

Chapter 7

X

"Honestly, I think maybe Jasmine is just nervous about making any decisions," says Mira as she re-enters the room. "She knew perfectly well what to do next, but because she could not do exactly what mother's recipe said, she wants someone else to tell her what to do so that she is not the one making a decision. I wonder if maybe we should not be helping her any more, just to force her to take responsibility."

"She'll be fine, when she gets a little older," says Bella. "She just needs a little reassurance now and then."

"So you'll help her next time?" asks Mira.

"Actually I believe it will be Donna's turn," says Bella. "Assuming there is a next time, even. Maybe she'll be fine from now on, for the rest of this evening anyway."

"Why don't you read some more, Mira," you say. You are not as optimistic about how much time there is before Jasmine comes back.

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"So, was that not a long time ago?" I asked. Rinthilios kept walking, and said nothing for a few moments.

"It was, as hobbits would count it," he said eventually. "It was a long time before there were hobbits in this part of the world, for example."

"You have been here all that time?" I ask. "Are you as old as Elrond?" He was the oldest elf I had ever heard of, although I had never met him.

"Far older than Elrond, who is half-elven, by the way," said Rinthilios.

"Oh, are you the oldest elf on this side of the Sea, then?" I asked.

"No, there are a few older. Cirdan the Shipwright, for example, who lives west of the Shire, by the seashore."

"I see," I said, and then looked over at Ricarda, thinking that she could help out a bit with the conversation. She looked back at me, a bit wide-eyed, and seemed to be wanting me to do the talking. I think she found being with an elf intimidating.

"So," I said eventually, "where are we walking to, then? What lies at the end of the Long Tunnel?"

"An exit," said Rinthilios. "If I wish it to be there."

"Is it protected by one of those flooding mazes, like where we came in?"

"It is," said Rinthilios. "But it will drain or fill, at my command."

"Aha," I said, "well that is useful. I don't suppose any orc would be able to find their way through that maze, while holding their breath."

"Not without solving its puzzle-map," said Rinthilios.

"Oh, was that grid with the tiles a map?" I asked. "I could not make head nor tails of it."

"That is because you do not read Goldogorin," said Rinthilios, "nor do the servants of the Enemy. If you put the tiles on the grid in the order it says on them, then you will have a clear map that tells you the way through the maze. Then, if you can swim well at all, you can make it through in one breath."

"The order it says? But the grid did not say anything on it, that I saw."

"Not the grid, the tiles," corrected Rinthilios. "They have numerals on them, that say what order to put them on the grid. In this fashion, we can leave a map there for any friend to use. But, since no orc or other servant of the Enemy will know Goldogorin, they will not be able to know which tiles go where, and there are too many different ways it can fit together."

"So, how many others of your kind live here, then?" I asked.

"There are no others of my kind, any more," said Rinthilios. "They have all gone west over the Sea, or died in war."

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said. We walked on in silence for a time.

"Why do you stay then?" I asked. "You could you go west over the sea as well, on one of Cirdan's ships."

"I could," said Rinthilios.

I noticed that he did not answer my question, and looked over at Ricarda. She looked back at me, and I could see that she had noticed as well, but she still said nothing.

"Those flowers that you carry," said Rinthilios, "in Goldogorin, they were called glôrtimpiloth, the flower of the golden bell. They are very special."

"Yes," said Ricarda. "They are, and I am very grateful for them."

"They banished the sorcerer from your mind," said Rinthilios.

"Yes," said Ricarda, without asking how he knew that.

"You both carry them as if you have a knowledge of their worth," said Rinthilios. "Not like orcs, who trample anything that is not stone or iron. There are defenses, around those flowers, but they are hidden. Apparently not hidden so well that the sorcerer could not see them, however. He contrived to send hobbits to collect them for him, so he would not lose his orcs in the attempt."

"All I know about them," said Ricarda, "is that the Dunadan sorcerer wanted me to trick Gerontius into

getting them, but they also seem to keep him from messing with my head. Also, they glow in the dark a little, and they look pretty, and they smell nice."

"So, just as I said," responded Rinthilios. "you have some knowledge of their worth. Who is this sorcerer you speak of?"

"He, I think he might be a Dunadan who used to live south of Tharbad," I said. "There was a lady there called the Lamplighter who told me about him. He once lived at a place called the Yellow Rush Ruin."

"I know the one you speak of, then. He dares not come too close to these flowers, while they live, or they would banish the sorcery that prolong his life, if life you could call it. It would work in the same way that they banished his hold over your mind. Curious that he wanted you to collect them for him. He must have devised some scheme to use them for his own purposes, without having to come too close to them himself. Perhaps he would have the orcs grind them up for him, or something similar."

We kept walking in silence for a little while. I was feeling bad for having picked the flowers in the first place.

"I suppose I should have left them there," I said.

"The only flowers that last for long, are these," he said, pointing at the stone engravings of flowers along the walls of the tunnel. "You took what you thought was needed, and left the rest, and you took care not to damage them after that, not to have wasted them. At some cost to your

own skin, I believe," he said, looking down at my skinned knees.

"I wonder what we should do with them now," I said.

"I believe your friend may need them for some time still," he said. "This sorcerer fellow will need to be dealt with, eventually. But until there is an opportunity for that, he may try to take possession of her, and these flowers will prevent that."

"Can he do that to anyone?" I asked.

"Not anyone," said Rinthilios. "He must talk to you, for some time. Moreover, it is more likely to give him a hold over your mind if he has you in a physically submissive posture, unable to escape, while he talks."

"His orcs tied me up," said Ricarda, her voice choked a bit with emotion.

"Yes," said Rinthilios, "that was an attempt to sap your will, to make you believe you could not resist, so that you would not. But," and here Rinthilios stopped and turned to look at Ricarda, "you did resist, didn't you? For one so young, and small, and without physical power, it is a peculiar degree of resistance. Was it your little bird friend, there, reminding you of who you really were? Or are you hobbits all like that? Perhaps both."

He turned again and resumed walking.

"Will I always need these flowers?" Ricarda asked, eventually.

"In time, and with some distance between you and he, his hold over your mind will fade. But I believe it would not be safe to spend time near him. The effect may be easier to reestablish a second time."

"Well I don't want to spend time near him anyway," said Ricarda, "so that's not a problem. But I wonder if I could keep a few of these flowers around for a while, just in case."

"I think you should," said Rinthilios, and for a long time after that, we all walked together quietly down the tunnel, the soft glow of the flowers showing us the stony shapes of trees, bushes, ferns, and flowers carved in stone along the walls.

When we got near to the end of the Long Tunnel, we descended to another one of the mazes. It was not filled with water, but it looked and smelled as if it had been, not long before we arrived. I believe that Rinthilios had caused it to drain, somehow, at our approach, but I never saw him do anything to make that happen.

After we were through, he stopped at a pile of ceramic tiles on the floor, next to a 3x4 grid similar to what we had seen before. If you could read the Goldogorin numerals, you could arrange them on the grid, like this:

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| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |  
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| 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |  
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| 9 |10 |11 |12 |  
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Arranged the correct way, they showed a map of the maze, which would not be too hard to get through in a short amount of time. If you did not know the pattern, though, you would end up going down a lot of dead ends, and unless you could hold your breath forever you could end up dying down there.

It was nice of him to show us, but given that I cannot swim very well, I'm not sure it would do me any good if I needed it.

Fortunately, we did not have to swim. Rinthilios controlled the water, somehow, such that it only filled the mazes when he wished it to. We walked through the maze, and soon we were at the exit from the tunnel. It was dark out, and cold, and I believe neither Ricarda nor myself looked especially eager to leave now that it was time to do so.

Rinthilios stood with us there, at the exit, the tunnel behind us and the cold snow in front of us. For a few moments, no one said anything.

"Hobbits hesitate, seeing
snowy starlit pathway,
ponder perilous journey,

gently judging getaway."

"Hesitate, hesitate," said Who.

"Yes," said Ricarda, "it seems like maybe not the greatest idea now. I know we should go while it's still dark enough to stay unseen, but looking out at the dark just makes my knees shake, I'm afraid."

"You have both had a long day, I believe," said Rinthilios, "and not a restful one either. Perhaps your knees would do better if you slept for a time, somewhere you knew to be safe."

"Where would that be, though?" asked Ricarda.

"Let me show you a place," said Rinthilios, and we all went back into the tunnels, and went north.

It was a different style than the Long Tunnel we had just reached the end of, not so decorative and not as wide across, but still it was much better than sleeping outside in the snow. Rinthilios said it was a "grotto", and it was a triangular shaped underground chamber with passages leading off in all three directions. Other than the one we came from, Rinthilios said they were all impassable now.

"What happened to them?" asked Ricarda.

"At one time there were far too many tunnels for me to maintain alone," said Rinthilios. "I chose which ones I would keep structurally sound, and collapsed the rest so they would not collapse on their own, perhaps with me in

them. There were also a few that had been lost before, during the wars of the past."

We found the least uncomfortable spot on the cold stone floor to sleep, and laid down. Rinthilios produced, from where exactly I'm not certain, a couple bedrolls, which helped. The only light was the slight glow still coming from the flowers, and we lay there for a short while in silence. Rinthilios showed no sign of sleeping, but he had not left yet, if that was his intention. He was standing in the middle of the room, gazing up at the ceiling, which was covered in detailed carvings of plant life. After I had looked for it a while, I realized that there were also the figures of other elves, partially hidden in the foliage. I wondered if they were modeled on any real elves who had lived here before, and if Rinthilios had known them. I wondered if he got lonely, staying here with no one else to talk to, and if he was perhaps staying nearby simply because we were the first people to visit in a long time.

"Did all the other elves who lived here leave right after the war?" asked Ricarda. "Or did they trickle away one by one?"

"Many left soon after the war," said Rinthilios, "but some remained for a time. Eventually, they all left."

I wondered why he had stayed, but it seemed too forward of me to ask, too personal.

"Why didn't you go, then?" asked Ricarda, who had apparently gotten over her fear of talking to elves.

At first, Rinthilios did not answer, he just continued looking up at the ceiling. I thought perhaps he did not want to answer, and would just ignore it.

"When she died in the war," said Rinthilios at last, in a quiet and somewhat strained voice, "she asked that her ashes be scattered across the forest, so that it would fuse with the trees of the forest. When the enemy was repelled at last, and we were able to emerge from the towers and the tunnels and roam freely, we found that much of the forest was burned. What was left, I spread her ashes across, a grain or two at a time. Wherever I put them, the trees grew back quickly, so that she is across the entire forest now. So, you see, I cannot just sail away and leave her here. I remain."

"Of course, in time, even forests die, and someday I may have to leave. But until then, I stay here."

Ricarda and I did not say anything else, then, we just lay in the dim light and thought about it. Sometimes a person might envy the elves the fact that they do not grow old, and can live for thousands of years. But at times, they seem unbearably melancholy.

When we woke up the next morning, Ricarda looked around, and suddenly asked, "Where's Who?"

Rinthilios, who as far as we could tell had stayed in the room where we were all night, pointed up to where a small stream of daylight was coming down.

"Your starling wished for a place to fly, in the sun, and so I decided to tell Who how it could leave and come back. It should be back soon."

"Tell Who, Tell Who," came the voice from above, and the starling flew back down through the small hole to land on Ricarda's outstretched hand.

"Hello there, little one," said Ricarda. "I don't suppose you found anything much to eat with all that snow covering up the insects in the grass."

"Would it like a bit of my food, do you think?" I asked, offering a handful of mixed seeds and nuts from my pack. The answer was apparently yes. The rest of us, including Hildigard but not Rinthilios, also all had a quick breakfast, and then it was time for us to follow Rinthilios back to the entrance we had been to the night before.

"You will need a bigger gate than the one your winged friend used," he said, "but I think you will find it not so forbidding in the daylight, after a night's sleep."

* * * * *

There is a knock on the door.

"Yes, Jasmine?" asks Bella, while looking at you with one eyebrow arched, as if to say that it will be your turn to help her. But it is your little nephew Hildibold who pokes his head through the door, the younger son of Isembold, one of your older brothers. He looks to have been crying recently.

"Um, Aunt Mira," says Hildibold, "can you help me?"

He then sticks his right foot through the door, and you see that it is pierced by a shard of splintered wood, clear through from top to bottom, and is dripping blood. You and both your sisters all jump up, and your sisters shout in alarm and rush over to help little Isembold.

"Goodness gracious, child," says Mira, "how did you do that?"

"I was playing the game where the floor is lava," says Hildibold, his voice choked a bit but trying to be brave, "and I jumped from one chair to the other one, and I missed and I hurt my foot."

"Let's carry him to the Old Kitchen," says Bella, "we can get water there to wash the wound after we pull it out. Where is your father, Hildibold?"

"He was in the next room," says Hildibold, "but I don't think he heard. You won't tell him, will you? I broke a chair. I didn't mean to!"

"Oh Hildibold, mercy me, he's going to care more about your foot than that chair," says Mira, as she and Bella carry little Hildibold out of the room, leaving you alone with your father.

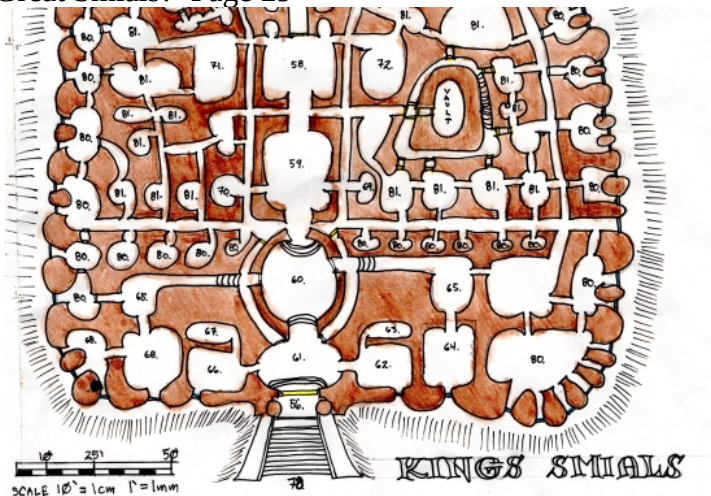
After you get over the shock of seeing little Hildibold bleeding and in pain, you look over at your father, resting in bed. It is difficult to see if he is awake or not; certainly he did not react in any obvious way to the fuss with Hildibold. You stare at him for a little while, carefully but

quietly. Eventually you see him open his eyes just to slits, and then close them again quickly. Curious.

On the little table next to the chair where Mira was reading, sits your father's journal. Mira has taken it with her during previous interruptions, but she left it this time, presumably out of alarm at seeing Hildibold bleeding. You look at it, and then at your father. You pick it up, and decide to take it with you.

Your sisters will be gone for a little while as they look after little Hildibold. While they are dealing with that, do you:


- 1) Check on the Great Parlor, where preparations are underway for more hobbits to seek refuge in Great Smials? Page 18
- 2) Visit the Hearth Hall, where a great iron pot is used to cook a ceremonial pot of soup for all the hundreds of guests during the Midsummer Festival? Page 22
- 3) Take a look at the King's Parlor, whose walls show murals from the very earliest days of the Shire? Page 26
- 4) See if you can get into the Vault, the most secure place in Great Smials? Page 29



- 56. GREAT DOOR
- 57. KING'S HALL
- 58. KING'S PARLOR
- 59. HEARTH HALL
- 60. GREAT PARLOR
- 61. FRONT STOOP

wondering why. Since it is only two ways to open the Kingdom of Rhudaur; each of Arthedain lockbox, then, is points always to one of the changed as you move from northwest corner of Great told you that any of them with its hidden message, speech that comes out of his father was under a spell, so your pocket. They are very new flowers, of the same He had one extra, or maybe the antechamber of the crypt Hyacinth Banks to get the door, and grab the goldbell braids; you will need to the sorcerer. So he has Beneath the stairs to the what is now called Old spot. He may even have been

unlikely that such a finely
Arthedain lockbox. One, is
the three lockboxes can be
to figure out where he
others. The Arthedain
place to place. This has
Smials is where you saw a
would be long since smuggled
told you that you needed to
mouth is not his own. You
that the sorcerer who was
old, though, and thoroughly
kind, in the upstairs Solar,
he had always intended to
was the least likely place
key from her, or else pick
flower, hurrying but also
run, there may not be much
likely gone to where the
cellars, on the northwest
Smials. Great Smials, like
there; you're not sure how

The Great Parlor was made, along with the rest of the eastern half of Great Smials, in the expectation that it would be a bigger, better version of "Old Smials", the western and older part. But, of course, many years had passed between the construction of the two halves, and it did not turn out that way. The "Parlor" of Old Smials had, in the past, actually been used as something like the parlor of a normal home; a place for visitors to be seated in comfort, for a conversation about whatever needed talking about. But by the time the Great Parlor was made, there was no need for it, since the Shire had become a larger place, with many important families and many places to meet. The Tookes, if they were simply having a few friends over for a visit, would not use such a large room, it would have felt empty and echo-ey. If it was something more official, they would have met in Michel Delving or Hobbiton or one of the other, larger towns, rather than just having visitors over to their home. Nonetheless, the Great Parlor did find a use.

It was, essentially, a room for big parties.

Midwinter, Midsummer, Spring or Autumn Equinox, these were the biggest four parties of the year in the Shire. The location was not always the same, but the Took family took their turn more often than most families, owing to their wealth and large size family, but especially owing to the fact that Great Smials had the most room for it. Only the Brandybucks' home came close. You recall, as a young hobbit-lad growing up here, that they were exciting but also exhausting to prepare for. Now that you live with your husband and the other Boffins in the Yale, in the East Farthing, you have not had to do the work of preparing for one of the four big annual parties so often. However, the couple times that the Boffins have hosted all the most important families of the Shire (plus many of the poorer families who lived nearby) for one of these festivals, you found it to be even more stressful than when you were younger. Having large rooms such as the Great Parlor, which can be set aside for such gatherings, allows for some of the preparations to happen earlier, so not everything has to be done the day before.

What is happening here now, however, does not look like preparations for a party. Well, not exactly. There are many, many tables and chairs being set up, and they are organized in a way that might work for a banquet. But, you know for a fact, there will be no banquets here this winter. This winter has started too early, and too ferociously, to allow for that. The food that is available will be hoarded, given out in the least amount to keep everyone alive and mostly healthy, with none at all to spare and no certainty as to whether that will be enough.

The hobbits who are working, to set everything out, are from Tuckborough. Your oldest brother Isengrim has been hiring and organizing them to get ready for the time (perhaps very soon) when many of the hobbits of nearby settlements will need to move into Great Smials.

You see a group of several hobbits enter from the south, apparently having just come in through the Great Door, carrying loads of firewood. You notice one, Marlow Miller, that you knew when you were a young hobbit-lass and he a young hobbit-lad who lived in Tuckborough, nearby. He does not see you over his load of firewood, which is sizeable. You overhear his conversation with one of the other hobbits carrying wood.

"But really, is there any need?" asks the other hobbit.

"Certainly there is, Terrel," says Marlow. "Even with so many huddled close together here, a fire is needed for cooking."

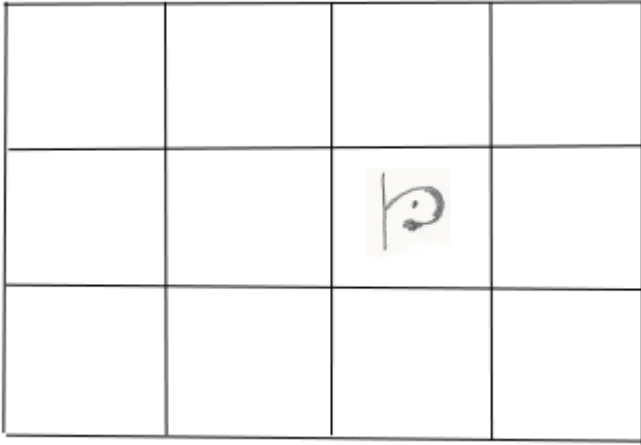
"But there's plenty of wood nearby," says Terrel. "Why can't we just chop it down as we need it?"

"It's not the Took way," says Marlow. "You want to be taking the trees that are fallen or near to falling, not just hewing down every one that happens to stand close to you. Otherwise, soon enough there will be no trees at all. If every sapling within reach gets chopped and burned before it's had a chance to grow and branch out, where will the next generations trees come from? Further and further away, that's where."

"If we don't get through this winter first, there'll be no need to think of the next generation," says Terrel.

"Come on now, Terrel, there's no cause to talk that way," says Marlow, and with that they have crossed the whole of the Great Parlor and headed north into the next room, likely to Hearth Hall to stow the firewood next to the great hearth. You ponder going after Marlow to say hello, but something in the tone of the conversation makes you decide not to, and you turn to head back to your father's room.

Marlow is right, you think to yourself, it's no good talking as if there is no future. If you think that way, soon enough there will not be. You hope that Terrel's gloomy outlook is not widespread yet.



The Hearth Hall had been made to be used to cook food in vast quantities during Shire Moot. Eventually, Shire Moots happened more seldom, and when they did were too large for a single room, even one as large as this one. But, when the Long Winter had forced many Hobbits to take refuge once in Great Smials, this room and the great iron pot (as tall as a full-grown hobbit) had been used again. Every Hobbit had contributed what little food they had into it, and it was cooked into a stew that they all ate from. It was used now only once a year, at Midsummer Festival, when a great pot of soup was prepared once again. No one is exactly certain how long the great iron pot that sits in the mighty hearth has been here, but without question it is older than any hobbit still living.

The room is large, but normally kept empty except for the many tables and chairs which are used for Midsummer Festival. This room is the place where the banquet is held on those years when rain makes it impossible to set up outside. You see that the stocks of fuel for the fireplace have been topped off, and the tables near it have been

piled high with whatever food can safely be kept here without spoiling; salted meats, clay vessels of grain sealed with wax, and herbs and such. There will no doubt be stew made in the Hearth Hall again, this winter. It should be a festive occasion; when hobbits gather together in large groups to eat, it normally is. This year, with fear that the current winter may be another Long one, there may be nothing festive about it.

You move up closer to the southeast corner of the hall, where the great iron pot sits in a sort of walk-in hearth. The pot is as tall as you are, and it is the same one that was there when you were a child. You look again at the decorations around the outside edge of the rim. They are not often looked at in detail, by anyone other than you perhaps. But even you have not examined them closely in decades. You lean in closely and hold the candle lamp in your left hand higher up and behind you, so that the pattern is well lit but the glare of the candle flame itself is not in your eyes. It looks to be a braided rope, with a number of different types of flowers tied through it.

You check carefully, but none of them appear to look like the flowers you are most interested in, right now.

Turning around, you see a few hobbits entering, carrying armloads of additional firewood, some of it still dusted with snow. You recognize one of them as Marlow Miller, a hobbit from Tuckborough that you knew as a lass. He recognizes you, smiles, and after dropping his load of firewood on the stack comes over to chat, still shaking the cold off as he does so.

"Well if it is not Mrs. Donnamira Boffin!" he said, his broad face cracked in a smile. "How are you faring, ma'am?"

"I am very well now, thank you Marlow," you say, "and you should call me Donna, as you did when we were children. How is your wife?"

"Oh, good, good," says Marlow, distractedly, but you notice a worried look cross his face. Many hobbits are catching ill from the cold and short rations, and you wonder if Marlow's wife is sick. Or, perhaps one of his children is, and his wife is worried sick about that.

It occurs to you that one risk of bringing everyone from Tuckborough and the other surrounding villages here to Great Smials, is that any illness could spread quickly from one to another if all were living together in the same smial.

"How is your father?" asks Marlow, as if he wishes to change the subject.

"Better," you say, and it occurs to you to wonder whether Marlow thinks you sounded distracted as well.

For a few moments, you look each other straight in the eyes, wondering what to say.

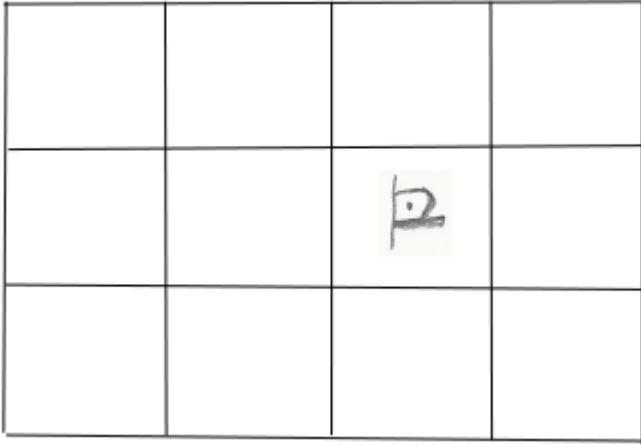
"It will be alright, ma'am," says Marlow eventually. "We'll get through it."

"Yes, of course we will, Marlow," you say, attempting to sound confident. "The Shire has had bad winters before."

"Sure we have!" says Marlow, sounding cheered at being reminded of that. "And Hobbits always came through it, didn't we? We'll get through it again, then."

The other hobbits who he came with are ready now to go back for another load, and Marlow nods his goodbye and leaves with them. After you watch them go, you stand there for a little while, thinking. Are there any records of what happened during the Long Winter? Could there be lessons that would be valuable to recall, now?

Your father probably knows more about the library and records of Great Smials than anyone else. Perhaps it is time you talked to him about it. You decide it is time to get back to see him.



The King's Parlor is one in a series of large chambers between the Great Door, and the Great Shire Moot Hall. It is not as often used as either of those rooms, but it is occasionally used as an overflow room when the Midwinter Festival is held in Great Smials. Its walls are covered in ancient murals, presumably from the time, centuries ago, when this part of Great Smials was first made. The scenes on it, though, are from far longer ago than that.

1300 years ago, two Hobbits named Marcho and Blanco left Bree to make the journey north to Fornost Erain, capital of the Kingdom of Arthedain. They asked the King, a tall, wise, and strong Dunedan named Argeleb, if the hobbits could settle the lands to their west. They had been good farmland, long before, but there were fewer Dunedain or Men by then, as some had died in many wars against the Witch King of Angmar, and many of the rest had left for the Kingdom of Gondor. Perhaps the King thought it was better to have Hobbits living there than no one. Perhaps he did not think there were enough Hobbits


to worry about where they lived. Or, perhaps he was genuinely motivated by a merciful desire to give the Hobbits who were fleeing wars in Cardolan and Rhudaur, somewhere to settle. Whatever the reason, he gave his permission.

It is recorded, that Marcho and Blanco, upon being told that their request was granted, danced an impromptu jig in celebration. It is not recorded what the reactions of the King, or his dignified Dunedain courtiers, was. Well, not recorded in any official written history. In the scene as depicted on the walls of the King's Parlor, the King looks amused, and his tall and elegantly dressed courtiers look appalled. Marcho and Blanco look like good-natured clowns. Your guess is that, being the sort of Hobbits to travel to the capital, request an audience with the King, and successfully plead their case, one or both of them must have been rather more savvy than the foolish-but-likable figures shown dancing in the mural. But then, perhaps that was the role they chose to assume, when pleading their case with the King, the better to seem unthreatening and unlikely to cause trouble.

There is also a mural of the Great Plague, which soon afterwards came sweeping through all lands in its path, Man, Dunedain, or Hobbit. There was the fall of the Kingdom of Arthedain, when the Shire sent a unit of Hobbits to Fornost Erain, armed with bows; they never returned. There is the first elected Thain, Bucca of the Marish, who took the place of the King of Arthedain as military leader. The depiction of Bucca, standing in the midst of a ring of Hobbits as he accepts the role, is particularly interesting to you, given the old tales of Bucca's ghost still roaming the hallways of Great Smials.

Rumors said that the real reason the Oldbuck family left Old Smials, and gave up their hereditary position as Thain, was that they were trying to get away from the ghost of Old Bucca, their ancestor. You don't know if this is actually true or not, but it occurs to you to wonder if the same tale is told among their family (now known as the Brandybucks). Your sister married into the Brandybuck family; you should ask her about this someday.

Come to think of it, perhaps it has been long enough that Mira and Bella have finished helping little Hildibold. You decide to return to your father's room.

There are actually a couple vaults in Great Smials. The one more commonly used, is on the western, "Old Smials" side, closer to your father's room. However, there is a larger vault in the eastern half, and it is more difficult to get into, in theory. Whereas the western vault has one locked door, the eastern vault is behind a series of three locked doors. The locks require different keys, and the locks themselves were probably made by the dwarves of the Blue Mountains. Certainly the locks, and the keys that fit them, appear to be more complex than you normally see in Hobbit metalworking. It would take an expert burglar to pick these locks, and because there are three of them and they are all different, it would take a considerable amount of time.

It would, if it were not for the common practice of hanging the locks for the second door on a hook on the wall just past the first, and the lock for the third door on a hook on the wall just past the second. This means that, instead of having to pick three difficult locks, a thief with enough knowledge would just have to pick the lock of the

first door. Once they were through that, they could search for, and find, the keys to the second and third, without even any risk of someone finding them while they are doing it, since they could lock the first door behind them. There would still be the problem, however, of how to pick the lock to the first door, without being discovered while you are doing it.

The first door's key, in recent years, has been kept under a storage box in the room just outside the vault. You tip the storage box on one side, retrieve the key, and use it to unlock the first vault door, in less time than it takes to talk about it. No one but the Thain and his heir are supposed to have access to the keys to this vault. However, you did a lot of sneaking around Great Smials in your youth, and you saw things you were not intended to see.

One reason for the lax security of the Vault, of course, is that there isn't much kept here. Once upon a time, your father kept some memorabilia here, from his earlier traveling days. It has been decades since this was true, mostly because your brother Hildifons had found out how to get into the Vault, and your father may not have known who it was but he figured out that someone besides himself had been there, and moved everything out to the smaller vault near his room.

Or at least, you think it was your brother Hildifons. There is a small chance it might have been the ghost of Old Buck. But Hildifons left, years ago, and never returned, so you cannot ask him the truth of the matter now.

Once inside the Vault, you look around in the light of the oil lamp you are carrying. It appears to be filled with junk

now, that was once stacked in unused rooms in the rest of Great Smials, when no one lived here but your parents and siblings. Now that so many of your brothers have married and started families of your own, some of those rooms have been cleared out and are in daily use again. With the need for poorer families to take refuge here this winter even more of the rooms have been reclaimed. Much of the broken furniture that once filled it was simply thrown out, or burned, but that which was though too valuable to discard, but not useful enough to use, appears to have been put into the Vault.

Some of it is both broken and valuable; antique furniture, for example. Much of it is simply of historical interest; you see a plow that was supposedly used to till the soil of the very first field farmed by hobbits in the Shire. There is a long row of polished wooden cabinets in which papers of some sort are stored, which are probably not so much valuable per se as they are unknown; someone would have to go through them before they could be thrown out, to make sure there is nothing important in them, and so long as there is still more room for storage in Great Smials, there will always be a task with higher priority than that.

Unless the fuel for fires gets extraordinarily low this winter, in which case a lot of what's in this Vault may get cleared out because it will be thrown on the fire.

You do, however, see something that catches your eye. Hanging on a hook on the wall not far inside the vault, is a key, with a label or note hanging from it. You turn the note around so you can read it. It's in your father's handwriting.

"To whom it may concern: since you keep breaking into my personal vault, I have had to move this key here for safekeeping. This is the master key for all doors in Great Smials. It is for EMERGENCY USES ONLY! If any of the other keys get broken or lost, we can use this until a replacement can be made. It is very important that this be available for an emergency of this kind. So, please leave it here. p.s. Donna, this means you."

Oh, bother. Your father knew it was you getting into his other vault, all the time. Well, anyway, this winter IS an emergency, really. Anyway, you'll be sure to tell him about it. You put the key into your pocket, and head back to see him.