

SMAILHOLM

BOOK ONE



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— *C.L. Williams* —



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For Ava and Henry



The Scottish Marches





*For those who seek adventure away from this place,
Let it be so—always.
Remember though, to look behind you from whence you came,
lest you forget what you might have had if you had stayed,
or turned in another direction.*





CHAPTER ONE

Smailholm Tower 1565

In the great Tower's shadow the river weaves down to a rocky outcrop covered in brambles—deep purple and green as ever has been known in the late August sun. Here, beneath the flowers of late summer, something is stirring. Quickly I find my favourite spot and lean forwards, carefully placing my ear above the brambles. Prickly thorns scratch against my cheek; the scent of recent raindrops fresh and heady filling my nostrils. The sunlight shines bright in my eyes and I squint to the horizon to check I've not been followed.

I crouch down behind the rocks, my hands brushing against a blanket of soft green moss. Finally, I am out of sight of the Tower. The noise of my own breath, so loud about my ears, crowds out all other sound. 'Shh, calm yourself,' I whisper.

Placing my hand over my mouth to stifle my heavy breaths, I lean in even closer, so that my face is completely covered by the brambles and my hands claw at the sodden earth beneath.

It is the sound I hear first, surprising me as it always has done. It seems so strange, with no one around, to hear the noise of a busy village in an otherwise silent place. Horses hooves clip against the cobbles that pepper the muddy earth, as the pocket-sized folk make their way into Smailholm's miniature marketplace.

It is busy today and I wonder what has brought more visitors into the village. Mrs Jetty, the baker's wife, seems merrier than usual—no doubt pleased at the extra custom. Announcing she is open for trade, she sings a cheerful melody.

*Baking since dawn,
Whilst Smailholm yawns,
Quick from the oven,
A baker's dozen'*

Despite how tiny she might seem; her voice, which is pitched low, echoes up to my ears perfectly. She is every bit as you would expect of a baker's wife; her ample waist bursting her apron seams and cheeks red with effort from hard work at the stove. Every bit as you would expect that is, except for her size. For compared to me, she is no bigger than one of my peg dolls. So tiny she is, I could pick her up in the palm of my hand, put her in my pocket and you wouldn't think she was there at all. She has no wings to make her fly; nor ears that point to a peak. She is



neither a fairy nor a spritely elf, as the old folk tales might say. Simply a jolly woman singing a jolly song. In fact, if my size didn't dwarf her tiny frame you wouldn't realise she was any different at all.

This place Mrs Jetty calls home is just like any other village, with its inn, stables, church and some ten houses dotted around a central water well. All so perfectly formed, yet in miniature with tiny leaded windows, doors and chimneys where now the grey smoke rises and tickles the back of my nose, making me sneeze. The tiny horses in the stable below neigh at my noisy intrusion and kick their legs at the doors in protest.

Closing my eyes, I smell the soot of burning coals as Caen the blacksmith bangs, turns and moulds his molten metal. The shrill sound of metal against metal startles me and I open my eyes to see another visitor enter the marketplace. One that I know better than any other—my dearest friend Jimmy. Even though he is so tiny to my eyes, I can still make out the beads of sweat that trickle down his brow, dampening his messy white blond hair at the tips. His turquoise blue eyes glisten in the sun and his cheeks carry a rosy blush. His neck is taut from the effort of pulling water from the well and he mops the sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his loose white shirt. Untucked from his simple linen breeches, his shirt billows in the breeze, loose at the sleeves yet clinging slightly to his torso. Clanging the pail of water down in exhaustion he finally looks up at my giant-like form. After all, to Smailholm folk I'm hard to miss.





‘Morning lass, I thought you were busy today with your uncle, visiting ‘n’ all,’ he says, shading his eyes with his hand from the glare of the sun to look up at me, as if nothing is amiss. How can it be that these tiniest of folk don’t even blink when they see a giant like I, peering down into their tiny world?

‘I’m avoiding it, nay dreading it,’ I reply, as I always do, in a whisper. My voice, at normal volume, is hundreds of times louder than theirs, and must sometimes hurt their tiny ears. Yet other than my hushed conversation with Jimmy, life goes on in Smailholm just as it always has. The presence of the giant girl ignored.

You see for many years a secret has been kept beneath my family home—Smailholm Tower, the wild brambles hiding a big secret of the smallest kind. It is a secret which only I seem to have discovered—that of the miniature folk of Smailholm. They say they were once the same size as I, but they were shrunk by some other-worldly curse.

When Jimmy first told me tales of a faceless sorceress casting a curse on all those who lived beneath Smailholm Tower my ears burned hot, yet my body chilled cold. Why would any of my clan be banished to live beneath these thick brambles? Such curses always seem a little hard to believe until you see them for yourself. Even though such tiny folk are regularly before my very eyes, I cannot imagine what cruelty could have made them so. Besides, I hope in my heart that there’s no such beings as witches or faceless sorceresses. Whilst my nightmares





are often plagued by such creatures they have no place in Smailholm on this fine sunny day.

‘I know what you mean, we too have unsettling news today. Laird Falmouth has called a meeting of all in the village,’ Jimmy says, suddenly interrupting my thoughts. ‘I don’t know how he dares order us about, for he’s not to be seen here most of the time. Off on some frivolous pursuit. Hunting he calls it, but I’ve never seen him bring much meat back of any kind. He’s too busy lying under an oak tree in Ettrick lamenting his small place in the world.’

‘If it weren’t for my sister and I hunting and farming the land I dread to think what we would eat. Some Laird of Smailholm he calls himself!’

‘Do you know what the meeting is about?’ I ask.

‘Aye lass. Some worry about Smailholm being discovered. There are rumours that he’s prepared to take a hunting party out to find a cure for our strange predicament.’

‘Oh Jimmy, what unexpected news this day brings,’ I say, bubbles of excitement popping in my tummy. ‘Just imagine how different it would be if we were to be the same size!’

‘Hmm. I’m not so sure lass. We’ve been happy enough, haven’t we? Just look around at this place,’ Jimmy says, his hand gesturing towards the miniature stalls and folk bustling about the marketplace. Indeed, there appears nothing strange or unhappy to be found in this tiny world. As the sun warms my back and the smell of fresh





bread still wafts up my nose, making my mouth water at the very thought of it, I wonder too if anything at all should change. For small or large Smailholm will always be my favourite place.

‘I don’t see many wishing it could be different. Seems to me we are just right as we are,’ Jimmy says, ‘after all most folk here don’t know any different. The last of our men to know a normal-sized world have died—along with any great desire to reverse the curse. In fact, it was Laird Falmouth’s father himself who was the last to know both sized worlds, and who urged, with his last breath, his son seek a cure to our tiny size. A quest that seemed to be peacefully unheeded, until now at least. What change it will now heap upon this place I dare not think,’ he says, his brow wrinkling with lines of worry. ‘I, for one, am happy with my place in this world, tiny though it may be.’

Jimmy may only be fifteen, yet his shoulders, despite their broadness earned from farming the land, seem to have the weight of his tiny world upon them. I can always tell when he worries; his eyes show every little thing he’s feeling. It is quite unusual for a girl to have a boy best friend, particularly when the boy is so miniature in size to her own—yet Jimmy really is just that. My best friend. Since we met two years ago now, when I first peered down between the brambles to look in startlement upon his fair face, we’ve spent nearly every day together. Summers have come and gone, Yule celebrations too. I’ve listened patiently, as he regaled me with endless tales of hunting field mice—a mighty catch for his tiny size, and watched





from afar as he ploughed the land with his miniature shire horse Chestnut. Even if he's working he'll always stop for a moment or two to share a funny story that he's recently heard.

I annoy him sometimes, just like any younger sister might do. Although I'm a mere two years younger, he will often frown upon what he calls my 'childish ways'; pranking him as I sometimes do by placing a giant heather beetle in his cart as he struggles to pull it along without his knowing.

'Lass, I've no time for your foolery!' he will shout, on catching sight of the heavy, squirming beetle at the back of the cart. 'Some of us have work to do. We don't all live in a Great Tower with servants to do our bidding!'

It will hurt me a little that he doesn't find it funny and rebukes me in the same tone that adults use when they are cross for something or other. It is true also that Jimmy likes nothing more than the comfort of the tiny world of Smailholm, whilst I prefer to wander a little further in search of some adventure or other to ease my boredom. Perhaps even if we were of the same size we'd still have our cross words, those two years in age making more of a difference than our size ever did. Yet I know in my heart that we are the best of friends and always will be.

'But what if Smailholm is discovered?' I ask in a panic, and a little too loudly, for I notice a few of the villagers stop what they are doing and stare up at me, their eyes suddenly opening wider. 'For what a treasure you would be to any normal-sized man—no tiny folk have ever been





discovered in these parts and you would surely fetch a heavy weight in gold,' I say, pointedly lowering my voice. I look down and see that some are now continuing on their day's errand, ignoring me. Yet I can't help shivering at the thought of how wide my Uncle Eanraigs' eyes might become if he ever discovered this small sweet place.

'Nay lass, now how is it you are the only giant us small folk have ever seen in all the years of this so-called curse? 'Tis true you haven't put so much as a giant foot wrong,' he says, as he shrugs his shoulders once more and tries to comfort me with a playful smile. I wonder how his confidence in his own small world can be so strong, when he fears so much to step outside it.

'I know, Jimmy, but it is hard for me not to worry. If Uncle Eanraig has his way I won't be around forever. What if I am to leave and there is no one to protect your village? Then there will only be Vargo to watch over you, and you know how *useful* he is,' I say with a giggle.

'Speak of the devil,' Jimmy says suddenly, diving for cover under the roof of the well as Vargo appears by my side. Just in time as well, as giant drops of Vargo slobber splash across the marketplace.

'Where have you been boy?' I say, stroking his golden fur. 'Have you been hunting on the moors without me? Now settle down. Remember we must not get too excited in Smailholm.' I know he is too excited at the smell of the morning's freshly baked bread to heed my words and pushes his wet shiny nose in front of Mrs Jetty's stall.





‘Get away with you, silly dog,’ bellows the baker’s wife. ‘Can’t you see I’m trying to make a living down ’ere.’

A mass of golden hair led by a red slobbery tongue flops expectantly into the marketplace as Vargo gently lies down and places his black nose right in front of the tiny figure of Mrs Jetty, awaiting his daily treat.

‘Oh, be gone with you. Big hairy oaf,’ says Mrs Jetty, as she carefully places a tiny piece of bread, no bigger than a thimble to my eyes, into Vargo’s giant open mouth and pats his dribbling nose. How she isn’t terrified of my golden dog, twenty times bigger than her tiny doll-like frame, with teeth so large and sharp, I really have no idea. Yet every morning—for the last two years since we discovered Smailholm—she has offered up a tiny freshly baked loaf, and Vargo has taken it just as greedily between his giant teeth. In fact, I think, despite all her daily grumbles, Mrs Jetty has a bit of a soft spot for him.

Suddenly, Vargo’s ears prick and he lifts his head on high alert. As he stands on all fours and squeezes himself between the tiny wooden and stone buildings, creaking and groaning with the movement, I see Jimmy and Mrs Jetty place their hands upon their ears.

‘Vargo *please do not* bark,’ I whisper, knowing what is coming next.

‘Ruufffff,’ his bark so loud in the small confines of Smailholm that everyone in the village covers their ears with their hands. Now the church bell knocks wildly against the bell tower, its unexpected chime signalling Mr Smelt to run outside.





‘Be off with you Vargo!’ Mr Smelt says, ‘and why this fine day do you not have somewhere else to be Wynn?’ he says, gesturing his hands back and forth to encourage me to leave.

‘Nay, Mr Smelt, my Uncle Eanraig is arriving today. In fact, I do hear his horses now. ’Tis probably what Vargo is barking at. I’m sorry for the disturbance Mr Smelt we’ll be gone soon enough.’

Indeed, Mr Smelt does seem momentarily satisfied with my answer, and returns briskly inside the church shaking his head.

Ever since Jimmy and I cheekily placed a giant worm in his church I’ve always been a little scared of Mr Smelt. What a commotion was caused, a worm after all is no wild boar. I’m sure the children’s screams of ‘worms, worms, worms!’ could be heard all the way back to my home at Smailholm Tower. To little folk big worms can be quite scary I do suppose.

‘Jimmy what time is the meeting with Laird Falmouth?’ I whisper even more quietly than usual, just in case Mr Smelt should return.

‘When the clock strikes seven this eve in the Bull Inn,’ Jimmy replies. ‘Shall we see you back here lass?’

‘I’ll try, Jimmy,’ I say, not promising. For what this evening holds in this small place or another I dare not think. ‘A dance has been planned at the Tower tonight, so I may only be able to sneak away for a few moments.’

Waving to Jimmy, I push myself gently back up from my knees. The brambles scratch once more upon my face,





returning my senses to another windy day on the moor. It is such a peculiar place, for I may have been gone an hour or perhaps just a minute. Time in Smailholm is a strange thing. Some days I find myself right back at the beginning of the day that I started hours before. Yet other days, like today, I can see time has been kept in the right order so that the sun, although now in an altogether cloudier sky, is a touch higher and time has passed just as it should have.

Vargo has raced ahead, no doubt on some new adventure in search of food. I look across to the moor to see Smailholm Tower rising above the barren land beneath. With no trees to speak of on this vast murky moor, the rectangular Tower sits atop a crag of rocks known as Lady Hill, where it gives the appearance of resting taller on the landscape than it actually does. This is especially true when viewing its heavy-set and somewhat squat walls from within the small protective barmkin wall that runs around its boundary, and which plays host to our market day, as it always has on the fourth day of each week.

From Smailholm's secret brambled boundary, some distance from my home, I cannot help but stare and marvel at how the Tower manages to stamp the Hoppingle family name so unmistakably on our many acres of land. Yet though just our home it is easily the biggest landmark in the area and can be seen for miles around by passing-folk who happen to glance to the horizon, even as far as Ettrick some 30 miles away—or so they say.

Its four walls, a pristine yellow when it was built by my great grandfather, now bear the dappled grey marks of





high winds and rain that have thrashed against the exposed sandstone during fifty unforgiving winters. Climbing to four storeys in all, atop sits an unremarkable roof which slants steeply down to reveal two small ramparted terraces, from where, on a good day, you can glimpse the gently sloping fire mountain of Rubers Law in the distance.

It is true my home perhaps looks a little weary. Where once our lands were rich enough to build a Tower of great standing upon them, over the years the border raiders have snatched away both the fruits of our farm and our cattle. Thrice the Tower has withstood such raids. None in my lifetime thankfully, but how many more it could withstand I do not know. The Hoppringle clan no longer carries the wealth it once did, and I know my father is often vexed with the cost of the Tower's upkeep. Servants and luxuries have long since been kept to a minimum—much to mother's dissatisfaction.

As the sun momentarily blinks from behind a cloud, I see a glint from the small arched-lead windows of the top floor chamber which I share with my two sisters. Just beneath the Tower walls a streak of gold catches my eye. I watch as Vargo weaves his way between crags sprinkled with a dusting of purple and orange heather, racing excitedly to greet the horses that have just arrived at the barmkin gates.

Lifting my long full skirt in my hands, I hesitate a moment not wanting to leave. I already wish I was back in Smailholm with Jimmy. For I know a storm is brewing within the Tower walls.

