

Chapter 6

3 by 4

"Did you have any luck getting little Ivy to sleep?" asks Mira, when Bella returns.

"Yes, it was not too difficult. Sometimes a crying baby has real problems, and sometimes it's just doing whatever gets it rewarded with attention. Little Ivy might be somewhat of an attention hog. Just convince the two adults to sleep, or pretend to, and then in a couple minutes the baby does. No sense crying for an audience that can't hear you and doesn't respond."

"So, no need for rum, then?" asks Mira.

"How do you think I got the adults to sleep?" responds Bella. "Now, where were we?"

"Underground," says Mira.

You notice your father's eyes open, just a tiny amount, as Mira resumes reading.

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"What are those things, anyway?" asked Ricarda.

We had gone south for a time, passing a small triangular shaped underground room, and then a slightly larger

chamber with passageways leading off in many directions. I was still turned around, and headed off to the southwest, thinking I was going northeast, and it was about fifteen minutes of walking along a long tunnel before I began to realize my mistake.

"I don't know," I said, and then, "which way did we go at the first fork in the tunnel? I mean the very, very first one, that happened almost as soon as we went into the cave."

"It was too dark," said Ricarda, "I couldn't see and was just following you. There was a fork in the passage at the beginning?"

I stopped walking and stood still for a bit, then handed the four flowers which I was still carrying to Ricarda. I held my left and right hands out in front of me, and tried to remember which way I had turned. Then I got out my map, and thought for a while.

"Don't know, don't know," said Who.

"I'm sorry, Ricarda, I believe I may have turned the wrong way," I said. I looked over at her, expecting a look of outrage or at least exhaustion, but she was smiling blissfully, with her eyes closed, the soft golden glow from the flowers lighting up her face.

"Ricarda?" I asked. She opened her eyes, looked at me, and smiled.

"Oh, sorry, I was a little bit lost in thought there. I think these flowers are powerful in some way. The closer I hold them, the further away that sorcerer is."

"sorcerer?" I asked. "Oh, you mean that dead-looking Dunedan noble. Why, I thought you had shaken that off already."

"Not completely," she said, "I could still feel him in the back of my mind, trying to take over again, I just had the ability to resist him better. I'm thinking now, that it was you bringing these flowers close to me, that broke his hold over me in the first place. Now that I'm actually carrying them closer still, I think he's completely shut out. It feels good. Maybe I could carry them for a while?"

"Of course," I said. "I wonder why he wanted me to go get them, if they make it so he can't control you."

"I have no idea," she said, "although I notice he didn't want me to get them, he wanted me to tell you to. But anyway, what were you saying?"

"I was saying I went the wrong way, and we are far from Mathom Holt now. I'm sorry."

"It's all right," she said, still smiling blissfully, "I think he cannot get down into this tunnel anyway. Especially not now that the maze is flooded. Maybe it is just as well that we take the long way around. It may put him and his orcs further away from us."

I felt like this was putting an optimistic spin on things, but it also felt better than if she had said I was an idiot for turning the wrong way. Then I remembered something she had said a few moments before.

"What things were you asking me about?" I asked.

"Those," she said, and pointed to a series of symbols on the wall, a bit awkwardly since she was still holding the four flowers and being very careful with them. The symbols looked like Goldogorin, and I realized that they were the same symbols I had seen in the 3x4 grids. I also felt like I had seen them somewhere before, and I realized that they were on the map which I had gotten from Uncle Bullroarer's things. Gandalf had translated it for me, so I wondered if I could figure out what these on the wall said. I compared it to the symbols on the wall, and then tried to remember what Gandalf had told me.

"If I remember aright, those are numerals," I said. "It says, I think, one-five-zero."

"I wonder what that means, though," said Ricarda.

Neither of us knew, so we walked on. The walls of the tunnel we were in, were carved into the shapes of ivy, trees, bushes, and flowers, and the roof above us had tiny points of crystal that reflected our light, looking like tiny golden stars. As we walked on, I wondered how long they had worked on this tunnel, to have not only dug it through the rock, but also decorated it in such a detailed way.

After a little while, Ricarda pointed out another set of numerals on the wall. They were inlaid in the stone, and surrounded by tiny crystals that made it easier to pick them out in the dim light of the flowers.

"One-four-nine," I said. "Oh. Well, whatever it is we're headed to, it's quite a distance away. I suppose we had best keep walking."

We walked on for a while in silence, when we both became aware of the faintest sound of footsteps behind us. At first I took it for our footsteps echoing, and then I thought it might be my imagination, until I saw Ricarda look over her shoulder. Hildigard had already turned around to look behind us, but curiously she did not bark, but rather just stand there with her ears rotated forward and her nose quivering as she tried to smell any trace of a scent.

"Lost little fugitives,
finding few signs,
softly searching primitives,
patiently ponder designs."

"What? Who was that?" I asked, alarmed. The voice sounded very close, but looking around, I couldn't see where it came from.

"Fleeing fierce invader,
innocently, idly discuss,
doubtful dark serenader,
sparking startled fuss."

"Is it there?" asked Ricarda, pointing into the dark back the way we had just come. "Hello? We are hobbits. I'm Ricarda, and this is Gerontius."

"Insecure introduction, aware
and always polite,



RINTHILIOS

patiently peering into
intense icy night."

"Do you always speak in rhyme?" I asked. It might not seem like the most important question to ask, just then, but it popped into my head and I was curious. I didn't really expect an answer, but then a peculiar figure moved forward out of the darkness, and said:

"No, not always. Also, some of that was alliteration."

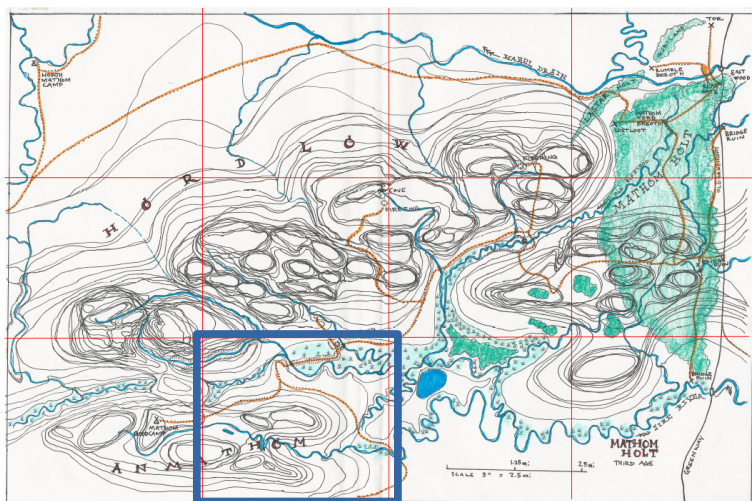
We looked at a figure not much taller than a hobbit, but in appearance much more like an elf. He had dark hair, that fell straight down both sides of his head, and very large, dark eyes. He was thin and moved gracefully, and was in no way monstrous, but I did get the distinct feeling that he was dangerous. Perhaps it was something in his self-assurance, like there was nothing that could be a danger to him, and that suggested he was quite capable of being dangerous to those around him if he felt the need to. Or, perhaps I simply was unnerved by being trapped in a tunnel I knew nothing about, having been chased there by orcs, with no idea what lay at the other end.

"I see," I said. "May I ask your name?"

"Only if you tell me yours," he said.

"I just did," said Ricarda.

"Not everyone's," said the strange elf, and he looked at the dog and starling that accompanied us.



"Oh, this is my dog Hildigard," I said, "and the starling's name is Who, I'm afraid."

"Tell me yours, tell me yours," said Who.

"Affable avian companion,
curious comments greet,
gives graceful wisdom,
with whimsical repeat."

"Hmmm..." I said, "doesn't that get tiring after a while? It seems a lot more work than just talking."

"He's right, though," said Ricarda, "sometimes I think Who is not just picking randomly what words to repeat. I think he knows more than we normally would expect a starling to."

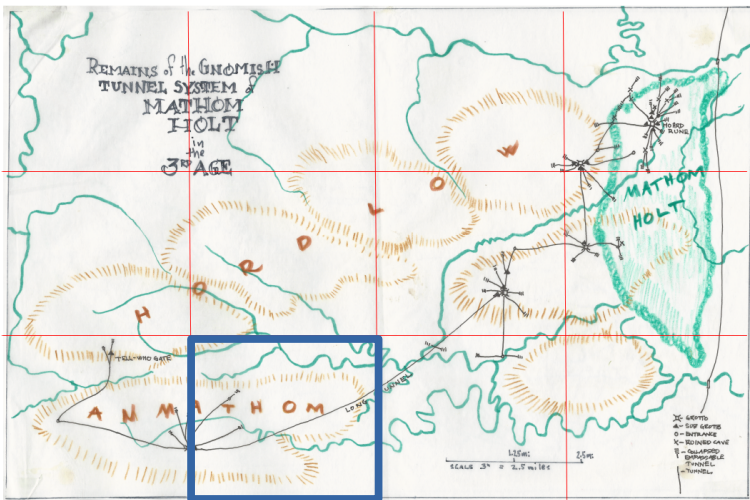
"I have played with words for more centuries than you have years, hobbit," said the elf, if that was what he was. "For many of those, I have done it without conversational companion. If I did not play with words, I might have lost the power of speech entirely. Still, I am slower at it in your Common Speech than I am in my own native tongue."

He stopped, then, a few steps away from us, and held out his hand to Hildigard, palm down, for her to sniff if she wished. She stepped forward, sniffed him, and apparently found him acceptable as her tail began to wag.

"My name is Rinthilios," he said.



Belongground



"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Rinthilios," I said, "and my apologies for entering your tunnels without permission,"

"You had my permission," interrupted Rinthilios, "or you would not have been able to enter."

"Ah, I see. Well, in any case, I was wondering if you would be so good as to tell us what would happen if we were to travel in this direction, the way we were going?"

"Oh, that is a very difficult question," said Rinthilios, furrowing his brow slightly, "the future is ever uncertain. But if you mean where it would lead you to, I can help you there. It is called the Long Tunnel, and it would take you three hours or more to walk the length of it, from where you entered."

With that, he stepped between Ricarda and me, and began walking again, and not knowing what else to do we walked with him. For a time I thought I would say nothing, and surely he would say something else, but as he did not, at last I spoke up again.

"So, have you lived here a long time, then?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "Ever since I built it."

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When Jasmine Took opens the door and pokes in her head, you and your sisters all turn to look at her with annoyed looks, and both your sisters additionally make small sounds of exasperation.

"Aaahhhh!" (you may have sounded like that as well, you're not sure)

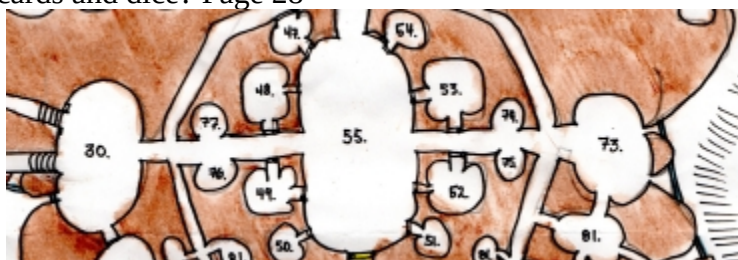
Jasmine's eyes widen with an expression of mortification, she peeps out a small "sorry", and she quickly closes the door again and you hear the pitter-patter of her footsteps receding. Hobbits are normally very quiet when they walk, so she must have been very upset to make enough noise that you could hear her running away.

"Well now I feel bad," said Mira.

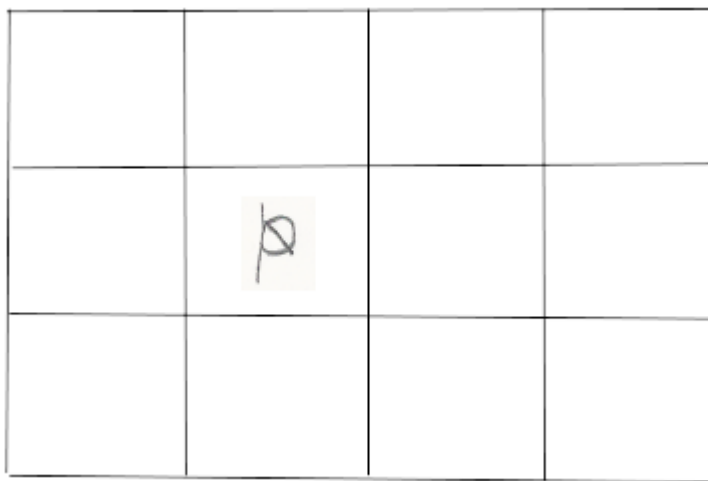
"Which means YOU will go this time?" asks Bella. Mira's eyes narrow slightly, and she looks over at her older sister with a grimace. Before she has a chance to fire back her response, you slip quickly out the south door, taking the Arthedain lockbox with you.

While those two argue about whose turn it is to help Jasmine figure out the cooking, do you go to:

- 1) The West Reader's Alcove, which you remember from your childhood as the place where your father would read books to you as a small hobbit-lass? Page 14
- 2) Find out what news and gossip you can overhear in the Great Shiremoot Hall, where the Four Farthings of the Shire meet in modern times? Page 21
- 3) Inspect the four Farthing Armouries, where weapons were kept in case of war? Page 25
- 4) The East Reader's Alcove, where your brothers often meet to allegedly study, and in fact to play games with cards and dice? Page 28



30. READER'S ALCOVE/STAIRCASE
47. NORTH FARTHING ARMORY.
48. CHAMBER OF NORTH FARTHING.
49. CHAMBER OF WEST FARTHING.
50. WEST FARTHING ARMORY.
51. SOUTH FARTHING ARMORY.
52. CHAMBER OF SOUTH FARTHING.
53. CHAMBER OF EAST FARTHING.
54. EAST FARTHING ARMORY.
55. GREAT SHIRE MOOT HALL.
73. READER'S ALCOVE & STAIRCASE
(ACCESS TO THAM'S QUARTERS)



The West Reader's Alcove is so called because it has a window, like a tunnel to the outside, sunlit world, that for much of the winter will provide direct sunlight to a good part of the room, during the afternoon and early evening. The chairs and tables of the chamber are arranged to take advantage of this, and also to allow youngsters (or anyone still limber enough to enjoy sitting on cushions on the floor) to enjoy being read to. You were, as a young hobbit-lass, a regular member of the audience when your father would read stories aloud. Your sisters, and the two brothers (Hildibrand and Isengar) closest to you in age, were all also sometimes interested in hearing fairy tales, epics, or journals of exotic travels, but you were the most consistent.

Looking around the room now, it looks as if little has changed, except that the cushions have been replaced and some of the furniture has been repaired. Just now, your sister-in-law Rosa is reading to a half dozen small hobbits, none of whom you recognize. Your guess is that they are

not even Took, but rather some of the children of other families who have been moved into Great Smials for the winter after their own homes were buried in snow. It appears to be a tale about a young boy, the son of a widow of very poor means, who encounters magical beings and overcomes great obstacles to achieve the primary objective in any hobbit tale, a great deal of hearty food for him and his family.

You have, by now, learned a little bit about what the children's tales of other folks are like. The tales of dwarves involve recovering treasure that was stolen, and avenging old wrongs. The tales of men involve getting treasure without having to work for it, either by taking it from a dragon or just having something magical that makes it for you out of nothing. Some mannish tales also involve gaining a wealthy and attractive spouse. The tales of elves involve gaining a glimpse of ancient beauty (tree or gem or painting), now lost but someday perhaps it will be seen again. You are not sure what goblins' children's tales are like, assuming they have them. You find the idea of insuring a ready supply of tasty food to be a lot more motivating, and by the end of this winter perhaps all folk will, hobbit or otherwise.

Rosa is your older brother Hildigrim's wife. You were born in the same year, and this should have made you better friends, but you always had the impression she instead felt somewhat competitive towards you. It took decades before your younger sister Mira eventually explained to you, that your normal expression, which is watchful but neither smiling nor frowning, allows the other person to imagine whatever emotion they choose to believe you are feeling. In Rosa's case, perhaps because

cranny of Great Smials, and
have been anyone to notice
cellar of Old Smials, your
normally use. Once you
the ancient door which had
he is turned away from you,
father, but not far away,
(or your father). "Put the
only it. You also pull out
see it underneath the
your father holds the
points towards it. He must
Your father steps towards
certain how much power they
over, and blocking the view
is that close to them, to
brighter, and he raises his
to the side, but the flower
but he deflects it with the
lamp towards the sorcerer,
dark. In fact, it seems as
the sorcerer, who parries it
advantage, and step forwards

you found the sealed door
him at it during the long
heart starts beating harder
reach the bottom, instead of
been sealed off has been
and looking further into the
and he holds a long sword to
lockbox down on the floor
the ledger book, with
lockbox. You back up
Cardolan lockbox in his
have forced your father to
the Arthedain lockbox on the
still have, in their
for the sorcerer, but then
banish the sorcerer's
sword. You take the fresh
lands just short of him.
two lockboxes that he holds
who staggers backwards. He
if it might be glowing
with his left hand. The
towards the sorcerer. He

she was often insecure, she often imagined you to be judging her harshly, when no such thought was in your mind. Mira had been telling you to "smile more" for many years, and never explaining why until a few years ago. It was a hard lesson.

As you enter, Rosa continues to hold up the picture book and read from it to her young audience, but her eyes momentarily dart over in your direction. You smile at her, reassuringly, perhaps a bit awkwardly. When you have looked at what your smile looks like, in the mirror, to you it looks desperate and perhaps a tad alarming. But you have to admit that it does seem to normally make Rosa more at ease around you. Perhaps you looking a bit awkward is actually reassuring to her as well.

The hobbit-children around her, if they glance your way at all, do so only briefly and without great interest, only wanting to make sure that it is not someone who will interrupt story time. You have no such intention, and they turn back to Rosa and the picture book. Moving quietly so as not to disturb them, not that they would be willing to let you interrupt their listening anyway, you look around the walls of the Reader's Alcove to see what has changed since you spent so much time here, and what has stayed the same. Rosa resumes her telling of the tale.

There are many shelves mounted on the walls, with books piled up on them, mostly for children. There are also some books of the sort your siblings or parents might want to read, such as mapbooks of the area and songbooks. Mostly, however, your father was the most serious reader, and after him your oldest brother Isengrim, and both of them were more likely to read in their personal study, by

lamplight, or in some other room where they were less likely to be interrupted. Thus, it is surprising to you when you come upon a handwritten book obviously in your father's handwriting.

It is small, clothbound, and is lying upside down and open on one of the shelves, as if it had been placed there for just a moment, but then forgotten after some interruption. Your father has become somewhat more easily distracted in recent years. You hold it carefully in your hands, and walk casually over towards the window to get better light for looking at it, trying not to look too obviously interested so as to be noticed by Rosa or the children.

You see that it has notes concerning children's stories, such as:

"Grey Goose and Badger; story from a time when lived by rivers? Does wolf character represent Big Folk?"

"Poor child and the Kind Star; star is high up, wise, but lives forever. Child cannot rely on friendship with something that won't notice the passing of ten years. Memory of elves?"

"Rumpuskin and Stealthikin; lessons about being quiet and hidden, not loud or wanting attention. Lesson about avoiding dragons, trolls, Big Folk? Language is old; how far back does this story go?"

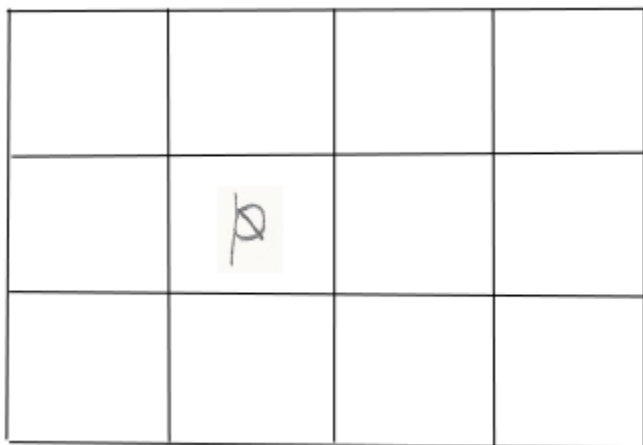
It looks to you as if your father was investigating the children's stories from an adult's perspective, perhaps even an historian's. This would explain why it was in this room; most of the books of ancient children's stories would be in this room. Leafing through the earlier pages, you see many notes of the same sort, on dozens of different tales, if not hundreds. Then, you come to the

first page, where your father wrote the title for this little notebook of his.

"Where did Hobbits come from?"

My goodness, what a peculiar question. And how could he think to answer it from a room full of children's books? Moreover, why did he think it was important to know the answer?

You decide to return to your father's room now. On a whim, you decide to take his little notebook with you. If you hurry, perhaps there will be time enough before your sisters return, for you to ask him some questions.



The Great Shiremoot Hall is the largest gathering space in Great Smials that can still be used. There is another room of about the same size in the older, western part of Great Smials, but it is clogged with junk, and probably has been for generations. In theory, the Great Shiremoot Hall is still needed to be used as a meeting place for prominent Hobbits from all four farthings, should any crisis arise that merited it. There has not been such a crisis in any living hobbit's memory. The current winter might be severe, but it would hardly be a good idea for hobbits to travel so far in order to meet together, because of snow and bitter cold.

It may be, though, if the winter continues as it has begun, that the Great Shiremoot Hall and several other large chambers will be needed, simply to hold everyone that will need refuge. Most of the hobbits who live in Tuckborough, or other hobbit settlements nearby, own simple homes, far smaller than Great Smials. They are either newer, above-ground homes, or they are smials of much smaller size. When snow comes to the Shire, in most parts, it is rarely above ankle high. This year it has

already made drifts deeper than a hobbit is tall, around many of the homes of the poorer families. Even those who are better off do not always have a home prepared for such a weight of snow on the roof, or to dig themselves out from great drifts against the door.

Your father has not been well recently, but your oldest brother Isengrim has seen to it that room is made for any who need it. Thus far, they have all been given guest rooms, but as the numbers increase, there may not be enough, so he has had the Great Shiremoot Hall cleared out and prepared for a flood of refugees, if it comes. There are rows of small bedrolls laid out, so it appears that the plan is for the Great Shiremoot Hall to become an enormous bedchamber.

It would be entertaining, in some ways, to see the hustle and bustle of all of Tuckborough crammed into Great Smials. It would be like an enormous overnight party. But, before long, it would not be fun any longer, having too many people in too close quarters. Growing up in Great Smials, it always seemed to you an enormous and mostly dark and empty place. What a change.

While you are standing there in the Great Shiremoot Hall, looking around, you see a hobbit you recognize as Erling Greenhand, one of hobbits who delivers the mail. He is at the far end of the Hall, laying out and arranging bedrolls. He sees you enter and raises a hand in greeting.

"Well if it is not Donnamira, back from my childhood!" he says with a smile. You and Erling had met, a few times, as youngsters, when he would accompany his uncle in

making deliveries. "How do you like the layout, eh? It will be quite a gathering, if it comes to that."

You walk over to where Erling is, and nod in agreement.

"Where do all these bedrolls come from?" you ask.

"Your father ordered them, some time back. They were made in Hobbiton, and I helped deliver them here. How your father knew to order them in the autumn, I don't know."

"He ordered them months ago?" you ask in surprise. How could he have known they would be needed?

"He did," says Erling. "I recall him telling me, and with some urgency too, that they must be delivered here as soon as they were ready. 'Before it gets harder to make deliveries', he added. At the time I had no idea what he was thinking of, and I suppose I still do not, but it appears it was good that he did. I have seen many more in Tuckborough, and at Tookbank as well, who will need to come here soon, if the snow keeps coming as it has."

"I suppose the mail has all stopped, now," you say.

"Not entirely, but it's emergency deliveries only. Most of our time is spent going to every home and making sure they are still able to get out of it, if they need to. I just hope they don't all wait too long."

"I wonder what all the animals are doing," you say, "poor things must be hard put to it."

"No doubt," says Erling, "but they are better prepared than hobbits, I sometimes think. For example badgers, they have stopped roaming around so much, and now they are bedded down and waiting it out."

"Do they sleep all winter like bears?" you ask.

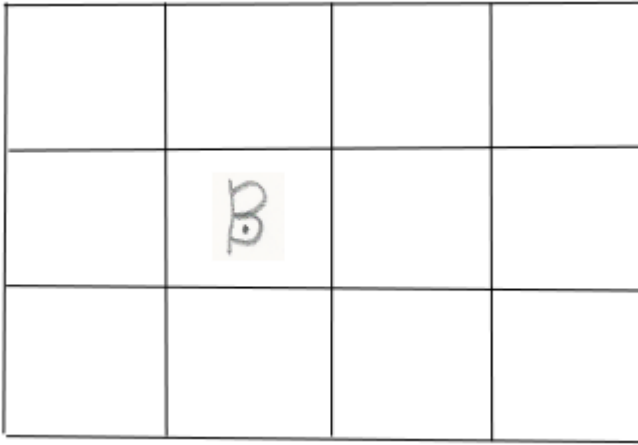
"Nearly," says Erling. "If the winter is mild they may roam about a bit, but when it's freezing out they stay in their homes underground, and wait it out. You wouldn't catch a badger out and about in this winter, that's for certain. Any animal that can burrow underground and keep warm that way, did so a month ago or more."

You look around at all the signs of preparation. It would have been far too late for your father to order all of these bedrolls made, if he had waited until the snows began. How did he know?

Also, something about what Erling said, about badgers and other burrowing animals. It reminds you of something. You feel like there is a question in your mind, that you can't quite remember, much less answer.

"How is your father doing, Donna?" asks Erling.

"Better," you say, "but I've just thought of something I need to ask him. Thank you for your help here, Erling. I'm going to go check on him."



The four quadrants of the Shire (called "Farthings") each have a room here, where weapons and armor are kept. Of course some things, like bows and polearms that could be used to trim trees or pitch hay with, the various hobbit families each keep in their own homes. But some things, like shields or helmets or swords, have no particular use unless it is a time of war. The Shire has not seen war very much in recent centuries, but in the earliest days of the Shire it was different.

You once, as a young hobbit-lass, snuck in here to see what was kept in each room, by picking the locks one by one. It took days for you to figure out how to pick each one, in part because you had to slip away from your mother's watchful eye to find the time to do it, but also in part because you didn't know much about how to pick a lock.

You know a little more about that now. Over the course of the years, you have learned about what the insides of locks look like, and how to use a piece of bent wire to substitute

for the key. It's still not easy for you, but it can be done. But, there is another way, which is almost always easier, that you didn't realize when you were a young hobbit-lass.

Sometimes, when the elders from the most important families in the four Farthings of the Shire would make the journey here to engage in the annual ceremony in which the contents of each Farthing's armoury were polished (and repaired if necessary), they would find to their consternation that they had forgotten the keys to their Farthing's Armoury room. Also, what if the key were somehow lost? A backup key was needed, one that could be used in either case.


It is stored just on top of the small ledge of the doorframe, above the door to each Armoury, out of sight but not hard to reach. What is most amusing to you, having watched in secret as each door was opened, is that each Farthing seems to believe that only they use this secret system. Picking a lock is difficult, though a useful skill to have at times, but simply finding where the key is hidden is almost always easier. In addition, the hiding place never seems to change, even after this many years. You think back to when you were sweating and struggling in the dim light of a hooded lantern, bending the small wire you had and trying to pick the locks without making any noise in case someone wandered into this part of Great Smials. You wonder if the keys were already being hidden there years ago, just above your head, while you were doing it.

The North, East, and West Farthing's Armouries all have much the same contents as when you saw them many years ago. In the South Farthing's Armoury, though, you see something you are certain was not there before. It is a

small stand, with a helmet on it, that is clearly not made for a hobbit. Looking at it, you realize that you must be looking at a helmet from the fallen Dunedain kingdom of Cardolan. The symbols on it match the lockbox of Cardolan, which held the journal Mira is reading to you.

No doubt the hobbits of the South Farthing found it in some forest or meadow, covered in dirt and overgrown, and pulled it out and polished it up. Then, having no use for it, they put it in the only place in the Shire where such things would belong. It is a curious coincidence, that you should encounter it while carrying another ancient artifact of that fallen kingdom. But, coincidence it must be. Right?

You decide that it is nearly time for you to meet your sisters in your father's chamber, and slip out again, locking the armoury door behind you and returning the key to its old (perhaps ancient?) hiding place on the top of the doorframe.

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You are walking down the hall to approach the East Reader's Alcove from the west, when you hear the sound of Isengar and Hildibrand talking. They have apparently entered the room just ahead of you, having come by the north door, from the Thain's Hall. Out of old habit, you stop in the hallway to listen in on their conversation for a time.

"They're all grumpy now," says Isengar, "it's not just Isembold. Isumbras and Hildigrim are just as foul tempered."

"Yes, yes, I suppose you're right," says Hildibrand, who apparently had just been complaining about Isembold. "But really, they will need to learn to relax. Of course they will bring all of the others from Tuckborough and Took Bank and the rest into Great Smials, and of course food will run short, and yet we will make it. No need to be so uptight about everything. Hobbits will pull together, and pull each other through. But, not if they start

snapping at each other like that. You think that will make anything easier?"

"Of course not," said Isengar. "You know, it's a good point, Hildibrand. We need to give a thought to how we can keep so many people entertained when they are all crammed together in Great Smials for months. Normally hobbits keep everyone in a good mood by enjoying a meal together, so we'll need to have something else ready for when food is in short supply. Maybe a series of plays, or poetry readings, or a bit of singing?"

"Nonsense," said Hildibrand, "you make the common folk sit still for poetry readings, there'll be a riot. Songs would work well enough with enough beer to go around, but singing together will put everyone in a mind for a pint of bitter, and that will just make people grumpy that they don't have it. You know what might work, though? Dice games!"

"I'm not so sure," says Isengar doubtfully. "Our older brothers get grumpy pretty fast when they see us playing cards or dice."

"Well then we'll just have to cooperate a bit!" says Hildibrand. "If you distract them, I can organize some dice games, and maybe occasionally some card games for a bit of variety. That will keep folks in good spirits. You know, with a little bit of wagering on it, just to add a bit of spice and sport."

"Now, Hildibrand," says Isengar, "you shouldn't go encouraging the folks who don't have as much money, to

spend what little they have on dice games. Anyway, you win too often. Don't you have enough money already?"

"Just small stakes!" says Hildibrand encouragingly. "No one will go bust on it. It will give people something to think about besides being hungry. Plus, when Isembold or Hildigrim come around, everyone can hide it all away really fast, and that will add some sport to it as well, thinking that they're putting something over on their betters."

"Maybe," says Isengar. "We could probably have people take turns keeping a watch, and arrange for some signals. Remember when we would drop a metal cup or plate, as if by accident, whenever mama was coming and we needed to warn each other without her knowing that's what we were doing?"

"Good idea, Isengar!" says Hildibrand excitedly. "Now you're getting into the spirit of it! You know, it will probably work all the better if one of our older brothers comes around every so often, it will give people more to gossip about, and they will need something to think about besides the rumbling of their stomachs. Half of the time we'll distract them to make sure the game gets going without interruption, and half the time we'll nudge them off in the right direction when it's been going on long enough and we need to break it up before someone loses their shirt. Oh, this winter be might sporting, after all. I'm starting to look forward to it."

You cover your face with your hands, imagining the awful squabbles that will happen when your brothers infect all of the (normally hard-working and clean-living) hobbits of

the region with a taste for cards, dice, and gambling. Not to mention the desperation that will strike any hobbit family that loses all the money they have when even their house is buried under a snowdrift. You will have to find some way of talking to Isengar alone, and convincing him not to go through with it.

Not now, though; with Hildibrand in the same room, you will not get anywhere. You decide it is not a great time to visit the East Reader's Alcove, after all, and walk back to your father's room early.

