

Chapter 8

4 Flee From Flurries

"Well I don't see why Isembold couldn't hear what had happened, even if it was in the next room," says Bella as your two sisters enter the room where your father is sleeping. "The chair was broken into splinters, that ought to have made enough noise for him to wonder what had just happened to his own son."

"I wonder if Isembold is going deaf," says Mira.

"I wonder if he just doesn't care enough to listen," says Bella, still clearly upset.

"How is little Hildibold?" you ask.

"Oh, he will be fine," says Bella. "We got the splinter out, and cleaned out the wound, and bandaged it up, and then carried him back to his father and told him what happened."

"Bella chewed his ears off," says Mira. "Not that he didn't deserve it. To think that Hildibold was so afraid of his own father that he would hop down the hallway on one leg to find us. Isembold needs to be less of a grump."

"Isembold needs to be less of a something-else," says Bella with some vehemence.

"Where did the journal go to?" Mira asks.

"Here it is," you say, and hand it to her, the place where she was reading still marked.

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"Well, he was nice," said Ricarda. "A tad standoffish, perhaps, but not bad at all once you got to know him."

We were walking aboveground again, headed north. It was daybreak now. We had slept belowground, although I don't believe Rinthilios slept, and then he had showed us the way out. There were no signs of orcs, or the sorceror, so we decided to risk it. For a while we walked in full silence, but after a time we felt more at ease and we began talking, although we kept our voices low still.

It did not seem like the thing to do, to just head back the way we came, as the chance of running into orcs again was too great. I thought maybe we could circle around to the north end of Mathom Holt, since once we got into the forest we would probably be safe, and we had seen no sign of trouble up there.

"Not that I have met many elves," I said, "and certainly none as old as he was, but the tales I heard all seem to say they are good people. Well," I hedged a bit after remembering some tales of ancient times, "except for a few of them."

"The Grandmother said there were bad people among any folk," said Ricarda, "and I should not be surprised if that

applied to elves as well. But Rinthilios seemed to be good."

"Why do you call her 'The Grandmother'?" I asked. "It sounds awfully formal for a person's grandma."

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Ricarda, "you don't know who The Grandmother is. No, I don't mean my Oma. The people I come from, we are called Grandmother's Hobbits. Or that's what we call ourselves. Not so many other folk have a cause to call us much of anything at all, and that's the way we prefer it."

"You mean, in the same way I'm a Shire Hobbit, and there are Bree hobbits, you're a Grandmother's Hobbit?" I asked.

"Something like that," she said.

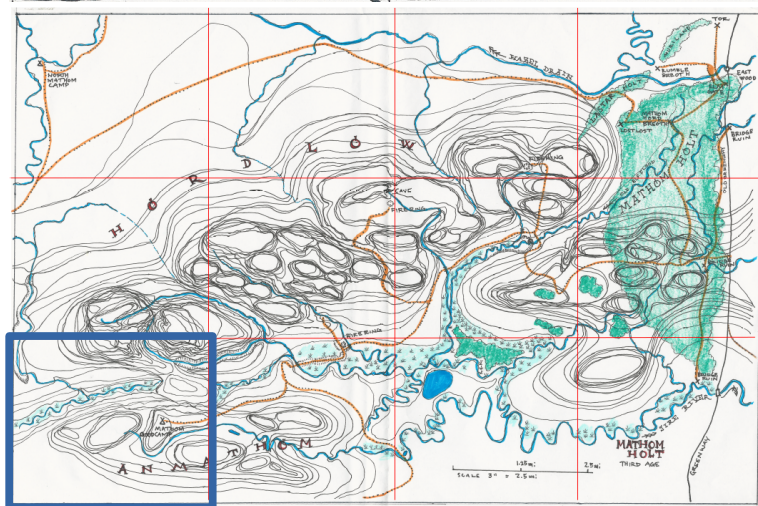
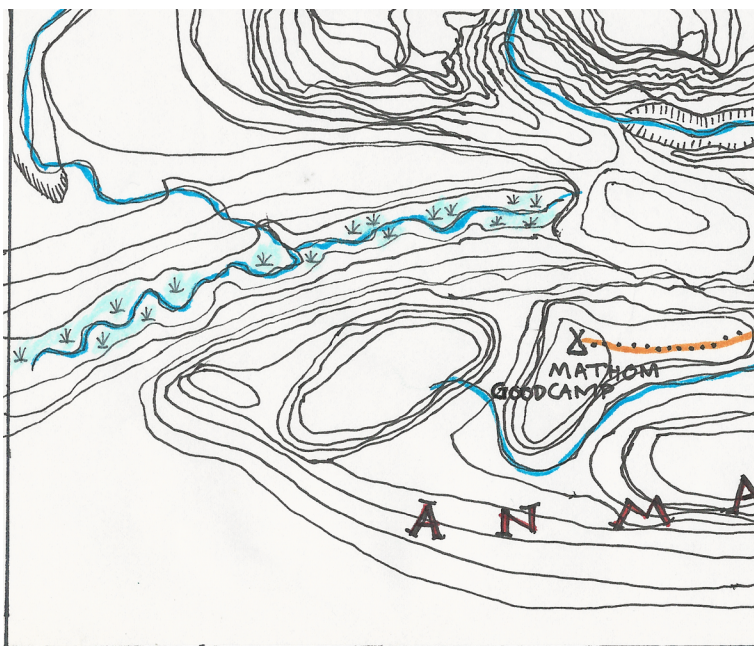
"Why don't you name yourself after where you live then, like the Shire or Bree?" I asked.

"We don't talk about where we live," said Ricarda. "We also change where we live every few generations."

"Why?" I asked. I tried to imagine if the Took's tried to move out of Great Smials and Tuckborough; it would take generations just to pack everything up.

"Because The Grandmother told us that someday, The Gollum would cause evil men to come searching for us, and we needed to be impossible to find."

"The who?"



"Don't you name, don't you name," said Who.

"Oh, sorry Who," I said. "I was just asking about the other person that would bring evil men."

"The Gollum," said Ricarda. "He was a hobbit, one of Grandmother's Hobbits, but he turned to evil and was banished. Soon after, The Grandmother said we had to leave our homes, on the other side of the Misty Mountains."

"Since then, we have remained hidden, and we change our homes every few generations. We need to live close enough to the cities of Men or Dwarves that we can trade with them for metal tools and other things that we do not make. But we don't let them know where we live, exactly, and when it seems that they are starting to guess, we must move to another place."

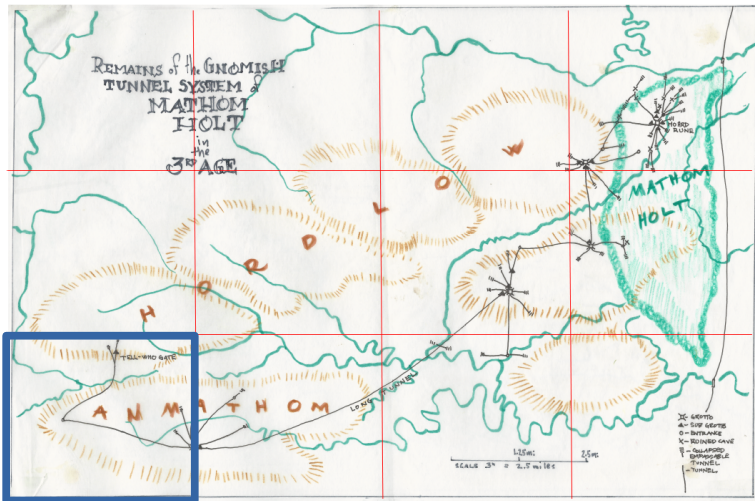
"It sounds a great bother," I said, "having to pack it all up and move."

"We don't keep too much in the way of belongings," she said. "Only that which we need or use. It keeps us from becoming misers."

We walked in silence for a while, over the hill and through the heather, the snow crunching beneath our feet. The sky was grey, and it was cold, but the wind had died down at dawn so it was not bitter cold. Still, I wished I was headed towards a warm fire in a pub. I was not totally certain what I was headed towards, but whatever it was, it probably was not going to be warm.



Belowground



We came over the crest of the hill, and now there was a long slope down ahead of us. We saw a path ahead, that passed from west to east; it looked like it might work well for us, in order to loop back to the north end of Mathom Holt. There was not much cover, but there were the hills between us and where we had last seen the orcs, so there was at least a decent chance of making our way without being seen. But what we would do if they did see us, I had no clue. I stopped.

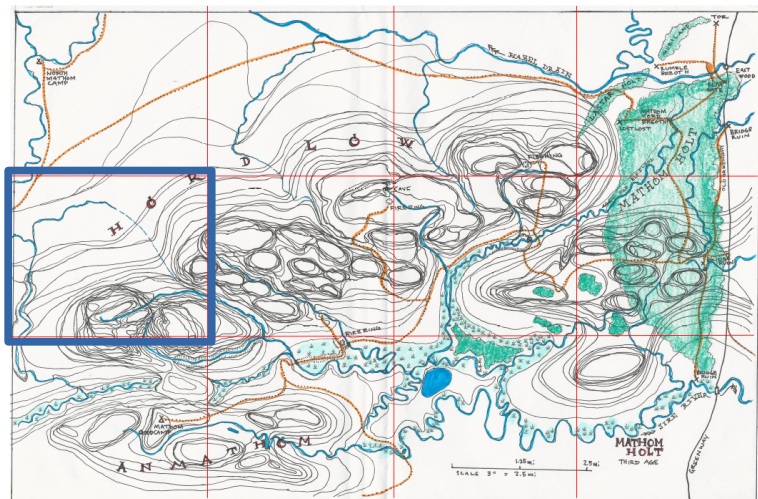
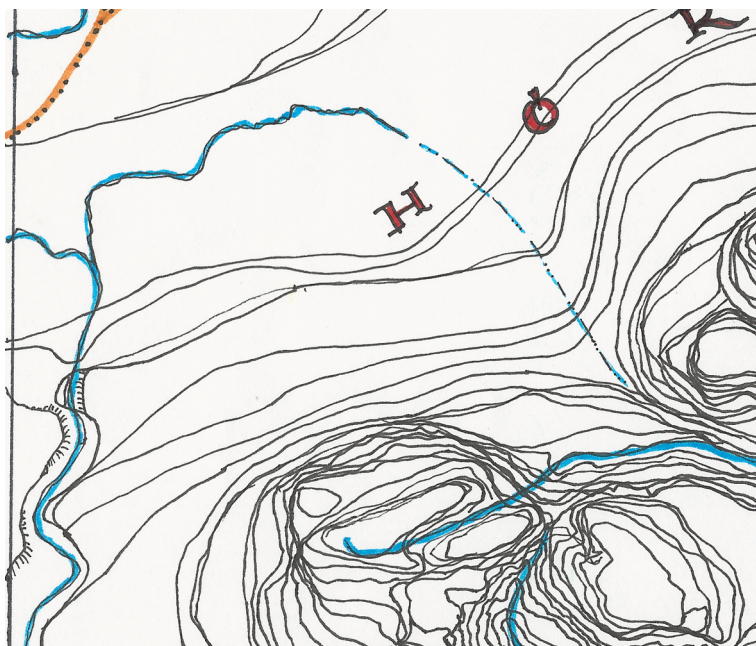
"Yes, I agree," said Ricarda, without me even saying anything. "It's too out in the open."

"Let's try over there to the west," I said, "where there's a little gully. It won't be as easy walking down in there, but we'll be out of sight more."

We didn't want to get wet, it being cold enough already, but the stream was still very small at this point so it was not difficult to walk alongside it. We could even hop across it from time to time, if one side or the other looked easier. Hildigard stopped and lapped up a bit of the stream, and sniffed the air, and seemed satisfied, so I felt better. We followed the stream down the gully, which was heading nearly due north.

After a while, I asked, "how many of Grandmother's Hobbits are there, do you think?"

"Not many," said Ricarda, "less than a thousand, I would say. Not as many as there are hobbits in the Shire, I expect. How many live in your cete?"



"My what?"

"Your cete? Uh, your colony? You know, the group of hobbits you live with, bigger than a family. You don't call that a cete?"

"Isn't that a word for a group of badgers?" I asked.

"Or hobbits," said Ricarda. "At least, among Grandmother's Hobbits it is. What do you call it?"

"I suppose we say village, or town," I answered.

"Really? Aren't those words for groups of Men?"

"Yes, we use the same word for groups of Hobbits. There are a few hundred hobbits in Tuckborough."

"But hobbits aren't like men," said Ricarda.

"Well we're not like badgers, either," I said.

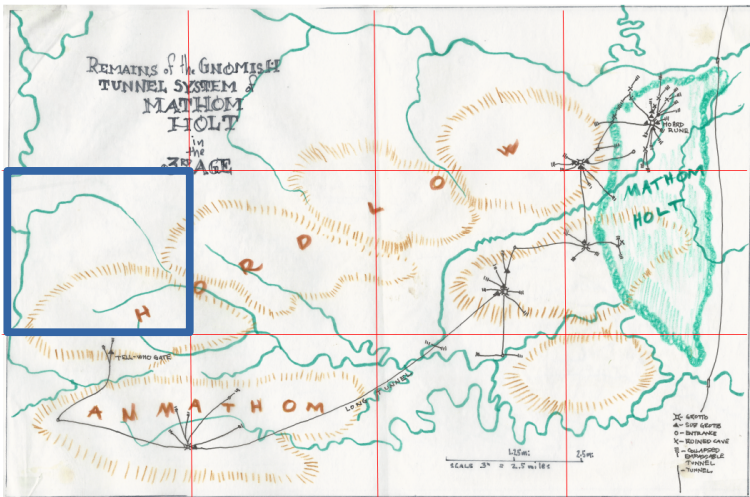
We got to the end of the gully, and now there was really no way to make our way further north without being out in the open. I wondered if we should wait until it was dark.

As luck would have it, and I don't know if it was good luck or bad, that was the point at which it started to snow. Soon, it was coming down so heavy we could hardly see each other.

We both had winter clothes on, of course, but not as warm as I should have liked, if I had known we would be walking in a snowstorm. Normally, if it starts snowing in



Belowground



the Shire, all travel stops (except for some tobogganing down hillsides, for fun). I had expected to be on the Greenway, where we could just stop by the side of the road and wait it out if the snow came down too heavy.

The snow made us feel a bit safer about being seen, but we could not see as well either, and the worst part was when we came to a stream that we needed to cross. If I could have seen better, perhaps we could have found a better place to cross, but as it was, we had to hop across a few rocks, and hope to our balance and our luck. Ricarda and I both made it, and of course Who could just fly, but Hildigard looked at the rocks we had used as stepping stones, and back at us, and I think she whined a bit.

"Oh, poor thing, she can't cross that way," said Ricarda.

"Hold on, Hildigard," I said, "we'll find a better place to cross."

Of course, Hildigard did not hold on, and instead just jumped in and splashed across. It was very cold out, and I was a bit wet just from the snow but I cannot imagine how cold it must have felt to swim in. Worse yet, I realized that as soon as she got across, she would shake the water off her fur, and anyone within a stone's throw of her would be drenched.

"Run!" I said, and Ricarda and I turned and ran away. Poor Hildigard did not understand why we were running away from her, and actually barked at us. But, she shook herself dry before she ran to catch us, and we were far enough away not to get drenched in the spray. Once she

had finished, and caught up with us, I had to stop and pet her a bit.

"Sorry, old girl," I said, "but my fur is not as warm as yours, and shaking dry doesn't work for me."

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There is a knock at the door. Before you can react, Bella and Mira grab their left ears. It was an old game, from when you were three small hobbit-lasses living together, and whoever was slowest to touch their left ear was the one who had to go when your mother called for assistance without saying which daughter it had to be.

"Who is it?" you ask.

Little Holly Took, daughter of your brother Isembold, pokes her head through the door. She is about seven years old, with big eyes and a quiet voice. She sometimes reminds you of yourself as a child.

"um, aunt bella, and aunt donna, and aunt mira, i have a question..." she says in a voice so soft that all three of you lean forward a bit to hear better.

"Yes, sweetie," says Bella, "but speak up a bit. What is it you want to ask?"

"um, well, i was just wanting to know if someone could look at something in the [something something something]," she says, the last few words so soft that none of you can tell what she said.

"Holly, please speak up a bit," says Bella, "your aunts cannot hear you properly. What would you like us to look at?"

Holly's eyes get bigger, she looks a bit worried, clears her throat, and tries again.

"i just wanted to know if someone could come up to the playroom upstairs and look at the [something something something]." Her voice quickly fades into obscurity, and she looks off to the side, with a sad expression, as if she knows that she is not talking loud enough but cannot stand the thought of speaking up for an entire sentence.

Bella's expression is a mixture of sympathy and exasperation, and she is about to say something, when you decide to interrupt her.

"Holly," you say, "why don't I just go with you, and you can just show me whatever it is, would that be alright?"

Holly looks grateful, and nods yes emphatically, her big brown eyes tearing up a bit in relief that she will not again be asked to talk louder.

"We'll wait for you to get back before we read any more," says Mira.

You hold little Holly's hand as she leads you up the stairs to the Old Smials Upper Story, to a room on the north side called the Playroom. Here there are blocks, old clothes for playing "dress-up", and other toys for Hobbit children to play with. There are also several windows, on the north

side, that look out north and a bit east. Holly takes you to these windows, and points out. There, you see it.

Tracks, in the snow. Not Hobbit tracks, either. They come down the path from the Three Farthing stone, to the north. But looking more closely, you see something else.

The tracks further north are clear, but as they came closer, they are somewhat obscured. Not well enough, in the current light and from this angle, but they made some attempt at brushing their tracks where they left the road. It looks as if they has simply used a branch to sweep snow over their tracks behind them as they walked. Probably, at a lower angle it might keep them from being obvious, but looking from further up where you are, it is still apparent where they went after they left the path. They went west into the woods there, not far from Great Smials.

Who would do that? It does not seem like a likely path for a Hobbit to take, in the middle of the winter, off-trail and into the woods, while trying to cover their tracks. It seems more likely the sort of thing a person might do if they did not wish themselves or their tracks to be seen from Great Smials.

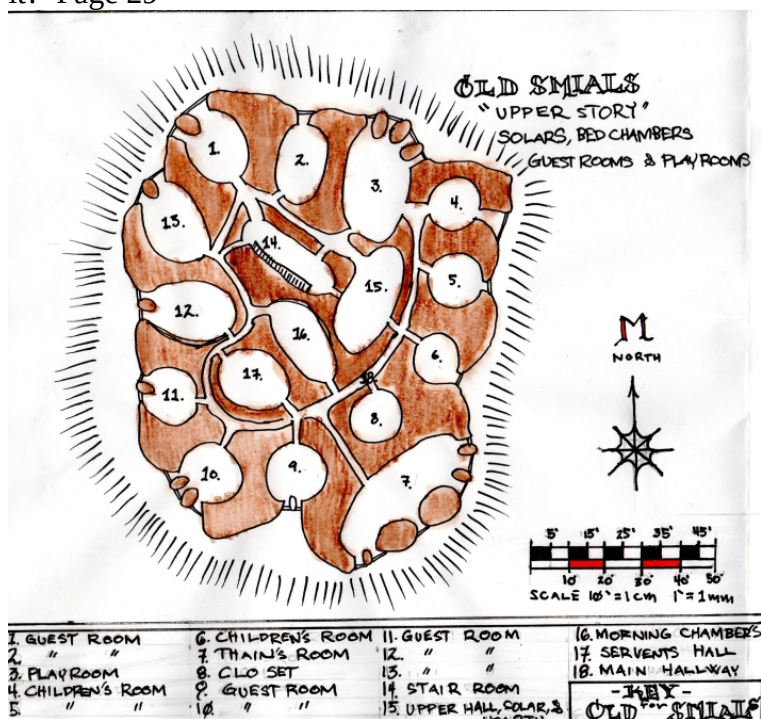
After looking out the window for a while, you realized little Holly is looking up at you, wide-eyed and expectant, waiting for an explanation. Or, perhaps, reassurance that everything is all right. You look down at her, and ponder what to say.

Is everything all right?

Perhaps not.


Do you:

- 1) Go to the Guest Room in the northwest corner of this storey, to see if you see anything else from that room's windows? Page 18
- 2) Walk as stealthily as possible to the woods north of Great Smials, and follow the tracks? Page 22
- 3) Reassure Holly it's nothing to worry about, and head back down to your father's room? Page 28
- 4) Find your oldest brother Isengrim, and tell him about it? Page 29



behind him, into the snow
door closed, sealing the
Arthedain lockbox on the
an instant. Long enough to
have been there since the
for the King of Arthedain.
lockbox. The lid snaps shut
never catch him now, to try
these somewhere safe?" he
somewhere, and you will have
ascend the stairs, you hear
says the crow. "He just
your father has already
around again!" says the
outside, he looks like he
suppose the tall one has
briefly between pecks of
taking it, because it was
father, "the tall one is not
that he doesn't see you
"He comes from a long line
father places a second roll
be upset, when he realizes
all. "Let's wait until

and the night. You put the
sorcerer outside. Now,
ground, you realize that the
open the lock on the
fall of Arthedain, not long
Your father stoops down,
again, locking. The two of
to open it again. Oh, well,
says, and hands you the
to use the Arthedain
the noise of a bird loudly
left for the woods!" "Yes,
grabbed a roll from the bowl
crow. "I'm so glad! I
hasn't been eating too well
been eating too well lately.
roll, "the tall one dropped
small enough for me to lift,
actually a friend of ours.
doing it." "Sure, I think
of crows that Ricarda and I
on the windowsill, and
that he's lost it." You
we've both had a good hearty

You and Holly go to the Guest Room in the northwest corner of the upper storey of Old Smials, and knock on the door. It is answered by a young hobbit-lass, adult but perhaps barely, with curly black hair and big brown eyes. Her face is plain but likable, and she smiles at you and Holly.

"Hullo!" she says. "Who might you be, then?"

"Hello, my name is Donna Boffin," you say, "although I grew up here in Great Smials as Donna Took, and this little one is Holly. I'm sorry, I don't know your name?"

"I'm Rosie," she says, and smiles down at Holly, "but my mum's name was 'Holly'! What a lovely name. Pleased to meet you both. How can I help you?"

You pause for a moment, trying to think of how exactly to explain that you would like to barge into the room she is

staying in, and Holly unexpectedly speaks up. Well, in any case, she speaks.

"can we come in, to [something something something]," says Holly.

"You want to look out the window?" asks the hobbit-lass, apparently possessed of even keener hearing than you. "Why sure, come on in! Pardon the mess, I've been trying to sort out our things that we rescued from the house before it collapsed under the snow."

You walk in and see the room is littered with clothes, gardening and farming tools, and various other possessions of a small hobbit family from Tuckborough. Two children, a boy and a girl, are playing on the bed, and they stop and stare at you and Holly.

"Them's Aster and Rogo, their father is helping with some of the firewood gathering downstairs," says Rosie, and she leads you to the larger window, which faces northwest.

You climb up into the broad window sill, which forms a sort of bench or sofa, and look out; Holly has some trouble climbing up after you, until Rosie notices and boosts her up.

There.

In the narrow gap between the woods to the north, and the larger woods to the west of Great Smials, there is a clear path through the snow. Whoever, or whatever, you had seen the tracks of, that had approached from the northeast, crossed over to the woods to the west of Great Smials.

"Is there anything wrong, Mrs. Boffin?" asks Rosie. You ponder what you should say. Is there? Perhaps there is. But then again, perhaps not, and it is simply the tracks of a Hobbit, foraging through the trees for firewood and not wanting to get seen doing it. You would prefer not to start a panic, or worry the already-worried folk needlessly.

"Not that I know of, Rosie," you say, choosing your words carefully. You aren't actually aware of anything wrong, so that much is true. Suspecting and knowing are not the same thing. "I was just curious. Do you know where your husband and the others are gathering firewood from?"

"I'm not sure, ma'am," says Rosie. "But I could ask, if you'd like, when he gets back."

"Oh no need," you reply, and help Holly down from the ledge by the window. "Thank-you, and pardon the interruption."

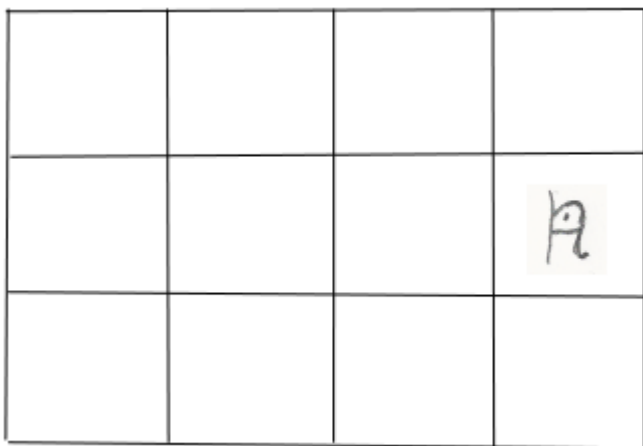
"No trouble at all, ma'am," says Rosie, sounding slightly concerned. Bother. Your careful choice of words was not as subtle as you were hoping, or else Rosie is more perceptive than her simple appearance lets on. You chide yourself for judging on appearances. How to prevent a wave of whispered rumors of unknown problems?

"I think it's just some folk gathering wood from where we would prefer not to chop down any trees if we don't absolutely have to," you say, "and I expect that's just because it hasn't been made clear where firewood is to be gathered from. We don't want to last through the winter only to have a treeless desert to live in."

"Oh I should think not, ma'am," says Rosie, and her worried expression clears a bit. A known concern is usually less worrying than an unknown one; 'monsters grow bigger in the shadows', as the saying goes.

Yes, you say to yourself, it's probably just hobbits gathering firewood. And covering their tracks. And bypassing the woods to the east or north, walking through them in fact, to go gather firewood from the west of Great Smials instead.

The part of the woods, which comes closest to your front door. A good spot to be, if you wanted to watch who came and went, without being seen. Oh, double bother. Perhaps there is a problem.



You're still not sure if this is a great idea, but you're heading north on the path towards where you saw the tracks enter the woods. When you get closer, you try to see if you can tell anything more about what made them from close up, but it has been too long, and it is still snowing lightly. By tomorrow morning, there will not be anything to see, the tracks will have been completely obscured. You walk west, parallel to the poorly covered tracks. Whoever did this, did not know very much about covering their tracks.

It also looks like whoever did this, did not walk very nimbly; the footprints have long dragging marks behind them, as if the walker's legs did not bend well enough to allow them to lift their feet completely above the snow. For a moment you feel as if that should remind you of something, but you are quickly distracted by the difficulty of navigating through the woods, while still following the tracks.

Fortunately, it appears that whoever this was, also didn't like fighting their way through thick underbrush, and they mostly took the easiest route. In fact, in some cases it looks like they had trouble with branches that were quite a bit higher up than you are tall. This was most certainly not a Hobbit.

"Are you lost?" comes a strange voice.

"Whosaidthat?" you whisper fiercely, spinning around. You know that it was not a Hobbit, Man, or Orc, but what it was is not clear. Still, it sounds strangely familiar.

"Me, up here," says the voice, and you look up to see a crow.

"Um, Tiecelein?" you ask, amazed. Tiecelein was a crow you met long ago, when you were a young hobbit-lass, who could speak.

"No, that's what your sister said, also. That was my ancestor. My great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, grandfather. Crows don't live as long as Hobbits."

"Oh, of course," you say. It occurs to you that Tiecelein must be long dead. You wonder if you should express your condolences, but then it's been so many generations of crow that perhaps it would be like an elf telling you they were sorry to hear that Old Buck had died.

"Does every crow in your family speak?" you ask instead.

"Yes, but only a few of us speak Hobbit languages, though. Most of us just speak crow."



TASSELL

"Well sure, but...anyway. Can I ask you a question?"

"Yes, it sure sounds like you can. You asked it just fine. I think you speak really well! But you are a Hobbit, so I don't think that's too surprising."

"No, no, that's not what I mean," you say, not sure if the crow is misunderstanding or just being contrary. "My question is, have you seen anyone else walking in these woods, lately?"

"Walking? Not flying or climbing or hopping from tree to tree?"

"No, just walking."

"Well, not so often with the snow on the ground. It's been pretty snowy this year. Not good walking weather; even the squirrels have mostly stayed up in the trees, and the birds definitely. The ducks were the only ones who really prefer walking, and they've all flown south. No, as far as walking goes, it's just been you and the tall one."

"The tall one?" you ask.

"Yes, the tall one in the big robes, with the stringy hair and not much muscle left on his bones. He doesn't look to me like he's all that healthy, in fact. I nearly mistook him for a yummy corpse when I first saw him, but then he started moving. I'm glad I wasn't too close when that happened."

"No, that would be bad," you agree, and suddenly start wondering if it was a good idea to come out here alone.

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"I would say it was yesterday," says the crow. "Say, you don't happen to have any food on you, that you aren't wanting, do you? Your sister usually does."

"Um, not on me, no," you say, wondering how often your sister has been feeding this crow. "But you know, if you could do me a favor, I could bring some food out to you later."

"Sure, what do you need?"

"If you see that tall one again, can you come to the window of the Old Smials kitchen and caw loudly? It's those three windows, right over there," and you point them out.

"Did you say they are windows to the kitchen?" asks the crow.

"All three of those are, yes," you say, then realizing the point of his question, you add, "and the kitchen is where a lot of the food is. But you may have to caw loudly for me to hear. Can you do that? I would like to know if you see the tall one again."

"No problem. And then I get some food?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"I hope I see him soon," says the crow, and it flies up to get a better view from above.


You are alone again, in the quiet, cold woods. You realize that you now know, nearly for certain, that the Dunedain sorcerer who put your father into a coma before, is still haunting these woods. Your sister bluffed him into releasing his curse, but he didn't leave. And you are out here alone.

Perhaps it is time for you to go inside again.

			B

You reassure Holly that everything will be fine, and head downstairs to sit with your father again. He lays in bed, his eyes nearly closed, pretending to be asleep but not doing so very well. Why does he pretend? If he chooses to pretend to be asleep, why isn't he any better at it? You wonder if Papa's mind is finally starting to succumb to advanced age. You were better able to feign sleep when you were 5. You recall doing so when you were little, if you and your sisters were up playing after you were meant to be asleep in bed, and at the sound of your mother's approach you had to dive beneath the covers and adopt a slumbering pose. If your mother suspected, she never let on. Were you as bad at it as your father is now? You think not.

Soon, your sisters return from wherever they had gone to while you were upstairs with Holly, and you put the topic from your mind for a time.

"Probably someone sneaking into the woods near Great Smials to collect firewood," says Isengrim, looking at you from where he sits at his father's desk. Since your father fell ill, Isengrim has been acting as Thain and head of the Took household in all but name, so there is nothing particularly wrong or improper about him using his father's office to work in. But, you wish he would stop reading letters and writing orders while he talks, and take what you are saying more seriously.

"But why sneak around covering your tracks while you do it?" you ask. "It's not like they will be able to carry a load of firewood out without making a lot more tracks, probably being seen doing it, and certainly not able to cover their tracks as they leave."

"So the ones stealing firewood from the woods are not very clever, you're saying," says Isengrim. "I don't disagree. But I don't think we need to be doing anything about it, do you?"

"Well, yes, I do, actually," you say awkwardly. You were never one for arguing, and when it comes down to it you have a hard time doing it.

"Donna, look, normally I would say so as well. But, the fact is, there are a lot of families running out of firewood just now, and we can't keep them all out of the woods, nor do we want them to freeze to death. Granted, we don't want them to clear-cut the woods either, but chasing after them won't stop that. The only solution will be to convince them to come to Great Smials, or one of the other bigger smials, so that we can share hearths and share warmth. Trying to chase them through the snow and forest won't get us anywhere."

"What if it's not a Hobbit, though?" you ask.

"Is this more about that sorcerer that Bella says she saw?" asks Isengrim. His voice makes it plain that he is not convinced of the story.

"If Bella says she saw him, I'm sure he was there," you say.

Isengrim grunts noncommittally, and turns back to his papers at the desk.

It occurs to you, that it may be that Isengrim just doesn't believe Bella's story of the Dunedan sorcerer, because he's never seen such a thing. Isengrim is a good person, hardworking and trustworthy, but he lacks somewhat in imagination. If he has never seen a thing, at some level he simply cannot imagine it coming to the Shire. You are suddenly certain that no amount of arguing with Isengrim

will do any good, on this point. And, to be honest, since you hate arguing, you are relieved to be able to drop it.

If anything is to be done about the sorcerer, if that's who it was circling Great Smials, it will have to be done by the sisters of the Took family, not the brothers. Perhaps it is time to go back to your father's room.

