

Chapter 4

End Where You Began But Keep Moving

"Well that was nearly as much trouble as just cooking it ourselves," says Mira to Bella, as the two of them rejoin you in your father's chamber. He is lying in bed, quietly, and looks over at them as they enter, but says nothing.

"Yes," says Bella, "but you have to show them how to do it themselves, or they will never learn. Anyway, now I think we can get back to Papa's journal. Where were we?"

"Hildigard didn't let Ricarda leave the forest, and Ricarda gave her a hug," says Mira.

"Ah, yes, the crazy hobbit-lass who runs hot and cold," says Bella. "Please continue."

Mira's mouth tenses into a look of annoyance, and you think she is about to argue with Bella again, but she instead she picks up reading where she left off.

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"Um, look, Ricarda," I said, "what flowers are we talking about exactly? And why do we need them so badly that we should leave the forest before Gandalf and Arathorn get back?"

When Ricarda looked up, her eyes were shining, as if she felt ready to cry. But she didn't say anything, although it

looked like she wanted to. I sat down next to her on the path.

"Look, Ricarda, I would like to help, really I would, but I don't understand, and you haven't been very good at explaining yourself."

Then, suddenly, Ricarda seemed to stiffen a bit, and she sat up straighter. Hildigard stepped back away from her.

"There are flowers there that we need, to save my very life," she said, while looking glassy eyed at the forest floor in front of her. "They are to be found nowhere else but the falls of Acallos, not far past the edge of this wood. If I were but to journey forth, on this very path, it would take me to them. Alas, I cannot."

I just sat there, silent, amazed at both what she said and how she was saying it. Since I didn't know what to think or say about it, I said nothing. She continued.

"Gerontius, I must ask you this favor, to go to the falls and pick for me a few of the flowers which grow there, a brilliant gold in color, very near the falls. If you could do this, and bring them to me here, I would be forever at your service."

"So, um, no need for service," I said nervously, "but why can't you go with me, again?"

"Fear," she said, still staring at the path before her. "I am but a small hobbit maid, I dare not to go out of the protection of this wood, for fear of the orcs that might

range there. But you are brave, and clever, and I plead with thee to do it for me."

It was the oddest sort of pleading I had yet witnessed, in a flat tone of voice and not even looking at me. It also made no sense, given that she had been trying to leave the forest just a short time before. I decided that maybe I did not care. It all seemed a ruse to get me to leave her alone, anyway, so I decided I would play along, since by this point I was not sure I wanted her company. But instead of just walking off, for some reason I decided to see if I could get her the blessed flowers.

"So, then," I said as I got up, "I will go this way, and when I get to a waterfall I will find these flowers, which are gold colored, and I will pick a few and then return. Does that sound right?"

"Indeed," she said, and then said nothing else. She did look up at me, then, and her eyes were wide, and for the first time did look a bit like pleading. I felt uncomfortable at that, but also a bit more like helping.

"I will go," said the starling from somewhere nearby, "sound right?"

"Alright then," I said, and I began walking in the direction she indicated, and Hildigard came with me.

Now I was at this point somewhat suspicious, and knew for a fact that there was something going on which I did not understand, but I did also know a few things. Gandalf had said that the forest was safe from orcs, there had been orcs nearby not long ago, and I was getting ready to leave

the forest. So, whether I knew what was going on or not, I knew at least it was a good time to move low, stay quiet, and be cautious. Hildigard took my example, and hung back a bit, and moved as quiet as a dog can. That's not as good as a cat, but it's better than a man, if you take my meaning.

We went about a mile along the path, and as we went I began to hear pretty clearly the sound of a small waterfall. It was not a large one, but the sound of it rang clear enough across the open hillside. There were a couple copses of trees alongside the path, before it got down to where the waterfall probably was, further down the hill. As I came around the first copse, and saw the second one up ahead, it occurred to me that it would be difficult to imagine a more perfect place to hide, if you wanted to ambush anyone who came along this path towards the waterfall.

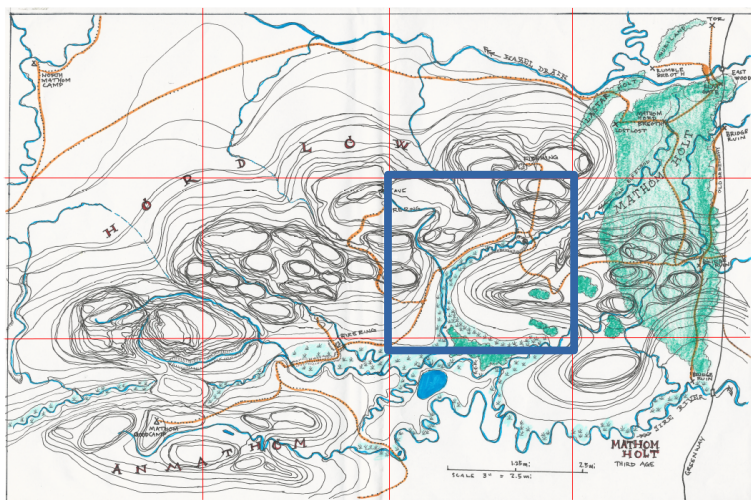
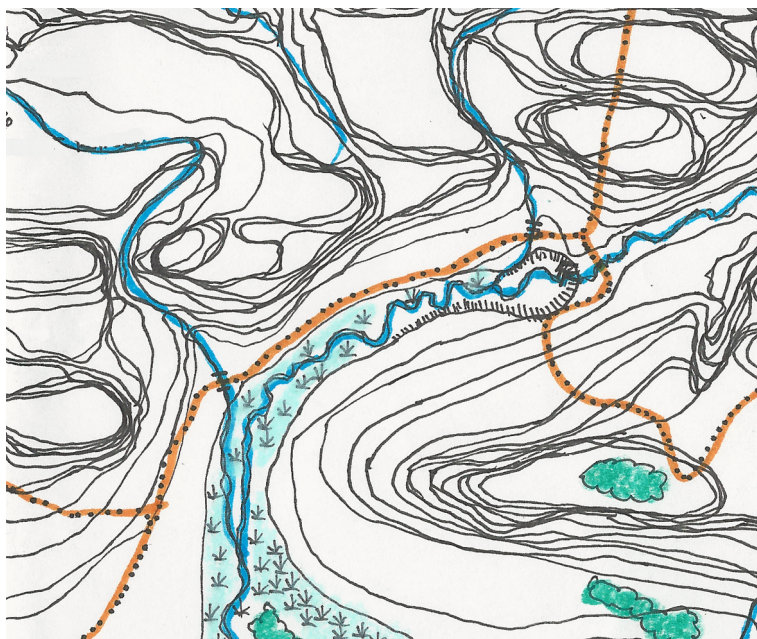
Now I had not exactly decided that I thought Ricarda was trying to set me up, but it was still pretty clear that she knew something that she hadn't told me, and in any case I knew there were orcs about who had been chased off by Gandalf and Arathorn not long before. I was on the west side of Mathom Holt, and the orcs had fled towards the east, but it wouldn't have taken them long to circle around if they were trying to lose their pursuit, and in any event perhaps there had been more than one group. I decided to back up a bit, so that the first copse was blocking the view of me if there were anyone watching me from that second one.

Now Gandalf had said not to leave the path, but that was with regard to when I was inside Mathom Holt, and I was

outside it now, so I decided to chance it. Instead of taking the path, right past the point where it came closest to the copse, I walked a bit north, just outside the edge of the forest, staying low so the tall grass would block me from sight (I hoped). It was night, by now, but it was clear, with a bright moon and countless stars, and anyone who could see at night would still be able to spot me if I were not careful, so I tried to be quiet and not move too quickly. Then, when I came to the stream, I followed it downhill, still trying to stay low and quiet.

I realized then that the stream I was following was called "Old Elf-flood", and Arathorn had said that if you waded or swam in it, you would fall into a deep sleep. This seemed like a bad idea, just now, and I was a little nervous about what might happen as I got closer to the waterfall, if any of it splashed on me. Fortunately, it was no huge, thundering cataract, so there was no spray of mist coming off of it. When I arrived, I could see the flowers immediately.

Many flowers draw your eye to them, but these were something special. I felt like they looked golden even in the moonlight, that was how bright their color was. It was a golden yellow, and they were all gathered there close to the falls. I had seen no such flowers in the forest, nor along the hillside, so it may be that they needed the water of that stream. Whatever the reason, I crept up to them quietly, and collected four of them. There were only a few dozen there, so I didn't want to take any more, nor would it even have been possible to carry so many without damaging them. I turned to go, and then I heard it.



The voice was hoarse, and sounded like it came from a throat that was dry beyond measure. Nonetheless, it echoed across the hillside.

"Catch him, fools! He has them!"

I didn't wait to ask who or what was being referred to, it was clear I had been caught in the act of something. I sprinted back the way I had come, wondering if I should risk plunging into the forest, even though I would not be on the path. When I got close, I looked back, and saw that the orcs had come charging down to the waterfall, and had not seen me until they were down there. This made me wonder who it was that had raised the alarm, and where they were watching from, since apparently it was not someone who had been with them in that copse of trees.

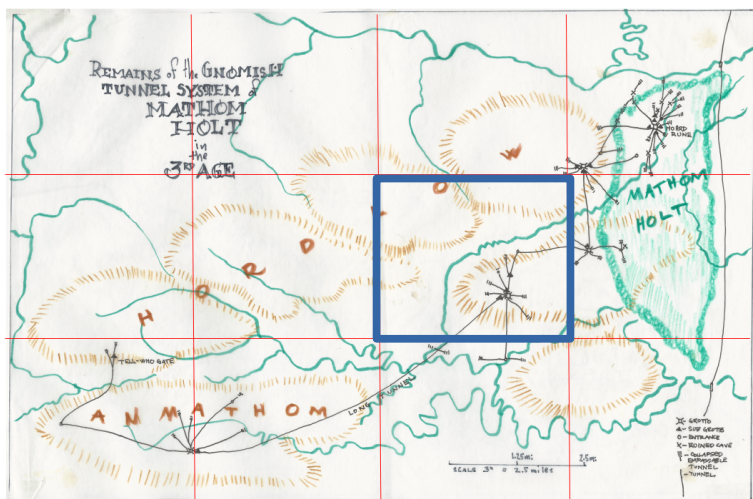
"Uphill, back towards the woods!" came that same hissing, echoing voice.

I decided that I had enough time to get to the path before I entered the forest, and I ran uphill. Once, I swear a tree root changed position in order to trip me, and it occurred to me that the edge of a forest is not a precisely defined line, and maybe I was inside the woods already. I fell hard, trying to protect the flowers, not sure why except that they had seemed so beautiful and it seemed a shame to crush them now they were picked off of the plants. I got up, stinging from scrapes and cuts that would hurt more in a short time, and sprinted ahead, a little further away from the trees.

I got to the path and turned left into the forest, ready to tell Ricarda that we needed to run inside a bit just in case the



Belowground



orcs didn't know to stay out of the forest. However, Ricarda was nowhere to be seen. Then, as I looked around, I saw her running down the path OUT of the forest. I could not fathom why she would have left the forest, after telling me she was afraid to, because of the orcs. At that moment, I think I was fully prepared to run back inside Mathom Holt, go to the southern edge of it, and wait for Gandalf and Arathorn to reappear. But then, like a flash, the image came to me of having to explain to those two that the hobbit-lass that they had left in my care, had been abducted by orcs, and I had decided she was too much trouble, and abandoned her. I ran after her.

"Hildigard, get her!" I said, and Hildigard was off in a bolt. At the copse of trees where I had suspected an ambush, she tried to turn and go in, but by then Hildigard was upon her, and herded her like an errant sheep, nipping at her ankles. Ricarda stumbled back, still not seeing me until I was almost upon her. Then she spun around, eyes wide.

"Oh Gerontius, I am so sorry!" she said.

"Ricarda, what are you doing out here?" I hissed. "There are orcs, we should be deep inside the forest by now!"

"I tried, I tried to tell you, but it wouldn't let me," she said. "It made me say things, I tried not to, but it had control of me somehow, I'm so sorry!"

"What? Say what things? Who had control of you?"

"That man, the Dunadan noble who looked half-dead," she said. "Sometimes I could see nothing but him, and he

would say things to me, and I would hear my own voice saying them, and I didn't want to and I'm so sorry."

I looked around, still unclear on what she was telling me but without any more time to think about it, and saw that the orcs had reached the point where the path entered the forest, and now realized their mistake and looked down at us. I had basically led them on a merry round-about, down to the falls and uphill and now I was down the path to their original hideout, and they were quite angry at being made fools of. Half of them came hurtling down the path towards us, and the other half went back the way they had come, to make sure we didn't just circle around again.

Well I knew we couldn't outrun the orcs, they have longer legs and they run pretty well, better than I do in the dark for sure. It occurred to me that perhaps I could find a way across the stream they called Old Elf-flood, and if there were a branch or something I could pull it up after me or topple it into the water, and then perhaps the orcs would try to wade after me and the water would cause them to fall asleep. I recalled seeing a stout branch laid across the stream just above the waterfall, and it looked small enough for me to move, especially if Ricarda and I did it together.

"Follow me!" I said, and sprinted downhill. To my relief, she did, and Hildigard as well of course.

"Follow! Follow!" came the call of the starling. Well, at least one of us will be able to get across, I thought, even if it's only the one with wings.

It was a horrible feeling, coming around the curve of the path as we approached the falls, and seeing that the orcs who had come that way were too fast for us. There was no way we could get to the branch before them, much less soon enough to both cross and throw it down after us. I turned around, not even sure what I was looking for, I could think of no way to escape.

* * * * *

There is a light knock on the door.

"Oh come on," you say softly, "not now."

"If there's work to be done in the kitchen," says Bella, "it is your turn to help."

"Hear, hear," says Mira.

"Aunt Mira?" comes the voice of Jasmine Took.

"Hold on Jasmine," says Mira, "your Aunt Donna is just on her way to help out."

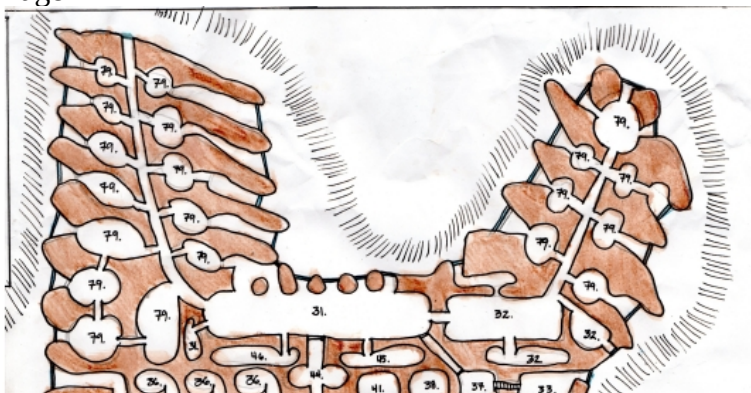
Your sisters both have rather stony expressions as they look at you, and you decide maybe now is the time to investigate the kitchen parts of Great Smials, anyway. You ask your sisters to wait until you get back to read the rest, slip out of your father's chamber, and accompany Jasmine back to the Great Kitchen.

The issue appears to be something to do with missing ingredients that the recipe calls for, and the right dishes not being clean. Jasmine is a sweet lass, but she is not


able to deal with things not going according to plan. It takes just a few minutes to tell her what to do (substitute parsnips for potatoes and wash the one dish that's needed now even though there is no time to wash all the dishes), and a little bit more to make sure that Daisy and Violet stop squabbling and help out their older cousin Jasmine. Then you decide it is time to see what has changed in this part of Great Smials in recent years.

Do you:

- 1) Spend some more time looking around the Great Kitchen, now that you don't have to focus on the cooking? This way if Jasmine needs help again right away, you will still be here to help out. Page 14
- 2) Look into the bakery, in the next room? You want to know just how short food will be this winter, and looking into the bakery might give you a quiet way to evaluate that. Page 20
- 3) Have a walk through the servants' quarters, largely unused during your childhood here but now mostly full again? Page 24
- 4) Return to the Thain's Hall, which you know to be filled with members of your family gossiping and drinking? Page 27



31. GREAT KITCHEN
32. BAKERY
44. THAIN'S HALL
79. SERVANTS QUARTERS

The Great Kitchen was, when you were working in it as a young hobbit-lass, entirely too oversized for one family. Unless there was a major party being held, such as for Midsummer Festival, it could have been a tenth the size and still been sufficient. Now that a dozen Took families live in Great Smials, it makes more sense, and especially given the many guests who have taken refuge from the especially harsh winter this year.

There are multiple ovens, and between them small round windows let in light, when there is any to be let in. The sun is far to the south now, and the Great Kitchen is on the north side, so although the sun has not yet set, little light comes from that direction. The windows do show a glimpse of the brilliance of the sunset, however, and its orange and pink hues match the fiery light from the ovens and lanterns. The weather outside is bitter cold, but in the Great Kitchen it is toasty, and also full of the buzz of many hobbits working and talking.

Jasmine, Daisy, and Violet Took have help from several of the servant girls who live in rooms near the Great Kitchen. Really, you imagine that if the three of them simply left the kitchen entirely and got out of the way of the servants, the meals would all be done in a reasonable way and in less time. But, as Bella pointed out, if they don't do it now they will never learn to. You notice that the servant hobbit-lasses have mastered the delicate art of telling their bosses, the Took ladies in the kitchen, when they are making the wrong decision.

They could, of course, simply say, "don't do that", or "you should do this", or even "you should order me to do this instead of that", but they do not. Because they are wanting to see that the meals turn out edible, though, they also do not simply follow the mistaken orders they are given. Instead, they look slightly surprised, arching their eyebrows and making silent "oh"s with their mouths, and look at Jasmine (or Daisy, or Violet) as if they must have misheard them. They continue this, hesitating and looking surprised, while Jasmine changes her mind repeatedly, until finally she hits upon the right answer, at which point the servant girls say "yes, ma'am" quickly and set about it.

"Should I check anything with the stew just now, ma'am?" asks Snowdrop Haley, one of the most experienced of the kitchen servants.

"No thank-you, Snowdrop, it should be fine," says Jasmine. "Er, I mean, why not give it a look, just to see that it's not burning. Oh, hold on, let me just check the recipe...Snowdrop, we should add the bay leaves, and move it back from the fire a bit."

you spent your childhood
shovel himself? Hard to
dark especially. As you
and see by its light instead
It is very cold in this
immediately, in the light of
sorcerer behind him. He is
in your hair, and doesn't
dress, and pull out the
thin, so you are pretty
moving awkwardly like a
knew where it was, because
the sorcerer sees a chance
and the pressed flowers
grabs the book underneath
but even the old pressed
blocked his control. His
you think he is. "Duck,
comes down, point-first,
and grab the fresh flower,
him, and the one you hold is
from behind you, just past
falls to the ground. You

looking into every nook and
say, but there would not
descend the stairs into the
of the candle lamp you
spot, and you can see that
the lamp, your father, but
on the other side of your
want it any closer to him
Arthedain lockbox. But, not
certain the sorcerer cannot
marionette. You see that
he holds the lockbox that
to have all three of them.
inside that. You **are** not
it. He is still leaning
flowers are enough, when he
eyes blaze redder and
Papa!" He ducks and rolls
towards your father's chest,
and thrust both it and the
fresh and glowing in the
your right temple, towards
decide to press the

"Yes, ma'am," says Snowdrop quickly, and she moves to comply. It strikes you as rather similar to a parlour game like charades. You are fairly certain you could have simply told Jasmine, when she came to interrupt you and your sisters, "do whatever Snowdrop Haley tells you to", but it may be that she is embarrassed to do this, or Snowdrop would be embarrassed to have her do this, so perhaps it is just as well you came in person. In any case, you feel secure now in moving further away from the action, to take a look around the rest of the space.


The back wall of the Great Kitchen, opposite the row of ovens, is covered with cabinets and shelves. Some of it is for cooking, much of it holds the tableware for when the Midsummer Festival is held at Great Smials. There are also some more exotic plates and bowls, which you have rarely if even seen used, that are kept in the corner most remote from the action. You move closer, and grab a candle from a wall sconce, to take a closer look.

There is a great copper serving plate made by dwarves from the Blue Mountains, with geometric patterns engraved on it. There is a ceramic bowl from the elves of Lindon, with two great trees painted on it. There is a wooden bowl made by some tribe of Men from the east, with elaborate knotwork chiseled along the outer rim. There is also a matching pair of dark blue crystal decanters, that you do not know the origin of, with stars painted on the outside in gold. Then, your eye is drawn to a silver serving vessel on the bottom shelf.

There, in delicate gold filigree on the lid, is a pattern that you have seen before. In fact, it is the exact same pattern that is on the Cardolan lockbox, that Mira is carrying.

This serving vessel must have been made in Cardolan, and somehow found its way to here, in Great Smials.

What a curious coincidence. You wonder what it means, for a while, but then realize that it is probably time to be returning to your father's room, before your sisters lose patience and start reading more of his journal without you. With a slight backward glance out of curiosity as to what story brought another item from Cardolan to your childhood home, you leave the Great Kitchen and head back to see your father.

The bakery of Great Smials is actually several connected rooms, for storing of flour and other ingredients, storing of fuel for the ovens, and the great table worksurface in the middle of the biggest room where it is kneaded and shaped before being put into the oven. Baking is easier to get wrong than, say, making stew, in that even if the stew is not quite right it is edible, whereas if the baking is not done correctly the result can be hard as a rock. The younger Took lasses are not given a role in the baking, at least not normally; this is reserved for experienced bakers and their apprentices.

In fact, the bakery of Great Smials runs all the year long. It is often the place where other hobbits from nearby Tuckborough bring their grain after the miller has ground it to flour, and they can get it baked into bread, even if their home does not have a stove shaped for baking. Fewer are coming to have this done since the winter turned fierce, but since there are also many guests living in Great Smials due to their own homes being damaged by

the winter's storms, the bakery is still kept busy to make bread for them all.

When you enter, the head baker, Marley Blythe, looks up at you and gives a nod of recognition before peering back into the stove to judge if it is staying hot enough but not too hot. The feeding of fuel to the stove is a matter of judgment, and it depends on the type of tree the wood came from, how old it was and how long ago it was felled, and it takes no small amount of experience to know just how to feed it to keep it at the right heat for the bread.

Looking around the bakery, you admire the fine old woodworking on the cabinetry that holds each hobbit family's flour that they have dropped off, and then after the flour is baked holds their bread until they come to retrieve it, with doors that seal so tight no vermin can get in. The decorations along the top and sides represent in carved wood the many flowers, trees, and crops of the Shire. Here and there, a bird or small beast of the woods is shown, including your personal favorite, a rabbit that is gnawing on the calabash plants. Not that you have ever actually seen a rabbit eat calabash greens yourself; they seem to prefer lettuce and carrots.

Some of the woodworking was once colorfully painted, but only a few bits of paint now remain, so it must have been long ago. The cabinet doorhandles in particular have long since been worn back to plain wood, but some of the bits around the edge still have a few flecks of colour. Was there more colour still on the parsnips, barley, robins, and apple trees when you came here as a youngster? It is hard to know for sure if you can trust your memory on this

point. Looking around, you notice something you had not seen before, or had not noticed if you did.

In one end of the long wall of cabinetry, there is a small waterfall depicted. Growing around it are a number of flowers, that look a little bit like giant bluebells. Peering closer, though, you see from tiny bits of faded paint that still adhere to them that they were originally coloured gold. Moreover, there is a full moon in the very corner of the scene; you recall as a young hobbit-lass the moment when you realized that the birds and beasts on this end of the wall were all nocturnal, while the ones at the far end were seen in the daytime, near the carved image of a wooden sun.

Golden flowers, growing near to a waterfall, in the moonlight. Did your father have a hand in deciding how these cabinets were decorated? Or did it go back even further, to Bullroarer Took, or before?


You stand there, staring for a short time lost in thought, until the voice of Marley Blythe breaks you out of it.

"Is there anything wrong over there, Mrs. Boffin?" he asks. You look back, and see the faces of Marley and two of his young apprentices, all looking over at you with a curious expression on their faces. You turn away from the carving, and smile.

"No," you say, "nothing wrong. Just remembering, is all."

You would never have been caught, as a youngster, investigating something that others did not notice. You were more accustomed to avoiding notice, then, and Great

Smials was not so full. No matter, and no harm done. But, it is a warning to you that you may need to be more careful in the future, when investigating, when stealth is called for. For now, it is time to return to your father's room, and hear if his journal says what it was about these golden moon-flowers that was so memorable.

When you were a young hobbit-lass, there were few servants in Great Smials, and the few who were employed lived in Tuckborough, and came over only a few days a week. Your mother preferred to set her daughters to work, and in any case Great Smials had only your immediate family living in it. Now that it holds a dozen families, even when it does not have guests staying there, there are several servants who, in addition to their wages, are given living quarters in Great Smials. Since most of the work which is not outside involves the kitchen or bakery, their rooms are on the northeast side of the main floor.

You recall exploring these rooms when you lived here, seeing the rooms now dusty and unused but still filled with plain and serviceable beds, trunks, wardrobes, and nightstands, and imagining what it must have been like when Great Smials was full. During your great-grandfather's time there was a split of some sort between him and the other Took, including his younger brother Bullroarer, and all of the other Took moved out to either Tuckborough or North Cleeve. Relations remained frosty

during your grandfather's time, and it was only when your father became Thain that the different parts of the Took clan became more friendly. Now that so many of your brothers have families of their own living here, a few other Took relations have moved back in, and Great Smials feels more like a village than the mostly-empty home it was in your childhood.

Along with those many Tookes, there are a number of servants, some with small families of their own, who now live in Great Smials. They have mostly moved in here after you and your sisters left, and you have noted more than once that this rather implies that you three were performing the role of servants while you lived here. Still, it is probably true that your aging parents could not have kept such a large home going on their own, and likely true as well that none of your brothers' wives would have been willing to work for your mother. She was a wonderful hobbit in many ways, but a bit sharp-tongued.

As you wander along the hallway, you hear a conversation through the open door of one of the rooms ahead of you. It is two of the gardeners, Colby and Oakley, and they are arguing about what to do about the normal winter plantings. Colby is for planting of winter onions and broad beans as usual; plants that will grow over the winter and be ready to harvest in spring. Oakley is opposed.

"There's no sense in it, Colby," he says, "it's naught but throwing away good seeds and bulbs. This is no ordinary winter, as you can well see already. Onions and broad beans may grow through a normal winter, or survive under the snow anyway, but they will die out in this one."

"Oakley, we need those crops to last through the spring," says Colby.

"It matters not if we need it or no, they won't grow."


"If we have naught to harvest 'til summer, we'll starve before then."

"We will, if we eat our normal five meals a day," says Oakley, "but we aren't, are we? No feasts, no second breakfast, and soon the word will go out that it's no dinner as well. We cannot afford to waste seed and bulbs on plantings at the normal time, when we will need them in the spring, if that ever comes."

"Of course spring will come, Oakley," says Colby quickly, in an alarmed tone, "and keep your voice down a bit, you'll panic the others."

"I'm not saying we need to panic," says Oakley, "I'm just saying we can't just carry on like it's a normal winter. It's not, it's the coldest winter we've seen in our lifetimes, and that has consequences the likes of which have not been seen for a long, long time."

You have a harder time hearing them, after this, as they lower their voices, and in any case it seems like they have moved on to other topics. You decide it is time to return back to your father anyway, and the gardeners' conversation gives you a lot to think about as you walk back.

The Thain's Hall is the closest thing Great Smials has to a living room. It is not as intimidatingly large as, say, the Great Shire Moot Hall or the Old Shiremoot, where half a dozen hobbits would still leave it with an empty and echoey feel. It is larger than the individual family rooms, though, and also conveniently close to the kitchen. When the Took's are eating all together, which they do about once a week, and the weather is not fair enough to eat outside, which in winter it most certainly is not (and this winter even more than usual), then the Thain's Hall becomes a dining room. But at all other times, it is the place where a hobbit in Great Smials goes when they do not wish for privacy, but rather for company, and they have been shooed out of the kitchen by the hobbits actually working there.

As a young hobbit-lass, you spent rather less time here than most of your siblings, though you did at times linger in the library or study rooms just nearby, so as to catch snippets of the conversation without being viewed. Your brothers and sisters, though, enjoyed meeting here, on

neutral ground as it were, and the sounds of laughter, banter, and even occasional shouting gave it a happy feel. The walls are covered in dark wood paneling above, and darker wood benches wrap around the walls below. The tables are sturdy, ancient, and polished to a dark brown, and on the side opposite the walls there are plain chairs made from tree trunks to which chair backs have been affixed. You recall using a lens and lantern to count the rings on some of them, to see how old they were when they were felled. You learned to recognize some of the patterns in the rings, for example the Long Winter was easy to distinguish, because the trees grew nearly not at all for a year.

Isumbras, the second-oldest of your brothers and the oldest one present in the Thain's Hall, is speaking about the current winter and its consequences.

"Well there's no question it will be hard," he said, "the question is how hard? It's 'caught by the badger or caught by the fox', as far as I can tell. If we tell all the Shire they're to go on half-rations, Thain's orders, there will be cries of outrage, and then if the winter lasts only the normal time it will all seem for nothing. But if we don't, sure as anything, it will be another Long Winter, and hobbits will starve. If Papa were not sick, he would have given the orders already."

"But can the Thain even do that?" asked Hildigrim, next oldest after Isumbras. "The Thainship is a military office, and there's no orcs or mannish brigands invading. If the Shire hobbits choose to eat their own food, who can go into their kitchens and pantries and stop them?"

"If they run out," says Isembold, "we can let them starve for their foolishness. An empty stomach in the evening is a bother, but an empty stomach for a season is deadly. If they eat their fill for months and then want some of ours when it runs out and the snow has not melted, tell them to go back to sleep like a bear and wait for spring."

"But we won't do that, you know we won't," says Isumbras. "Anyway, how would we know if they had been eating their fill when they shouldn't? There's no record of who has how much food."

"But that's my point," says Hildigrim, "what is the point of giving the order, when we cannot even know if it is being obeyed?"

"We will know," says Isumbras, "but only if we do what's been done in Tuckborough. Empty the smaller homes, and have them move into the smials of the bigger and wealthier families. When we run out of firewood and it's too cold and snowy to get more, which will happen soon, they won't be able to each stay in their own home aboveground anyway. If we all move together into the bigger smials, like we have started to do here in Tuckborough, we can pool the food together and make sure we all stick to half-rations until we know how bad this winter is going to be, whether another Long Winter or merely bad."

While the older brothers are thus occupied with serious discussion at one table, Hildibrand and your younger brother Isengar are engaged in a game of some sort. It appears to involve dice, cups, cards, coins, and beer. You aren't familiar with the rules, but you do know your

brothers fairly well, and it appears from their facial expressions that they are both cheating, or attempting to. You would put your money on Isengar, if it were a fair game of strategy, but on Hildibrand if it were a contest of cheating without being caught.

Looking around the Thain's Hall, lit by candles in sconces on the wall, with beams that arch upwards to meet in the peak of the ceiling, you see the ancient designs of ivy, herb, flower and tree painted on the ceiling in between the beams that support it. Most of them you have seen during walks in the Shire; a few are either too imperfectly rendered to recognize, or they are plants no longer known in this area. As the centuries have gone by, and the numbers of hobbits in the Shire has grown, more of the forest has been cleared and planted with grains, fruit trees, or gardens. In some cases they have been grazed by goat, sheep, or cow, and that has turned forest and heath into grassland. You once made a journal with every plant from this room drawn on one side of the page, and notes as to what it was and where it was found on the page facing it. There were only a few pages which you could never fill in.

There.

A flower, shaped somewhat like a bluebell, but golden. Never have you seen such a flower in the Shire, not even now that you live with the Boffins in the Yale, in the East Farthing, and have seen all the Shire between that and Tuckborough on a dozen trips. You have even been outside the Shire a few times, in your youth, and never seen such a flower. Did it once live here, back when this room was first dug out and the ceiling painted? Or did

some Took from centuries past go to Mathom Holt, see it there, and then come back to record the memory here? Curious. The Thain's Hall is old, it could even have been a member of the Oldbuck family, prior to the time when Took's lived here. There is a story behind this, you are sure, but it might be a story from too long ago to ever find out what happened.

Unless of course, there is some mention of it in your father's journals. You have a feeling it is time to return to see how he is doing, and hear your sister read more.

