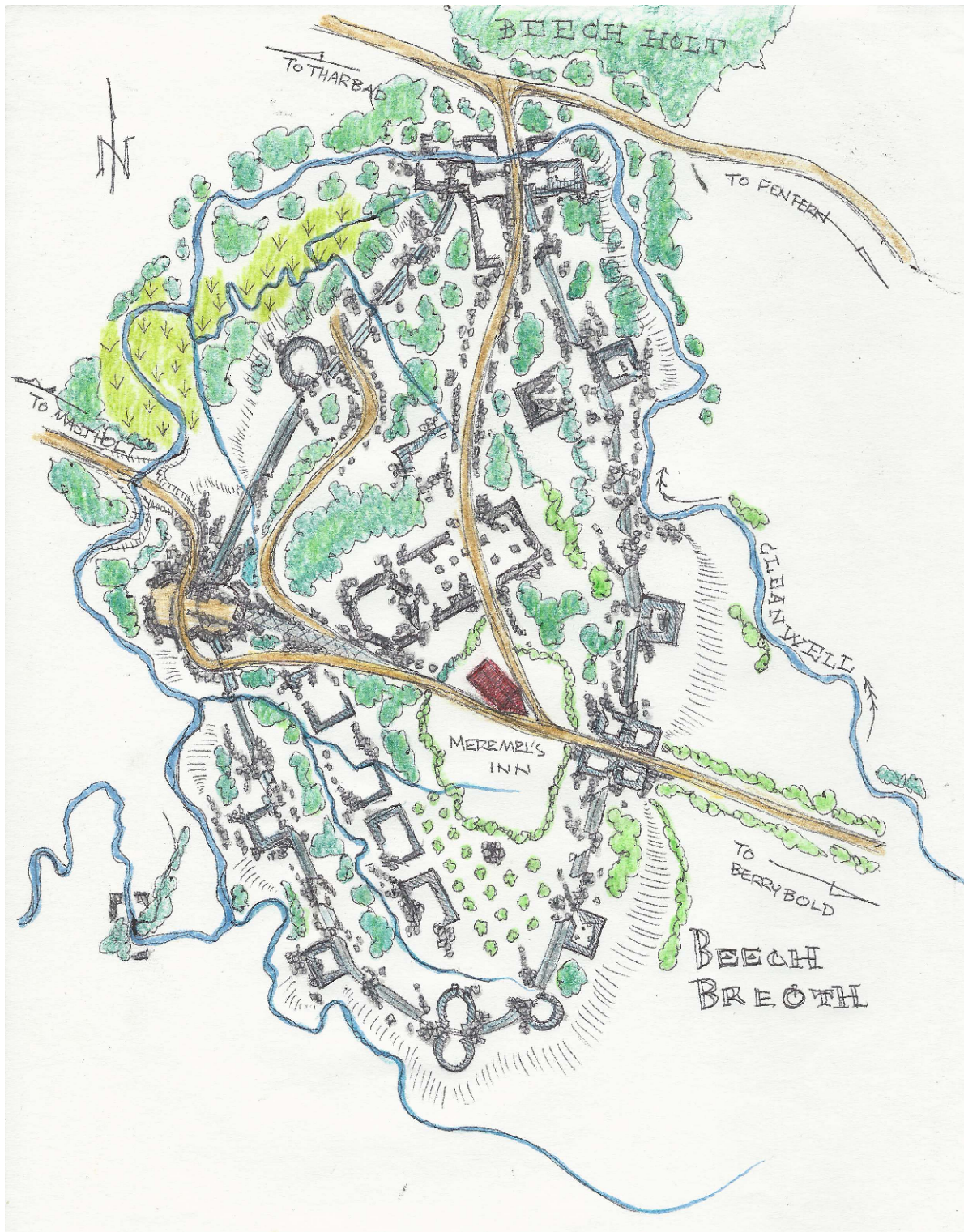
The walk was kind of long, but the first part wasn't too bad. It was only about 20 miles, and at first it was good walking, until we came to where it kind of petered out and was overgrown with trees. Gerontius had found out on some maps that this would happen, and we went on a slightly different way, through this little town called Beech Breoth. There wasn't much there but Meremel's Inn, and a bunch of fallen down buildings. I'm not sure how Meremel keeps an inn going in the middle of ruins. But then, since the main road is all choked with rubble and trees, pretty much everybody has to go around it, and right past his Inn. I kind of got a suspicion that maybe he has been working at it for years, taking flagstones from the main road and laying logs across it and so on, so that people will head his way instead. He looks like the kind of fellow who would do that.

His Inn looked fine, though, with lamplight in the windows and a nice smell of stew coming out as we walked up to it in the late afternoon. I wasn't sure if they would let me in, I ain't had much luck in places like that, nor Corliss neither. But Gerontius, he seemed to kind of have the right way of talking, plus it maybe helps that he doesn't look like he's gonna cause any trouble. I think maybe I come off the wrong way with people, sometimes, but we let Gerontius do the talking. Anyway, I don't think that old Meremel gets too much extra business, even with the main road out, so he looked us over for a few moments but then waved us in. Even Hildigard, which was nice.

I kind of got to liking Hildigard by that point, she and I would play a game where if I would see a squirrel, I would chuck a rock at it, and then Hildigard would go running over to see if she could catch it. The squirrel I mean, not the rock. She got pretty close a time or two, but never quite caught one. I think she enjoyed it anyway, though, she would come back to the road with her tongue out and her tail wagging and her ears all perky, like she was having fun. I think I maybe get along better with dogs than people, sometimes.

So Meremel's Inn was not quite empty, there was a group of other men there, from a place south of Swanfleetwick called Larach Duhnan, headed north they said, and we talked to them a bit, while we were all sitting out in the common room. Gerontius, he was curious about somewhere called the Yellow Rush Ruin, so he asked them all if they had ever heard tell of it.

"That would be the sorceror's house," said one of them. "Everyone in this area has heard of it."



Gerontius asked, "Is it hard to find?"

"Why would you go there?" they asked.

"To look at it," said Gerontius, "just to look."

The others didn't look too happy about his line of questioning, and they kind of stopped talking to us after that.

So after a while we walked back to our rooms and went to sleep. It was kind of nice sleeping in a bed, maybe as comfortable as when I had my own house with Corliss. The morning came and we all woke up and started walking, and by midday we had got to Swanfleetwick.

It's a pretty town, not as big as Tharbad, but not so fallen down either. The front gate was this big tall stone building, even though the palisade on either side was wood, and it had these two giant yew trees in front. We managed to walk through without anybody hassling us, which was good because that gate looked pretty solid, and if they didn't want you coming in I suppose you would be sleeping outside that night.

The town was pretty, with lots of shrubs and hedges trimmed up nice, and the main roads were all kept clean. There were lots of gardens and tidy little houses, and it seemed like they kept it all pretty neat. I did start to wonder if they were going to be welcoming us. I notice that places that are neat and tidy look nice, but the people who live there don't much like me at first. It gets to where I feel more comfortable, almost, when there's a bunch of clutter and trash around. It's not so much that I like that, it's just that when things are so completely picked up and orderly it tends to mean pretty soon someone will decide I'm out of place, and want to move me along. But nobody did anything much at first, so we walked on in to the center of town.

Right about in the middle was the place they called the Carparv. It was like a library, plus some. There was a fellow there who was in charge of writing up whatever needed writing, like copying books and such. He looked a bit surprised to see us, as I think they don't get visitors from out of town there very often, but he was polite enough. He had a broad face and a bald head, with a bushy beard, and he was dressed in robes like he did not spend too much time out of doors.

"Hullo," said Gerontius, who seems to know just how to talk to anybody, "I was wondering if we could speak to the master of the scriptorium?"

"That would be me," says the fellow, "and who might you be?" You could tell what he really wanted to say was, what on earth are hobbits doing in Swanfleetwick, but he was polite, like I said.

Swanfleetwick map foldout goes here

"I am sent, on advice of the Lamplighter in Tharbad, to look at the floor of an abandoned mansion near Swanfleetwick, called now by the name of the Yellow Rush Ruin. I was wondering if you might have anything like a map which would help us to find it?"

The fellow's left eyebrow went up a bit at the mention of this ruin, and he leaned back in his chair again and put away his plume that he was writing with. He fixed a bit of a skeptical eye on Gerontius then.

"The Yellow Rush Ruin, of which you speak, is not a place with a happy history," he said. "I wonder why the Lamplighter of Tharbad would have sent you there."

"To see the map that it is carved in the stone floor of it," said Gerontius. "So I guess we are looking for a map, which will tell us how to find a map."

"And why might that be?" asked the man.

"Well there is a third map involved," said Gerontius. The man kind of shook his head, like he was confused.

"Never mind, I suppose your business is your own," he said. "Have you heard the warnings about approaching this house?" he asked.

"I have," said Gerontius, "and we will take nothing. We only wish to examine the map carved into the stone floor."

The man sat there, then, and was quiet for a bit. He looked at all of us, one at a time, and then back at Gerontius, like he was deciding if he was gonna be helpful or not. Then, he got up and went to the rows of bookshelves behind him, and finds a big book and pulls it down. He brings it back and puts it on his desk in front of us, opened to a map of the area. He points to a spot on it.

"There," he says, "is the House of Malantur, known now as the Yellow Rush Ruin." Gerontius started scribbling down some notes on how to get there.

"Who was Malantur?" asked Gerontius, while he was copying.

"Malantur is the name of the Dunadan who lived there," said the man. "He was respected well enough, when he first had this house built, although some wondered why he lived so far away from all company. But in time it became clear that he was an evil man, and the people of Swanfleetwick shunned him. They say now that he became a lich, a corpse that walks from foul magic."

"Why do we want to go to this place again?" asked Willie, and I was kind of wondering the same myself.



CARPARV
LIBRARY & RECORDS
HALL, SCRIPTORIUM
ETC, IN SWANFLEET
WICK

FROM THE SOUTH-EAST
CORNER

"To look, just to look," said Gerontius. "We will not stay there."

So, we came out of there with Gerontius' map, to take us to a map, which would help us figure out the other map he had, that we hoped would get us to a tower with treasure, so that we could maybe save Flora and Willie's little sister. It all sounded way more complicated than just breaking into the apothecary at night, and grabbing and running. But Gerontius seemed to think he knew what he was doing, so we found a room at a nice place called the Old Barracks, and we spent the night there. Swanfleetwick had a few big lanterns out on the streets that were lit at night, which you could see from our rooms, and they looked nice. The town was quiet at night, but there were treefrogs and crickets and some nightingales and other birds singing in the dark, and all those sounds were some distance away and they just kind of made a soft music together. Plus the stars in the sky reflected off the lake that Swanfleetwick was on, it was kind of pretty and made you feel like life was doing all right, except for the fact that we was going to march through the marsh towards a walking corpse sorcerer's cursed house the next day. Willie and I were both looking out of our rooms, which were next to each other so we could talk some. We decided to sing a song about it.

Bone man, rag man,
evil man, dead man,
we just came to pay a visit,
hope you aren't a nasty spirit,

bone man, rag man,
evil man, dead man,
take a look at your house floor,
we're the types you can ignore,

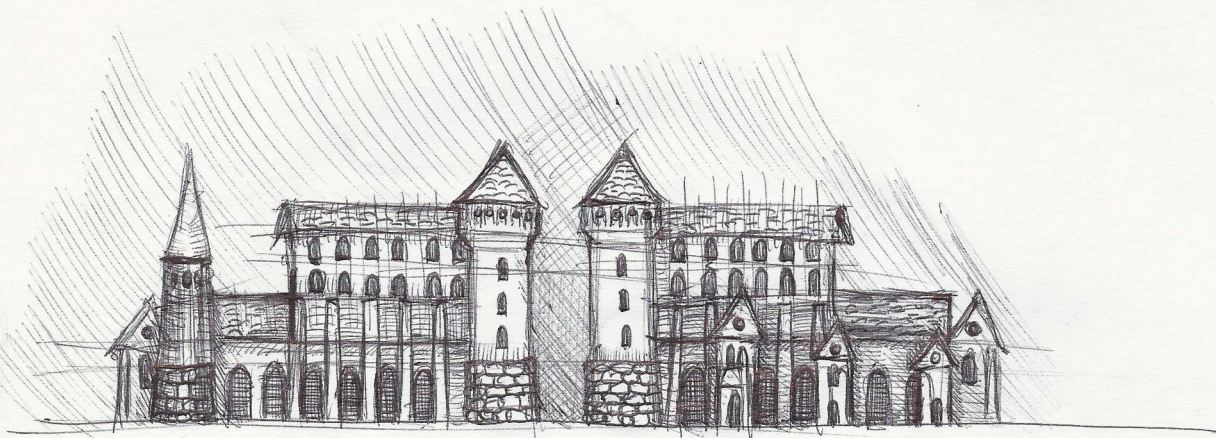
bone man, rag man,
evil man, dead man,
swear we won't be any trouble,
won't disturb your charming rubble,

bone man, rag man,
evil man, dead man,
there's no need to curse us dead,
don't worry your bony head,

bone man, rag man,
evil man, dead man,
no call for your sorcery,
won't cause trouble or worry,

bone man, rag man,
evil man, dead man,

THE OLD BARRACKS
(FACING SOUTH EAST)



teatime must be awfully gray,
when you've no live friends today,

bone man, rag man,
evil man, dead man,
I can see it's a bad time,
you're not in the mood for rhyme,

bone man, rag man,
evil man, dead man,
don't mind us we'll soon be gone,
back to wick on fleet on swan,

bone man, rag man,
evil man, dead man,
we won't touch your splendid ruin,
no call for your potion brewin',

bone man, rag man,
evil man, dead man,
please don't try to cast that spell,
think it's time we said farewell,

But then Flora shouted at us from inside, "Oh stop it! That is not helping me get to sleep!"

Corliss wasn't too keen on it either. "I'm a gonna have to side with Flora on this one, Digby. I think I'd rather hear your snoring than any more a that tonight." She does not give me too much trouble about my snoring, usually, but I guess thinking about where we were going the next day had made her kinda jumpy.

So, we went to bed, and the next morning we got up and hit the road early. Gerontius seemed to be in a hurry.

"How far is this?" asked Willie.

"About 25 miles," said Gerontius.

Well that made us all get kinda quiet. 25 miles is a long walk, and we wasn't exactly looking forward to camping in the swamp, but there was no way we could make it there and back again in a day. 25 miles is a hard day's travel already, and that was just one way. In fact, it sounded like we would probably get there about the time the sun was setting, if we didn't hurry, and that meant maybe we would stay the night there. Which we did not especially care to do. So we didn't say much, and just kept walking. I think it was a little easier on Corliss and I, on account of we have longer legs, and Hildigard, on account of she has four legs. It

map of Swanfleetwick region foldout goes here

seemed, Flora, like maybe you and Willie had a harder time with it, as Gerontius was setting a pretty fast pace for a Hobbit.

We took our lunch on the move, as I recall, not stopping even for that. It was a sunny day, and the road was elevated a bit but it looked a lot like marsh on the north side of the road. One thing that helped keep us moving was that any time we would pause, the midges would kind of descend on us and start biting. So we managed to make it to where the house was while there were still a few hours of sun left. But I was not looking forward to sleeping the night in a haunted ruin, and neither did I like the idea of doing it out of doors where the midges could feast on us.

So then we got close to where it was supposed to be, and he led us off the main road, and we was headed north into the marsh. The road was not so clear, and I was getting a little nervous that we would be lost in the marsh in the middle of the night, when he cried out "There it is!" And we all looked and sure enough, up ahead rising up out of the yellow rushes of the marsh was a big house that had probably been nice at one time, although now parts of the roof were startin' to fall in.

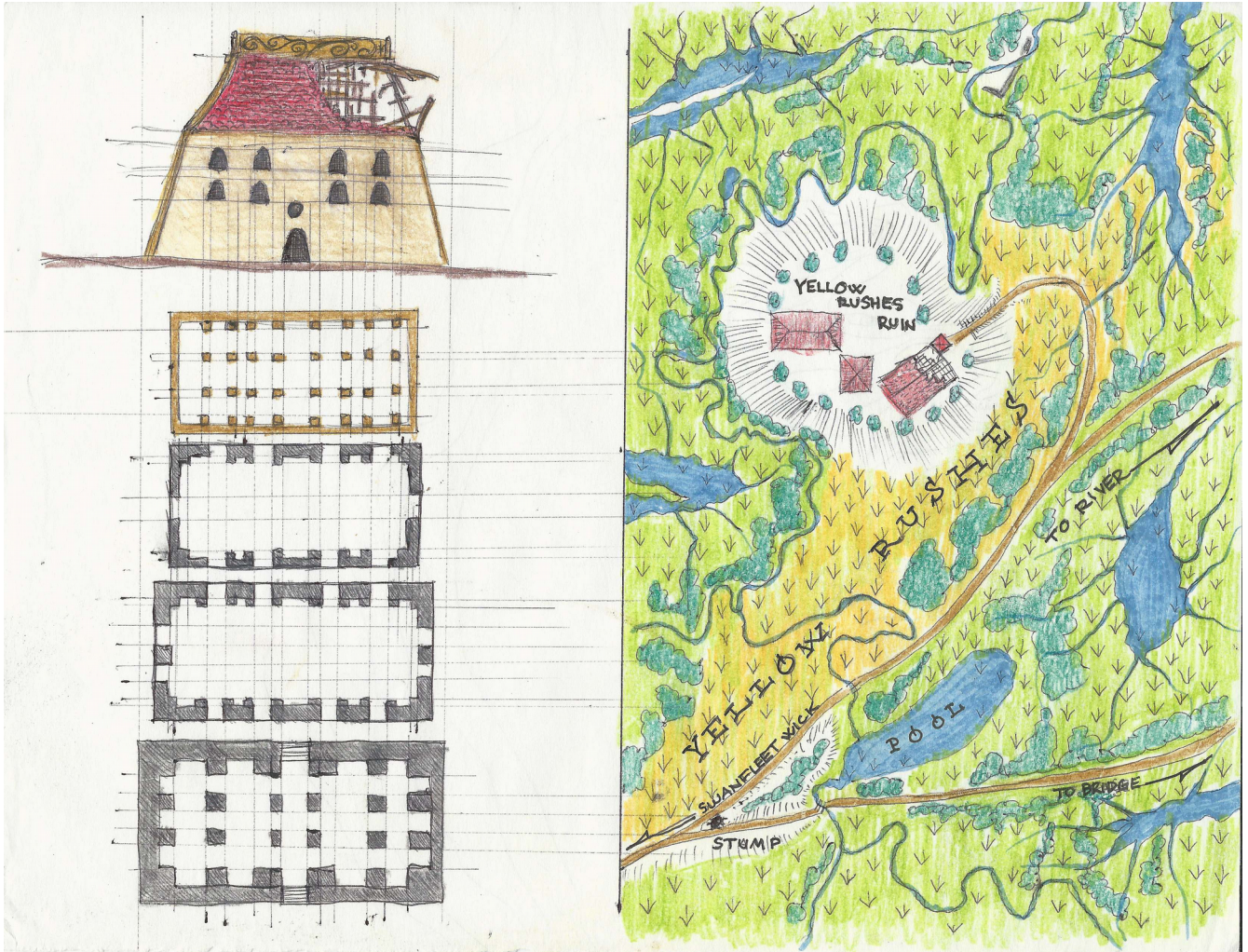
At which point I started to wonder if it was better to spend the night in a marsh, or in a haunted house, and I wasn't too certain as to my answer to that.

We came up to it and saw all the windows were closed in by some sort of wooden screens, still mostly intact. The roof was made of some sort of reddish tiles, and the walls were a yellow that might once have been white plaster but it was hard to tell, maybe they were supposed to be yellow.

We went on in and found that the inside was not too bad, not as far gone as the tower we had been in a while back where all the floors above the ground were fallen in. But it was clear no person had been living there for a long time, and what was a bit peculiar to me is that I saw no sign of any bird or beast living there either. There didn't even seem to be any weeds grown up inside it, although the wind and rain and sun must have been able to come in for years now through the hole in the roof. I thought that was a bad sign, like nothing could live there.

But it was impressive, the way the whole stone floor was carved into a gigantic map. Parts of it was covered over with dirt or leaves, but it wasn't too hard to sweep that aside, and Corliss got some rushes from outside and made a broom and we started uncovering it all. I think maybe we were doing that just to take our minds off of what was coming once night fell. Plus it seemed like maybe if we could help Gerontius to hurry up he could get done whatever he needed to do and we could leave.

Gerontius took out his notes that he had taken from somewhere, I think Flora you said they was from Fornost Erain up north, and then he was running back and forth looking at the floor in one spot and then the other. Then, after a few minutes of doing that, he started looking real close at a particular part of the floor, and he got kind of a peculiar look on his face.



Willie said, "What is it?", and you went over Flora and looked at his map and looked at him and then you got that same peculiar look. You was both real quiet then.

This is Flora saying that what I could see was that the part of the floor that looked the most like Gerontius' map, was the part right around Tharbad. The course of the river had changed a bit, I guess the people in Tharbad had done some dredging and dike-building, so it wasn't too obvious now. But the way it was etched on the floor matched Gerontius' map quite well, and the spot with the 'x' on it was right where the statue of Aldarion was. That was right where we had been yesterday, and we had just hiked 25 miles and through the marsh to find out that we needed to turn right around again. Anyway, Digby is still talking so I'll stop now.

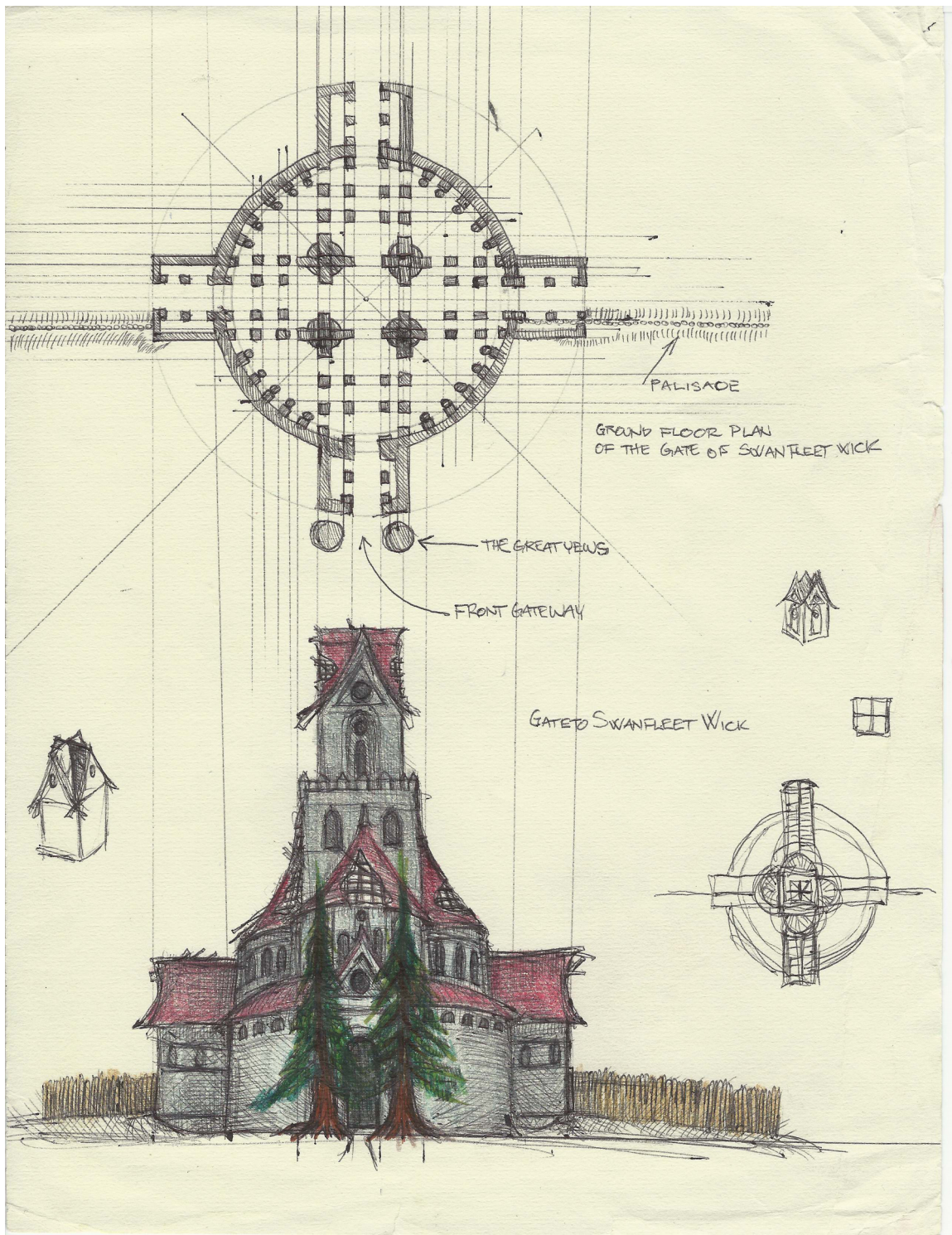
...and Willie was shouting and I was asking questions 'cause I didn't quite understand, but basically it turned out that we needed to head north again, because the treasure was back near where the Lamp was. So then everybody had a lot of questions, and we all were asking them but nobody was listening much, and then the next thing you know Corliss pointed out that it was about to be dark, and we maybe ought to figure out where we were sleeping.

Well that pretty much shut us all up for a while. We talked about hiking out into the marsh in the dark, but the thought of losing the path was a caution to us, and it was none too easy to follow out here in the daylight. Then, we thought that maybe we would at least move from this building to one of the other smaller ones next to it, but they were boarded up. We thought about breaking into them, but then Gerontius started talking about some kind of curse, and we decided to leave them alone. The buildings were all on a kind of a low plateau, not really a hill but just lifted a bit up out of the marsh, and we decided to just camp in the middle of that flat spot and build a campfire, so we did that.

Well it turned out that, no matter how much you don't want to sleep in a haunted house, sleeping outdoors in the marsh is worse, as the midges will just eat you alive. I usually can do pretty well at keeping them off me, and it helps some if you haven't had a bath in a while, the dirt kind of keeps 'em away some, but there was just too many and they was awfully excited about us, so within about an hour after dark we moved into the house with the stone floor with the map on it.

For a few minutes, we just lay there on our bedrolls and enjoyed the fact that we were not getting bit. Then, Willie started asking why was it that we were not getting bit, when there was a big giant hole in the roof for the midges to come in. Nobody wanted to answer, but it seemed pretty clear it was because even midges know better than to go into the house we were in now, and that was a bit of a peculiar feeling.

It was a few hours after that when we all woke up on account of Hildigard was barking, and we looked up and saw a sort of bluish white light floating in the air above us. I don't exactly recall who among us started running first, but soon we were all hoofin' it pretty quick through the marshgrass, with no particular rhyme or reason to who was in front or behind or even which way we was heading. It is a hard thing to plan like that when you wake up from a sleep in the middle of the night.



Then Gerontius shouted, "Stop, stop!" and we all stopped and looked around. We could see the old house up on that little plateau it was on, with the moon lighting it up all silvery grey and the ruined roof and those weird lights floating over the marsh all around. It wasn't just around the house, they was all over. It was a sight to send a chill down my spine, at the time.

Gerontius said, "We need to go back, we left all our things there," and I won't repeat what Willie said to that. For my part, I said I had nothing not so long ago, and I was willing to go on having nothing if the alternative was marching back to a house full of ghosts in the middle of the night. I believe Willie said something similar.

But Gerontius just started walking back towards it, not too fast but walking. So Hildigard looked at us, and then looked back at Gerontius, and then she turned and kind of bounded after him. Then Flora and Willie talked it over and decided that if they was gonna ever get the medicine for their little Hazel, they needed Gerontius' map and some of the other things there, so they started trudging back. Corliss and I was standing there wondering what we were gonna do, and then Willie stopped and looked back at us, and that did it and we started walking back with the rest.

So by the time we got back up to the little hilltop the house was on, Gerontius was there, and we could see that those little floating lights would kind of move away from him whenever he got close to them. So we trudged on in after him, and once we were there we decided to stay, and we all collapsed to the ground back where we had been sleeping before, including Hildigard. I thought there was NO WAY any of us would get any sleep, but once we were lying down and my heart stopped pumping so fast, it must have turned out that we did 'cause we woke up and it was dawn and we were all still alive. Which was nice, I must say, because I much preferred walking away from that place in the daylight with a clear path in front of me, instead of running through the dark and hoping the ghost fairy lights didn't pull you off into a muck or mire you could not get out of.

Willie wondered if we should maybe take a look in one of the other buildings, but Gerontius said it was not advisable, and I think the rest of us were all ready to go. So it was a long walk back, and I dare say we did not look like someone you wanted to let into your town by the time we came to Swanfleetwick with its big tower gate, but they did not stop us, and we made it in before the sun went down. Willie and I thought about singing some more songs about that haunted house now that we were out of it, but Flora you and Corliss still seemed to be pretty much against it, so we just rented our same rooms again and passed out. And that is the story of how we went to Swanfleetwick and the Yellow Rush Ruin, and then decided it was all a mistake and came right back again to Tharbad. And now I'm about ready for that Lamplighter lady to come back here, as that big stone head staring at us while we camp here is startin' to kind of grate on me.



Chapter 13 - One Thing and Another

I am back at Great Smials now, and I haven't looked at this journal in a while, but I decided I should fill out the rest of what happened, so I can keep it clear in my mind. Something tells me that I will want a record of exactly what happened, someday. Especially everything the Lamplighter said.

We had arrived back at the base of the fallen statue of Aldarion, right after the Lamplighter had gone, apparently. It had been a week since we had been there before, by the time we went through Tharbad and down to Swanfleetwick and out to the Yellow Rush Ruin and back. So, we returned, and found that we had just missed her.

It occurred to us briefly to go to the House of the Numenorean and try to get in, but it did not seem like she took visitors, so we decided to wait there by the fallen statue and the Lamp. I suppose partly it was because her huge fortress of a house was intimidating, and not very welcoming, but also I wanted some time to think over what I would say.

By the time she arrived, it had been two weeks since we had spoken. She did not seem especially surprised to see me.

"Gerontius Took, you have returned," she said.

"I have," I said.

"Have you found the answers you were looking for?" she asked.

"I believe so," I said.

We stood there, silently looking at each other for a few moments. The Lamplighter is a patient lady; she is able to outwait you. She said nothing.

"If I am reading this map correctly, and the map on the floor of the Yellow Rush Ruin, then the treasure is right here. Specifically, I think it is right beneath that."

I pointed at the great stone head. It seemed to stare back at me.

The lady smiled, just slightly.

"It may be, that you are correct," she said.

"You knew it," I said.

"I did," she said.



"How long have you known?" I asked.

"Since I was a young woman," she said, "in need of a dowry."

"That treasure was your dowry?" I asked.

"No," she said, "only the one necklace I took from it. Remember, I told you, the only way to break the curse of the treasure is to only take a small part of it, and leave the rest."

"You have left it, then, all these years."

"I have," she said. "I am not poor, it was not so tempting."

I looked out, across the river, to the Great Crane.

"Is that how you lift it?" I asked. "Using that crane? You could use it and a long chain to pull the head up on one side, take something out from under it, and then lower it back down again."

"Just as you say," she said.

"Will you stop me from doing that?" I asked.

"No," she said. "It is not my treasure, only the one necklace which I already took, many years ago. If I tried to stop you, I would be trying to make the whole treasure mine, and then I would be caught by it. It is not my right to stop you."

I thought some more. I looked out at Willie, and Flora, and Corliss, and Digby, who were standing back by the Lamplighter's coach, out of earshot.

"I'm not sure the others will understand," I said. "They might try to take the whole thing."

"They might," she said. "What happened at the Yellow Rush Ruin?"

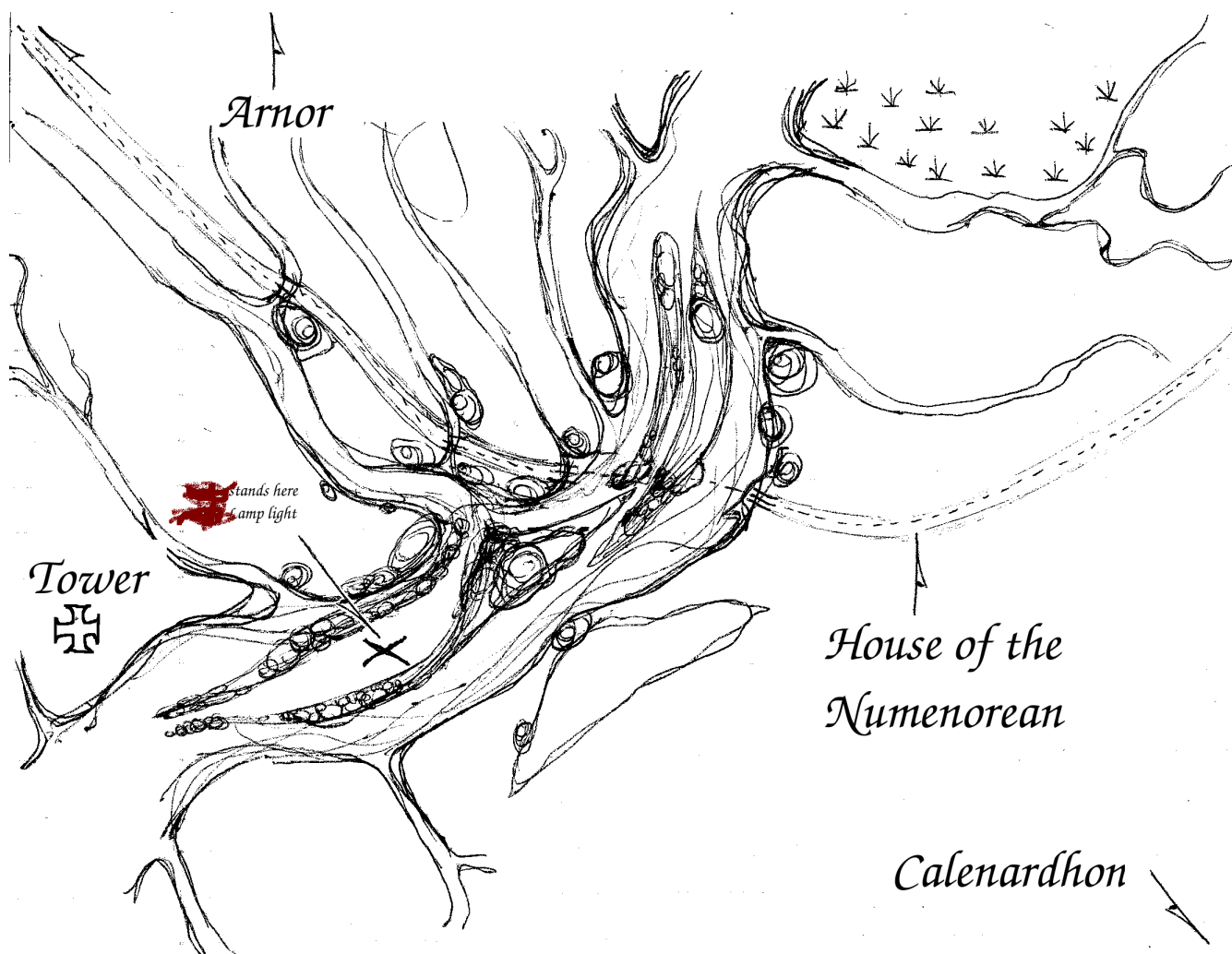
I stopped and thought about it.

"I told them there was a curse, and we shouldn't take anything."

"Did they listen?" she asked.

They did. I guess that means they are not too greedy, and they will be able to take just one thing this time, if I explain it to them."

"Perhaps," she said.



"I've just realized something," I said.

"What is it?"

"That's why you sent me to the Yellow Rush Ruin, wasn't it? To see if I could go there and return without taking anything. It was a test to see if I was too greedy to leave it be."

The Lamplighter smiled then, and shook her head.

"I am not so devious, or perhaps so clever, as you imagine. I agree that it is a good sign, though. But there was something else I wanted you to look at, when you compared your map to the one carved into the stone there."

"Oh," I said, "yes, that. I had noticed that. Even though one is drawn in ink on paper, and the other is etched in stone, the style looks the same, doesn't it?"

"It does; the etchings on the stone floor were done with acid, I believe, so they were drawn on with a tool not so different from a quill."

"Does that mean that the same person did both maps?" I asked, already knowing the answer. She nodded.

"But wasn't that a long time ago? Wasn't that hundreds of years ago? This map is only 60 or 70 years old. Even a long-lived Dunedan should be dead by now."

"Yes, I am afraid he should be. But it appears that he is not. Or at least, he was not, when he made the map your uncle found. It means that his sorcery has kept him from death, although I doubt that he is alive as you or I know it. For one, he cannot come here himself, he must send goblins with directions on maps."

"Not very wise on his part," I said, "they don't seem very reliable."

"No, but he may not have had much choice. I believe he is trapped, high up in the mountains to the north, where it is forever cold. There were rumors that late in his time near Swanfleetwick, he would only come out of his house when it was cold outside. As his body has decayed, but his spirit is still locked to it, he has had to retreat northward to stay where it is cold. He sent goblins from the mountains because the mountains of the north is where he must stay, and the goblins are the only ones there who he could send."

I had a hard time imagining that, at first, but then I had a glimpse, like a vision in my mind, of a half-skeletal figure, dressed in the tattered rags of a former Dunedan lord. It was sitting on a stone throne, high up in the mountains and far to the north, and it was surrounded by ice and snow. Then, the vision disappeared, and I was glad to be where I was, warm and far away.



"What does it want with treasure?" I wondered. "Maybe there is no reason, I suppose. Some people want treasure for no reason."

"Perhaps," said the Lamplighter, "but perhaps he has a reason. There were many powerful items, that once belonged to the Kingdom of Cardolan, that were lost when the kingdom was conquered by the Witch-King. Then, when the Witch-King was overthrown in turn, they were recovered, but there was no Kingdom of Cardolan left to give them to. So, they were hidden here in Tharbad, which was once part of Cardolan. Perhaps there is something that he wants, for his own reasons. He is old enough to know things about the relics of the Kingdom of Cardolan that most people do not, and he may have some use in mind for them."

"Well that is a thing to worry about, then. What if the thing which I take from the treasure hoard, is something he wants? Will he come after me, to get it? How do I know what to choose?"

The Lamplighter did not say anything for a while, and all I heard was the soft sound of the river sliding by us.

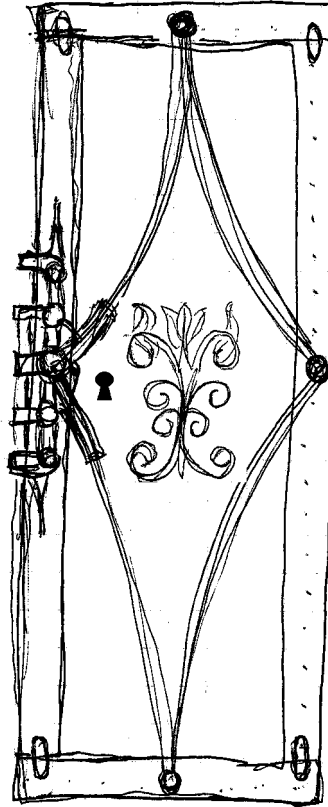
"I suppose you will just have to look, and trust to your instincts and your judgement," she said, which was not very helpful but really what else could she say.

She was helpful, though, in showing us where the great chain had been stored under the wooden platform, after the statue's head had been lowered to its current position. It took us a few hours to go across the river, find the fellow who could let us use the Great Crane (for the price of a few copper coins), then rent a small boat to cross the river with one end of the chain, while the rest was tied around the statue head. By the time we had it all set up, it was evening, which probably helped to keep any of the people of Tharbad from paying much attention to what we were doing. The fellow who ran the Great Crane probably had some suspicions, but I got the impression that he and the Lamplighter had an understanding, and he asked no questions.

So when it was all set up and the crane started to pull the chain taut, and then it began to lift the head up a bit, so that you could see under it, I was using torchlight to look. The Lamp on the platform was lit, of course, but it was pointed the wrong way for us to use its light. The Lamplighter showed us how we could use shutters on the Lamp to send a message across the river to the crane operator, so that he would know when to stop winching. I thought to myself that it was a clever way to send messages, since they would be fast as light, and only in the direction you wanted.

I had spent a few minutes explaining to Digby, Corliss, Flora, and Willie that we were all to take just one thing from it, and why. I'm not sure they completely understood the reasons, and that's because I didn't explain it very well and only partly understood it myself.

"What counts as one thing?" asked Willie. "Is a bag of coins one thing?"



"I would think so, yes," I said.

"What about a pile of bags of coins, is that one thing? It's all one pile."

"If you have to explain why it should only count as one thing, you're probably doing it wrong," said Flora. "By that logic, the whole hoard should count as one thing, it's just one treasure hoard. Don't get greedy, is the point. Just take one thing and let it go."

"I expect," I said, "that if you can grab it with one hand, it's fine."

So when the huge head rolled back, there was a point when we had to step under it, into the spot it had just been covering, to look into the hole underneath it and pick something. It occurred to all of us, I think, that the chain could snap and that big stone would crush us flat as a bug before we could jump out of the way. We all looked at each other.

"I ain't a goin' in there," said Corliss. "I don't need no treasure that bad."

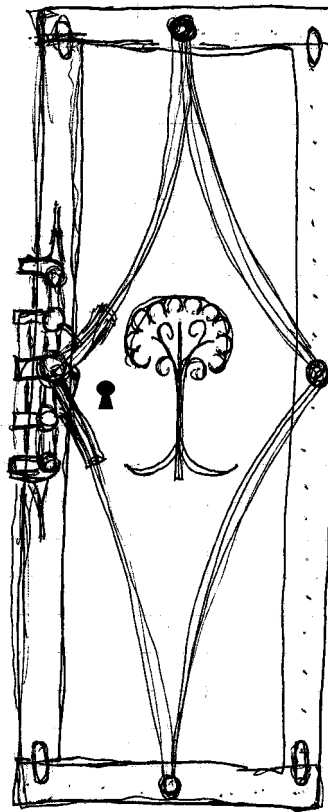
"I'm not either," said Flora.

"Suit yourself," said Digby, and he jumped down into the hole, grabbed a small chest as big as his two fists together, and jumped back out. Corliss hugged him as if he had just dodged an arrow, which I suppose he sort of had. Willie and I looked at each other, and then he jumped in, grabbed another small box similar to Digby's choice, and jumped back out.

When I jumped in, my eyes immediately went to the lockbox. The reason, was that I felt like I had seen something like it before. It was not until I jumped out again and had been looking at it for a few moments, and comparing what I had with Digby and Willie, that one of the links in the end of the chain gave way, and the huge stone head came thundering back into place. There was a tremendous, low 'whomp' sound that we all felt in our bones. We all looked at each other, wide-eyed, and imagined what it would have been like if any of us were still there, taking too long to decide, or trying to grab as much as we could instead of just one thing.

Once we got Digby's and Willie's little chests open, it looked like Willie had enough money to get a good long supply of Hazel's medicine, and it looked like Digby had enough money to buy his land back from Talbot. They asked me what mine was, and I said I wasn't sure, but then I showed it to the Lamplighter and she told me. That's when I realized where I had seen one like it before; we had something similar back in Great Smials. I had seen it in my father's Vault.

He took me in there once, to show me some of the things I would have to know if we ever had a siege at Great Smials and needed to lock everything up. We have not had a siege at Great Smials or anywhere near it in living memory, and I was bored, so I'm afraid I did not pay close attention. When I was looking elsewhere, I saw a box that looked very much like this one, and picked it up.



"Don't touch that," he said quickly. I put it down.

"Why not?" I asked.

"It does things to the person who carries it," he said. "We don't know all the details. It's from the King's time."

I told the Lamplighter this story, and she nodded.

"They were used when the Kings of the Three Kingdoms of Arnor would send their messengers to the Tower of the Winds at Amon Sûl," she said. "There was one for each kingdom, and the tower was at the spot where the three kingdoms touched. They had a palantír there, a sphere of crystal that could be used to see things from far away, sometimes even far in the past, or that had not happened yet. The Dunedain who tended to the palantír would write down what they saw, one copy for each king, and then lock their report in these lockboxes and send them back to the capitals of the three kingdoms. Only the kings had the keys to open them."

"How did they put the message in them in the first place, then?" I asked.

"When brought together, each had the power to unlock one of the others," she said. "Also, each had a sort of dial or compass on the top, that pointed towards one of the others. See there, you hold the lockbox of Cardolan; it points towards the lockbox of Arthedain. It is pointing north now, and west, so the lockbox of Arthedain must be to the northwest of here."

I knew that Great Smials was northwest of where I was then at Tharbad, and I nodded.

"It is good that you have the key to it, also," she said. "Whoever has the key, has power over the one who has the lockbox. They can curse you to fall into a slumber from which you cannot awake unless they will it. This is how the kings could prevent these lockboxes from being stolen; they protected their bearer from harm while they carried the message for them, but they also put them at the mercy of the holder of the key. The messengers who carried them to the Tower of the Winds, of course, were loyal to the kings they carried them for, but if any should fall into the wrong hands, they would not get far before the rightful king, who still held the key, would strike them down from a distance."

That was all I can remember her saying about them, but now I am thinking about it more and more since I got back to Great Smials.

We said our goodbyes to the Lamplighter, and then we went all together to the apothecary.

His eyes went wide when he saw how much Willie and Flora were prepared to purchase of the medicine for Hazel. It took him a day and a half to prepare it all, but we headed north with a small chest full of what we hoped was a lifetime's supply. I have never seen a family so happy to see each other again as the Underhills of Staddle when we came back. They even invited



Hazel Underhill

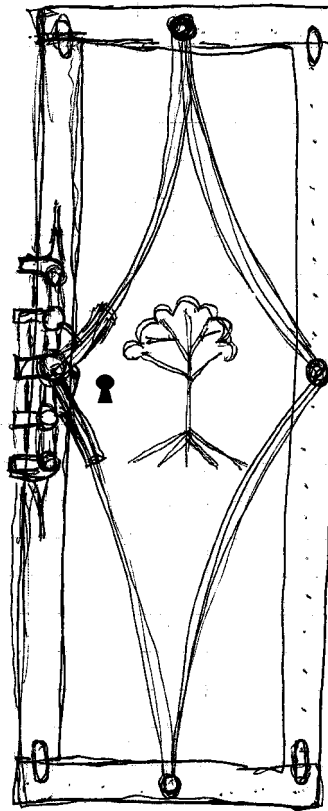
Corliss and Digby in for a meal, which was a bit cramped quarters for them as they were too tall for the Underhills' smial, but they were very nice about it and it was a merry evening, with Willie and Digby singing one last song together about travelling and coming home. I finally got to see Hazel, then, a tiny little hobbit-lass with long rusty brown hair and big eyes, hazel like her name. She smiled and laughed at the song, and especially at Digby's dancing, which was pretty comical because he had to do it while crouched over to keep from hitting his head on the roof, but I think he was trying to make it even funnier than usual just to make her laugh. It was a nice thought that maybe she would get the chance to grow up and have a full life, if the medicine worked like we hoped.

Then it was Digby and Corliss' turn to go home, of course. I parted ways with them, then, and they headed north to Southtonburg to pay off their debt to Talbot and get their land back. I was hoping that they could get a fair deal, and would not be swindled out of their money somehow. I advised them to keep most of their money out of sight, so that Talbot would not guess they had more and somehow get the court to raise the price of their debt until they lost it all, or perhaps still could not pay. They nodded as if they understood. I guess there is not much I can do about whether or not they are treated fairly, but at least they have a chance now. Southtonburg seems like a hard place to try to live. Still they will be happy if they can get their little house back and the land around it to farm on. They waved goodbye to us and headed north, and then Hildigard and I went west, towards the Shire.

Papa was somewhat angry at me for being gone so long, but he was glad to see me back, and I think he was a little bit impressed with the stories I told him. I did not tell him the whole thing, because I did not think he would like to hear about me chasing a treasure I found on Uncle Bullroarer's map, but I told him about our journeys to Fornost Erain and Tharbad and the places in between. It turns out he was aware of the Underhill family of Staddle, he says they are an old and numerous family among the Bree hobbits. I did not really know that he knew much about Bree, although I guess I knew he had been there before. I don't think he had ever been to Fornost Erain or Tharbad, though, and he made me start a map of everywhere along the Greenway that I had been. I guess that was a good idea, and I'm going to add to it later.

Hildigard has settled in quite well at Great Smials, and we go on a walk together every day, and when we're not she mostly spends the daylight hours chasing squirrels away from the orchard trees, and at night she sleeps in my room, curled up near the foot of the bed after she circles around a couple times first.

I've tried to start paying more attention when Papa tells me about how the Shire Reeves are to be organized, or what role the Thain is supposed to play in the counting of ballots for the mayor's election in Michel Delving, or that sort of thing. It's hard to concentrate on that, because not much of it seems to matter nowadays. There's not much the Shire Reeves find as they police the borders except wayward cattle, and there's usually only one candidate running for Mayor in Michel Delving, and everything else in the Shire seems to run along with very little trouble. But I've seen what things are like outside the Shire, now, and it looks a lot



different to me, so I try to pay better attention, so that if things get worse again I will know what to do. I guess that's what Uncle Bullroarer meant when he said it was important to see what it was like outside the Shire, so you can appreciate what you've got.

But today, I was in the Vault again, and it occurred to me to look again for the other lockbox. Sure enough, when I moved around the Vault with the Cardolan lockbox in my hand, the dial on it always pointed at that one, so it is the Arthedain lockbox. Plus, when I bring the Cardolan lockbox near to the other, it unlocks and pops open. But, I noticed something else.

The Arthedain lockbox also has a dial on it, and of course it points in a different direction. It points off to the north east of us. That is the direction of the Misty Mountains of course, and I remembered that the Lamplighter said that the lich, the dead sorcerer, was probably off in the frozen northern end of the Misty Mountains, hiding from the warmth. It's a bit of a coincidence, maybe too much to be a coincidence. I think that he probably has the third lockbox, the one from the old kingdom of Rhudaur.

But, if the Cardolan lockbox points to the Arthedain one, and the Arthedain lockbox points to the one from Rhudaur that the sorcerer has, then where does the dial on his lockbox point to? It must point to the Cardolan one. Which means, it is pointing to me, and Great Smials. It also means he would have noticed when I moved it from the place it had been all those years, under the giant head of the statue in Tharbad. I am afraid I may have just caught the attention of someone I would rather not have notice me.

I'm out of room in this journal now, so I will have to start a new one. I want to keep this one, in case I need to look at it, but also safe and secure, away from others. For example, I wouldn't want Papa to read that I got into his Vault the other day.

[Ha! said Bella. So, Donna, he is where you get this from!]

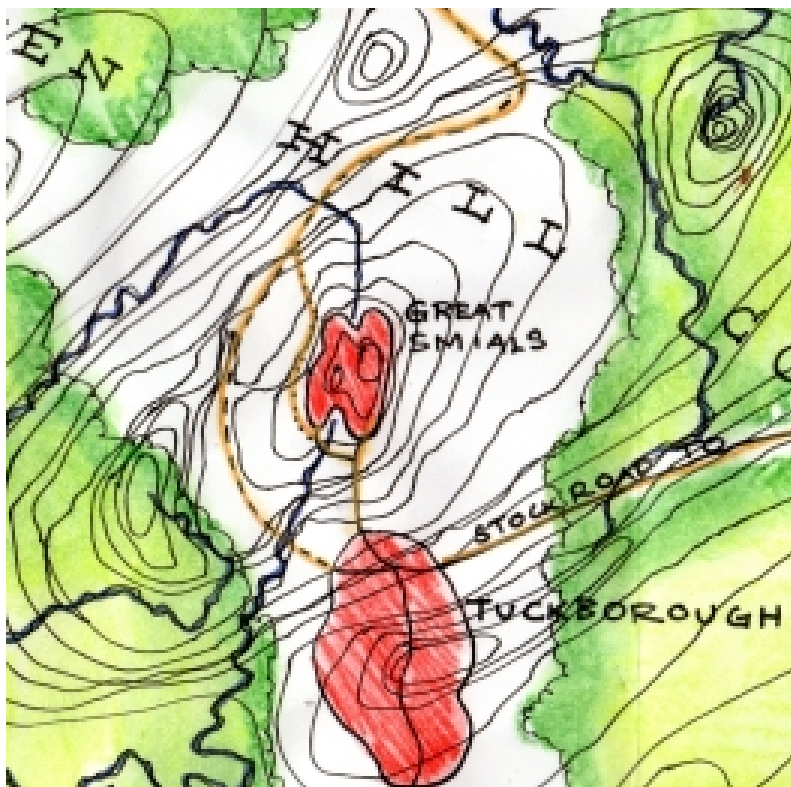
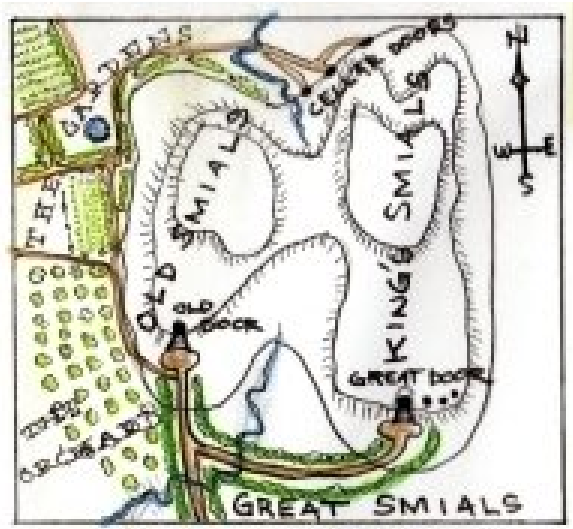
[Hush, Bella, said Mira, you'll wake Papa.]

[That would be fine, said Bella, we want him to wake up, if he can.]

[You know what I mean, said Mira. I'm almost done, let me finish.]

...into his Vault the other day. I think I will use this Cardolan lockbox to store it in, for now. I thought about using the Arthedain one, but the key for it does not seem to work any more. Anyway, Papa might miss that lockbox if I took it, whereas he doesn't know about the Cardolan one yet. I hope he never has to. But if it is drawing attention to us from somewhere else, then it would not be fair for me to keep it here and not tell him.

I need to figure out what to do about that. I need probably to take this Cardolan lockbox somewhere else, somewhere that is too far south for him to get to, even in the coldest part of winter. But where, exactly, and how?



Chapter 14 - The Key

Bella stood, outside the Great Door of Great Smials, and looked out into the snow as it settled softly down from the dark sky. The blanket of snow that had already fallen made it even quieter than usual for this hour, and the clouds above made it darker, but a sliver of moon near the horizon washed the hills and treetops with silvery light. It was cold, but she had on a good coat, and she held it close around her, and she waited.

She had not told her sisters that she was coming out here, because if she had told them what she planned to do they would have tried to talk her out of it. For that matter, actually saying it out loud to them might have caused her to rethink whether or not she really wanted to attempt this.

There.

He was hard to see, but once her eyes adjusted to the dark, she could just barely see him, under the shadow of the edge of the trees. It was a little easier, since she had known which direction to look. They had found the Arthedain lockbox, on their father, and had removed it. Bella wondered briefly how long he had been carrying it with him like that, on a small chain around his neck. Years? Decades? She had looked at the compass dial on it, and it was not pointing to the northeast any longer. It was pointing southwest, to where the woods came closest to Great Smials.

She started walking that way. The snow made a soft crunching sound underfoot. She carried a walking stick, but that wasn't what she intended to defend herself with. For that matter, it wasn't really to defend herself that she was going to meet him. But, having a stout stick handy seemed like a good backup plan.

She had wondered what to do if he ran away; would she pursue? But he did not. Probably, he could not move very quickly. His legs had been stiff even 70 years before when Bullroarer had found his tracks near Annuminas, so perhaps running was no longer an option. In any case, he might not have needed to fear anyone or anything in a long time; it had been almost 1000 years since Gondor's army had driven the Witch King out of Angmar.

She stopped when she was about a dozen steps away, and looked up at him. He was still dressed in the tattered rags of a Dunedan lord, but the body within was little more than a skeleton. At his waist was a short sword in a sheath, and atop his bony head was a circlet that glittered with red rubies, but neither the sword nor whatever power might reside in that circlet concerned her.

In his right hand, he held a key. In his left, the lockbox of Rhudaur. Without it, she thought, he would have died long ago. But, the lockboxes were enchanted to preserve their bearer, so that they could complete their mission no matter what might happen to them between the



tower of the palantír and the palace of the king. The Rhudaur lockbox was likely all that kept him from falling down, a pile of bones.

"You have something of ours," said Bella. It stirred, but did not respond.

"That key," she said. "It is the key to the Arthedain lockbox, isn't it? And it's what you are using to keep my father from waking."

Then, he tucked the key into his belt, and moved to draw his sword from his sheath.

"I have a key too," said Bella, and she held out the key which they had found in their father's Vault. The key that looked like it was made in the same style as the Cardolan and Arthedain lockboxes, but that had not worked in either one. Which meant, it was the key to the third lockbox, the one that the sorcerer was holding.

He froze, and did not draw the sword out of its sheath after all.

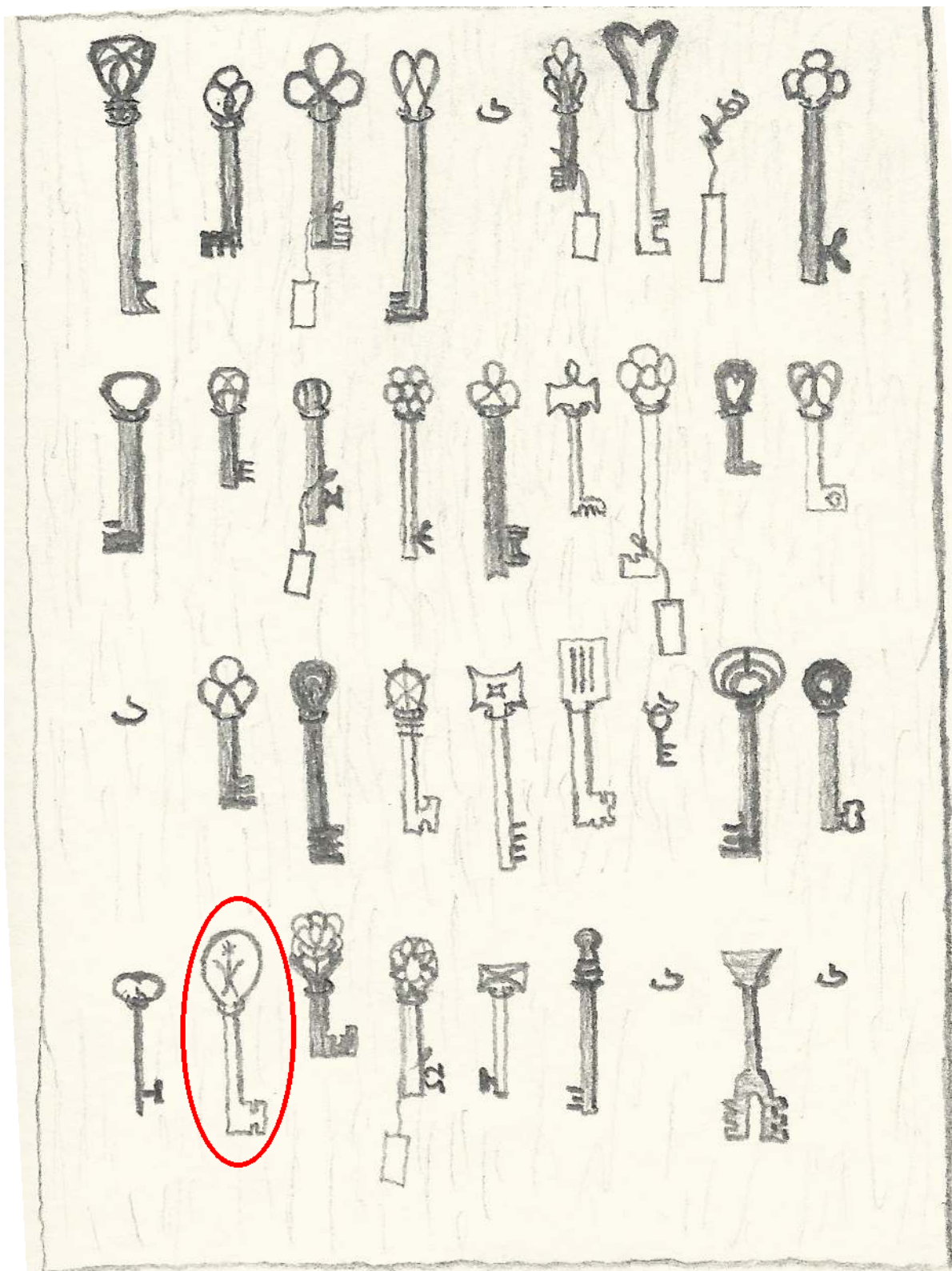
"You want this, I suppose, because it can open that lockbox. But there's another reason you want it. Whoever holds the key, can use it to curse the one who holds the lockbox. To allow the King who holds that key to prevent any thief from stealing the lockbox, or prevent them from getting away with it if they do. Well, I may not be a King, but you are certainly a thief. I think you will not use your sword on me, nor key to cause my father to sleep and not wake. Because I have the Rhudaur key, and I will use it on you if you try. I can strike you down the same way you struck down my father."

"We took the Arthedain lockbox away from him. I don't know how long it would take for the effect to wear off, but you can use that key you have there to make it stop now. I think you had better do that. Because if I have to use this key to strike you down, I will. And if I take that lockbox away from you while you are stricken and cannot stop me, I think you will turn to dust."

The sunken eyes in the skull face glowed an angry red.

"I'm going to go inside now," said Bella, "and when I get in there my father had better be awake and well."

Then there was the awkward moment when she turned around and began heading back to Great Smials. Turning her back on him seemed unwise, but then backing away from him might make it too obvious that she was afraid of him. Because, despite her words to the contrary, Bella had not the slightest idea how one could use the magic Key of the Rhudaur Lockbox to cause the bearer of the lockbox to fall asleep and not wake. If he guessed that, he might decide to cut her down with his sword after all. So, she had to walk away with her back turned to him, as if she had no fear of him at all.



She listened intently for the sound of crunching snow behind her. He had longer legs, but they did not work very well any more; if he came after her she could probably outrun him. Probably. She heard nothing but her own footsteps, and she forced herself to walk at an even, slow pace all the way back to Great Smials, without hurrying or looking back. She came to the door, and opened it, and went inside.

As she stood on the threshold and shook off the snow and cold, she heard the sounds of jubilation from everyone inside, hobbits cheering and laughing and shouting excitedly. After a sleep of many days, Gerontius Took had awakened at last.

