

Chapter 9

Ghosts of the Past

"He's still here, then," says Bella. "The sorcerer, he released Papa from his curse but he didn't leave the Shire. He's still stalking around Great Smials, watching us from out there, for some reason."

"But you have the key to the Rhudaur lockbox," says Mira, "and he has the lockbox. That means you could use it to put him into a coma, like he did to Papa."

"I could, if..."

"Bella!" you interrupt quickly, before Bella says anything more. She was about to say that, although each key and lockbox are magically tied together, such that the holder of the key can in theory strike the holder of the lockbox with a sleeping curse, doing that requires knowing something about how it works. Bella knows no more of that than she knows how to blow magic smoke-rings like Gandalf the Wizard. But, the sorcerer doesn't know that, and that's why her threat to him worked. For some reason you can't quite pin down, you have the feeling he might be able to listen in on what the three of you are saying, and you would rather Bella not talk out loud about the fact that she was bluffing.

"Yes?" she asks.

"I think we should have Mira read more in Papa's journal," you say quickly. "It might tell us something useful."

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Soon, we found a path that headed north, and it led us to a place that was marked on my map as "North Mathom Camp". This seemed like a place that had been used before, although not terribly recently. There was a lean-to, with some dry ground beneath it, and we all crowded into that happily. Not far off I found a pile of branches, still dry enough after I shook off the snow, and we decided to take the risk of making a small fire at the edge of the lean-to. I put my pack on the other side of it, so that the fire would not be quite so obvious to see, but still it was clear that we were going to be taking a risk at getting noticed. By this point, though, the snow was falling thick enough that I was more worried about us freezing to death, than of the orcs finding us.

"I think it probably hid our tracks pretty well, anyway," said Ricarda.

"True, if they even ever got into that tunnel, or knew where it let out," I said.

"Not if Rinthilios didn't want them to, I think," said Ricarda.

We sat there in silence for a time, with only the sound of the softly crackling fire. Then, Ricarda noticed that the flowers were still very well preserved (the cold might actually have helped with this), and decided to weave them into her hair. They were large flowers, though, and

she couldn't get all four of them, so she decided to put two of them in my hair, which seemed pretty silly to me but I was in a good mood now that I felt safe and not as cold, so I let her do it. Shortly after she did this, we both started to experience a queer thing happening with our vision.

The snow was still there, but we could see fires through it, and some of them appeared to be quite large. There were also encampments on the hills between us and Mathom Holt, and we heard loud and harsh voices coming from them, along with the sounds of metal machinery grinding, the lash of whips, and the braying of animals in pain or rage.

Beyond the hills, I saw the peaks of a few towers rising out of the forest, with white lights on them that shone through the darkness. I realized that I was seeing a siege, an army had surrounded the forest with soldiers and machines of war, and the ones who lived in that forest, and those towers, could not leave.

Then, there was a particularly dense swirl of snow that obscured my vision, and when that cleared, the towers and the rest were gone. It was back to empty hillsides and a forest in the distance with only the ruined bits of broken towers poking through here and there. I looked over at Ricarda, a bit dazed, and saw from the expression on her face that she had seen the same thing.

"What was that?" I asked, not sure why I thought she would know but I had to say something.

"The past, I think," said Ricarda. "I've been getting glimpses of it ever since I started holding these flowers,

but that was the longest one yet. When we were in that tunnel, I saw it full of light and the sound of elves, every once in a while, just for a moment or two at a time. But this wasn't a happy scene; it looked like a war."

"It's probably why those tunnels were all made," I said. "There were wars, between the elves and the Dark Lord, ages past. I don't know much about it, but there are some books at Great Smials that tell a little bit about it."

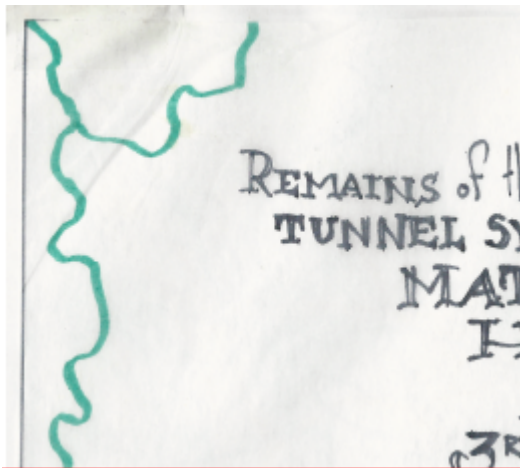
We sat there in silence for a little while longer, with only the soft sound of the fire crackling. Then, I realized that this was really the first opportunity I had to talk to Ricarda about something other than, "what do we do now?!" We had been running, walking, or trying to figure out where to go (and how) ever since we had met.

"So," I said, not sure how to begin exactly, "where did you say your family lives again?"

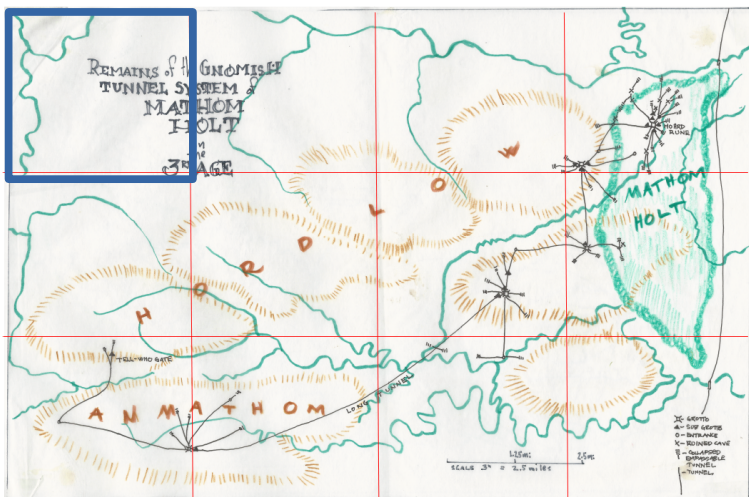
"We don't say," said Ricarda, without looking at me, just staring into the fire with her head propped up on her knees.

"Oh," I said. "Wait, to anyone?"

"No outsiders," she said, then looked over at me and narrowed her eyes a bit, "although actually now that I think about it I'm not sure about other Hobbits. The Grandmother talked about not wanting to let the Big Folk know where we lived, not even the good ones. But then I'm not sure if she knew we would ever meet other Hobbits."



Belowground



"Oh. Why is that? Some of the Big Folk are good. The Rangers, for example, or Gandalf."

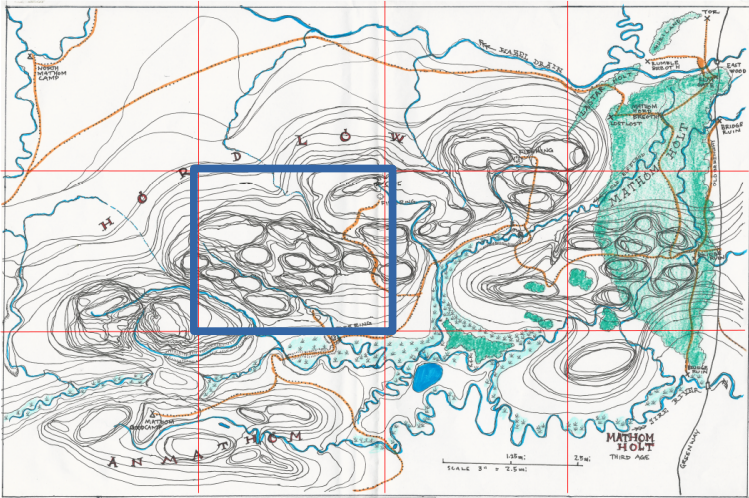
"I don't expect The Grandmother ever said anything about Wizards, but she did say that even the Big Folk who seem good must not be told. You don't keep a secret by telling people who don't absolutely need to know."

"Oh. Well, if you're so afraid of the rest of the world," I said, maybe not choosing my words very wisely, "why did you ever leave? How did you end up traveling with that merchant?"

Ricarda sighed, and looked back at the fire, and away from me. For a nonce, I thought she was not going to answer at all, and that I had offended her. But then, she did answer, slowly, as if she were figuring out the answer as she spoke, and had maybe been asking herself the same question.

"We do leave our homes, from time to time. Usually, we just go to the city of Tharbad, to trade for the things they make that we can't, like metal tools. But I met the merchant, and he said he needed a helper, and I was tired of home and excited about seeing somewhere else. Plus, he had these ancient coins and carvings and they looked elvish, and he said we would find more of them, and I had never met an elf."

"Why was he looking for a hobbit as a helper?" I asked.
"The Big Folk don't normally employ Hobbits, I don't think. Not in Tharbad, anyway."



"I'm not sure, but I think we wanted a helper who was small, so he wouldn't have to worry about them taking his treasure once he found it. He probably thought a hobbit would be easier to control. I wasn't intending to steal anything anyway, and also I thought maybe if we were going somewhere that you could find elvish coins washed downstream, I might meet an elf that was still living."

"That part worked out, anyway," I said. "You met Rinthilios."

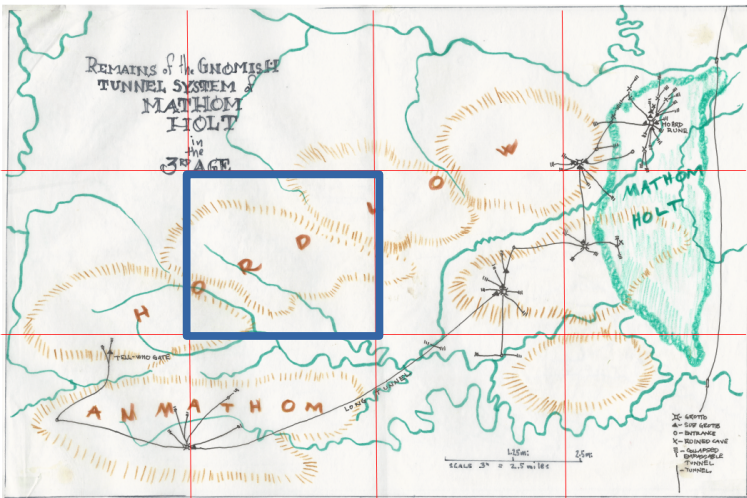
"I did. But first I got beaten by orcs and tied up, and I thought I was going to get killed, and now I'm thinking maybe it was a silly idea to leave home. But on the other hand, I think the Big Folk of Tharbad are starting to have some guesses as to where we live. The only reason they haven't figured out exactly where yet, is they don't particularly care. But someday we will have to leave; we do it every few generations. When we do, someone will have to know something about where else there is to live."

"I suppose that's true," I said. "How do you know when it is time to move everyone to a new place?"

"There isn't a rule for it," said Ricarda. "It is more that the elders start to see too many signs of trouble coming. The young are always interested in moving, I think, but it doesn't actually happen unless the oldest of Grandmother's Hobbits are also convinced. That hasn't happened yet, but I think it may happen in my lifetime, maybe. I thought it might be good for me to know where we could move to, that would be out of sight and safe. But so far, I don't see anywhere like that."



Belowground



"Maybe you could just move to the Shire," I said. "It seems safe enough."

"Not for us, it isn't," said Ricarda. "The Grandmother said it was not safe if Big Folk knew where we lived, even the good-hearted ones. We must be hidden, or cruel Men will come to us. I wonder if it will look something like that vision of the battle we just saw. I don't think any place would be safe from that, except a place they didn't know how to find."

I sat and thought about that for a time. I thought of Great Smials as very safe, but I could not say for certain that it would do all that well if Big Folk came in large numbers. Then again, I don't think there was any place where you could keep hidden as many hobbits as lived in the Shire. Grandmother's Hobbits must have been a much smaller group. Perhaps they were about as numerous as the Bree Hobbits, or the Shire Hobbits when the Shire was first founded, and they all lived at Old Smials.

While we sat there, looking out at the hills and the forest in the distance, I realized that I could see movement off in the east, on the road. At first I thought it might be those strange visions coming back, but after a short time I decided it was really happening now.

"Do you see that?" asked Ricarda, at about that time.

"I saw something, on the road I think," I said. "It's hard to see, with the snow flurries, but it looked like a group of a dozen or so. I could not say for certain what sort of folk they were."

"Saw something, saw something," said Who.

We sat there for a few long moments, thinking. It was not long before I started to think that, if we had seen them, they probably had a fair chance at seeing us. The snow had tapered off, and our little fire must have shone out clearly. They had gone over a rise and down again, out of sight, so we were probably out of sight to them now, but if they kept coming our way, once they came over the next rise we would be completely exposed. The only way to get out of sight was to get up into the hills before that happened, where there were more boulders and ridges to use to stay out of sight.

I don't recall that we even said anything, particularly, we just both got up, gathered our very few belongings (pretty much just my travel pack), and started walking. It was still cold, but at least the snow had stopped. Hildigard and Who came along with no hesitation. The last thing I did before we left was dump some snow onto our little campfire, so that it wouldn't lead anyone straight to our tracks. I felt very cold, and we ran for quite a while in complete silence, sticking to the lowest line between two ridges, hearing only the crunch of the snow beneath our feet and our own hearts pounding.

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You are surprised to be interrupted from a different direction, when Isengrim enters from the direction of your father's office. You and your sisters look up in surprise.

"Hello?" says Bella.

"Bella, could I talk to you in father's office, please?" he asks.

No one says anything, but Bella gets up and walks with Isengrim back into the Thain's Office. You and Mira look at each other in silence for a few moments, wondering what that was about.

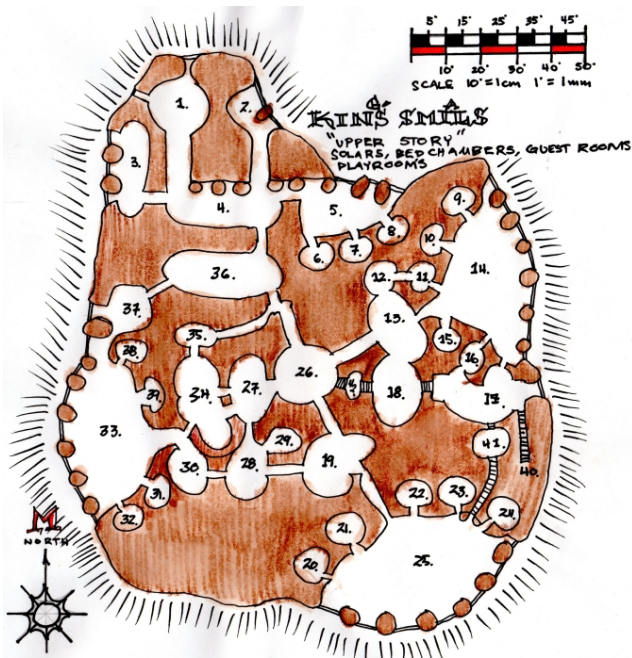
"Well," you say, "I guess I'll just pop out and do a bit of looking around. I haven't had the chance to do a proper exploration of our old rooms since I got back, I've been spending almost every waking hour down here with Papa."

"Oh, what a good idea!" says your sister. "I'll go with you."

Bother. Your actual plan was to circle around to the other door of the Thain's Office, press your ear to the door, and see if you could overhear the conversation between Isengrim and Bella. You would feel a little awkward about doing that in front of Mira, but more importantly, she would be likely to giggle and give the whole thing away. Sometimes, middle-aged mother that she is, she still acts like the little sister.

So, instead of that, do you and Mira:

- 1) Go the Children's Solar, where you and your sisters played as youngsters? Page 15
 - 2) Visit the Children's Study and Hearth, where you sat as your father taught you to read and write? Page 21
 - 3) Investigate the Thain's Solar, where your brother Isengrim has been spending most of his time in recent years (and perhaps left clues as to what he is thinking about)? Page 25
- Check out the Guests' Solar, to see if anyone is staying there now? Page 29



4) check out the Guests' Solar?

1. GUEST ROOM	12. STUDY	23. THAIN'S ROOMS	34. GUEST STUDY
2. " "	13. CHILDREN'S STUDY & HEARTH	24. " "	35. CLOSET
3. " "	14. CHILDREN'S SOLAR	25. THAIN'S SOLAR	36. SERVANTS HALL
4. SERVING CHAMBER	15. CHILDREN'S ROOM	26. CENTRAL CHAMBER	37. GUEST ROOM
5. GUEST SOLAR	16. " "	27. GUEST HEARTH	38. " "
6. GUEST ROOM	17. STAIR HALL	28. MORNING ROOM	39. " "
7. " "	18. SERVANTS HEARTH	29. CLOSET	40. STAIRS TO BARN K.S.
8. " "	19. THAIN'S HEARTH	30. GUEST ROOM	41. THAIN'S ATTIC
9. CHILDREN'S ROOM	20. THAIN'S ROOMS	31. " "	42. CANDLE ROOM
10. " "	21. " "	32. " "	
11. " "	22. " "	33. GUEST SOLAR	

KEY: KING'S MILLS



The Children's Solar was, when you were very small, the place you spent the most time in Great Smials. It was large enough to run around in, and had many windows to let in light. You recall it as being somewhat bigger than it looks to you now, of course, since you were smaller then. As you grew it became more the room you stumbled through, half-awake, on the way to the Great Kitchen downstairs where your mother would put you and your sisters to work.

It was also, of course, the room that your youngest brother Isengar was playing in when he was abducted, many years ago. It was your first introduction to the fact that the world could be that dangerous, even to your family, and even in your family home. Even after he was rescued, you never fully returned to your previous sense of security. Unlikely your older sister, though, who deals with problems mostly by charging straight at them, or your younger sister who deals with problems using charm and empathy, you have most often used stealth and quiet observation.

no hobbit alive who would long ago. Did he bring orc night. There is only forest in your chest, and you feel walking forward into the re-opened, and the icy air darkness. As you come your father's throat. His where you are, then step pressed flowers in it, and several steps. "Get the box hands. Mira must have left walk to the library and get floor, and then leans over dessicated form. You watch again, the sorcerer is control of your father's flower from your hair, and Bother, you are not very in his hands. It slashes still holds the sword out in brighter now then it was left hand, which holds the

even remember that it once
servants to dig for him? Or
looking on Great Smials, and
a thrill of fear. You
main cellar, you turn
from outside can come into
closer, he does **not** turn
eyes glow red. "Stop
away from it, or your father
place it under the Arthedain
and bring it to me," says
it in the library when the
it, then come down here to
to pick it up. Putting **his**
for any sign of a change in
inside his head. He sees
mind. But then, even that
throw it over him, hoping
good at throwing, and
across the very side of his
front of him, but clearly
before. To your surprise,
Rhudaur lockbox. The

"Oh, it's been a while," says Mira, looking around with wide eyes, obviously lost in memories of her early childhood spent playing in this room.

The rooms adjacent were once the rooms you and your siblings shared. You and Donna were roommates for part of your childhood. Without saying anything to each other, you both drift over to the room you shared for several years. It is occupied, but the door is standing open. A young Hildibold looks out at the sound of your approach.

"Oh, hullo Hildibold," say Mira. "How is your foot doing? Did your father give you some herbs to reduce the pain a bit?"

"Uh, no," says Hildibold quietly. "He did send me to my room and tell me I had to stay here for the rest of the day."

You hear your sister's sharp intake of breath, and looking over you see a her lips tighten into a grimace. She is not as sharp-tempered as Bella, but she seems not to be very happy with her brother at this moment. You are not either, but really little Hildibold cannot be running around right now with his foot wrapped in a bandage, so telling him he has to stay in his room is not such a problem. It does seem like he could use some company, though.

"Well, your aunt Donna and I used to sleep in this room," says Mira as she walks in, "so we'll just come in and chat with you for a while."

You both sit on one bed, while Hildibold sits on the other bed, facing you. He looks a bit nervous at first, unsure if he is supposed to be having company, but soon your sister

has him laughing with stories of her youth sleeping in the same room. She tells the tale of the time she snuck a bullfrog into her room and tried to keep it as a pet. Its croaking at night made the walls of Great Smials echo until her parents showed up, at which point she tried to hide the frog under her covers and pretend that she had just been belching from too much dinner. A grown mother of several hobbits herself now, your sister is well able to guess what sort of story sets a young hobbit at ease, and her practiced imitation of the bullfrog's croaking noises suggests to you that she has told this story to young audiences before.

While she tells her next story, about the time the two of you convinced your younger brother Isengar that he was adopted, and actually descended from wild pigs, you look around the little room and observe many small changes since you stayed here.

The bedframes are the same, although the mattresses are new. The rug on the floor is new, with a pattern of ducks on a pond beneath a cloudy sky. The wardrobe is the same, and the small shelf on the wall is the same. You walk over close to the shelf, and hold up your lamp high to look at what is on it.


A puzzlebox. A bag of polished marbles. A rock with the pattern of a leaf in it. A small stick which, as far as you can tell, has no distinctive features whatsoever. Also, several small paper packets of seeds, with ink writing on them that says what plants could be grown from them. Flowers for the garden, mostly, although also a few herbs. You notice that most of them are written by your father. He must have given them to Hildibold.

Hmmm...seeds. Your father collected seeds, and was rather organized about it, at least sometimes, from the looks of it. Likely, the ones he gave to Hildibold would not have been his most rare or difficult to replace, since Hildibold is a rambunctious child who seems unlikely to retain his enthusiasm for gardening much past the time of whatever conversation prompted your father to give them to him. So, somewhere, your father must have a collection of seeds, likely somewhere in Great Smials. He might have collected some from his travels, even. Was he already doing this in his youth? And how long can seeds be kept? And did he ever collect any from Mathom Holt? Flowers, perhaps?

Mira has finished her story, including the part where Hilibold learned that his uncle Isengar, at the age of 3, once ran naked through a mudpit outside and snorted, thinking that it was how he should behave given his parentage, until his mother discovered him and put a quick end to Mira's fun. Hildibold finds the story quite entertaining, and is doing a good bit of snorting himself as he laughs. Actually, some of the snort-laughing might have been Mira, perhaps.

"I'm glad you're feeling better," you say, "but I think your aunt Mira and I have to head back to see how your grandfather is doing."

"Yes," says Mira, "I expect Isengrim and Bella are done now. I'll tell someone to bring you up an herbal for the pain in your foot, by the way, Hildibold. If your father finds out and objects, tell him your aunts insisted."

Literacy in the Shire is mostly for the more prominent families, and especially the sons. Your father was somewhat unusual, though by no means unique, in insisting that his daughters be taught to read and write. Word of this spread to some of the other families, such as the Boffins and Brandybucks that you and your sister married into, and it has become more common in the current generation. Certainly you and your sister both taught your own daughters to read, as well as your sons. But when you were a little hobbit-lass, you had no idea that it was pioneering, except for some vague mutterings of disapproval by your mother. You had assumed at the time that it was simply because when you were being taught to read and write, you could not be helping with the chores in the kitchen. Looking back, it may also have been that she had not been taught to read, did not approve of change very much, and also saw no real purpose in it.

The room where you were mostly taught, was this one, a combination hearth and study. The fires in here were

never large ones, but they added a bit of light and warmth. When you were very young, you sat in your father's lap in an overstuffed chair, and he read to you and then you read the same page of the book back to him. Later, you had to sit in your own chair, and work at reading by an oil lamp or candlelight, while your father sat and listened, and occasionally corrected you or gave you a prompt when you didn't know how to say a word.

You recall once telling your older sister, that it had taken a while for you to notice that he was able to do this without looking at the page you were reading (mostly stories of the early days of the Shire, or the fallen Dunedain kingdoms of Arthedain, Cardolan, and Rhudaur). This means that he had memorized, or nearly so, hundreds of pages of that history. Your older sister's eyes got wider as you told her this, and you realized that she had never noticed that fact until you told her.

When the weather was fine, you would receive your reading lessons out of doors instead, where the light was brighter, but the writing lessons were always in this room. Your writing is good enough, though not as bold and wide-stroked as Bella's, nor as graceful and curved as Mira's. Mira looks around the room, noting that it is full of lesson books and writing materials, suggesting that it is still used for the same purpose on occasion.

"We didn't have a room set aside for this in Brandy Hall when I got there," she says. "After Rorimac was born, I had one set up in a similar way. I think I didn't even realize at the time how much I was copying this room."

"We don't quite have anything like that in the Yale," you say, "I mostly use one of the tables in the kitchen. At least the light is good. This room is comfy, but darker than I would like. It never occurred to me when I was little, though, so I suppose it wasn't as much of a problem. Young eyes are sharper."

"Oh, look," says Mira, "it's father's reading lamp." She holds up a lamp with a finely crafted set of mirrors so that all light from the candle inside will fall upon a line of text. "I mostly use my magic lamp from Calpitan. Do you still have yours?"

You shrink a bit from the idea of bringing out a magic lamp for such a normal and mundane task as giving lessons. Sitting next to a window seems a better approach. But then, the Brandybucks seem to be less stuck on custom, and less averse to new things, than the Boffins. Or most of the Shire, really.

"Yes," you say, "but I don't use it much. It seemed better to keep it secret, or at least not show it off too much."

In fact, you have it on you. Great Smials has a lot more windowless rooms than the Boffin home at the Yale, and an intuition told you that you might need to do some looking around in private. Why the elven-made magic lamp would be better for this than an ordinary oil lamp, you can't quite say.

"Do you suppose it's still Papa giving the little ones lessons here, nowadays?" asks Mira. "Not right now, obviously, but when he's not bedridden. Or do you think our brothers or sisters-in-law do it?"

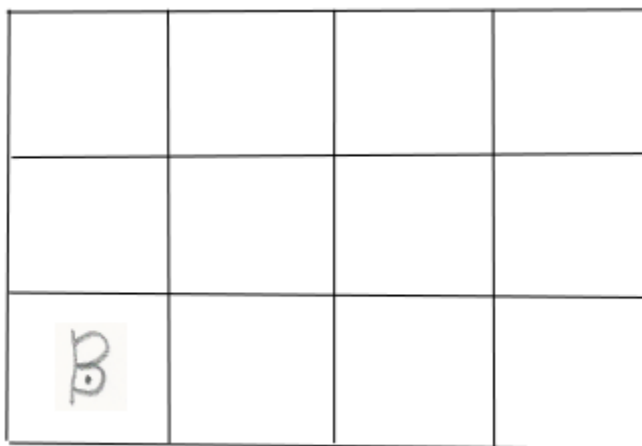
"Papa, I expect, whenever he's able," you reply. "I really cannot imagine Hildibrand being a very conscientious teacher, for example. Young Sigismond often seems more mature than his father; he would never have learned to read if he'd had to rely on Hildibrand to teach him."

"No, I expect not, although no doubt he has been a very conscientious tutor in the manner of card and dice games," says Mira. "Oh, look, it's Papa's fancy inks. He's been making some illustrations. Oh, goodness..."

Mira stares at one page in particular, then hands it to you to look at. There, on a page, in your father's unmistakeable art style, is a large flower, in gold ink. Not any flower that you have ever seen in the Shire. Was it drawn from memory?

Or perhaps there is a living model somewhere? The paper is not aged or brittle, and the drawing looks recent, not more than a month old.

"Let's see if Bella is done talking with Isengrim," you say to Mira, and with wordless agreement you both head quickly downstairs to return to your father's room.



Once, the Thain's principal chambers were up here, in a large, many-windowed "Solar" and several smaller rooms that attached to it. Your father's father and grandfather spent most of their time here. Your own father, on the other hand, spent most of his time in a cluster of rooms downstairs, on the western side, and these rooms were for many years left more or less as his father had arranged them.

Then, because the Thain's Solar has south-facing windows, so it gets a goodly amount of light from the sun during the winter, your father started to raise plants in here during the winters. He would put the pots in the window, or on the floor nearby where they would get a good full dose of sun every day, but they were protected from the frost. His father and grandfather's things were finally moved out, and for a while it was simply a winter greenhouse.

More recently, your oldest brother Isengrim has been spending much of his time here. You are aware that he has

a perfect right to do so, and moreover that your father probably encouraged him to move into this part of Great Smials. It nonetheless did give the appearance that Isengrim was trying to take over the position of Thain, while your father is still alive, because these are still known as the "Thain's Rooms". Your father doesn't seem to mind, and given his advanced age it makes perfect sense for Isengrim to be taking over many of the duties of Thain anyway, so why not the Thain's Rooms. Still, it rankles, just a little; it reminds one of a vulture, waiting for the dying animal to finally expire.

Isengrim has sparse decorations, here, as is his way. The walls are mostly bare, with only a few maps of routes around the Shire that the Shire-Reeves used to police the borders. Your father is too old now to walk with them, and in truth they are perfectly well able to do it themselves, but Isengrim often accompanies them, helping them to find if any outside people or force is approaching the Shire.

There hasn't been any such threat, not of any size, since your ancestor Bullroarer Took led a small army of Shire Hobbits to defeat an invading force of goblins. There are occasional vagrants or small bands of thieves, though. You find on Isengrim's desk his notes on what has been intercepted, and on what date and where. You look up to see your sister Mira cocking one eyebrow and smirking.

"Isengrim's notes make good reading?" she asked.

"Just looking to see if...just looking," you say. This would be so much easier if Mira were not along. But at least it's not Bella; you wouldn't be able to look at

anything. You look into the smaller rooms, which connect to the Solar. Most of them seem to be storerooms. One of them, you realize, is a seed bank. A sizeable chest of small drawers, each filled with small paper envelopes labeled in your father's script. "Dog Rose", "Honeysuckle", "Enchanter's nightshade", "Columbine", "Kingcup", "Forget-me-not". It appears that this drawer holds the flower seeds.

Because your father had been using this Solar as an indoor greenhouse, from time to time, he had the seeds stored here, along with a few small gardening tools and a few potted plants. Wait, potted plants? Why would they be here? No sun gets into this room, it's too far away from the windows of the larger chamber. You lean down to look closer at them.

"What are those?" asks Mira.

"I don't know," you answer, "there isn't any label."

"Should we put them by the windows? It seems like it would be too dark in here."

"Yes, I suppose so," you say, and carefully pick one up. "Father must have put them in here before he got sick. I'm surprised they're still alive."

"Why would he do that?" asks Mira.

"Well," you say slowly, thinking out loud, "maybe he wanted them to flower. Sometimes if you put a plant in a dark room, it will force it to produce a flower. I remember father used to do that before a Midwinter or Autumn

Solstice party, if he wanted all of his potted plants to flower at once, so he could put them out on the tables as decorations."

You put the pot you are carrying carefully onto one of the windowsills, in a spot that looks like it might be where it came from. With Mira's help, the two of you put all six of the potted plants back by the window, where they can get enough sunlight.

"Why would he be doing that now?" Mira asks. "Is he thinking he'll have decorations for the folks from Tuckborough who are moving in to Great Smials for the winter? Six plants won't be enough to make much of a difference in one of the big halls."


While you are carrying the last plant, you look closer at the stem, and realize something you hadn't before. There are marks near the stalk, that look like there had been a flower there, not so long ago. Checking the others, you find the same. These plants did flower, but perhaps Papa thought they might produce more if he kept them in the dark longer. Then he fell ill, and couldn't move them back into the sunlight.

"What is it, Donna?" asks Mira.

"They did flower, it looks like," you say. "but I'm curious what they were."

"So am I," says Mira. "Should we ask Papa?"

Should you? In any case, it seems like it's time to go back to see him.

There are many rooms in Great Smials which are called "Guest" rooms. Some of them may never have actually been used for guests, since the Long Winter at least, which was over 150 years ago. But, the Guest's Solar was in fact used by guests from time to time. It had many west-facing windows, which gave a nice view of the sunset in the evening, and there were several smaller rooms adjacent to it for use in the case of larger groups. When the Brandybucks or the Bagginses or one of the other important families came for Midsummer Festival or one of the Solstice parties, they were often given this area to stay in.

Odd, then, that it is empty now, when so many other guest rooms are actually being used. Perhaps it is being saved for someone? But none of the more prominent families would be coming to Great Smials, now, with the winter as fierce as it is. Each of them is, like the Took, taking in lodgers from among those who have seen their own small homes buried in snow.

Looking around, it is evident that it has been cleaned out recently, so your father has something in mind. Or perhaps it is Isengrim? You look over at Mira, who is gazing around the room with some memory of the past in her mind. She looks over at you and smiles.

"I remember when the Brandybucks came to visit, and I met Gorbadoc in this room while the rest of his family was downstairs. He showed me a hidden panel that he had found, where someone stored their whisky. Gorbadoc is rather observant, and he saw it almost immediately, although it looked well camouflaged to me. I think perhaps the fact that he can't hear means that he pays more attention to what he sees."

"Whisky? Whose was it?" you ask.

"I never did find out. Whoever it is, was probably upset that it was empty by the time the Brandybucks left. You really ought not to leave drink undefended around the Brandybucks."

"It might have been another guest from the past," you say, "who forgot it when they left."

"I doubt it," says Mira, "not many guests check their rooms for hidden panels to store things. Some Took thought it was a good room to use for the purpose, though, since it is normally empty. I wonder if there's anything in it now."

She leads you to one of the smaller rooms attached to the Solar, and quickly finds the hidden panel. It is rather well disguised, although once you know it is there it is not so

hard to pull the panel off the wall and find the space behind it.

"Whoa," says Mira, and she brings out a flask of whisky. "It looks like the same kind of bottle that was there before. You realize what this means?"

"What?" you ask.

"Two things, actually," says Mira. "First, I'm going to have a sip right now," and she opens it and takes a spoonful's worth. "And second, now we know whose whisky Gorbado and I got tipsy on all those years ago."

"We do?" you ask, and then immediately add, "oh, I guess we do."

There are not many people living in Great Smials now, who were also living here back when Gorbado Brandybuck found a similar bottle in the same hiding spot. Of the few who were, your father would have no need of a hiding place, and if he needed one he had more than one vault he could use. Others, like Isengar, were too young to have obtained the whisky in the first place yet, or like Hildibrand they were not clever enough to hide it well. Most of your older brothers now would have no reason to hide whisky up here, as they could as easily store it in their own rooms, under lock and key if they were worried about it being taken by anyone else. No, there was only one Took who would have needed to hide it when he was young, who might still find this spot close enough to his rooms to keep using it for the same purpose now, perhaps out of habit.

"Our own Isengrim," says Mira with a smirk. "And he always acts like the proper and responsible one."

"Let's go back and see if he's done talking to Bella," you say.

"I am tempted to take his bottle to him," says Mira, "but if I do he'll guess that I helped drink his whisky years ago. I bet he would still get mad about it."

"Your secret is safe with me," you say.