

Puzzles, Answers, Tunnels, Holt

Being a story in 12 volumes

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based on characters and setting by
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Chapter 1

Moving South

You, Donnamira Boffin, daughter of the Old Took, are sitting in a room at Great Smials, your childhood home. With you are your sisters, Belladonna Baggins and Mirabella Brandybuck. All three of you, now grown-up hobbit ladies with husbands and children in other parts of the Shire, have come back to Great Smials because your father, Gerontius the "Old Took", had fallen ill. At 122 years old, it was expected that he was soon to pass away, but the truth turned out to be stranger than that.

Mira's friend from afar, a hobbit-lass who lives far to the south, sent a mysterious and apparently magical lockbox, along with a letter, saying that the lockbox had been left at her home (far outside the Shire) by your father in his youth. You recognized it as nearly the match to another lockbox that had been in your father's Vault. You found a way to open this mysterious gift, and inside were three old travel journals, written in your father's hand. Mira read the first one aloud to the two of you, while you sat in the room where your father lay comatose. At the end of it, you realized that your father had the other lockbox with him, under his waistcoat, and had been carrying it there for a long time.

This was a bad idea, because there was an evil sorcerer, a Dunedan from the fallen kingdoms of the north, who had the key to that lockbox. With it, he was able to cause whoever held the matching lockbox to fall under a spell,

unable to fully wake, and he had been using it on your father. Bella, your older sister, realized this, and found the sorcerer hiding in the forest just outside of Great Smials. She marched out to confront him, and threatened to do to him what he had done to your father. By the time she had come back inside, Gerontius had awakened.

The three of you, and many of your brothers, talked to him jubilantly for some time, and watched him eat his first real meal in weeks. Now, still weak from so many days under the spell of the sorcerer, he has laid back in his bed to rest again.

"Papa?" asked Mira, "while you were asleep, we got a package, sent from far to the south. It was the Cardolan lockbox. We know about the Arthedain one, that you were carrying with you."

"Oh, do you?" said your father. "My goodness, that was all a long time ago. So, that crow that I asked to deliver the message came through. I was hoping they would send it."

"They didn't seem to know what was in it," said Mira, "but they sent it."

"Oh," said your father, in a soft and sad voice, "I suppose that means that Ricarda has passed. Well, I suppose that is not really a surprise, she would be very old by now."

"We opened it," said Mira, "and we found your travel journals."

"Three of them, I hope?" asked your father.

"Yes," said Mira. "We read the first one. It's how we figured out what was going on, or some of it, anyway. I hope you don't mind."

"Oh it's no problem at all," said Gerontius. You notice that he then gets a strange look on his face. "Why don't you read the second one now? It was all so long ago, perhaps I will remember better if I hear you read it."

"Are you sure?" asked Mira. "You don't mind?"

"Not a bit," said your father. Again, you find something odd about the way he says it, but you can't quite figure out what it is.

"All right then," said Mira. "You can just put your head back on the pillow and relax. Do you want me to sit next to you while I read it?"

"No, no," says your father, quickly, in an odd way that your sisters don't seem to notice, but it sounds strange to you. "I can hear you just fine, and the lamplight is better over where you are sitting. You can just sit there and read it."

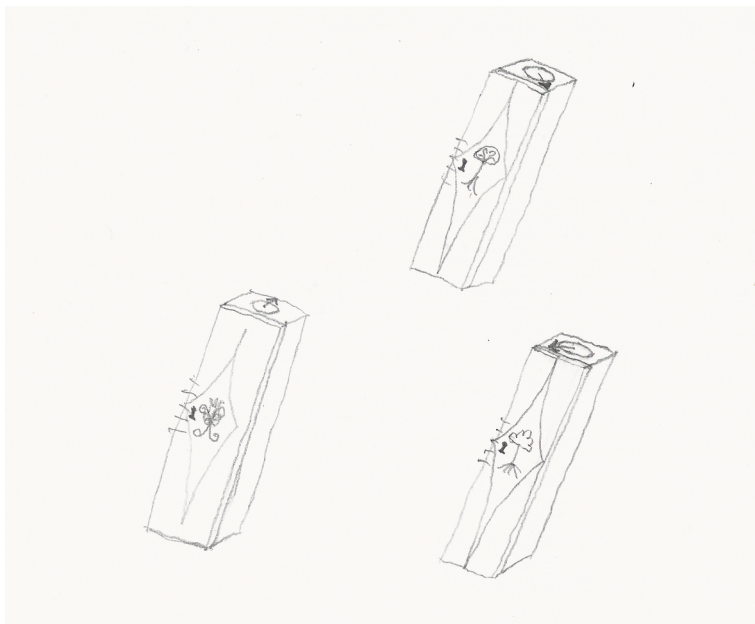
You look at your father, as he leans back and tries to relax. A look of confusion seems to cross his face, and for a moment you think he is about to say something. He does not, though, and then Mira begins to read aloud his second travel journal.

* * * * *

I suppose I am doing it again. I am starting my travel journal in the middle of things. But we're stuck here, and I am not going anywhere for some time unless I can figure out a way out of this trap. I talked it over with Ricarda for a while, but she is tired now and has fallen asleep. Hildigard is on watch, as usual, and I could talk it over with her. She always is a good listener. But I think maybe if I write it all down, it may help me to think it all through better.

It started when I noticed that the compass rose on the Arthadan lockbox was moving. For months, ever since I had first checked it after sneaking it out of Papa's Vault, it had been pointing to the northeast, where the sorcerer lived up in the northern peaks of the Misty Mountains. But, as soon as winter started, it began to move, pointing a bit closer to due east each day, and I knew I had to leave Great Smials. He was tracking me, or rather tracking the Cardolan lockbox that I held. It seems that they work this way: each one of the three lockboxes, points always in the direction of the other. Cardolan's lockbox points towards Arthadain's, which has been in the Great Smials vault for generations. Arthedain's points towards Rhudaur's, which the sorcerer had up in his frozen mountain lair for just as long. Rhudaur's must point towards Cardolan's. For centuries, that was in Tharbad, but I had just found it, and brought it with me. That might have been a mistake, I suppose, because now it was far enough north that during the winter, it was possible for the sorcerer to reach it without having to leave the icy weather that he requires. The Shire is not nearly so wintry as the Misty Mountains, but it gets colder than Tharbad, which has not had a really cold winter since the Long Winter, 30 years before I was born. Even then, it was hidden in a place known only to

Arthedain



Cardolan

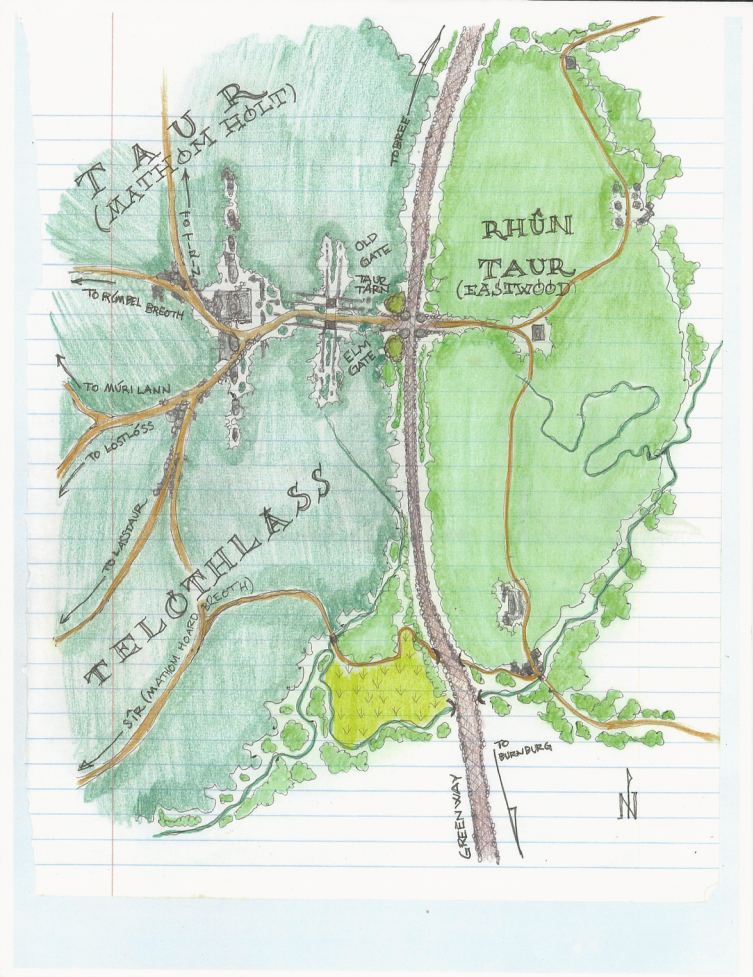
Rhudaun

the Lamplighter, and she might have had powers enough to keep the sorcerer away.

For sure, I have no such powers. So, I looked through my uncle Bullroarer's papers to see if there was anything to tell me where a safe place to store the Cardolan lockbox would be. That's when I found the map of Mathom Holt. He had never told me anything about it, but it looked to be a map with several different handwriting styles on it, so it was not just one he had made himself. There was a paper with it that had writing of the same style, but I could make nothing of it, and it did not look like it was Uncle Bullroarer's hand. On a hunch, I took them with me, along with my pack of travel supplies, and my dog Hildigard.

Hildigard had been happy to walk about the Shire with me the last few months, since she had come to live with us at Great Smials. Papa was none too keen on having a dog inside, but Hildigard was very attentive and conscientious, if you can call a dog that. Papa eventually decided to make an exception for her, and she normally slept inside Great Smials, but we would go together on many walks during the day. At first, she probably thought we were just on another walk about the Shire, but after we crossed the Brandywine River bridge, she seemed to get more serious, like she had figured out that this was something different.

I snuck her into my room at The Prancing Pony, the inn at Bree, and then settled down in the common room with a mug of ale and my maps, to think about what I was doing. To my surprise, who should walk in but Gandalf the Wizard, and Arathorn, Chieftain of the Rangers. If they



were pleased to see me, I was many times as pleased to see them. I told them about my intention, to find a place somewhere to the south to store the Cardolan lockbox, perhaps all the way back at Tharbad. Arathorn's interest peaked when I showed them one of the maps I had from Uncle Bullroarer.

"That appears to be a map of Mathom Holt," said Arathorn. "We will pass it on the way south, if we take the Greenway."

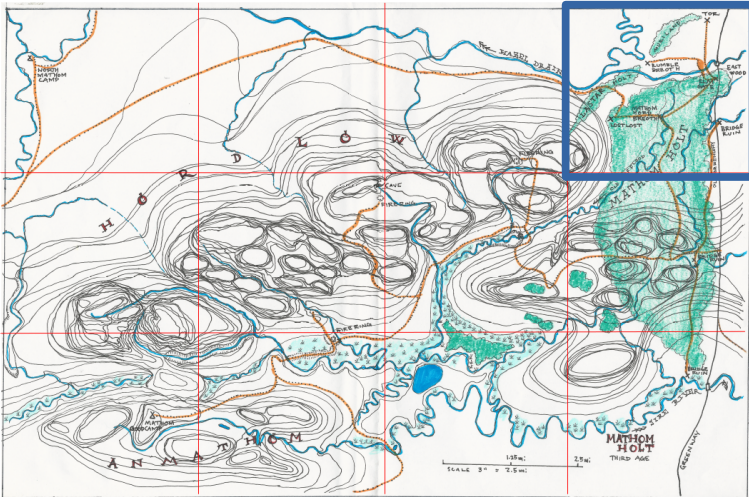
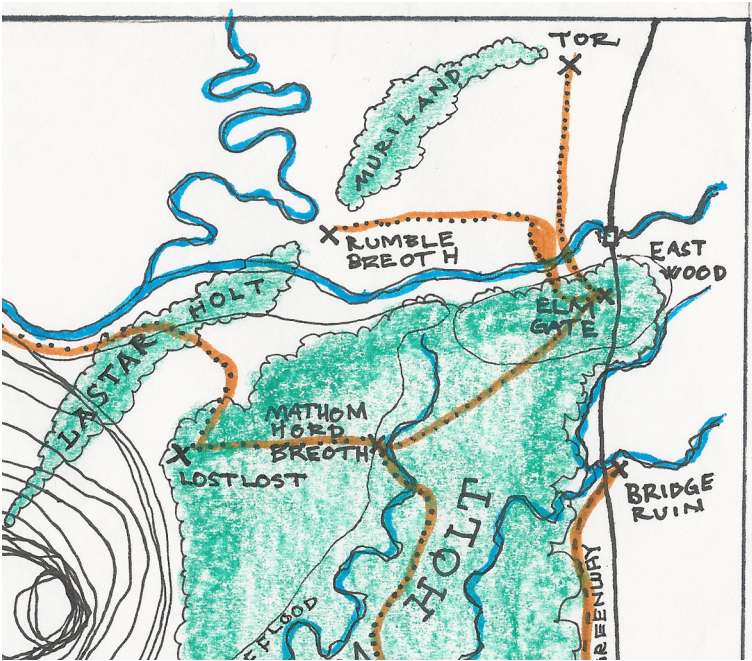
"Mathom Holt?" I asked. I knew that a 'holt' was a word for a small forest, and 'mathom' was a word used in the Shire for a gift that kept getting passed around from one birthday to another. It turns out it is actually just a word for a treasured item; a very old word not used much any more.

"Mathom Holt is a very old forest," said Gandalf, "part of a great forest that was already old when this age of the world began. It was left, when much of the rest was cleared away by Men and Dunedain seeking timber for ships and houses."

"Do you know what this writing is?" I asked, pointing at the odd script that I could not read. "It looks elvish."

"It is Goldogorin," said Gandalf. The word sounded strange to me. "It is an old language, the ancestor to Sindarin, which most of the elves speak today."

"I know Sindarin," said Arathorn, "but that writing is strange to me. I feel I have seen it somewhere before, though."



"Who would have written that?" I asked.

"Someone from a long, long time ago," said Gandalf.
"Even a thousand-year old elf would not have used Goldogorin. Certainly this cannot be the original copy of this map; any original map old enough to be written in Goldogorin would have crumbled to dust by now. This must have been copied from something older, perhaps something carved in a hard stone that would be able to last for millenia. Where did you get it?"

"It was in my Uncle Bullroarer's things," I said.

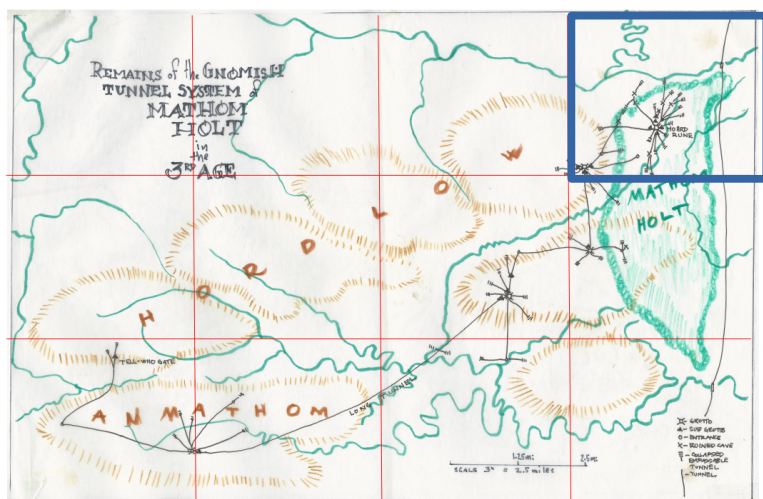
"Interesting. I wonder if that means he went to Mathom Holt. I never heard him say anything about it."

We set out early the next morning, and the first several days it was cold, but clear, and once you were walking the effort warmed you up. The only problem was keeping up with their long legs, but they were willing to wait up for me. Hildigard also has shorter legs than they do, but at least she has four of them.

Then, we came to the edge of Mathom Holt. The Greenway actually passes just through the northeastern tip of the forest. It was not like the forest in the Shire, which has some old trees but nothing like this. There were trees in Mathom Holt older than the Shire, maybe older than the three Kingdoms which made the lockboxes, and disappeared a millenium ago. It was very quiet and still inside the forest, I suppose because there was no wind blowing across the road, but that combined with the shadows from the tree branches overhead made it seem like we had left the outdoors and gone into a very old



Belowground



home. Some parts of Great Smials, which have not been used for years, feel like that. I looked off through the trees as far as I could see, but even after my eyes had adjusted to the gloom it was difficult to see much.

"We will come soon to the Elm Gate," said Gandalf, "that the elves who lived here called 'Taurtarn', the Forest Gate. If we wish to go further into Mathom Holt, that is the way we should take."

"It's still there?" I asked. "Do the elves still live here?"

"There have been no cities of elves here for many years," said Gandalf. "Sauron sent his armies to besiege them in the Second Age, long ago, and when he was routed at last by Gondor, the elves departed west over the Sea."

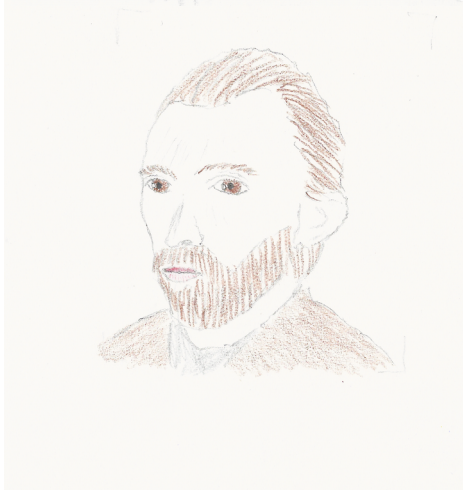
"All the roads must be long overgrown then," I said.

"Not all of them," said Arathorn. I looked at him, expecting him to say more, but he just walked on in silence, with his hand on his walking staff and his eyes on the road in front of him. I turned back to Gandalf.

"The Rangers maintain a few," said Gandalf, "that lead to sacred sites. They remember the past age, and the sacrifices that went into defeating Sauron then. But they are too few to maintain it all. The forest has reclaimed many of the roads. Those, you would not recognize as roads if you were on them."

"It would be a bad idea to leave this road," said Arathorn. "Mathom Holt has holy sites, but it is a dangerous place, and its reputation is mixed. There were spirits called in from beyond by the elves who lived here, when they

GANDALF



ARATHORN

fought with Sauron's armies, and they say those spirits still prowl the forest. The roads which are still cleared, are safe, but to leave them would be unwise."

"But it is said that no servant of the Enemy can pass its borders and live," said Gandalf.

"That I believe," said Arathorn.

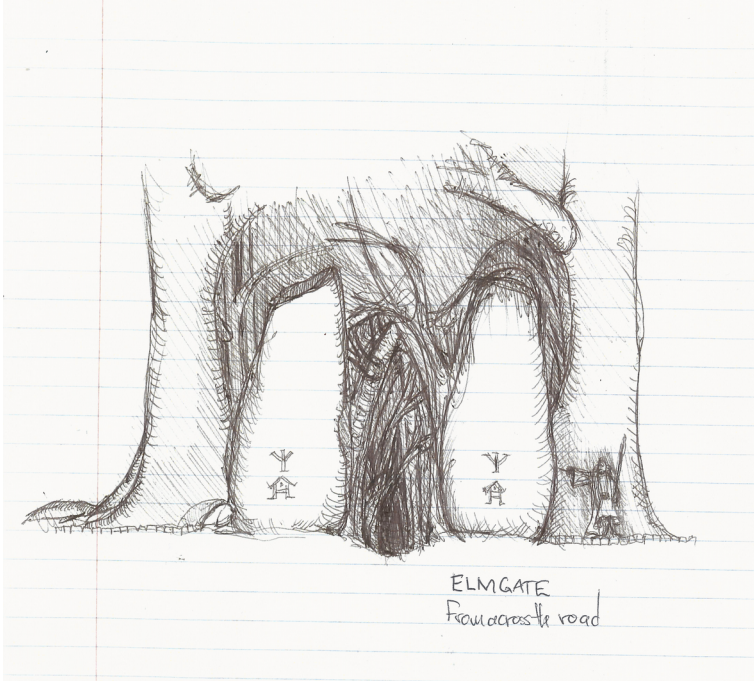
Just then, I saw Hildigard's head snap up to look off to our right, into the forest, and her ears perked up. She started to growl, and I saw her tense up as if she was preparing to spring into a run. I was about to reach out to calm her, since I didn't want her to run off into a forest that was as dangerous as Arathorn said, but then she seemed to hear or see something else, and she got quiet again. Her tail dropped down, and she lowered her head, and she walked a little closer to my side. I put my hand on her back to reassure her.

"Your friend has a great deal of wisdom, more than most men," said Arathorn, and we walked on. I looked off to the direction which she had been looking, but I never saw anything.

Soon afterwards, we came to Elm Gate. They did not have to tell me that was what it was; there was no doubt. The two elm trees that it was named for were as wide across as both arms of even a tall man such as Arathorn. Just inside them were two large standing stones, broad and very tall, perhaps five or six times as tall as I was. They looked to be of local stone, and were only roughly finished, but they had inscribed on them peculiar signs, maybe related to the language on Uncle Bullroarer's map

crafted lock will be picked
to use the key that was made
used to unlock one of the
is. This wasn't so
lockbox, which you have,
told you, that he is very
disturbance in the snow, as
into a warm burrow to wait
bring him one of the
are fortunate that your
controlling him could not
dessicated. Whatever powers
and put them into the dark
put one at the antechamber
for someone to wander in
the lock, it would take far
careful not to damage it,
time. Now, the question
sorcerer is. But where is
side of Great Smials, there
many truly old buildings, is
old he is. He probably

or forced (without
for it, which was meant to
others. Unfortunately, both
difficult once you
points to the Rhudaur one.
close (because if he were
if something had burrowed or
out the winter. No, this
goldbell flowers. Just as
visit to the bakery reminded
see that you were
they possess, it might not
to encourage them to bloom.
of the crypt. Perhaps he
uninvited, and he wanted one
too long. Fortunately, the
because it may be that your
only remains, where has your
that? Likely, the only
was **once** an **entrance** to what
layered **u**pon that which came
thought that there would be



ELMGATE
From across the road

but not the same exactly. I guess if you're chiseling into stone it will have to look different than when you're writing with a brush. I supposed they said "Elm Gate", or something similar.

Between the standing stones, there was a narrow space of a pathway, that went deep into the forest with tall trees along both sides (but none so large as those two elms, of course). We all looked at it for a long pause, and then Hildigard started forward, and the rest of us followed.

"Which of us is leading the way, Arathorn, you or that dog?" asked Gandalf with a friendly tone.

"One could do worse, in either case," said Arathorn.

* * * * *

"I think I need to get a drink of water," says Mira, pausing in her reading of the journal.

"I have to go, too," says Bella, "I promised Scilla I would help her with her sewing for a bit today. It shouldn't take too long for me to show her how to do the next part of her dress, then I can come back here. Perhaps we can start again then?"

"That sounds like a good idea," says Mira. "But I think I should keep the Cardolan lockbox with me. It doesn't seem safe, somehow, to leave it unattended."

"Good idea," says Bella, "and I'll keep the two keys. Donna, you keep the Arthedain lockbox with you. I don't

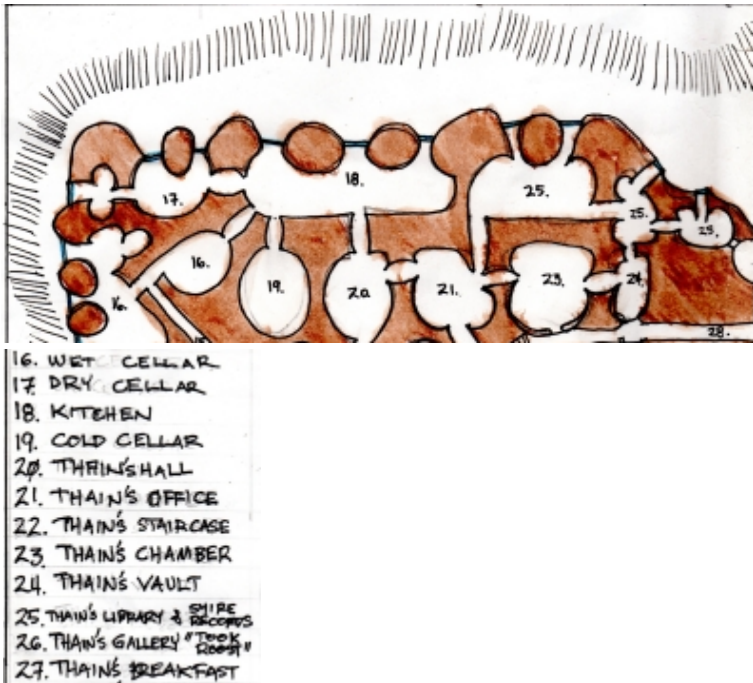
suppose the lich will dare try anything with that, again, but it seems unwise to leave it unattended."


You nod, and the three of you each go your separate ways, leaving your father sleeping peacefully. Or is he? You notice a small twitch, as if he may not be having sweet dreams. It occurs to you that you could wake him, but he doesn't seem in the grip of a nightmare, so you let him sleep. In any case, another possibility has occurred to you.

You could use the pause to search around Great Smials. After all, you have not been here in some time, and even then normally with children in tow. Now, unaccompanied, you could investigate freely for the first time since you were a young hobbit-lass.

Do you:

- 1) Head straight to your father's office? A look through his papers should answer your questions about what's going on. Page 22
- 2) Investigate the Shire Records room? Perhaps a look through there may give you a better historical perspective for the current situation. Page 25
- 3) Try to get into your father's personal vault, where he keeps his most valuable treasures, keys, sensitive documents, and other secret things? Page 28
- 4) Stay here in your father's chamber, quietly, and watch him sleep? Page 31



Just to the east of your father's chamber is his office. You are a little bit nervous about spending too much time rooting around in it, as it connects to so many other rooms, and you could easily have someone walk in on you. To provide a good excuse, you bring a feather duster and a small broom from his chamber (neither one appear to have been used for some time), and commence cleaning. It gives you a good excuse to look closely at everything, and get under the desk and other furniture.

His desk does not appear to have been cleaned in some time, nor has it been organized, but it does look as if it was used not too long ago. There are several unanswered letters, some with half-finished responses lying on them, mostly to other important families in the Shire. You do find one letter, though, that seems different.

"Dear Gerontius,

I write to you because I can tell that I am not very long for this world, and I still have with me the thing you entrusted

me with so many years ago. It is a wonder to me that I have lasted this long, and it is our good fortune that you have not needed it yet. But, I have a fear that the winter to come will be cruel; the signs that we have been told to look for, all point to it.

I am uncertain now if I should send it to you, so that you can find another hiding place, or take it with me, and trust that it will not be needed in your lifetime. We may not be able to go to Tharbad to get letters from you. I see that not long after they carry me to my final resting place, my people will need to move on, to a new home somewhere. Too many people have guessed at where we must be, and in any case it is our way to move every few generations, and stay hidden.

Send your answer to me, whether you want me to bury this thing forever or have my heirs take it with them to keep hidden forever, or send it to you now. I suppose I would not be able to take it myself, but my granddaughter Amaranth could be trusted with it, at least as far as Tharbad, where she could find someone else to deliver it to you in the Shire.

I wonder if keeping it for you here is the reason I have lasted so long. Regardless, I am at peace with my end; the joy of seeing my children and grandchildren grow has been great, and I would not have had that if you had not saved me all those many years ago. If you send to us, do it quickly, before I am gone, perhaps all my people as well.

Be well, Gerontius, and goodbye,
Ricarda Argine"

You put the letter down on the desk again, a little bit dazed at its melancholy news. This must have been the letter your father received, just before he became ill, that caused him to send a crow messenger to ask for them to send the Cardolan lockbox back to Great Smials.


Just then, you hear light footsteps in the hallway, and you busy yourself with dusting and cleaning. Your oldest brother, Isengrim, comes in.

"Oh, there you are Donna," he says. "What are you doing?"

"Cleaning," you say. You didn't say, 'just cleaning', so technically it's not a lie. "What are you doing?"

"I need to sign some of father's letters, business he was unable to attend to the last few weeks as he has been ill. This winter is getting ever harsher, and some families have questions for the Thain about food. As the oldest, I can sign for him when he is ill."

"Oh, and by the way, your sisters were just asking for you. They are in father's chamber again."

Just north of your father's chamber is his personal library. In fact, he has several more rooms in his library, further east in the King's Smials part of Great Smials, but this part is known as the Shire Records. It has books on the early days of the Shire, on the plants of the Shire, on the birds of the Shire, on how big the harvests have been and what the weather was like and so on, going all the way back to the days of the Oldbucks, before the Took family even lived here in Great Smials.

It has bookshelves along all the walls, built specifically for this room, curving to match the walls. There are stepstools and ladders scattered about, to help with finding books up on the higher shelves. You know, because you used them a lot as a girl, to help you peek into every corner and look behind every row of books. Your father used to sometimes hide things, on the shelves, behind a certain book he thought no one else would look for. Keys, notes, pieces of candy that he didn't want your mother to see him with, and so forth. Sometimes you found other

things, that might have been hidden by other Took, in generations past. You are probably the only person to actually know how many things are hidden in the library; you even once had a special tool, like a small mirror on a long handle, that you could use with a lamp to shine light behind each row of books on the shelves, and see what might be there.

Once, you also found a dead rat. That was unpleasant, especially since you saw it close up, in the mirror tool you were using. After thinking about it for a night, you came back and retrieved it, and gave it a proper burial outside in the woods.

Unfortunately, you don't have your specialized mirror tool with you now, so you'll just have to look around the ordinary way. You get up on the nearest stepstool, and start pretending to dust the shelves. Occasionally, you find a few coins, or a small key, or an envelope that you recognize from years past (you used the bright sunlight to look through it without opening it; it is a birthday card and present for your older brother Hildibrand that your father hid many years ago and then forgot where he had put it). But eventually, you find something new.


Well, not new exactly, but something that you've not seen before. It's a small packet of papers, but they appear yellowed with age. You untie the string that holds it together, and quickly you find that it was the papers that your father took from his Great Uncle Bullroarer's house, along with some notes that your father made as he tried to figure out what each one was.

Soon, you come to what must be the map of Mathom Holt.

You look through it, then it occurs to you to wonder why your father had it hidden here. Why not his desk, or if not there then the Vault? Perhaps he was surprised here, and put it quickly out of sight when someone else entered. If that is the case, then he was probably comparing something in the packet to the books at this spot on the shelves.

Looking at the books it was hidden behind, you see that they are weather records, showing how much rain and so on, for a period some time ago. You realize it was around the time of the Long Winter, when the Shire had much more snow than usual, and the freezing cold lasted for months longer than usual. So, your father had been reading up on the Long Winter, with his Great Uncle Bullroarer's papers with him for quick reference. You wonder why.

You hear someone walking down the corridor toward you, and like your father must have done before you, you swiftly chuck the packet back through the gap into the area behind the row of books, and slide the book of weather records back into its spot. When your brother Hildibrand comes in, he only sees you dusting. You chat for a short time, and then you decide it is time to return to your father's chamber and see if Mira is ready to read more from his journal.

Getting into your father's Vault it not hard; you know where he stores the key. It is, of course, a bad idea to hide the key to your very important, official Thain's Vault in the same place for decades. Especially if the place you choose, is hanging from under a chair in the very next room. But, then, as far as you can tell no one but you has ever found it, and if a thief has gotten this far into Great Smials then perhaps there is already a big problem. Regardless, you never told your father that his place was too obvious, and so now you can go quickly to find it, and let yourself into the Vault.

There are chests (some large and sitting on the floor, some small and sitting on shelves), scrollcases, cabinets, bags and sacks, and several different filing systems for official and especially valuable or sensitive documents. There was also a large board with hooks, on which keys were hung. You look about, but at first you see nothing that wasn't already here years ago.

Then, you notice a small sack of tiny tools, sitting on a

shelf near the back of the vault. Next to it, still lying open, is a small book. It appears to be an instruction manual of some kind, with many precisely detailed mechanical drawings. Taking care to keep the spot it is opened to, you turn it over to look at the cover. "A Short Manual On The Art of Lockpicking", by Gordenhad Oldbuck. What was your father doing, trying to pick a lock?

Then, you remember that the Arthadan lockbox, which he was wearing for years until just a few days ago, was unopenable, because the lich had the key. Perhaps it was the Arthadan lockbox that he was attempting to pick the lock of. Did he ever succeed? It was still locked when you found it on him as he lay comatose, but that doesn't mean he might not have picked it open, then relocked it. On the other hand, he still had the manual and lockpick tools laying here in the Vault, as if he would occasionally come here still to work on it in secret. Perhaps he never succeeded. The lockboxes do seem to be very finely made, perhaps even magical, so ordinary lockpick tools may not work.

You wonder for a few moments why your father had a set of lockpick tools, and then why he never showed you. It occurs to you that you might be able to learn a few things from this manual. Still keeping his place in the book, you flip to the beginning and start to read.

A few minutes later, you realize that it is probably time to go back to your father's chamber and see if Mira is ready to read more of his second journal. You regretfully leave the manual and tools where you found them, exit the Vault quietly, return the vault key to its hiding spot, and head

back.

While your sisters go do other things, you sit in a chair by your father's bed and watch him sleep. After a while, you begin to wonder if he's actually asleep. Once or twice, it looks almost as if he is peeking out from under nearly closed eyelids.

On a whim, you decide to do the same. Leaning back in your chair, you relax, and then close your eyes. You think about trying to leave them not quite closed, but if you could tell when he was doing it, he will be able to tell when you are. You close your eyes entirely, and concentrate on your hearing.

For a long while, you hear nothing, and you almost actually fall asleep. Then, you can hear your father sit up in his bed. It almost sounds as if he is about to say something, but then there is a sort of tiny strangled noise, and he says nothing. It is almost as if he started to say something, and then stopped. Next, you hear the sound of him getting out of the bed. He walks very quietly, but not too quietly for you to hear him if you listen as closely as

you possibly can.

You hear him step over towards the east door, which leads to the Vault. It is nearly always locked, and you can hear him quietly try to open it, unsuccessfully. It is strange to you; why would he try that door if he did not have the key with him? Surely he would know that it was locked? But perhaps one of your brothers locked it, not him.

You are seated near the west door, that leads to the office. You hear him moving slowly in your direction. You ponder what you should do next. Open your eyes? Ask him point blank what he is doing? Continue to pretend you are asleep?

Then, just as you are about to open your eyes, you hear the sounds of Mira and Bella talking to one another in the hallway, walking nearer. You hear the soft sounds of your father moving quickly back to the bed, and arranging the sheets and blanket. When your sisters open the door to enter the room, you open your eyes, and pretend to wake and look over at your father. He is lying in bed, apparently asleep.

"Well Donna," says Mira, as she picks up the second journal where it was left on a small table near the south door, "I've gotten a drink and your sister has helped Scilla with her sewing. Shall we read a bit more?"

"Yes," you say, looking over at your father, still pretending to be asleep in his bed, as if he had never moved.