

Chapter 10

Running Into Each Other Again

"So, what was all that about?" asks Mira, when Bella at last returns to your father's room.

"Oh, Isengrim is being a fool," says Bella, sounding only slightly perturbed.

"What about?" asks Mira.

"He seems to think I'm making up tales, about seeing the sorcerer in the woods west of here," says Bella. "For what reason he thinks I would do that, is not clear. I think he just hates the idea of there being intruders in the Shire that he can't just go beat with a stick until they leave. He's hardly even looked."

"I think he means well," you say, "he's just a little bit slow to believe in something happening that he hasn't seen happen before."

"People say my Bungo is cautious," says Bella. "If I told him I'd seen a sorcerer in the woods, he wouldn't be frowning and trying to talk me into thinking I hadn't seen one, as if that would do any good. Sometimes I think Isengrim is just a big"

"Why don't you read some more of Papa's journal, Mira?" you say quickly, trying to interrupt Bella's fuming before

it turns into a rage. Bella frowns at you for a moment, then her expression clears.

"Yes, I suppose Donna's right," says Bella, "let's do something that might be more useful than listening to my older brother."

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We managed to make it to the banks of a small creek, and continued uphill while bent over to keep our heads low, so that we would not be seen from the road when they came over the last rise. I was tempted to poke my head up, to see where they were, but I knew that would just give them a chance to see me, so we just kept moving. Our backs began to ache, after a time, moving fast while doubled over like that, but we made it up into the hills without being seen, or thought we had. Now, I'm not so sure.

When we got to the end of the little stream, where it turned into a few dozen small rills of melting snow, we had to pause and think what to do. If we kept going straight, over the hills, we would soon end up back by the falls where the flowers were, and that was pretty close to where we had last seen the orcs before we entered the tunnels. It might be that those orcs were who we had just seen on the road north of us, but then again it might not be. Or, they could have split into two groups, so we did not think much of heading right back to where we last saw the orcs, in case some of them at least might still be there. We came to a small trail, and took it to our left, up towards the top of the hill. It stopped at a fire ring, stones in a circle around a place where it seemed that campfires had been lit not so long ago. I wondered who lived

around here besides Rinthilios, to make or use a fire ring, and if Rinthilios ever came out of the forest and the tunnels. If it wasn't him, perhaps the orcs had been here before.

We paused there for a short time, but it still seemed too exposed, and we found a cave nearby. We were standing at the entrance, wondering if it would be safer to hide in there for a while or look for somewhere else, perhaps a place with more than one exit, when the sounds of movement from down the trail made the decision for us. We moved into the cave, headed towards the back of it, hoping there was no hibernating cave bear or the like. Ricarda paused for just a moment when Who flew away, off to the south, but there was no time to call her bird back and anyway we did not wish to make any noise, so we hustled on into the cave instead, just the three of us, and got out of the light before the sounds got closer.

It was a band of orcs, for certain; I'm not sure even now if it was who we'd seen on the road before but probably it was. They had with them a prisoner, a man, and they had tied him up. We did not stay close enough to the cave entrance to watch, but headed back to be out of sight. As the cave went back, it got narrower and narrower, until it was hard for Hildigard or us to go much further. We were pretty well hidden, though, behind rocks that screened us from sight from the front of the cave, and it was good that we were, as the orcs ended up going into the cave as well, of course. We crouched there, in the dark at the back of the cave, hiding behind rocks and trying not to make a sound. I was worried about Hildigard, that she would growl or bark, but she seemed to understand what was going on, and she stayed quiet and hidden as well.

"This man has no money," said one of the orcs, "and he doesn't know where any treasure is either. He lies. Let's just cook him, and get a good meal for our troubles anyway."

"Now, Dugrum," said the man, in a high, pleading voice, "you're not quite correct there, I do know where a great deal of treasure is. Just you wait and see, you'll not be sorry, I promise you."

"Why would you not have this treasure on you, man-scum?" asked another orc.

"Well, now, uh, Dashguf is it?" said the man.

"Gashduf," corrected the orc impatiently, "answer the question."

"So, I had more treasure than I could transport," said the man quickly, "and I meant to come back and get it. In fact, that's just what I was preparing to do when we happened to encounter each other on the road. I had already taken a great deal of treasure with me to my home town, in Tharbad. Have you been there? It's a wonderful town. Perhaps we could all go there together? There's a lot more treasure there, you could..." but he was shouted down by many orcish voices at once.

"Gashduf, Dugrum, you stay here with him, and we will check if the treasure is where he says it is," said a third orc.

"You will take it and leave!" said Dugrum angrily. "We will go with you."

"You said he was good for nothing but the stewpot anyway," said the other orc, "and there was no treasure. Why do you care if we go without you? But if you want to come, then come, just make sure he is tied up securely and out of sight. Hurry, or we will not wait for you."

There was some sound of shuffling about, as the dozen or so orcs made ready to leave the cave, and we also heard high-pitched sounds of anguish from the man as his bonds were tightened. Then, for a while, all became quiet. We waited long enough to be certain that they were gone, and not coming back for something they forgot, before we came out of hiding at the back of the cave. When we finally did, Ricarda stomped straight up to the man, who was on the ground, tied hand and foot. He was balding, a bit overweight, with a broad face and blue eyes, and a thick beard across his jawline and chin. He did not look happy to see Ricarda.

"Tyne, you miserable piece of pond scum!" she hissed at him, her voice low (so as not to be heard by the orcs from a distance) but fierce.

"Now, now, Miss Ricarda," said the man anxiously, sweating and eyeing her nervously, "I realize that the exact circumstances of our parting of the ways might have caused you some anxiety,"

"You left me to the orcs and ran away!" hissed Ricarda. "I've seen more loyalty from traitors! You could at least have scattered your coins behind us, the orcs might have

stopped to take them! You could have let me get up on that horse of yours! But no, you were off on your horse and out of there before I had a chance. What happened to your horse, anyway, did it buck you off in disgust?"

"Well now, Miss Ricarda, I have in fact had some difficulty with old Ripley," said the man, "but it is to be hoped that he will"

"You backstabbing poison-tongued toad!" interrupted Ricarda, leaning her face down close to his, her expression twisted in anger, "You left the horse to its own devices, thinking the orcs would follow its trail instead of yours! Well your trick didn't work, you clay-brained, loathsome knotty-pated fool! You are the rankest compound of villainous smell that ever offended nostril! I've a mind to dump you into the ashes of the orcs' fire just to remove your stink from the air!"

"Ricarda!" I said, still keeping my voice low but trying to inject it with some urgency, "keep your voice down! And calm down!"

"You think you're in trouble now, that the orcs may come back and kill you quick?" said Ricarda, jabbing her finger in the man's chest as he lay on his side. "Well you may not be so lucky, maybe they'll leave you to die slow instead!"

"Ricarda, get a hold of yourself!" I hissed. "We need to get out of here! Let's just untie him and get moving! You can yell at him later!"

Ricarda looked over at me, and she calmed down just a small amount. When she turned back to look at the man, she still looked angry, but I could tell, and so could he, that the storm had passed. He looked relieved, but he made sure to keep apologizing, just in case.

"Miss Ricarda, you have every right to be angry, and I have certainly made some mistakes in recent days, but I am very sorry about that, and if you could find it in your heart to loose my bonds, I promise you, that you will never regret it."

Well then, Ricarda reached into small purse and pulled out a knife, and she stood there over him, looking down with a hard expression on her face, and I was not quite sure what was going to happen. But then, she stepped over him, and started to work on cutting the ropes that tied his hands and feet.

It was just at that point that we heard the orcs returning. It was too late to leave the cave, and we scurried to the back, and returned to our hiding place behind rocks in the rear of the cave. We tried to squeeze even a little further back, not that this would do much good, but it seemed like perhaps if we got far enough back it would be too narrow for the orcs to get to us even if they knew we were there.

"His bonds are cut!" came an orc voice, perhaps Gashdudf.
"Dugrum, you idiot, you left a knife on him!"

"I did not!" said Dugrum angrily. "He had help!"

"It doesn't matter," came the other voice we had heard before, which appeared to be the leader's. "Man, you have

lied to us, there is no treasure, and we will put you in a stewpot now."

"Now, Burunduk," said the man, his voice panicky and quick, "there must be some mistake! You must have looked in the wrong place, perhaps! Let me describe where it is again, and you can check, it will be there, I promise!"

"Do not listen to him, his voice is poison," said Gashdulf. "Shall I kill him fast, or slow?"

"Now Dashguf, please don't be hasty!" said the man, virtually squeaking now, "if you're hungry, there's a better morsel than me for you! Right in the back of this cave!"

"What?!" came the voice of the leader.

Ricarda said nothing, but I could feel the tiny sound of her tensing every muscle in her body with fear and anger, as she realized that the man was about to betray her to the orcs a second time. She might have exploded with more insults for him, but there was no time, because right after that we heard the sound of a very large bear, roaring angrily.

It seemed to shake the whole cave, a mighty tidal wave of sound, and for a few moments it stunned us all, Hobbit, Man, Dog, and Orc. Then, there was a terrific avalanche of the sounds of orcs scrambling for the exit, followed shortly thereafter by another mighty roar from a cave bear. I laid where I was, eyes tightly closed, hoping that it would not see (or smell) where we were, or could not get to us in our small crevice in the back of the cave if it did.

Ricarda and I hugged each other and Hildigard, who was lying very flat and very still.

Then, there was only the distant sound of the orcs as they beat a hasty retreat off into the distance. We lay where we were, making no noise, listening for any sound of a mighty bear moving in the cave. For a time we heard nothing, and then:

"Hiding hobbits huddle quiet,
questionable quarters filling,
ferocious fantasy fears nearby it,
not nocturnal killing."

"Rinthilios!" said Ricarda and I together. We scrambled out of our hiding place, and saw him standing there near the mouth of the cave. He was looking at us with the slightest of smiles on his face. Near his feet, the man was lying there, passed out from shock apparently.

"Hello, friends. You have attracted attention from the orcs once again, I think."

"Is it the same ones?" I asked. "Or are there several groups?"

"Several, several," came a sound from the bush nearby.

"Who!" said Ricarda. The starling came fluttering down to land on her outstretched hand.

"Your little friend there came to me, quite excited, and seemed to think you might need help," said Rinthilios.

"My little trick of sound has sent them scurrying away for the moment. But not too far away, I think."

"I was not sure which way we should go next," I said. "We were wanting to circle around back to the forest, where it comes near to the main road, so that we can meet up with Gandalf and Arathorn again. Now I'm not sure if that's the right idea or not."

"Still a good idea, I would say," said Rinthilios, "but I would circle north. I will come with you, I think, until you are safe back inside the forest. What shall we do with your friend, here? He seems to have found the sound of a cave bear to be too much for his gentle disposition."

"He can lay there until the orcs come back to roast him!" said Ricarda, angry again. "He was about to turn us over to them! For the second time!"

"I heard that," said Rinthilios. "It is a common trick, in certain fairy tales. 'Do not eat me, there is another who will be tastier.' I believe it does not work so well in reality. But he was not acting out of malice, I think, but simple fear. He is not equipped with much in the way of basic courage."

"He's a back-stabbing coward, is what you mean!" said Ricarda, unmollified.

"Perhaps yes," said Rinthilios, "but I would not take it so much to heart. Some people are good at some things, others at different things. The proper strategy, is simply to know what each person is, and not count on them being

otherwise. He is not made for facing fear head-on, I believe."

We looked at his unconscious figure on the floor, and there seemed to be little argument on that point.

"There are people who would not esteem Hobbits, because they are not large, muscular, and fit for great feats of strength or brutal combat. There are those who do not esteem any type but their own, forgiving only of flaws they have themselves, and condemning any who lack their own virtues. It is a wiser tactic simply to know what each person is capable of, and not, and treat them accordingly. I believe your erstwhile companion is not the sort to do well in combat, but he may have other talents."

We stood there, for a moment, looking at him and thinking about what Rinthilios had said. He was right, of course; the Rangers could have considered Hobbits to be small and useless in combat, but instead they always seemed to treat us with respect. It seemed different, though, to be unable to face danger without trying to betray your comrades.

"There were other minions of the Enemy," said Rinthilios, "more powerful and horrifying than orcs, in the ancient wars. Few there were, of Elf or Man or any other race, who could face them; terror would seize their hearts."

"I bet they didn't try to sell out their friends, though," said Ricarda, still with a trace of bitterness in her voice.

"No, they did not, but they had not his instinct for barter," said Rinthilios. "If dealmaking is all your life, it would be

hard in a moment of terror to not reach for it, and grasp for some deal that could save you. I do not say to trust him, but it will do your own heart no favors to bear a grudge. Simply note that it is his way, and do not make plans that require him to be otherwise."

"I certainly will not," said Ricarda, and about at that time, we saw that he was beginning to stir again. He sat up, blinked, looked around, and when he saw Ricarda he could not look her in the eyes, and looked down instead, and his face showed such unhappiness that I nearly felt sorry for him. He did feel ashamed, I guess.

"Come on then," said Rinthilios. "We should be on our way quickly, before the orcs reconsider and come back ready for a fight."

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There comes a knock on the door, and you and your sisters look at each other a bit wearily.

"Yes, who is it?" asks Mira. Rosemary Took, formerly Rosemary Goldworthy but now married to your brother Isembold, pokes her head in. You see Bella's lips tighten a bit, and her eyes narrow slightly.

"Hullo, Bella? I was just wanting to come by to find out about what happened to my son, Hildibold?"

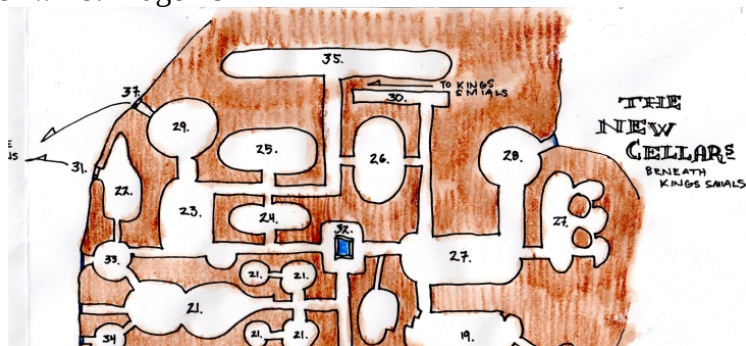
Bella bolts upright and strides over towards Rosemary with a great deal more energy than seems called for, and Rosemary's eyes get wide with alarm. She retreats into the hallway, and perhaps would have closed the door

behind her if not for the fact that Bella has already barged through it. You hear Bella say, "First of all," in a voice that indicates she has quite a lot more to say after the first thing, whatever that is. Bella closes the door behind her with a thud, and you and Mira look at each other in a mix of surprise and amusement. The voices of Bella and Rosemary are still dimly audible from beyond the door, but you decide not to go closer to listen in. You can fairly well guess the content, in any case. Bella has never exactly approved of Rosemary, and was already in a dark mood from her conversation with Isengrim.


"So, that could go on for a while," says Mira. "Shall we wait here, or slip out? I've a mind to hit the wine cellar."

You don't drink wine very much, but you are a bit thirsty.
Do you:

- 1) Accompany your sister to the wine cellar? Page 15
- 2) Say you're thirsty for a drink of water instead, and head to the cistern? The water there is safe to drink, if not always very tasty. Page 21
- 3) Walk with her downstairs, then get some snow from outside and melt it into pure water using the fire in the smithy? You have often found that looking over what's broken and sent to the smithy to be mended, and what new things are being made, tells you a lot about what is going on in Great Smials. Page 25
- 4) Head to the beer cellar and get a flagon of beer instead of wine? Page 28



21. FORGE & SMITHY	28. STAIR RM. EAST	35. STORG. DRY GOODS
22. SHED	29. STAIR RM. WEST	36. TASTING ROOM
23. BEER CELLAR	30. KITCHENS STAIR	37. GARDEN DOOR
24. CHEESE CELLAR	31. SHED DOOR	38. GRANERY GATE
25. MAIN CELLAR	32. CISTERN	39. SHOPS
26. WORKROOM	33. KILN	40. CRYPT
27. WINE CELLAR	34. KILN	

The wine cellar of Great Smials is actually several rooms, two of them on the larger, eastern side of the cellars, and one on the western. Mira and you are headed for the eastern side, and the most remote of the three wine cellars, where the oldest bottles are kept.

Winemaking is an old tradition in the Shire, its origins, if not lost, then at least debatable in the mists of history and pre-history. The Oldbuck family, which inhabited what later became Great Smials before the Took did, actually were the first to produce wine here, but presumably anything they left here when they departed to cross the Brandywine river has been long since consumed. There are, however, some bottles which were laid down here by your great-grandfather Ferumbras, older brother of Bullroarer Took. Your father once told you that he had been told, by his great-uncle Bullroarer, that some of the bottles in Great Smials were rightfully his, but when he moved out of Great Smials it was not a matter he thought worth arguing with his older brother about.

had an entrance there.
did he use sorcerous powers?
with the bitter cold no
decide to take out your
around, and go back to the
here and keep the sorcerer
around, but you can see the
there," he says. You stop.
dies," he says. You reach
lockbox, on the floor. It's
the sorcerer, and your
three of you rushed out to
bring it to him. Now,
head very close to the
your father's face. He
what your father sees. Or
is enough to tell the
that the sorcerer is as
flowers don't work very well
face, drawing blood, but not
whatever these flowers do,
the Arthedain lockbox comes
Arthedain lockbox ricochets

Well, there is at least one;
Or did he simply wield a
Hobbit is outside, after
magical lamp from Calpitan,
space underneath the stairs.
freezing. You see, almost
shadowy figure of the
He sees the goldbell flower
into the pocket of your
a black ledger book, and
father turns, wide eyed and
find him, and the sorcerer
because you have arrived,
ledger book underneath it,
grabs the box, and then
he did, until that moment,
sorcerer that something has
repelled by these flowers as
as missiles. The sword
much. You jump forwards
he doesn't want it too near
hurtling through the air
off the stone wall, and

You have been to the wine cellars before, of course; you managed to explore every last corner, cranny, niche, and nook of all of Great Smials during your childhood here, at least once. However, you notice that Mira seems to know her way expertly around the wine cellars, as if from long acquaintance. You wonder if she and Gorbado Brandybuck have fond memories of this part of Great Smials also.

The racks of winebottles are not entirely full, of course. When a batch of wine has just finished fermenting and is bottled, it gets close, but this is an infrequent occurrence, annual at the most, and after the next festival at Great Smials (Midsummer, Midwinter, or a Solstice) there will be considerable empty space on the racks. Some parts of them, though, are rarely if ever touched or looked at.

Mira holds her candle lamp close to the bottles, peering at the labels and apparently looking for something in particular. She scans along the rows, looking first high up on tip-toes and then stooping down to look near the floor.

"What are you looking for?" you ask.

"Wine, silly," she says. You arch an eyebrow and consider firing a retort, but decide just to wait. Mira is clearly on the hunt for something in particular, but does not wish to say what it is until she has found it. In the meantime, you look about you in idle curiosity.

The labels are, for the most part, plain and descriptive, made in Tuckborough, but there are a few fancier ones from the best winery in the Shire, near Michel Delving. Some of them have printed, elaborate labels, showing

stags or ivy or grapevines or mushrooms (a Hobbit favorite, perhaps on the wine label to suggest what food it could be paired with).

You know that there is also some wine that is produced outside of the Shire that finds its way here. There is a Mannish village named Folkstead, for example, that is located north of the Shire, and occasionally some of the Tooks will buy a bottle or three of Folkstead wine that they find for sale in Bree.

"Here it is!" says Mira, and she stands up holding a bottle of wine with just such a fancy label. It is not from Folkstead, however, but a place even further away.

"Oh," you say, "my goodness. I didn't know Papa had any wine here from Tharbad."

"He's had a lot of things down here you wouldn't expect to find," says Mira, who has apparently made a more thorough inventory of the wine cellar than you have. "But that's not the most surprising part. Take a closer look!"

She hands you the bottle, and you take it carefully in both hands, setting your candle-lamp on a shelf next to you. It would not do to accidentally drop a bottle of imported wine. Then, holding the bottle's label where the light best hits it, you see what your sister is talking about. Someone has written something on the bottle's label, long ago but in good ink that is still clearly legible.

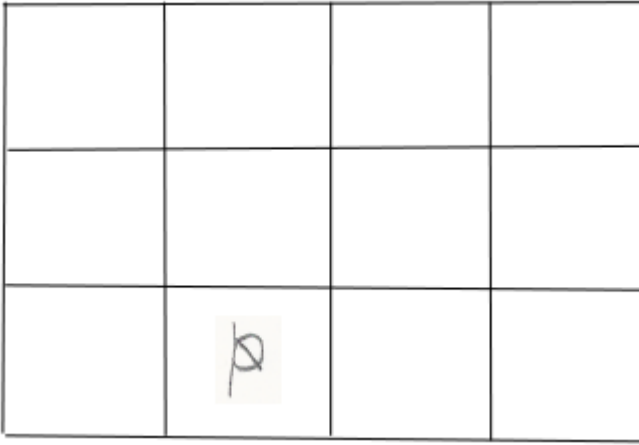
"Gerontius, Don't worry, you'll forget, I trust you. Ricarda."

Ricarda. The aged grandmother that Mira met among another colony of hobbits, far to the south, just upriver from Tharbad. The young hobbit-lass who has been tramping around Mathom Holt, according to your father's journal. No wonder your father put this bottle in the remotest corner of the wine cellar. He might not have wanted your mother to see this particular one. You have a feeling your mother would not have liked it; she did not have a fondness for any mention of your father's youthful adventuring days.

You and your sister look at each other in silence for a few long moments. Then, you hand the bottle back to her.

"Let's not drink that one," you say, "it might have sentimental value. It's probably gone bad by now anyway."

"Agreed," says Mira, "I'll just get a newer white wine on the way out. Hopefully Bella is done with Rosemary, and we can read some more. Let's go."



The cistern of Great Smials, is fed by rainwater from above. Falling through seams of sand that help to filter it, the rainwater then exits through a grate in the cellar roof, and fall into the cistern. When there is a great deal of rainfall, you can hear a steady stream of falling water from this spot if you come down to this part of the cellar.

Rumor has it that the cistern was not planned, but rather an improvised solution to the fact that the roof above this spot leaked water whenever the soil above was sodden. Making a virtue of necessity, the Thain at the time (Isengrim II, namesake of your oldest brother) decided to have a cistern made beneath the leaky spot, as a reservoir of water for whenever it might be needed.

Often, during the winter when there is snow on the hills which Great Smials lies beneath, the melting snow will seep through here, and fill the cistern just as well. This year, the temperatures have thus far been too cold, and there is little snowmelt. The cistern is far from full.

Looking down into it, you recall the time when you came here alone, and lowered your magical Lamp of Calpitan down on a string, guessing (correctly) that it would not be harmed by being submerged. You were able to see it descend down into the water to a great distance. Not until it was halfway down did it occur to you that you might discover, once your lamp reached the bottom and you could see what was there, the bones of some ancient murder victim. Who would you tell, if anyone? Would it be proper to keep such a thing secret? But what would be the point of telling anyone? You were spared that moral quandary, when the light revealed only that about four times since the cistern had been made, the rope that held the bucket had failed, and the ancient remains of the current bucket's predecessors still lay at the bottom.

To be honest, you have never liked the taste of the cistern's water. It is not oily or rotten or anything so bad, but it is not as fresh tasting as you would prefer, unless it has very recently been topped off by rainwater or snowmelt. You bring up a half-bucketful regardless, and dip your flagon in it. Not too bad. While you are standing there considering the taste, you hear the soft footfalls of a Hobbit approaching. It is Holdun Noakes, from nearby Tuckborough. He is carrying a wooden beam across his shoulders, from which two large buckets of hard-packed snow are hanging.

He nods a greeting to you, and sets down his load to dump it into the cistern.

"Oh," you say, "that's why the water tastes fresher than normal. You're filling it."

"Indeed, ma'am, and happy I am to see that you are enjoying it. There may be a need for a store of clean water, before the winter is over, if fuel becomes too scarce to melt snow in quantity."

"I suppose so. It seems like an awful lot of work, though."

"No problem, ma'am," says Holdun, and he reattached his empty buckets to the wooden beam and balances it on his shoulders, and walks back the way he came. "Happy to help."


"Thank-you!" you call after him, and he acknowledges it with a wave of his hand as he walks away.

What you didn't say, because it would seem ungrateful, was that a lack of water is the least likely problem for the months ahead, given the mounds of snow outside. True, fuel to melt it might become scarce, but surely they could simply bring buckets of snow inside and wait, it would melt eventually, since Great Smials is never below freezing inside. Traipsing upstairs, filling the buckets, traipsing downstairs, it seems like an awful lot of work for not that much benefit. Although the water does taste better than usual, with all that fresh snowmelt.

It occurs to you, that some of those who have had to take refuge in Great Smials, because their own homes have collapsed from snow or been buried, may feel awkward about doing so. They are looking for work to do, to convince themselves that they are not simply freeloading. There is work to be done in Great Smials now, but perhaps less than there are hands to do it, and mostly what is needed is for people to simply sit, and wait. No one likes

to believe they are not pulling their weight. But a village full of Hobbits, living in Great Smials for a long winter, worrying if they will have a home to live in come the spring, and doing so in increasingly cramped quarters...this may be a long winter, indeed.

You see Mira walking your way from the wine cellars, holding a bottle of white wine. Hopefully, Bella is done with Rosemary by now, and the three of you can read some more in your father's journal.

You walk downstairs to the cellar with Mira, and when you come to a workroom she goes straight, to head towards the wine cellar, and you turn to your right and make your way to the smithy and kilns. These are not much in use right now, as all fuel is being conserved for the winter, but you find that Gilford Brown is here, and the smithy is fired up. He looks up briefly at your arrival, nods welcome, and immediately returns to his task at hand. It appears that he is making a crude lock of some sort. You wonder what would be the purpose of that; there are much finer locks to be had from the Blue Mountain dwarves who travel through the Shire upon occasion, if one waits until the spring.

Oh, of course. This lock is not for safeguarding family treasures, and its purpose cannot wait until spring. It is meant for locking up foodstocks, when all the food of Great Smials, Tuckborough, and the surrounding villages are accumulated together in one place, and parceled out in small enough portions to last through the winter. Food is always prized by Hobbits, but rarely has it been necessary

to protect it from thieves, aside from the kind who walk of four legs or have feathers. This winter, things will be different. Well, at least it means the fire is lit, and you can get a flagon full of fresh snow melted quickly.

You continue on, to the room called the "Shed", which is full of garden implements and the like, and open the door to the outside. The snow at your feet could have been trampled on, by hobbit or beast, so you turn instead to reach up to the snow piled up just above the doorway. It's a little too high, so you reach inside to grab a stepstool which is conveniently close at hand for the purpose, and use it to get your flagon high enough to scoop up fresh, untouched snow, piled deep on the side of Great Smials.

What is that?

You have to reach into the pile of snow to discover what it is that you have accidentally snagged. You expected it to be a twig or branch, blown here from the woods in some windstorm just prior to the first snow. It is not. To your great surprise, it is a golden flower, in the shape of a bluebell but somewhat larger. It did not grow here, that much is certain; it was picked. How long it has been here is difficult to say; encased in the snow like that, it might last a long time. Holding it in your hand, you feel a calmness spread through your mind, and a clarity of vision.

The flowers your father mentioned in his journal. How can it have come to be here? It cannot have grown here; it looks to have been picked, and placed here. Perhaps hidden in the snow intentionally? Or else buried in later


snowfall. You put it back where it was, and cover it lightly in unpacked snow.

On a hunch, you walk a short distance north, to the garden door, carrying the stepstool with you. In short order, you find another golden flower there, above that doorway, buried in the snow. You cover it over again, and return the stepstool to the spot just inside the shed, where you found it.

Where your father no doubt left it, after he had placed one of these golden flowers above every door to Great Smials.

You stop briefly at the smithy, to ask Gilford to melt your snow for you. After it is done, you remember that a flagon of hard-packed snow, once melted, makes a disappointingly small amount of water. Bother. Gilford has a canteen of clean water himself, though, and tops it off for you. After a brief chat about his family and yours, in which you learn that he is not yet living in Great Smials but expects to be in a week or so when his wife has gotten the place packed up and the children ready to move, you are joined by Mira, holding a bottle of white wine that she has already opened. Then it is necessary to give Gilford a taste, as just payment for sharing his water with you, and more discussion of Gilford's family, and yours, and Mira's, and the families of a few mutual acquaintances who have not been seen recently but are all as well as can be expected.

At last, it is time to return. Your flagon is half empty, and so is Mira's bottle. You also had the impression there was something you were going to ask your father about, once you returned. What was it again?

You and Mira descend the stairs together, then part ways, she headed to the wine cellar and you to the beer cellar.

Beer. Of the many drinks that a Shire Hobbit may have, beer is the most common (aside from water, maybe). Exactly when beerbrewing began in the Shire is not entirely known, but it must have been soon after Hobbits arrived, as it was already known to them from places like Bree, where Hobbits had already been living for some time. Beer is thought by Hobbits to be easier to keep clean and healthful than water.

Of course, Hobbits most prefer to have beer at a pub, with friends from the neighborhood, in the evening after the day's work is done, sitting by a cozy fire. The pubs of the Shire are, for the most part, shuttered now by the ferocity of the wind and cold, plus the ever-growing drifts of snow. Perhaps Great Smials will end up performing the role of a great pub, for all Tuckborough and several villages more, this winter. Put that way, it sounds not so bad. The

principal problem is, that even the beer cellar of Great Smials may not have stocks enough to last.

But then, maybe it will have. Upon arriving there, you are surprised to find that there is considerably more beer here than was normally the case in the past. There are barrels stacked as high as they can be, in every spot available. You walk slowly along the rows of barrels carefully stacked, and are surprised to find Corliss Hadley, a hobbit of about your age. The two of you occasionally played together as young hobbit-lasses during festivals in Tuckborough or nearby. She is a little bit startled and looks up with wide eyes, then smiles as she recognizes you.

"Ah, it's Mrs. Donna, bless me!" says Corliss. "I haven't seen you in many's the year!"

"Hullo, Corliss, it's good to see you again," you say.

"Have you come to get a pint from the cellar, then?" she asks.

"I have, what do you suggest?" you ask. Corliss is trying to hide from view the flagon which she has already filled, and you think that letting her know you are also here for a drink may put her more at ease.

"Oh, I dunno, what's your fancy? Ale or porter or...?"

"Porter, I believe," you say, "but there are so many kinds here. Where did they all come from?"

"Everyone who had any!" says Corliss. "The ones who wasn't ready to send their own families to Great Smials yet, they were still ready to send their barrels, while there was still room for 'em! Every pub in the area for a day's wagon ride in any direction, plus many of the homes. It's my job to take a census of all that arrive, and mark it down here on the list, and keep track of who has how much."

"You spend all day in the beer cellar?" you ask, sympathetically.

"Oh, it's not so bad as that," says Corliss, "we take it in turns. To be honest, I'm not really all that good with my letters so I can't do the marking down of the names extra well, but they can write their own names and then I count up the barrels they've sent and tally that up. Your Pa said I could have a bit of the Took barrels for my troubles, if it wasn't too much, which was kind of him."

"Well I should think so," you say. "Corliss, do you hear much sound of people walking around down here? It seems a bit lonely."

"At first I didn't, and it was a bit peculiar I'll grant you," says Corliss. "I would sit in the dark sometimes, to save on candles, and just think about what it might be like back at my poor house. The roof caved in, and we had to leave, and we got out everything we could but some of it we could not. It must be all frozen over, now, and dark and quiet. I'd rather sit in the dark and quiet here, though, where I'm not freezing and there's a pint now and again. I don't know if we'll be able to move back to our home come the spring or not, but I guess at least I'm glad I'm not there now."

"I'm sorry to hear you lost your home, Corliss," you say. "I think we'll all pitch together and get everyone's homes fixed up once the weather turns warmer."

"I hope you're right about that, Mrs. Donna. Here's your porter."

You sip a bit of it, and look around at all of the labels on the barrels. "It is good you are watching over all this, Corliss. It may be a long winter, and it will not do to run out halfway through."

"No, nor would it do to have all the young lads drink themselves full and fall to arguing," says Corliss. "My own Oswald, he's a gentle soul typically, and after one pint he's merry, but three or four and he may fall to fighting, and he's not the only one. At least I can tell them they can't have but more than one per day, Thain's orders while they're staying here."

"Yes, I suppose it may help keep the peace some. Corliss, would you like someone to keep you company down here?"

"Oh, it's not so bad, Mrs. Donna, don't worry. But you can come visit any time you like. How is your Pa doing, anyway? They said he was sick, but then maybe was getting better?"

You hesitate a moment before asking, not sure what the answer is, much less what you should say.

"Well, Corliss, to be honest I suppose now that I have my pint I should head back to see him. I'll come see you again soon, and we can talk about old times."

"Sure, Mrs. Donna, that would be grand. Oh, here comes some more, I'll have to find room for it now!"

Sure enough, you see half a dozen hobbits, using small carts and dollies to bring barrels of beer to be stored here, small lanterns hanging from them to light their way. Happy that Corliss has company for a time, you drain your pint and say a quick goodbye before heading back to see your father.

And, as Corliss asked, how is he doing, actually? Is he better?