"You'll take a dwarf's gold, but not his hand?" Uncertain, Hanah reached out, and his hand clamped around hers like a bear trap. She had heard dwarves were as harsh as the rock they dwelled in, that any slight against them would be remembered. Forever. But her father was dead, and the business that put food on her and her sister's table was threatened. So for that warm gold, Hanah would accept the dwarf's deal with gratitude. But in a place where dwarves are considered the spawn of demons, will his money bring salvation or damnation?

Unexpected Death

The pelt master was dead. His hare hunt had been too long. In the northern winter, hunting everything with a white coat, he had only eaten hare and rabbit for weeks. Hanah had heard of the long-eared killer before. Some said it was superstition, that surely poisonous plants or berries had killed them; others had looked in the backpack of the various hunters laying stiff in the snow, noticed the fresh skins, and drawn the conclusion that too much rabbit could kill you. Nothing flourished on the moors except rabbits and their predators. Not to mention that no self-respecting pelt hunter would eat fermented, frozen berries rather than rabbit. This was how Hanah and her little sister Hemery found themselves orphaned at the ages of eighteen and twelve.

Their mother had died when Hemery was still an infant. Hanah and Hemery had spent more time in the workshop with their father than by the warm hearth of their mother. Their trousers were made of leather beneath their tunics, their supper of cold, smoked meat. Their backs were not strong enough for more than tightening a trap noose, but their hands were calloused and tough from pushing needles through animal hides.

Father told them stories about the mason and the houses he built with the hard gloves Hemery made; the smith and the weapons he forged with the fire resistant apron Hanah prepared; the dyed coat embroidered with silver thread their father made for the landlord in town; and many more stories of all kinds of strange people Father had heard in his travels about elves and dwarves and kings and dragons and battles.

They did not grow tall or round faced, but when their father showed them the world through his words, Hanah and Hemery felt strong through the confidence and knowledge he shared, and tall enough to see it all like the bird sees the world from its branch in the pine.

Hanah did not feel strong or tall now. Father's strength had been just enough to get him home, collapse in his chair in front of the fire in the big room, and tell his daughters to unpack the frozen block of stacked skins and prepare them, before shutting his eyes in exhaustion. When they tried to raise him for supper, he did not stir. Hanah shovelled and hacked a shallow grave in the frozen slope behind the cottage and covered it with stones.

The sisters continued the habits they kept when their father had been away. Finished the orders, the gloves, the aprons, the boots, the bracelets. Went to market, collect on their work, took new orders. Bought salt, blades, and needles. Traded with the butcher for cattle skins. Went home again.

It was not unusual that the pelt master was not at the market at Blackwater Ridge with his daughters. The town was placed halfway between the Iron Hills and Erebor, surrounded by moors and woods where rabbit, fox, and wolf were common. He had always been busy, hunting, working. No one asked where he had gone. Hanah did not know what she would have answered if they had. They needed the coin that the work of the pelt master brought in. Would they still receive commissions if people knew that there was no pelt master? Hanah was young, but she was not stupid. No one would pay a girl and a child for anything more than bootlaces, that was sure and certain. But none asked, so she did not say.

Neither did Hemery. She turned very quiet after their father passed. Hanah did not blame her. She had reminded Hemery of what Father had said to her when Mother died, about the halls of their ancestors where their spirits travelled when they left their bodies. But Hanah did not remember the vivid details Father had provided. Where was this hall, and how did one get there? Hemery was not convinced. Hanah could imagine every piece of gold in a treasure guarded by a dragon she had never seen, picture every snowflake on top of the Iron Hills, but she could not explain death to her
Thus, a month passed.

Stark white bed linen covered the down mattress, but Hanah could feel one or two sharp feather pens through the fabric. She lay on her back, her tunic pulled up to her waist. Graham's breath was on her neck, his weight on her chest. A moment ago he had been a flurry of movement and passion. She had even been a bit curious herself. There had been a tingle in her belly when he kissed her neck, but by the time he had reached his destination—it was gone. The discomfort of his entry had made sure it stayed gone. Hanah thought the pain was only part of the first time. Perhaps it was normal. Or perhaps she was doing something wrong. Fortunately, he had not kept going for long.

Now he lay heavily upon her, as if asleep. The house was quiet, but Hanah could hear the busy street outside the window. Horse hooves, people shouting. Tiny grains of dust floated in the sunbeam shooting across the room. She had to return to the market stall soon. Hemery was waiting. She had been going to buy something for their midday meal when she had come upon Graham in the street. He had said he missed her and wanted to talk.

"When we're married," he began as he turned over on his back, "we can do this whenever we want. Don't have to hide."

"Mm." Hanah sat and put her trousers on. Then she pulled out the fastening in her hair to redo the braid.

"When will your father be back?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"I need to speak to him about ... arrangements. A lot has to be done before the wedding."

"How soon can we marry, do you think?"

"Not sure. Midsummer maybe?"

Hanah's heart sank. That was months from now.

"What if my father won't agree?" she asked.

"He will."

She finished her hair and turned to look at him. "But what if he won't?"

He smiled. "We'll find a way. Don't worry." He sat up and kissed her, one hand finding her breast. She kissed him once and then pulled away.

"I have to go."

Hanah left the house of Graham's father on quick feet, but with a sick feeling in her stomach. She did not like lying to Graham about her father. While both fathers had agreed to the engagement, much of the traditions remained unperformed. She had hoped he would not need to be involved, but Graham kept asking to see him. She was afraid there would be problems or, even worse, the wedding cancelled if he was absent.

Graham was the son of the most prominent tradesman at Blackwater Ridge. When Hanah married him, she and her sister would be taken care of. Not that she wanted to leave her childhood home,
but they were not safe. If people knew two girls lived alone at the edge of town—

She did not want to think about it. But when Hanah married, there would be no more worries about making ends meet, about living alone, no more sleepless nights. They would have protection.

As long as Hanah could keep Graham happy. She knew she had to keep him happy—and distracted—until she could find a solution.

Hemery gave her a scrutinizing look when Hanah returned to their table in the marketplace.

"What?" Hanah asked innocently.

Her sister did not speak. As if able to see all of Hanah's dark deeds by the state of her dress and look on her face, Hemery's eyes seemed to discern and judge, silently. But of course, that was all in Hanah's mind. There was no way anyone could know how she submitted to Graham like a well-trained dog whenever he wanted her. No bark and no bite.

"I got fresh cheese," Hanah coaxed, producing a loaf of newly baked bread and soft cheese with herbs wrapped in paper.

"The landlady's maid was here," Hemery suddenly said, ignoring the offering.

Ice wrapped around her chest, but Hanah forced herself to show no reaction. "What did she want?"

"She said Father should remember to fulfill his contract by the end of the week if he likes to do business in this town."

Father's contract. She must have meant the coat he had been working on before . . . before he left. It was different to other coats he had made. Prepared carefully. Water resistant. He had even begun to decorate it with beads before . . . before. That was why he needed the rabbit furs, of course. The white against the tar black leather. It would be beautiful. But what was Hanah supposed to do?

Hanah's heart sank, but she smiled at Hemery.

"Rich people sure can afford to be cheeky, can't they?"

Hemery just looked at her.

"It's alright," Hanah said. "I'll finish it myself."

Hemery said nothing.

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The coat. That was what Father had called it. But it was much more than that. Dyed black with the first stitches outlining a flowing pattern of silver thread and white beads that Hanah could see in her head would become the waves on a dark water, or stars in a deep black sky. The white rabbit fur for the inner lining, keeping the wearer warm in any season. That was why he was out for so long, she thought, to collect enough rabbit skins to cover the entire inside. She knew the potential of that coat. How it could be transformed into the finest piece she had ever seen. Made for something other than working. Made for standing tall with squared proud shoulders.

Hanah looked at it a long time every morning before starting to work on something else. Always something else. Father would be rolling over in his frozen grave if he knew how the coat sat untouched at his workbench. Unfinished, neglected. But she had not had the nerve to pick it up. She had so many alternatives, so many ideas on how to complete it. In the evening, in the firelight,
she drew possible patterns, possible cuts. Drew on every paper in the house, paper that had been wrapped around meat and cheese they had bought at the market. She added paper to the shopping. But Hanah had never done anything like this before, and not bearing the thought that she might make a mistake and ruin Father's last commission, she had left it. Now, the day had come when she could put it off no longer. Despite the question ringing in her head—How in all of Arda could she do this in a week?—she had no choice.

When they got home from market that night, Hemery prepared supper and Hanah searched the workshop top to bottom for specifics on the coat. Measurements, designs, a receipt, anything. She found nothing, of course. Father rarely wrote anything down. Hanah herself could read very little. Signs above certain shops. Names of food—mutton, fish, bread. Materials—steel, iron, silver. Some numbers to keep account of sales. She did not know what came after a hundred hundreds, but she knew a pair of new leather boots were worth twenty-five silver coins. No more, no less.

She also knew people rarely asked for specifics when placing orders with Father. The creative choices already made to the coat were probably the only ones that were expected: the beading, the thread, and the fur. It would have to remain sleeveless, since she did not know the arm length. A slit at the back to allow for walking and riding would have to be cut from the bottom to at least half leg height. The beading would need to be sparer than she originally thought, no time to cover the entire upper body.

Over the next six days, no more trips were made to the market. Though the walk was short, Hanah refused to let Hemery go alone. Hanah herself would not leave the workshop for anything but food and sleep. She still spent a long time just looking at it every morning, going over the steps in her mind like a puzzle. Deciding and then rethinking the best course of action, like weaving the plan and tearing it up all over again.

When she came to the slit in the back, she measured it carefully to make sure it was centered and straight before taking the knife to the task with an apology to Father under her breath.

Hanah walked to the Big House with the coat carefully rolled up in layers of cotton and carried in a shoulder bag. Of course, it was supposed to be used without fear of tearing or ruining the decorations, but she was not taking any chances. The product was always supposed to be delivered in perfect condition. Hemery was close behind her.

Hanah stopped in the busy street outside the gate and turned to her sister.

"I want you to stay here."

"Why?"

"Cause I'll only deliver the order. I'll look like a beggar girl with no kin to mind her sister."

Hemery's eyes darkened, but she did not argue.

"I'm deliverin' the pelt master's order and gettin' paid,"Hanah explained. "He will want me back at the workshop as soon as possible, and I can't dawdle with a bairn on my heels."

"I'm not a bairn," Hemery protested this time.

"I know. But they don't." Hanah put a hand on her shoulder. "Stay here."

Hemery nodded. Hanah stepped through the gate. Horses and carriages were being prepared in the yard. Unusually many people around the Big House. Perhaps the landlord was planning a journey.
Straight forward was a large double door heading into the heart of the building, but Hanah chose the smaller door off to the side. She had come with Father on a few deliveries to big houses around Blackwater. She knew she was expected to use the servants’ entrance.

Hanah knocked and was let in by a maid in a grey shapeless dress and a head cloth. She looked very proper and put together, Hanah thought, despite clearly being a maid, and Hanah became self-conscious of her own hair which was only long enough to braid into a plait from the top of her head to her shoulder. They did not own a looking glass, so she really had no way of knowing how it actually looked. But it was a windy, cold, early spring day, and she could feel stray hairs that had come loose tickling her face and neck, and not in charming locks either.

Her leather trousers were covered to the knees by a linen tunic which in turn was covered and bound by a leather vest and belt. It only accentuated her feel of being a wildling in this pristine household.

"I come with the order from the pelt master," Hanah declared.

The maid nodded in affirmation and left Hanah in the hallway connecting the kitchen to a big corridor leading to the main part of the house. Voices echoed toward her. She was able to make out "Lady Brage" and "trapper." Hanah did not want to eavesdrop, but how could she help but hear what was obviously the usual talk about her low craft without putting fingers in her ears and humming?

The maid appeared in the doorway. Hanah took this as a sign to follow. She was shown into what looked like a dining hall with red tapestries hanging from the ceiling, except that the long table was filled with papers, candles, quills and inkbottles as if it was a desk. Lady Brage sat at the table. Her hair was raven, but grey streaks shot from her temples into an intricately braided bun pulled so tight that Hanah was sure she had more wrinkles on her face in the evening when she loosened her hair.

Servants went in and out, silently handing over or receiving pieces of paper and occasionally given brief instructions.

"Well," Lady Brage finally said without looking up. "Don't just stand there. Show me."

Hanah tore her eyes away from the exquisite decorations. Since the last servant just left the room, Hanah assumed she was the one addressed. She hurried to unfasten the package. Carefully, she unfolded the coat as quickly as possible and held it up by the arm openings.

After a moment, Lady Brage laid down her quill and raised her eyes. Her face made no change; it was as indifferent as her voice when she looked the coat up and down. She stood from the table and came to stand in front of Hanah. She was much taller than Hanah, especially since she held herself like an iron rod, neck straight, shoulders back, posture impeccable in a dark green dress with sleeves skimming the floor.

But as she came closer, Hanah noticed the sickly pale complexion, the red rimmed but dry eyes which darted like a birds. Forcefully focused as if she was trying to see in a world of darkness.

Unceremoniously, she plucked the garment from Hanah's grasp, turned it over and around, inside out, examining the stitching, then practically threw it back at Hanah.

"It's too wide. The design is foreign. The inside is covered with fur instead of the edges. And there's a cut in the back. It is supposed to be a ceremonial robe, not an elven travelling cloak."
Hanah was taken aback, gaping while desperately trying to fold the coat in her arms without it touching the floor.

"You . . . You don't want it?" Hanah managed. "My lady?" she remembered to add.

"This is not what I ordered. You may leave." Lady Brage turned back to the table.

"But, my lady," Hanah burst out. "The master has worked on this for . . ." She paused. He had not actually worked on it the entire time since the order, and neither had she, but he had died for this coat.

"This is the finest work the master has ever made," she settled on, finally. And it was true. "How can you not want it?"

It was incomprehensible to Hanah. She could not grasp the idea that the item, which was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen, could be rejected so completely.

The woman turned back, her eyes wider. From surprise or anger, Hanah could not tell.

Lady Brage spoke shortly and concisely. "The garment does not fit the purpose. It is useless."

Hanah was aware that people around them had stopped in their tracks and observed the interaction, too wary to interrupt.

"My lady," Hanah tried. "Changes can be made. It doesn't have to—"

"I will not pay for it," Lady Brage raised her voice.

"But it was made especially—"

"Nor will I ever pay the pelt master for anything in the future. You. May. Leave."

Hanah felt her cheeks burn, but lowered her head, gathered her package and turned to go. She brushed past the maid and the other servants on her way from the room, only looking up when she realized her path was blocked. In the entrance, Lord Brage had paused with several men whom Hanah assumed were servants and personal guards, but it did not make the situation any less humiliating. Among them were a handful shorter men, stocky and long haired, but—strangely enough—with gold in their beards to contrast their dour expressions.

Dwarves, Hanah realised with an invisible, giant fist gripping her chest. They must be dignitaries from one of the neighbouring dwarf kingdoms, she thought. She had not only embarrassed her father and his work, she had openly defied and been reprimanded by Lady Brage in front of Lord Brage and his guests. It was beyond mortifying.

"I beg your pardon," she muttered before going the long way around the group and escaped through the hallway, past the kitchen, and out into the yard. Outside the door she paused to fold the coat properly, rolled it up in the bag and tossed it over her shoulder.

"What happened?" Hemery asked when she appeared in the street.

"Nothin'," Hanah replied, without breaking stride. Hemery followed, trying to keep up with Hanah's quick steps. "She did not think it would fit, that's all."

Hanah blinked back tears of shame, keeping her face averted from her sister. Hanah bit the skin of her dry lips as they walked home.
"Who will buy it now?" Hemery asked.

"No one. If it's not fit for the landlord, then it's not fit for givin' away."

"What will we do with it?"

"We'll take it apart. Use the beads and the fur for somethin' else. Take the water proof leather for boots."

Hemery's eyes went wide. "But it's Father's—"

"Father's not here!" Hanah interrupted. "We can't let it go to waste. We need to sell what we can." She continued in a softer voice, putting her arm around Hemery's shoulders. "We can't keep it just because we like it. It'd be ridiculous."

The next morning, Hanah sent her sister to the workshop to pack their usual bags of boots, laces, belts, and other wear and tear items for the market. Hanah prepared breakfast and packed food for later. Suddenly, she heard the sound of heavy hooves on the gravel outside the cottage. They rarely had visitors. Especially not visitors that could afford horses.

Hanah darted to the door and tore it open.

Four ponies stood in the yard. Strong animals with thick fur and short legs, carrying four longhaired, bearded, gold and fur wearing dwarves.
Hanah froze and stared. Two of the dwarves had dismounted, one holding the ponies' reins. The other was a few feet closer to the workshop, where Hemery stood in the doorway, watching the strangers. If Hemery had been a cat, her back would have been taut as a pine bow pulled to a fox trap. Hanah could tell by her lowered chin and her hands that gripped the doorframe forbiddingly, Hemery did not approve of the dwarves' presence at their home.

"Good morning." She addressed the one who had been nearest her sister, but the attention of all the dwarves were directed at her now. She had never met dwarves before, but she had heard they were as harsh and stubborn as the mountains they lived in. Seemed to prefer rock to people. Or perhaps just men.

Hanah could not allow herself to show any fear, and she could not let them know that she and her sister were alone.

"What brings you here?" she asked.

"We were told this is the home of the trapper."

"Not trapper, peltmaster. Finest leathers and furs that you've ever seen." Hanah quickly regretted her rash comment, but she could not stand to hear people talk about Father as if he was—had been—some common squirrel catcher.

The dwarf smirked, a blond braid of his mustache hitched up a fraction.

"Very well." He held up his hands in a placating manner. "I would like to do business with the peltmaster."

"You want something from the shop?"

"I suppose that is where he makes his masterpieces."

Hanah did not like his tone, but bit her tongue. She closed the door to the cottage behind her. Hemery reluctantly moved into the workshop when Hanah opened the door wide for the dwarf to enter. Though he was not much taller than her, he was broadshouldered enough that Hanah thought he would not fit through the door. Not with those thick layers of fur. And was that armour underneath? She soon found out as all four of the dwarves followed Hanah and Hemery inside the shop. Hanah went to tidy up the work area while the dwarves surveyed the finished items on their shelves and tables. It was not exactly a showroom, but it was a good sample of what they made.

Fireproof aprons, gloves, and boots. Water resistant coats, tunics and trousers. Fur mittens, hats and more.

The dwarves' boots and chainmail chinked heavily when they walked on the floorboards. Looking, lifting, prodding, trying, testing. The sisters had to move out of the way several times to allow them room to examine every apparel and every accessory. Sometimes they would rumble things to each other in another language and laugh. Hanah gritted her teeth. She considered going outside until they were finished, but dismissed the idea; she would not be forced out of her father's shop, no matter who rummaged around in there.

"Is this all?"

Hanah spun around facing one of them. This one had no mustache or beard, but long, black hair
"Yes," Hanah replied. "Did you expect something else?"

"The coat from yesterday."

Hanah spun around again to the blond one who came to stand on her other side.

"With silverthread like water and fur white as snow," he explained. His smile and dramatic words made her think he was insincere, but his eyes were serious.

She pulled out the package from under the bench and unfolded it for their view. They crowded the table, touching and tugging on the seams, making Hanah wince, but she did not say anything. It was supposed to hold, after all.

"Too fine for the wee lord, eh?" One of the others said. His head was bald, but his beard more than made up for it. His gritted words sounded like the first deep roll of thunder, like he was working up the force to yell at someone. "Or perhaps not good enough?"

The black-haired sat on the edge of the table to get a closer look. He spoke. "Good size. Can fit armor under it, no problem. Fur's not fixated to the back, air can pass between, the two layers even warmer than one. Allows for movement when riding or running."

The fourth dwarf—the one with . . . was that an axe in his skull?—said something in their own language. He did not sound happy.

"Aye," the other three agreed in unison.

The blond one gently ran his hand over the soft rabbit fur.

"Does the peltmaster have more like this?" he asked.

Hanah shook her head. "That's the only one."

Suddenly his attention was distracted by something behind her. He reached over her shoulder and picked up one of her sketches. She could not tell which, she had done many. Long, short, sleeveless, sleeved, hooded, no hood, more fur, less fur, buttons, belts, pockets, anything she could think of. And beads; lots and lots of different carved bead designs. He looked back at Hanah.

"He must be able to make more. Perhaps even finer ones," he said.

"Of course," Hemery snapped.

Hanah looked at her sharply, but it was no good. Hemery stood at her workplace, back turned, hands busy with something they could not see, like she was not even speaking to them.

The blond dwarf's smile reached his eyes. "Of course!" he echoed.

"Expected nothing less from the finest peltmaster in the land," said the black-haired with an even wider smile. None of the other dwarves' lips even twitched. Something like alarm must have shown on Hanah's face.

"Is there a problem?" the blond asked.

She glanced at the coat and thought about how many weeks it had taken to complete it. "No problem."
"Excellent. Then we have an accord?"

"Yes." Hanah cleared her throat, it had suddenly gotten very dry. "Any special requests?"

He thought a moment. "If you imagine this," he touched the leather of the coat, "as the burial shroud of a lord, then the other will be the coronation cloak of a king."

"But something practical as well." The black-haired added. "Something that can be worn with armour and a weapon harness. Something he can wear while fighting a troll, you know?"

Hanah stared dumbly. "A troll-fighting coat?"

"I wouldn't be the coat fighting the troll, obviously."

"I trust the peltsmaster will figure something out," the blond dwarf said. He turned to go, but stopped. "Oh, and I'll take that one as well." He pointed to the coat on the table. They left the shop.

Hanah grabbed Hemery's arm. "What do you think you are playin' at?"

"Ow," Hemery hissed. "You said we need to sell as much as we can."

Hanah let her sister go and began folding up the coat.

"They look rich," Hemery said.

Hanah would think they were, too. Trade in the area had increased a hundredfold after Thorin Oakenshield had taken back Erebor, not to mention the treasure the dwarves had reclaimed with it.

"Did you see their boots?" Hemery continued.

"Like clogs—their feet must be bloody huge. But why did you have to say that? You know we can't make anythin' that fancy!" Hanah hurried under her breath.

"Yes, you can! Father taught you everythin' he knew."

Hanah sighed. She closed the satchel with the coat inside and followed the dwarves outside.

"What you want for it?" the blond dwarf asked.

"A hundred and forty of whatever silver coins you have." This she knew. She had counted very carefully before going to the landlord. She needed one hundred and twenty-five to break even. He looked at her until she thought he would change his mind. "I'll give you one hundred."

She almost scoffed. "No." She shook her head.

"Fine," he said like he gave in. "One hundred and ten."

She narrowed her eyes. "One hundred and thirty five."

He shrugged and looked away towards the woods, as if he was thinking about something else. "One hundred and twenty."

"One hundred and thirty five," Hanah maintained.

He looked back at her a long moment. "One hundred and thirty."
"Agreed," Hanah said quickly, holding the satchel out with one hand for him to take.

He brought forth a leather purse and products changed hands. Hanah turned the purse upsidedown. It was heavy, and the cause showed itself as a handful of gold pieces inscribed with runes tumbled into her hand.

"But . . . this is too much, sir."

"See it as an advance as well as payment."

She stared at the gold in her hand. It was warm. She had no idea how much it was worth, but it was more than she had ever seen in her life.

"Where is the master, by the way?"

"He's not here," Hemery answered before Hanah could catch her breath from the gold shock.

"He's away . . . working," she finally said.

"Working," he repeated. "Good. Then he won't mind a trip to the Lonely Mountain to deliver my order?"

Hanah had never been further than a few miles from Blackwater, but the Lonely Mountain was not an unknown place. Should be easy enough to find. These dwarves were obviously making the same trip, deeming it worth the trouble. And for another handful of that warm gold, she would trek to ten mountains with a smile on her face.

"Does it all the time." Maybe she exaggerated a bit too much.

"Good," he said, and stretched out his hand toward her. She stared at it as if he had offered her a burning piece of firewood.

"You'll take a dwarf's gold, but not his hand?" the bald dwarf growled from his place already astride his pony.

Hanah's face burned hot. He wanted her to shake on the deal like a man? She had never been expected to touch any man in public, especially not among strangers. Perhaps customs regarding males and females were different in dwarven society. And she did not want to cause offence.

Tentatively, she reached out, mirroring his stance. When she was close enough that she could feel the warmth of his palm, his hand clamped around hers like a bear trap. His other hand came up to grip her elbow. Slowly, she did the same. His grip was hard, but not crushing, just made her squeeze back as much as she could. A braid from his mustache hitched up. They shook their hands once, like a game of clapping hands.

She had seen it done before, naturally. But it felt different than she thought it would. She felt grown up, making this agreement with another grown up. More so than her engagement with Graham. You were not necessarily grown up because you married; it was hardly even a decision. You merely took the opportunity when a suitable person proposed it.

This dwarf was obviously more than grown up. She had heard that they lived longer than men, and that was the reason they could be rancorous. Any slight against them would be remembered. Forever.

"When you arrive at Erebor, ask for Fíli."
She nodded, but he did not let her go. He even pulled her in by her hand a bit more.

"I told you my name, now you tell me yours." His tone was polite, but his eyes smiled. He was laughing at her ignorance of social conduct. Her face had not cooled, and it did not seem to be getting a chance to do so any time soon. She could not even introduce herself, for Valars’ sake.

"Hanah Skinner."

He let go of her arm and went to mount his pony. They turned the horses around to leave.

"I suggest you not wait long after summer's end before beginning your journey, Mistress Skinner."

"Summer's end?" The first days of spring was just upon them. "How much work do you expect this item to demand?"

"Did I not say? I want thirteen of them."
Hanah and Hemery stayed in the yard until the visitors disappeared from sight.

"Let's see," Hemery said, enthusiastically.

Hanah gave her the purse of gold. Hemery took one piece and peered at it glinting in the pale sun. Then she bit into it.

"Hem!"

"What? It's what you're supposed to do. You can't do it in front of them. But if they're not real, we don't have to make them nothin'."

Hanah thought that sounded reasonable. "I'm more worried about your teeth."

"We should melt them into one and bury it where no one will ever find it."

"What good will that do? We still need it. Go pack; we're goin' to the market."

Hanah put one of the gold coins in her own purse. She hid the rest under the floor in the workshop.

While Hemery set up the market stall, Hanah went to the goldsmith. He looked at her and her coin curiously, but did not ask where she got it. It was not unheard for dwarves to pass through these parts. And if they made business on their way it would not be news, so it was not a ridiculous notion that their currency would circulate and eventually reach his smithy.

Hanah left the forge with light steps and weighty pockets. They bought four arm lengths of cattle skin and several pounds of bone for beads from the butcher. They even brought home a pint of milk and a half dozen eggs to celebrate the occasion.

Not until the walk home did the stomach dropping feeling catch up with Hanah, and she remembered they still had to make this happen. They had to prepare, carve, sew, trim, and decorate thirteen long coats elegant and awe inspiring enough for a king, before summer's end. She had never even seen a royal palace with her own eyes. How would she know what would suit? She had not known with Lord Brage. She almost laughed out loud at the absurd situation. Back to making sketches, she thought. She should have bought more paper.

"Be honest," Hanah said.

"Honesty has nothin' to do with it; I don't know," her sister replied.

"I've been working on this for days. I can't even see it anymore," Hanah complained.

"An' you think I can? It's just coal on paper. It won't look like that in real life."

"It doesn't matter, just say what looks better on paper. That's all."

Hemery glared at her sister over the worktop, but Hanah held the papers up in front of her face for her to look at instead. Hemery stubbornly kept braiding leather bands.

"Left, or right?" Hanah asked.
"Right."
"Come on. You're not even lookin'."
"I'm looking, alright?" Hemery widened her eyes and poked on the paper. "That one."
"Alright." Hanah put the papers down and lifted two others. "Now these? I know they're similar, but the left has a bigger pattern than. . ."
"Left."
Hanah hesitated. "My left or your left?"
"I'm lookin' from my side, aren't I? Of course my bloody left."
"Alright! Now these."
"Why are you so such a pain? We haven't even started on the cuts yet."
"I want to plan everythin' so we don't have delays later."
"So you're delayin' the whole order to not have any delays?"
Hanah sighed. "I don't want to do twelve of them and then run out of ideas and have the last one be uglier than the others. I want to know exactly what I'm gonna do."
"And I don't want you botherin' me while I do my part. I want to go to the bonfire tomorrow. You promised; if we finished work, we'd go," Hemery complained.
Lighting bonfires to celebrate the return of life to Middle Earth was a yearly tradition they had not missed as long as Hanah could remember. They usually made their own out in the yard, but this year, since Father was not there, Hanah had promised they would go to see the massive fire in the middle of town. Everyone would be there, playing music, dancing, and singing.
"I don't think we'll ever finish work," Hanah muttered. "But yes, I remember," she added at the sight of Hemery's offended look. "If we finish the week's work, we'll go to the bonfire."
"Good."
Hanah bristled at Hemery's patronizing tone. She placed her hand on top of Hemery's, stopping her work. "As long as you remember to behave."
Hemery pursed her lips in a pout, but did not say anything.
A knock sounded at the door. The sisters shared a look. Though the last company of strangers passing the cottage had been of benefit to them, the rare occurrence of visitors still made them apprehensive.
Hanah opened the door.
"Morning, Hanah."
"Graham, what are you doin' here?"
"I heard about what happened at the landlord's."
"Really?"

Hanah was surprised he knew. But then, there had been servant and guards present. Truth be told, if Hanah had seen someone get into a shouting match with Lady Brage, she may have been loose lipped about it herself.

"Hope she wasn't too hard on you." He leaned on the door frame.

"It's fine."

"You haven't lost business over it, have you?"

"No—except hers maybe," Hanah shrugged, trying to seem indifferent talking about the most humiliating experience of her life. She would rather change the subject.

"Was that why you came here? Feed the gossip mill?" she tried to jest.

"Came to see you," he answered.

Hanah smiled. She was surprised. It was nice of him to take time in the middle of the day just to visit her. It was not as if he did not have work to do himself.

He looked around and continued. "And your father. Is he here?"

Hanah looked behind her at Hemery who stared back, chin down, eyes awake. Hemery always seemed to dislike people she did not know, which was almost everyone. Hanah noticed it at moments like these when they had been speaking openly with each other and then were interrupted by strangers. Like closing a previously wide open door in the blink of an eye.

Graham walked past her into the workshop, casually taking in the room as he turned.

"No," Hanah said. "He's not."

He sighed. "Have you any idea how long he will be away?"

She looked down at the floor.

"It's been months," he said.

"I know."

He folded his arms across his chest. "This is getting ridiculous."

Hanah glanced at her sister. Hemery's eyes had darkened, but she remained silent, like an accusing reminder of all this time she had spent lying to Graham about her father, and to Hemery about her marriage plans. A lump formed in Hanah's throat.

"There's . . ." Hanah's voice wavered. She cleared her throat. "There's something I need to tell you."

Graham became still. "What?"

"About my father. He . . . he's not comin' back."

"You said you didn't know."

"I know I said that, and . . . I lied. Because he's dead. My father—" Her voice broke. "Is dead."
"But, how do you know?" He looked confused.

"I buried him myself." She wiped a tear from her cheek.

"When?"

"About two months ago."

"How have you managed alone?"

Hanah shrugged. "How we always manage; workin'. Doin' what we do."

"With only the roof over your heads and the clothes on your back? He left you no . . . security?"

Hanah did not understand. "The roof over our heads is our security."

Graham seemed stunned. Almost as if he had not heard her.

"I didn't want to tell you because I was afraid that it would spoil our plans," she explained.

Graham's eyes widened. "Of course it spoils our plans. This ruins everything!" His arms flew out.

"It's you and me who's gettin' married, not him. You said we would find a way." She reminded him of his assurance to her a few weeks ago.

"If he's alive, yes! But without him, none of this matters. There'll be no wedding, no dowry, no nothing."

Dowry.

The word echoed in her head. She knew what it was, of course, but it had not entered her thoughts as a factor in her planned future.

Graham turned away, only to turn back again, a hand rubbing his forehead.

"But he was one of the busiest craftsmen in town, though never bought a horse or new clothes. Everyone knows he's an old miser. And you're saying he didn't leave you anything?"

Her father had no land. No cattle. No horse. No money but what they used to buy and make new products to sell with a little profit for their own upkeep. She and her sister had no money either.

Graham locked eyes with her. "There is no money? At all?"

She shook her head. "No."

As soon as the word escaped her mouth, Hanah's eyes caught on the table behind Graham. There, next to jars of beads and scraps of paper, rested a small leather purse. The silver she had exchanged for the gold—the dwarf gold—and the promise of more where it came from.

Hanah looked at Graham's frustrated appearance, his usually tall and straight back now tense and bent, his face contorted with irritation.

She had said yes to Graham's offer of marriage without any romantic notion. She respected him. He worked hard and provided for his family. He was friendly and intelligent, not a lazy fool like many other young men who only worked hard to do as little as possible and brought shame on their families.
She had considered herself lucky when Graham proposed marriage. She was not wealthy or highborn. What she wanted was protection in a family. That was all she could expect in this life, and all she hoped for. But the thought that Graham's proposal was conditioned on her dowry struck a chord in her chest that resonated with an ill note. He did not value her craft, nor did he enjoy the prospect of her as a wife or mother of his children. He rejected her because she had no money. Or so he thought.

She could tell him what she was worth, that gold glimmered on the horizon. That there was the possibility of a dowry, but something held her back. She realized she did not want to tell him.

"So . . . you don't want to marry me?" Hanah asked.

He did not even look at her as he answered. "Doesn't matter. My family will never agree to it now."

A calm descended over her. Her eyes dried, and she took a deep breath. Graham looked at her. He who had held her hope and her fate in his hands now felt like little more than a stranger to her.

"You lied to me. All this time," he said.

"It was all I could think of to do. I'm sorry." And she was sorry, if only for how things ended between them, not that they in fact ended.

"I'm sorry, too." With those words, he left the workshop.

Hanah turned to look at her sister. If Hemery had opinions on Hanah's behavior, she kept them to herself. However, Hanah could not help but notice the tense muscles of Hemery's jaw as she continued her work.

The next morning, Hanah's breakfast left her as soon as it had entered her. While Hemery packed their bags, Hanah went outside, around the cottage, and threw up. She covered it with snow and walked back inside. She chewed some bread to erase the taste of bile from her tongue, and spat it out. She was hungry, but the rest of the morning she only drank water. For lunch she was able to hold down some cheese. Hemery watched her small nibbles, but did not say anything.

After eating, Hanah was surprised to see the landlady's maid stop at their market table.

"Do you have anything for sale?" she asked Hanah.

The morning had cleaned them out of laces and gloves, and they ran low on belts and bracelets. Hemery's bracelets and wristbands were favourites. Silverthread, beads, and branded designs on different sized leather bands. Everything else was still available and visible on the table; tunics, aprons, and much more. If that was not worth selling, then she had no idea what the landlady's maid may deem worthy. But perhaps it was not she who wished to know?

Hanah looked at the table before her, then back up at the maid. The sun were in her eyes, so she held a hand to shade them as she spoke. "I guess it depends who you ask, doesn't it?"

"Bring your wares. Lady Brage wants to see you at the House."

"I thought our business was no longer welcome there." Hanah made no move to get up from her seat behind the table.

The maid offered her a grave look and lowered her voice. "The lady summons you. I suggest you comply."
Hanah would not refuse to visit the Big House, but would have liked to know why the landlady had changed her mind. However, it did not seem like she would be given an explanation any time soon. She smoothed down her hair and stood.

"Certainly," she said.

Hanah was shown into the same room as last time, and told to wait for Lady Brage. The maid left her to unpack. The room was empty, except for the table which was as cluttered with papers as before. The other end was clear, so she lay out the items there. When she unrolled one especially thick belt, the tail flicked an ink bottle, knocking it over and spilling unforgiving black liquid over the papers.

"Damn it!" Hanah hissed. She looked around hurriedly. Fortunately, no one was around to witness her mistake. She rightened the bottle, careful not to get any ink on her fingers, but the paper could not be salvaged.

Footsteps echoed in the corridor. Hanah's heart skipped a beat. She could not let Lady Brage see this.

Quickly, she folded the paper in on itself, so the ink would not spill out on the others.

"I expressly said the study, not the hall," the landlady's voice drew nearer.

Hanah stuffed the paper in one of the pockets in her bag.

Lady Brage entered with the maid on her heels who looked thoroughly chastised with her head bent. The landlady went straight to the pile of documents and gathered them to hide their content. Then she turned to the foreign objects on her table, her eyes flickering back and forth as if the items were moving and she tried to keep track, not stopping on any. At no point did she look at Hanah.

"No coat?" Lady Brage asked.

"I didn't think you wanted it," Hana said.

"I don't."

Hanah clamped her jaws together to stop from talking. She did not need to talk, she needed to sell. Lady Brage was not interested in her opinions.

"How is business?" Lady Brage asks. "Is leather all you do? I can't imagine a family living solely on . . . this." She gestured towards the table like she was reluctant to touch it.

"Leather has many uses. It's enough to live on," Hanah replied, uncomfortable to be discussing finances with Lady Brage, but answering truthfully, however loosely.

"And it's only your father, the peltmaster, your sister, and yourself? No other family?"

"No other," Hanah agreed.

"That's a shame. Young girls really should have . . . more."

"More, m'lady?"

"What are your plans for the future?"

Hanah thought how brutally her one and only plan had shattered the day before. "No plans. Just
The lady locked eyes with her. "That sounds very wise," she said softly. She pointed at a bracelet off the table, decorated with braided leather cords and silver thread.

"I'll have this one."

"What happened this time?" Hemery asked when Hanah returned to the market.

"She bought a bracelet."

"You left me here for an hour, with nothin', to sell one bracelet? Why?"

"Because she did not want to fight with me, but still remind me of my place."

"Couldn't she just say so?"

"Remember what father said—rich people rarely say what they mean or mean what they say. Not when it comes to pride and forgetting past offenses."

If Hanah doubted it was worth paying Lady Brage an awkward and degrading visit just to sell a bracelet, she would never admit it.
Unexpected Accusations

They came at dusk.

Hanah heard the sound of hooves on hard dirt. A muted, but distinct beating like dropping potatoes on wooden floors. Before she reached the door, there was a pounding of a fist on it. As soon as she opened, she was grabbed by the arms and dragged out of the shop.

"No! Let me go." Hanah shouted in surprise and protest, but could not tug herself free, though she tried.

They were tall men dressed in black. She knew that uniform. She stood between them, able to do nothing in their iron grasp, but look around her in astonishment. Six horses crowded the yard, four of them with riders still on them. One was a woman—Lady Brage. She wore a dark coat with the hood covering the crown of her head, gloves on her hands, riding boots and leather trousers visible beneath the hem of her skirts which were hitched up for the gallop.

So they had been in a hurry, Hanah guessed. But not too much of a hurry to have time to change into riding clothes.

"You stole from me," the landlady said. Her voice frosty and high pitched. "I want it back."

"What? I don't know what . . ." Hanah began, but then she remembered.

The paper. She had taken it. She could feel the blood drain from her face. In all honesty, she had not thought it was important. The table had been littered with papers just like it. How did she even notice? Never mind. She obviously did. Hanah could hit herself for her own stupidity if her hands had been free. How she would explain herself was the real problem. Lady Brage would never believe her now, even if she spoke the truth.

"I haven't stolen from you." It had not been the intention, anyway.

The lady turned to the other men. "Search the house."

Two others, and one of the men that held her, went into the shop. Hanah could hear them moving around in there. Throwing, turning over, breaking things. She was glad Hemery was not there. Her sister had gone to the creek to see if the ice had melted enough for fishing, but she would be back any moment.

"You can't do that!" cried Hanah. "Please, my lady, you have to believe me. I haven't stolen anything." She tried to sound as polite as possible over the anger simmering in her chest, but she only wanted to scream at her that she was a hag whose only joy in life came from torturing people like children tortured insects.

"I know it cannot be easy," Lady Brage began impatiently, ignoring Hanah's words. "Losing your father when you are little more than a child." She probably meant to sound understanding, but only communicated cold condescension. "But that's no excuse. You must learn where your loyalty lies."

How did she know about Father? Hanah was thoroughly confused now, and frustrated by the violation of her home and her freedom. And the knowledge that there was nothing she could do if the landlady decided she had no right to either. "How—? Why—? What?"

"M'lady." One of the guards appeared in the doorway.
Hanah’s blood froze. Was this it? Had they found it?

He approached the landlady and gave her a heavy, leather purse.

Lady Brage looked at Hanah like she was a dog who had pissed indoors. She gripped the saddle, swung a long leg over the horse in her dismount and closed the distance between them. A metallic zing reached Hanah’s ears and suddenly a blade gleamed a few inches away from her face.

"You are a spy for the dwarf scum!"

"Spy? No!"

"Don't. Lie. To me," Lady Brage gritted out. Her eyes were red rimmed as they had been before, peering at her from a pale face tilted like a bird's.

"I'm not a spy. Why would I be?"

"It's simple. You've lost your father and with him any prospect of taking care of yourself and your sister. Who can resist a purse full of gold?"

"They bought some wares."

"For five gold pieces? Do you take me for a fool?!" Lady Brage reached out and grabbed Hanah's braid, bringing the knife closer to her face.

Hanah shut her eyes tightly. Before she knew what was happening, the lady let go suddenly. No, she realized, she had not let go. Lady Brage held up a big chunk of Hanah's hair in her fist before she threw it on the ground.

"What have you told them?"

"Nothing!"

Lady Brage struck her across the mouth. She had not been hit like that since she was ten and fought with the neighbor's children. But this time Hanah was pretty sure she would not laugh about it and go play with her again the next day.

The man still on his horse spoke. "We'll take her back with us." Then he turned to one of the others. "Wait for the other one. When she shows up, bring her too."

"Why?" asked Hanah. "What are you gonna do?"

They ignored her.

"Leave my sister alone! We've done nothing wrong," Hanah protested, until another strike made her vision swim. They tied her wrists, pushed her up on a horse and rode into town. Holding tight to the saddle of the trotting horse, she tried to look behind her. The doors were gaping open, letting the glow of the fire spread out into the evening. It would die without someone tending it, and the cottage would descend into darkness.

Hemery would be back soon. She would not know why a man in uniform was at her home and not Hanah. He would hogtie her and drag her with him. And there was nothing Hanah could do to stop it.

"A night without food or fire will loosen her tongue." A heavy door closed somewhere at the end.
of the corridor outside her room. Four blank walls, a shelf like bed and a blanket. Her cell.

They had brought her into the big house through a back door and down into a cellar. Hanah guessed they did not want to advertise their capture of a young girl suspected of being a dwarf spy. Not sure why—they seemed pretty pleased with themselves.

The door was made of planks and not heavily fortified, but she did not want to break out. Not yet. She did not know if they had Hemery. If they did, perhaps they would bring her here, and Hanah did not want to be on the outside if Hemery was on the inside. That is, if she could get out.

She did not know what they wanted her to tell them after a cold and hungry night, but if they thought she was a spy, there was not much for it. Judging by the behavior Hanah had witnessed from the landlady so far, she did not seem like the trusting sort. Or the forgiving. They would not believe her if she told the truth about the ink paper or the dwarf business. She hardly believed it herself, after all.

She did not know how long she sat there—blanket wrapped around her, no light except for what seeped through the cracks in the door, and even then there was nothing to look at other than the bare wood walls—listening for signs of life coming her way. Footsteps sounded in the distance, but they faded as quickly. Time crawled.

Hanah fumed silently. What right had Lady Brage to lock people up like this? Lord Brage owned most of the land around Blackwater Ridge, Hanah knew. He owned the mill, which the farmers needed to make flour and gave a percentage to the landlord as payment for using it. He also owned the mine, but that had collapsed before Hanah was born. A few people had died down there, but it had not stopped them from digging deeper. It must have made Lord Brage a lot of money, because he was rich enough to hire guards, soldiers, to keep the peace as they said.

To some extent, it was true. If someone had a grievance then Lord Brage would settle it. But people rarely sought his aid, since his justice was often harsh on both sides of the dispute. If someone was accused of stealing a lamb that had wandered off its pasture and onto the neighbor's, Brage's solution would be to slaughter the lamb and divide the pieces equally between the quarrellers—pound by pound. To Hanah it seemed more like the landlord was making his own justice in the area with his private army.

And what horrible secret could Lady Brage be hiding for her to be so upset at the thought that the dwarves might learn it?

She heard footsteps again, but they did not fade like the others. The heavy door opened out in the corridor. Quick, light steps. Hemery? Hanah did not dare hope.

Hanah jerked back in fright when a metal rod was stabbed between the door and the frame. With a few twists and bends, the wood moaned and splintered, and the plank holding the lock came loose. Light from the lantern in the corridor flooded the doorframe as the door swung open unhindered.

It was not Hemery. It was the maid. The young woman with the headcloth who had led her through the house both times she had visited.

"Make haste," she hissed. She waved Hanah forward. Hana did not waste any time. The girl was obviously taking a great risk in releasing her, and Hanah was not about to object. She followed her back the way she had come.

"Have you seen my sister?" Hanah whispered.
"No, but I doubt they would let either of you live." She paused to look at Hanah. "Even if you give them what they want." She continued walking.

When they came to the outermost door, they stopped. The girl glanced out through the small window. "You must hurry. Everyone is at the bonfires, but they might return any moment."

Hanah could only see darkness through the glass.

"Why are you helping me?"

She looked at Hanah. "Because his lordship is mad . . . and we all do what we must. Now go."

And she did. Hanah hardly looked around before she started to run. The streets were empty, but she still took the back routes through town and out onto the western road. When she looked behind her, she could see the red glow of the bonfires on the rooftops. It looked like the whole town was set ablaze. Hanah ran home. She ran until she tasted iron in her dry mouth, and then she kept running.

After an eternity, she slowed her steps as the cottage came into view through the trees. She did not see the guard anywhere, though the moonlight her eyes had adjusted to was dim and unreliable. Wind made shadows move and blur, and footsteps fade. The cottage lay dark and abandoned. The door to the shop opened and closed in the draft, as if the building was breathing in a deep slumber.

She paused by the kitchen door. She could not hear anything other than the wind in the trees and her own laboured breathing. She went inside. Her steps were loud in her ears, and the floorboards' creak deafening in the night.

Opening the cupboard, she retrieved some smoked meat wrapped up in paper, a cube of cheese, a loaf of bread, and stuffed it in a bag. She snatched an empty water skin and her coat on the way out.

In the workshop, it was almost pitch black. On all fours, she found the far left corner. She ran her hands along the floor, counted three planks from the wall and dug her nails into the grain. The board came loose. She picked up the small purse hidden underneath. It jingled merrily when she weighed it in her hand. That too went into the bag.

Footsteps disturbed the floor behind her. Hanah whirled around, desperately trying to focus her eyes in the dark. The only hope she had was that the other would see even less than her, and would lose her in the dark corner. She stayed still.

"What are you doing?" hissed a voice from the doorway.

"Hem?"

"Of course it's me."

Hanah leaped up from her crouch to hug her sister close. Hemery squeezed back until she thought her ribs would crack.

"We have to go," Hanah whispered. She could feel Hemery nod against her collarbone. "Take a bag and pack some knives, the toolkit, a tinderbox, and your coat."

By the workbench, Hanah went down on her knees and felt around for the edge between planks. Another purse was found.

Damn lady Brage for stealing a third of her gold. Not even her profit, it was investment money she
was going to use to fulfill her order to the dwarf. Then again, though Hanah would never admit it, she had technically stolen from Lady Brage, even if it was never her intention. However, she was pretty sure a piece of paper could never be worth five gold coins. Hanah clenched the purse in her hand hard. She guessed everybody was a thief in some way in this world. That was why Hanah had divided the gold in the first place. Just in case.

Hemery was stuffing a blanket into a full bag.

"Let's go," Hanah said.

She passed through the doorway into the midnight moonlight that was like pale dawn compared to inside. Something struck her head hard from behind. The world tilted and her legs folded beneath her.
Unexpected Journey

Hanah's arms were suddenly trapped against her body, a pressure on her chest like a vise pushed the air from her lungs.

"You're not goin' anywhere," a man growled in her ear.

It seemed the guard had waited after all, she thought. Obedient bastard.

She jerked her head back into something soft that crunched against her skull. It did not help her own headache from the blow to her head a moment ago, but he let her go—howling in pain. Probably to cradle his broken nose.

"Hem, run!" Hanah called. She reached for the bag she had dropped, but was yanked back by the arm. The force of the man's hand colliding with her face was enough to throw her off balance and fall to the ground. Her eyes failed her. Light and dark shifted before her. She could feel gravel against her arm and hip; she was lying on her side, but soon hands turned her over on her back. A weight pinned her to the cold, wet dirt, and big hands closed around her throat.

"Now you'll go to sleep," he grunted. "And wake up all nicely tied up and on your way back to the Big House.

Panic awakened when Hanah could not breathe. Her hands clutched his wrists and her eyes sought his, but all she could see was a dark outline against the starry sky, like his skin was orc black—a demon risen from nightmares to haunt her.

An echoing thump vibrated into her through his arms. This was it, she thought. Her mind was giving up, producing hallucinations before the final shutdown, like the echoing bell tolling for Death's arrival.

As suddenly as it had come, the pressure on her neck was relieved. The paralyzing weight on her doubled, though, as he collapsed on top of her. Hanah drew frantic, wheezing breaths, and struggled to shove the guard's limp body to the side. Slowly, she came to her feet.

Hemery stood a few feet away with an iron rod gripped in her hands. It was the one they always kept leaning against the side of the door to hack away ice around the threshold. Hanah looked at her sister, looked at the guard, and back to Hemery.

"Hem, come," Hanah said in a scratchy voice.

"Should we—?" Hemery pointed at the guard.

"No," Hanah interrupted. "Leave him." Hanah unclasped the rod from Hemery's hands and threw it aside. She fetched the bags, hefted them over one shoulder and took Hemery's hand in hers. Not until she was pulled away by Hanah did Hemery tear her eyes from the lifeless man.

On the other side of the cottage they found the guard's horse, a black mare, tied to a treebranch. Hanah would not have noticed her had the horse not whinnied as they rounded the corner and almost scared the girls to death. Hanah stripped the mare of sword holsters and harness and anything else they did not need, secured their own bags to the saddle before untying her reins.

Her father had never owned a horse, but she had ridden one a few times. Either she had picked up more about horses than she thought, or this was a really docile animal, because she did not make a
noise or even hesitate when Hanah turned her around to help Hemery mount.

They left on the road going south, opposite from town. White stones outlined the way. The stones reflected what little light shone from stars or moon, making them just visible in the night. They followed the white stone road until they reached a river. It was not more than a creek, but the melted snow water from the north and the surrounding heights made the stream flow fierce and wide.

After a few miles they found a bridge. It was thin and narrow above a natural damm. The water was flat, but Hanah could tell by leaves and debris on the surface that it moved in fast torrents below. The bridge was anchored on some poles in the water, but it was not strong enough to carry a horse. The road continued south, and probably led to a proper crossing further downstream, but Hanah thought it best to leave the white stone road as soon as possible. There were many trails around these parts for trade routes between the Iron Hills and Esgaroth, and further north to the Lonely Mountain. They needed to stay away from the main road if they were to be sure they would not be followed by the landlord. By now, Hanah would not only be accused of being a dwarf spy, but a horse thief as well.

They unfastened the bags from the saddle, removed the reins, so the mare would not get caught on anything in the forest, and let her go. The mare would find her way home.

On the other side of the river, the trees grew closer and it was much darker. The last hours before dawn, Hanah decided they would try to sleep since they barely saw their own hands in front of them. They climbed a wide oak tree and settled on a branch halfway to the top. Hanah sat with her back to the trunk, legs on either side of the branch. Her sister sat in front of her, Hemery's head resting on Hanah's shoulder. Hanah wrapped her arms around Hemery and the blanket enveloping them.

A short reprieve, thought Hanah. A moment to catch her breath. For the moment, they were safe. For the moment, she could relax.

"Hem?"

"Hmm."

It seemed foolish to ask if she was alright.

"You did good today," Hanah said.

Hemery did not answer.

"How did you not get caught?" Hanah asked.

"I heard you screamin'. When I came to the top of the hill, I hid behind the trees. I was gonna come for you, but then they took you away. I'm sorry I didn't stop them."

Hanah's throat constricted. "No. There's nothin' to be sorry for. They would have taken you too. Then we'd both be in the landlady's cellar. It's good you hid. You did good."

"I'm scared," Hemery said.

"No, no," Hanah soothed, rubbing her hands over Hemery's arms. "Don't be. The landlord's men won't find us. And no animals can get us up here. Tomorrow we'll go west to the Lonely Mountain. We'll find some place to live, and work as usual. We have orders to fill and gold to do it with. Where there's work, we'll be fine."
Hemery did not say anything.

"I'll protect you," Hanah said. "I swear, I'll always take care of you."

Then Hanah sang to her little sister until she felt Hemery go limp in her arms. And if Hanah was equally comforted by the familiar rhymes as her sister in the cold night, no one would know.

Sold and cold our gold mine
let the moon or sun shine
on the hills where we climb
where the eagles are cryin'
slopes are riddled with pine
Clinging vines will entwine
lonely hearts to confine
in a foreign design
among rock like a shrine
Drink up mead, drink up wine
for our sunlight divine
Feed the goats, feed the swine
let them all fall in line
Foxes laughter will chime
gold is mine, gold is thine
in the fine summertime

Hanah's eyes snapped open. Had she imagined it in her half dream, or had she heard something that woke her from her torpor? She did not think she had slept at all, but she must have because the sky through the foliage was turning pale blue though the ground below was still as shrouded in shadows as before.

There—the crunch of dry leaves, twigs breaking. It was not a dream. Something was moving down there. Feet shuffled through the underbrush. Screeches in the distance, like crows, and chatter like magpies. Clatter like armour. Mutterings, rumblings, like rocks tumbling down a landslide.

Hanah peered down, careful not to rouse her sister.

People? A caravan, perhaps? They might be able to help. Allow company on the road to the next village, or even as far as Esgaroth or Dale. But they did not usually travel at night, and there was no path here. Hanah and Hemery had gone into the forest before climbing their oak, deliberately to avoid meeting anyone. If it was the landlord's men, which Hanah doubted—who would go to such trouble, off trail, to find a petty thief?—they needed to be quiet until they passed, and Hanah
wanted to know which way they were headed.

Suddenly, shapes came into view from the bushes to her left. Huddled, bent creatures swayed from side to side as they shifted their weight from left to right foot in their walk. Chunky armour lay as patchwork on their backs. Heavy, club like swords and axes hung from their hands, trailing after them in the dirt. Bare heads revealed ashy, hairless skin and large, pointed ears. Hanah had never seen elves, but she was sure these creatures were not it.

They were orcs. Perhaps twenty-five of them, Hanah counted. They passed the oaktree on their way north. One in the last group slowed its steps beneath the oak and looked around, turning its lizardlike head back and forth as if sniffing the air. Clutching the metal slab of a sword compulsively. The others passed, yet it lingered.

A gurgling coughing was heard from the front. The lingerer answered with a hiss like a cat, then wheezed hoarsely back.

Hanah was afraid Hemery would wake from the noise any moment, and prepared to cover her mouth and restrain her should she panic at the sight of these beasts. If they were discovered, Hanah and Hemery were truly doomed. Despite her promise, Hanah would not be able to protect her sister from a pack of orcs. They would be trapped in their tree as easily as had they sat in a cage.

A roar echoed from the forest to the right. The lingerer jerked at the sound, but followed the group through the trees. The noises of weapons on armour and creaky voices faded in the distance.

Hanah inhaled deeply, and allowed a tear of relief roll down her cheek.


"Sorry, sorry," she whispered.

"Is it morning?"

Even if the sun had been glaring her right in the eye, Hanah would not have climbed down that tree. As it was, the sun had just flooded the sky in orange on its way up, and the orcs were on their way to some place the sun would not reach them.

"No rush. You can doze a while yet."

On the second day, Hanah and Hemery reached Dale. The sun warmed their backs as they trekked the mountain road in the late evening. They were chased by the sunset up the hill, but lost to the dusk a few miles from the city. They were following a white stone road, but as they neared the populated area lamp posts replaced the stones.

They passed some houses interspersed with ruined buildings which seemed to have been uninhabited for some time, charred to black, and weeds from many summers clinging to the structures.

It was not until lights became dense and noise louder in the center of Dale—people going places with determination, men as well as dwarves—that Hanah thought about what they would actually do there. They needed to eat and sleep. Find a place to stay and work. And wash, she thought, looking down at herself and her sister. She did not even want to know what she looked like, and she did not care. After walking for days and not sleeping properly at night, she could barely think straight she was so tired.
They had money; they would just go to an Inn. Hanah was sure people a lot less proper than they came to trading towns like these all the time.

"Great Aulë! Are you alright?" The matron of the Dragon's Head cried out at the sight of the sisters. She rounded the counter, but did not come near them. Like injured dogs, Hanah and Hemery attracted sympathy in their disheveled state, but also wariness, as if they might rabidly lash out at any moment. Hanah guessed they looked worse than she had first thought.

She looked around the room. Through the side door was the dining area, where people drank and ate loudly, and someone played the fiddle. No one took notice of the woman's outburst.

"Oh, we're fine," she explained. "We just need a room."

The woman raised her chin. "Do you have coin?" Not rudely, only inquiring.

Hanah admitted to herself she would have done the same. She brought forth her pouch of silver and counted them in her hand. She gave the woman fifteen coins.

The matron glanced at it, then nodded. She wrote something in a ledger, and handed Hanah a big iron key.

"Two nights, supper included. Up the stairs, to the right. I'll send up hot water. Won't do for ladies to go dinin' looking like that."

Hanah and Hemery did not have any spare clothes with them, so they settled for scrubbing their faces and hands clean. Hanah placed a metal plate on a table in front of the fire to see her own reflection when she evened out her hair with a knife. It barely skimmed her shoulders now. She would have kept it back in a tail or a knot, but she wanted to hide the bruises on her neck and face as much as possible, so she let it be.

When they came downstairs, the matron showed them to a table in the corner of the lively dining room. Being two lone girls, they were grateful to be hidden away. They were served stew and bread, but when the barmaid put ale on the table, Hanah asked for water instead. Hanah had tasted ale before, but the girls were both exhausted and malnourished from their journey. Ale was the last thing they needed.

In the low light of lanterns and a fireplace, Hanah looked over the other customers. It was a mixture of men and dwarves, even some females among them. It was late, so most had already eaten and was now just drinking. The volume was high and there was merry music playing.

Hemery chewed her food slowly, eyelids heavy, as if she would fall asleep any second. The warmth of the room was finally seeping into Hanah's bones now that she had eaten. She raised her hand from the table top and watched it tremble. She quickly put it down again, pressing it against the wood. Just nerves, she thought. She needed sleep to gather her strength.

Someone touched her shoulder. Hanah jumped in her seat and knocked the hand aside.

"Woah, easy there," a man said, smiling. "Didn't mean to scare you. Just wanted to sit down and share a glass with you, seeing as you're here all by your lonesome."

The man placed two goblets filled to the brim with red wine on the table.

"I'm with my sister," Hanah said.
"That's alright. I'm enough company for both of you." He pulled up a chair, scraping its legs loudly over the floor.

Hanah stared at the man. His hair reached his shoulders, the sleeves of his shirt were rolled up, and Hanah could see parts of a faded tattoo on his forearm.

He was much older than her. Not as old as Father had been, but old enough that he should have a family of his own and children in Hemery's age. His smile was disarming, but his manner forward. In this festive atmosphere, it was difficult to refuse an offered drink.

Hemery's fatigue seemed to have disappeared when the man sat down. She looked at him as if he had a poisonous snake around his neck.

"Where are you from?" the man asked Hanah.

"East."

"And what brings you to Dale, m'lady?"

"Work."

He chuckled. "Like most I expect. What kind of work attracts you?"

She did not know exactly what he meant by that. "Leather," she replied.

"A girl in craft. I'm in textiles myself. Well, shipping and trading silks," he explained.

"A lot of tradin' of silks in taverns?" Hanah's tone was dry.

He laughed. "More than you'd think. How about you? High sales of skin tonight?"

Hanah looked at her dirty and torn sleeves. He was humouring her, she thought. She and her sister must look like rats someone had tried to drown, but had survived and dried off the remnants of low tide by the fire at the Dragon's Head. It was nice of him to buy her a cup of wine on a chilly night.

"Does it look like I've sold anythin' lately?" she smiled wryly.

"We all have our ups and downs. I'm sure you'll have no problem finding customers in Dale." His smile grew and he raised his cup. "To good business."

Hanah looked at her untouched goblet. It was just wine. A drink with a dry, sour aftertaste. She was familiar with it. The first time she spoken to Graham, at the Midsummer festival last year, she had drunk five cups and emptied her stomach due to the dizzy spell that followed.

This was just one cup. One toast. Hanah reached for the goblet.

A large hand came down hard on top, like a lid on the goblet, forcing it to stay in place.

"Ye don't want to do that, lass," a rough voice thundered. She turned around to see a dwarf over the back of her seat. His beard and hair, what he had around his tattooed scalp, was dark brown, and his eyes even darker where they glared from under low, scarred eyebrows. He had his arm stretched over the back to cover Hanah's drink.

"Mind your own business, dwarf," the man said.

"Aye, if ye leave the women to theirs."
"We're just having a friendly conversation. There's no harm in that."

"There are places in Lake Town where they specialize in conversation, as friendly as ye like."

Hanah recognized the distinguished brogue and the deep growl, like the beginning of a thunderstorm.

"I prefer to stay here." The man spoke to Hanah. "You don't mind. Do you, love?" His fingers came up, as if to stroke her cheek.

Before she even felt a touch, the man's chair had been kicked from under him, bringing him to his knees, and his arm was slammed on the table. Plates and cups clattered, water and wine was spilled. The dwarf held a blade to the man's fingers. The people around stopped to watch what was happening. Some gasping, some laughing. Some continued speaking to each other, not even bothered by the drawn knife in the corner. The fiddle player did not seem to notice the disturbance either, but kept playing his tunes from the other side of the room.

"Reclaim sense, dwarf! No harm was intended," the man barked hurriedly.

"I know yer intention well enough. And ye'll know not to lay hand on a lady unrequested." The dwarf's knife grazed the man's little finger. Blood pearled at the cut.

Hanah was transfixed by the scene unfolding where her dinner plate had just been.

"Alright! Alright. I'll go," the man shouted hoarsely.

The dwarf raised his knife before stabbing it into the table top right next to the man's hand. Then he let up on his hold enough to shove the man away from him. The man scrambled to his feet quickly, looked around as if not really believing what had just transpired, but left before the dwarf could change his mind.

Hanah looked to Hemery, but she was not on the bench opposite her where she had been a moment ago.

"Hem?" she called.

Before she could panic, she felt a hand on her leg and Hemery emerged from beneath the table to sit next to her sister. Hanah took her hand. Then she turned to the dwarf.

She wanted to shout at him, tell him he was mad, that he was rude, that he could have seriously hurt someone. He could have hurt Hemery who had sat close enough to feel the rush of air from his descending arm as he stuck the knife to the table. He had cut a man's flesh in front of her sister.

"Why did you do that?" Hanah gasped.

"He's not welcome here," he simply replied.

"Because he bought me a cup of wine?" Hanah did not understand.

"His wish was to buy you, lass. And failing that, to drink ye under the table."

"It was one cup." Hanah gestured to the fallen goblet.

"One is all it takes. Never take a cup from someone other than the barmaid, ye don't know what have made its way down it."
Hanah's eyes widened. She had not thought of that. But she had thought it strange that someone would just come and sit with her like that. Especially with the girls looking like drifters. "You didn't have to injure him, though."

"He can still play with himself with four fingers. Nothing less than he deserves for disrespecting a lady like that. Taking ye for a woman of pleasure. And even if ye were, ye should not be harassed at any tavern. He can find that elsewhere."

Hanah fell silent at that. Hemery spoke for her, though. "Thank you."

The dwarf grunted something and sat down in his seat. The sound set off something in Hanah. She turned around to look at him.

"Do I know you?" she asked.

"No, lass. Though we have met."

"You and your friends came to my house in Blackwater."

"Aye."

She nodded. "I must say it's nice to meet you again. I'm Hanah and this is Hemery. What's your name, m'lord?"

"No lord. Just Dwalin."
"I'm a blacksmith, not a carpenter," Dwalin barked, but Hanah did not shrink back. She had not heard a harmonious, calm word from him thus far, and was beginning to grown accustomed to his gruff tone.

"I never suggested you were. And it's not as bad as you made it out to be."

Hanah looked around the kitchen. The plaster on the walls had crumbled long ago, revealing pale grey stone walls. The floor was also stone; big, black flagstones. A cupboard, a chest, a table, two chairs. One door led outside, where Dwalin lingered, and one led to an alcove in the back with a bed. A third door led to a bigger room with a bench and some shelves. The windows were taller than they had been at their Blackwater cottage. Dust and cobwebs covered everything, but nothing a brush could not handle. She pointed at the stove.

"Does it work?"

"Aye," he rumbled low, like a dog's warning growl. "Now do ye want it or not?"

"Alright," she said and held one hand up in amused annoyance. Impatient, she thought. "Yes, we'll take it."

Hanah and Hemery had spent all day looking for somewhere to live in Dale, but the town was growing fast and more people came to trade and dwell than houses were built. Though they had washed their clothes in their bath water to dry overnight at the Inn, they were still torn and soiled and made the girls look like the homeless wretches they were. Even if they found a room or a house for rent, no one was keen to have some poor girls for tenants.

In the evening, over dinner at the Dragon's Head, they had spotted Dwalin once more. Since he was the only one they knew in town, and the only one who knew the girls worked and could pay their way, Hanah asked for his advice. After much discussion which consisted mostly of Dwalin professing his disinterest—to put it mildly—he admitted that he owned a piece of land outside Dale where his own forge was built along with another building he was not using. He had rented it out to people during short periods of time, mostly dwarves who came to work and re-settle in the mountain. It had not been maintained or re-painted since the reclaim of Erebor. Since Dwalin did not need the money, and people considered it bad luck to live in a house still charred with dragon fire, the house was empty.

"There's firewood at the back. The rent is due monthly." Dwalin was already on his way over the yard toward his own house. "If somethin' happens, I'll be in the forge—not to be disturbed."

As soon as he was out of earshot, Hanah and Hemery looked at each other and had to choke back giggles threatening to burst out.

"First thing we need to do is buy brushes and cloths," Hanah decided.

"And something to sleep in," Hemery added.

"And new clothes."

"And soap."

"And supplies so we can start working," Hanah stressed.
Hemery noticed some mice droppings on the workbench. "And maybe a cat."

Every morning when Hanah went to fetch firewood behind the house, she continued into the forest, up the slope, and emptied her stomach. Sometimes she barely had time to throw on her clothes before rushing outside. Sometimes she leaned on a tree for a while before her body decided it was time. Sometimes long enough for Hemery to ask what she had been doing, but Hanah simply said the firewood was wet and that she had been looking for dry sticks.

It had taken two days to clean up and get settled in the new house. It was a half hour walk to the center of Dale, but the small house was exactly what they needed to live and work in. The small space meant they did not need much fuel to keep the rooms warm, and the rent was cheap compared to something of equal size nearer the market.

There was undisturbed wilderness around them. Dwalin did not own a horse or carriage so the yard between their houses was mostly untouched. The ground where the snow had begun to melt showed no mud, only yellowed grass. Behind Hanah's and Hemery's house the forest floor rose up towards the top of the mountain, while the road took the longer and more accessible path around to Dale. Behind Dwalin's house the ground sloped slightly towards sparser trees before meeting the river which rushed cold and quick over jagged stones down to Esgaroth.

It was quiet and calm in Dwalin's yard, and Hanah savoured every moment of it. It even comforted her to know the dwarf lived so near, though they rarely saw him. When the sisters sat in their new workshop, with fresh material in their hands, Hanah felt how her nerves were soothed in the familiar movements. Finally, with her sister in their new home, she could relax.

That was why Hanah was unhappy to discover when they had eaten dinner on their third day at Dwalin's cottage, listened to the crackling fire in the stove, and sang together while they braided leather cords, that she had begun to bleed.

Hanah had always been irregular in her monthly bleeding, and she knew distress could push it for days, so she did not know if she was late or early. However, the bleeding did not concern her as much as the pain. A dull ache quickly transformed into paralyzing torment, which she had not felt since her very first red moon. She asked Hemery to lock up the house and mind the fire, and went herself to bed.

Hanah lay awake a long time. She listened as her sister moved in the other rooms. Hemery went out for a while—to the outhouse, Hanah suspected—before coming back in and locking the door. The poker clattered against the stove. Hemery settled the embers before closing the stove for the night. Hanah heard when Hemery came into the alcove and changed into her nightclothes. The bed dipped as Hemery came to lay next to her.

"Hanah," she whispered.

"Hmm."

"Are you ill?"

"No, I just need to sleep."

But she could not. Blue light of dawn reflected on the wall from the window in the kitchen before Hanah fell into a restless slumber.

She woke from a stab in her gut, like a dagger was twisting its way through her innards a little
more with every heartbeat. Her head swam from exhaustion. When she hid her face in her hands she felt tears on her face that she had cried in her sleep.

Hemery was not in bed. The sun seemed to have risen not too long ago. Hanah knew she should get up and change her underclothes, but she could not be bothered. She turned on her side and pulled her knees up. Finding a slightly less agonizing position, she drew the blanket over her eyes, and stayed that way.

"How are you feelin'?" Hemery asked low from the doorway.

"Hmm. Not better. I need to rest a bit more."

"Are you hungry?"

She was, but the thought of breakfast or even the tea she could smell Hemery brew in the kitchen made her stomach churn.

"No."

At dusk on their fifth day at Dwalin's cottage, Hemery snuck out of the house and ran across the yard in the orange light of the setting sun. She knocked on the door to Dwalin's house. When she did not hear anything, she knocked again, harder.

"What?" Dwalin thundered when he tore the door open. "I said to not disturb me no matter—"

"I think she needs a healer."

Dwalin glanced at the house across the yard. "Why is that?"

"Somethin's wrong. She's bleedin'."

Dwalin gave pause at that. "Where?"

"In bed."

His nostrils flared as he frowned harder. "Where on her person?"

"Down . . . there."

Dwalin growled in disapproval. "Womenfolk do that, ye know. I would have thought yer mother had taught ye these things."

"But this is different," Hemery said, willing him to understand. "It's been days, and she's bleedin' a lot. She hasn't moved at all."

He seemed to think it over a moment. It may have been Hemery's watery eyes or something in her voice that reached the stern dwarf. Hemery knew that bleeding—wherever and whenever it occurred—was never good, and she was sure Dwalin knew as well.

Dwalin's sigh was deep as a mountain chasm. "Very well. I'll fetch someone."

"Thank you!" Hemery breathed out.

"I'll be back within the hour."
Hanah had watched the sunlight move on the wall of the alcove all day. She was tired, so tired. Tears escaped her eyes now and then, drying to salty sand at the corners of her eyes. Hemery had given her a bucket of water and a cloth to wash herself with, and she had changed into new underclothes. She did not know how long they would last.

A while ago, Hemery had decided to change the sheets on the bed. Hanah had told her to leave it, that she would do it herself, but Hemery had been adamant.

"Must be bad luck to sleep in a bed with old blood. You'll bring the wolves to our door."

Hanah had laughed, but it faded quickly as the stabbing resumed with the tensing of her stomach.

Suddenly, the front door opened.

"Who is it?" Hanah called out to Hemery, but it was barely audible with her weak voice.

A dwarf appeared in the doorway. But not dressed in fur and leather trousers like Dwalin, but skirts and a purple tunic. Her long, thick, dark hair was decorated with copper beads, and streaked with grey. A dwarf woman?

She knelt beside the bed. "Good evening, Hanah. I'm healer Elín. Dwalin called for me."

"Dwalin?" How did he—?

Hemery.

Hanah sighed. Hemery was worried about her and had gone for help. Nothing less than Hanah herself would have done, had the roles been reversed. Her heart softened with pride.

"What are you feeling?" Elín asked. Her voice was deep and soft, but her words were clipped.

"Pain, here," Hanah stroked the lower part of her belly.

"And this is not your usual bleeding, is it?" The dwarven woman looked at her closely.

"I don't think so."

Elín put fingers on Hanah's face. Turning it back and forth, she felt the soft skin beneath the jaw, behind the ears, and along her neck. Without warning she pulled the covers back and ran her hands over Hanah's stomach. It did not hurt Hanah more, but it was uncomfortable, and chilled her when cold air hit her skin. After a moment, she tucked Hanah back into her blanket.

The healer asked her more questions. How long had her symptoms been evident, and when and where had they begun? What had she eaten? What had she done the last few days?

Hanah was careful to answer the last one, replying only in bare facts, no circumstances.

"You're already too thin, even for mankind, and you've lost a lot of blood. Never a good combination," Elín said. "Hemery is brewing a tea for your pain."

"Thank you."

"Now, answer me; have you been with a male these last few months?"

Hanah stared at her. Then she nodded.
"And I can tell you have suffered physical stress and violence of late."

Unconsciously, Hanah touched her neck where the bruises had not quite faded.

"It is very likely that you have been with child."

Hanah looked at her. Elín's jaws were tight and her eyes grave.

"And it's difficult to say for certain, but there is a great risk that your child is now lost."

"Oh." Hanah did not know what to say. She felt sick, but she was not sure if it was from her pain and hunger that had ravaged her stomach all day or from Elín's words. Hanah had known that a child was a possible outcome of her congress with Graham, after all. At the time, it was a risk she had been willing to take. It seemed so foolish now, her old plan for the future. Even if she had stayed at Blackwater, and even if she had been able to keep the child, she would not have wanted to go to Graham. Not after their last meeting. She would not have been able to demand anything from him, would not want anything from him, though she was very aware of Graham's own part in it. He had been a willing, active part in the conception. She had not tricked him. If she had forced him to marry her, it would have been his own doing as much as hers.

Her stomach churned again at the thought of a marriage to Graham. Hanah sighed. So foolish. Elín narrowed her eyes at her. Hanah realized Elín had expected another reaction from her. She was sure it would have felt awful to lose a child if one had been wanted. A child born into a family and a good, safe home. But she did not feel it. Now she felt guilty for not showing the proper emotions for the situation. Guilt for not saying what Elín expected her to.

"Time will tell if my assessment is correct,"Elín concluded. "Until then we can only hope and pray."

If the healer meant hope for the child that may or may not come into existence, or hope for Hanah's convalescence, Elín did not specify.

Hemery came in with a steaming cup of tea.

"Drink it," said Elín.

Hanah took a sip. She made a grimace. It tasted like rancid fish and birch sap.

Elín held up a small bag. "No more than a tablespoon per cup of water. No more than two cups a day. Any more than that and you'll fall into a deep sleep. Too deep."

Hanah nodded.

"The worst of the bleeding should be behind you. Blood may come and go as regular as rain, but if the monthlies do not return, come see me." Elín stood up to leave.

"Hemery," Hanah said. "Fetch the purse."

Hemery ran to the workshop and back, leaving the leather pouch in Hanah's hand. She could not sit up, but leaned on one elbow as she counted coins which she then handed to Elín who had stood silently waiting.

"I don't know what is customary..." Hanah began.
Elín regarded the coins in her hand before meeting Hanah's gaze. Her face softened a fraction, and... was that surprise? But she quickly corrected herself into a professional blankness.

"Gratitude," was all she said.

"I apologize for makin' you come here at this time of day. It's already night, is it not?" said Hanah.

"Do not trouble yourself. I have transport. Good evening to you."

Healer Elín disappeared through the bedroom door like a gentle fae in the dimness of dusk and Hanah's swimming head. Her pain had already lessened.

A week later, Hemery knocked once more on Dwalin's door.

Spring had truly come to the Lonely Mountain. Most of the snow on Dwalin's yard had disappeared, and bird song echoed in the tall pines around their home.

She was not surprised when there was no answer. Hemery was very aware that Dwalin wished to be alone when he worked. As well as when he ate, when he was at the Inn, and when he was sleeping. She knocked again.

On the third knock, the door flung open, almost hitting Hemery had she not hopped out of the away in time.

"Are ye soft in the head, lass?" Dwalin growled.

Hemery's upper lip curved. "What?"

"Did yer mother drop ye on yer head as a wee bairn?"

"How should I know?"

"Do ye suffer from amnesia?"

"No."

"Then why can't ye follow a simple instruction? Did I or did I not tell ye never to disturb me."

"But I'm not disturbin' you," Hemery protested.

Dwalin seemed stumped. With only an eyebrow raising, this was the first time Hemery saw something other than deep glaring from him.

"I've come to thank you for all your help." With both hands she held up a wrapped package toward him. "We did not have anyth'ing to give you before now, because we've just started workin' again. Today is the first day we're goin' to the market in Dale."

He just looked at her, and when he did not say anything she thrust the package a little closer to him. Finally, he took it and unwrapped it.

It was a belt. Hemery had made it herself. It was about the width of a hand, branded with a vine design, with metal circles around the pin holes for durability.

Dwalin scrutinized it and grunted. "Is it supposed to go around my waist, or my wrist?"
He seemed to think it was too small. Hemery shrugged. "Do whatever you want with it."

Dwalin turned and walked inside again, but he did not close the door so Hemery followed him. He walked to the far wall where countless hooks were fastened to the wall, and hung the belt from one of them.

Hemery looked around. His house was similar to theirs in that his forge, where the big fire was, was connected to his living quarters. The fireplace glowed in the corner and radiated more heat than Hemery would be able to stand for a longer period of time. There were several anvils of different sizes, workbenches cluttered with hammers, pliers, and tongs, and shelves with knives, daggers, and swords neatly stored in wooden boxes.

Hemery stared at the smallest knives. So small, so light they seemed. Some no bigger than her palm. Inscribed with runes and geometric patterns. Some thin, some wide. Some rounded, some hooked. Some triangles, some stars.

"Oy," Dwalin said sternly. "No touchin'."

Hemery looked at her hand hovering above the star knife. She had not even realized she was about to touch it.

"Do you use all of these?" she asked.

"I'm a smith. I make—I sell. Same as you."

"But you know how?"

"Of course I know. I've trained since I was a wee lad."

"Did your father teach you?"

"Who else?" he muttered, but it seemed he was busying himself with something on the other side of the room.

"Can you teach me?"

Dwalin sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. "What's with all these questions?" he grumbled louder.

"If I knew how to handle a knife, we would not need to be afraid."

He looked at her. "Ye should know it already. Ye mean to say, ye never held a knife?"

"Not the fightin' kind."

Dwalin sat heavily in a chair, bent low to pull out a box from beneath a bench. He dug his hand in and rummaged around among pieces of metal, making a terrible racket. He straightened with a square, metal plate in his hand.

"Here," he said, holding it out to her. She approached him and accepted the plate. It was as big as her hand, but thin as a fingernail. Black and dirty. Her hands became oily from touching it.

"Paint a mark, no bigger than yer thumb, on a tree. Step ten paces back and throw this at the mark. When ye can hit the mark, and make it stick, ten times in a row—"

Hemery touched the pointy corners. It was sharp enough that she could scratch herself very badly,
but stick to a tree?

Dwalin continued. "Then I'll teach ye how to use a proper knife."

Hemery could not deny the spark that ignited in her chest at his words. She smiled carefully.

"Though I hoped my time wiping dwarflings' noses at the range was over," he growled. "Now, away with ye."
Hanah needed to meet with Lord Fili.

She had worked on the first coat for a week, and she was driving herself crazy. She constantly questioned every decision, from cut to colour, buttons to beading. She had bought paint to try out different looks.

_Coronation cloak of a king._ Lord Fili's words.

When she thought of royals, she thought of white. No one who laboured ever wore white. But when she imagined thirteen white coats all in a row, she grimaced. It would look silly. Even if they were worn on different occasions, it would look like the same coat every time. She had already done black. It would not do to make the new coats resemble the old one.

Her beading designs were running out of steam. The only things she was really good at were vines, leaves, and flowers, all kinds and for all occasions, but it was not good enough here, not special enough. She needed something fresh, something solid, a theme. Hanah's ideas were stale and dried up like last season's grass. However, she did not want Lord Fili to know that.

After mulling it over for a few days, she decided to visit her customer. She needed more information. She needed to see where he lived, how he dressed, to get an idea of what might be appropriate for her own work.

Hanah could tell her sister was not keeping up with her. Outside the giant entrance to the mountain, she turned around.

"Hem, what are you looking at?"

"Nothin'," came Hemery's automatic reply.

It was a nice sunny day, mild winds tugged on Hanah's hair knot. Her hair was too short to braid and even the knot would not hold for long. She tucked hair behind her ears as she looked around.

A lot of people were out this afternoon, dwarves mostly, going in and out of the mountain. Some market tents were raised along the road between Erebor and Dale, and on the grassy fields further away were groups and scattered people busy with target practice and what seemed to be combat training. Most of them wore what she had come to recognize as the crest of Durin. They had to be soldiers or members of the royal guard, Hanah thought.

Along the road and around the entrance were more guards, though these were on active duty, standing straight and carrying banners and full armour.

"Why don't you wait here," Hanah said.

"Alright," Hemery said.

"Really? No complaint?"

Hemery shrugged. Hanah looked at her a moment, but nodded.

"Here, buy yourself some sugared almonds," Hanah reached into her pocket for a silver coin.

"Don't we need it?" Hemery looked worried.
"I'm not sayin' spend all of it."

Hemery turned to the market tents, looking at the coin reverently.

"And save me some," Hanah called after her.

When Hanah approached the entrance, one of the guards along the path stepped in front of her.

"State yer name and business," he barked. Hanah had gotten used to Dwalin's tone of voice and interpreted this dwarf's utterance as quite polite—by dwarf standards.

There was an entire city in there with hundreds, hundreds, and hundreds of people, and they still wished to know her purpose there. She figured it was good for them to take security so seriously, but she could not completely erase the memory of Lady Brage's guards. These dwarven guards were big, armed, and meanlooking, so Hanah stopped immediately and did as she was told.

"My name is Hanah Skinner, and I'm a leathersmith. I have business with Lord Fíli."

The dwarf glanced at the guard next to him, but did not comment.

"Show your bag."

Hanah pulled the satchel from her shoulder and held it forth. He took it. He opened the bag, lifted some linnens and leathers out of the way. She opened her mouth and drew a breath to ask what he was doing, but was silenced by a stare before she could make a sound. He picked up a small, leather-bound toolkit.

"What's this?" he asked, leafing through it.

"It's needles and things. Tools."

His gaze bore into her.

"It's nothin' special, they're not dangerous or anythin'. I don't carry weapons, I promise." She tried to placate him.

"No weapons?" he echoed, and shared another look with his colleague. "You should, miss." He gave the bag back to her. "Go on," he said as he stepped aside.

She blinked, but did not waste time lingering in case they changed their minds.

Inside the massive gate, there was a large room with an equally large gate a hundred yards ahead. Nothing decorated the walls in the anteroom but squares and lines carved in the stone. Runes, she realized. Runes from floor to ceiling, and even the floor was covered in them. Sand and twigs and pine needles filled in the deep patterns in the stone.

She could not see properly in the dim light when she had been in sunshine the moment before, but beyond the second gate she noticed a long table straight ahead which seemed to be a reception area. In here there were more guards stationed along the walls. People moved back and forth through the entrance, some hurried and some strolling wrapped in conversation. Dwarves dressed in light grey tunics and robes attended the table, shuffling papers, and speaking and gesticulating vigorously to newcomers as well as each other.

Hanah approached one dwarf who was not engaged in any discussion.

"Excuse me," she said. "Can you tell me where I could find Lord Fíli?"
He looked startled for a moment. "Is there a scheduled appointment for your visit?"

Scheduled? As in, planned in advance? "Eh... no," she said.

"His excellency does not simply receive anyone who walks into Erebor. You need to apply to the office for a scheduled appointment." The dwarf placed a stack of papers before her. She looked at each page in turn. She did not understand what the text on them said.

As Hanah stood there, one particularly large group of dwarves came into the reception area from somewhere within the mountain, talking loudly over each other, clearly on their way outside. Despite carrying swords, they were dressed formally with tunics and trousers in different shades of dark red, blue, or purple, all decorated in hair and beard with metals and minerals. They were followed by four regular guards, completely outfitted with helmets, spears, swords, and shields on their backs. They looked important and she could tell the steward's attention was not directed at her anymore.

She tried to speak over the clamor of the passing group as well as the general noise of everyone in the reception hall echoing on the tall, stone walls.

"Maybe you could deliver a message for me?" she asked the steward.

The steward turned back to her with a stony expression. "You are of course allowed to write him or his office a letter and send as regular correspondence, that would be no business of mine—now would it?" His tone was one of forced patience.

"But that could take weeks." And Hanah did not know how to write. "These orders have been requested by Lord Fíli personally, and he's goin' to—"

"Wait—what was that?" a voice behind her asked.

Hanah turned around. The loud group of dwarves had stopped some ten feet away.

"Did someone mention my name?" one of them spoke.

First, she just stared. Two of them looked at her, while the other two looked between themselves questioningly. Then she recognized them. The two dwarves closest to her had been at the cottage in Blackwater. The black haired and the blond. It was him. Lord Fíli.

"Yes. I did," Hanah blurted quickly, fearing she would hesitate too long and they would move on. "I wish to speak to you, m'lord. About your order."

He looked at her a moment, no flicker of recognition or otherwise change in demeanor. "Of course," he finally replied. He turned to his comrades. "I'll meet you there."

"Now is not the time—" an older, grey haired dwarf began.

"Relax. No one's attacking," the young black haired said, seemingly thinking his friend was overreacting.

"Half an hour," Lord Fíli assured them. "Go ahead."

Slowly, the others continued their path to the exit. The black haired touched his fist to Lord Fíli's shoulder before joining them.

Before Hanah could even begin to explain her errand, he moved past her. "Walk with me," he said,
motioning the way with his hand to a wide staircase on the left.

"What brings you to Erebor so early?" he asked as they ascended. "Is the craft of the peltmaster so impressive the order is already completed?"

"No, m'lord," Hanah said, but quickly changed her mind when she realized it sounded as if the master was not impressive. "I mean, we decided that... it would be beneficial for us to travel earlier than planned." Not a total lie. She had indeed decided that it would be better for her and her sister not to remain in Blackwater at present.

He glanced at her as they walked side by side. "I see."

On the third landing he turned into a large corridor. There were no guards stationed here as there had been on the other floors. Just burning torches and long tapestries hung on the walls between the wide doors.

"Well then. What is on the agenda for today, Mistress Skinner?"

Dwarves really did have good memory. Most customers did not bother with names.

"It would be best for this project if we were able to take exact measurements for the coats, but... perhaps this is a bad time?" She thought about the others who were waiting for him.

He sighed, but shook his head. "Calling this a bad time suggests there is such a thing as a good time. We'll just have to make time." He smiled tiredly as he opened a door for her to step through.

They entered a study. A fire burned in the fireplace, a large desk sat in the far end of the room, bookshelves and tapestries hid the walls. There was a closed door to the left. It was quiet, except for the crackle of the fire, none of the echoing noise that seemed to reach every other corner of the mountain.

"What do you need me to do?" he asked.

"Oh, you can't really do anything," Hanah replied. That did not sound right. "I mean, you don't have to do anything."

She looked at him apprehensively, but he just looked back, face completely blank. Almost deliberately so.

Hanah brought out a bundle of linens and her needles. The linens unfolded into a thin, white copy of a coat design. It consisted of four lengths of cloth, only stitched together at the shoulders, leaving the rest to simply hang straight down. Hanah paused before approaching him.

"Stand here, please." She motioned him a little closer to the fire light.

He did as she asked. She dressed him in the linen coat lengths, adjusting and tugging them to make them level and fall naturally from his shoulders. Then she began fastening them together with needles.

"So where are you staying?" Lord Fili asked.

"We rent a house outside Dale, from Master Dwalin."

"Is that so? He has not mentioned keeping new tenants."

"We've only been there a week or so. How many layers do you suppose should fit underneath?" she
changed the subject.

"Shirt, leather tunic, chainmail, perhaps some pauldrons."

"I'll make them adjustable beneath the arms," she concluded.

There was silence a long moment while Hanah worked. She stole some glances at the textiles on the walls. Some were weaved, some were embroidered. Very sharp lines, points, pyramids, squares, and other shapes with even more edges than that. Zigzags and stars. And runes, up and down and across, letters making shapes in clusters, transforming the tapestries to labyrinths and landscapes with hidden messages.

"What is it?"

"Hmm?" Hanah was abruptly brought out of her revery.

"You look like you're solving a puzzle. Is there a problem?"

"No, no problem." She refocused on the needles in her hand.

"I'm not too big, am I?" he asked.

Hanah looked up in astonishment. "What?" she asked.

"I am quite strong, you know. Don't feel bad if the peltmaster's coat is not large enough to accommodate my grand stature."

Hanah snorted unladylike in a sudden laugh. Immediately, she covered her mouth to stop anything else from escaping unbidden. Her eyes widened in horror at what she had just done. She took in his serious expression. She had laughed at her employer. She had laughed at his stocky, dwarven appearance. She had just killed whatever business they might have had at the Lonely Mountain.

Hanah's thoughts spun out of control. She and Hemery would have to leave and never come back. Hanah would be lucky to leave the mountain unscathed. Why, oh why, could she never keep her mouth shut? She tensed every muscle in her body, waiting for his judgement.

Lord Fíli smiled. Dimples showed in his cheeks and the corners of his eyes crinkled.

Hanah slowly removed her hand from her mouth, still staring at him in shock.

"I merely jest," he explained.

A breath of air left Hanah in a relieved half-laugh. She tried to smile back, but she did not know whether she succeeded. He chuckled, probably in amusement over her flustered behavior.

"Forgive me," she breathed, small huffs of air still left her, almost like coughs. "I wasn't prepared." She waved a hand as if to erase what she just said. "I didn't expect..."

"But that's when it's the most enjoyable," he said, laughing now.

She could not help but join in. It was contagious. Suddenly, it was the funniest thing in the world. She could not remember the last time she had laughed this hard. For a moment she had to brace herself, holding one hand on his shoulder to keep from doubling over. And his face with unguarded eyes, showing rows of teeth in his own uninhibited laugh was...

She did not know what it was. Warm and inviting. Like they understood each other and laughed at
themselves—at his joke, her reaction, and the strange situation that arose because of it, all at once. Like they had their own private moment, separate from the rest of the world, here in this room—which was very secluded, she suddenly realized.

Hanah sobered then. She was there to work, otherwise it was inappropriate for them to be in this room together, alone.

She calmed herself, straightened, and avoided his eyes as she continued adjusting the linens.

"So what occupies your mind if not the girth of my belly?" he asked.

"I was just admirin' the decorations. Is that your language? Those runes."


"And only . . . your people speak it?"

"Originally, yes. But after a hundred and seventy years of dwarves scattered in the wind all over Middle Earth, and then twenty more years of retying close connections with men and elves around the Lonely Mountain, some is bound to be picked up by keen ears."

"Its runes are displayed everywhere. Must be hard to keep secret."

"Well, we shouldn't have to lock up all our treasures to prevent theft. Some things should just remain untouched."

She thought about that. One should not need to hide gold underneath the floorboards, and even if one did it, someone would look for it, find it, and steal it.

"I suppose so," she agreed. She crouched down to level the bottom hem. "Sadly, it seems whenever people suspect you have somethin' you don't deserve—they will try to take it."

"What has been stolen from you then, Mistress Skinner?"

She compared her fate with that of the dwarves of Erebor. Her troubles did not seem to be in remotely the same category. Her home had not been taken by a fire breathing dragon. Although the imagery quickly brought Lady Brage to her minds eye, with a serpent's tongue and smoking nostrils. But at least her kin had not been burned alive by her.

"Nothin' that can't be replaced," Hanah settled.

"You did not attempt to reclaim it?"

"I don't have much experience with conflict, but I know when I'm bein' outmaneuvered."

Hanah stood then, put her needles away, and lifted the linen pieces from Lord Fili's shoulders. Carefully she rolled them together, making sure no needles were visible from the outside before placing it back in her bag.

"Thank you for your time, m'lord."

"My pleasure." He smiled politely.

They left together, but instead of going back the way they came, they continued all the way through the corridor and exited onto an enormous landing, where people moved as if on a city road. Guards once more occupied the entrance to every door. Directly in front of Hanah, beyond the
railing, was a two hundred feet drop down past several floor just like the one where they stood, where balconies jutted out and banners in different colours swayed in the breeze from the main entrance below.

Slowly, Hanah walked to the edge and looked down. She could scent spring on the air as the wind caressed her face. In the mountain it was much colder than outside, the sun only brightened half of the gigantic hall. Sunbeams, like fallen pillars of light, rested from the southern openings in the mountainside and reached the far wall where they touched statues tall as trees and, between them, another large door leading into the depths of Erebor.

Birds sat on the railings or darted in and out of the mountain through the tall windows above the gate, their song bouncing off the walls, creating echoes in higher and lower pitch.

Hanah could see people down on the first floor, like mice, casting shadows on the floor ten times their height. The ceiling was domed, set with crystals which glittered like the night sky. The levels all had pillars connecting them to each other, and everything was straight, sharp lines: horizontal, vertical, and diagonal. The staircases turning from left to right, the doorways narrowing at the top, the floor set in square and rectangular stones in different shades and ever expanding shapes.

Lord Fili came to stand next to her.

"I understand," she whispered, mostly to herself.

"What was that?"

"I've heard of cities and palaces, but I never thought—" The air was drawn from her lungs as the looked down again. Her wide eyes teared up from trying to see every detail as clearly as possible. Even the stone railing beneath her hands was cut like pointy waves frozen in motion, in larger and smaller ripples.

"I mean, look at this." She ran her hand along the smooth polished stone, and bent low to look on every side. "How does one even plan somethin' as intricate as this? It must have taken—" She straightened. "So many people, and so many years. And look at the—" She pointed at the patterns around the doors and above the balconies, but stopped herself. She was rambling.

"Forgive me. I'm keepin' you from your work, m'lord." She looked at him then.

"Not at all." His smile was still polite, but his voice had softened. "My eyes have grown accustomed to this sight. It's refreshing to see it anew through someone else's."

They walked down a long flight of stairs before crossing the anteroom and into the sunshine.

"I was wondering," Hanah began as they stopped outside the gate. "If I might make an appointment two weeks from now, to display the first piece of the series for inspection?"

"I have trust in you and the peltmaster. There is no need."

"We should do this continually until it is done, to prevent any misunderstandings and unexpected. . . issues," Hanah insisted. She would be damned if they would have one more dissatisfied customer. "And it was difficult to be allowed in there, so. . . that's why I ask."

He seemed amused now, but still polite. "Of course. I'll make a note of it."

"Thank you, m'lord." Hanah began to look around. She had expected to see Hemery as soon as she left the mountain, but she did not spot her sister in the stream of people.
"Something the matter?" Lord Fili asked. He must have noticed she was too distracted to properly bid farewell.

"Where's Hemery? She was supposed to wait for me." She raised her hand toward the tents and began walking. "She was right here. Hemery? Hem?" She looked around. "Hemery?" Her voice cracked with panic. What could have happened to her? Surely, the landlord could not have come all this way—?

"Hey!" Hemery called suddenly. Hanah turned toward the sound. Her sister was waving to her where she stood out in the field next to a line of people, men and dwarves, who seemed to be watching the soldiers shoot arrows and throw knives at targets. "Look!" Hem shouted and pointed excitedly.

Hanah let out a sigh of relief. She returned to the noble dwarf whom she had left standing by the side of the road.

"Apologies, m'lord. I thought..." She could not speak the words. "Anyway, I'll not keep you any longer. Good day."

He did not return the farewell, however.

"What misfortune has befallen the pair of you since we last met?" All softness of tone and polite smiles had left Lord Fili. Only the grim expression typical of his people remained.

Hanah looked at Hemery where she stood transfixed by the skill of the soldiers. At that moment, no one could have guessed what she had been through in the last weeks. Not to mention that some of it had been Hanah's fault.

"Travel is never simple," she said. "Not even the short way between Blackwater and Dale."

"The peltsmaster did not travel with you?"

She tensed. "No, he... he had other business." She cringed inwardly at the deception, but she still did not trust he would keep her employed if he knew a mere girl was performing the master's work in his permanent absence.

"Something has you scared. The panic in your eyes when you thought the girl gone. You feared something particular just then."

She did not answer.

"There's traces of bruising on you. And your hair..."

She raised her hands to check the knot. Much had escaped the cord at the nape of her neck.

"I'm not aware of any female who would willingly cut her hair short."

Hanah wanted to refuse to answer and walk away, but he was still a noble and her main source of income. Besides, he had a part in what had happened. A small part, but a part none the less.

"What made you leave Blackwater?" he insisted.

"They thought I was a spy," she finally said. She looked to gauge his reaction. His grave expression had sharpened, but aimed at her. Surely, he did not think she was a threat as well?

She sighed. "For you. They found some of the gold you gave me, and thought I was a spy for the
dwarves." It was half the truth, anyway.

The storm clouds cleared from his eyes, but was soon replaced with a trouble look.

"What did they do to you?" he asked, though he did not really seem to want to hear the answer.

"Not much. We managed to get away before the landlords had decided what to do with me. But we can never go back."

"I'm truly sorry. Lord Brage's grievance is with us. Your family should never have suffered for it," he said.

Hanah felt a little guilty about basically blaming him for her exile, but he had pushed her to speak of it. "What is their grievance with you, if you don't mind me askin'?"

He shook his head and rubbed his eyebrows. "It's no secret," he said. "During Smaug's presence here, dwarves from Erebor took work in mines and smithies wherever they could. A few dozen mined at Blackwater, but in the service of Lord Brage and his father's before him. The Brage's had claimed the land and discovered the findings therein. After we reclaimed the mountain, the dwarves who worked at Blackwater returned here, leaving Brage to mine his own ridge. Eight years later, there was a collapse in that mine."

Hanah remembered and nodded in agreement, but did not want to interrupt.

"Lord Brage's two sons died in those tunnels. And even though it was long after the dwarves had left, they blamed the collapse and their sons' deaths on us."

Hanah had been very small when it happened so she did not remember that. Naturally, few spoke of it nowadays. She understood now Lady Brage's outrage at Hanah's suspected treachery.

"Since then, relations have been . . . tense between Erebor and Blackwater. I do not believe Lord Brage, in his heart, thinks dwarves were to blame, but grief still clouds his judgement. Dwarves are not welcome there, though they know Blackwater is the best place to rest on the journey between Erebor and the Iron Hills, trade routes are cut off and detours delay transport all along the ridge. We have ongoing talks, but they're mostly charades. Both parties agree to make their best effort to work toward the common good of the communities, but nothing changes. Lord Brage expands his borders and encourages hostility towards dwarves."

"Still you go there with only a handful of dwarves with you?" She had seen them in the Big House at Blackwater. Although, she had been a little preoccupied with her own problems to take note of their well-being at the time.

"They would not dare attempt anything against a royal ambassador." His reply was framed by a humourless smirk. "Buying a coat which was intended for Brage was just a small pleasure I allowed myself after another pointless meeting."

"But you knew they didn't want it. You were there." Hanah still found it embarrassing to think about that day.

"Lady Brage would change her mind. She always does." He shrugged. "And I wanted it. It was a very nice coat."

They stood quiet a moment.

"Had I known—" Lord Fíli began. He put a hand to his heart. "I am profoundly sorry you were a
victim of the Brage's paranoia, because of me. I will make it up to you in any way I can."

"Please, there's no need, m'lord." Hanah grimaced and willed him to stop apologizing. He was a noble who did not need to ask anyone's forgiveness, and it made her feel terrible for not confessing to her own part in the crimes for which she had been accused.

"No one could have known that was going to happen. I wasn't in Lady Brage's favour to begin with. Our days of business in Blackwater were numbered. We have been very lucky to be able to settle here. Only..." Hanah paused.

"Yes?"

"Perhaps you should have a little more care about paying in gold."
"I did it! I did it!" Hemery came running at Dwalin as he sat in the sun outside his forge. She stopped in front of him on the fresh, green grass which covered more and more of the yard each day.

"Did what?" he asked, completely unaffected by her exulted mood. He did not even look up from stuffing his pipe.

"It stuck ten times. I thought it'd never work, but I fuckin' did it!"

"Oy, watch yer mouth." He finally looked up at her and pointed at her with his pipe. "What would yer mother say?"

Hemery curved her upper lip, as she always did when she thought Dwalin did not make sense. "But you say it all the time." She shrugged.

"I do no such thing." Dwalin struck a match on his thumbnail and lit his pipe.

"Yes, you do. You said it when the snow began to melt and it fell from your roof and crushed your sleigh."

Dwalin only hummed low.

"And that time when you called the king a stubborn, old goat."

"I said he was as stubborn as an old goat. I never called the king a goat, and how in the bloody halls of Mahal do ye know that?"

"It was that day when Hanah was so stressed, and I came here to get out of her hair, and your friend came to visit and you told me to make tea. I heard you talkin' from the kitchen."

"He's not my friend, he's my brother Balin. And you shouldn't be listening in on private conversations."

Hemery tilted her head and chose her words as if wishing to spare his feelings. "I don't know if anyone ever told you this, but you can be very loud," Hemery informed him.

His eyes bore into her a long moment. Then the tension seemed to fade from his shoulders and he drew on his pipe.

"After fightin' in two battles and reclaimin' our mountain, I've earned the right to say whatever I please. And you'll not exhaust such a crude word for simply hittin' a tree that doesn't move with a piece of metal."

He sat back against the wall and smoked his pipe slowly, almost as if forgetting Hemery was there.

"So you said you'd teach me how to use a real knife if I stuck it to a tree ten times, and I did."

"Then show me," he grunted.

"Here?"

He peered at her through narrowed eyes. "Forgive me for not takin' yer word for it, lass. But you'd
better hurry before my pipe burns out and I go back inside."

Hemery pursed her lips in frustration, but walked up to the nearest birch, took out the coal from her pocket and made a mark at eye level. She stepped ten paces from the birch and aimed with the makeshift blade Dwalin had given her. It was a bit dented now, and not as sharp as it once was, but it soared true when it flew from her hand.

Hemery had learned some tricks to throwing things. She did not hold tightly to it all through the arch of her arm, but only the very last flick of her wrist, and only at the tip of the square. The blade stuck to the tree with a *chuck*.

She ran up to it and saw she had hit the mark. "One," she called to Dwalin.

He said nothing, just drew on his pipe.

Hemery stepped to throw again. The steel bounced with a *zing* off the bark. She ran to fetch it back.

"In a row, mind," Dwalin reminded her in a lazy rumble.

Hemery gritted her teeth and threw. "One," she called again.

"So what battles have you fought in?" Hemery asked.

"Shouldn't you focus on the task at hand?"

"I can't focus when I know you're sittin' there, starin' at me. Say somethin'." Hemery threw. "Two."

"Azanulbizar and the Battle of Five Armies. Orcs as far as the eye could see. What more is there to say?"

"Were you hurt?"

"Aye. Would have thought ye'd noticed the scars," he pointed at his face, "as yer so observant of everythin' else."

"Three." Hemery glanced at him after her hit. "You were never scared?"

"Fear is good. Keeps you sharp. As long as ye don't let it take over. As long as ye move, rely on yer trainin', don't hesitate. Trust yerself."

"Four. But if you don't have trainin'? What then?"

"Then ye stay away from battles."

"And if the battle comes to you?"

Dwalin sighed. 'I'm guessin' we're not talkin' about orcs now are we?"

Hemery shook her head.

"Then ye fight for survival, tooth and nail. Use every dirty trick, take every cheap shot, kick 'em when they're down and have no mercy, because they will have none on you."

"And you're not talkin' about orcs?" Hemery was confused. It sounded as though he was speaking of fighting heartless, soulless creatures.
"Someone who wishes ye harm is an enemy, no matter what race."

Hemery thought of the people at Blackwater who took Hanah away and hurt her. She did not like many people, but it still felt strange to think of other men as enemies. When Dwalin said it like that it made a lot more sense.

"Five. Why don't you like the king?" Hemery changed the subject.

"Lass," Dwalin barked suddenly. "I will only say this once so listen good—"

She turned to face him fully. He leaned forward with one hand on his knee and the other held the pipe which he pointed at her.

"I have never—and will never—speak ill of the king. And ye'd do well to remember never to say anythin' that may let people to believe ye do not respect him, or it will be worse for ye."

Hemery listened wide eyed, but with furrowed brow. "But you said—"

"I know what I said," Dwalin's face twisted in a wince, and held up one hand to stop her. "And it's one thing to speak in confidence with yer brother in the sanctity of yer own home and quite another to vent personal issues out in broad daylight. Now throw."

Hemery did as he said, but did not keep silent. "So you know the king? Personally?"

He snorted, it sounded like the huff of a bear. "Ye could say that."

"Six. I did say that, would you say that?"

"Aye, we were brothers in arms. Ventured on a long journey together from Ered Luin to Erebor."

"What's Ered Luin?"

"What's Ered?—" Dwalin almost choked on pipe smoke. "Ered Luin are the Blue Mountains in the west. What have ye been taught in school, eh?"

"I've never been to school."

He blew smoke out through his nose. "Well, that explains a lot," he muttered, along with a few other things Hemery could not distinguish.

"Seven. What happened on your journey?"

"We walked and walked for an eternity, and were almost killed a few times, but we made it here eventually. Then there were the dragon and the orc army to deal with, which seem like minor details compared to the elves and men we had to make nice with afterwards."

"You were there when the dragon died?" Hemery listened raptly.

"Well, not as such." Dwalin scratched his beard. "I saw the dragon. And shortly thereafter it was dead."

"You didn't kill it?" Hemery felt like she had hundreds of questions.

"No, I didn't kill it," he grumbled, clearly annoyed. "Just throw, will ye," he ordered. Perhaps he would have liked to have been the one to kill it.
"Eight. So you're one of the dwarves who freed the mountain so that everyone could move back?"

He shrugged and smoked his pipe.

Hemery was confused. "But then, aren't you a hero? Shouldn't you live in the mountain too?"

"Are ye finished?" He stood up.

"What?"

"Well, I am." Dwalin knocked his pipe against the doorframe, emptying it from burnt weed.

"But I still have two to go," Hemery protested.

"Should've thrown more, talked less. Better luck tomorrow." With those words he closed the door to his forge.

At the same moment, Hanah packed her bag with material to attend the meeting with Lord Fíli. She had the first coat ready, and had made samples for colour and designs of the other twelve to show him, and hopefully get his approval for all. While she was double checking her packing, Hemery burst through the door to the shop, her hands dirty from throwing that piece of metal junk at the trees outside.

"That dwarf is coming!" she called.

"What?" Hanah asked, though she had heard her sister perfectly. "Which one?" Hanah moved past Hemery to the door. "Go wash your hands," she added before opening the door.

On the other side, looking as though he had just been about to knock, stood Lord Fíli.

"M'lord, what are you doin' here?" Hanah asked in surprise. "I was just about leave."

He smiled and held up one hand. "I know we had agreed to meet in the mountain, but I was also planning to see Dwalin, so I thought it would be best if I came to you. If it's not an inconvenience?"

"I suppose not," Hanah said.

"Are you going to invite me in?" His smile remained polite, but his eyebrows rose.

"Of course. Please, enter." Hanah stepped out of the way.

They had not lived there long enough for the shop to be as cluttered as their previous one. They had assembled another table to have room for both girls to work, and the shelves were already filling up with base goods. Boots, aprons, and gloves mostly, but also a handful of Hemery's bracelets. In fact, most of it had Hemery crafted. Hanah had been busy with other things.

"This is a good space," Lord Fíli commented, looking at the large windows and the light they let in, and the surfaces. Hooks on the walls supported bags with smaller supplies: threads, buttons, buckles, cords, ribbons. Boxes were placed in rows on the table, keeping needles, knives, scissors, and other tools separate.

"You must have lost much in your. . . relocation. Do you have everything you need?" he asked.

Hanah nodded. "Yes, we'll manage. Most of this is new. It was years of collected supplies in that shop."
"I will replace all of it," he said.

"There's no need for that," Hanah began, but he ignored her and brought out a purse.

"It's the least I can do", he said.

Though she dearly wanted it, she knew better by now than to accept money too easily gained. "Thank you for your concern, but there's truly no need."

"I insist," he said.

"As do I, m'lord," she said, as respectfully as she could.

He still held out the purse, waiting for her to take it. Hanah turned to the table and began unfolding the coat and the samples from her bag. She heard him come to stand beside her. She felt her cheeks burn just from being aware of his scrutiny on her work.

The base was dyed a bluish green. It was impossible to tell which colour dominated. The shoulders were reinforced with layers of different sized leather squares, their corners pointing out toward the shoulder, toward the neck, straight down the back, and down in the front. These levelled patchworks were mirrored all the way down the front, like dices balancing on eachother. On the back was one large square surrounded by expanding lines of beads exaggerating the pattern. The inside was covered in brown fur.

Accentuating the square pattern was the shimmering glow of round, flat, and cylinder copper beads. In the middle of each leather square was a copper plate Hanah herself had imprinted with a stylized flower in sharp angles which made it look like a star.

The vivid bluish green and the orange, fiery glow of copper made the coat seem misplaced in the shabby workshop. And it was; Hanah had made it for the polished marble halls of Erebor.

Lord Fíli pursed his lips and nodded. "Hmm."

"All the items will have different colours and different combinations of decorations." She displayed the samples next to the coat, like playing cards. "If you're unhappy with anything, just let me know and we'll fix it." Hanah almost bounced on the balls of her feet. She wanted to know what he thought, even if he hated it—she did not care. She just needed to know so she could rethink the design, if that was what he wished.

He carefully turned it over, lifted it to feel the material, to touch the beading and the stitching and the fur.

"Well?" Hanah asked. She knew she was being too impatient and bit the inside of her cheek.

"It's interesting," he replied. "The design, it's. . .very original." He sounded as if he was trying to think of things to say, stalling, and leading up to a nice way of saying it was not what he wanted.

"The coat is quite nice."

Quite nice? Hanah could hardly retain his statement. She had been preparing herself for a potential rejection, but as he said this—she could not believe it.

He continued. "Decent leather work. Good even, I'd say."

Hanah did not know what to say.
"What?" Disbelief laced the tone, but though it portrayed Hanah's thoughts, it was not she who had spoken. She turned to see Hemery in the doorway to the kitchen.

"That work is perfect, and you'd better not insult her and my father by saying it's decent."

"Hem!" Hanah barked. Her little sister quietened, but lowered her chin and kept glaring at Lord Fíli.

"My lord, I—" Hanah looked at him in order to apologize, but he did not seem angry. He smiled crookedly.

"You didn't let me finish," he explained to them, though he was in no hurry to continue his critique. "What I was going to say, was that the leather work is good, but—" he paused deliberately to make sure he had their attention. "The decor—the colour, the stitching, the beading—that is what makes the work excellent."

His calm manner was not quite schooled enough for Hanah to not detect a hint of smugness.

"Thank you, m'lord," said Hanah. Hemery had enough sense to remain silent.

"Do you have pen and paper?" he asked.

Hanah fetched a clear sheet from her sketch pile, and a coal pencil.

"Here are the names of the best craftsmen who make metal, stone, and jewel beads, and anything bone related," he said as he scribbled. "Tell them I sent you and they won't charge you any limbs."

He gave the paper to Hanah. She looked at it a moment. She took a breath to speak, but changed her mind. She figured she could always ask Dwalin what the note said, if she felt the need. When she looked up, she found Lord Fíli regarding her with a bemused expression.

"Is my script that bad?"

"No, not at all," she said, depositing the paper on the table.

"Can you not read?" he asked.

The blunt question stumped her momentarily. She had never before felt the urge to hide the fact that she could not read until now. Living at Blackwater she had never needed to read, knowing where everything was, who everyone were. But of course Lord Fíli knew how to read and write, and for some reason she was ashamed of her ignorance.

"Not very well, no," she admitted.

"And you?" he asked Hemery. She shook her head.

"Whyever not?"

"Never seemed to be enough time," Hanah shrugged.

"Well, you should definitely take the opportunity while you're here," he said lightly, as if he had solved the problem. "Erebor has a massive library, hardly ever used. You're welcome to it whenever you like."

"Do you have books?" Hemery asked.
Hanah was not sure if Hemery wanted confirmation of the fact that there was a library, or if she did not know libraries contained books.

He smiled. "Thousands. About mining, sword fighting, crafting. History, myths, and legends from far away lands." His tone grew dramatic and intriguing. Hemery did not say anything, but her eyes were a little wider.

"Thank you. That's very generous," Hanah said, though she had no intention of taking him up on his offer.

"My generosity means nothing if you won't accept it."

Hanah looked away then.

"Is this ready for delivery?" he asked suddenly, motioning toward the coat.

She nodded and began to pack it up.

"What did we say? One hundred and thirty?"

Hanah's eyebrows shot up instantly. "We most certainly did not," Hanah stated firmly, with a hand on her hip. Gone was the awkwardness of the past moment. "That was the first one," she clarified. "This is as different from that as a coronation cloak is from a burial shroud." She repeated the words spoken at Blackwater.

He pursed his lips in contemplation, but she could tell a smile was restrained with the action. He tucked his thumbs into his belt and raised his chin. "Name your price."

"Two hundred and fifteen." She needed two hundred to profit from the coat.

His eyes narrowed. "Deal," he replied suddenly, reaching out his hand for her to shake.

"But—that's not the way," Hanah protested.

"You said two hundred and fifteen. Is that not what you want? Because then I think it's you who don't know how this works."

"You're supposed to haggle."

"Says who? I pay what I wish, and I wish to pay two hundred and fifteen, or you can keep the coat." He still had his hand reached out. "Deal?"

Hanah could not keep the utterly confused scowl off her face, but she took his hand and shook it. "Deal."

He grinned in earnest now. He brought out a purse which he opened and shook a bit, as if calculating its contents. Then he handed it to Hanah and received the wrapped coat in exchange. Hanah emptied the purse into her hand.

"My lord," Hanah exclaimed in the same voice she used on Hemery when she discovered she had neglected the dishes. "This is too much."

"Is it?" Lord Fíli replied, already on his way to the door, not at all bothered by the mistaken sum. "Don't worry, you can use gold freely in Dale and Erebor. No one will bat an eye."

Hanah looked back at her handful of silver and gold coins. She suspected this was the same purse
he had tried to give her before.

"You must take this back."

"No, I don't," he said over his shoulder. Hanah followed him across the yard to Dwalin's house. Before entering the forge, he turned to her. "Consider it an investment. Good day, Mistress Skinner."

Hanah returned to the shop with annoyed, quick steps, but as soon as the door had closed behind her, she could not help but let out a relieved breath. She wanted to show her independence, but it was true—their resettlement, the house, new clothes and tools, materials, had taken more of their saved gold than she liked. He was right, in a way. Making the rest of the order required an investment she had no coin to make. This would help along the way.

At least she had put up a fight.
"Don't go too far," Hanah said to Hemery.

It was afternoon at the market in Dale. They had spent their day selling wares at a table and were able to work on orders at the same time. Hanah stitched decorative leather ribbons and patches, or imprinted copper and silver plates with an iron pencil. Hemery braided leather cords and silver thread for her bracelets and necklaces.

After work was done for the day Hanah needed to do some bead business and so Hemery went to look at the other tables that were still up. There were dwarves and men selling everything from tools to clothes, swords to sweets, cheese to jewelery. Hemery was surveying a table of silver necklaces when a voice startled her.

"Beautiful, aren't they?"

She flinched and looked up. It was Lord Fíli.

"They're decent," she replied, returned her focus to the table, and earned a chuckle.

"That's quality dwarven craft there, lass. You sure you're not underestimating it?"

When she looked at him, he was smiling. She did not think it funny.

"I can make necklaces and bracelets myself. And soft ones, as well, that follows the skin when you move, not stiff, cold chunks of metal just hangin' on a chain." She looked at the dwarf standing by the table, who had probably crafted them. "No offense," she said.

They really were beautiful, with intricate, detailed designs that demanded a lot of skill, but she did not want to admit that to Lord Fíli. The dwarf did not take offense, though. He did not seem to even notice she was there, his attention solely on Lord Fíli. She would never bow so low to a customer —lord or no lord. When she grew up, she would do the best work and people would seek her out and treat her with respect.

"Does Mistress Skinner happen to be at the market today?" he asked.

"She's busy," Hemery replied tersely, hoping to convey the sense that he should not bother her unless absolutely necessary. She did not have time to run back and forth to Erebor at his beck and call.

Hemery moved on to the next table which was covered in glass bowls, cups, and plates in different sizes with various colours swirling within. From the beam overhead, which steadied the canvas roof, hung small, glass figures. Hemery could see birds, cats, dogs, fishes, and snowflakes.

Lord Fíli nodded to the glassblower and took one of the figures off its hook.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked Hemery.

It was a fish no bigger than his thumb, but its tail and fins were twice its size and frozen in motion like flags billowing in the wind. Within the glass were streaks of blue, green, and gold. She shrugged, pretending to be unimpressed.

"It's a fish."
He nodded in exaggerated appreciation. "Indeed it is. You have a keen eye. But it is no ordinary fish. This is a wanderer. In the summer they live in the reefs of the ocean west of Ered Luin."

"The Blue Mountains." Hemery was quick to express her new knowledge.

"That's right," he smiled. Hemery pushed her lips together to suppress a pleased smile of her own.

"And in the winter," he continued, "they swim south from the Gulf of Lune all the way to the outlet of the Anduin river."

"Is that far?"

"It would take months to travel on foot. If you happen to be on a boat off shore on the right day, you may find yourself in a sea with all the colours of the rainbow like blossoming flowers beneath the surface."

"Why do they swim all that way?"

"To escape the cold, and find the right place to live—where they belong."

He handed her the glass fish. She looked at it closely. Its eyes were specks of gold that shot through its body and flowed out into the long tail.

"They see the world," he said.

"From under water," Hemery added.

"That's part of the world, too."

"Yeah, but it's dark and cold in the water."

"I see your point." Lord Fili bit his lip in thought. "I should have showed you this instead."

He snatched the fish from her palm and replaced it with a bird with purple feathers.

"This also travels from the mountains in the north to the deserts in the south during winter. And this one sees it all from the sky."

"That sounds a bit better," Hemery admitted. She thought about Dwalin's stories about his long travels. These dwarves had all done so much, knew so much, had been to so many places, while she had only known Blackwater. "Have you been to the Blue Mountains?"

"Aye, I have." He hung the glass figures back.

"What's it like there?"

"Dwarves living under ground, mining, crafting. Kind of the same as here, but not as nice as Erebor of course." He winked.

"Where else have you been?"

"Everywhere between there and here. The Shire, the Misty Mountains, Mirkwood, and a few visits to the Iron Hills. All dwarves here have once lived somewhere else. Other mountains or other cities, or mainly traveling all the time, working in different places.

"And why did you come here?"
"Everybody has somewhere they belong, and this is my home."

"But how do you know?"

"You know it when you feel it. Maybe you will need to travel and see the world before you know where you belong and decide to settle down."

"I don't like to travel. I'm no good at it. When we came here, we had only been walkin' for two days, and I was dirty and hungry and tired. I don't ever want to do that again."

He frowned. "I'm sorry to hear that. But it doesn't have to be like that. You can ride a horse instead of walk, and stop to rest in villages with proper Inn's, sleep in a real bed. Learn how to take care of yourself on the road, how to hunt and how to make a fire so you're never hungry or cold. Sometimes there are caravans of people who travel together in big groups to protect and help each other on their way to trade in other cities. You learn craft from each other and make things together. You should give it a try someday."

Hemery was so wrapped up in what Lord Fíli was saying that she hardly noticed Hanah approaching them.

"Hem, it's time to go," she said when she appeared by her side. "Oh—Hello, Lord Fíli," she added, turning to him.

Hemery was pretty sure Hanah had known it was him standing there before she came over, the surprise in her voice was a little flat.

"Good afternoon, Mistress Skinner."

Hanah hefted the bag with their unsold wares higher on her shoulder. Hemery knew her sister was tired. She stayed up late in the evening, struggling to see her beads in low candle light, and went early to market, sitting hunched over her work, wearing out her back. When Hemery reminded Hanah how she should sit, she was only rewarded with sighs and a distanced I know, so she soon gave up trying. That bag did not help either, weighing down her right shoulder like it did.

Hanah was always focused on work, which was good, but she obsessed over details until she did not trust herself, and criticized herself to a point where it sometimes delayed her work. Hemery thought Hanah also needed see new places. She needed to compare her work to others'. She needed to know she was better than others.

And she knew Hanah blamed herself for the way they had to leave Blackwater.

"We should go to Ered Luin," Hemery told Hanah.

"Really? And why is that?" Hanah looked between Lord Fíli and her sister.

"To see the world and learn new things, so we can find where we belong."

Hanah tensed, but smiled. Hemery could tell it was not real.

"And we must travel to Ered Luin for that?" Hanah asked.

Hemery quietened. She had said something wrong. She did not know what it had been this time, but she was sure Hanah would tell her later.

"Dwalin is over there." Hanah raised her arm to the right. "Go help him pack and we can go home
together."

Without a word or even a nod, Hemery did as she was told. Then Hanah and Lord Fíli were alone in the street. Many people still moved around the market, but Hanah felt alone.

*To find a place where we belong?* What had he said to Hemery? Hanah and Hemery belonged together. As long as they had each other, it did not matter where they lived. It did not matter that Hanah made mistakes that forced them to leave their childhood home. It did not matter if people chased them away. What had he said to make her question that? Did he not think they belonged here? She could hardly look at him for fear of what she might say.

"She's a very curious lass," Lord Fíli said.

She ignored the comment. "I wish you wouldn't do that," she said.

"Do what?"

"Play with her head like that."

His brow furrowed. "It's not play. She should explore her options, explore the world, learn new things."

She tried to find the words to explain their situation to him. "This is her life. Here, now, with our work. It's what she knows, and she's good at it. She's been trainin' to be a leathersmith since she was born."

He shrugged and waved a hand nonchalantly. "She's a child. She has plenty of time to become a master in any field."

"She's mankind. She doesn't have hundreds of years to find out what she's best at."

He shook his head. "It shouldn't be about what she's best at, but what she desires. What she sees at night when she closes her eyes. What her hands does without effort, without being asked. What her passion is."

Hanah just got more confused. Desires and passions?

"The important thing is that whatever she ends up doing is what she wants to do," he articulated. "What she wants?" Hanah repeated incredulously, as if he had claimed that it was perfectly natural to eat cake for dinner every day. "She wants to honour her father. She wants to perfect what he taught her."

She tried to make him see that their path was the most reasonable, but the statement only made his eyebrows lower into a hard line.

"Aye. Her father," he said. "The curse of every youngling. Tell me, how has her father honoured her, or you for that matter?"

Hanah gaped. "What?"

He closed the short distance between them and spoke lower to prevent people from overhearing their conversation. "He left you alone in that house, unprotected, to be prey for the Brages who see enemies wherever they turn. Letting you come here on your own, fending for yourself."

"You don't know what you're talking about," she breathed, averting her eyes. She looked to where
Hemery and Dwalin were putting together his boxes and wrapping his sheathed weapons in cloths. Lord Fili's voice was very close now.

"I know he didn't make anything in that shop of yours, however forcefully you may claim otherwise. He may have taught you how to make a nice coat, but you're the one who made it great. You."

She did not know what to say.

"And you had to make that trip from Blackwater alone with Hemery, while you were hurt, and while you carried—" He stopped himself and took a slow breath.

Hanah froze, wondering what he had been about to say. While she carried what? Did he know she had lost a child after coming to Dale? Had Dwalin told him? Hanah did not have time to reflect over what other humiliating, intimate issues of hers he may be aware of because he was speaking again.

"Don't let a husband who's off nobody knows where, doing Mahal knows what, dictate your behavior and how you spend your time."

Hanah felt as if an ice fist squeeze her chest.

"You can choose to respect your husband, but you don't have to honour him," he added.

Hanah's hands grew cold.

Lord Fili thought the pelt master was her husband? Of course, she had never given him reason to believe otherwise. She had been under the impression, or feared rather, that everyone thought she was very young, which had led to her lie about the death of her father in the first place. She had thought no one would hire a girl to do a pelt master's work.

Hanah was indeed within reasonable age to marry, but then who did he think Hemery was? Did he not realize that Hemery could not possibly be her daughter? Perhaps he thought Hemy was her step-daughter, a child from an earlier marriage?

Lord Fili thought the child she lost had been the pelt master's, and assumed they were married. It all seemed too strange to Hanah, she would have laughed had she not been so perplexed. She had half a mind to let him continue believing it. If people thought she was married, it would give her more protection. However, when time passed and no husband appeared, the lie would prove equally useless as a pelt master who was never in his shop.

And it did not sit well with her to lie to Lord Fili—her employer, and one of the few people who had ever treated her with kindness and respect.

She drew breath to refute his assumption, but when she turned he was gone.
"Stand up straight," Dwalin commanded.

"I am standing straight," Hemery replied.

"Straighter." He grabbed her shoulders and pulled them up until her feet almost left the ground, as if trying to make her taller.

Hemery had finally managed to complete the knife throwing test in front of Dwalin, but if she thought she would now be allowed to wield a real knife, she was sadly mistaken.

"I'm not givin' ye a weapon til ye can control it and yerself. Any weapon ye carry can be used against ye, except fer yer own body."

He had told her to stand in the middle of the yard, and was now criticizing her posture.

"Shoulders back. Find your balance."

Balance? She was just standing on the grass. "What?"

He shoved her shoulder. Not hard, he was standing next to her, barely making an effort, but it took her by surprise. She stumbled and fell on her bottom.

"Ye have no balance. How are ye s'posed to fight if ye can't even stand."

"I wasn't ready!" Hemery protested from her place in the grass.

"Ye should always be ready. No one will give ye heads up."

Hemery stood and brushed off. As soon as she straightened, he pushed her again.

"Hey!" She yelped as she fell.

"Oh—my apologies. Ye weren't ready?" He did not sound sorry at all.

Hemery glared as she stood up. Her eyes were glued to him when she faced him.

Dwalin raised his arm, but this time she dodged it. However, she did not see his foot come out to trip her as she side-stepped which sent her sprawling on the grass again. She grunted from the dull pain in her back side, but clenched her jaw and stood again, glaring at him even more. This did not bother him one bit, his face in his usual grim frown.

He advanced. She ducked the arm he swiped at her, jumped away from the foot that tried to trip her, but could not withstand the pressure from his elbow at her abdomen, and was shoved backwards.

"Feet apart, bend yer knees."

Hemery got back up. Swipe, swipe, trip, swipe, push, and she was down again. As soon as she got back up, it started all over. She did not know how long they were at it, but she sensed that complaining she was tired would fall on deaf ears. Or worse, he would actually stop, and then he would never teach her anything ever again.
In the end, she did not have to say anything. Her body did the talking. Her legs burned as she stood up for what felt like the thousandth time, and promptly fell to her knees before he even touched her. Dwalin put a hand under her chin and turned her face up to him. Tears stained her cheeks, but she was silent except for the wheezing breaths her lungs could hardly draw anymore. Who knew simply falling and standing could be so exhausting?

His brows knitted together. He hummed gruffly and let her chin go. "This is why I don't train men. Ye have the endurance of a corpse."

If Hemery could speak, she would have informed him that was not the only reason. No sane man would want to train with Dwalin. What did that say about her? If she could breathe, she would have pleaded with him not to go back on his word. He had promised her. She could only raise her hand toward him as he turned away, as if trying to stop him.

He spoke over his shoulder.

"Tomorrow—wear gloves. Don't be afraid to stop the fall with yer hands."

Hemery smiled and let herself slump down in the dewy grass.

Hanah's walk to Erebor was slower than usual, but her steps determined. She was on her way to deliver three of Lord Fili's coats, she could not put it off any longer. It had been an awkward last meeting, but it had not been her fault.

He was the one who did not understand what it was like for women to work and live in this world. He did not know any better, having been born into aristocracy. Sure, he sat in some sort of royal council or something, but he did not know what it was like to be poor and work for bread crumbs. She could not explain that to him, though she had tried. And he had the nerve to suggest they explore their options.

Hanah's lip curled in derision at the thought. Lord Fili and his richboy fancies.

However, he had been very generous to her and Hemery throughout their business arrangement, paying more than he ought, and not demanding more than she delivered. Because of him, they had somewhere to go after they left Blackwater. It was not his fault the Brage's were vengeful wolverines.

Then there was that other thing. Hanah could not let Lord Fili believe she was married to some good for nothing man who had abandoned her and Hemery. Especially not let him believe she would stand by such a man and defend him. It was intolerable.

No one asked Hanah where she was going when she passed the guards on her way into the mountain. Neither did anyone stop her when she went up the stairs or entered the corridor that led to Lord Fili's study. When she came to the red tapestry she recognized from last time, she halted and knocked on the door.

The day had progressed past regular working hours, so she did not think she would be disturbing him. After a moment, the door opened and revealed Lord Fili on the other side.

"Mistress Skinner."

She bowed her head slightly. "Lord Fili. I have three new coats for you." She showed him the large bag she carried on her back.
He nodded and stepped aside for her to enter. The fireplace was the only source of light in the big room, making it gloomier than usual. Lord Fíli cast a tall shadow on the walls as he moved to the desk. Hanah put her bag down on a chair next to the door.

"May I light some candles?" she asked.

He waved his hand in her general direction before he picked up a silver cup and drank from it. Hanah found a long splinter in the firewood and ignited it. She moved slowly, with one hand in front of the flame to not disturb it, and lit some lanterns which were placed around the room. She unfolded the first coat and turned, only to find him observing her. His direct gaze unsettled her and for a moment she could not move.

The firelight left half of his face in shadows and exaggerated the other, making his dwarven features especially prominent, the thick hair, his marked brow and nose, the unusually wide shoulders and powerful arms displayed by the simple shirt with rolled up sleeves. Together with his grave expression, it reminded her how different they were and how inexperienced she was with the social conduct of dwarves.

There had been instances when they had spoken and laughed freely together. Now she could not remember how those moments had come about. She hardly dared speak. Perhaps he had taken offense to her speaking her mind last time they met?

Then she mentally shook herself. She had been hired to do a job, and she would do it, regardless of whether she was comfortable in her employer's company or not.

She unfolded the other coats for him to look at. The first was a bluish purple with silver beading. The second was an earthy, dark brown with turquoise accents. The third was the colour of anthracite with red jasper stone decorations.

He did not touch them or comment at all, merely nodded in approval at each. She took his silence as a good sign. That meant she would not need to change them and could get on with the remaining nine.

"Would you like to try it on?" she asked where she stood holding the grey coat by the shoulders. He put his cup down and stood in front of her. She helped him into it, tugging on it a bit to make it fall evenly. She moved around him, looking at her hands adjusting the coat, never at him.

"Is it supposed to feel like this?" he suddenly asked.

Hanah froze.

"This loose?" he added.

She exhaled. "It's outerwear. You're meant to wear layers underneath, remember?"

"Layers," he muttered. "Right."

Hanah tightened the lacings under the arms to make it a bit smaller. She had put them in especially for this reason. She took a few steps away and knelt down to check that the bottom was in line with the floor, then she came to stand in front of him, checking the fastenings and the belt loops.

"I thought a belt would be best," she said. "Otherwise they'll look like formless, tacky, robes of temple priests. I brought some with me that you can choose from, if you don't prefer your own, of course. Included in the price."
'Is this how it's going to be now?' he asked.

"What?" She feared he had found some flaw in her design. She looked the coat over, trying to see what it could be, but she found nothing.

"We continue to do business, all the while you refuse to look me in the eye?" His voice was rougher than usual. Of course he would think it was rude of her to avoid his gaze when they spoke, and she recognized a challenge in his words.

She looked at him, and almost wished she had not. His jaw was set, his eyes hard, like he was waiting for an explanation or an apology.

As soon as the thought crossed her mind, anger boiled up within her. The only reason there was now an issue was because he had felt the need to share his thoughts on education and worldliness. And it made her feel small and ignorant, though she would never admit it even to herself.

This was good, Hanah thought. She needed a firm line to keep to when it came to Lord Fíli, and he had far too easily created a sense of friendliness between them. But they were not friends. She worked for him—nothing more, nothing less.

"I'm lookin' at my work, m'lord," she said, admittedly a bit childish. "It's what I'm here for."

"You have nothing to say?" He seemed surprised now, or was he provoking her?

"If you have something to say, you may. This is your study. Say whatever you like." She shrugged and refocused on her work. She could see his chest rising as he took a deep breath.

"As a matter of fact, I do."

Hanah stepped back and crossed her arms in front of her, looking at him with her chin raised. She kept her expression flat and waited.

Lord Fíli threw his arms out, as if not knowing where to begin. "I realize," he said, "how my opinions may have come across. And..." He looked at a spot over her shoulder. "I understand your situation, and I have no right to judge you or your family's decisions because, technically..." He glanced at her and away again. "It's none of my concern."

Hanah could tell it had been difficult for him to say that, which meant he probably still stood by his opinions, only he was sorry that he had expressed them the way he had. When it was clear he was done, she slid the coat off his shoulders and folded it.

Her anger drained away, but now he had tipped the scale. He had apologized—well, as good of an apology someone like her could expect from a noble. He backed off in respect for her and her family. Now she could not deny him the same courtesy.

When she was ready to leave, she turned toward him.

Lord Fíli had sat down in a chair by the fire, watching the flames, the silver cup once more in his hand.

"I'm not married," she said.

His head turned to her suddenly, as if he had forgotten she was in the room.

"The pelt master was our father. He died last winter. We never told anyone, because we... I didn't
think we could make a livin' on our own."

He stood then and came towards her. "The work speaks for itself. Who cares about who made it?"

Hanah pursed her lips and shook her head. "I was also afraid of what could happen if people knew two girls lived alone out there."

His hands closed into fists at his sides.

"And besides, who would pay two hundred silver pieces for a coat made by bairns?"

"But now you're here, selling just fine."

She nodded and cleared her throat. "But that's not why I'm telling you this. I couldn't... I didn't want you to think I would be with a man like that, who would... do those things you said."

They were silent a moment.

"I'm sorry about you father," he said. "I lost my father when I was very young."

"How, if you don't mind...?"

"In battle against orcs, a long time ago. How did your father die?"

She cringed inwardly. Her father had not died anywhere near as valiantly or honourably as that. Hanah thought of the phrase people around Blackwater had used to describe it. "The rabbit curse."

"Sorry—the what?" His eyebrows rose almost comically fast.

"You know, when hunters are out in the winter, they only eat what they catch. After a while they die from eating the same thing for weeks on end."

"Right. I've heard of that." His eyebrows were pulled down in a deep frown and he nodded in serious understanding, but the braids of his mustache twitched, his lips were pursed, and she could see his nostrils moving as if his face tensed up. Was he holding back a laugh?

"It's not funny," Hanah protested.

"No," he agreed, shaking his head emphatically. "Of course. Absolutely not. Sounds awful. It's just... the way you said it. The rabbit curse. It's maybe... a little bit funny?"

It may have been a bad way to explain it. Out of context, she herself found the phrase stirring a strange mix of emotions within her. Sorrow for her father, but also a bubble of laughter at the absurd nickname connected to the strangest of diseases, and then astonishment that she was even capable of laughter in relation to anything about her father, and a sensation of shame for letting out a baffled half-chuckle, half-gasp, in the situation.

"No, it's not," she maintained, though the corners of her mouth betrayed her.

"No, no. Obviously a horrible business. I completely agree." He sounded as if this had truly been his opinion the whole time, but the sparkle in his eyes had not been there before. "Shall we shake on it?" He reached out his hand.

"Why?" They had not made a business deal during their meeting. Why did he think a handshake was appropriate?
"To confirm our total agreement and to put any old vexations to rest."

Sounded reasonable, and Hanah did not want to cause further tension by refusing, however strange she thought it was that dwarves expected females to shake their hands.

She reached out and took his hand. Like before, his big, warm hand enveloped hers and, like before, they steadied the handshake by taking hold of each others' elbows.

But when she let go, he did not. Instead, he turned her hand over and raised it to his mouth. Before she had time to register what he was doing, his lips brushed her knuckles. Her chest tightened. The sensation of his warm breath and the scratch of his beard on her skin was still there a long moment after he let go.

He did not say anything after that, so she guessed she was excused.

"Right. I'll be..." She turned to the door, but remembered her manners and stopped before walking out. "Good evening, m'lord," she said hurriedly, and bowed her head.

"Evening, Miss Hanah."
"Why can't he just come to the shop or the market like everyone else?" Hemery asked. She stood in the doorway to the kitchen watching Hanah pack six different kinds of belts, twenty leather bracelets, and twelve wrist bands into a bag.

"Because he's a nobleman," Hanah replied. "Noblemen don't visit shops. They have people to do it for them, or they call for the smith to come show them stuff."

"But he's not a man—he's a dwarf."

"Hem!" Hanah looked at her sister sharply.

"What? He is!" Hemery's lip curved in defiance.

"I know that. But you don't go... pointin' out things like that." Hanah continued to pack.

"Like what?"

"Obvious things like that. It's rude."

"Is it rude to tell the truth?"

"Sometimes," she sighed.

"How do you know when it's rude?"

"Well..." Hanah thought about it. They had never met dwarves or elves or any kind of other at Blackwater, so Father had not talked to Hemery about these things.

"You don't compare people's titles, especially not in front of them, because you never know what might offend them, really. And you never talk about what people can't do, or things they're not good at. You don't say that someone can't be a nobleman because he's a dwarf. You can just call him 'a noble,' then."

"So when can you say 'dwarf'?"

"When you talk about somethin' special about dwarves that is only about dwarves. Like dwarven crafts, or dwarven clothes, or dwarven language."

"And dwarven titles?" Hemery insisted.

"No," Hanah shut her eyes in frustration and dropped the full bag on the worktop. "The titles are basically the same. Only when it's somethin' special about dwarvish things, not when somethin' is special because it is dwarvish."

"But—"

"We can talk about this later, alright?" Hanah walked to the door to put on her coat. "Try not to talk to people about dwarves while I'm gone."

"I still don't understand why you have to go." Hemery crossed her arms.

Hanah knew Hemery could take care of herself while she was away, and Dwalin was just across
the yard if something happened. But she got bored without Hanah there to talk to or sing with. Several times, Hanah had found her practicing throwing knives on a wood beam in the shop, and they had been forced to have several conversations about practicing after work was finished and to stop throwing knives indoors.

She would take Hemery with her, but they had too much to do to leave two hands idle just to accompany her to the mountain, even if it was close to evening.

"Because Lord Fili's footman who was in here yesterday informed me he is in need of new accessories, which is richman speak meanin' I need to bring our products for him to look at and comment on, while I stand by sayin' yes, m'lord—no, m'lord—certainly, m'lord, waitin' for him to buy somethin', which he won't." Hanah laced her boots.

"Then why do you have to go?" Hemery looked at her as if she was mentally deficient.

"Because he'll see somethin' he likes, but ask me to change it anyway until he's completely satisfied."

Hemery groaned from deep down her throat while draping herself over a chair, clearly pretending to die of exhaustion. "Why can't he just buy what we make?"

"Nobles are fussy about what they wear and those sorts of things."

Hemery lit up and nodded in understanding. "You mean dwarves, don't you?" she smiled.

"No, I mean nobles," Hanah said patiently. "They like to think they're special, so they spend lots of money on things that will make them look special. That's why Lord Fili wants somethin' that he chooses himself, but doesn't have to make himself."

Hemery dragged her fingertips down her cheeks, as if trying to pull her own face off. "Sounds like a lot of trouble for nothin'."

"It is. But it's also good money in it for us. We really need to keep this customer."

"Things were much simpler when we lived at home."

Hanah sensed that Hemery was not just talking about work. She came to stand next to her little sister, putting her arm around her shoulders.

"You know why we couldn't stay there, right?"

Hemery nodded.

"And here we have this nice house, and almost as many customers as before. When this order is finished we'll have more money than we'll know what to do with. I know you like the food we've been havin'. We've both gotten fatter." She poked Hemery's side. "I know I have. I can barely close my trousers anymore, my arse has gotten so wide." They laughed.

"You know what," Hanah continued. "While I'm gone, I want you to think of somethin' we can use that money for. Some will have to go to pay rent and things, but not all of it. You can choose somethin' we can use, or just somethin' fun."

"Anythin' I want?" Hemery looked up at her.

"Almost anythin'. Come up with some ideas, and we'll talk about it."
Just as Hanah was about to leave, she turned to Hemery. "You're not unhappy here, are you?"

Hemery shrugged. "It's alright."

Hanah nodded.

"Are you?" Hemery asked.

Hanah thought a moment. "I'm content." Work was the same, though more well paid. The customers more easily dealt with, more particular perhaps, but not petty or cheap. They paid what they owed because they recognized the quality of their work, not trying to do them over at every turn.

"People are friendly. Even the nobles," Hanah concluded. "And, yes—this time I do mean the dwarves."

On her way through the entrance hall of Erebor, Hanah was intercepted by a dark haired dwarf.

"Good afternoon, Miss Hanah." The dwarf stopped in front of her, smiled and bowed as if she was a lady.

"Good afternoon," she replied, uncertain of what he wanted.

He seemed to pick up on her hesitance. "I am Fili's brother." He put a hand to his chest. "Kili—at your service."

She remembered now. He had been at Blackwater that day, and been in Lord Fili's company the first time she came to Erebor.

"Oh, yes. Of course," she said. "Nice to meet you again."

"Are you perchance heading to the south wing?"

She looked up at the floor she was headed to, doing a quick calculation in her head. She new the entrance was on the south slope of the mountain, and the corridor, where Lord Fili's study was, bent in that angle as well. That was probably what he meant by the south wing.

"I am," she said.

"Excellent. May I join you?"

The brothers clearly shared a certain teasing humour she had never encountered before. Lord Fili was inclined to play jokes on her, while Lord Kili showed a kind of exaggerated chivalry toward her when they both knew he was way above her station. The words seemed sincere enough, though his vocabulary was overly formal to the point where Hanah was convinced it was in jest. But she did not comment.

"You may, m'lord."

He fell into step with her as they ascended the stairs.

"What is your business today?" he asked.

"Belts for Lord Fili."
He laughed. "Aye, can never have to many of those."

"Do you need somethin' as well? I'm sure I have more than—"

"I'm sure you do." He chuckled. "Ah, Miss Hanah. Merchant to the core, eh? No, I have all that I
require at the moment. In fact, I just got a new one." He gripped his belt with his thumbs. She
looked at it.

"That's mine," she exclaimed in surprise, before thinking.

"Well, now it's mine since I paid for it, but, yes, you did make it."

"But you never call for us, or come to the market."

"I have more important things to do than shopping. I have it done for me."

If Lord Kíli never saw to such things himself, then why did Lord Fíli?

"I guess Lord Fíli is more vain than you are," she ventured. "Always choosing everythin' himself."

She smiled, hoping he would see the joke. He must have because his face cracked into a wide
boyish grin, but his tone was serious.

"Oh, yes. Brother always need to take extra care with his appearance. It can't have been easy living
in my shadow all our lives, you know. But we must take pity on the poor ogre," he said in hushed
conspiracy, "and not stare at his ugliness. It makes him a bit testy."

Hanah burst out laughing and he smiled triumphantly. They passed the guards by the entrance to
the corridor.

"And even if he wasn't as ugly as a troll, if all crafters were as pretty as you, he'd never get
anything done for all the wares he'd inspect in his chambers all day." He winked at her as they
stopped by the red tapestry. "Good day, Miss Hanah."

"Good day, Lord Kíli."

He left her to enter a door on the opposite side. Hanah stood there a moment contemplating his
words. She knew he was teasing her, but the way he said it caused her to suspect a not so
gentlemanly meaning behind it. The thought of Lord Fíli doing something ungentlemanly in his
chambers made her blush. It was true, he could take all sorts of liberties in the warm, low lit
privacy of his quarters. Her stomach fluttered a bit.

No, she thought. Those thoughts were not relevant or helpful in this situation. He was her employer,
she was there to do a job. That was all he expected of her and all he wanted.

Still, Lord Kíli's comment bothered her for some reason. She was not sure if she should feel
offended or not. But then again, she was not his equal—it was not her place to feel offended by
anything he said or did.

Hanah knocked on the door to Lord Fíli's study. She did not wait long before it was opened by a
young, dwarven woman with auburn hair and grey robes. Well, young by dwarven standards, she
still seemed older than Hanah. Hanah was just about to introduce herself when Lord Fíli called
from within the room.

"Miss Hanah, come in." He came towards her, took the bag from her shoulder and put it on the
chair next to the door.

"Thank you, Sethie. That will be all," he spoke to the woman.

"Aye, sir," she nodded and left the room.

In front of the fire, a table was set with food. Grilled chicken, bread, cheese, carrots, tomatoes, potatoes, even a small bowl with butter gleamed like gold in the firelight.

The woman, Sethie, had probably just served his dinner. Hanah could feel her own stomach growl in reaction to the smell of grilled spices. She and Hemery ate well, but rarely hot.

"Sit down," he said and reached for her coat to help it off her shoulders.

"Alright." She had interrupted his meal. Of course he would want to eat before doing business. She sat in the chair by the door.

"No, no. Come." He grabbed her wrist and pulled her to the table. Not hard, just insistent. "Join me." He motioned for her to sit down opposite him. He filled a plate with chicken and vegetables, sprinkled some orange spice on top, and set it before her. Hanah's eyes grew wide.

"Oh, no, m'lord. I couldn't..."

"Please." Lord Fíli put his hand on her arm to prevent her from leaving the table. "I can't eat if you're not having any. And I'm starving." He smiled.

There was no trace of the hardness from last time in his eyes. Today he was just a generous host. A very insistent, inappropriately generous host.

"Please?" he asked again, looking at her as if her decision would determine the goodwill of the rest of their acquaintance. Maybe it did? Maybe it was rude to refuse food at a dwarf's table?

"Very well," she agreed. "Thank you."

"Try the butter. Fresh from cows fed on cloves and honeyed water."

"Why do they only drink honeyed water?"

"They are only given honeyed water to drink by the farmers. It makes the milk and butter taste better."

"What was wrong with the old milk and butter?" She was not trying to be smart. She was just curious.

He smiled and shrugged. "Nothing. This is just supposed to be a delicacy." He thrust the bowl at her. "Try it."

She took it in her hands. A small knife was stuck in the golden mass.

"I've never had it," she said.

"Really?" Suddenly he reached across the table, took the butterknife and a bread roll, and proceeded to cover it with butter. "It's best on freshly baked bread. None of those stale biscuits you get at the Inns."

He presented her with the roll. There was butter everywhere. Her fingers grasped it and she could
feel the butter melting and running down her hand.

She took a bite. It was warm and soft and the best thing she had ever tasted. Salt from the butter and sweet from the bread filled her mouth and nose. It made her remember something she had not known she had forgotten.

Her mother's warm hand on Hanah's head. Fresh bread and milk in her hands, sitting at the table in the cottage at Blackwater.

She chewed and swallowed past a lump in her throat.

"It's good," she said.

Lord Fili smiled knowingly, as if he knew exactly how she felt then, but of course he could not. He was just satisfied that she agreed with him. She put the bread down and tasted the chicken as he dug into his own food.

"Best poultry east of the Misty Mountains," he claimed.

"Fed on mead and strawberries?" she guessed.

"Corn actually, but that is a brilliant idea." He lit up. "They eat quite a lot so we'll need to plant fields of strawberries as large as the clove pastures. I'll speak with the head of agriculture first thing in the morning."

Hanah held back a smile. "I'm sure you have better things to do than plant strawberry fields."

"Nothing is more important than a good meal." He looked at her plate. "What do you think? The spices really makes the whole difference, does it not? Transported all the way from Eriador."

Must be nice to be able to buy anything you wished just to make your perfectly grilled chicken taste a bit more, Hanah thought dryly, but why was he telling her all this?

"It's good, but ehm..."

He looked up when he heard the clatter of her fork being put down. She leaned forward and spoke low.

"M'lord, why are you braggin' about your dinner?"

He did not answer, but looked down into his cup and took a long drink.

Shit. He was definitely offended now. But he was acting so strangely! In the future, she would not comment on anything he said or did without specifically being asked.

"Because you don't need to," she tried to explain. "I can see for myself that it is very nice. There's spices and butter and it's served by a beautiful woman. But I'm not some ambassador you need to impress."

He met her eyes then, keeping his face blank.

"I mean, I know you're rich—I've seen your gold. You've got nothin' to prove to me." She laughed awkwardly.

Finally, a smile made it onto his face, but it was careful.
"I have to admit," he began. "I sometimes forget that you're not... from here." He filled his cup and then hers from a pitcher. "I must seem strange to you."

Yes. Absolutely alien.

"No," she hurriedly said, shaking her head reassuringly. "I'm just... Not knowing your customs, I worry that I will offend someone without knowing it. The whole world is strange." She shrugged, picked up her fork and poked at her carrots.

"Truer words have seldom been spoken." He seemed to have decided to take pity on her, and not be offended, because he smiled genuinely now. He raised his cup.

"I'd like to propose a toast." He motioned for her to pick up her own. "To strangers becoming less strange. To friends." He clashed their cups together so that she spilled all over the roasted chicken, but he waved his hand nonchalantly.

"Don't worry about it," he chuckled and emptied his cup in one go. She took a mouthful.

It was not water as she had first thought. It was bitter, but thirst quenching, and left an aftertaste of yeas, sort of like the one you get from burping after eating unbaked dough. Ale or beer of some kind, Hanah thought. It was not her favourite, but it was what was offered, and what Lord Fíli drank, so she would not complain.

"How is Hemery?" he asked.

"She's alright." Hanah wondered what she might be doing at that moment, and was pretty sure it was not work, but considering her own current occupation, she could not very well blame her. "She's throwing knives."

He smirked. "I'm glad she's enjoying herself." He did not say anything else, but he did not have to. Hanah imagined Hemery throwing knives in the kitchen, tearing down the interior. She tried to keep the smile off her own face.

"I'd ask you about your brother, but I saw him myself on my way here, so..."

"Really? Then I might ask you instead. How is my dear brother?"

"He looked like he was in good health, and he informed me that he was very happy with a belt he had bought from us."

"That sounds uncommonly civil of him."

She thought it unnecessary to include the indecent comment he had made about the two of them.

"He said he didn't have time to buy things himself, though. How come you are less busy?"

Lord Fíli threw his head back and laughed at that."That's the thing with my brother. You can never tell if he's actually busy or merely seem busy."

"Pretending to work must be harder than actually working."

"It's a skill he's honed over many years," he said and refilled her cup.

She began to enjoy the drink better. The taste was an interesting contrast to the bread and the chicken. She took another mouthful.
"So you do work more than him, but still take the time to make sure you have the perfect belt?"

"It's an important part of a dwarf's identity. What he wears and what items he carry says a lot about his character. Even the ugliest dwarf should take pride in his appearance, because it means he takes pride in himself."

Hanah had never thought of it like that. "I've always been told that modesty is better than pride."

His laughter surprised her. "Was it not you, Miss Hanah, who said the first day we met that you sold the finest leatherworks the likes of which my miserable, dwarven eyes had never beheld?"

She drank from her cup before answering. "Can't I be modest and truthful at the same time?"

"I don't know. Can you?" He smiled.

"I'll just let the product speak for itself, then." She left the table to fetch her bag. When she came back, she sat on the chair next to him to better show him the details of her work.

"See," she said, holding a belt between them. He shifted in his seat to face her. In the light of the fire she pointed at different features.

"Quarter inch thick. Five feet long. The decorations are burned all along the outside so you can shorten it however—" She looked up to see him watching, not the belt, but her face with an amused smile.

"Are you payin' attention? I'm tryin' to prove a point here." She knew she was a bit forward, but he had questioned her abilities, and she had to set him straight.

"By all means, go ahead. Prove it."

"You can shorten it however much you like. It's pierced all the way so you don't have to use it as a waist belt. It has many areas of application. There are also steel rings attached so you can fasten tools, bags, knives or whatever and carry with you without pockets or separate holsters."

She put the belt in his hands. "Now tell me, is this not the very manifestation of practicality and decor?"

She sat back and took another drink, confident she had won the argument. He pursed his lips in thought, turning the belt over in his hands.

"It's nice."

She stared at him.

"Alright, it's very nice. But I've seen better."

Hanah put her cup down with more force than intended. "Show me."

"Now?"

"Yes. Show me a product that's better, and I'll make one that's even better than the one you think is better than mine." She waved a hand in front of her to erase her rambling. "I will improve your so called superior product," she amended. "Show me right now."

He slammed his own cup down. "Who could resist such an offer?" He stood up and bowed. "Follow me and I will display the arsenal, my lady."
Grabbing their cups and the pitcher off the table, he lead the way, not to the corridor outside, but through another door into what resembled a dining room with a long table and chairs all around, then through a second door to a room filled with beautifully carved wardrobes. Down one end of the room there was a door ajar, and down the other stood a door wide open. Through it Hanah could see a large, flat, ascended square in the middle of the room, covered with furs and blankets. She quickly turned her eyes away, cheeks burning.

That had to be Lord Fíli’s bed chamber.
Unexpected Bathroom Encounter

That room had to be Lord Fíli’s bed chamber.

His most private space, where he slept, completely relaxed, completely unguarded, completely naked—completely inappropriate!

Hanah turned her gaze to the expansive wardrobes in front of her. Here were all his clothes. He had probably been naked in this very room. *Stop it.* She wanted to push her fingers into her eyes.

She found herself in a vortex of bad thoughts, like the few times she had visited the temple in Blackwater and everything was so quiet and serious, and all she had been able to think was *do not scream,* without having the least bit of reason for doing so. Except now she kind of had reason. She was alone with Lord Fíli in his chambers. *Damn him* for being so familiar with her. And *damn Lord Kíli* for joking with her earlier and putting the image in her head.

An image that was vivid enough without also seeing him in front of her, his imposing frame, his alert eyes, and that heady, warm smell of his skin she had come to know from their previous meetings.

Hanah bit the inside of her cheek and pressed her fingernails into her closed fist. She forced herself to focus on what he was doing.

He lay out a leather and metal monstrosity on a sideboard. It seemed to be made of metal hinges with only the base made of leather. She picked up one end. It moved like a flat centipede. Heavy, but seemingly indestructable. Along the bottom hung holsters for different sized daggers. The metal was decorated with runes and that tell-tale dwarven pattern of lines and angles.

Lord Fíli poured more drink as she examined the belt.

"It's nice," she said, earning a laugh. "And technically it's more metal than leather—"

"Does that mean you forfeit?"

"*However,*" she continued, ignoring his jibe. "Considerin' its purpose, I think it can be done better." She held his gaze challenging and took a drink.

"And what's its purpose?" he challenged in return.

"Well, I haven't been here long, but I'm under the impression that dwarves' fightin' skills are specialized in swords, axes, hammers, big weapons. So the only time the soldier would have need of this—because it *is* a soldier's belt, not a practical all around belt—would be if he didn't have access to his first-hand weapon. The purpose is close fightin' or if he's been disarmed. In any case, it would be good if the other thought you were unarmed."

"You mean feigning weakness in order to lower the opponent's guard?" He narrowed his eyes at her.

Perhaps such an idea was below him. Perhaps his dwarven pride would not allow him to be viewed as defenseless, even if it was just an act.

"It was a common trick among the children at Blackwater," she explained.
"And how would one appear unarmed? Can you make weapons invisible?"

Hanah was already brimming with ideas for new designs. "Pretty sure the pelt master can figure something out," she said.

He smirked. "I must say I'm intrigued. I tell you what—if you'll make it, I'll buy it."

"I do have a lot on my plate right now, as you know, so it may be a few weeks."

He nodded.

"But you have a deal," she finished.

Lord Fíli weighed the pitcher in his hand. "This calls for a toast, but we have nothing to toast with."

He held up a hand toward her. "I'll return shortly. Wait here."

He briskly strode out the way they came, his footsteps faded until she heard a door close.

Hanah looked around as she waited. Her eyes fell on the bedroom door. She took a few steps closer.

There was a low fire casting a soft light on the room. The floor was also covered by furs, like moss on a forest floor.

Did he walk barefoot here? What did he think about when he closed himself in, when he lay down and let the furs keep him warm? Perhaps someone else kept him warm? A rich, handsome lord could not have much trouble finding a bed companion. Perhaps he was married? She had no idea. There was nothing to suggest a woman's presence in his quarters, but perhaps she had her own. Perhaps he did not sleep here at all. Perhaps he shared her bed every night.

Hanah turned away from the bedroom which seemed cold and empty now. She moved to the other door and carefully pushed it open.

It was a wetroom. Gleaming, polished marble floor. Two beautiful, wooden bathtubs. Ceramic basins, linen towels, bottles and bars of soap. It smelled of bergamott. A huge difference to her small tub Hanah used at home in the kitchen, standing, while pouring water over herself. She smiled at the thought. Lord Fíli would not be able to fit one foot in her tub. This room was a sign of true wealth.

"What are you doing?"

The voice startled her. Hanah looked up to see an open door on the opposite end of the room, where a dwarven woman stood watching her. All the rooms seemed connected in a never ending chain. She wore a dark blue dress with a matching robe and silver details. Exquisite beads in her dark hair which was streaked with grey. She had high cheekbones, piercing blue eyes framed by crows feet, and a stature that demanded attention. To say she was beautiful would not do her justice. She was breathtaking.

Was this his wife? Surely not. She looked a lot older than Lord Fíli, but Hanah was no judge when it came to dwarves' age.

Hanah froze. What was she doing? Eyeing the lord's gilded brushes? Indulging her curiosity in a life she would never experience herself? Both would be correct, none could she divulge to this important dwarf lady. She was doing something she should not, that was for sure.
"I'm...er," Hanah faltered. "I'm waitin'."

"Waiting for what? The mountain to grow?" Her husky voice was inquisitive rather than scathing, but that did not mean she was any less intimidating.

"Lord Fíli. He said he would be back soon."

The lady regarded her a moment. "And who are you to be left by yourself to wait in Lord Fíli's quarters?"

"My name's Hanah Skinner, M'lady." Hanah bowed her head. "I'm a leathersmith. I have business with Lord Fíli."

"What business do you conduct in his bathroom at this hour?"

"He was showing me his knife belt." Hanah moved back into the room with the wardrobes to show the belt displayed on the bench. "I'm goin' to make him a new one."

The lady just looked at her until Hanah could not take anymore of that sharp gaze.

"The door was open, I was curious," she confessed hurriedly. She seemed satisfied with the honest answer, and walked past her into the wardrobe room. The lady closed the door to the bedroom before turning back to Hanah.

"You are a leathersmith, you say. Do you have anything to sell?"

"Yes, M'lady."

"Do you have a shop or a market stall?"

"Yes, M'lady."

"Then Lord Fíli will visit you there in the future," she stated. Not harshly, just so matter-of-factly that Hanah did not know what to say.

"I, er..." Hanah began. "I mean no disrespect, M'lady, but... who are—?"

Footsteps were heard in the room behind Hanah, and before she could finish the sentence, Lord Fíli appeared in the door. He stopped short when he noticed the dwarven woman.

"Mother," he exclaimed. "This is a... surprise."

The lady did not answer, just looked at him exactly like she had paralyzed Hanah a moment ago, as if waiting for something.

"I see you've met Miss Hanah."

"Yes. She was so good as to inform me of your... business arrangement." Her words were innocent, but the tone was critical. Hanah did not understand why, but she felt that the dwarven lady disapproved strongly.

"I will go," Hanah said, bowed her head and turned.

"There is no need—" Lord Fíli began, but his mother interrupted.
"Yes, that would be best."

Lord Fíli tried again. "Really, you don't have to." He shook his head as if trying to convince Hanah that she should not heed the lady's advice, but his mother locked eyes with him.

"It's late. Let the poor girl go home. There is no business so urgent that it cannot wait 'til morning."

Lord Fíli turned to Hanah and smiled politely, the sparkle that had been in his eyes most of the evening now muted. "Of course. Where are my manners? Thank you, Miss Hanah, for your time."

Hanah bowed her head. "Thank you. Good evening, M'lord—M'lady."

She left, quickly passing the room with the big table. On it sat two bottles which had not been there before.

She was almost at the great doors when she heard her name being called. She turned to see Lord Fíli approach her, carrying the bag which she had forgotten in her hurry to leave.

"Thank you. I'm sorry," she apologized as she heaved the bag onto her shoulder.

"Don't worry about it."

Both continued out through the anteroom and into the dusk, neither spoke for a moment. Hanah wondered if his mother had told him she had been snooping around his chambers in his absence.

"Please forgive me, M'lord," she said. "I should not have been lookin' around. It was inappropriate. I hope I didn't offend your mother too badly."

"No, no." He waved a hand. "She said a lot of things at your departure, but nothing about that, I assure you."

_Oh, no._ In what other ways could Hanah possibly have offended her?

"What did she say?" Hanah asked, worried now.

"My mother is under the impression a trap is being set."

Hanah's heart fell. Parents held great sway over their children, always. If Hanah had done the lady wrong, she had in effect done the lord wrong, and she had unwittingly jeopardized her work again.

Would this nightmare never end? Was Hanah doomed to dig her own grave and fall face first into it?

"Does she think I'm a spy as well?" Hanah tried to joke, but was sure her smile remained a grimace and she choked on her laugh.

He chuckled. "Not in the sense you're thinking, but just as dangerous."

"And what do you think?" She waited, tensely. Was this it? Would he cut her off like a diseased limb?

"I'll tell you what I told her—which isn't much because I could barely get a word in—I assured her that nobody would lay a hand on anything which is not freely given." He seemed particularly pleased with himself at that.

She stared at him, baffled that he would even joke about something like that. He laughed when he
saw her disapproval.

"So tell me, what secrets have you been divulging to the axis of evil?" he asked. "What valuable information have you gathered in my chambers while measuring my belly?" His eyes sparkled.

Hanah pursed her lips. He was teasing her.

"I've learned that lords and ladies rarely know the difference between reality and fancy. But then again, that's hardly news, is it? Nobody would reward me for that."

Lord Fíli laughed heartily now. "True. You're a very bad spy."

"Good thing that's not actually my occupation."

Hanah was surprised how quickly she had relaxed. It was strange how her stomach warmed when he laughed, but perhaps it was because of the drink. Perhaps her nerves were playing tricks on her.

"Well, dear Miss Hanah, I bid you goodnight," Lord Fíli said as they stopped on the road to Dale.

The way was lit by sparse lamp posts, though the sky was shaded in perpetual, purple dusk these cool summer nights, the sun never disappearing far below the horizon between evening and morning.

Hanah and Lord Fíli turned towards each other to shake hands. She barely thought about it now, she just did what he did.

"Thank you again for your company and most entertaining dinner conversation," he said.

"Thank you for inviting me to share your table." Hanah was suddenly overwhelmed by gratitude for the good will he had shown her. He had given her and Hemery work. He spoke to her with respect, like an equal, expecting her to answer like an equal, even though she was painfully aware they were not.

When he brought her hand to his lips, like had done last time, her eyes stung. Why did he have to treat her that way? It was almost cruel how he invited her into his home, gave her a glimpse of his life, knowing it was more distant to her than the moon. She could never share the experience like a true equal. She was not even his kin, his people. The knowledge made her cherish this tentative friendship even more, and at the same time mourn its impossibility.

As soon as his warm mouth left her skin, she held fast to his hand and brought it to her own lips. A quick brush against coarse skin, dry like a riverbed, knuckles bruised from sword training. Half a second, then she let go, murmured another "thank you," and walked away as fast as she could without looking back.
Unexpected Offer

Sleep came quickly and so did dawn. In the clear light of a new day, realizations came crashing down on Hanah, brutally honest and sharp like masonry on her head which felt heavier this morning for some reason.

She had kissed Lord Fíli's hand, like a love sick puppy begging for scraps at his table.

But she did not mean it like that. She had just wanted to show somehow the well of emotions she had felt at that moment. Gratitude, respect, humility... and tenderness, the kinship she knew was impossible, but felt anyway.

How come when *he* did it, it was a respectful farewell, albeit an intimate one, but when *she* did it, it felt like a transgression—a humiliating, irrevocable boundary-breaker?

When Hanah washed that morning, she scrubbed her skin raw as if it could erase the mortification she felt at the memory. She did not remember what his face had looked like when she left him the night before. She had been in too much of a hurry to find out.

Tresses of hair escaped her hair knot and clung to her cheeks as she washed her face. From outside she could hear the clunk of metal on wood. Hemery was practicing again. Hanah half-expected, half-feared, she would ask for some kind of weapon when the order was finished. She knew what would happen; she would argue that it was neither useful nor fun, and Hemery would argue that it was.

Suddenly her little sister was calling her from outside. Hanah hurried to the door, almost running into Hemery on the other side. With a towel still in her hand, she looked at Hemery's smiling face coming toward her.

"Hanah, I'm gonna learn to read. Lord Fíli said I could come and learn with others in the mountain. *In a real school.*"

Hanah looked up then, indeed noticing Lord Fíli and Lord Kíli in the yard. Her stomach dropped. Hemery continued.

"I'm gonna look at all the letters and all the runes and know everythin' there is to know about everythin'."

Hanah's first reaction was to politely decline, of course, but the way Hemery took her hands and shook them up and down with emphasis when she spoke, and the way she said *real school*, as if it was a mythical place, made it very difficult for Hanah to refuse.

"I made the inquiries myself," said Lord Fíli. "There's room in one of schoolmaster Ori's classes. It's in the first half of the day, so there's still time for work. And to train," he added to Hemery.

"There's always time for sharpening those knife skills, isn't there?" Lord Kíli smiled with Hemery's black makeshift blade in his hand.

Hanah thought Hemery was already spending too much time on that piece of metal crap. And she was not really sure what she and Dwalin were up to, but when Hemery came in at night she was almost too tired to eat, leaving Hanah to make supper and clean up.

"I don't know," Hanah said. "This is not a good time. We really have a lot to do."
"But you're the one who's busy," Hemery argued.

"That's why I need you to do all the other things," Hanah replied low.

"I can do that in my sleep." Hemery's voice began to hold long tell-tale notes, suspiciously close to whining.

"Hem," Hanah snapped. Not loudly, but enough for Hemery to understand.

Hemery leaned in close so the visitors could not hear.

"I want this. For us."

Hanah closed her eyes and sighed. It could not be something that just cost money, it had to cost time as well. Naturally. Frankly, she did not see the fascination. So what if she learned to read, what then? Reading did not do anything. Reading did not pay. She would probably get bored within a week and stop going on her own.

Hanah felt a drop of water run from her hair down her cheek. She wiped it away.

"Then you'd better bring somethin' to eat on your way."

Hanah turned and went inside. From the kitchen cupboard she took some bread and cheese. She heard the front door open and close, and looked over her shoulder. Lord Fíli had followed her.

She thought it was unfair of him to ambush her like that, to get Hemery all excited and forcing her to say yes.

The metal clunk noise started up again outside. Hemery probably showed Lord Kíli her aim, like she had done with Hanah more times than she could count.

"I hoped you wished to learn as well," said Lord Fíli.

With her back to him, Hanah wrapped up the food for her sister. She wondered how she could explain her thoughts to him, when she remembered something her father had told her a long time ago.

"I once heard about the city of Minas Tirith. They said it's so big that it is built on top of itself like a staircase. And as proof of how elegant and sophisticated the city is, they have learned men, paid by the crown, who sit around a big table discussin' whether the stars move around the earth or if the earth move around the stars. That's their job." Finally, Hanah met his gaze. He was standing by the door, watching her silently.

Hanah continued. "I can't even imagine what the purpose of that is. It seems like such a waste. They could be doin' somethin' useful. People who pay tax to the crown give them their salary, and they get nothin' in return."

"I'm not asking you to solve the mysteries of the stars." He smiled now.

"Then why do you want me to read? I know everythin' I need to pay my way."

"It's not a matter of survival. It makes your life easier. You can do so much with it. Correspond with people over long distances, read books about other times, other places. How to build things, how to grow things. It makes life better."

"But our lives are fine." Hanah raised her voice in frustration before she managed to stop herself. It
would not do to shout at a Lord. She took a deep breath and leaned on the back of a chair.

"I'm not like you," she said. "I don't need to do what you do all the time."

"What do you mean 'like me'?" he asked.

"Impress people with what you have, what you know. How much gold you have. Your gilded basins and giant bath tubs." That was rude, but she needed him to understand. "Why do you push us to change? To do more, to learn more, to be somethin' else?"

Hanah had been so happy living in Dale after their disastrous escape from Blackwater, so relieved that everything worked out, but now she felt a lump in her throat. A sadness she had no right to feel, and would have no reason to feel had it not been for the dwarf in front of her.

She drew a quivering breath. "If we're not good enough . . . then you should just leave." She turned away, arms folded.

There was silence. Had she finally succeeded in offending him? She glanced at him, but averted her eyes just as quickly. His eyebrows had grown into a hard line as they had that day in the market when he spoke of her father.

"Is that what you think? That I would have you change?" he asked in a deceivingly low voice. She did not dare answer. In a few steps he closed the distance between them in the small kitchen. He gripped her shoulders in his giant hands, forcing her to look at him. Hanah recoiled, but he held her fast.

"That's not what I want. Not at all. I think you're too good for this life."

She stared in surprise. Not fearful as she had been a moment ago, but genuinely dumbfounded.

"You have the right to know everything so you can decide for yourself how to live your life. You're too intelligent, both of you, to allow yourself limitations."

Nobody had ever looked at Hanah with that intensity before without anger in their voice. Lord Fíli looked angry, but she could tell he was not. It confused her how she was afraid when he looked at her like that. Her stomach was in her throat, but she did not want him to stop. She did not want him to go. The warmth of his hands seeped through her shirt. She wanted him to keep touching her, to keep talking.

She looked back into his terrifyingly focused eyes. Nobody had ever spoken to her like that before, like she deserved more, like she deserved those things she thought about when she lay down to sleep.

Lord Fíli filled her whole vision. Was he getting closer?

No one spoke to her like they cared about her life, her fate. No one, but Lord Fíli.

He must have read her mind. He must have seen the thoughts displayed on her face because in the next moment his mouth was on hers. Perhaps thoughts were what lords were taught to read in those classes? This was the last discernable thought in Hanah's mind. After that it was all warmth, his lips radiating heat onto her face, making her feel a flush up her neck and over her cheeks, while a chair dug into her back.

His mouth was a solid pressure on hers, soft and hard at the same time. When he pulled away she focused on the lower half of his face, scared that his intense gaze would remain, and also scared
that it would not.

He only moved back an inch or two and instinctively Hanah followed, not enough to close the gap, but enough for him to act on the invitation. He kissed her again. Her hands came up to grip the front of his shirt while his arms enveloped her and pressed her closer.

Oh, how she wanted this. She had not dared allow herself even the fantasy of Lord Fíli, and suddenly this was happening. This was real and so alien to everything she had ever experienced before. She had felt a spark of something with Graham. Some physical reaction, a tingle or a buzz Hanah had figured was an automatic reflex built into men to help reproduction. But it had always been conjured by physical intimacy, never the other way around.

This was new and scary, and she did not know what to do with it. She just knew she wanted more. Hanah's brain was all but convinced this was a frozen moment in time where she could bask in the heat of Lord Fíli without consequences, but alas...

"Hanah," Hemery called from outside.

They broke away just as Hemery came in. Lord Fíli had his back to the door and Hanah brushed past him to join her sister. She did not want to explain to Hemery what she was doing in there.

"Are you coming too?" Hemery asked.

"No, but you go," Hanah said, handing Hemery the wrapped food. They moved outside. The breeze was cool against Hanah's flushed skin. She feared the skin on her neck was red like a boiled crayfish.

"Miss Hanah. Always a pleasure." Lord Kíli bowed his head to her before starting down the road with Hemery beside him.

Lord Fíli came to stand next to her.

"You will not go?" he asked.

"I can't," she said, glancing at him. "I don't have the time."

He nodded, thinking. "No worries. You will," he said, picked up her hand and kissed it before walking away.

"What's that?" Hanah asked Hemery when she came in with a parcel in her hands the next morning.

"Some farmer dropped it off." Hemery put it down and began to unwrap it. Inside was a round, wooden box. Hemery lifted the lid and revealed its golden yellow content.

"Butter," Hanah gasped. "Master Dwalin must have ordered it."

"No. Farmer said it was to be delivered to Miss Hanah Skinner." Hemery put a finger into the stuff. It was hard due to the morning chill, but she caught some on her fingernail to taste.

"Hem," Hanah scolded. "Your hands are dirty."

Hemery had been practicing again this morning. That was probably why Hanah had not even noticed someone had come into the yard before they left again, because Hemery would have intercepted them.

"Wait til you try it on warm bread," Hanah said reverently. "But where did it come from?"

Hanah picked up the box to look at it, as if its mysteries would be shown on the surface.

"There's a note," said Hemery. A piece of paper had been hidden in the wrapping cloth. Something was written on it, two rows of script.

"Any ideas, Miss Reading?" Hanah asked, smiling.

"It doesn't work like that. I've only been to class once." Hemery was obviously disappointed by this fact, judging by the dark look which appeared on her face. But she looked at the note a long moment.

"Is this a joke?" She turned to Hanah with her curved upper lip.

"Why? What does it say?" Hanah was both curious and a little worried now.

"I don't know what it says, and neither do you, that's my point. Why would anyone write us anythin'?" Hemery shrugged.

Why indeed. Hanah thought about this. If it was a joke, it was not funny. At least not to her. But then again, in Hanah's experience that was rarely how it worked. It could just as easily be a joke for someone else. Hanah pursed her lips. A joke for someone who knew she could not read, who knew she liked butter and could afford it, someone stubborn who wanted to prove a point.

"It's from Lord Fíli," she stated.

Hemery looked at her. "How do you know?"

"I just know. And we can't accept it."

"Why not?"

"He has already done more than enough. We can't keep takin' things for free. Especially not things like butter. It's expensive and not somethin' we need. If we take what he gives us, we will need to pay him back. I don't want to owe him anythin', because I don't know what he will want in return."

"But isn't that tradin'? Givin' things and givin' back?" Hemery asked.

"Yes, but it's different. When you trade, there's a deal made between two people. Both know what is bargained for and they agree on the price. Then it's over with, nobody owin' anyone anythin' after the deal is done."

Hanah closed the lid and wrapped the box up in the cloth, note and all.

Hemery sighed. "I'm gonna have to give it back, aren't I?"

"You're goin' to Erebor anyway."

Hemery sighed again, if possible even more deeply.

"You know where it is," Hanah insisted. "Tell the guards that Miss Hanah Skinner wants to return somethin' to Lord Fíli."
"Why can't you do it?"

"Because I don't have time. And you do, remember?" And she did not want to get into another argument with Lord Fili which would surely happen if she went herself.

Hemery was not happy about it, but she understood and so she went. Hanah sat alone in their market stall in Dale until noon when Hemery joined her. She still had the parcel.

"What happened?"

"He wasn't there, and the guards said it was not their job to take deliveries."

"Did you try again after class?"

"Yes, and he wasn't there. I had to hold on to the box all mornin' and everyone kept askin' what it was and were teasin' me for not showin' as if I thought it was a treasure or somethin' and please don't make me go to Lord Fili again." Her voice grew increasingly agitated.

Hanah put her arm around Hemery's shoulders.

"No, of course not. I'm sorry it didn't work. I guess we'll have to keep it. It will go bad if we don't eat it soon."

That night they had freshly baked bread with butter and tea until they thought their bellies would burst. If Hanah liked the butter gift better at that moment, with salt on her lips and a smiling sister with her at the table, she would never admit it.

The next morning was a near copy of the one before. As Hemery was outside practicing someone came to deliver a parcel. When they unfolded the cloth on the table, they revealed a small see-through glass bottle with something that resembled water. There was a label on it, but it did not make the girls any wiser.

Hemery unscrewed the cork and smelled it. She recoiled in surprise, like a cat smelling sour milk, but quickly returned it to her nose. Now sniffing more tentatively, she seemed to enjoy it. She passed it to Hanah who did the same.

Memory of standing in a warm room in the mountain, taking in fresh water smells with a belly contentedly full of food and drink, filled Hanah's mind. It was the same scent in the bottle as there had been in Lord Fili's bathroom.

Hanah tipped the bottle and put a drop on her finger. It was oil, bath oil. Too bad she did not have a bathtub. She pursed her lips. Why did Lord Fili send this? They could not use it. Did not know how. If she wanted something like this she would have bought it herself, and if she could not then maybe she should not. And he definitely should not show her up like this by giving it to her for free. Who needs bath oil anyway? She would never understand him. It must be him. Who else could it be?

Having not spoken a word since Hemery came in with the parcel, Hanah looked at her sister.

"No way," Hemery crossed her arms. "I already tried. I'm not goin'." She emphatically shook her head long after she was done talking.

Hanah folded the parcel and put it in the chest of soaps, towels and other cleaning items in the kitchen, planning never to use it, but to return it when opportunity arose.
The next morning was slightly different. Instead of some merchant’s delivery boy or farm hand, a
wagon with two men stopped outside their house. The clamor of the cart and horses drew Hanah
from the kitchen to join her sister who was already standing in the yard watching the visitors.
Something the size of their kitchen table was in the back covered by a cloth.

"Skinner?" one of the men asked.

"Yeah."

"This is the place," the man told his partner before jumping out and uncovering their cargo. They
unloaded it and were about to carry it inside, but Hanah did not move out of the way.

"Is that a bathtub?" she asked, incredulous.

It was oval in dark reddish brown wood, intricately carved with a forest scenery on the side, with
wines, trees and waterfalls.

"Aye, Miss," he confirmed, albeit a little annoyed to be hindered in his work.

"I didn't order one."

"Well, someone did. And we don't get paid if we don't deliver."

"But..." Hanah looked into the kitchen behind her. "There's no room for it." Which was true. With
the table, the stove, and the chest, there was just enough room to move around in there.

"Then it will make a fancy rain barrel," he said, and the men deposited it underneath the kitchen
window.

Hanah gaped. The smooth, sanded surface of the dark wood looked extraordinarily out of place
beneath the peeling shutters and dusty windows.

"Have a good day, Miss." The men stepped back into the wagon.

Hanah looked up then. She noticed Dwalin who happened to be sitting on his stoop smoking his
pipe, idly observing this morning's spectacle, frowning deeper than usual. He would be no help in
this trivial matter, though he would put it in much less polite terms, and she had no way to transport
the tub to Erebor should she decide to return it to Lord Fíli in person. Because, though she had not
been absolutely certain before, Hanah knew no other who would spend money on strangers like
this—it had to be Lord Fíli.

Hanah realized she would never get rid of the tub if she let the carpenters leave without it.

"Wait," she exclaimed. "What if you buy it back? Reduced price, of course."

The men shared a glance. "Fraid not, Miss."

"Very reduced price," she offered pointedly.

"Miss, not even for a copper. It's custom made, virtually unsellable." He motioned to the tub. "If
you want it gone, break it up for firewood. But we're not takin' it. Good day, Miss."

When they had turned their cart around and headed down the road, Hanah looked at Dwalin.

"Do you need a bathtub, Master Dwalin?"
He said nothing, knocked his pipe on the doorframe to empty it, and went back inside his forge.
Hanah was busy counting beads on her needle when there was a knock on the door to the shop. Hemery was attending class in Erebor, so she did not receive any warning before the visitor approached as she usually did.

"We're open," she called out, staying in her seat, not wanting to disturb the beads.

"Is this how you greet your most important customer?"

Hanah's head jerked up in surprise at the sound of Lord Fíli's voice. She forced her breath to calm, though her heart raced.

"I did not expect you so early in the day, m'lord. As you can see, I'm busy with your most important order."

He chuckled and began walking around the shop, browsing. "Don't let me bother you."

As if she would be able to work with him in the room, distracting her. Hanah put her needle down.

"Four of them are already finished," she said, rising to present him with four bundles wrapped in cloth. She unrolled them for his scrutiny.

One of the coats was dark red, like oxe blood, with white bone beads and plates in different shapes and sizes, covering the top half of the coat like a game board. The second was a deep purple with milky white stone decorations. The third was blue grey decorated with tiger eye stones. The fourth was reddish-brown with copper beads.

She tried to ignore the memory of their interrupted kiss. He seemed as carefree as ever, and so would she. If he pretended as if nothing happened, she would not be the one to bring up the issue.

Hanah knew males had... urges. Growing up she had heard stories from older women in Blackwater depicting them as animals, like creatures possessed by demons when the base lust took hold of them. She had seen a glimpse of it with Graham, how he seemed to fade out of existence when they coupled, barely hearkening to anything besides his own drive. She had also heard that men of higher station were prone to take advantage of female servants or lesser ladies in their surroundings in order to fulfill their needs.

However, she did not feel this description applied to Lord Fíli. His kiss had been an impulse, an urge—yes, but not demanding in any way, and he had not made any kind of inappropriate proposition toward her. She still felt safe in his presence. Still felt warm and tingling standing next to him. She could smell leather and mineral oil from his clothes, traces of horse, and the bergamot she now knew. He must have bathed this morning.

He glanced at her then, before returning his focus to the coats.

"You work too hard," he commented, almost absently, as he ran his hands over the coats.

Yes, warm, tingling, and frustrated. That summed up what he made her feel.

"There is no such thing," Hanah informed him and changed the subject. "Would you like me to change anythin'?"

"No, I'll take them as they are."
She began to wrap the coats up so he could take them with him.

"You need to rest once in a while," he said. "Otherwise you won't have energy for when you really need it."

Hanah sighed. Easy words. She sat back down with her needle to resume her work.

"And if I need energy all the time, what then?" she challenged.

He laughed. Her heart leaped from hearing the throaty sound so close.

"Are you a siren?" he smirked and tilted his head at her in question. "Are you some unearthly creature living without food or rest? You do sleep on occasion?"

Hanah decided she had enough of his irrational teasing for the moment. "M'lord would not be interested in buyin' a brand new bathtub?" She looked him straight in the eye. "You bein' so easy with your pocket-book and all. I have one outside the kitchen, just sittin' there, gatherin' dust. Can't keep it myself, bit too fancy really. Can't fit it into the house." She explained in feigned regret.

Lord Fíli took a step back, the smirk gone.

"Well, technically it's not really mine," she continued. "Someone dropped it off a few days ago, but I don't know who's it is. Maybe I shouldn't sell it. I'll just leave it out there and wait for someone to come claim it." She shrugged.

He nodded thoughtfully, stroking his mustache.

"Aye, you could do that," he said. "Or you could just accept it."

"How can I accept somethin' I don't know the price for?"

"What makes you think there's a price involved?" He frowned and put his hands on his hips.

"There's always a price." Hanah bit off the thread which she had just fastened.

Lord Fíli groaned and rubbed his eyes. "Mahal, woman," he said, exasperated. "Have you not heard a word I've said to you? You should embrace what life offers you. Enjoy it while you can and don't ask why, because you don't know how long you'll be allowed to keep it. Why are you so determined to refuse yourself even the smallest bit of happiness in life?"

He turned away and drew a hand over his face. She could see his shoulders move from a deep breath. She felt her eyes sting, but blinked it away.

How could she do as he asked? How could she make him understand?

Hanah walked up to him where he stood with his back to her. She put a hand on his arm. He stiffened under her touch, so she pulled back, but did not step away.

"I hear you. I do," she said softly. Carefully.

He angled his head toward her, but did not turn.

"But... you must see what it is like for me." She searched for the words. "You're too good to us."

"Hanah," he ground out in protest, shaking his head.
"No, let me finish. You can't expect me to open my arms to a never-endin' stream of gifts and favours, because if I keep my arms open, I'll not be able to hold on to what I have. When you gave me all that gold, I thought my life couldn't be better but... you weren't the only one who paid with that gold. I had to pay too."

He bent his head so she could not see his expression.

"And I know it's not your fault. I don't blame you for... what happened, but I will never again accept somethin' freely that seems too good to be true. My life doesn't include butter or bath oil, and I'm fine with that. Why aren't you?"

"I don't know," Lord Fíli sighed. "Maybe because you don't deserve what you've been through and I worry for you. Out here," he looked around. "In the open. No stone walls to protect you. I want to give you what comforts I can until..."

"What?"

"Until such time when I can be assured you are safe."

She could not help but smile at his ironically naïve wish.

"No one can be truly safe," she said. "I could choke on a carrot tomorrow—"

She was interrupted by a mouth on hers, effectively silencing her.

The solid impact was familiar, but she was still surprised by the sensation. Her stomach fluttered as if she had not eaten in days. She knew she was supposed to close her eyes. That was what people usually did, but she did not want to. She wanted to look at him, his own eyes shut, indulging in this carefree moment. Hanah understood, and though she was bothered by the coat she had abandoned unfinished on the worktop, she chose to ignore it—just for a moment. She would work into the night to make up for the lost time, she promised herself, but right now she let it be.

She watched him and felt his mouth, his breath, his scent. It was like filling her nose with the scent of dawn, watching the mist fade at sunrise, to know that this exact moment would never repeat itself and it would be over all too quickly.

As their lips moved softly against each other, she placed her free hand on his cheek, so that she could feel him move under her fingers. She made her mouth soft and pliant as she kissed him back, to let him know she wanted this to continue.

He placed his hands on either side of her face, opened his mouth and nipped at her lips. Remembering old kisses, what she used to like, Hanah carefully let her tongue touch his bottom lip, hoping he would like it too. He responded eagerly. In the next motion his tongue met hers, and again, and again. It was so close, so intimate, but it only made Hanah want to be closer.

For the first time in months, she was glad she was not an innocent maid anymore. If she had, this would have scared her much more. But then again, she would have liked her first experience with men to be with someone like Lord Fíli, someone who seemed to genuinely care even without the promise of future reward. Still, now she had more courage to act. She moved her arms to embrace his torso, as much as she could. It felt good to hold on to him.

Suddenly, he tilted his head and plunged his tongue into her mouth. She hummed in surprise and appreciation of the increased contact as he did so. No sooner had she gotten used to the movement and rhythm before he left her mouth and kissed her neck. His warm mouth and scratchy beard made new sensations stir within her. The hair on her arms rose and heat gathered between her legs.
Hanah gasped.

His hands fell to her waist and gripped tightly. She pushed closer as she felt his teeth scrape against her throat before being replaced by tongue and lips once more. Then he stopped and rested his forehead against hers.

"I swear I will not risk your honour," he said, while squeezing her waist. "But I would very much like. . ." His thumbs caressed her sides. ". . .to touch you."

Their breaths mingled as they stood pressed together.

"Will you allow it?" he asked.

If she had not been so nervous, Hanah would have smiled. They disagreed more often than not, and he teased her and annoyed her, but she knew he would not break his word. He was too stubborn for that.

She nodded. "Yes."

Barely had she uttered the word before he was kissing her again. His hands were quickly undoing her belt. She was glad to have his face to focus on while having no idea where his hands were going.

The belt dropped to the floor and he started to work on the buttons of her shirt underneath the leather tunic. Unrestricted by the belt, the tunic hung open like a long vest, the linen shirt the only barrier between skin and open air.

Lord Fíli had only undone half of the buttons from the top before he picked her up, his strong arms holding her up around the hips. She thought he would put her down on the table or something, but he just held her as he kissed the bare skin of her chest and found his way beneath the collar of her shirt to kiss each breast.

Being lifted off the ground was a new experience for Hanah. No one had carried her since she was a small child. Her legs were pinned, but her hands were free. She wrapped her arms around his neck and held on. His bearded kisses made new waves of goose bumps erupt on her skin. When he moved from the left to the right breast and her shirt got in his way, she helped by holding her collar aside, letting him have complete access.

It was not until he expanded his exploration to the skin below and to the sides of her breasts that she started to squirm.

"No, not there," she gasped. She hoped he would not take advantage and tickle her on purpose.

He just chuckled and lightly bit one nipple before letting her down again. He shook off his jacket, leaving him in his own linen shirt. She swallowed nervously, but he did not move to undress further. Instead he kissed her mouth again.

She could taste salt on his lips, hers. Perhaps she should have bathed this morning? If she knew this would happen, she would not have thought twice about it.

He lifted the hem of her shirt and touched the skin beneath with his fingers, lightly around her nipples, around her breasts, and down over her stomach, down below her belly button, and stayed there above her trousers, tracing patterns, around and up and down.

In between kisses he whispered hoarsely. "Let me know if I go too far."
As soon as he said this, he dipped his fingers below her waistband.

Hanah inhaled sharply, but did not pull away. She did not want to stop altogether, but maybe it was too far? At first he just covered her with his hand, holding her most private, most hidden flesh. Not even Graham had done this. Yes, she had lain with him, but he had never really touched her there. She knew herself what she felt like. Warm, wooly, and now, as he ran a finger along her sex, sticky.

Suddenly, she was very aware of what was happening. Lord Fíli was touching her naked skin, most inappropriately, in her shop in the middle of the day. He, she could tell, had bathed and washed his hair with scented oil that very morning. She had not washed since the day before and her hands were dirty from work. The same hands which were now gripping his white shirt.

Hanah felt her face flush as he began to move his fingers over her sensitive folds, producing a sweet sting that travelled from her core down her legs. She broke their kiss abruptly.

"Wait," she said, out of breath. Her hands were on his shoulders.

He removed his hand and held her waist.

"Did I do something wrong?" His face was seriously inquisitive, but his thumbs rubbed circles on her hips.

She groaned and put her hands over her eyes. "No. It's just . . ." She forced herself to lower her hands, to not hide. "I'm just embarrassed."

He stilled. "Do you . . . not want me to?" he asked tentatively.

"It's not that," she said quickly. He relaxed visibly.

"No one has done exactly. . . that to me before." She felt her cheeks burn.

His hands resumed their soothing rubbing.

"I know it can be overwhelming." His voice grew very deep and serious. "Especially in the presence of such an excellent dwarf as myself."

Hanah frowned and met his eye straight on. His face had adopted a pensive expression as he spoke. "Because you know, deep down, that there will be no going back. After you've had a sample of the real thing, no one but Fíli will be able to satisfy your female needs."

His dramatic words finally became too much and she started to laugh. His charade dropped and he smiled at her, showing deep dimples.

"You talk such nonsense, m'lord." She tried to sound sober.

"I don't know about that." He shrugged. "Simply being in the same room as me would make anyone self-conscious."

She gently pushed at his shoulder. "Don't be silly," she muttered, trying not to smile.

He tilted her head up and kissed her slowly. "What if," he said. Kiss. "I did not look at your face." Kiss. "And you did not look at mine?"

As if to prove his point he lowered his head to place kisses on her neck, so she could not see his face. The return of his lips on her skin, and the idea that he wanted to make her comfortable and try
again, and what would happen if he did, made her stomach flutter.

"Ehm..." she wavered, but her hands moved to encircle his neck.

"Come. Let me show you," he said. He sat on the chair she used when she worked, pulled on her hand until she sat on his lap with her back to his chest.

It was true, she could not see him, but she could feel his strong body beneath her. She could feel his big, warm hands slipping under her shirt and gently stroking her belly, up and down, but stopping below her breasts and above her trousers. His breath was hot on her neck, lips barely touching.

"If you want me to continue, untie your trousers for me," he said low. It almost sounded as if he was asking for a favour. His deep voice asking permission like that, together with his movements, made her blood warm again.

The only thing that made her hesitate was that he made more fluid pool between her legs, and it was making her uncomfortable to know he would be touching it. Then his mouth sealed itself onto her shoulder, teeth scraping lightly, and his embrace tightened, one hand brushing the underside of her breast.

She wanted to be there. She wanted his arms around her. If he wanted to give this to her, then she wanted to receive it.

One of her hands rested on his leg for support, the other found the string at the top of her trousers and pulled on it until the knot dissolved. He knew the moment it was undone. His hand was flat as he pushed it underneath her waistband.

Gently he dipped a finger in her wetness, as one would with paint, and began to draw shapes on her skin, creating a sweet, sweet burn that came and went, but came back stronger every time.

Her breathing changed, sometimes quickening, sometimes longer, sometimes gasping, sometimes hissing, but he seemed to listen to every nuance. Whenever she made a louder noise his kisses on her throat grew more intense, his grip on her torso tighter. He hummed deep in his chest, as if the pleasure he created in her was also felt in his own body.

Suddenly, the peak she had been rising toward slipped away, or was it her that was slipping? And she felt heavy, so heavy with molten gold and crystals swirling like a whirlwind in her stomach, grounding her to the flesh and blood she rested on. She felt release, relief, release, relief. Released from shackles she had forgotten bound her.

As suddenly as it had appeared, the feeling drained away, leaving a tingling relaxation. And the awareness of her weight on top of Lord Fili. She realized she was leaning back with her head on his shoulder. She straightened.

"Sorry," she murmured.

"No, no. Don't be." He pulled her back against him.

Hanah had touched herself before, but only a few times. It was difficult to have undisturbed peace and quiet when your sister was always in the same room. She had experienced the burn and her slick, smooth folds, but had never reached anything beyond. She always felt strange, never knowing what to think about, and always had the feeling she should not touch herself like that. She would grow frustrated and tired, so she stopped trying. It was so different when someone else was present, when someone else held the reins. It was foreign and embarrassing to give herself over,
but also all the more powerful and surprising when the release came.

Was that what Graham had felt when they had lain together? It would explain the look on his face and the noises he made. Fortunately, Lord Fíli had not seen her face, but she may have uttered an oh or an ah somewhere at the end. She was pretty sure she had. Would he experience the same thing? Still on his lap, she angled her head towards him.

"Do you want me to...?" she asked.

"No, that's alright," he dismissed the suggestion. "If you did, I would want you to come at the same time, and we don't have time for that." He pushed a hand into her hair and kissed her over her shoulder. When he pulled back, all traces of amusement were gone.

"I did not plan this, just so you know. I did not come here to get into your bed." His hand still in her hair, he fixated her with his gaze. He seemed to wait for an answer.

"I believe you."

And she did. She and Lord Fíli had business together. She had refused his gifts, although only in principle, for she had not been able to return any of them. Except for the unexpected kiss last time, he had no reason to believe she would be willing. Although, she had not thought so either, yet here she was. Until now, she had not stopped to think where her was. She knew it was not within the realm of propriety, and definitely not something she would advertise. Other than that, she just knew she did not want him to leave. But it was almost midday, and Hemery would be home soon.

He kissed her again, and when he drew back, the spark was back in his eyes.

"I need to oversee my investments after all. And I could not have people believing my gifts are not worth accepting, so I came to make you see reason."

"I haven't actually been able to return any of them," she protested.

"No, but I did receive complaints from an affected party regarding them."

So he had heard of Hanah's and Hemery's attempted refusals of the butter and the tub.

"And? Am I reasonable?" she asked.

Lord Fíli looked thoughtful. "Hmm. Reasonable is a relative term, but I do believe you're coming around." He caressed her breast under her shirt one last time before helping her button up.

Hanah stood to tie her trousers and retrieve her belt from the floor. She wanted to change underclothes, but she would wait to do so until he had left.

"I'll prepare some water for you to wash your hands," she said.

"It's fine," he said, and licked his fingers.

Her eyes grew wide, and she swatted his arm. "Stop it. What are you doin'?" she hissed at him, incredulous, as if he had tasted her monthly bleeding. He laughed at her shocked expression.

"It won't kill me."

"I know," she admitted, frozen shock still on her face. "But I don't think that's appropriate." She flushed.
"You regard that as inappropriate?" His arm came around her waist and he moved in as if to kiss her. "You have no idea just how inappropriate things there are—"

Flushing, she turned and escaped his grasp, entering the kitchen.

"You are washing your hands," she decided. "You may have a cup of tea as well, but then you have to go."

Her back was straight, but her face hot as she heard him snickering.

Hemery came home after class with a spring in her step. For her midday meal she drank cold tea and ate a sandwich with cured ham and mustard. With the bread in hand she moved into the shop, humming a tune and surveyed her work for the afternoon.

Hanah, who had already eaten, sat in her chair by the table as usual, sewing beads to leather. She seemed tired, or distracted, Hemery thought. She took a long time to count the beads before threading them, starting over several times.

"What is it?" Hemery asked.

"What?" Hanah looked up, confused. She had been working a lot lately, but her face was fresh, a little pink even. There were no circles beneath her eyes, and her shoulders were surprisingly straight when she sat up.

"Somethin's different." Hemery took another bite of her sandwich and chewed slowly.

"Is it?" Hanah did not seem bothered to ask what Hemery meant, and returned to her beads.

Hemery looked around the shop. Everything was as she had left it in the morning. The walk home had been quiet, except for the usual clamor of Dale when she passed, and the only signs of life in the yard had been the thrushes and the swallows darting back and forth, and the echo of a woodpecker's creak in the pines.

Had someone been here when Hemery was gone?

She looked at the shelf where Hanah kept the finished orders. Empty.

"Has Lord Fíli been here?"

Hanah did not look up. "Yes. He picked up the three coats."

Why did the colour on Hanah's cheeks darken? Perhaps she was overly tired after all.
Everytime Hemery fell, a small burst of anger sparked in her chest. It did not hurt as much anymore. Strange how someone could get used to falling.

Well, *falling* would suggest she did it all on her own out of clumsiness, which was definitely not the case. Being forced to the ground by an unstoppable power, more like. Dwalin was relentless. Just when Hemery thought she was progressing, he would deliver a series of strikes too fast to evade and she would be on her arse again.

"Don't be afraid to fall. This exercise is not about remainin' on your feet, it's about evasion. Imagine every move as an attack with a deadly weapon. Every body part I touch would be damaged. Divin' and grazin' a knee or an elbow is nothin' compared to a slashed artery."

"What's an artery?" Hemery asked when she came to her feet.

Dwalin paused in his assault to press two fingers to the side of his neck. "The veins that carry most of yer blood. Feel it." He motioned for her to imitate him.

Hemery's pulse was frenzied and familiar at her throat.

"If pierced, ye bleed to death in moments. Same goes fer every bend in yer body."

He made cutting motions to the back of her knees, her armpits, and lastly he pointed to the soft tissue in the middle of her abdomen, right beneath her ribcage. Hemery can feel a strong pulse against his fingertip.

"And here," he adds. "The most vulnerable parts of yer body are not shielded by bone or muscle, only a thin layer of skin."

"Bodies are weak," Hemery commented in disapproval.

"Aye," he agreed, straightening to his full height. "Which's why we must take extra care to stay away from sharp things. Though I understand that can be difficult, seein' as ye have such a talent fer kickin' on the ground like a ladybug on her back."

"I'm not an insect. I am tryin' my best," she protested.

He ignored her comment. "Not to mention yer habit of attractin' attention."

"I don't attract anythin'." She curved her lip.

"Have ye already forgotten yer first night in Dale, how I had to save ye from that degenerate at the Inn?"

"That wasn't our fault."

"Unguarded ladies, especially those who excel at craft and spends gold are sure to make targets of themselves."

"That's not fair—" Hemery frowned, but Dwalin held a hand up to stop her.

"Aye, I know it's unintentional. But ye better get used to it, ladybug. It will only get worse."
Hemery blanched, but her frustration did not drain. "Why should we have to get used to anythin'?"

"Because of who ye are. Those orders yer makin' fer Fee are goin' to make people notice ye."

"It's just a job. What's wrong with wantin' to do it well?"

"Nothin'. It's what everyone should strive for, but not everyone can do it as well as ye, and it will make ye shine in folk's eyes. There are some treasures ye can't bury beneath a mountain. Some ye display on a market table, some are in yer skin."

It was probably visible on her face, Hemery's struggle to comprehend this new threat she had no control over.

Dwalin sighed. "Ye need not fear for yer safety as long as I'm here, but as fer the other thing, I'll say this—I love the lad, but there's a reason Fee comes to visit as often as he does, and it ain't to see me."

"Then what?"

"Why would any warm-blooded fella visit a bonny lass like Miss Hanah?"

Hemery though about that a long time after her session with Dwalin was over.

Hanah rushed to the door of the shop, buttoning up her shirt properly as she went. Hemery had already gone to class in Erebor, and Hanah had just finished cleaning up after breakfast when she heard the knock on the door. She tucked her loose hair behind her ears. She could only guess who would visit this early in the morning.

"Mornin', m'lord," she greeted with a small bow of her head.

"Good morning, Miss Hanah." Lord Fíli bowed back. "How are you this fine day?"

"I'm well, thank you." She glanced behind her to the kitchen. "What brings you here? It's a bit early for business."

He smiled and invited himself in, walking past her into the shop. "Thank you, I am very well, so good of you to inquire."

He was dressed more casual today in a shirt, leather trousers, and a sword holster thrown haphazardly over his back. It was too warm in the late summer to wear much more. She could see the fabric strain across his broad back when he looked around the room.

She closed the door behind him. "I can see you're very much your usual good-humoured self, so I didn't bother askin'."

"Your observation is accurate and astute as always."

His eyes lingered on her. Hanah remembered that she was only wearing her linen shirt. The material was quite thin and she knew it hid very little in direct sunlight. She turned her back to the windows and crossed her arms.

"Your next delivery is almost ready. A few buttons and hooks left." She pointed to a coat on a hanger behind him.

As he ran his eyes over it, she glanced toward the kitchen, worried that she would hear that hissing
noise of the water on the stove boiling over and drowning the flames. When she turned her attention back to her guest, he was watching her.

"What is it?" Lord Fíli frowned. "Is someone here?"

"No, I just... I have something on the fire. I'll be right back." She held up a finger for him to wait there, and hurried to the kitchen, pushing the door closed behind her.

The large pan of water was seething. She did not wait for it to boil, but lifted the pan to the side and calmed the flames. She closed the hatch to the fire and was going to return to the shop, when she noticed he had followed her.

She froze and was about to usher him back out as quickly, but it was no use. He had already seen. His frown of curiosity disappeared.

"So this is what you did not want me to see. The secret." He touched the edge of the bathtub Hanah had managed to roll into the small kitchen. She had almost filled it with warm water when he interrupted her.

"Miss Hanah's bath time." He smirked and his eyes glittered. "And with the horrid, free merchandise, as well. Who would have thought, eh?"

Hanah took a deep breath to strengthen her patience. She folded her arms, lifted her chin and smiled tightly, as if she was not in the least affected by his taunts.

"Are you finished?" she asked.

"Are you?" He put his hand in the water. "It's really nice. Should hurry before it cools."

She shifted her weight, but said nothing. He came closer.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Too embarrassed to undress in front of me?"

Hanah scoffed.

The nerve of him, to visit unannounced, interrupt her personal time, and then tease her about it. But it was nothing new, was it? It seemed he would always demand her time, whether it was business related or not. She moved to keep her distance, but he hindered her escape, gripping her waist lightly, but unmistakably.

"It's not like I haven't seen—"

"Don't you dare finish that sentence," she interrupted, with cheeks flaming and a fingertip to his chest. If possible, he smiled even wider. She could feel herself beginning to melt from the heat of his hands. "If you carry on like that, I don't think you deserve to watch me undress a single stocking."

"Of course I do. I promise, I'll be nice." He leaned in as if to kiss her.

How did she get to this place with him again? One moment she was alone, preparing a bath, and the next Lord Fíli knocked on the door and wanted her to undress in front of him. And, naturally, she was too embarrassed to undress at the drop of a hat, he was right about that.

She turned her face away. "Was there somethin' you wanted?"

He chuckled. "I would think that's fairly obvious." He leaned in again, but she turned her head the
other way.

"I mean, other than. . . this?"

"Not today." He was watching her seriously now.

How beautiful he was. How special she felt when he held her. How warm she became when he looked at her with that silent, honest question. She wanted to grab the braids of his mustache and pull him toward her, but she did not. She did, however, close the small distance between them and kissed him.

Soft, solid, warm. Persistent arms tightened around her waist, broad chest against hers. Hanah almost laughed at how quickly heat pooled in her when she kissed him. She kept her eyes open to look at him.

He was always beautiful, but more so now like this. Relaxed and tense at the same time. Hard and soft. Utterly concentrated with a small frown. No more teasing, only focus. Focus on her, as if he was searching for something.

Like last time, she made herself soft and pliant in his arms to show her earlier rejection was not sincere. She put one arm around his neck and felt the muscles and tendons work under his skin. The other hand moved to the side of his face. She felt the warm skin of his cheek, the coarse hair of his beard, and then the cool, smooth skin of his ear. She knew he had big ears, but had not given it much thought as they were hidden in his mane of hair most of the time. She did not wish to draw attention to their physical differences, but she could not resist trailing her fingertips along the shell of his ear and down his neck. He hummed as she did so. Perhaps he did not mind.

Lord Fíli's big hands travelled down over her hips to squeeze her bottom. She drew in a sharp breath, but did not break the kiss. His hands then moved to her front to the strings that fastened her trousers.

"May I?" he asked. So respectfully. So carefully. So attentively.

Hanah nodded. He pulled on the strings and opened her trousers, but instead of just reaching inside, he pulled them down her legs for her to step out of.

He was sneaky to get her undressed though she had initially refused. But it was alright, Hanah concluded. It was he who was undressing her, instead of standing idly by merely observing while she stripped for his viewing pleasure.

He had to take off her shoes while he bent down in front of her to get the trousers off completely.

"Why can't you wear skirts like other women folk?" he huffed dramatically.

"I'm sorry, m'lord, for not bein' like proper women," she replied in kind.

"I believe you said something about stockings? They'll have to go as well." He lifted her feet one at a time to pull them off. Hanah laughed.

He stayed on his knees before her. He ran his hands up the back of her legs, fingers just grazing her swell of her bottom. Then his mouth was on her inner thigh, moving upward.

Hanah's shirt still covered her center, but she would soon be bared if his pace was anything to go by. She had an idea where he was heading, and was shocked as well as intrigued.
Suddenly, a familiar moment of clarity came over her, just like last time. She was aware of everything in her surroundings. The grains of sand between the soles of her feet and the stone floor. The cooling water in the tub. The fact that she had not used it yet that morning, and that Lord Fíli was kneeling before her, his hot breath and raspy beard on her skin, about to please her with his mouth. About to taste her and smell her. The warmest, softest part of his body against the most sensitive and intimate of hers. She was feeling vulnerable, it was a bit scary, but she refrained from stopping him this time. She knew he did this because he wanted to.

And she wanted it too. Hanah had thought of little else since his last visit. Heat had flooded her at every reminder of the encounter. Every morning Hemery came in with a new present—butter, soap, new bedlinens with a high thread count, or exotic spices—she blushed for reasons she could not explain to her sister, no matter how many times she asked, and simply put the package away in the kitchen cupboard. There were no more refusals. She received and enjoyed every offering.

Their encounter had seemed so innocent. Neither of them were married, that she knew of, and she was not risking getting pregnant again. And no one knew of this new connection. From this perspective, it was fine. She could indulge in this moment.

Hanah leaned her head back as his lips and tongue found her. Lord Fíli's mouth was softer than his fingers had been, but just as relentless. With intense, but slow, strokes and sucking, he pushed her towards the same peak as last time. Sometimes the climb was so slow she almost thought she would not reach it, but that only made the following rise all the sweeter.

He opened her more by hitching her leg over his shoulder. She braced herself on the kitchen table behind her. When she sensed the approach of the golden whirlwind on the horizon, he suddenly raised her other leg as well, forcing her to lie down on her back on the table. He continued licking and sucking her flesh with both of her legs over his shoulders.

Hanah could feel the release approaching more forcefully now when she was not distracted by her tense, tired legs. Her breathing grew shallow and her stomach muscles twitched. He responded with a groan as if he felt the sensations building in her. His hands tightened on her hips, and when the whirlwind gripped her, she clasped his wrists.

As she came down from her high, he kissed her stomach before straightening. She pulled her knees together, rested her heels on the edge of the table and tried to catch her breath. Then she covered her face with her hands and laughed.

Lord Fíli leaned over her, stroking her legs. "What is it?" He smiled and placed a kiss on her knee.

She peeked at him, still hiding her open smile. "Just look at me. What am I doing?"

She allowed him to pull her up by her hands.

"Whatever you want," he said, and kissed her. She could taste a tart sweetness, kind of like raw potatoes, which she guessed was her own. His beard was wet. She pulled away.

"Sorry," she said, flushing, and wiped his chin with her hand. "You can clean your face in the tubwater."

He groaned, seemingly unwilling to move from her embrace. "I don't care about that." He tried to kiss her again.

Hanah pushed at his chest. "But I do. You're not leavin' here with that stuff on your face."

She slid off the table and fetched a washcloth to wet in the tub. He took it when she offered it to
him. She moved to the stove to heat the last bathwater. While she waited for the pan to boil she turned to him.

Lord Fíli reclined in a chair by the table, with one hand resting flat on the table, the other on his knee. He was watching her. She was aware of her naked legs, though the essentials were now covered by the long shirt once more. She prepared two cups of tea with water from a smaller kettle.

"So... how come you don't want anythin' in return?" Hanah asked.

"I'm getting plenty in return," he replied, saluting her with his tea-cup.

"You know what I mean."

He looked down into his cup.

"I would never enter a woman's house and expect her to service me." He met her gaze. "If you would like to, you may come to me, but never assume you need to. Besides, I like to make myself wait." Amusement danced in his eyes. "And I will remember your taste when I am in my own bath tonight." He fixed her with his stare while he took a drink.

Hanah had to look away then. Even though his words were nothing compared to what she had allowed him to do only moments ago, the image he conjured in her mind of his strong, naked body caressed by hot water made her blush furiously.

So he was perhaps not expecting her to, but certainly waiting for the time when she would seek him out, and was looking forward to it. He seemed to believe she would not be able to help herself, that it was only a matter of time. The thought made her stomach flutter, and at the same time the corners of her mouth twitch with barely contained mirth.

He sat there totally relaxed and confident, like it was not completely inappropriate for them to meet this way. For her to even have tea with a male who was not her family or her husband was unthinkable by the standards of her upbringing. How could he be so calm about this, like it was a common occurrence? Maybe it was for him?

"Have you...?" Hanah began. "That is—" The hissing and spluttering of boiling water interrupted her. She covered her hands with oven rags and moved the boiling pan from the heat source.

"What was that?" Lord Fíli asked.

She did not look at him as she carefully poured the hot water into the bathtub. "I was just thinkin', what you said about other women's skirts. Have you done this a lot?"

"Done what?"

She searched for the right words while she brought out a fresh towel, soap, and the bottle of scented oil from the chest in the corner. "Have you visited women like this before?"

"They have mostly visited me. When you live as long as we do, things are bound to happen."

Hanah poured some oil into the water and stirred it with her hand. "I just find it strange. I would never have thought this was viewed as normal."

"Normal—yes. Spoken about—no."

She wondered if she should wait until he left before bathing, but he did not seem to find her a
lacking hostess for occupying herself with other tasks while he was there. And they had already broken every rule of propriety she had ever been taught. With her back to him, she unbuttoned her shirt while he spoke.

"Unmarried dwarves, especially nobility, cannot be seen with different bed partners." He turned silent when she pushed the shirt off her shoulders and hung it over the back of a chair.

Hanah stepped into the tub. The hot water pinched her cold feet, but she knew it would pass soon. One end of the tub was higher than the other to rest one's back against, and the position of the tub in the room made her sit with her back to Lord Fíli.

With a scoop, she poured water over her hair. She heard his chair scrape against the stone floor. If he was leaving he could show himself out. She was not worried he would disapprove.

She reached for the soap, but it was not there.

"Let me." His voice came from behind her. She craned her neck to see him. He had moved his chair next to the tub.

Not leaving then.

His hand holding the soap dipped into the water, and after a moment he began to lather her hair and massage her scalp.

Hanah felt goose bumps along her spine and smiled.

"So how come in this long life full of . . . experience," she began, "you have never married? The main responsibility of nobility is to provide heirs, right?"

"Too busy, I guess, to bother. Thinking there's always time later. It's, eh . . . a long and complicated process."

Hanah laughed. "Yeah, I can see you're very busy."

Suddenly, a scoop of water was emptied on her head, sending suds of soap into her eyes.

"Alright," she admitted, splashing water into her face to remove the soap. "You're a very busy and important dwarf, alright?"

"Correct," was his dry reply.

"And it's graciously generous of your nobleness to take time out of your hectic day to wash my hair."

The sound of his laughter warmed her more than the water.

"What if someone would court you?" he asked.
"Do you wish to marry?" Lord Fíli asked.

Hanah thought of her attempt with Graham. She felt exhausted and dispirited by the mere thought of another courtship. She groaned, a noise of distaste.

"I don't think so," she settled—a clear understatement.

"How come?"

She wondered if she should tell him. He already knew her every secret and had not turned her away thus far.

"Tried it once. Didn't work out so well."

"What happened?"

"He found out I was poor, and broke off our engagement."

"Just for that?" He sounded astounded.

She chuckled without humour. "Why settle for me when he could marry someone else and be rich?"

"Money is the last thing you should focus on when deciding who to spend the rest of your life with."

She frowned. What was he talking about? Money was the sole reason anyone married, to keep it, or to make more—that was it.

"You and I have very different ideas of how marriage works, M'lord."

"What's your idea then?" he asked.

"Well, a man asks the family of a woman of similar birth to marry him, and they agree. After the handfasting, the woman's family will pay the man a dowry, and then she goes to live with him. She gives him many sons and he gives her a home and protection."

Lord Fíli's hands stills in her hair.

"But that doesn't make sense."

"What?"

"The lady's family give her away and their money?"

"Yeah."

"It should be the other way around."

"He should give them money?"

"Of course. How else will he show them he can take care of her and her children?"
"Well, they already know."

"How?"

"His work. His employment, or position in the town. Y'know—his status." She shrugged.

His hands began working again, though her hair was more than clean by now.

"That's just wrong," he established. "Status will not provide enough to eat, or protect her from harm. He must prove his worth. A wife is a gift to be cherished. She is the center of the hearth, an educator of children, a weaver of family bonds, the nurse who heals every wound."

He obviously had high standards to match when it came to choosing a wife. Of course he would take his time about it. His conviction was overwhelming. Hanah's eyes stung—she probably still had soap in her eyes.

"And what of compatibility?" he went on. "Does she simply agree with no thought to common values, common aims, sentiments or sensibilities?"

She did not know exactly what he meant by that, but he had clearly given it a lot of thought. It made her feel ashamed of the way she had agreed to marry Graham when he asked. He had seemed agreeable enough. He had asked about her day and picked her flowers. She knew he came from a good family. She thought it had been better to take the opportunity when it arose. Who knew if she would ever receive another offer?

The decision had been made quickly and undone as quickly. It seemed life was that way. At least the lives of men. Quick turns, up and down. Lord Fíli was a noble dwarf, he could afford to be picky.

"I guess our values are different from yours," she said in a low voice, watching water droplets fall from her fingertips into the tub. "Marriage is a business. We buy security. Buyin' a home, or buyin' children. That's how it goes, around and around."

"And like or dislike, personal desires have nothing to do with it?"

There he went talking about desire again.

"Not really. It's not about what you want, it's about what you need. One can't live off one's parents forever."

"But you don't have parents to burden, to interfere or persuade you to marry."

"No. And I will probably never marry either." Her tone was sober.

"Don't you want a companion to share joy and sorrow with, see your shared hearth fill with children? A second self to complete you? Someone who inspires you to become a better person?"

Hanah actually snorted at his words. Lord Fíli seemed to have taken his childhood lullabies and bedtime stories a little too seriously.

"I already have more than I could ever wish for. I have a home, my own business, I have Hem. I have food on the table, and I'm never alone."

"And when she grows up and wants to live her own life?"

She did not want to speak the words out loud, that Hemery would probably remain unmarried just
like Hanah. Even the thought felt like a betrayal towards Hemery.

"That's years from now," she simply dismissed.

"Years pass quickly."

He would know, would he not?

"I'll manage." She tipped her head back to rinse her hair. Then she took a washcloth and began scrubbing her arms.

When he remained silent for such a long time, she turned to look at him.

Lord Fíli still sat leaning forward in the chair right behind her, his elbows resting on his knees, his face blank.

"Do you even like me?"

The question took her off guard. His face was so serious, she wanted to assure him somehow. She did not know the name of all the things he made her feel. How to give an easy answer? She leaned on the high edge of the tub and touched his arm.

"Sure I do," she said, sounding lighthearted like she did when trying to cheer Hemery up.

He frowned and averted his gaze. Wrong answer?

How had he described it when he spoke of like and dislike? She tried again.

"I mean, I prefer you to others."

He looked up then, one inquisitive eyebrow raised in expectation. She could tell he was not satisfied.

"No one speaks to me like you do," she said.

He cracked a lopsided smile, but it faded. She continued.

"You listen to me and care about my well fare. You make me laugh, but you also make me grind my teeth—I'm not sayin' this right." She sighed, and shook her head. "I like makin' you laugh. It makes me... glad."

He covered her hand with his own. "And do you miss me when I'm gone?"

Hanah thought about it. She had missed her mother when she died, but that was such a long time ago. She hardly remembered what she looked like. She had worried for her, wondered where she had gone. She had worried for her father whenever he left home, but she had always known he would return. And she had never been a day without Hemery since she was born, so she never missed her.

"I don't think so," she said, uncertain.

Definitely the wrong answer. He looked down at their joined hands.

"I'm not worried about you because I know you're safe in the mountain with your guards and your sword. And I know I'll see you again soon, but..."
Lord Fíli searched her face, waiting for her to go on.

"I never want you to leave when you're here."

His expression softened, a hint of a smile on his lips. He leaned in for a watery kiss. Water droplets still clung to her face.

"I worry about you," he said.

They had talked about this before. She shrugged. "Well, don't."

"How can I not when I'm safely locked in the mountain, and you're not?"

She smiled and kissed him.

"I'm fine," she said, letting go of his hand. She turned and picked up her washcloth. He sat back, drinking his tea and watched Hanah as she bathed.

It was not until she had dried off and dressed in fresh clothes that she told him to leave.

"You said you didn't want me to go," he protested.

"That's not the same as needing you to leave so I can get some work done. You'll just distract me."

She ushered him to the door.

"Aye," he agreed, grabbing her waist. "I am very good at that." He pulled her close and buried his nose in her still wet hair. "My gifts smell good on you."

"Goodbye, M'lord." She kissed him soundly one last time before opening the door.

As if suddenly becoming aware of the existence of the outside world by the sunshine hitting his face, he seemed to sober and searched for something in his pocket.

"I was distracted last time. I forgot your payment," he said, bringing forth a purse for her to take.

To be honest, Hanah had forgotten it herself. She had plenty left from last time, so she had not needed it yet.

"Oh—of course. Thank you."

Lord Fíli did not linger, but gave her one last smile. "Goodbye, Hanah." He bowed his head and strode out.

Hanah closed the door after him and stood immobile for a moment. She felt the weight of gold in her hand, but she did not even open it to see how much was there.

A strange feeling creeped up on her to lay heavy over her shoulders. Something to do with the purse in her hand. Something to do with the frequency of their encounters. It disturbed her that she only saw Lord Fíli because they had business together. They were not in each other's natural company, so to speak. Somehow, she felt that the gold in her hand would always stand between them. The thing he had and she did not. The thing he gave her more of than her services were worth.

Because the gold was only for the coats, was it not?
After class was over, Hemery did not go straight home like she usually did. She went to the library which Lord Fili had promised she could use. But this time, she was not looking for books on sword play or dragons.

The thick door boomed closed behind her. She loved the smell in here. Paper, dust, and burning pine from the fireplace in the middle of the room. The mantle was higher than she was tall and open two ways. Personally, she thought it was stupid to have an open fire in a library. She never went near it. She preferred the lanterns, gaslight encased in glass that you could carry as you searched for books along the shelves.

Hemery was not very good at reading yet. She knew all the letters, but it took a long time. She even knew some Khuzdul, though she was not supposed to hear those lessons.

She began walking along the wall of books, holding the lantern high. The order was alphabetical, to some extent, in terms of field of study. Honestly, she did not know where to start so she just kept walking, reading what she could on the cracked, burnt, ripped backs of the ancient volumes. All the while spelling the syllables out to herself, but softly—she knew how well sound travelled in the gigantic room.

Once, she had dropped a particularly thick tome from the sixth shelf. Its contact with the floor had sounded like a thunderclap. A grumpy guard had poked his head in, demanding to know if she was attempting to wake the ghost of Smaug with that racket.

Hemery had apologized, but only because she knew he would not leave unless she did. It would not help if she maintained that it was not her fault you had to climb a ladder from the Second Age to reach the books, and that the library had been designed by the most dimwitted dwarf. And it would definitely not help if she asked whether the architectural genius possibly could have been a blood relation to the guard who found it in good taste to take The Dragon's name in vain within the mountain?

Besides, who could ever have thought it was a good idea to build a library in Erebor upwards? They were dwarves. Not exactly known for their tall reach.

So Hemery was careful to keep her voice down when she walked the stone floor of the library, reading the backs, but it did not help.

"Stop that singing, girl," a low rumble sounded from somewhere down the room.

Hemery whirled around. In the light of the fireplace, she could see someone moving in one of the chairs there.

A mass of long, dark hair hung over broad, fur covered shoulders. It was the sweltering last days of summer outside, but in the mountain the temperature was never-changing. She guessed this dwarf did not get out much.

"I'm not singin', I'm readin'," she explained.

"Stop your reading then. This is a place for silence."

"It's a library. I thought it was a place for readin'," she countered.

"And what's your place, girl? Do you know it?" he snapped, the baritone echoing down the hall like a war horn. Hemery froze.

"What are you doing here, anyway? This room is private."
"Lord Fíli said I was welcome to use the library whenever I wished because I'm learnin' how to read."

"Lord Fíli never mentioned anything about letting stray children of men be given learning in Erebor. Aren't you a bit old to be illiterate?"

She curved her lip. She did not know what the word meant, but she could guess. "I didn't know there was an age limit."

Suddenly, he rose from his chair, approaching her with long, heavy strides. He was tall for a dwarf, and a lot taller than her. She had to force herself to stay put. As he moved, his black coat swayed open, revealing a white fur lining the inside. Hemery knew that coat.

"What's your name, girl?" He stopped a few feet away.

"Hemery Skinner. Me and my sis—" She corrected herself. "My sister and I made that coat you're wearing."

"Is that so?"

"Black calf skin, water-resistant, mother of pearl beads. The loose rabbit fur on the inside makes it warmer because air can move between the skins, but it was only made that way because Hanah didn't have time to fasten them all the way before it was sold."

Right as she said it, Hemery knew Hanah would not like for her to tell their customers things like that.

"I have heard of your sister."

If she thought the dwarf would elaborate on this statement, she was mistaken. After a long scrutinizing gaze, he turned to go back to his chair.

"Now find what you're looking for, quietly, and leave."

"I'm not sure, sir, where—"

He stopped in his tracks and groaned exasperated. "What do you need?"

"A book about dwarves."

He stared blankly at her. Had he not heard her? He must have. She explained further. " Customs, traditions and things. We're probably going to live by the mountain a while. I'd like to know these things, you know, so I won't accidentally offend anyone."

Perhaps it was too late for that. No matter, it was not true anyway, but it was what Hanah would have used as an excuse. He would not help her if he knew the real reason she needed the book. If he knew, they would be having a completely different conversation, much less pleasant than this.

At last, he unglued his feet from the floor and crossed the expanse of the long room. At first, she thought he was leaving, but then he stopped somewhere in the shadows before returning, holding something. He stopped by the fireplace, but held the item towards her as if offering it to her.

Hemery came up to him and closed her finger around the slim book. He did not let go.
"It's merely a loan," he said.

She nodded.

"You may return it tomorrow. I need peace and quiet. This is the only place in the mountain where people do not disturb me with endless, arbitrary pursuits and petitions—or so I thought." He released the book. "At least few others seem to know what a library is, much less go look for it."

The dwarf sat down heavily in his chair.

Hemery thought there was an insult thrown at her in there somewhere, but she ignored it. Tomorrow was the equinox.

"M'lord, there's the celebration tomorrow—"

He scoffed in derision. "The blasted celebration." He rubbed his forehead. "I could do without constant reminders of the days of my life I would rather bloody well forget, much less celebrate. Thank Mahal they're growing sparse. Used to be every year, now every fifth year. The greedy beast is still robbing us from beyond the grave. Very well, return the day after tomorrow."

"Thank you," Hemery said, turning to go.

"And don't tell anyone you saw me in here, either," he called after her.

She paused by the door. She could not tell anyone even if she wished to, he had not introduced himself.

"Saw who, M'lord?"

"That's right," he settled the matter with a bark. He leaned back in his chair, like a calming bull slumping in his stall, tired after banging his head against the bars of his cell.

She tried to close the door even more carefully than usual, but it still boomed as if a cave troll was knocking on it go gain entrance. Hemery winced and ran straight home.
"If you don't get out soon you'll look like a big prune," Hanah said.

Hemery was lying in the bathtub with her head resting on the edge, holding her book high to catch the light from the candles on the kitchen table. She had been in there a long time, and begged her sister to reheat the kettle twice before Hanah said it was enough bathing for one night.

"It's getting late, and we still need to empty the damn thing before bed."

Hanah sat at the table, sewing beads onto the last coat.

"How come you changed your mind? About the tub?" Hemery asked, not moving her eyes away from the pages of the book.

"Lord Fíli is a very stubborn dwarf. And he made it very clear that he was not goin' to stop givin' us things, so we might as well enjoy it while it lasts. He'll soon find somethin' else to amuse himself with, other than comin' here to tease and make fun of us little, poor people."

Hemery looked at her sister then.

"Is that why he does it?"

Hanah liked to think he did it because he cared about them and wanted them to be comfortable. But he was so different from everyone she had ever met, she could not calculate why he did the things he did, why he sought her company, and why he cared. He had an entire mountain full of people of his own kind who could amuse him and warm his bed, should he wish it. She looked up from her needle.

"Who knows what the dwarf lord is thinking?" She shrugged.

Hemery returned to her book. It had taken a while, but it was becoming easier to read. It was like a puzzle she had begun to piece together, and the more she read, the clearer the picture became in her mind. But reading in the dim light made her sleepy.

"Be careful not to drop the book in the water," Hanah advised.

Hemery froze. She could just imagine the look on the stern dwarf's face if she would return the book to the library all wrinkly and damp.

She turned, aimed, and threw it out of harms way on top of the table. Then she stepped out of the tub.

"No training tonight?" Hanah asked.

"Dwalin is meeting his brother about something important, and he thinks I'll spy on them."

"What?" Hanah's head jerked up.

Hemery shrugged. "Not really. He just said I'd better keep my ears to myself so I'll not get any fancy ideas, whatever that means."

Hanah smiled. Her little sister had become very fond of Dwalin, as had Hanah. It made Hanah relax somewhat to know they had a grown male around, for safety of course, but also that other
kind of guidance a man could give which Hanah in her young years and limited experience could not. Hanah thought it was especially beneficial for Hemery to have a male dwarf to look up to when growing up in a kingdom dominated by dwarves.

Hanah had the deepest respect for Dwalin. He had a rough exterior, but she knew he had good principles, values, and a code of honour he lived by as a warrior. And some strong ideas about privacy which Hemery was bending to her will, slowly, but surely.

"He just wants to draw a line in the sand," Hanah said.

"What sand?"

"The invisible boundary which separates his life and ours. He wants to keep his privacy, some space where you cannot enter."

Hemery frowned.

"You are over there every day," Hanah explained. "He'll want some time where he can sit in peace, and smoke and drink with his brother and feel like a man." She adopted a serious expression and lowered her voice in imitation of Dwalin and his accent.

"But he's not a man—"

"You know what I mean, Hem," Hanah interrupted.

Hemery dried off and wrapped herself in one of the large fluffy towels Lord Fíli had sent them. She sat at the table opposite Hanah.

"Is Dwalin a good teacher?" Hanah asked.

Hemery thought of how sore she had been every day for the first two weeks of her 'training.'

"He's horrible."

Hanah raised her eyebrows at her sister.

"But he's good, 'cause I'm learning a lot," Hemery continued. "He's horrible and good. How can that be one person?"

"People are complicated. You know you hate me sometimes, but you love me at the same time?"

"I never hate you."

Hanah laughed. "Remember that every mornin' for the rest of your life when I try to wake you up."

"Do you like Lord Fíli?" Hemery asked.

Hanah tried to show no reaction as she focused on her beads, but Hemery noticed how her shoulders tensed.

"What do you mean?"

"You know, like mother and father liked each other."

"Mother and father were married for over ten years," Hanah dismissed. "I hardly know Lord Fíli, and even if I did—" She stopped herself to gather her thoughts. "It doesn't matter, because he is a
dwarf lord, our employer, and I am... what I am."

Hemery did not recognize Hanah's tone. Usually, when trying to make Hemery understand something important, she would open her eyes wide and look straight at Hemery, as if she would be able to read the truth in her eyes. And her words would be structured and logical. At the moment, Hanah did neither.

"But do you like him?" Hemery asked, determined to have an answer.

Hanah sighed and her hands stilled on the coat, but she still would not look at Hemery. After a long moment she spoke.

"He is the kindest, most intelligent, considerate, and amusing person I have ever met."

And handsome, fascinating, intriguing, alluring, captivating... Hanah's thoughts spun further. She could not make them stop now that she had begun describing him, but she forced herself to not utter anymore.

"And does that mean—"

"That's all," Hanah settled.

Hemery knew Hanah would not say those things about Lord Fíli if they were not true, but she did not know why Hanah was so reluctant to talk about it. Hemery knew Lord Fíli had been coming to see Hanah. He did not need to collect his orders in person, but he always did. Dwalin had even said Lord Fíli sometimes left their house empty-handed.

If Hanah was made uncomfortable by his attentions, she would have said something about it, or stopped him from coming. She would have found some clever way to avoid him, meeting him in the market, or making Dwalin help her find some alternative. But she did not. She had even accepted his gifts.

Hemery wondered if Hanah encouraged Lord Fíli's visits.

Hanah reached for the book on the table. She ran her hands over the ink, as if she could soak up the words' meaning through her fingertips. She flickered through a few pages.

"What are you reading about?"

Hemery bit her lip. "Dwarven customs," she answered simply.

"Hmm." Hanah ran her eyes over the cover, and pointed at a letter in the title. "I know that one. It's the first letter of our names."

"H," Hemery supplied.

Hanah frowned. "Is it?"

"It's pronounced ha," Hemery explained, breathing it silently. "But it's called H."

Hanah put the book down. "Perhaps you could read it to me sometime?"

"Sure."

"Now put some clothes on. That tub isn't goin' to empty itself." Hanah put the coat and the needle aside and stood to fetch two water buckets.
Hemery waited outside the corridor to Lord Fíli's study. Not near the entrance, she did not like the look of those guards. They looked extra glaring and menacing today. She guessed they had a lot to glare at.

From the autumn equinox until Durin's Day, the jubilee of the return to Erebor was celebrated. People came from all over Middle Earth to celebrate and show their respect to the dwarven kingdom. Dwalin had explained how the festival was an opportunity for other heads of state to improve their connections with Erebor, set up trade routes, negotiate, bargain, show good will, give token presents, or simply ask favours.

This was the twentieth anniversary of the dwarves' return to the Lonely Mountain, and it was a particularly big festival, beginning in September and lasting until October. There was a lot of eating and drinking. Scenes were played out, describing of the defeat over The Dragon, and there would be music and dancing going on almost every day.

Over night, the market in Dale had exploded and stretched down the streets of the entire city, including hundreds and hundreds more people than usual. The stalls of products, food, and drink flowed seamlessly from Dale to Erebor, and Hemery had to elbow her way through the anteroom to get inside. People walked so slowly.

It was almost noon. She had been to class despite it being the first day of the festival. According to Master Ori, one could have fun and study at the same time. Hemery liked class, but she would trade it in a heartbeat for a feast like the one underway below. And she doubted Master Ori would have the guts to state the same thing to the poor souls working in the kitchens this day.

Hemery knew Hanah wanted her home as soon as possible. They had a lot to do, especially during the festival, but she needed to do this first. It was a matter of honour.

She did not have to wait long.

Lord Fíli and his brother, flanked by guards, came from the direction of the council halls, where all nobles seemed to ‘work.’ As far as Hemery could tell, that just meant they sat at a table talking around each other.

She stepped out right into their path.

"Lord Fíli, I would have words." She spoke clearly, holding her chin high.

Two of the guards placed themselves between Hemery and the brothers, their spears crossed in front of them. The action would have been more impressive had Hemery not been perfectly able to duck and slip under them.

"Stand down," Lord Fíli commanded in a strangely flat, but loud voice Hemery had never heard him use before. The guards stepped aside as Lord Fíli came forward.

"What is it?" His voice was lower and softer now that he addressed Hemery. "Is something wrong?" He looked genuinely concerned.

"That depends. I want to speak with you."

He frowned. "Very well." He ushered her toward the corridor. "Go on, brother. I'll meet you shortly."

Lord Kíli's eyes widened in astonishment and he threw his hands out, palms up, as if to convey his
complete disbelief of the statement. "But we were going to go do that thing!"

"We will. Later, Kíli."

"Do you think I'm bloody backwards or something? You always say that and then we never do. I'm not falling for that one again." Lord Kíli followed them through the corridor, while the guards remained outside the entrance.

Hemery was shown to a large room with a fireplace, a desk, and tapestries and bookshelves lining the walls. It had to be Lord Fíli's study Hanah had spoken of. Lord Kíli went straight to the sideboard where he poured himself a drink, pulling the cork out of the bottle with his teeth. Lord Fíli turned to Hemery.

"Will you sit?" he offered her politely.

"No thanks."

"So what is it you wish to discuss?"

Hemery glanced at Lord Kíli's back. This was a rather sensitive topic, but if he did not mind his brothers presence when she had specifically asked to speak to only Lord Fíli, then fine.

"I know you've been coming to see my sister."

Lord Fíli frowned. "Aye. We do business. But you know this."

"I mean, you've been meeting her in secret."

Lord Kíli slowly turned around to watch them, so slowly it was as if he considered his brother and the girl wild animals he did not wish to startle by alerting them to his presence. His eyebrows had shot up to his hairline, the cup in his hand all but forgotten. Lord Fíli did not reply, but he grew a little pink beneath his beard.

Hemery did not want to be more informative than that about the circumstances of the meetings. The worst of her accusations were based on guesses, after all, but she counted on him to give something away. Anyway, even if nothing had happened between them, his behavior was still inappropriate.

"If you don't want to make this more painful than it needs to be, then admit it," she said.

Lord Fíli had the decency to look away.

"Wait, a minute," Lord Kíli piped up, a lopsided smile on his face. "You didn't—?" He peeked at his brother's averted face. "Oh, suck an elf, you did!" Lord Kíli suddenly guffawed.

"Just don't, Kee," Lord Fíli said, frowning. "Not now."

Hemery was staring at them, as if they both had a lesser than average intelligence to skull ratio.

"I knew it! What happened to 'oh, no, I'll be a perfect gentleman this time'," Kíli screwed up his eyebrows and spoke in a exaggerated posh voice to impersonate his brother. He could hardly hold back his laughter. "Class act, brother. That's why I was supposed to come with you, remember? You begged me to not leave you alone with her." Kíli snorted. "Fat lot of good that did—"

"Will you shut up?" Lord Fíli exclaimed, finally turning to glare at his brother.
Kíli ignored him, focused on Hemery now.

"How did you know? I didn't even know, and I'm his brother, he tells me everything. Well, he used to."

His attention bounced back and forth like he was having two conversations at the same time. Kíli crossed his arms in indignation towards at Fíli.

"I noticed there was something bugging you these last few weeks, but I thought it was just the wild oats trying to break out of that frustrated, blue cage of theirs."

Kíli pointed a curious finger at Hemery.

"Did Hanah tell you herself, or are you some kind of witch?"

Kíli peered closely at her.

"She didn't tell me anythin'." Hemery stood straight with her shoulders back like Dwalin had taught her, ignoring Kíli's close scrutiny. "She keeps it to herself, like she's ashamed."

Lord Fíli met her eyes then, his expression troubled.

"I'm not very fond of you," Hemery said. "I think you do what you want, and everything you do is for your own gain, like every other man, and I don't think Hanah needs any of you—never have. That being said—"

She paused and took a strengthening breath.

"I demand you offer marriage to Hanah."

"You what?" Kíli burst out, surprised.

Hemery had guessed what had happened with Hanah and Graham. She knew they were supposed to be married, then he broke it off, and shortly afterwards Hanah had lost a child. Hemery was not unaware of the procedure of childmaking. She had seen enough calving at Blackwater to figure it out. And she would be damned if she let Hanah be used that way again, and forced to go through even one more of those painful, bloody days.

Hanah was under a lot of stress, from their journey here, to the demanding orders, to making sure they were both clothed, fed, and had a warm bed to sleep in. She was exhausted, and obviously not thinking clearly since she allowed this nonchalant dwarf to seduce her. Well, it would not be tolerated while Hemery drew breath. She needed to take care of Hanah.

"It's what should happen in these circumstances, and it will happen this time. It's also what your plan have been all along, you just haven't told her."

Here Lord Fíli found his tongue. "What would you know of my intentions?"

"It's all in here," Hemery said triumphantly, showing him the library book.

He snatched it from her hand and leafed through it. *The Ethics, Morality, and Virtue of Dwarves.* It was a very slim book.

Hemery went on. "It says all about how dwarves show their wealth to the one they court. They give them presents, food, rare special things to show how good they are."
"This I remember," Kíli said to his brother. He began counting on his fingers. "You ordered that bathtub for her, and sent her paint for her sketches. Oh—and one of those funny, timekeeping clocks from the Shire."

Kíli looked at Hemery apologetically.

"I tried to tell him you wouldn't want it. They say it's supposed to help you plan your time, but all it does is tell you exactly how late you are to everything—with annoying accuracy. Completely useless. And that weird *tik-tok-tik-tok*—"

"I know, it drives me bonkers," Hemery reluctantly agreed, clearly unimpressed by the fancy present. "It's in a drawer in the shop and it still keeps us up at night."

"So, yeah, you're busted, Fee," Kíli concluded and returned to his drink.

Lord Fíli stared daggers at his brother, crumpled the book in his large hand, and began to pace restlessly.

"You will propose to her," Hemery stated, "and if she agrees, everythin' will work out. But if you don't, and you keep meetin' her in secret—I will make sure you never see her again." Her eyes bore into him. "And don't think I can't," she added between clenched teeth.

"Oy, just hold up a moment!" Lord Fíli stopped his pacing and met her glare. "I don't appreciate being accused and dictated to like this."

He paused, taking a breath.

"Yes, it's true. I have been seeing your sister, but I have not dishonoured her." His eyebrows furrowed and his eyes grew dark.

"You don't have to. It's enough that you're seen goin' to our house time and time again for people to talk."

"I don't care," he dismissed with a wave of his hand and continued to pace restlessly. "Let them talk what they will. They wouldn't dare slander her, I'll banish anyone who tries."

"It won't matter. They'd all know that she's your—"

"*Do not speak it!*" Suddenly he was in front of her, a forbidding finger pointed in her face.

They stared at each other. Hemery did not need to expand her argument, she had made her point.

Lord Fíli exhaled and his shoulders slumped as he turned toward the fireplace.

"I don't think she'll have me," he said after a long moment. "She doesn't think she will ever marry, because of her station, because she doesn't deem it's worth it, because she doesn't have to."

"Well, that's true, isn't it?" Kíli said. "She doesn't have to. She can live the rest of her life as a respectable citizen. Absorbed in her work. It's the dwarven way. Admirable, I would say."

"Of course," Fíli replied. "She has proven that she can manage perfectly well on her own, but... she's vulnerable. Much more than she thinks. She is content, for now, when the relief from the escape from Blackwater is still fresh in her mind. She's grateful for what she has, but will not reach for more. When Hemery grows up and have her own life, Hanah will be alone, and even her short years will seem like an eternity."
Fíli stared into the fire, pensive.

"She's young. She cannot see it. She is without desire. Doesn't want anything, doesn't need anything. I don't think she wants me enough to say yes. And if she would agree, it would be out of a sense of obligation, not because she actually wished it."

Hemery rolled her eyes behind his back. "Poor you."

Kíli choked on his drink, hiding a smile behind his hand. Fíli turned to frown at her.

"You got yourself into this mess. This is the way out," Hemery said. "It's what you want, right?"

He looked back into the flames. "Aye."

"Then you will *ask* her. Tell her all those things you just said. If I can get it, she will too. Just tell her the truth."

Hemery snatched the book from his hand and turned to leave, but paused by the door.

"And no more 'visits' until you do," she added.
Hanah could kick herself, she was so angry. She had been busy in the shop all day with people coming in to buy shoelaces, belts, or bracelets before the celebration of the equinox started, so she had not had time to deliver the last coats to Lord Fíli like she promised. The one job that could actually kill her entire business if she screwed it up—and she was late. All because Hemery had attended class instead of the shop. Hanah should never have allowed it.

Though, honestly, she was mostly angry at herself for getting distracted by Lord Fíli. When he was not in her home demanding her attention, he was in her head, doing the same.

Hanah's stomach fluttered at the thought of seeing him again, that she might do so in a few moments. He would say something to let her know he had been thinking about her, and she would make him laugh. He would admire her work and approve, to a degree. Then he would make suggestions for improvements, even though he had overseen the whole procedure and never once interfered. Or he would comment on something else, her health, her education—or both—and imply she should take better care of herself.

Hanah gritted her teeth, but assured herself he would not demand changes on the coats. It would be fine, really. He would pay what he owed and maybe place a new order if she was lucky.

She was grateful for the small surge of annoyance. It would make it easier for her to keep her head when she saw him, and not get so carried away by his smiles and warm hands.

Lord Fíli had visited her on his own twice now, but she still could not be sure of what to expect when she arrived. He was always smiles and teasing, it made her uncertain. Every time, the confidence she had gained from their last encounter faded and had to be rebuilt when they met, like nothing had happened. Well, not nothing. The tension was always there. It made her shy. After all, she had not known him very long.

It was early evening. The sun crawled over the horizon, clinging its orange fingers to the mountain top. She sun warmed Hanah's back as she entered Erebor.

Like last time, no one stopped her on her way to Lord Fíli's study. But, like before, the statue like guards followed her movements with their eyes from their positions at every doorway. She kept her steps determined and her chin high.

There was no answer when she knocked on the door by the red tapestry, but she knew he expected her and she was not about to ask the guards to take the coats, so Hanah entered Lord Fíli's chambers anyway.

The fire crackled merrily in the fireplace, but there was no other sign of life. The door to the adjacent rooms was open, and she could see the other doors were as well. She walked through to the wardrobe room.

Someone had been in a hurry to dress this morning, she noticed, or had been searching for something, because the wardrobes were gaping and some clothes littered the floor.

Hanah unpacked the coats and hung them on unused hangers. They had become a bit flat and bent from being rolled and pressed together in her bag, so she spent a while tugging and bending them back into shape, and triple checking them for any flaws.

Suddenly she heard a sound. A faint noise from somewhere. She froze in her movements. Had
Lord Fíli returned? No, there were no footsteps.

The noise was repeated. A voice, Hanah realized. It came from the third door, the wetroom. But it was not speaking to her. It was not speaking at all, actually. It was more like a whimper of pain.

It was not Hanah's place to interfere in others' homes, but she was there, and something may be wrong. She thought she might be able to help, especially since this was Lord Fíli's rooms. But as she heard the sound a third time, she could tell it was a female voice.

Hanah pushed open the door to the bathroom, carefully. Everything in there looked exactly as she had seen it before. It was empty and the lanterns unlit. The door on the other side was open a few inches, casting a ray of warm light on the floor towards her. She stepped silently on the marble in her soft leather shoes to glance through the crack.

The light was dim, but it looked like a bedroom much like the one by the wardrobe room. A woman was lying on her back on the furs. She seemed to be in a state of high fever or a nightmare, a moan broke from her lips, rising and falling, like waves against the shore. Her legs were bent, her feet resting flat on the bed.

Suddenly, her dress shifted, billowed as if moved by a wind, or a snake coiling between her skin and her skirt. Ice water flooded Hanah's veins and she drew a startled breath, before she realized the woman was not alone. Not a snake, but hands which were not hers appeared on the woman's naked hips, and in the shadows next to the bed, Hanah made out a shape.

The ice which had not subsided returned like the tide to flood her chest, as she recognized the scene in front of her. It was an exact copy of her and Lord Fíli's actions, only it had been on her kitchen table.

Lord Fíli?

The woman's breathing sped up until she seemed to almost choke on the air, gasping and writhing on the bed. Hanah wanted to leave, to run from the room and forget she ever saw any of it, forget how she could connect it to her own experience, burn out her eyes, vomit away the memory of her taste on his lips, but she could not look away.

Through the narrow crack in the door, Hanah saw the woman calm and quieten down. As she sat up, Hanah recognized the dwarven woman with auburn hair. It was Sethie, who had served Lord Fíli's dinner. The dinner she had shared with him.

Sethie adjusted her skirts over her knees and suddenly yelped.

"Stop it." Her voice was light in the reprimand. Her laugh mingled with a male one and her companion came into view as he stood.

The first thing Hanah noticed were the unruly waves of dark hair on his head. A wave of relief washed over her, and she put a hand over her mouth to stop any sound. The ice in her chest drained away, leaving her an empty shaking shell. She felt light-headed.

It was only Kíli.

He came to stand behind Sethie, kissing the back of her neck and squeezed her breasts over her tunic while she attempted to fix her clothes. He was only wearing trousers and boots. Dark hair covered his arms, chest and stomach, coming together in smooth lines in the middle. He even had some on his back, which was broad like an ox's.
He said something low in Sethie's ear. She slipped out of his grasp.

"Good evening, Prince Kíli," she laughed before leaving.

As soon as the door closed, Kíli began untying the fastenings of his trousers, and Hanah was released from her spell. She hurriedly turned to leave as quickly and unnoticed as she had entered Lord Fíli's rooms, which she now realized were joined to those of his brother.

In her haste, her shirt sleeve caught on the handle of a water pitcher. She saved it before it tumbled to the floor, but while trying to find her balance her foot kicked the stand on which it stood. The metal feet scraped unforgivingly against the stone floor with a grating hiss.

"Fee?" Kíli called from beyond the door.

Hanah hurried across the room on quick feet, snatched her pack from the floor in the wardrobe room, and shot through the rooms towards the exit. Her hand closed around the door handle.

"Hanah?" Kíli's voice came from behind her.

She froze, breathed, and turned. Lord Kíli watched her from the other side of the room.

"M'lord," she managed to squeak.

Lord Kíli seemed completely unbothered by his bare torso and came closer, a curious expression on his face. Hanah's face, however, burned hot with embarrassment and she looked away.

"I was just hangin' Lord Fíli's coats in his wardrobe and. . .was just leaving."

He looked behind him towards the wardrobe room.

"Ah," he said, smirking. He rubbed his fingertips on his brow, and the smirk turned into a smile. "Never had an audience before. Except maybe that once..." He looked thoughtful.

"I swear I didn't mean to—" Hanah shut her eyes tightly, as if to erase the memory of the sight by refusing to look at him now. "I was just there and then I heard a noise and I didn't know what was goin' on until... I'm so sorry, M'lord."

He laughed. "Relax." He dismissed her apology with a wave. "You'd think you had witnessed a crime or something. It's perfectly normal."

"Normal, M'lord?" She glanced at him.

"To enjoy a female in the afternoon," he shrugged, carefree. He lit up and continued. "As part of the celebration of the equinox, if you will. It would not be the first time, nor the last I daresay, a dwarf have been caught with his hand in the jar of sweets, so to speak."

Hanah flushed, and stuttered. "I—I really wouldn't know."

"It's no big deal," he assured her.

"So, you and Sethie...?" she began uncertainly.

"Have an understanding," he filled in and smiled.

"An understanding, as in... an engagement?"
"No, no." He searched for the words. "A... temporary, mutually beneficial arrangement."

Hanah's cheeks flared hot once more. Was she one of those—how was it Dwalin had said it?

"Is she," she lowered her voice, "a lady of... pleasure?"

"No, dear Hanah. We simply enjoy each other's company, physically, from time to time. Neither has been promised anything, not money nor marriage. I don't know about Miss Sethie, but I do it because I want to. And I can," he added, shrugging.

His revelation struck her chord in a bad way. It sounded far too familiar and left a foul taste in her mouth. Hanah had not thought much about it, but comparing her situation to Sethie's now, she did not like what she saw.

"Are you not worried it will get complicated? That she might think your relationship is something more?"

"I'm no paragon of virtue, but I'm no liar either. I don't make promises I don't intend to keep and if they want to put me on a throne of roses and moonlight wishes, that's their choice."

Lord Kili made a very good point. If no promises were made, there was no reason to think he did anything wrong. And Hanah had not been under the impression that Lord Fili had any plans at all for the two of them. Of course not. Not when she was what she was, and he was... What had Sethie said to Kili?

Prince Kili.

But that could just as well be a saying, an expression. An exaggerated joke between a woman and her employer with whom she has an open, casual, physical relationship with—surely?

Hanah knew there were princes in Erebor. They were nephews of King Thorin Oakenshield. Two of them. Brothers, to be precise. Now Hanah grew light-headed for a whole new reason.

She tried to view the situation from an outside perspective. Had she actually just seen a prince of Erebor in a sexual situation with one of his servants? Lord Kili—Prince Kili—could put her in chains, banished, or... she did not know what, but certainly something worse than that for even implying such a thing, and she had seen it! And he knew!

Hanah's stomach flipped.

And she herself had been in the same exact situation with his brother.

Double flip.

This was what they did. Princes of Erebor could do what they wished. And obviously did, judging by what Kili had just said. He had enjoyed women before. Them he said. As in several. Many. And to be completely honest, Fili had told her as much himself.

Hanah met Kili's gaze head on, to show she was as unaffected by the conversation as possible.

"You make a good point. Can't argue with that." She nodded and tried to smile. "Well, I'll not disturb you any longer." She opened the door and stepped out, but swung it open again. "Sorry, again," she threw into the room.

Lord Kili laughed. "Always a pleasure, Miss Hanah."
Hanah did not go home straight away. She walked through the halls of Erebor, she did not know how long. It was not until she heard the blowing of horns up ahead that she raised her head to see where she was.

She was in the middle of a crowd of people, dwarves and men, who moved slowly together along a big corridor, like logs on a river, towards the tall opening to the throne room.

Of course, the celebration. She was invited. All crafters working for the jubilars were invited. As were key members of the merchant's guild, the blacksmiths guild, and the masons who were working on the new and improved Erebor. The restoration was still going, twenty years after the dwarves' return to the mountain. The rest of the citizens of Erebor and Dale celebrated in their homes, at the Inn's, or in the streets.

The autumn equinox was the start of the twenty year jubilee of the return to Erebor. The opening ceremony was just beginning.

There was some kind of music in the air unlike any Hanah had ever heard before. Horns sounded, low and resounding as if from somewhere far away, from deep in the mountain. She could feel the vibrations in her chest. Muted drums rolled like thunder on a distant horizon. Sharper horns and trumpets joined in, creating a wall of sound from the lowest to the highest note, moving up and down, passing each other, merging into new patterns. A rhythm of metal clashing against each other echoed like hammers in a forge.

Hanah was drowning in the beautiful sound. Slowly, she walked around the crowd, behind the pillars that rose along the sides, trying to find the source of the sound. Every other pillar marked the entrance to more rooms and halls connected to the throne room. The whole city was like a huge labyrinth. Aside from guards around every corner, she could see nothing of the instruments or those who played. Perhaps they were on the balconies overhead which she could not see.

The last note of the music faded and died in the expanse of the halls. On the platform at the far end of the room, a procession of dwarves appeared from a side door. Four came to stand to the right of the throne, five to the left, and three in front of the thrones in the middle.

Hanah felt her stomach do that thing again. She had been stressed out of her mind all day to finish the order. In combination with her more than awkward discussion with Kíli, it left her nerves completely frayed.

She could not make out the princes faces, but she saw that one was dark and one was fair.

A dwarf dressed in what Hanah had come to know as the official uniform of the royal guard, black tunic and trousers with a white banner covering his torso picturing a mountaintop with a star above it, turned to the crowd from his place on the platform. The crowd stilled.

"Citizens and comrades of Erebor. King Thorin welcomes you to the twentieth celebration of the rebirth of the Lonely Mountain."

He raised his spear and let it fall to the floor with a bang.

Then King Thorin began to speak, a rumbling growl of a voice which Hanah paid little mind. In the shadows of the pillars and the other guests, she crept closer to the platform to get a better look at the princes.

When she reached the last pillar, she thought she saw the fair prince turn his head in her direction. She quickly ducked behind the black stone column.
What was she doing? Hanah dug her nails into the palms of her closed fists. She was invited, she should not be embarrassed to have a good view of the jubilars. But she could not help it.

Slowly, she looked around the pillar. Inch by inch, the platform came back into view. There was King Thorin finishing his speech.

"...let us not remember the beast who plagued this land, but the people who survived it."

An ear deafening roar of cheers and applause erupted from the audience as Hanah peeked at the king and his nephews. When others around her brought their hands up to clap and wave, she used her hands to cover her mouth in astonishment. She stared.

It was him. It was them, both of them. Prince Fíli and Prince Kíli.

How could she have spoken to them so many times and never realized who they were? She cursed her own lack of observation.

Then again, she had been very busy all summer. She had hardly taken the time to talk to anyone besides her employer, Dwalin, and Hemery. She barely exchanged pleasantries about the weather with the butcher, and definitely did not trade gossip at the bakers. How would she know anything about politics or high members of government in Erebor, much less what the royal family looked like?

Well, for one thing, he could have told her! Lord Fíli. How many times had she spoken the words? Why had he not corrected her? That was why his brother and mother always seemed so bemused whenever she said his name. They must have thought she was a half-wit.

What must he have thought? Probably had a hearty laugh about it, listening to her make a fool out of herself, talking to him like she had—talking back like she had. She never would have risen to his baits, she never would have given him cheek, had she known he was a damned prince of Erebor.

Stupid. She could hit her head bloody against the stone column.

She would have been more careful. She would have walked on eggshells. She would not have been so familiar, so honest. And she would not have kissed him or let him do any of...those things he had done.

Anger rose in Hanah.

And he should not have done it! He should not have spread her on the table in her cottage, played with her like she was some flimsy shepherdess he had found and taken in from the road side. He should not have made her think he cared about her.

Now Hanah grew angry at herself. Her eyes stung.

Of course, she had not thought they would...marry or anything. That would have been ridiculous. He had not made her think that. But she realized now, in this very moment, that she had hoped it had been something other than a temporary, mutually beneficial arrangement.

It had not entered her mind before just how replaceable and insignificant she truly was. One of them. One of his women.

Hanah remembered Graham. He had picked her because he thought she could add to his fortune, he had shared her bed, and disappeared, still leaving her feeling like she was the one who was false. It would not be fair to compare Fíli to Graham. Fíli had not promised anything. Any fancy about his
character or their relationship were totally weaved together by her, and her alone. She had known it
would lead to complications, and she had received him anyway . . . because she had wanted it. She
still wanted it. She wanted him.

Would Fíli be pleased to know she had finally allowed herself to want something?

Hot tears escaped her eyes, which she quickly wiped away with her shirtsleeve. She was so angry,
at him, at herself, because she wanted something she could not have. Because princes do not fall in
love with daughters of trappers. Dwarf or no dwarf.

Had Hanah not been so focused on their faces, she would have noticed what the royal family and
their companions were wearing. Whether her heart or mind would have softened at the sight of her
work resting on the backs of the heroes of Erebor, no one would ever know.
Hanah was brutally awakened by a pounding fist on the door.

"What in the bloody halls of Mahal is that?" Hanah asked, groggy from sleep. "What's so fuckin' urgent? Has The Dragon returned?"

She pulled herself up, throwing a blanket around her shoulders and padded quickly barefoot on the cold stone floor. Hemery stayed in bed, rubbing her eyes.

Hanah looked out through the dusty window. Dwalin was on the other side. She turned the heavy iron key in the lock just as he was about to continue his pounding.

She only opened it enough to glare at Dwalin through the crack. She did not know the time. It was light out, but the sun had not shown itself above the horizon. She could see mist hovering over the grass.

"What is it?" Hanah could not contain her annoyance.

"That how ye open the door? Half-asleep and half-naked?" he asked, disapproval clear in his voice.

What was he moaning about? She looked down at herself. She was in her nightshirt which reached almost all the way to her ankles, and the blanket was down to her knees. And she had seen it was him through the window.

"What if somethin' had happened, and I was bleedin' to death on yer doorstep? Accosted by bandits, my house burnin' to the ground?"

Hanah leaned on the door frame, closing her eyes and sighed. If that had happened, all at once, she doubted there was anything she could have done.

"Is somethin' wrong?" she asked patiently.

"No, but ye didn't know that when ye opened the door, now did ye?"

Hanah rubbed her face, trying to come awake.

"Is this a test?"

"No, just a wake up call. Get yer sister up, we're goin' out."

"Out where?"

Dwalin ignored her question. "Make some breakfast to eat on the road, and send the wee one out when she's dressed."

Hanah sighed.

Normally, she would have said she did not have time, but she actually did. She had finished the big order yesterday. She could do with some time away from the shop. And Dwalin had been good to them, it would not hurt to indulge him for a day.

"Alright," she muttered. She closed the door, but did not lock it this time. Padding back to the bedroom, she shook Hemery lightly.
"It's too early. The magpies aren't even up yet," Hemery grumbled, and buried her face into her pillow.

"Dwalin wants our help with something today. Get dressed and go out to him."

Hemery forced herself to sit up, steadying herself on her arms as if she was exhausted and on her way to bed, not the other way around.

They washed in cold water and dressed in yesterday's clothes. Hemery joined Dwalin in the yard, still yawning, and Hanah boiled eggs and fried ham to eat with bread on the way. One sandwich for her, one for Hemery, and five for Dwalin. When Hanah had finished packing the breakfast, she put on her coat and a scarf before leaving the house. It was still early, and the late September chill would cling to her ears until long after the sun was up.

She could hear thumping and hacking from behind Dwalin's house. When she turned the corner, the grass already softening her boots with dew, she noticed Hemery on their knees, digging in the dark soil. Dwalin stood next to her, holding a small bucket.

"Are you diggin' for worms?" Hanah asked, keeping her chin inside her thick, warm scarf.

"The ground is cold," Hemery stated, and flexed her fingers. Hanah could see they were red beneath the black dirt.

They used to fish with worms in Blackwater, but always in the summer when the ground was soft.

"That's enough," Dwalin said, sifting through the bucket.

Hemery wiped her hands on the wet grass before standing up.

Dwalin handed them each a fishing rod, swung his axes onto his back, and picked up his own bag.

"Let's go," he said, and led them down a path in the opposite direction of Dale.

Through the thin pine forest, they followed the small trail on a slight down hill slope. They could hear the river rushing to their left. The sun rose before them, turning the clouds pink, and cast long beams of light between the trees on the last mist of the morning.

They ate sandwiches wrapped in paper. Hanah handed Dwalin one after the other, exchanging the sandwich for the paper of the last one, which she stuffed back into her bag.

They entered a particularly dense part of the forest. The underbrush growing thicker and they had to raise their bags and rods high above the bushes to not get caught in them.

"Deer use this path when they go up and down the mountain in the summers. That's why it looks like a labyrinth of dozens of small trails on the forest floor," Dwalin informed them. "Should ye ever get lost in them, just continue upwards, ye'll get to Dale eventually."

"Why don't you fish in the river by your house?" Hanah asked.

They got out on the other side of the bushes and came to stand on a boulder overlooking a part of the river which slowed and widened into a small lake before spilling down a waterfall on the other end. Pines closed in the lake in a half-circle, leaving the view beyond the waterfall unfiltered. Hanah could see all the way down to Esgaroth and the forest changing colour to autumn from their vantage point. The trees slowed the wind around the lake, and the sun had just begun to warm their faces.
"That's why," Dwalin replied, and dumped his bag heavily on the boulder. He seemed confident the mirror surface of the lake and the view spoke for themselves.

Hanah loved the Lonely Mountain. It was so quiet and serene where they were. Their house at Blackwater had also been quiet, but Hanah had never felt the peace which she felt here. Despite Dale and Erebor with their myriad of inhabitants, she felt safe and secluded.

And, of course, Dwalin was there. Hanah would feel safe anywhere with Dwalin.

He sat on the edge of the rock, dropping his line with the worm in the water below. It was so dark and deep that the girls could see their own reflection when they looked down. Rather than sitting with their feet dangling like Dwalin, Hanah spread out a wool blanket for them to sit on. The rock would cool them down quick if they were to sit still directly on the damp stone. It was autumn after all, and they were going to be outdoors all day.

It did not stop Dwalin from dropping a remark.

"Fragile and thin like straw dolls. If a puff of air pushed ye over the ledge, ye wouldn't even fall in—ye'd float away on the wind like butterflies."

"And if you slipped on some wet rocks with those ridiculous steel toed boots, you'd sink like a stone," Hanah offered her contrasting perspective.

Dwalin merely grunted in reply.

They were silent for a long time, only hearing the sound of the water lapping against the rocks, and the swallows chirping as they sailed through the air, sometimes so close to the water they skimmed the surface with their forked tails.

Hemery caught two. Hanah caught one, but it slipped off the hook before she could haul it in. Dwalin caught six before the sun had reached its peak.

"How come you're always better at everythin'?" Hemery complained, when he hauled the seventh.

"Experience, discipline, and finesse," he said simply, cut the fish open and removed its guts in one pull.

"But you just sit there letting the hook do the same thing ours' do. How can you be better at doin' nothin'?" Hemery asked, astounded.

"Perhaps ye should have dug up better bait?" He did not look at Hemery, seemingly focused on his task, but Hanah could see the barely contained smirk on his face.

"It's just luck," Hanah stated, trying to sound nonchalant. "That, or he gives us the dead worms the fish don't care about."

Hanah gathered some branches from the riverbank and made a fire. Hemery whittled some sticks into skewers they could use to grill the fishes Dwalin had gutted. The old driftwood burned quickly down to embers good enough to cook fish on.

"You're not workin' at all today?" Hanah asked the dwarf.

"Not with the madness goin' on in town," he said, spitting into the fire with what Hanah suspected was more derision than dirt on his tongue.
"Hanah was invited to the ceremony," Hemery said.

"Aye, I don't doubt it," Dwalin said, nodding and smirking, but not expanding on his thoughts.

"How was it?" Hemery asked.

Filled with anxiety and panic, Hanah thought.

"I was only there a short while."

"What did you see?"

Hanah pushed the image of Prince Kíli in his bedroom out of her mind, and remembered the grand room and all the people, how happy everyone had seemed.

"There was music. Wonderful, loud, strange music I had never heard before. And hundreds and hundreds of people listening to King Thorin welcoming everybody and saying how important the day was and all that."

Dwalin snorted. "It's just an excuse for people to drink more and work less."

"Like we're doing right now?" Hanah asked, lying back and crossing her ankles, making herself more comfortable while they waited for the fish.

He glared at her smiling face.

"It's a major health and safety hazard," he said, his gritted teeth making clear it was no laughing matter.

"The citizens drink themselves into a stupor every weekend, if not every night of the festival, allowing for violence and robberies fifty times worse than any other time of the year. The guard should be increased five times over, for Durin's Day alone. If somethin' were to happen, Mahal forbid," he touched his chest and head in a gesture warding off bad luck, "Erebor would not stand a chance in its current state."

He shook his head as he poked the embers thoughtfully.

Hanah had seen big celebrations at Blackwater, dancing, drinking and the occasional fight, but nothing as large-scale as the anniversary of Erebor. She could only imagine what it could be like in the thick of it.

"Then why do they have it?" Hemery asked.

"To keep the people happy," Dwalin said. "They need days to celebrate the greatness of their kingdom, or they will crumble under the weight of a strict ruler. The king needs to be harsh to keep the peace, but if he doesn't give them reason to come together for feasts, they will shatter anyway. Old sorrows and new hardships will overwhelm them and cracks will form in the foundation of the mountain."

He moved some embers with his bare fingers to increase the carpet of heat for their lunch.

"And then they might project their shortcomings on their leader, and decide they want another king. And the king wants to stay king, always."

Dwalin opened the fish to see if it was cooked through.
"What happened with you and the king?" Hemery asked.

He growled. "Is it too much to ask to let me eat before ye start the interrogation?"

Hanah and Hemery shared a smile at his indignation, while he divided the fish for them.

The meat came off the bones in white, chunky layers which they ate with their hands. When Dwalin was finishing his last morsel, he began speaking without being bid.

"Twenty years ago, I deliberately kept a piece of information from Thorin. And when he found out. . . he dismissed me from his service."

"What was it?" Hanah asked. The girls sat up straight, looking at the dwarf over the low glow of the fire.

"Somethin' personal, about. . . a certain lady." He coughed and avoided their gaze, brushing the remnants of fish skin from his leather trousers.

The sisters had never heard him confess anything as private as this before. Hanah hardly dared speak, but she was too curious.

"Was she. . . his lady?" she asked, carefully.

"In a sense. It was his sister."

Hanah's eyes widened. Fíli's mother?

"Were you and her. . . ?" Hemery left the question hanging, but she did not have to finish it for him to stop it right there.

"None of yer business," Dwalin barked. "And none of his either. 'Course, Thorin didn't see it that way.

"So you haven't spoken in twenty years?" Hanah asked.

"No."

He took a drink from his water bottle and pushed the cork back with a decisive pop.

"And that's why you don't live in the mountain?" Hemery asked.

Dwalin did not answer. He did not have to.

"The mountain wasn't big enough for the two of you?" Hanah smirked.

"He started it," Dwalin grumbled, childishly.

"Nah. . . " Hanah trailed off. "Sounded like you started it, actually."

"It wasn't a problem until he made one. He overreacted—like he always does," Dwalin drew out the vowels in exaggerated boredom, while shaking his head. He accentuated his speech by throwing out a big arm dramatically, like he was shoving the thought aside with his hand, emphasizing his view on the king's antics as unreasonable and not worthy of further investigation.

"The king stays the king, even with his own family and friends, because he's as stubborn as—"

"—As an old goat!" Hemery finished with him, triumphantly, in a loud chorus.
All three of them broke into laughter around the fire. Hanah had trouble catching her breath and could only manage a high-pitched birdlike laugh, while Hemery made small coughs and smiled broadly, happy to have made the others so merry. Dwalin boomed a loud laugh which echoed in the clearing and seemed to shake the trees around them as some doves took flight from their resting place, disturbed by the sudden sound.

Dwalin pulled out a rectangular box from his bag and put it on his lap.

"Enough talk of that miserable bastard," he drawled comically in his heavy accent. "Give us a song, lasses," he said, lifting a viola from the case. He began to strum it lightly and tighten the strings.

Hanah was so surprised by the revelation that he could play a musical instrument, that her mind stood still and could not produce any lyrics at all.

"Ehm... what would you like to hear?" she asked.

Hemery was no help, only looking at her sister in anticipation.

"Anythin','" Dwalin said, simply. "I'll catch up."

"The witch's song," Hemery encouraged and shook her hand up and down.

"Only if you help," Hanah said. Her sister nodded.

It was one of the songs she had learned in Blackwater. Dwalin would probably not know it, but the melody was simple and repeated itself. All songs she knew were rhymed things which were designed to be easy to learn and remember.

Hanah began to sing, and Hemery chimed in on the third and last line in every verse—the only ones she knew by heart.

_A girl tread in the queen's yard_

_She wished to weave gold for the lady_

_Roses and lilies I am from_

_A girl invited to the queen's yard_

_They wished she wove gold for the lady_

_From the valleys whence I come_

True enough, after only one verse Dwalin was able to follow the tune wonderfully, making impulsive sways when he changed from one note to the other.

_With the first strike on the loom_

_She wove in sky, wove in earth_

_Roses and lilies I am from_

_With the second strike on the loom_

_She wove in home, wove in hearth_
From the valleys whence I come
With the third strike on the loom
She wove in father, wove in mother
Roses and lilies I am from
With the fourth strike of the loom
She wove in sister, wove in brother
From the valleys whence I come
There was joy in the queen's hall
Grander weave no one had seen
Roses and lilies I am from
The girl stayed at the queen's call
No place she had rather been
From the valleys whence I come
The magic spell in the night
Weave replaced the queen for she
Roses and lilies I am from
So exchanged was royal might
Girl graced with crown and key
From the troll hills whence I come

The afternoon became early evening before they returned home through the shadowy forest. Though they heard foxes barking in the distance and some small animals scurried in the bushes and up the trees, Hanah was not worried.

They were with Dwalin.
When the butter was delivered the next morning, it was by Fíli himself. Hemery answered the door.
"Good morning, Hemery." Fíli smiled, offering the wrapped package.
"Mornin'." She did not move out of the way or invite him in.
"Is your sister up?"
"The sun is over the tree line, of course she's up."
"May I come in and see her?" he patiently asked.
"If you have business, you may see her at the market in an hour."
Right then, Hanah came around the corner, carrying fresh water from the well. Her steps faltered as she noticed the prince, but she did not stop.
"Oh," she said. "Good mornin'."
"Morning, Miss Hanah." He smiled and bowed his head.
Hanah would have done the same had she not been weighed down by her bucket. Hemery let her pass into the kitchen.
Fíli shared a look with Hemery behind Hanah's back, she glaring, him challenging. Hemery moved. He handed the butter to Hanah.
"Thank you. That's very kind." Hanah, in turn, handed it to Hemery who did not look pleased, but took it and placed it in the cupboard.
Hanah made tea. Hemery stood behind her, watching Fíli who sat at the table, seemingly unbothered by her deadly stare.
"Apologies for bein' late with my last delivery," Hanah said. "We had so many customers, I couldn't get away."
He shook his head. "I didn't notice."
Hanah nodded in relief.
"Have you come to pay us?" Hemery asked.
Hanah whirled around. "Hem?!" she hissed forcefully.
"Why else is he here?" Hemery asked Hanah, but looked at the dwarf.
"Don't you have class to attend?" Hanah whispered to her sister.
"Not today."
"Actually, that was one of the reasons I came to see you this morning," Prince Fíli said, producing
his purse. "Remind me, how much do I owe you?"

Hanah racked her brain. She had already been paid too much. The coats were finished and she still had gold left over. But he would not take no for an answer.

"Sorry, I'd have to check the book—" Hanah began.

"Twelve gold pieces," Hemery answered.

Prince Fíli raised his eyebrows at Hanah in question. It sounded reasonable enough for the last five coats, she thought.

"Yes, that would be right," she confirmed. "Thank you, Hem."

His mustache quirked. He dug into his purse and offered some coins to Hanah, but Hemery was quicker. She shot out to receive them before Hanah had lifted her arm, and swiftly returning to her place behind Hanah. Silence stretched between the two girls and the dwarf.

"Are the bags ready for market?" Hanah asked Hemery.

"Almost. We can leave whenever you want. I have a book to return to the library, as well." Hemery shot Prince Fíli a meaningful look which her sister did not catch. Hanah closed the door behind her.

"I apologize for Hemery's forwardness."

"That's quite alright. I like it. Almost as amusing as the sharp tongue of her sister." Prince Fíli chuckled.

Hanah's stomach heated when she heard the throaty sound.

"So you were happy with the coats?" Hanah changed the subject.

"They fulfilled my expectations," he answered ambiguously.

"Is that so?" Her tone was dry.

He laughed. "I knew you had potential, and there's no greater motivator than doubt. A few less than enthusiastic remarks in your ear and your result is golden," he explained.

"I should have known it would be pointless to expect a reply with more than the least possible information, but I'm glad you think my work is nice, Prince Fíli."

Hanah stood to retrieve their cups and realized what she had just said. Her hands turned cold. She forced herself to pretend as if it was nothing. It was no secret, after all.

Fortunately, she had to turn her back to him when she cleaned the cups, giving her an excuse to not meet his gaze.

"I wasn't sure you knew." His voice was low.

She did not now what to say to that. That he had turned her world upside-down these last few days since she found out he was a prince, without him actually doing anything?

"You didn't treat me like a prince, I liked that."

She said nothing. She heard him get up from his chair.
"What is it, Hanah?"

She turned and leaned on the counter. He watched her from a few feet away. That beautiful, open face, those searching eyes, and those hands that knew her so well, which she did not know at all. She tried to shrug casually.

"I just feel stupid, because..." She shook her head. "I didn't know. I had no idea until I saw you at the openin' ceremony."

"This doesn't change anything between us," he assured her.

Hanah smiled without joy. "I know you think that, and I understand. You've been perfectly honest and respectful and generous, and I let you in, and I was happy to do so, but we have to stop now."

She tried to sound sober and practical, letting no emotion show through. She did not allow herself to feel any of the hurt that she had brought on herself by her naïve actions. Now it was time to face the consequences of her actions, and put and end to it before it got any worse.

Prince Fíli looked like he did not understand what she was saying.

"Do you want to stop?" he asked, stepping closer and piercing her with his inquiring gaze.

Hanah sighed, and felt an increased urge to keep her distance.

"You know as well as I do that we had to, eventually. I've just been ignorin' it until now. We've... killin' time."

"I can't think of a better way of spending my time. Can you?"

He was trying to lighten the mood, but Hanah was physically incapable of smiling anymore. Of course he could be so off-handed about the subject—it was not as serious for him as it was for Hanah. It did not mean anything to him.

"It's time to move on. On to the next," she said, calmly.

"The next what?"

Why did she need to spell it out for him? She had to look away.

"The next girl who wants to catch the attention of a charmin' prince for a few hours. You said it yourself, you've done this before. And I've seen how your brother acts with Sethie."

"My brother..." he muttered and rubbed a hand over his face.

"I get it. It's nothin' strange in your world, but I'm not used to it. And it's fine, I never expected anythin' from you. But I don't think we should see each other... alone... anymore."

There was a moment of silence.

"Do you believe me to be so lacking in honour?" he finally asked.

The question threw her off guard.

"No—?"

"I will not lie and claim to never have visited a woman before, but I certainly don't make it a habit."
And I will thank you for not comparing me to my brother in all things. We share many traits — however—sexual zeal is not one of them.” Prince Fíli’s voice was scathing.

Hanah felt heat in her cheeks. She had no idea he would react in this way. She had tried to say much in few words, but never question his honour.

"You think I would pursue you in this manner, indefinitely, taking anything and everything you offered?"

Not indefinitely. Hanah had no illusions about the temporary nature of their relationship. She knew it would dry out, sooner or later. But she could not speak, she was struck by the intensity of his words and his indignation which she did not understand.

Suddenly, his anger drained away.

"I never wanted you to think that. It was not my intention. I don't want it to be that way,” his words turned persuasive now.

There was that word again. Want.

If they just kept going, what did he think would happen? Did he not realize how much she had begun to care for him? Did he not see how she trembled when he was near? She would grow more and more dependant on him, live for the short moments he would spare for her. And when he decided he did not want to visit her anymore, she would not be able to let him go.

"It doesn't matter what you or I want. This is just a complication. A waste of time. Can't you see that?"

This was apparently the wrong thing to say. Anger sparked to life in his eyes.

"Have you ever fought for something you wanted?" he asked.

Hanah had fought a lot, too much, for her life and for Hemery's. She wanted to live, if you could say that. But she had a feeling that was not what he meant.

He closed the distance between them and took hold of her face in his large, warm hands.

"Have you ever really wanted anything in your life?"

She wanted him, to laugh with, to hold and never let go. But then there was that shallow want, the physical want driven by the automatic impulse all men had, which she had felt too. She had never wanted a person in this intimate way before, and she would not be a slave for some bodily craving now. She would not jeopardize her current security for a few of his exciting embraces.

Hanah wanted to close her eyes and open them far away from here, away from Blackwater, away from Erebor, away from Prince Fíli. Why could she not be allowed to just live?

"There are many different kinds of want," she said.

"I want you, Hanah," Fíli said with fervor. "To keep, to care for, and to bear my children—that kind of want."

Now she was completely confused. They were not of the same kin. And he was heir to the throne of Erebor. Was he playing a game of 'name one hundred impossible things' she was unaware of?

"But . . ." she began, brow furrowed. "You can't have children with men." It was a question, really,
but it had not come out as such.

Prince Fili's eyes turned dead cold, and he released her.

"So that's how it is," he seethed. "Glad we cleared that up. I was beginning to think it was my personality that displeased you. I'm relieved to learn it is only because I'm a dwarf."

His words were acid as he began to pace the floor restlessly.

"Of course it's part of it—" Hanah had no idea if dwarves and men even could conceive children, much less a dwarven prince and a common woman. She wanted to explain further, but he interrupted her and twisted her words.

"It seems you are, after all, the kind of woman who will take a dwarf's gold, but not his hand." He almost growled.

"That's not fair. You're misunderstandin' me on purpose," Hanah argued. "What would people say if you had children with someone like me?"

She was a poor leathersmith of mankind. What would happen to the bastard child of Prince Fili of Erebor and the trapper's daughter?

"I don't bloody well care," came his quick response. It seemed he had made up his mind to contradict everything she said.

"You cannot be serious!" Hanah almost shouted. "You must care, you're goin' to be king one day. No one would accept a king with half-breed children."

He became still at her words, and Hanah knew she had made a mistake using such strong language, but she had wanted to prove a point. It seemed she had succeeded. He regarded her with a dark expression.

It was official; she had offended Prince Fili in every way possible.

Slowly, he moved closer until he was an arms length away. Then his face changed from anger to bewilderment, like he was gazing into a dark well to see if there was any water in its depths.

"How is it that you're so young, and yet... so cold?" he asked.

The word resonated within her. Cold, winter, frost, ice, starvation, death. Did he think she was like that? She was not! She burned with shame for what she had said, what she had allowed the situation to become, and with need for him to touch her as gently as he had a moment ago when he still liked her.

And he felt as if the fire of Smaug would be a cool breeze in comparison with the smolder that boiled her insides and flared out into the skin of her neck and face. How could he think she was cold?

She wanted to explain, if she had dared, what she was thinking. But he seemed to be in the worst mood for conversation and misunderstood everything she said.

No—everything she said was wrong.

"Hanah?" Hemery's careful voice came from the door to the shop, and pulled her out of her thoughts.
Fili turned from her and moved to the door. As he walked through it, Hanah called after him.

"I'm sorry!"

He did not stop.

Hanah took a few steps, as if to follow him, but changed her mind. What would she say to him? She felt hollow and thin like burnt wood in an old fireplace. All eaten up.

"What happened?" Hemery asked softly.

Hanah hardly knew. But she knew her dealings with Prince Fili were over, as if they had never begun.

"Nothin'," Hanah breathed. She turned her back to Hemery, so she would not see her tears gathering.

"Did he hurt you?" Hemery's voice was flat, while Hanah tried to keep the quiver out of hers.

"No." Hanah was hurt, but she knew the blame fell on her own shoulders.

"Did he... ask you to marry him?"

Hanah turned in surprise, forgetting to hide her tears.

"No," she replied. "Don't be silly. Why would he do that?"

She continued cleaning the dishes from breakfast, pretending nothing was amiss.

Hemery felt the weight of the book in her coat pocket.

"No reason," she said. "Just a thought."
The lit fireplace cast an orange glow on the stone floor of the library. From Hemery's point of view, it appeared as if the floor was water reflecting the flickering firelight.

She followed the bookshelves on the left side, slowing her steps when she neared the place where she remembered the dwarf had retrieved the book. She read the bindings of the books.


Getting closer.


This shelf would have to do, Hemery thought, pulled the slim volume out of her bag and slid it onto the shelf among the others.

"You're late." The low rumble was almost like a dog's growl.

Hemery spun on the spot. Her bag, which she had slung over her shoulder, pushed up against the nearest shelf, knocking the books down like... well, like books on a shelf—each one's weight pushing the next one over the edge and onto the floor.

Hemery recognized the hunched figure sitting in one of the high-backed chairs by the fire, and his coat.

"Still making a nuisance of yourself I see," he said.

"You scared me," she accused. She picked up the books, not bothering to see if they were in the right order, much less right side up.

"Your permission expired two days ago."

"We've been busy with work during the festival. I couldn't get away." Hemery borrowed her sisters defense.

"We're all busy. That's no excuse. When we have an agreement, we try our best to honour that agreement, do we not?"

She could not argue with that. It was exactly what Hanah would have said. She would have liked this dwarf, all principles and clear rules of conduct. But she still did not want to give him right.

"It's just a book," she muttered.

"These books are part of the great legacy of my people." He raised his voice. "They are our memories, they will show us our future, and they will be here long after you and I are gone. They deserve our respect."

"Did you write them?"
"No. Though I have been present at a few writings and rewritings of history."

Silence descended in the large room. The fire crackled. Hemery thought she could almost hear the dust swirling through the air.

"You don't look very busy," Hemery observed.

"The first time in days I have been able to breathe," he spoke low, as if to himself. "Should have known it would not last."

He sighed and looked at her a long moment, something like pain in his expression.

"You do not know how lucky you are, girl. Sitting in your workshop making boot laces."

"I don't?" Hemery asked, confused.

"You may think this festival is just feast and fun," he snorted derisively. "It's a theater. We conquered the dragon and the orcs, and now we celebrate our victory on the day we used to honour Durin. It turns my stomach that our ancestors' glory has fallen into the shadow of our enemies."

Listening in awe to the honest voice, Hemery found herself moving closer to the fireplace.

"And I must endure the pollution of their memory. Endure it all. Almost two months of hosting hundreds of strangers in Erebor, feeding them, amusing them, humouring them. Listen to their complaints, requests, advice. All attempting to further their own political aims, whether it's trade, taxes, or military alliances. You'd be surprised by how many people do not recognize the word no."

Ten fingers on ten people was a hundred fingers. And several hundreds were many more. That was a lot of people.

"Do you really have to listen to all of them?" Hemery asked, carefully.

"Such is the custom. All who seek counsel must be heard."

Hemery thought it was unfair of the guests to request favours from the king, especially since the guests were given food and diversions during their stay. Even Hemery understood the dwarves would be taken advantage of. And she remembered Dwalin's words about the safety of the kingdom on this holiday.

There had to be a way to prevent the Lonely Mountain from being swarmed like an ant hill every year.

"What if they didn't want to come?" Hemery asked.

The dwarf was roused from his melancholy, almost as if he had forgotten she was there. A deep frown attempted to disguise the curiosity in his eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not sayin' Erebor should be unwelcomin' on purpose, but the festival could be more focused on dwarves and what they like. Adding more ceremonies and plays in honour of Durin, not just the usual 'kill the dragon' story. I'm sure that would bore men pretty soon."

The dwarf did not say anything, so she continued.
"Oh—and serve them that strange meat loaf dwarves love so much. They'd be running home to their privies after one day."

Suddenly, the dwarf startled Hemery with a laugh. It was a rough, hoarse bark which soon faded, but she could see white teeth lingering.

"Any other ideas?" he asked.

She leaned on the other chair, thinking.

"Move the festival to the winter. People don't like to travel in the winter, and it would leave October free for Durin's Day."

"And if people object to the rescheduling?"

"Tell them that the real reclaim of Erebor did not occur when the dragon was killed, but when... enough people had settled there for it to be called a city again, or when the king had his first assembly or somethin'. Make somethin' up."

She shrugged.

"Or say the king wishes to move the festival to his birthday or coronation memorial day. That way he'll at least get presents and things in return for puttin' up with the guests. Nobody will say no to the king as long as the dwarves get their festival."

He hummed low, and nodded thoughtfully.

"You should have had a place in the king's council twenty years ago. Perhaps his present outlook would not have been so bleak."

He regarded her a moment.

"Was the literature of aid in your education?"

Hemery frowned in confusion. "The what?"

"The book," he clarified, raising his black eyebrows.

"Oh," Hemery simply said.

Remembering Hanah and Fíli's abrupt farewell this morning, she looked down awkwardly.

"Not really. It told me what I wanted to know, but it didn't help."

He just looked at her.

"I think I made a big mistake," Hemery confessed weakly. "I interfered in my sister's life and now she's hurtin' because of me."

"Did you use violence on your sister?"

"What? No." Hemery curved her lip.

"Did you betray someone's confidence?"

She thought about it. She had not told anyone's secrets which she promised to keep quiet.
She shook her head. "No."

"Then you are not to blame. People have their own will, their own agenda. Everyone is responsible for their own actions."

"I guess."

She was not convinced. That was what she did not like about Hanah’s and this dwarf’s principles and rules—when it came to real situations they did not apply as clearly and logically as they made it seem.

He sighed. "What's with the doom and gloom? I thought things were good here for you and your sister."

"They were. They are. We have a nice home and business is good."

"But?"

"There's a dwarf who comes to see Hanah." The words tumbled out almost all on their own. "In the day, when she's alone."

"And you assume he's not there for boot laces?"

She shook her head slowly from side to side.

"And how do you know this, if she's alone on these visits?" he asked.

"I know my sister."

He levelled her with his gaze, as if he could tell there was more to the story.

"And I talked to him," she confessed. "I think that was my mistake."

"That depends. What did you say?"

"I demanded he propose marriage to her or leave her alone."

He did not laugh like Kíli or look shocked like Fíli. He just looked at her, blankly.

"And what did he choose?"

"Neither."

He considered this.

"There are worse things you could have done. Under the circumstances, I believe you did all you could. If it was my sister, I would have beaten the dog within an inch of his life."

"Really?" she asked, opening her eyes wide, hopeful. Relief flooded her chest. It was a great comfort to know she had not been overreacting in her own impulse to physically harm Fíli for all he had caused Hanah.

"Really," he grunted in affirmation. "You defended your sister's honour. There is no shame in that. So no more sulking, do you hear me?"

Hemery smiled and stood up straight like Dwalin had taught her. She closed her hands behind her
back to stop from fidgeting.

"Yes, sir."

"Who is this unworthy dwarf, anyway, whom your sister would be foolish enough to welcome into her home?"

She hesitated. She had already told him what happened. Would it really make much difference if she gave up the other party?

"I swear, no disrepute will befall your sister at my hand," he said when she did not answer.

He had helped her, Hemery thought, and given her advice. He was nice. Well, not nice—no dwarves were nice—but an individual who seemed to know right from wrong, as she saw them.

She looked him straight in the eye.

"Lord Fíli," she admitted.

His face grew even more grave, if that were possible. His dark brow shadowed his eyes. Then he stood up. His wide frame was taller than Hemery remembered, and she took an unconscious step back.

"I believe my time is up, girl," he muttered tiredly.

She followed him through the doors to the library. He stopped outside.

"Your acquaintance has been. . . interesting. I bid you good day."

He turned and walked away. Four of the guards who were standing in a row along the big corridor fell in step with him as he passed.

Hemery did not have time to stand around wondering exactly who the dwarf was. She was supposed to meet Hanah at the market. So she turned and walked the other way.
"Why aren't you yellin' at me?" Hemery asked her sister.

"What?" Hanah looked up from her tea. "Why would I yell at you?"

"Because I haven't cleaned the dishes from breakfast, swept the floors, or changed the sheets on the bed, like I said I would."

Hanah just stared at her sister, as if stunned. Hemery continued.

"You didn't say anythin' yesterday either, when I chipped your favourite scalpel on the steel thimble."

"It was an accident." Hanah shrugged.

Hemery frowned. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothin'."

"Then why aren't you yellin'?" Hemery felt that she was the one yelling, and it was not supposed to be that way. Everything was backwards since Lord Fíli's last visit. Why could Hanah not snap out of it?

"You should be happy I'm not. Yellin's not a good thing, you know. I'm not supposed to yell, ever. I should be a good enough big sister to make you do chores without naggin'."

"It's not just that." Hemery pulled her hair in frustration. "You look for tools you already hold in your hand. You only eat when I'm here. You don't draw. You don't visit Dwalin. It's like you're not you anymore."

"I'm just tired. It's been a long summer. The order from—" Hanah paused for a heartbeat. "The coats really wore me out."

"You've always worked hard—you've never been like this before. What happened?"

Hanah got up from the table.

"Nothin'. Our business is over, that's all. He got his order and we got paid. There—done."

Hemery stilled. She had not asked specifically about Fíli, but Hanah had automatically assumed Hemery had meant him, which proved her mood had indeed something to do with the dwarf.

Hanah had been perfectly normal and healthy during the time they had lived and worked in Dale, during the whole time Hanah had known Lord Fíli. Even before, when they suffered the oppression of the Brages, she had been fine. What had he done to make her so distraught and withdrawn from the moment he sat down in their kitchen to the moment he left and never came back?

"Did you have a fight? Did he say somethin' mean?"

"No." Hanah leaned down to settle the embers in the stove. "Although—" She stopped herself.

"What did he do?" Hemery felt anger boil up within her.
"He didn't do anythin'. It was me," Hanah took a breath, but still avoided her sisters gaze.

Hemery saw Hanah's jaw tense, like it did when she refrained from cursing out loud.

"I just can't seem to do things right. Everywhere I go, I disappoint people."


Hanah always tried to do the right thing. She was the best worker Hemery knew, even more focused than Father had been. Yes, he had been skilled, but never as devoted as Hanah. She took everything so seriously. How could she think anything she did would fall below the standard of others?

Hanah closed the hatch to the fire with an iron clang.

"I'd rather not talk about it."

"You can't let him make you feel bad. You said nobles don't say what they mean or mean what they say. People say mean things, doesn't mean they're true."

"This is different. I don't want to talk about it."

"But you liked each other. What happened?"

"We're not talkin' about this!" Hanah had her back turned. Hemery could see her stiff shoulders.

Hemery froze. A lump formed in her throat.

Hanah had not used that sharp tone since Hemery was little, when she had climbed up on the stove to grab something off a high shelf, tipped over a pan, and almost scalded herself on the boiling water.

"Now," Hanah spoke low. "Go clean your teeth and wash your hands. It's time for bed."

Hemery did as she was told without another word.

The following week, Hemery felt like she was running from her own shadow. Every waking hour was spent keeping Hanah occupied with talking and singing, never letting her have a moment to herself. As soon as Hemery turned her back, or left Hanah to her own devices, even for a moment, Hanah would grow pale and her eyes distant. Every day, Hanah was more tired, more closed off.

When they attended market, Hemery forced her sister to take detours to avoid Fíli and Kíli. Once, when they had packed up to leave, she saw a group of dwarves including the dark-haired brother coming their way and Hemery suddenly stopped in her tracks. She was not sure the dwarves had seen them, or if indeed Lord Fíli was with them, but she had to do something—quick.

"Ow," Hemery exclaimed, her legs folding beneath her like those of a newborn lamb.

Hanah dropped her bag and fell to her knees next to her sister. By the side of the road, between stalls and rushing people, they were mostly shielded from view.

"What is it?"

"My ankle. I think I twisted it. I need to go to the healers."
"Let me see," Hanah said, lifting Hemery's foot.

"Ow," Hemery cried louder. "Don't touch it. I need to go to the healers."

"But you can't walk, and I can't carry you."

Hemery hurriedly pushed herself off the ground, hopping on one foot. "It's fine. I can just hold onto you for balance. Come on, hurry. Ow."

Hemery leaned on Hanah while jumping on one foot down the side path towards the nearest healers' tent which were erected in various places around town during the festival. More people meant more injuries to tend to.

However, as soon as Hemery got inside the tent and was offered a seat on a bench to wait for the examination of her foot, she instantly felt better.

"Are you sure?" Hanah asked, bewildered. "You almost fainted in the street."

"Yeah, you know, I think I just strained somethin'. It feels much better now that I’ve rested it." Hemery bent her foot with her toes pointing down, as proof.

"But you just sat down," Hanah reminded her.

"I know, right?" Hemery sounded very much surprised. "It's strange how it can just disappear like that."

A few days later, when Hemery saw Lord Kíli walking down the market street alone, she discretely emptied their water bottle under the table and asked Hanah to fetch more.

"I'm really thirsty. Please, Hanah," Hemery whined. She could see the dark mop of hair approaching their end of the street.

"Use Dwalin's," Hanah said.

"He doesn't have any water. He only has ale," Hemery explained. "He makes me get refills for him from The Dragon's Head."

Hanah looked over at the next table where the dwarf sat, leaning back, sharpening his blades. When noticing the older sister's gaze on him, he raised an eyebrow and his bottle in a salute. Clearly, he had overheard the conversation.

Hanah sighed. "You're the one who's thirsty, you go fetch water."

"I'll get lost."

It was true that the market had expanded and mutated into a monster of itself in the last few weeks, the stalls growing in size as well as numbers, turning big roads into many small paths lined with salesmen on all sides. But that Hemery would not find her way to the nearest water pump and back was an exaggeration of monstrous proportions equal to those of the market.

"Fine." Hanah grabbed the bottle and briskly walked down the path, quickly disappearing in the crowd.

Hemery heard Lord Kíli speak to her left a moment later. "Afternoon."

"Afternoon, lad," Dwalin muttered.
Hemery did not speak, nor did she look their way more than peripherally.

"Afternoon, lady Skinner," Lord Kíli said a little louder.

Hemery met his gaze then.

His face was perfectly pleasant, polite, and absolutely infuriating. Her jaw tensed by itself. But her sister was not there, he could do her no harm with his teasing, and Hemery had to keep a respectful front to any potential customers.

"Afternoon," she clipped.

"Business good?"

None of yours, she wanted to say. Carefree, irksome dwarf.

"Fine." Hemery continued to braid leather cords for bracelets, while keeping a discrete eye out for Hanah's return.

"I imagine business would be flourishing after my brother's sponsorship."

Since it was not a question, Hemery was not obliged to say anything, so she did not.

"Of course, his ability to show off your hard work to the public is limited when he's not in the city."

Something in his tone was provoking. Almost deliberately so.

"Has he moved?" Hemery asked without looking up. Nothing would bring her greater pleasure, but she did not know how Hanah would react.

"No. Though Thorin thought it convenient to send him away from the mountain. A temporary expulsion, as it were."

Dwalin scoffed loudly from his table, but did not speak.

Thorin was the name of the king, Hemery knew. How had Lord Fíli attracted the wrath of the king?

She looked up then. Lord Kíli had come very close, leaning on the table in front of her.

"What trouble has your brother gotten himself into this time?" Hemery prided herself in sounding very calm, though she was sure the satisfaction could be seen on her face. She did not flinch as she met his stare. He looked thoughtful.

"You know, that's the strange thing. He never told anyone about Hanah, not me, not mother—no one. And Hanah, the puritan, wouldn't sully herself by speaking of it, neither to brag nor gossip. Not to mention—she has no friends in all the world, except for the two of you."

Kíli pointed to Dwalin and Hemery.

"So who would go blabbing about it to Thorin—who has enough to worry about in the middle of the festival without dealing with malicious rumours which he then clubs my brother over the head with?"

"Malicious?" Hemery repeated in surprise. She was not sure what the word meant, but everything beginning with mal was bad. It sounded like a mix of malady and suspicious, like he thought her
sister had been involved in something horrendous. "What did he say?"

"Thorin wanted to know why Fee had snuck around like a thief in the night, why he would subject himself and his office to the judgements of others—and he questioned Fíli's honour. Where would he get these ideas, hmm?"

Did Lord Kíli not think his brother deserved to have his actions questioned? To Hemery, King Thorin seemed pretty well informed.

Hemery slammed her hands down on the table and stood, making her head closer to his in height.

"True, though, ain't it?" Hemery snapped, challenging. She knew it was.

Kíli leaned even further toward her, peering at her.

"Was it you?"

Hemery just stared back.

She did not disregard the possibility that she was to blame for the king's knowledge of the events. The dwarf in the library did not seem like the sort of person who would condone aristocrats abusing their station, but she thought he would not be interested enough in the affairs of low craftsmen to act on it personally. If he, without her knowledge, had taken the matter further which resulted in the king's rebuke, she was not sorry. The dwarf had kept his word, Hanah had not suffered for it—Fíli had.

Kíli continued. "You did threaten to keep Fíli from ever seeing Hanah again, should he fail to live up to your demands. This would be a good start."

She almost laughed out loud at the thought. What a lark it would be to let him think she had that kind of influence on the king of Erebor. She wondered if she could...?

She kept her eyes glued to Kíli's, raising her eyebrows in exaggerated scepticism. "You want to know if I grassed on your brother to the king?" She spoke slow and deliberate.

She shook her head in disbelief and leaned in until they were only inches apart, one corner of her mouth pulled into a mocking smirk. "Listen to yourself."

Kíli was silent a moment, taking in her words. If he thought she did, he was unable to prove it—he had to back down. He put a finger to the table top.

"I'm gonna find out how you did it," he promised her, as if rising to a challenge and relishing in the competition.

Hemery just stared at him, smug smirk still in place. She did not care if he did; the damage was done. Lord Fíli had already dropped a peg in the eyes of the king. She could not have planned it better herself.

"You tell your brother he'd better make himself really comfortable wherever he is 'cause he'll never see Hanah again. And if the king scared him enough, he'll probably not find any woman's bed soft and welcomin' anymore."

Kíli raised his chin and looked down at her through narrowed eyes, evaluating her with a disturbing spark in his eyes.
"I don't doubt it. You do have something of the witch about you," Kíli said, fascinated. "Will you curse his manhood if he doesn't bend to your will?"

Hemery closed her hands into fists.

"Kee," Dwalin drawled from his seat at the other table. "Ye should go now." He spoke without breaking his movements with the whetting stone.

Lord Kíli straightened, pursed his lips, and nodded at Dwalin. As he turned to go, he threw Hemery one last determined look.

Neither Hemery nor Dwalin spoke when Hanah came back with the water.

"Here you go," she said.

"Thanks," Hemery muttered.

"I thought your were dyin' of thirst?" Hanah commented when Hemery did not touch the bottle.

"It passed."
Hanah was restless. She barely slept. As soon as she closed her eyes, day or night, she would see Prince Fíli cold eyes looking back at her. It filled her with anger and sorrow, and left her torn and frayed inside. She thought about things she could have said, should have said, but never had.

And then she wanted to hit herself for allowing some dwarf to affect her so much that she could not eat or sleep properly. It was ridiculous, really.

She felt an urge to do things, to clean the house and fix the drafty windows. She even found herself taking apart and repairing Dwalin's sleigh which had crumbled under the small avalanche of snow from his roof last spring. They would need it in the winter, might as well do it now.

Hanah chopped wood and swept the chimney. She got rid of the nettles which were claiming more ground around the yard and cooked soup on them. She painted the front door and the windows. And when she finished theirs, she did Dwalin's as well.

She scraped the old peeling paint off the boards around the windows, before cleaning them with soap water and repainting them. Dwalin sat outside, smoking his pipe and commented on her work now and then.

"Had you planned on doin' this yourself, Master Dwalin?" Hanah said between her teeth as she scraped a particularly stubborn patch.

"No time."

"Then should you not be pleased you're gettin' it done for free, and leave it at that?"

"No sense in havin' it done half-arsed, either way."

Hanah's hand slipped, ramming her knuckles into the board, and cut herself on the scrape. She hissed in pain.

"Damnit," she barked, and kicked the bucket of tools at her feet, making it fly several feet across the yard. It did not make her hand hurt less.

"Woah, lass. Have a care. It might be your work, but those are my tools."

Dwalin motioned for her come closer.

"Let's have a look at that."

Hanah sighed, but did as he asked. He took her injured hand and looked at it. The knuckles on her right hand reddened and her index finger had a line of small blood pearls.

"Tis nothin'. Put somethin' cold on it to keep it from swelling."

She followed him to the ice box in his kitchen.

"What's got you all wired up, lass?" he asked. He pulled out a piece of raw meat and pushed it roughly onto her hand.

"Ow—bloody Mahal," Hanah hissed and took the meat from him.
"Get it out. Won't do for the wee one to hear yer cursin' when she comes home."

"I'm fine." Hanah kept her eyes on the meat. Pink drops of blood stained the cuff of her shirt.

"Don't beat yerself down like stone. It doesn't suit ye. It's makin' yer sister miserable. She's jumpy like a hen in a wolf den. You need to get over it."

"There's nothin' to get over. I'm just in a bad mood."

"Have been for the last few weeks it seems. What's he done?"

Hanah froze. "Who?"

"Fee. Figured he must've done somethin' to upset ye. He hasn't dared show his face for weeks."

Hanah kept her eyes averted. "Our business is done. He won't be comin' around anymore."

She left the kitchen and returned outside to the window. She heard Dwalin follow her. He knocked his pipe on the door frame. After a long moment, he spoke with a deep, worrying frown.

"Are ye breakin' off the courtship?" he sounded grave.

Hanah's eyes widened.

"Am I what?"

"I haven't said anythin', 'cause yer both adults in yer own right. But I think ye should consider it very carefully. Once broken, it would take a lot fer it to be picked up again."

Did Dwalin think there was an engagement between Hanah and Prince Fíli? Dwalin had probably seen Fíli coming to her house. How would she explain that their relationship had been of another kind?

"I'm not—" Hanah shook her head, blushing and losing her words. "He hasn't courted me."

"Peddle that shite elsewhere. I'm not daft." He narrowed his eyes at her. "I know what's goin' on. The visits, the gifts—it's all there. He's courted you for months."

Hanah's chest tightened. "No, he hasn't."

"Aye, he has," he insisted in a growl.

It did not make any sense. He had not said anything. She had not said anything. She had not seen anything which would indicate—

Hanah grew light-headed. Her thoughts were all jumbled.

She knew dwarves had different customs from men. Fíli had said so himself, but she had never learned what those were.

Fíli had been extraordinarily kind to her and her sister. He had come to call on her for no other reason than her company. He had kissed her, been very intimate with her, he had even said something about children—but never anything about marriage. She would certainly have remembered if he had! Except that once when he asked if she ever would consider marrying someone—and she had said no.
She would have dismissed the idea completely, had it been anyone other than Dwalin who brought up the topic. Hanah felt a headache coming on.

"Don't bloody play with me, Dwalin. What are you sayin'?"

"I'm sayin', he's been makin' ye comfortable, wrappin' ye up in pleasurable, pretty things, singing ye to sleep with his lullabies, until the time when ye know each other so well that ye can't be separated, and ye'll move to his home in the mountain and become his wife."

A dry sob escaped Hanah's throat. She forced away any other threatening to break forth.

"But he's a prince," her voice quivered like a leaf in a storm.

Dwalin shook his head at her. "Which means he can marry anyone he bloody pleases. No one will be allowed to analyse and criticize yer origin. None will ever get close enough to try."

"What about his family?"

He snorted. "Oh, they'll have opinions—and plenty of 'em. That does not change no matter who the lad decide to court. But it hasn't stopped him thus far."

Hanah drew a deep breath, like she had been drowning and just reached the surface.

"Why didn't he say somethin'?" she shouted. "Why did he pretend like it didn't...?"

Why did she not ask? Why did he not stop her when she assumed all those things about his intentions? Why did she say all those things? Why could she not just have held onto him while she had the chance?

Hanah squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her palms to her forehead.

"So foolish." She hit her palms against her head. Her hands were sticky from ox blood.

"Oy, stop that." Dwalin's voice was gentler now. He came to stand next to her, forcing her to lower her hands.

"Here," he said, beckoning her with his hands. "Hit me."

"What? I'm not gonna hit you." Hanah sounded miserable with a lump in her throat.

"Take a swing. Ye'll feel better." He held up his palms. "Here."

She looked at him a moment. He was dead serious.

Hanah took an unsteady breath and hit his palm with her right hand. She winced as pained blossomed in her swollen knuckles.

"What was that?" Dwalin grumbled. "Are ye pettin' a wee pony? Hit me."

She punched with her left. His hand barely moved.

"The Ladybug hits harder than that. Now, come on."

Hanah began to hit him in earnest, gritting her teeth while doing so.

"Damn dwarves," she grunted between hits. "Ridiculous—infuriatin'—bloody—dwarves!"
The final hit was with both fists to his palms, any pain in her hand gone from her mind.

"There ye go," Dwalin muttered, satisfied.

Hanah doubted he found her strikes to be worthy of the name, but he seemed to recognize that she gave it her best. She stood a while catching her breath, which turned into deep sighs. Fat, hot tears ran down her cheeks. She could not stop them, nor did she try.

Dwalin put his large, heavy hand on her head. He did not stroke her hair, just held it there.

Hanah closed the distance between them and pressed her forehead into his chest, her hands clutched his tunic. He let her lean on him while she cried silently.

He did not offer any words of comfort, advice, or promises of future happiness. Instead, he praised her posture.

"Ye have a solid stance," he said, clearing his throat awkwardly.

Hanah soon calmed, but she stood there a moment longer, just breathing.

She had to let it go. She could not continue to walk around in a temper fueled with regrets and anger. It had happened quickly, and it would be forgotten quickly. It hurt now because it was fresh. It would fade, like everything else.

"He didn't do anythin'," Hanah confessed at last. "It's my fault he's not comin' back."

Hanah kept her eyes closed as she let the fire in her chest smolder and eat away at her heart as easily as burning paper.

Someday it would fade.
Hanah had cleaned the house, organized tools, buttons, and needles, when she began repairing their own clothes and shoes. This much to Hemery's dismay as she claimed new soles to her boots would make them stiff and chafe. However, since winter was on the doorstep and they both needed boots that retained warmth, Hanah took no notice of her sister's complaints.

After boots, she set her hands to patching coats and shirts and bags. She had forgotten to empty her old bag while fastening a new shoulder strap, making the contents spill out onto the floor of the workshop when she turned it up-side down.

Sighing, Hanah bent low to retrieve the items. Scraps of leather, a thread roll, and a wrinkled, folded piece of paper, but not her regular sketch paper: parchment, old, yellowed—and stained with ink.

Hanah froze with the paper in hand. Before she unfolded it, she knew what it was. On one side, long lines, circles and letters. On the other, a large black stain, accidentally spilled by her on Lady Brage's table.

Somehow, it had wedged itself in a pocket of the bag where she had not seen it. Until now, it had been invisible, blissfully forgotten.

"What's that?" Hemery asked from her work station.

It was not strange she would ask when her sister stood still, as if struck by lightning, with her eyes glued to the paper in her hand. It looked like waste paper, but Hanah knew it was not.

Unfolding it, she viewed the perfect lines and shapes drawn on the clean side. She had never seen anything like it. She had actually no idea what it was, or why Lady Brage was so furious to lose it.

"I don't know," she said.

Hemery jumped up from her spot to come and view the mystery herself. It was as if she could smell riddles, Hanah thought while flattening the parchment on the table.

"Is it instructions? A sewin' pattern?" Hemery asked.

Hanah shrugged.

"It's almost like a map," Hanah mused. "Only, the lines are too straight. A map of large straight things. Buildings, maybe?"

Hemery screwed her eyes at the images. She flipped the paper a quarter turn.

"It's Erebor," she said, triumphant in her revelation. "Well, part of it. Here's the big corridor from the south entrance." She pointed to two thick lines on the right side of the paper. "There's the big door to the throne room, and there's a..." She paused to read something. "A kitchen. Something about Durin."

"The royal kitchen?" Hanah offered.

"Sure." Hemery did not sound sure, but her guess was as good as any.

"The king would have his own kitchen, wouldn't he?" Hanah said, not really a question.
"So that's the kitchen," Hemery's finger ran over the parchment. "Cellars, more cellars..."

"The whole city is a cellar," Hanah stated wryly.

"Then this narrow corridor leads to... an eating room—dining room," Hemery corrected herself. "Key."

"What key?"

"That's what it says. Key. Here." Hemery pointed to a space between two thick dark lines. "I think they mean the key to a door there."

"But if it's the king's kitchen, there would be people there all the time. Probably guarded too. Why would anyone need a key?"

The word was written in a different script than the rest. In fact, there were a lot of scribbles in the margin and in the large empty spaces in the middle of big rooms on the page, written in fresher, darker ink than the original design. Were these Brage's own notes? What would the landlord want with this? It was a map to gain access to the private spaces of the king. Hanah knew the Brages hated dwarves, had it in their minds that dwarves were the cause of their children's deaths.

"Perhaps it's to lock somethin in?" Hemery said, looking up at her.

Would they be so bold as to make an attempt on the king of Erebor, in his home? It was unthinkable—impossible—surely? The mountain was a fortress. Hundreds upon hundreds of guards patrolled the grounds as well as the city. She was not sure how many men Lord Brage had at his disposal, but it was nowhere near the numbers of King Thorin's. Not to mention all the people gathering for the festival...

Hanah suddenly remembered Dwalin's worries about the lack of safety during the celebrations. There were so many people milling around, guests, strangers from all over, as well as their friends, family and servants. Anyone could sneak in. According to Dwalin, there were not enough guards to keep the city safe. Would they be able to keep the king safe, and his family? What about Fíli?

Hanah's head swam and she had difficulty drawing breath. She had to lean her hands on the table, forcing her breathing to stay calm to not let her sister know something was wrong.

"Perhaps you're right," Hanah said, thoughts spinning.

This map did not testify to a plan of an open attack on the city; it was the back door, the hidden way, the cowardly way. The way Hanah personally knew them to live by.

The sun was setting when Hanah crossed the yard to Dwalin's house. Now October, the days grew shorter. There would be frost tonight, she could smell it in the air and feel it nip at her nose when she inhaled.

Dwalin answered on the first knock. He did not demand to know why she was disturbing him or tell her to go away. Instead, he asked her to sit down and offered her ale which he knew she would refuse.

"I never told you why we left Blackwater, did I?" she asked, sitting down in Dwalin's warm kitchen. His forge, which never cooled even when not in use, sat just on the other side of the wall. In summer, it was unbearable to sit where Hanah sat without all the windows open. But on an autumn evening such as this, it was a welcome comfort.
"Fee said they falsely accused ye of espionage, and ye had to flee fer yer life."

"Yes, that is correct. I mean, that's what I told him. But it's not all."

Dwalin's brow lowered as he sucked on his pipe. That was his way of patiently waiting for her to continue.

"Aside from the gold Lady Brage found in the shop, she had another reason to distrust me. I ruined a parchment on her desk, and to avoid her horrid temper, I hid it and took it with me so she wouldn't see. When she realized it was gone, she called me a thief because..." She placed the parchment on the table between them. "I am a thief."

Dwalin raised a brow in genuine surprise, but did not speak. He unfolded the ink-blotched paper and regarded its contents.

"I did not know what it was when I took it. I had all but forgotten about it until today."

He still did not speak.

"It's a map, isn't it? It's strange she would have that, right? I mean, why would she want exact details of the king's kitchen, and how did she obtain it in the first place?"

Dwalin carefully placed his pipe on a plate, stood, and folded the paper. Hanah began to worry at his calm behavior, like he was suppressing something. She wished he would say something, anything.

"Please, tell me I did the right thing tellin' you this."

"We need to go to Erebor. Now."

Dwalin and Balin spoke rapidly in Khuzdul to each other. Dwalin loud and gruff, Balin calmer but concise. Hanah understood nothing except a few words and phrases Dwalin repeated now and then, which she figured were curses of some sort. She had heard him use them under his breath many times before.

She had barely had time to inform Hemery where they were going, and for her to stay home and lock the door until she got back, before she was dragged to the city under the mountain.

Balin's chambers were in the south wing on the second floor. The room was covered in books, papers, and quills. Hanah feared for the tomes on the floor next to the fireplace, but did not dare interrupt the dwarves' discussion.

Suddenly, Balin turned to her with a polite, but tense smile, as if he just realized she was in the room with them. He excused himself for a moment, leaving her with Dwalin while he stepped outside.

"Those black-tongued, mushroom-smoking, troll fuckers," Dwalin growled.

Hanah gaped. She had heard a lot of bad language in her life, especially since she moved into Dwalin's yard, but his temper surprised her. He did not like a lot of people, but she had never seen anyone get to him to the point of angering him.

"They're gonna wish they stayed in whatever dirt hole they were shat out of. My corpse will be picked clean by vultures in the wastelands long before they'll get within pissin' distance of Erebor,
much less any of the Durins."

Hanah still had not recovered from his initial vitriolic outburst.

"When you say troll— You don't really mean that, do you?"

"It would be as possible and likely as anything else. There has to be some kind of sorcery that has allowed them to become this fat, lazy, and wealthy for decades. In a sane world, the likes of them would have eaten each other until only one miserable, lardy, pathetic lump remained to bury them and himself in that pit they call a mine."

Dwalin was feeding his rage, and it did not seem as if he would finish anytime soon.

"Why would Lady Brage have a map of Erebor?" Hanah asked to distract him. "They don't have any business here."

"They want to make it their business. Those reptiles want to crawl through the tunnels of the Lonely Mountain into the heart of the city and murder the king."

When Balin returned, he only showed his face in the doorway, beckoning them to follow him. They passed through corridors and ascended stairs, but Hanah could not orient herself.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"To see the king," Balin replied.

"Oh, suck an elf," exclaimed Dwalin, stopping in his tracks.

"Well, where did ye think we were going? To see yer sweetheart?" his brother snapped impatiently, and pulled on his arm. "He needs to be informed as soon as possible."

Dwalin reluctantly started moving again. A low growl simmered in his chest.

They slowed by a familiar, red tapestry.

"This is Lord— Prince Fíli's chambers," Hanah stated.

"Aye," Balin said, observing her. "It's closer, and we will attract less attention gathering here than in the king's private quarters."

Fíli's study looked the same as always. Smelled the same. Hanah swallowed away a lump in her throat.

"What's he doing here?" The venomous rumble came from the other room. By the large table, resting his hand on one of the high-backed chairs, stood an unusually tall dwarf. Long, dark hair framed a bearded face with piercing eyes.

King Thorin Oakenshield.

"There have been certain developments," Balin began with a tired sigh. "About the ridge."

"I don't care about those ghouls. I asked—what is he doing here?"

The king pointed at Dwalin. He stepped forward as he raised his hand, making his coat sway open, revealing the crisp white inside. Hanah stared, not only because the dwarf demanded attention and seemed used to getting it, but also because he was wearing her coat, her father's coat—their coat.
Hanah's stomach warmed at the realization. Fíli had bought their coat as a gift for his uncle, the
king.

"My brother and Miss Skinner has brought to my attention that there may be a threat to your
safety," Balin tried again.

"And he's a threat to my patience," Thorin countered. "Get on with it then."

Balin unfolded the ink-stained parchment on the table.

"It was found in Lady Brage's possession," Balin explained while the king reviewed the map.

Hanah could see his shoulders tense and his hands fist where they rested on the table.

"Call off the celebration," he said, low and calm.

"But—" Balin looked shocked. "Sire, it's Durin's Day."

That is right, Hanah thought. Durin's Day. She had forgotten about that. Used to the crowds from
the past weeks, she hardly gave it any thought anymore when she had to elbow her way through
the streets.

"Lock down the mountain, rid us of any infiltrators."

Dwalin snorted, pulling the king from his thoughts.

"Does the threat to my family amuse?" Thorin asked in derision.

"Yer strategy does. Aye, lock yerself in with the assassins. Fine idea."

I do not require your opinion, nor have I asked for it."

"No, but you'll get it anyway. You'll go on with the celebration, but you'll triple the guard, cancel
any private audiences, and don't come within arms reach of yer guests and or touch anythin' they
bring with 'em."

"Well, thank you for that expert assessment," Thorin cut in, his words dripping with sarcasm.

"And no more sneakin' off on yer own without guards!" Dwalin finished.

Thorin's brow furrowed, like a gathering storm.

"Aye," Dwalin confirmed without being asked. "I may not be welcome in this city, but I know
everythin' that goes on around here."

Balin put himself between his brother and the king.

"Point is, we don't know who and how many they are," Balin brought them back to the topic at
hand.

"So I do nothing?" Thorin asked.

"It's better to make careful precautions and silent investigations than to rush into the hands of the
enemy."

"And give them more time to execute whatever plans they are forging? No. I will face any enemy
head on," Thorin stated.

"As usual, with no thought of the consequences."

"Damn the consequences!" Thorin seemed to get angrier every time Dwalin opened his mouth, no matter how logical his words were. Of course, it did not help that Dwalin deliberately provoked him.

"What's going on here?" Suddenly, Fíli's voice rose over the argument escalating in his quarters.

Hanah unconsciously took a step back as the princes appeared in the doorway to her right. They did not notice her in the corner.

"There's risk of an assassination in Erebor," Balin replied.

Kíli chuckled. "I know Dwalin and Uncle don't get along, but I doubt they will actually try to kill each other."

Balin ignored the jest.

"Here," he said, motioning to the map on the table.

The brothers regarded the parchment silently a moment.

"I don't suppose this was left out by the cook and the celebration committee?" Kíli asked rhetorically.

"This is ours," Fíli observed, tracing the numbers and letters at the bottom of the page. "Where would someone get a hold of this?"

"The old archives," Balin said. "But it was destroyed in the siege. Who knows how much has been scattered with the wind since?"

"So where did this come from?" Kíli asked.

Balin shifted his gaze over the brother's shoulders, at Hanah. They turned to follow Balin's focus, settling on her. The power of their stares, Fíli's stare, was like standing in Dwalin's forge. Hanah felt heat flood her cheeks and her stomach.

"It's from Lady Brage's table. I didn't know what it was until today."

The dwarves just looked at her, silently. Hanah sighed, folded her arms across her chest, and continued her explanation.

"I spilled ink on it and didn't want her to see, so I took it."

Fíli turned the parchment over and revealed the ink blotch on the other side. He smiled crookedly.

"I guess you are a spy after all."

Hanah blushed and looked away. Even now, he could not refrain from teasing her, however cruelly.

"Pretty poor spy," Kíli snorted.

"On the contrary," Fíli protested. "A spy that doesn't know she's a spy. That's brilliant." His smile
was cold.

"Ye'd better watch what ye're sayin', lad," Dwalin cautioned with a growl.

"Well, how do we know?" Fíli asked, looking at Hanah.

Kíli, who seemed to sense the weight of Dwalin's words more acutely than his brother, spoke up.

"To be fair, she's had plenty of opportunities to hurt both you and me. If she wanted to, don't you think she would have done so by now?"

"Perhaps that's what they want us to think," Fíli shrugged, taking this conversation way too lightly for Hanah's taste. "Lulling us into a false sense of security, and then—"

"That's ridiculous," Hanah interrupted. "Why would I? My connection to the Brages have been nothin' but a pain. I'm glad I'm rid of those tyrants who threatened the lives of me and my sister, as well as my livelihood. Why would I have shown you the map in the first place? I could have just burned it." She threw out an arm in the direction of the blasted paper. "Perhaps I should have," she muttered to herself, sitting down heavily in the nearest chair.

"And you know I can't read," she spat at Fíli, folded her arms, crossed her legs, and averted her eyes, ending the conversation. She just wanted them to finish their meeting, so she could be dismissed and go home.

"This is getting us nowhere," Thorin stated. He picked up the map, folded it, and put it in his pocket.

Fíli spoke then, but not to her. "Kíli, you and Balin make any extra security measures you deem necessary. Take all the guards you need."

"Aye, brother."

"Uncle," Fíli turned to Thorin. "I believe you have guests waiting."

An abyss could have been filled with the air exhaled in the deep sigh of King Thorin, as his nephew reminded him of his duties as party host.

"We will resume this in the morning," Fíli concluded.

"Thank you, Dwalin and Miss Hanah, for your time. We'll take it from here," Thorin said formally.

Dwalin muttered something unsavory in Khuzdul, which Thorin pretended not to hear, before stomping out. Balin followed him.

Thorin in turn paused by the door and addressed Kíli.

"Kíli, before you do anything else, you will escort Miss Skinner home."

Kíli looked between Thorin and Fíli, who had his back turned, before answering. "Certainly, Uncle."

Hanah was left with Kíli and Fíli in an awkward silence.

"Miss Hanah," Kíli said at last, motioning to the door.

She stood to follow him, but stopped half-way, turning to Fíli.
"You don't really think I have anythin' to do with this?"

Fíli glanced at her over his shoulder, but averted his eyes once more.

"You are free to go, charged of no crime. What does it matter what I think?"

He was right. It should not matter. They had no ties to each other. But did it mean they meant nothing to each other...?

"I just want to make sure you don't doubt me, M'lord—Prince Fíli." She was quick to correct herself.

He met her eyes then, a blank stare boring into her. She forced herself to return it, as blank and impersonal as his, to prove there was no emotional pressure from her end, only seeking assurance that he did not suspect her of any wrongdoing.

"Now, Miss Skinner, I would not presume to jeopardize your reputation by keeping you here any longer. I bid you good night."

The reversion to formal address and title stung.

"Right."

Hanah turned to go, thoughts flashing in her mind, like fireflies. She was heading for the door that would close behind her, separating her from Fíli for the rest of the night, for the rest of her life? They had no ties to each other, she had no reason to see him ever again.

She stopped, turning back to him.

"I just— I need to make sure..." she began, stammering. She closed her fists in determination. She needed to say this. "I could not bear it if... I was to leave this room and never see you again, and you would carry on thinkin' ill of me."

He appeared completely calm and unbothered by her words.

"You did your duty as a citizen of Dale, and deserve our thanks—"

"Stop it," Hanah snapped and waved her hands in front of her, as if she could physically brush away the wall he had erected between them. "Stop it, and just tell me honestly that you don't resent me now."

Fíli looked uncertain for a moment. Then he cleared his throat and turned to Kíli.

"Leave us," he said low.

"I can't do that, brother. Uncle—"

"Kíli, go."

Kíli pointed a finger at his brother, a stubborn expression on his face. "I'll be right outside. I'm not leaving, alright? Just so we're clear."

When Kíli left, closing the door behind him, and silence stretched between Hanah and Fíli, she waited. Barely daring to breathe, anticipating his reply.
Fíli closed his eyes briefly.

"I don't think ill of you."

He approached the sideboard where he kept his bottles. He poured himself a cup of something and held it a moment before changing his mind and putting it down.

"I don't regret what I did, though I admit it was wrong," he said, still not looking at her. "I tried to tie you to me without official bonds because, foolishly, I thought you'd be easier to catch if you were unaware you were being hunted..." He chuckled without humour. "So to speak."

Hanah felt a lump in her throat. She pressed her palms flat together in front of her mouth, afraid to speak.

"I chose the easy way—justifying it by reminding myself that you did not want a commitment. Hoping that, in time, you'd realize how well we fit. I'd show you all the benefits of a relationship with me, how good we could be together, without the complicating pressure of courtship. Because you didn't want marriage, to anyone."

Fíli turned to look at her then. Straight, unguiled, sober and honest. It still felt accusing to Hanah.

"Little did I know, the more time we spent together, the more you pulled away."

"I'm sorry," she whispered against her cold fingertips, wishing it could be against his warm cheek.

"I've realized my mistake." He peered at her with a furrowed brow, as if trying to see her better in the low light of the fire. "But do you even know what you're apologizing for?"

She nodded carefully, but she was unsure where to start. She had imagined this conversation so many times, never believing she would get an opportunity to play it out, lay it all out in front of him.

"I'm sorry for a lot of things," she began hesitantly. "I'm sorry for the words I chose. I was too harsh. I didn't mean for it to sound like I had some kind of aversion—" She could not even repeat it. "—because I don't. And you know that."

Fíli's eyes flickered to her hand which had moved by itself toward him, as if to reach out and touch him, but she caught herself and clutched it to her chest to stop her from doing something stupid.

"I'm sorry for rejectin' you," she continued. "I should have stayed in your embrace as long as I wished to, without fear, but I was convinced it was impossible for you to—" She had almost said love. "—be with someone like me, especially one so poor. The limitations of my birth haunted me, filtering everything you said and did."

This forced honesty made her face heat once more, but she continued.

"I'm sorry for not believing you. You tried to tell me, and I didn't listen. But I get it now. And I would never ask you to forgive me, but I need you to understand me."

Tears burned in the corners of her eyes. She blinked them away. She would see this through without bursting into tears like a child.
"I'm not sure I do," he finally said.

Hanah stared at him, confounded. He looked bemused, like he was trying to establish if she was really there with him in the shadowed room or if she was a dead image of herself, a ghost not to be trusted.

How should she have said it differently to make him understand? Did she have to start all over? She did not think she could handle that.

"I understand why you spoke like you did at our last meeting. I'm grateful for your honesty, but..." He shrugged, hopelessly. "What do you expect me to do with this?"

Hanah could make no demands. She had no right.

"I guess, I just wanted you to listen—"

"And then what? Make sure there were no hard feelings?"

She opened her mouth, but she did not know what to say.

Fíli shook his head in disbelief. "You still want nothing?"

"I want..." Hanah's voice broke.

Fíli locked eyes with her, slowly closing the distance between them, searching for something.

"What, Hanah? What do you want?" He came to stand before her.

"I want..." She hated her quivering voice and gave up trying to say the words.

Hanah took his large hand and placed it on top of her heart. The heat of the dry skin seeped through her shirt, branding her. She could feel the rapid tattoo of her heart against his palm.

He showed no reaction, only looked where his hand rested. But since he did not move away, she put her own hand to rest on his chest. His pulse was also unnaturally fast, and it gave her confidence.

Carefully, she placed her other hand on the side of his face. His searching eyes returned to hers with that intense focus she had not seen for so long. She had not realized how much she missed it.

"Let me show you," she whispered.

And with the lightest pressure of her hand, guiding him towards her, he came willingly and eagerly.

Fili crashed his mouth to hers as her arms encircled his neck. It seemed he found what he was searching for, but it did not stop his pursuit.

Hanah's senses filled with him, his warmth and earthy smell. For once, she closed her eyes and let herself feel, even while her brain recorded everything. The way his arms wrapped around her, how his hands travelled from her back down to her waist, one arm tightening and almost enveloping her, the other continued down to caress the swell of her hips.

While drinking him in, tasting his lips with her tongue and coaxing him to join hers, she decided that whatever time she had with Fíli was worth any eventual disappointment later on. She was a free person, dependant on no one, and had no family to answer to. She could make her own
choices. No one could punish her for following her heart.

She was free, and here with Fili she was also alive. She felt it in the goosebumps that appeared when he kissed the sensitive skin on her neck and his hands trailed up her back beneath her tunic.

"I want you," she breathed as his tongue and lips moved over her shoulder which was suddenly uncovered somehow.

He froze. Had she said the wrong thing? Was that not what he wanted to hear?

Fíli pulled back and took her face in his hands. Not uncertain anymore, or teasing, or calculating, but a with a warm spark in his eyes, he looked at her. Hopeful, conspiratorial, joyful, as if they shared a secret laugh—just the two of them.

In that moment, Hanah understood why he was special. Ever since the first time she entered Erebor, Fíli had been able to make her smile. He had not changed her, only unlocked something she had always carried. She had always been free, but with him she could show it, show herself, all of her. And she wanted to show him.

He spoke the words she was already thinking.

"Will you share my bed tonight?" His thumb stroke her bottom lip. She kissed the digit.

"Yes."

Fíli kissed her before the sound died on her lips. She held on to his shoulders when he picked her up, and he groaned when she secured her legs around his waist. Hanah kept her eyes closed while he carried her, the world seemingly spinning around them. When he put her down, she felt softness under her feet, the furs on the floor of Prince Fíli’s bedroom.

The thought was disconcerting, but it did not make her pull away. She knew he was a prince, and it scared her for several reasons, but being intimate with a male she cared for so much would be scary no matter what title he held. Right now, he held her, and that was all that mattered.

Hanah was faintly aware of a door closing and locking behind her. Then, Fíli's hand went to her belt and tunic. As soon as they fell to the floor, he simply grabbed the bottom of her shirt and pulled it over her head, not bothering with buttons. His lips touched her naked shoulder, working their way down her chest, as his hands traced her shoulder blades. He lingered on her breasts, teeth grazing her nipples and his tongue laving the underside, relishing how the soft flesh gave way. His gentle but urgent touch made her tremble, while heat flooded her abdomen.

He went down on his knees in front of her, placing open-mouthed kisses on her stomach. His fingers found the strings to her trousers and pulled at them just enough to tug the leather down her hips. Leaving the trousers at mid-thigh, he traced the edges of her triangle of hair with his mouth. Tickling and tingling, Fíli's beard and soft lips tightened a cord in her, which she knew would grow much tighter still before he would make it snap.

Her legs locked, Hanah tried to keep her balance by holding onto his shoulders. But when he began licking at her folds, she lost her equilibrium and slowly fell awkwardly backwards on the bed, leaning on her elbows. He chuckled, but took the opportunity to pull off her trousers all the way, along with her shoes.

Hanah sat on the edge of the bed and reached for him. Fíli complied, rising to his feet before her. Her fingers began undoing his buttons carefully, she could feel them trembling. She had never seen him naked, not even without a shirt.
Fíli, however, was anything but careful as he helped her by pulling off his tunic and undershirt before she could count four buttons down. One of his braids got caught on a buckle of his shoulder holster, which held twin knives hanging at his sides underneath the first layer. He yelped and they laughed while he tried to untangle himself.

Hanah raised herself up on her knees to help him. It distracted her from being self-conscious of her naked form until she felt his rough, scorching hands cup her buttocks.

"Wait." She tried to keep him still while she extricated his tresses from the unforgiving metal. Her fingers faltered when his lips closed around a nipple. Slowly, she managed to open the buckle and separate it from the strap and his hair. The holster dropped to the floor with a clatter of metal knife sheaths.

"Careful with my weapons," Fíli admonished, nipping at her.

Hanah was about to respond in derision, when her intake of breath turned into a gasp. One of his hands was between her legs, parting her folds to spread the hot liquid gathered there.

He drew small patterns, searing her skin as if the liquid was juice from the fire blossom she knew would explode within her at the end of the road. Hanah was on her way there, but Fíli was still half-dressed. This was going too fast.

Reluctantly, Hanah pulled away, scooting backwards. Fíli groaned in disapproval and followed her to the middle of the bed. He grabbed her waist and pulled her beneath him in one swift movement, seizing her mouth in a bruising kiss. Propped up on his elbow, he barely kept his weight off her, while his other hand roamed her side, kneading her flesh. Eventually, like a magnet, it was drawn to her center yet again, almost as if he was not aware of it.

She moaned into his mouth as his touch created that sweet sting which travelled down her thighs. Fíli responded with a moan of his own, pressing even closer, and she could feel his hardness through his trousers. She was overtake by a desire to give him pleasure, as well. She wanted to touch him like he touched her.

One of her hands was trapped between his chest and the furs, the hand resting lightly on his back. The other clung to his shoulder, the muscles in her fingers echoing the sensations inside her. She had to refrain from digging her nails into his skin.

Slowly, she moved her hand from his shoulder down his chest until she reached the fastenings of his trousers. She pulled at the strings, loosening the waistband and slid her hand inside. His skin was soft, softer than she would have imagined, and hot like the walls in Dwalin's forge.

Fíli groaned and broke their kiss when she wrapped her hand around him. Breathing heavily, he rested his forehead against hers, and for the first time his fingers lost their pace and confidence.

He said nothing, so Hanah assumed she was doing alright so far. Lightly and carefully, she caressed him, and though her movements were very much limited within the confinement of his trousers, he seemed to feel every touch intensely.

Fíli kissed her roughly, moving quickly down her neck to her breasts. By allowing them his undivided attention, his lower body moved beyond Hanah's reach, and he slipped out of her hand. He did not seem to mind or care, however, because his fingers found their rhythm again, hastening her ascent to climax with a vengeance after the short pause. She knew she would not last much longer, and he seemed to know it too, moving lower still, placing himself between her legs.
The change from the rough texture of his fingers to the soft insistent precision of his tongue, and Hanah's comfort on the furs, made the ground slip away from under her after only a few heartbeats. The suddenness surprised her, and a broken cry erupted from her throat.

Fíli did not stop kissing her. Only moved his mouth from her nexus to her inner thigh, slowly up her stomach, while kneading her hips leisurely. He was not done with her yet, still he made no move to remove his trousers.

Hanah feared he would not let her rest long before his fingers would return to her core to wind her up again. Wanting a moment to regain her breath and rest her sensitive flesh, she raised herself up on her hands and knees, out of his reach. Fíli went to grab her waist again, but she pushed at his chest.

"Wait," she said, coming to stand on the floor at the foot of the bed.

His gaze had that intense focus, which in any other situation could be confused for anger, but she knew what it meant. He obediently stayed, leaning back on his elbows, watching her.

Hanah grabbed one of his feet, still clad in his ridiculously big shoes, and unlaced it. When both had been dropped on the floor with loud thuds, she realized why he needed such footwear: he had, indeed, ridiculously large feet. She had never seen anyone with such big feet.

"What?" Fíli asked, indignant. But he wiggled his toes at her, making it obvious he knew exactly what she was smirking at.

"Nothin," she shrugged. "They're... cute."

She pinched one of his toes, big as a midsummer potato. Something mischievous flashed in his eyes before he caught her wrist.

"They most certainly are not. You take that back." Fíli slowly but purposefully pulled on her hand, forcing her back into bed.

"No." She smiled while shaking her head.

He managed to settle her on his lap and capture her lips. When his teeth gently tugged on her lower lip and his hands squeezed her hips, she felt more liquid gather at her already soaking folds. As Fíli’s hands began travelling down once more, she pushed him away, making him lie back. He almost growled in protest, but obeyed with an impatient sigh. His trousers then joined the boots on the floor.

Hanah had never seen a naked man up close in his entirety. Graham and her had kept most of their clothes on. She had seen Kíli without a shirt, and very low unlaced trousers, but that made her blush for reasons completely unrelated to physical intimacy.

Fíli was similar to his brother in build. Wide shoulders, broad chest with undefined but hard muscles covered by hair which flowed like water, gathering in a line from the center of his chest down his stomach, encircling his manhood. His strong legs were also covered in hair. Even his toes had small patches of fuzz on each one.

Hanah straddled his thighs, putting her weight on her knees as she slowly traced her fingers along his sides. She noticed how his hands fisted in the fur, but he did not stop her, did not grab her. Fíli let her explore in her own pace. Warmth flooded her chest at the thought. She loved how patient he was with her, even after all this time. Of course, if he displeased her, she could just walk away. She was free and he knew it.
Still uncertain about what to do, she very carefully wrapped her hand around him. Lightly, the pad of her thumb shifted up and down along the silky underside. Every breath he drew seemed arduous. Fíli's hands strayed to her thighs, his fingers dug into her flesh, but remained still.

Hanah bent forward to softly kiss his chest, like he had done to her, enjoying the salt texture of his warm skin while she contemplated her next step, how she could bring him equal pleasure.

Fíli was big. She was glad she was still wet from his earlier attentions, but she knew it could hurt anyway. Physically, it was possible for her to receive him; women gave birth to seven pound babies, after all. But she may need more preparation. If she used her mouth on him first, like he had done to her, it could only help. Hanah stopped herself from thinking too much about it. If she hesitated too long, she might lose her nerve.

She lowered her mouth to his cock, pressing her tongue flat and licking slowly up to the tip.

A moan filled with something like pain escaped Fíli, but since he did not stop her, Hanah figured it was not actual pain, but torture of another kind.

She continued licking him on all sides, hoping to make him as slick as she was, until suddenly he sat up. With one hand in her hair and an arm around her waist, Fíli pulled her flush against him, burying his face in her neck. His shaft rubbed between her legs, making her shudder and move her hips to increase the contact.

When the searing burn returned, Hanah lifted herself enough to grip him with light fingers and guide him to her entrance. The tight cord in her abdomen triggered her inner muscles to tense, but she willed herself to relax as she slowly lowered herself onto him. Rocking a bit back and forth, she made sure her wetness covered them both until he was fully sheathed. She stilled.

Fíli raised his head to look at her with those searching eyes, running his hands up and down her back.

"Don't ever ask me to let you go again," he said softly.

Hanah knew it was the cock inside her speaking, but it was very sweet of him.

She shook her head. "I won't."

He kissed her, hungry tongue and nipping teeth, and she began to move. Fíli hummed low in his chest, tightening his hands on her.

The hard flesh inside her kept the smolder of her arousal alive, but nothing as blinding as the pleasure of his hands and mouth. He seemed to read her mind, as he had done in the past when it came to physical desire, because he slid one hand between their bodies to caress her knot of nerves with his thumb right where they joined.

Within moments, the fire flared to life, not only by the burn produced by his fingers but also from the pressure of his cock on the inside, amplifying the sensations. She moaned into his mouth. Other more desperate noises left her as well, he swallowed them too. Hanah would have called them embarrassingly close to whimpers, if she had the thought capacity to reflect on it.

The cord tightened sooner than ever. Too soon. She had wanted to stretch it out, give him more pleasure, but she was unable to stop it. She simply did not want to. Hanah's nails dug into his back and she lost her rhythm, but she was already burning.

Fíli released her from their kiss, only distancing himself a couple of inches to watch her break.
Hanah was struck by the impossibility and the inevitability of the moment. She was powerless and
powerful. The whirlwind gripped her as tightly as Fíli's hands for a few precious heartbeats. She
was flying like a blackbird, and chained to him like iron to rock, with him, here, in this room, in
this bed, together. It made her sob, mewl, and cry out before she was muted by his lips once more.

As soon as he felt her relax in his arms, Fíli flipped them over, his wide shoulders filling her field
of vision. She could tell he was close to the edge as well.

Graham and Fíli had nothing in common, except for their tense back and erratic thrusts when
approaching climax. But even in that there was a major difference, where one was distant and
introverted, the other was open and vulnerable, as well as intimidating and overwhelming.

Fíli's physical presence was almost frightening because of his solid, heavy, broad body pinning her
down. But the arms holding her, lifting her so that she was more pressed against him than the bed,
and the half-lidded eyes focused on hers as he groaned his released against her lips, made her feel
like an essential, greatly appreciated part of his pleasure, instead of just a means to an end.

Fíli slumped against her, but she could tell he was carefully keeping most of his weight off her. As
their breathing evened out, Hanah stroke his hair, moving tresses from his face. When he rolled
over on his back, he pulled her with him, keeping her snug against his side.

Their shared heat made her uncomfortable. She tried to move away from his scorching skin, but he
would not let her go.

"I'm sticky. Let me breathe for a bit," Hanah complained.

"I like you sweaty," he replied, burying his nose in her hair. "I want to smell you on my skin and
know that I am on yours as well."

She chuckled. "I'd rather not smell like anythin'."

Hanah successfully disentangled herself from his arms and lay on her stomach next to him. Fíli
turned to face her. Seemingly incapable of letting her be, he traced patterns on her back and her
thighs with his fingertips. Goosebumps erupted all along her body.

"You're the first woman I've taken to this bed," he said after a long moment. Low, almost
whispering.

The last thing Hanah wished to think of at that moment was other women, or how she was similar
or dissimilar to them—in this bed or any other. Why did he feel the need to bring this up now?

"Aren't I privileged—being invited to the prince's bed?" she joked dryly.

"I mean it, Hanah. Since the return to Erebor, you are the first."

She looked at him then, but his eyes were on the skin beneath his fingers.

"What?" Hanah's brow furrowed. She had trouble imagining it. "In twenty years?" she asked
incredulous. "But you said—"

"I said it had been known to happen. I did not say how recently. After I became a prince, such
things have grown impossible to manage."

"Your brother seems to manage it just fine." Even though Hanah wanted very much to forget how
she knew that. She wondered if Kíli had told his brother that Hanah had been his audience during
one of his sexual escapades. If not, she was not going to be the one to tell him.

"Believe it or not, my brother can be very discreet. And I am not my brother." He met her eyes then. "As the first-born, I cannot be diverting myself, as my uncle so prudently reminded me when he sent me away."

As he mentioned the king, a chill ran down her spine. "Sent you away where?"

"He charged me with handling some business in Esgaroth for a week or so. He knows the lord of Lake Town is a pain in the arse to deal with and he thought I could benefit from a distraction which did not include the fairer sex."

"How did he know?"

Fili smiled crookedly. "He's the king. I was a fool to think I could keep anything secret from him. It was his duty to inflict a penalty on me for taking advantage of you. I'd expect nothing less."

Hanah frowned and sat up, pulling the fur with her, holding it to her front. "But you didn't take advantage of me," she said, thinking of all the times she could have, and should have, said no to Fili, but did not.

He closed his eyes and sighed. "Yes, I did."
Hanah looked at Fili, waiting for him to continue.

"I already had this gnawing feeling, but Thorin made me acknowledge just how wrong I treated you."

Fili turned on his back, staring up into the ceiling with an arm flung over his head.

"I should have made my intentions clear from the beginning. Instead I tried to make you as addicted to me as I was to you. And simply because of my station, I made things difficult for you. I knew, deep down, there was a risk that you accepted my advances because of my title, for fear of displeasing me, or want to further your own station. That's the real reason I never corrected you when you called me lord. If you knew I was a prince, I would never know if you really wanted me."

He smiled without humour.

"What about now? she asked. "How do you know I'm not takin' advantage of you?"

"Because you asked me to stop visiting you," he replied, turning his head to look at her, searching. "I had not succeeded in my endeavor to claim and secure your affections. Quite the opposite—I made you feel replaceable. Never could I have dreamed that by knowing who I really was you would reject me."

Hanah's cheeks flushed, though she had already apologized to him. "I didn't reject you, I just—"

She looked down.

"I know." Fili reached up to cup her face and make her look at him. "I know that now."

His face was calm, his eyes encompassing, enveloping her. He was old, she suddenly realized. She had never thought about it before, but she could tell he was very much older than her. There was a determination and an honesty there which she had never seen before. He must have thought about this a lot.

"I created an impossible situation," he stated. "Of course you would distance yourself. I threatened your business as well as your reputation. I was unfair."

Hanah's eyes burned with unshed tears as she thought about all the times she had beaten her head against the wall trying to figure him out. All the times she had questioned herself and her actions. His words were a balm on her frayed feelings.

Fili sat up, facing her.

"Over ninety years in this world and then suddenly a girl of men comes along, showing me I don't know everything I thought I did. Showing me I'm not alone."

His thumb caressed her ear.

"I just needed to know you felt the same," he said, he shrugged with one shoulder. His mustache twitched in an uncertain smile.

Hanah kissed him then, willing away her tears. She had no reason to cry anymore. Fili's hands held
her to him, molding their lips together a long moment. Then he slowly lowered her down on her back, covering her with his body.

"What's this?" he asked, feigning annoyance at the fur she had clutched to her chest. He pulled it away, leaving nothing but naked skin between them. "No more of that."

She smiled against his lips.

When Hanah stirred from her slumber, she wondered what had awakened her. The room was silent. Too silent.

The fire had dulled to a bed of red glowing embers, no crackle. No music or roar of people celebrating Durin's Day in the center of the mountain reached them in Fíli's quarters. Even the dwarf himself was quiet beside her.

It was late. She should return home. Hemery would worry.

Carefully, Hanah slipped out of bed and dressed. She contemplated leaving without waking Fíli, but then it would be strange the next time they met. She did not want to leave things uncertain between them.

She leaned over him where he lay on his back, furs and blankets covering his lower half. She stroke his arm gently.

"Fíli. I'm leavin'."

He did not stir.

"Fíli. I need to go."

No motion nor sound escaped him.

"Fíli?"

Hanah could not distinguish any movement of his chest. She put a hand on his heart. It beat a very slow rhythm. She reached for the empty silver platter from his bedside table, probably an ashtray, and held it to his face. Only a smudge of mist caught on the silver surface. He was barely breathing.

"Fíli?" She shook him now, hard. "Fíli."

His head fell to the side, limp, with no indication of waking. What had happened? Was he ill?

During one horrible, confused moment, a thought struck her head as suddenly and irrationally as lightening—what if she had caused this? He had been fine before and then they... and now... No. Of course it could not be that. People do not just fall asleep and then—

...you'll fall into a deep, deep sleep from which you cannot wake...

Hanah remembered the pain medication Healer Elín had supplied her with. There were plenty of substances found in nature—roots, bark, berries, fruits—which could alter one's state of consciousness. Make you happy, make you aggressive, make you sleep, or even kill you. Hanah's throat constricted painfully at the thought.

But Fíli was a healthy, strong dwarf. He would have no need for such medication. And if he had
not done this to himself, then—

Hanah tore from the room, desperate to find help. The guards would hear her if she called from the corridor. She opened the door between Fíli's study and the hallway, and a dwarf tumbled into the room.

Kíli had sat with his back to the door, falling backwards on Fíli's carpet when it opened. His attempt to rectify his horizontal mode was very cumbersome and sluggish, which indicated he had been sleeping while sitting by his brother's door.

"Now I really must put my foot down," he said, holding up a finger forbiddingly, while stretching himself to his full height. "And insist on escorting you home at once, Miss Hanah."

Hanah did not allow herself to reflect on how long he had been waiting, or whether he knew how long he had been sleeping while waiting for her.

"There is somethin' wrong with Fíli. I can't wake him."

"What?" The haze disappeared from Kíli's eyes.

"He's barely breathin'. Somethin's happened. You must get help."

Kíli seemed torn between going to see his brother's condition for himself and using time effectively by retrieving a healer at once. Kíli knew where to find the nearest healer, she did not. He looked from the door leading to Fíli's bedroom to Hanah, regarding her. What he saw there must have made up his mind because he nodded and took off running.

She turned to go back inside when a movement caught her eye. Taking a step back out into the corridor, she noticed on her right—the opposite direction of Kíli's route—a figure retreating down the hall. A guard?

"Wait! Please, help," Hanah called out.

The figure did not stop. The distance between them was not great. She should have been heard.

The person wore a cloak with little to no indication whether he lived or worked on the third floor of the south wing. He also seemed slimmer than a dwarf, making no sound as he moved away on quick feet.

Hanah began to follow, to meet the person and spread her plea for help.

"Stop. Please, help me!"

As she was about to lose sight of the cloak wearer around the corner where the corridor opened up and dropped down to the entrance hall, the figure paused, turned and glanced at Hanah, half hidden behind the hood.

Hanah stopped in her tracks out of pure shock. She knew that face. A young woman, with hair and bodily features clad in cloak and shadows. But where from?

Hanah began to run now. She quickly reached the balcony, but not quickly enough. The woman was gone. Few people milled around. Looking around, she saw a stream of dwarves and men moving from another corridor and down a staircase. The woman would most likely attempt to blend into the crowd to get to the exit.
Hanah joined the slow-moving river of people, slipping between them, cutting in front of them, trying to catch a glimpse of a raised hood. When she was almost at the bottom of the stairs in the entrance hall, she could see the slim figure in the sea of broad shoulders, but as soon as she came to the same level, the crowd swallowed the cloak.

She could not ignore the risk that this woman came from Blackwater. Not when they had only earlier that same evening talked about the threat of assassination. What would she be doing in the south wing? Only dwarves worked and lived there, no men.

Fire and ice waged war inside her at the thought. Hanah had to find her.

She climbed up on the base of a stone statue off to the side to be able to see over everyone's heads. People were not only going in one direction now. Some were going out, some in, and some simply stood still, immersed in loud conversations to be heard by their comrades over the clamour. It was impossible to fix even one person with her eyes and follow them, let alone find a specific someone in the crowd. Though it must have been midnight, or perhaps later, the celebration seemed nowhere near its end.

When she had scanned the room so long that the flames and frost inside her had consumed each other instead of her innards, and her worry for Fíli was stronger than her patience for detective work, she returned to the south wing. It took much longer to go up the stairs than down. When she approached the corridor on the third floor, six guards who had not been there before barred her way.

Hanah stated her need to see Prince Fíli, but the guards responded with the edge of their spears pointed at her.

"The prince is not available," one claimed in polite terms, though his rough articulation through clenched teeth suggested it was not meant as such. Thus, with no coddle, she was told to go away, sharpish.

So Kíli had summoned reinforcements as well as healers. It was probably wise, Hanah conceded, though she would much rather have been at Fíli's side at the moment. She had no idea how grave danger he was in. She could only fear. But she tried to convince herself that if anyone would receive the best medical care, it would be Crown Prince Fíli.

King Thorin would have heard of his nephew's condition by now. It surprised her that he had not yet forced the mountain to a grinding halt. Perhaps it was only a matter of time before they were all interrogated by the royal guard, including her. She was the only one who was in the room with Fíli when he... fell ill.

She had better go home to Hemery and tell her what was happening, before she was summoned to the city again. What would she say when they asked? That she had been asleep and then she saw a strange woman leave the corridor? It sounded ridiculous, though she knew it to be truth. It made Hanah's skin crawl to know someone had been in the room as she and Fíli slept.

Her steps faltered.

The door.

The bedroom door had been locked. Fíli had locked it when they entered. The perpetrator must have had knowledge of lock picking. Or a key. Although Kíli had remained at the door all night, that was not the only door leading to Fíli's chambers. If one had a map, it would be no problem finding a way in.
But they would wonder why Hanah had not stayed with Fíli to secure his safety while Kíli fetched help. Without the mysterious woman, it would be impossible to convince the king that Hanah had nothing to do with this. If they searched her house, they would even find remains of Elín's medication. It all looked very suspicious. Hanah's heart began to hammer in her chest.

As soon as she had passed Dale, Hanah ran the rest of the way home. She would raise Hemery from bed and go to Dwalin. He would know what to do.

Dwalin's yard lay dark when she got there. He would have gone to bed by now. If not, he would be at The Dragon's Head. In any case, it should be easy enough to find him.

Hanah reached her own door and stopped dead. The door was open. Not much, only an inch, but a sliver of black in the moonlight told her the latch was off.

Carefully, she pulled the door open. The uncovered windows allowed a dull grey light to drape the kitchen in shadowed shadows. Something like a boot scuffed against the floor, before silence descended once more.

Slowly, she moved toward the alcove where Hemery should be sleeping. Her footsteps were soft, but still made too much noise for her liking. She stopped in the doorway. It was almost pitch black in their sleeping space. She stood still, trying to distinguish anything in the murk, other than the dancing colours and shapes her eyes painted in their attempt to see patterns out of nothing.

Her breath was loud in her ears from the run, and her heart beat painfully from the fear, but was hers the only ones in the room?

"Hem?"

"Hanah?" her sister's voice quivered from the darkness.

Hanah had not seen her sister cry in a long time, but even without seeing her face, she recognized the choked, wet sobs. Why was she crying?

Something shifted. Shuffle of feet and rustling of clothes. A figure emerged from the corner. Hemery with something heavy around her neck, and a towering shadow with gleaming eyes. Was it the woman from the corridor? It had to be.

"Who are you?" Hanah asked.

"You don't know me?" a female voice answered, out of breath, from excitement or the run here—Hanah did not know.

"I know you, Hanah the dwarf spy. Skinner the sinner."

Hanah wanted to ask how she knew about her charges at Blackwater, how she knew where she lived, how she knew of her relation with Fíli, but she did not have to.

"Rumours travel fast."

If the woman thought she was a spy and wished to punish her for it, Hanah had to come up with a way to get Hemery out of her claws. She had her arm tightly around Hemery's neck, the girl's throat clamped in the crook of her elbow.

"I alerted the guards," Hanah said. "They'll be here any moment."
"No, they won't," the woman answered, unbothered. "You haven't told them anythin'. You're too afraid they'll suspect you. After all, you left the scene in quite the hurry, sneakin' back here, probably to collect this," she held up a purse jingling with coin, "before leavin' the mountain."


"I want you to go to Blackwater with me."

Hanah's intestines turned themselves inside out. She would surely be executed if she went back. And what about Hemery? She looked her sister where she squirmed in the woman's grip. Hanah could not bear the thought of leaving her sister in that place, returning her to the hell from which they escaped from by the skin of their teeth.

"Not going to happen."

"Oh? Then I don't need this one anymore," the woman looked at Hemery, pressing a knife under her jaw.

"No!" Hanah cried out.

Hemery elbowed the woman in the stomach, with the right and then the left, and ducked out of her loosened grasp. She threw herself at Hanah who caught her with hard hands under her arms. Quickly, she pushed Hemery behind her, keeping her eyes firmly on the woman.

The stranger soon straightened, with a chuckle on her lips. She seemed in no hurry to leave, nor to retaliate.

"We met once under similar clandestine circumstances," she said.

Similar? Hanah had never stood face to face with someone who threatened her sister's life. Though she had feared for it every day since—

Blackwater. The Big House. Their meeting had been very short, but she remembered now.

"The maid," Hanah acknowledged.

"Maaret, please. We were goin' to be sisters. No need to stand on ceremony."

Hanah glanced at Hemery. She had a red line across her neck, but the blood flow was minor. Again, her little sister paid for Hanah's mistakes.

"Sisters?" The word made Hanah sick, coming from this harpy.

"Graham's my brother. I know what you're thinkin'. What is the daughter of a wealthy tradesman doin' workin' as a maid? Well, accordin' to the old man, we all need to do our part for the good of the family. Especially now when the landlords have incarcerated my brother for conspirin' against them. I've got to do whatever they say, to keep that witch from killin' him."

"What did he do?"

"What did my family do?" Maaret sat down then, tired, calm almost, leaning against the wall. "Those who have everythin' wants more. Everybody knows Brage's gettin' old, and his woman's gettin' crazy. Her teeth growin' black from that shit she's smokin'. Father thought his time was comin', that they just needed a push. He was wrong. They're more vigilant and suspicious than ever. And now they've got my brother."
"Why can't you help him out, like you helped me?"

"That trick only works once. They have reinforced the cells. And they know who I am now. Why do you think I'm here? I'm the Blackwater spy." Maaret splayed her fingers next to her face, like she was revealing a secret, smiling without any enthusiasm or joy.

Hanah regarded Maaret, feeling Hemery at her back, clutching her tunic. Everything was quiet in the night, until Maaret stood. Knife still in her hand, glinting.

"What will you do now?" Hanah asked.

"They will never stop using me, unless I have somethin' to barter with. If I give them you," Maaret pointed at Hanah with her knife, "they'll have to release my brother. And then I'll leave that damned place forever."
Maaret reached back at her neck, drawing a sword from a hidden holster beneath her cloak. No longer than the length of her back, but long enough to reach Hanah if Maaret was to stretch her arm straight out.

Hanah stepped back, pushing Hemery further into the kitchen. Maaret moved closer.

"I'll never go back there," Hanah said, but her voice was not as sure as it was before.

"You don't have much choice. You can't both get away. It's hard to breathe with a pierced throat—ain't it, love?" Maaret tilted her head, looking at Hemery.

Hemery held her chin down, shielding her nick from view.

Maaret continued.

"Your oaf of a neighbor's not home. And, oh—I've got a fucking sword in my hand." Maaret raised the sword, making it level with the knife. The angle of her elbow held up in a perfect v made it clear she was used to handling weapons.

Hanah continued to back away slowly.

"Why would you save my life only to feed me to the wolves?" Hanah asked, thinking about that night when Maaret let her out of the cell at the Big House.

"I was savin' myself," Maaret protested. "I had to make them think you were the one who had been pokin' around in their business, not me."

Hanah felt faint.

Marret had framed her? It would explain how Lady Brage had known everything so quickly. Maaret, Lady Brage's maid, would have learned all from Graham, Maaret's brother. Hanah had thought her misfortune had been of her own making because of the paper, but perhaps it was not all. Perhaps it was all Lady Brage needed to start the bonfire beneath Hanah's feet, and the kindling had been a larger heap of garbage and lies than Hanah could ever have imagined.

Thoughts and possibilities sparked to life in her mind.

"It was you who told Lady Brage about my father's death. I told Graham, Graham told you, and you told her. And because I ran, they thought I was guilty for sure. They didn't even need any real proof."

"It's your own fault. You're the one flashin' dwarf gold around town, not me. Gold will get a poor girl killed quick at Blackwater. If not by the landlords, then by common thieves," she spat. "You'll get to learn that lesson first hand. And you owe me, for that night and for this."

"I owe you nothin'," Hanah spoke through her teeth.

"I did save your life. And tonight, the prince was supposed to die peacefully in his sleep. Instead you called for healers, revivin' him as we speak. Ruinin' the landlords' plans."

Hanah felt Hemery reach for something behind them. Trailing her hand along Hemery's arm, she found a small throwing knife in her sister's hand. She clutched it to stop her from doing something
rash, holding Hemery's hand in her own.

"So he'll make it?" Hanah asked with her heart in her throat.

Maaret narrowed her eyes. "If they get hold of a cure... in time. Very rare, very expensive."

"You know how to get it?"

"Perhaps. If I'll get somethin' in return."

Hanah knew what she wanted, but she still wished Maaret would see reason.

"But if the prince lives, you will have failed in your mission."

"It may well be worth it, as long as I have somethin' to appease them with. You left the Lady in a right state when you left. Your return will solve many problems, not just mine. And you will be able to save both your sister and your lover."

Hanah considered this. Maaret was probably telling the truth. The Brages would spare her, perhaps even reward her for bringing Hanah to them.

Hemery was bleeding, she would need seeing to, soon. If Hanah agreed to follow Maaret willingly, Hemery would go free. Free to seek help from healers, free to go to Dwalin with the cure, free to tell him everything about Hanah and Maaret and the landlords.

It would take at least two days to reach Blackwater on foot. Even if Maaret had a horse somewhere, they would be too heavy for it to carry them both for any longer period of time, and it would be too easy for Hanah to reach Maaret's weapons and use them on her. Two days would be more than enough time to gather a group of soldiers on horseback to track them down.

Wether they believed Hanah or Maaret had poisoned Fíli did not matter, the result would be the same. They would be found and brought back to Erebor. Back home. Even if Fíli died and Hanah was locked up in a cold, windowless cell at the bottom of the mountain, she would rather rot in Erebor than be shamed and die alone at Blackwater.

She shuddered at the thought, banishing from her mind, but the taste of bile lingered on her tongue from imagining Fíli empty and cold on his furs. It made her decision easier.

"Alright," Hanah said.

"What?" Hemery croaked. Hanah squeezed her, but still focused on Maaret, never looking away.

"I'll go with you, if you give my sister the cure."

"Just give it to you?" Maaret shrugged, disbelief clear in her voice. "A single vial cost more than I make in a year."

"Without me, there is no deal with Brage. Without the prince's survival, there is no deal with me. You will give her the cure, then I'll go with you—willingly."

After a moment, Maaret reached into her cloak and produced a small bottle. Hanah could not even distinguish its colour, it was too dark. Maaret placed the bottle on the table.

"Better hurry," she said. "Don't think the little one's gonna make it all the way."

Maaret watched Hemery reach short of the bottle, grasping it on the second try.
"Hem?" Hanah asked, worried.

"I'm fine." Hemery clutched the bottle to her chest.

"Now bundle up. It's cold out." Maaret motioned to the door with her chin.

Hanah still wore her coat, but draped a shawl around her neck and up over her head. She picked up a pair of sheepskin gloves as well.

Maaret looked out through the window before opening the door. It was deep night outside, but still brighter than in the kitchen, moonlight reflecting on the frost-covered ground.

"Say goodbye to your sister." Maaret sounded like a mother instructing a stubborn child.

With a lump in her throat, Hanah turned to Hemery, bending her head to speak next to her ear. One arm around her shoulders, one hand on the back of her head, clutching her close.

"The dwarves will catch up. Don't worry. Just get the bottle to Dwalin—he'll know what to do. I love you."

Hemery did not speak while Hanah kissed her, but squeezed her back hard. When they let go, Hanah felt a small triangular piece of metal pressed to her palm, hidden from Maaret. Hanah's eyes spilled over with tears, the lump in her throat expanding painfully. Hemery looked at her, brows drawn together and mouth pursed tight, as if she tried to scare away her own tears with anger and bitterness.

Hemery trusted Hanah. She did not attack Maaret, because she trusted Hanah to have a plan. She would not plead for Hanah to stay, because she trusted her to return.

Slow liquid stained Hemery's neck and glued her hair to her skin, black and sticky like tar in the dim light. Anger inflated Hanah's chest, but worst of all, guilt grew in her gut, simmering sour, boiling bile. She nodded at Hemery, then turned and walked out the door.

Hemery touched the sore spot under her jaw. She thought it was sweat running down her collar at first, a cold sweat from the stress and anxiety, and that the pain from her neck was from Maaret's harsh grip. But the smell of raw metal was unmistakable. She thought of Dwalin's lesson about arteries, and suddenly felt light-headed. Would she die now?

Hemery rummaged around in the kitchen chest for a clean rag, held it to her neck and fastened it with a scarf tied on top. It did not hurt as much if she tilted her head slightly to the left, keeping the edges of the wound together.

Another rag went around Maaret's bottle which was then stuffed into a drawstring bag. She did not bother changing out of her nightshirt, only pulled on her trousers underneath, and tied her tunic over it all. Coat and bag in hand, she ran over the yard to Dwalin's house.

The knock was not loud enough, Hemery thought, and kicked on the door as well. She could feel her rapid heartbeat pulsing in her wound.

There was no answer. She kicked harder on the door. She had to go after Hanah. She had to help her. Watching the forest, she waited and prayed Dwalin was home. The quickest way off the mountain was down the deer paths. Tears of despair welled up, clouding her vision before Dwalin opened.
"What's the matter, ladybug?" he grunted, like a dwarf who had just been awakened in the middle of the night. If Hemery had not been so distraught, she would have wondered if Dwalin slept with all his clothes and his boots on or if he slept at all.

"Take this to Fíli, right now," Hemery said hoarsely, pushing the drawstring bag at him.

Taking in her appearance, he ignored her command.

"Yer bleedin'," he barked. He took her head in his hands and tilted her chin, gently pulling on the cloth at her neck to see underneath.

"Nevermind that. You have to hurry," she said, shrugging him off.

"'Tis from a blade. Who did this?" he growled.

"She poisoned Fíli, and you have to take this to him 'cause they won't let me in, and he might die, and I have to find Hanah before it's too late."

Dwalin opened the bag and regarded the bottle. Uncorking it, he brought it to his nose and smelled it hesitantly. His face cleared of any confusion, eyes widening.

"Fee?" he asked at last.

"As fast as you can."

Hemery turned to leave. There was no time to lose. But Dwalin grabbed her sleeve, stopping her.

"Ye can't go by yerself."

"They'll be gone soon, back to Blackwater."

Hemery tried to tug herself free. He did not let go.

"We'll get help from Erebor. Kíli and his men will track them down before they even cross the river."

"I don't care," Hemery cried. "I have to go to her."

"It's too dangerous," he said between clenched teeth, shaking her. "The guards will handle it."

But Hemery only squirmed more. "They'll think Hanah did it. They'll kill her if we let Maaret get away," she wailed.

Dwalin's face darkened, his jaw tense. He looked at the bottle in his left hand, and then at Hemery in his right. He could not go in her stead, or with her—he had to get the cure to Fíli.

If Hanah would have a chance, the assassin needed to be kept alive to stand trial before the king—not escape during a chase through the woods, or take her own life before clearing Hanah of any suspicions, or be killed by guards while apprehended.

"You'll follow them," he said at last. "Leave tracks and signs for me to find. Just follow—do not engage. Ye only need to hear them, follow their sounds, footsteps. 'Cause if ye can see them, they can see you. Ye can't risk that."

Hemery had stilled in his grasp. He let her go to unclasp a dagger from his belt. He pushed the handle to her chest for her to take. Her eyes widened, but she accepted the offering. He gripped her
shouldest, leaning in to look straight in her eyes.

"I'll come for ye, hear? I'll find ye."

Hemery said nothing, but nodded. Dwalin released her.

"Go."

She needed no further encouragement and ran into the darkness.

The rustle of the women's footsteps on frosted, yellowed grass and the wind in the pines were all that was heard in the forest. Maaret made sure Hanah always walked two steps in front as they slowly descended the mountain. The river to their left, the pines to their right. The moon shone overhead, its rays filtering through the trees.

It was all surreal to Hanah. She had walked here many times during day-long excursions, but she would always go home in the evening. Soon, however, all would be new terrain, and she would not return home by nightfall. She was leaving the mountain and everyone on it—Fíli, Dwalin, even her sister. Hemery, whom she had promised to always protect, was left alone and hurt because of Hanah. New tears warmed her cold cheeks.

She had barely paid any attention to where they were going, which was why she stopped when the forest suddenly opened up to a calm pond with surrounding boulders. Across the pond, the view of the valley stretched for miles. In the middle, Esgaroth sat like a cluster of diamonds on a necklace.

Dwalin's lake.

A sharp crack echoed above the clearing, followed by a flash of light. Hanah and Maaret looked up. The sky exploded in golden stars, floating like glowing sparks from a gigantic bonfire. Then another crack sounded, and another. More explosions, more stars. Colourful shimmering showers reflected in the water.

"Guess nobody told the fireworks man that the prince is dining in limbo tonight. The last time there were fireworks over Erebor was probably when their king was born. Ironic," Maaret stated with a click to the last consonant. So cold and calm, treacherous like the landlords she served.

Hanah's knees locked. The mere thought of returning to Blackwater turned her stomach and overwhelmed her with weariness. She was weary to the bone, to the soul.

"I can't go," said Hanah.

"What was that?" Maaret asked, drawing her sword lazily. She had heard Hanah just fine.

"I changed my mind," Hanah said, raising her chin. "I'm sorry the Brages are usin' you and your family, but I can't be punished for that and I damn sure can't change it."

They regarded each other silently in the light of the fireworks. The stark flashes across Maaret's cheek made her look like a grey stone statue. Hanah was beyond reach of Maaret's sword, but a quick lunge would suffice for the blade to find its mark. Hanah's heart pounded, and her nostrils burned from the cold air she drew in shallow breaths—she was prepared to run.

Maaret's jaw tensed.

"I guess your head will do just as well as payment for Lady Brage."
Hanah jumped aside as Maaret struck at her, but the second attack came too fast for her to do more than meet and deflect the strike. With Hemery's throwing knife clutched in her hand, Hanah swiped the steel away from her with a spark and a screech as metal met metal. But Maaret was relentless, not releasing Hanah from the power struggle, keeping the blades connected, pushing against each other.

"And for stealing the flask and leading me on this merry dance—I'll have your sister's as well."

Hanah swallowed the bile on her tongue. Maaret might be proficient in sword fighting, but she could not wield it if she could not swing it.

Hanah closed the distance between them, gripped Maaret's hand over the handle and pushed her back. Taken by surprise, Maaret stepped back. Her legs hit the base of a boulder, and she fell backwards on the slanted rock, taking Hanah with her.

As if time slowed, Hanah watched clearly in the light of the fireworks the blade of the sword cut through Maaret's soft scarf and cloak. Both women froze—Hanah in fear, Maaret in paralysis. Slowly, the wool of the scarf shifted colour from grey to black, deeper and richer than the tar-like substance on Hemery's neck. Hanah let go and pushed away from the woman bleeding out on the stone.

Maaret's eyes blinked, and her mouth moved without sound, as if she tried to remember a question. The black spread from her neck down her shirt and seeped through her cloak like a living thing, consuming her. Her jaw slackened, and her eyes fixated in a glassy stare. Her fingers twitched around the handle of her sword.

The fireworks had stopped. Hanah could no longer feel her feet. She had no sense of time as she sat there watching Maaret's blood spread on the block of stone.

In the stillness, where nothing sounded but the wind rushing through the pine branches, she could almost pretend the young woman was only resting, not an empty shell bereaved of her soul.

"Hanah."

The word was a thin whisper breaking the silence, but it hit her like an arrow to the chest.

For a ghastly moment, because of the clearing's deceptive acoustics, sound echoing off the treeline and travelling over the surface of the dam, Hanah thought it was the corpse speaking.

"Hanah," the voice called again, stronger.

She let out a deep breath of relief when she recognized her sister's searching melody. Hemery came running from the trees, and in the next instant, she was in Hanah's arms.

"Are you alright?" Hanah released her, looking her up and down. "What happened? You should be at the healers."

Hemery stared at the body lying a few feet away. She slowly registered Hanah's words.

"Dwalin took the cure. All as you said."

Suddenly, Hanah pushed her away, stood up and ushered her back to the trees.

"Beware of the blood," said Hanah, holding her sister's shoulders while she scanned the ground and
Hemery's clothes for stains. Then she saw her own hands, let go of Hemery, and as if burned, hurried to the water, lay flat on her front on the rock, and sank her hands into the dam.

All done, Hanah sat up, leaning her right arm on her bent knee. Carefully, Hemery approached her, picking up the sheep-skin gloves from the ground. She bent before Hanah, putting the gloves on her cold, wet hands.

"We should go," she said low.

Hanah nodded, getting to her feet. "We need to move her."

"What?" Hemery's eyebrows shot up, as if Hanah had told her to build a house out of cheese.

"Someone will find her."

Someone like the guards of Erebor? Dwalin? Had that not been Hanah's plan all along?

Hemery nodded. "Good. She should be known to the world—"

"I'm suspected of one murder," Hanah cut her off, "and in fact guilty of another—"

Suddenly, she stopped talking. Turning, she bent over, leaning her hands on her knees, retching milky bile into the icy water. When she straightened, Hanah wiped her mouth on her sleeve.

Then she took the five steps which separated her and Maaret and grabbed her cloak. With both hands, she dragged the lifeless body over the edge with such force that Hemery had to catch her by the belt to keep her from joining Maaret in the depths.

A great splash, then nothing as the body drifted down and away in the dark waters. She would travel far, in body as well as spirit, Hanah knew, and neither of the women would ever be forced to return to Blackwater—only the black water of the Long Lake.

Hanah watched the body disappear, then turned and started back up the mountain.

"What did you do that for?" Hemery asked, running after her.

"People are gonna come lookin' for her. Guess where the trail leads." With her whole hand, Hanah pointed uphill towards their house.

"She was our only proof you're not the poisoner. How are we gonna explain there was someone else there besides you?"

"We're not." Hanah kept walking without looking back. "She's no good to me now. Before, she was a woman from Blackwater. Dead she's just a woman. A silent, innocent stranger. My only hope is that the prince survives..." She swallowed a lump in her throat. "Otherwise, there is nowhere I can hide where the king won't find me. He will not listen to a girl tryin' to piece together a story about a ghost from Blackwater."

"But it's the truth," Hemery protested.

"Doesn't matter. Men like him don't believe in coincidences."

Hanah thought about the king's reaction to the threat of an assassin. He had wanted to lock down the entire city over some scribbled notes on an old piece of paper.

"He'll think I used the map as an excuse to get inside the mountain, to get close to Fili, to make him
"lower his guard."

"It doesn't make sense. Why would you go to all that trouble?"

"Timing? Because I waited for orders? Because I wanted the spectacle of Durin's Day? I dunno. There are dozens of reasons he can conjure to explain my actions. Any one of which sufficient to justify jailin' me indefinitely. I'm not waiting around to find out how creative the king is."

Hanah picked up her pace through the forest.

When they reached Dwalin's yard, Hanah's relief at her return was vacant. She burst through the door, snatched a bag from a hook on the wall and began to fill it. Tinderbox, blanket, her favourite tool kit, and the purse of gold stashed at the bottom of a drawer in the furthest corner of the workshop.

Hemery watched her sister tear through the room before suddenly springing to life. She grabbed the bag and pulled at it forcefully.

"What are you doin'?" Hemery asked, though she had a fair idea. She had seen Hanah do the same thing just six months ago.

"We're leavin'," Hanah simply said, trying to take the bag back.

"No, we're not. Not this time."

Hanah looked at her calmly. "Even if Fíli makes it—" she spoke through her teeth. "I killed someone. I can't—" Her voice broke. "I can't wait for them to come take me away to some dungeon. I just can't."

She pulled on the bag, but Hemery did not let go. Hanah clenched her teeth so hard it hurt, trying to not lose her temper.

"We can't run away. We live here, we have to fight for it. We have Dwalin." Hemery shook the leather they clutched between them, jostling Hanah.

"We have no one!" Hanah snapped. "Dwalin can't scare away every threat. He can't fight our way out of this. He won't go against the king if Thorin Oakenshield decides I'm guilty, if people start to accuse him of shelterin' a murderer. What do you think happens to you if I'm imprisoned—or executed? Do you think Dwalin will take you in when I'm charged with murderin' his woman's son?"

Hanah's eyes bore into Hemery. Her words were a broken whisper when she continued.

"I can't risk leavin' you all alone. I don't want to leave you, Hem. They'll take you away from me, I know they will."

Tears blurred Hanah's vision.

"I'm done fightin'. I just want to live."

Hemery stared back at her, scared silent.

"We have to go. Now."
 Unexpected Perspective

Dís's shadow fell on her eldest son's sleeping form. With the fire at her back, she stood at the foot of the bed, watching Fíli.

He had blankets up to his waist. His skin glistened with sweat. After the healers administered the antidote, Fíli developed a high fever. During some particularly ugly episodes of hallucinations and awake dreaming, Dís had been able to make him drink some water before he was pulled under by the fever once more.

A knock from the door in Fíli's study disturbed Dís's vigil. Someone was let in, judging by the sounds of a door opening and closing, and footsteps on the carpet. It was Balin; Dís recognized the chink of keys on his belt. The steps stopped in the middle room with the big table, where Thorin had set himself up for the duration of the investigation of the crime against his nephew.

To Dís, it was fairly obvious what had happened. It was Durin's Day. There were no coincidences on Durin's Day. This was planned. Someone had been monitoring the movements in the south wing, where the royal family resided, looking—waiting—for a way in. And seeing Hanah as the perfect scapegoat, they chose to strike when she was there. It had been a calculated move, however impulsive it seemed.

Her suspicions were confirmed by the visitor in the other room.

"The guards enforce Kíli and Dwalin's accounts," Balin said. His words were only slightly muffled by the half-closed door between the bedroom and the meeting room.

"A female approached them, hooded and cloaked, asking for directions. That's the last thing they remember. One has a broken nose, the other is concussed—injuries probably acquired by hitting the floor as she drugged them. She was saving most of it for the prince."

"Damn dunderheads, getting distracted by some slip of a girl," Thorin grumbled. "They'll be maintaining latrines in the mines for the next century."

"They do, however, assure that the female was mankind, but not Miss Skinner, which is logical since she had no need of drugging guards to get into the south wing—I escorted her here myself. This woman was taller, fairer, and . . . wore more expensive robes."

As Dís thought. The assailant was clever, skilled, and probably half-way back to Blackwater by now. But not before tying up loose ends.

Dís turned her head to the voices beyond the door.

"What about Hanah Skinner? Where is she?" she asked.

There was silence a moment. Footsteps. Then Balin appeared in the doorway, Thorin behind him. Balin hesitated before answering.

"We don't know."

"Explain," Dís commanded.

"We have scoured the mountain, inside and out, looking for them. Then we expanded the search
further south and east." Balin rubbed his chin beneath his beard—a motion so similar to his brother when he was uncomfortable.

Did he wish to spare her sensibility because she was female? She thought Balin knew her better than that. So what was it?

"And?"

"A body was found," he finally managed. "In the river. She had been beaten against the rocks, but the guards recognized the cloak she was wearing. It belonged to the same woman who approached them. We also found traces of a struggle just south of Dwalin's house—blood—but we have no idea to whom it belongs."

"The sisters?" Dís inquired.

"Who knows?" It was all Balin could say. There was no evidence to suggest they were dead, but also nothing to suggest they were alive.

As unanswered questions slowed the room into tense silence, Thorin turned away from the door and disappeared.

"If they were in the river," Dís mused, "they should have been found by now. Keep searching."

She turned back to watch Fíli.

"Aye, m'lady."

Balin nodded, turned, but stopped. Slowly, he approached Dís by the bed and spoke lower than before.

"The woman... Her throat is slashed."

Dís inclined her head towards him, listening.

"If Miss Skinner..." Balin left the act unsaid. "She may not wish to be found. Or, if whoever hired the woman to kill the prince also killed her, the Skinners will have even less reason to favour discovery."

Troops of soldiers pursued Hanah and her sister. If she was alive, she would not appreciate being hunted down like a fox to be retrieved to Erebor. She would be afraid, then angry.

They were alone, perhaps hurt, out there somewhere in the early winter night. Not a friend in all the world..."

Suddenly, Dís's hand shot out to grab Balin's shoulder.

"Call them back—the search parties," she said, firmly. Her steel-blue gaze held him fast. "Send Dwalin."

Balin smiled.

"He's been out there since dawn."

The girls steered their way, not through the forest like refugees, but to the nearest white-stone road like ordinary travellers. Many people were leaving to mountain at the end of the festival, especially
merchants, bakers, wine makes, and cooks who only came for the extra work and wished to get back on the road as soon as their business had ended, even if it meant leaving Dale in the middle of the night. Hanah and Hemery easily blended in with the trail of men going downhill to Esgaroth.

The city on the lake was rarely quiet or calm. It had doubled in size several times over since the death of The Dragon, turning it into a metropolis on wood and stone legs, balancing its body over the surface of the Long Lake. The number of Esgaroth's inhabitants rivaled that of Dale and Erebor combined. Esgaroth rose in height up to five floors, or more in some places, housing several different tenants in one house. Some floors connected to their neighbor on the other side of the street with a wooden bridge. Long balconies hugged the buildings, acting as roads up to the top, like serpentine paths on a steep mountainside.

Taverns shone warm light into the night on every street corner, always open. Men, women, elves, and dwarves moved on the streets, as well as some who defied definition. Hanah did not even try.

They stopped at three packed inn's before the man who attended the night desk at The Galley took pity on the girls and allowed them to sleep in the stables. All the rooms were full due to the festival.

Trying not to think about what would happen the next morning, Hanah lay behind Hemery on a stack of hay on a loft somewhere on the outskirts of Esgaroth. Below them, a row of horses shuffled their hooves and grunted, the sound of their moving bodies comforting.

Hanah sang her sister to sleep.

O, woe is me, what do I see

All under the green linden tree

I see my daughter coming to me

She ride so carefully through the grove with thee

And if she silently cried herself to sleep afterwards because she had left everything she had ever dreamed of to an uncertain fate, never to be reached again, no one would ever know.

That night, it began to snow.

The girls ate breakfast at the inn. Though it was more like an early dinner since they had not gotten to sleep until dawn. Some straw had made its way down Hanah's boot when she slept and was now prickling and tickling her leg as she sat at a table in the small tavern eating pork and pea soup with mustard.

The tavern was fairly quiet, only two other tables were occupied. Hemery had said next to nothing since they woke. As the festivities were concluded with Durin's Day the night before, most of the visitors and ambulant traders were leaving the mountain region. Though Esgaroth was a busy tradestown every season of the year, Hanah could tell the difference by the sound of the street outside.

Now, the snow came, isolating the north. It would be foolish to begin a long journey right now, especially on foot, with no goal set. Esgaroth was big. Perhaps they could stay here for the winter.

"Sir," Hanah called to the innkeeper as he passed. "How's business?"
He paused by the girls' table, eyebrow raised.

"Good, until five hours ago when my last patrons left their keys at the desk. Til March, there'll be nothing but eaters and drinkers in these rooms."

"Surely, with the Midwinter's Eve comin' up, you'll have more than enough drinkers to make up the loss?"

A lopsided smile formed on his weathered face as he threw a rag over his shoulder and folded his arms.

"I hear a proposition coming on. Go on, lass."

"I'm lookin' for work—" She did not get further before he interrupted her.

"Already staffed with cook and housekeeper, and I can't pay wages for one more, let alone two." He nodded towards Hemery.

"We can peel taters and scrub floors as well as anyone, and we don't need much."

His brow furrowed. "You'd take wages less than others?"

"We hadn't planned on stayin', but the weather is too unpredictable. You know what the northern winters are like. We just need a roof over our heads."

The man leaned on his knuckle on the table. "Are you alright? Seem pretty desperate."

Hanah shrugged. "As desperate as beggars durin' wintertime. We're not yet, but we will be unless we find work. And that's hard to find this time of year. We're just two poor souls stuck in a cold snap."

He nodded thoughtfully. "You can sleep in the attic. As long as you're no trouble, you can stay."

"Thank you, sir." Hanah forced a friendly smile.

"Welcome to The Galley."

After the innkeeper left their table, Hanah could eat a little easier. Hemery had put her spoon down a while ago, but if she had opinions about Hanah's deal with the innkeeper, she kept it to herself.
The amount of snow that fell during this time was the greatest in a hundred years. The trails and roads between Dale and Esgaroth were unrecognizable and were filled in with fresh drifts as fast as people cleared them. And the closer one tried to climb to Dale, the fiercer the wind howled and thicker the snow fell. The mountain was completely cut off from the rest of the world.

Just like Hanah and Hemery were stuck in the town on the lake, so was Dwalin. Snow already covered the ground in several inches when he arrived the day after Fíli had fallen ill. They would have had time to reach Esgaroth, but he did not believe they would risk trekking further through blind, white days and cold, starless nights to any other settlement large enough to shelter from inquiry. The next town was days away.

No, he was convinced Hanah and Hemery were still in Esgaroth.

Dwalin had friends and informants in town, but since many people had passed through in the last week, and the girls had made no remarkable entrance, their leads were soon exhausted. Though dwarves were plenty in Lake Town, Dwalin was not a well-known face there as he was in Dale. People would not take kindly to a former military official from Erebor asking about missing girls in Esgaroth. This was not an official investigation; the Durins did not want the lord of Lake Town involved.

As far as Dwalin knew, Thorin had no intention of letting his nephew's circumstances become known to the public. He cursed Thorin for not cultivating a better relationship between the cities. If he had, this field trip would have been over in two shakes of a dog's tail.

A month passed before he had any luck in his search.

The sisters got up earlier than usual on the morning of Midwinter's Eve. It was the shortest day of the year, not in hours, but in sunlight. Not that anyone had seen the sun in recently, it had been snowing almost everyday for a month. Nevertheless, it was an important day, signifying the turn of the season. Though winter would hold the north in its grasp for a long while yet, the days would only grow longer from now on until Midsummer when the sun would be up all day and all night.

And as all important days, Midwinter's Eve would be celebrated by a feast. A feast Hanah and Hemery would help cook for all the people who would attend the tavern that night. Two more cooks and two more servers were hired to help particularly for this holiday. They would be on their feet from noon until midnight.

Not the sisters, though. They would stay in the kitchen, peeling carrots and potatoes and chopping onions. Their hands and their eyes would be red raw, but at least they got to sit down for the duration.

...Goblins' hoard is decimated

**By dwarf soldiers dominated**

**Blood of dwarves run high**

**Goblins' end is nigh**

The kitchen erupted in laughter as Hemery's singing came to an end. The cooks were making gravy
by the pint to reheat later, and the serving girls were stacking plates.

"Where did you learn that?" the older woman over the stove asked, a wide smile showing yellowed teeth from a lifetime of smoking pipe weed.

Hemery looked down as she dipped another potato in a large pan of cold water.

"A friend," she answered simply, her smile fading.

Hanah observed her sister as the rest of the kitchen staff went back to chatting about the upcoming chores. She wanted to say something, but nothing could bring them back to Dwalin's yard where they had been free and happy. And it would not do to discuss him in front of their work comrades. No one knew where they came from, and it needed to stay that way. Hemery knew this as well.

Suddenly, there was a bang of glass breaking on the stone floor of the kitchen.

"Bloody scales of the scorching sky snake!" one of the cooks growled in lament as he bent low to retrieve the cracked jar of pickled herring from the floor. The strong, tart smell quickly filled the room as the others moaned in dismay.

But none were as affected as Hanah who had to leave the room in haste, a hand covering her mouth and nose.

She made it to the water's edge outside the tavern before she threw up her small breakfast of bread and tea. There were some advantages to living on a lake, Hanah mused. She had felt ill at ease when they first came to live in Esgaroth for the very reason that the house, the street, the stables, and everything was on top a large body of water. Now, she could better appreciate it.

She took a minute to breathe in the fresh December air, calming her stomach a bit. She had felt funny for a few days, but had not suffered any evidence of illness until now. When she turned to back inside, she came face to face with Hemery.

"What are you doin'?" Hemery stared her down as if Hanah had been to buy sugared almonds without intending to share any with her sister.

"I needed some air. There are too many people in the kitchen today. We suck all the air out. Tonight will be unbearable." Hanah tried to smile, but could feel it was shaky.

"You're sick," Hemery stated.

"It will pass." Hanah moved to go inside, but Hemery grabbed her arm.

"It's happenin' again." Her brow was furrowed and her eyes pained.

"What?" Hanah froze.

"You will empty your stomach for weeks and then you will hurt and then you will lie in bed and bleed until you die." Hemery's eyes were wide and wet.

Hanah looked around them to see that no one in the street was near enough to overhear their conversation.

Her body had behaved unusual lately. It had occurred to her that... it could be the case that... perhaps... she was possibly... with child. And if that was the case, then she was the most impregnable woman in Middle Earth, but not in mortal peril.
"I will not die. Don't be silly."

"It's him, isn't it? Fíli?" Hemery looked livid now. "I knew he couldn't be trusted."

"It's not like that. Keep your voice down," Hanah hissed.

"He made this happen, and you and I will suffer for it."

Hanah put her hands on Hemery's shoulders.

"We will not suffer. I'm not gonna die. I'm gonna be fine."

Hemery hung her head, hopelessly. "You don't know that," she whined.

"We've come this far. I haven't been stressing or been nearly choked to death recently," Hanah reasoned soberly. "Nothin' has happened lately that could endanger my body. So... if I am—you know—then it will be fine. We'll deal with it. Alright? It's not the end of the world."

Hemery did not seem convinced.

"Why, Han? Why did you do it?" She sounded thoroughly miserable.

Hanah had no excuse or explanation that could justify her actions with Fíli. She had learned what it was like to want, and it could not be shut off. She could deny herself comfort, hot food, sleep, anything to keep her and her sister alive. But she could not deny herself him. Not when he was right in front of her, his warm skin inches away, and his eyes so clear and focused on her.

Hanah sighed.

"Because I love him."

Hemery froze with her head still bent. Slowly, she looked up at Hanah, confusion on her face.

"What?" She curved her upper lip.


"You love him?" Hemery echoed flatly.

"Yes," Hanah replied. Beginning to feel defensive, she released Hemery's shoulders and folded her arms over her chest.

"What does that have to do with anythin'?" Hemery did not understand the connection.

"Because—" Hanah was unsure how to explain it. "When you love someone, you want to, you know, show it in certain ways. Listen—what I mean is..." she floundered.

"Can't you love someone without... that? That's the worst excuse I've ever heard! You love him, so you let him put you in danger? That's stupid!"

"Hem, this was my choice. I chose to do it, and I'm not sorry I did it."

"Don't pretend like the thought hasn't crossed your mind. You could die because of him," Hem argued.

"Of course I have thought about it, but it's not like I planned it," Hanah spat in annoyance. "I don't
want a repetition of what happened last spring any more than you do. I honestly didn't think I would get pregnant after one night. Do you know how many times I lay with Graham before it happened?"

"Ah! I don't want to know!" Hemery waved her hands in front of her face, as if trying to erase the image in her head.

"Good, 'cause we're not talkin' about this anymore," Hanah pointed a determined finger at her sister. "It happened! There. Done."

Hemery let out a groan of anger and frustration before turning and walking away down the street.

"Where are you goin'?" Hanah called after her. Her voice was muted by the snow coating everything in sight. "We don't have time for tantrums. You can sulk tomorrow!"

Hemery bent down and gathered two handfuls of snow into a ball and threw it at her sister. It would have hit her chest if Hanah had not anticipated the aim and met the ball in flight with her palm, shattering the loose snow in mid-air.

"Hey!" Hanah barked.

Hemery stuck out her tongue at her, deliberately childish, before continuing down the street.

"Yeah, charming. Thank you," Hanna called, sarcastically. "I'm doin' a fine job of raisin' you, m'lady."

Hanah watched Hemery turn a corner before going back inside, figuring she would be back soon.

Dwalin had begun to surveil the most common gathering places around town, starting with the big markets and main streets of Esgaroth. He would place himself in one of the many corner taverns and watch people, basically. And if this sort of research allowed him to drink ale at the same time, well, who was he to complain? He had been stuck in this town for a month with fuck all to do but move around, watching, and waiting.

Even this proved difficult, however, since the snowfall which kept most people indoors would not let up. Every day, flakes as big as apple blossoms whirled ceaselessly around corners, up sleeves, and in under people's hoods. Another problem was the heavy winter clothing the inhabitants wore during the snowy season. The hoods and the cloaks made it nearly impossible to identify individuals in the streets.

_Nearly_ impossible. Dwalin was learning to recognize gaits and heights of pedestrians in certain areas, and learn to distinguish colors, decorations, and coat of arms of different cloaks. But it was a slow process, and fruitless for his purposes.

He was on his way to a new tavern this Midwinter morning. It was going be a long day with a lot of people out and about, and he had set his eyes on a particular place which rumored to serve a fine pale ale to make it worth his while.

Suddenly, a familiar figure became visible through the snowfall on the opposite end of the street. Short, but quick steps, estimated height not reaching beyond his own chest, shoulders pulled up in a tense posture. Dwalin screwed his eyes through the white blur.

Could it be?
"Ladybug?" he barked loud enough to be heard over the carts pulled on the street and the howling wind.

The figure froze, standing there in the whirl of powdersnow, a ghostly apparition.

Then the small figure started running towards Dwalin. Out of the deceptive haze, Hemery materialized, jumping up into his arms. He clamped her tight in his grasp, lifting her from the ground. She threw her arms around his neck, as much as she could reach around his heavy fur coat.

"Where've ye been, little bug?" he murmured into her hair. Her strands flew in the wind, tickling his nose.

Hemery said nothing, only pressed her face deeper in the fur. It smelled like pipe smoke and dwarf sweat which reminded her of summer evenings in his yard. She felt tears burn in her eyes, so she shut them tightly.

"Where have you been?" she finally squeaked.

He let her down.

"I've been stuck here for weeks under this bloody snow." He brushed flakes off his shoulders with his large gloved hands.

"You've been here this whole time?" Hemery sniffled.

"Aye. Lookin' for ye poor bastards."

Hemery was so relieved to see him that she hardly registered the offensive phrase. Last time she saw him, she really believed it would be the last time.

Suddenly, she gripped his sleeve.

"Did you bring him the bottle?"

"Of course."

"Did it work?" She shook his arm impatiently.

"I've heard no news, so I can't be sure."

If Fíli was alright, then maybe they could go back to Dale. But if Hanah was with child—Fíli's child—Hemery did not want her to go back to him. Hemery was sure she would if they returned. And Hemery had promised Fíli he would never see Hanah again. He would just hurt her more.

"What about you?" Dwalin asked. "Where's your sister?"

"She's fine. She's workin'." Hemery gestured vaguely behind her.

"Well, let's go get her. The weather's not ideal, but I'm sure I can hire us the best dog sleigh around to get us to Dale by nightfall."

Hemery felt her chest grow heavy at his words. She wanted to go with him, but nothing had changed. She looked down.

"What?" Dwalin grunted.
"Hanah doesn't want to go back."

"Nonsense. 'Course she does. She'll be achin' to know what happened to Fee."

Hemery shook her head. "She's afraid she'll be accused of killin' that girl. Or that the Brage's will come after us if we go back."

"Ye'll be taken care of. I'll talk to her."

Dwalin started down the street from where Hemery came, but she stayed put.

"I can't show you where we live. Hanah'll be furious if she found out I even talked to you."

"She knows me," Dwalin growled through his teeth. "Take me there. I'll talk some sense into her."

Hemery takes a few paces back. "You'll tell Fíli, then he'll come here too. They'll take her away."

"He won't do that."

"How do you know? Have they found the girl—Maaret? Do they know who really tried to poison Fíli?"

He sighed.

"I don't know," he admitted.

It was true. He had no contact with Erebor.

"Then we can't go with you." Hemery dug a pit in the snow with her foot.

"Oh, ladybug. What have ye gotten yerself into?" Dwalin asked low, more to himself than to her.

He looked up and down the street a moment.

"Come on. Yer not dressed to be out-of-doors."

He ushered her into the tavern on the corner. He ordered a pint of ale for himself and a cup of mulled wine for Hemery. She wrapped her gloveless hands around the cup, relishing the heat.

"Jolly Midwinter," Dwalin grunted and saluted Hemery with his cup. "May this one freeze the bollocks off those Blackwater pigs."

He drank half before the pint left his lips.

"Jolly Midwinter," Hemery replied, sipping her wine.

She had shared a cup with Hanah on her birthday last week, but had not gotten used to the taste. They had bought a custard pie for a silver coin at the bakers and sat in front of the fire all Sunday afternoon, making up stories about where custard comes from. That had been the first day in a long while that Hemery had really laughed. It had almost felt like it used to, before everything turned bad.

"So what's the plan?" Dwalin asked.

"What plan?"

"Yer sister's. She always has plans." Dwalin rested on his elbows on the table. "Rarely thought
through or well executed, but plans none the less."

"We'll stay here for the winter. After that, I don't know."

"Bloody halls of Mahal," he muttered, shaking his head.

He took another swig of his pint.

"And what do I tell Fee? As soon as the snow stops and the roads clear, he'll want news."

"And you have to do everythin' he says? You work for him now?" Hemery snapped in annoyance before she could stop herself. Why did everyone have to cater to the whines of that spoiled dwarf?

"He's my prince," Dwalin said, fixing her with his stare. "Our prince. Ye'd do well to remember that. Or do ye not wish to return to the mountain?"

"Dale has its own king," she muttered.

He ignored her.

"He's also my friend. He'll be upset to hear his loved one does not wish to come back."

"If he survived," Hemery added soberly.

"I'm gonna assume he has." Dwalin's reply came quick. "Clearly, there'd be no skin off yer nose if he didn't."

She shrugged. "I don't wish the dwarf harm, but—"

"But consider yer sister's wishes before ye finish that sentence. And promise me ye'll never vent yer opinions of the Durins with anyone but me," he added exasperated. He cast a glance around the half-empty tavern. "We shouldn't even talk about it here."

"Tell him we're gone. That you didn't find us." Hemery said finally. "If Hanah sees you, she'll act like nothin's wrong—happy to see you, even. Then run first chance she gets. You don't want us to go travellin' on foot in unfamiliar lands this time of year, do you?"

Hemery knew she was pushing it, but it did not make her words less true. Dwalin knew it as well. His gaze bore into her, a penetrating stare shot over the brim of his pint. She tuck her chin down and stared back from beneath low eyebrows in a battle of wills.

"Fine," Dwalin said at last. "But since I'm stuck here for the duration of this cursed snow, I want ye to meet me here every week so as I can keep an eye on ye."

Hemery sipped her wine, keeping a lid on her victory. Both were starting to heat up her belly nicely. She knew Dwalin meant that this deal only applied until the snow stopped, but that was a minor detail in Hemery's mind.

"Fine."

Hemery soon returned to The Galley's kitchen. Hanah did not ask where she had been, only gave her a long look as Hemery sat down at the table and picked up the knife she had left earlier. The chatter in the kitchen continued as usual, but the sisters were less involved the rest of the day. At no point did Hemery tell Hanah about meeting Dwalin. Not until late at night, when the girls lay down to sleep on the top floor while the celebration was still ongoing on the ground floor, did
"Did I do the right thing?" Hanah asked in a soft voice. "I feel like we never stopped runnin' after we left Blackwater. Should I have stopped? Turned back? Stayed?"

Hemery was not sure if she was supposed to answer when Hanah paused. Muted musicians and clamor of festive people spilled through the window panes, filling the silence in the attic.

"Should we have stayed in Dale?" Hanah asked.

Hemery thought a moment.

All Hanah's fears had been, and still were, justified. If they wished to be left alone, unharmed, and free without doubt or question, then she did the right thing. No one knew what would have happened if they had stayed.

And this way, Hemery was allowed to make good on her promise to Fíli. She took great pride in being a person of honor.

"No," Hemery assured her sister. "You did good."
Unexpected Assurances

The snowfall continued for the better part of the winter. And whenever it let up, the wind increased and made it seem like it was still snowing. The dunes which billowed and drifted on the mountainside reached higher than two men standing on each other's shoulders.

In the mountain, on the other side of the perpetual blizzard, Fíli was recovering.

The toxin weakened him for a long time, hindered him from keeping down food, which resulted in a deterioration of both his muscles and endurance. His dwarf constitution made him capable of withstanding the unusually long fever he was gripped by the first week. When he came around, he could only drink water and broth. Food make him sick—the smell was intolerable.

After three days of nothing but liquid, Dís forced him to eat some chicken in between bites of apple to disguise the smell of cooked meat. Slowly, he regained his appetite, but could only manage small portions, nothing like the large meals he would normally eat. Porridge, soup, bread, eggs, nuts, and fruit—nothing heavy.

Fíli spent a lot of time sleeping, but encouraged his family and friends to visit him, as much as their own duties allowed them, to talk about the economy, the ongoing renovations and expansions of the city, combat training, weapons' forging, or even common gossip—anything to stimulate him in his monotony as a bedridden weakling.

Fíli's favourite topic was the weather. When the mountain fell silent at night, when servants and healers ceased to frequent his chambers for the day, and when Dís had come to say goodnight, he would stay up to talk about the falling snow with Balin and Kíli.

Had it let up? Had anyone been able to breach the barriers between Dale and Esgaroth? Had there been word from Dwalin?

One night in January, he sat in front of the fire with his long-time friends, again approaching the issue of the weather. Fíli's patience was wearing thin, so he asked his brother to speed up the process of communication between the two cities. The result was unsatisfactory.

"Me? Go out there?" Kíli looked up from the game board set up between them. "But it's snowing."

People generally did not travel during winter. Dwarves especially did not enjoy being out-of-doors in the cold season. It was not the cold in itself, but the deep snow which became wet when in contact with dwarf that did not appeal to subterranean folk. Nothing less than starvation would motivate an ordinary dwarf to leave his dwelling in winter.

"I know it's snowing," Fíli replied with forced calm. "That particular aspect of current events has great part in the reason I wish you to go. If it did not snow, I would not have to ask you."

Fíli ached for a drink of ale, but he knew he should not. His body would suffer terribly for his indulgence. He was not strong enough.

"I never excelled at detective work. Tracking and intimidating the truth out of people is decidedly more Dwalin's suit than mine," Kíli claimed modestly.

"Will you not grant your own brother this, after I just survived a near fatal ordeal, because of a little snow?"
"And now you want me to risk my life?" Kíli asked, baffled. "A little snow? That's like saying our journey from the Blue Mountains was a little stroll. And the dragon we faced at the end of it was a little moody. And the Battle was a bit of a kerfuffle."

Fíli sighed and rubbed his face. He did not even have the strength to argue properly with his brother.

"I'm asking you nicely, Kee," he croaked weakly, frustrated and exhausted.

"And I appreciate your confidence, but even if I did make it down there and found Dwalin, I don't know if I would make it all the way back up." Kíli looked completely serious, as if Erebor was Mount Doom and not their home which he had climbed a thousand times.

Fíli suspected Kíli was exaggerating to get out of going rather than expressing genuine honesty.

Balin clapped a hand on Fíli's shoulder.

"I assure you that Dwalin is the best hope you have," he said. "Anyone who ventures to pick up the trail at this stage and in this weather would be doomed to fail."

The older dwarf leaned back in his chair.

"The snow will not snow forever," he said, far too composed for Fíli's liking.

"You sound like the wizard," Fíli grumbled.

"Which is not the worst charge in the world," Balin replied, unperturbed.

Balin's assurances lost weight, however, as the months passed with neither sunshine from the cloudy sky nor word from the youngest son of Fundin.
When Hanah went to visit the temple, it had been one year, to the day, since their father had died. She had given him a poor funeral. A candle and a prayer would not hurt her conscience, or his peace in the afterlife. It was windy when Hanah set out from The Galley to the temple—a large wooden structure with a domed roof and carved trees, vines, and fruits in the walls and ceiling. Normally, temples were made of stone, but that was not possible on the Long Lake. Still, it held up three storeys, bell-towers and pinnacles, and housed fresh, green tree branches every day. How they were acquired in long winters like this, Hanah had no idea.

Though busy, it was not crowded when Hanah arrived at mid-day. She did not remember the proper words for the prayer for peace and prosperity and had to make due with the common tongue. She managed to light a short stub of a candle, which had been lit earlier but gone out in the draft of the great room, before she was interrupted by another visitor.

"Ye're not very good at this hidin' thing, are ye?"

Hanah jerked in surprise, turning to her left. Surely, her ears did not deceive her. Dwalin sat down heavily beside her.

"Ye're not supposed to do normal things like goin' to temple. It's predictable. Ye're predictable." He shook his head in disappointment. What had his purpose in the temple been then? Surely he was not sorry to find her there?

"I haven't been to temple all year—how could anyone predict this?" Hanah whispered harshly, so as not to disturb the other praying occupants in the temple. "We can't all be masters of strategy and warfare. What I know is all I know."

While warmth lingered in her heart from the first sight of him, Hanah wondered what his presence meant. She looked around, but she recognized no one else. Everyone seemed oblivious to her erratic heart which was stopping and starting at will. Even Dwalin was annoyingly calm.

"That's what ye need friends for: to know what ye don't, and tell ye when ye're bein' foolish."

Hanah frowned at him. "Aren't friends meant to help?"

"Same thing," he stated.

"How did you find me?"

"The littlest Skinner doesn't know how to read or write very well, but she's good with numbers and days. She once told me when yer father died. The first year has to be hard on a young lass. I knew ye'd come."

Dwalin put his big, warm hand over hers on the bench and squeezed it for a moment.

"When the weather eases up," he began. "We'll go home."

Hanah pursed her lips and got up from the bench, put a coin in the collecting box by the altar, and turned to the exit. Dwalin was on her heel.

"Ye're not actually payin' a fee for this twighouse? Ye'd think those priests could offer better seats if they're paid in silver for the upkeep of this barn."
"The silver is for charity," Hanah snapped and went on without breath. "Have you been sent to collect us?"

"There are people lookin' for ye, for sure," Dwalin evaded.

"We can't go back." She shook her head. "I don't know if the Brages know where I live. I don't know if Fíli is alive or dead, and I can't prove I didn't poison him."

"Ye'll have to plea yer case, at least," he argued.

Hanah thought of the rash King Thorin, the disapproving Lady Dís, and Fíli's jester of a brother. Hanah stopped.

"To that lot?" Hanah motioned to the peak neither could see beyond the wall, but both knew very well were there. "I might as well cast myself in iron and jump into the lake."

"So ye'll just go? Run away? Never knowin'? That's no way to live."

"Oh, yes it is. It's the only way I know for sure I will live."

Dwalin looked at her, narrowing his eyes.

"What are ye wearin'?" he asked, suddenly.

Hanah pulled the cloak around her, carefully hiding the bump on her stomach which was increasing in size every day.

"A dress," she said, defensively.

"Since when?" He seemed to find her clothing very strange.

"Since Esgaroth, where even workin' women wear dresses−hey!"

She pulled the cloak out of Dwalin's grasp where he had picked up the hem as if to inspect the quality of the fabric. But wrapping the cloth tighter around her simply enhanced her profile.

Dwalin's eyes grew wide, his face white, then red in quick succession. He grabbed Hanah's arm and scrutinized her form at arms length. She obliged, tensely fearing his reaction, not knowing if he would yell or faint.

"Bloody Mahal," he gritted through clenched teeth.

It was all he could produce for a long moment. When he spoke next, it was slow and deliberate. Dwalin looked at her midsection as if suspecting something might jump out and attack him.

"There is no fuckin' way that this will be a secret."

He regarded her almost fearfully.

"Ye can't make this disappear, lass. Ye carry Fíli's child. Do ye have any idea what this means?"

"I have a fairly good idea."

Hanah's back was already starting to ache. A birth would be the most challenging experience of her life, filled with pain, blood, and other fluids. Then her family would grow by one. Twice the work, twice the love, and twice the security.
"It's a dwarf child," Dwalin stressed, not believing she had any clue as to the consequences. "The prince's child. The firstborn of the firstborn. Ye have to be with his family."

To give herself and her unborn up to they who may believe her a killer? Hanah blanched.

"I don't have to do anythin'." She recoiled.

"This is huge." He spread out his hands in uncharacteristic enthusiasm, as if to illustrate his words. "Do you know how rarely dwarves have children?"

She shrugged. "There are quite many of you so it can't be that rarely."

'I'm a dwarf," he said impatiently. "Trust me—it's rare. And with a woman no less. This could change everythin'." 

'I'm not a complete imbecile. I have seen half-dwarves. It's not as uncommon as people think, not here in Lake Town. Only in Erebor are dwarves too high-class to associate with individuals of such diversity."

"And havin' a member of the royal family of mixed blood would change all that. Don't ye see?"

"And my child would be the core of your social experiment? I think not."

At that moment, a man appeared right in front of them in the entryway of the temple, probably for a prayer of his own. At once, Hanah snapped at him.

"Do you mind? We're havin' a conversation."

If the man had any objections, one look at the stern dwarf—and the battle axes he carried with him—made him quiet and scarce.

Dwalin spoke as if they were uninterrupted.

"I understand yer sister's reticence at sharin' this piece of news—she hates Fee's guts. She'd cut off his bits to use for target practice. But you? I refuse to believe ye're as narrow as ye seem. And besides Fee—imagine Dís havin' a grandchild she could never meet, never see grow up."

Dwalin drew a deep breath, as if to go on berating her and explaining just how much she had disappointed him and telling her how many conventions she had broken in dwarven society by isolating herself in her state. However, the situation seemed to overwhelm his senses, and he ended up releasing the breath with no words to drape in it. He shook his head.

Hanah recognized the logic in his words, but she could not ignore her instinct to stay where she was. The pull she felt away from the mountain was stronger than any ties and obligations she may have to Fíli and his family. She could not trust in fate, trust that things would simply work out. She was not only in charge of her own life, she was now also responsible for two others.

"I get yer initial reluctance to remain in Dale, but this... Now things have changed. The arrow has left the bow. Ye can't stay here."

Hanah said nothing. Dwalin's words resonated in her, plucked at her heartstrings, and settled heavy in her chest. He sighed deeply. The fight in his posture was leaving him.

"As soon as the weather clears, I'm going to Erebor," he said, his words softer. "Ye'd do well to join me."
He reached out to lift her chin with his rough, scarred knuckle. She met his grave eyes. He must have seen the conflict there for he continued even more severe.

"It's time to stop runnin'."
Dwalin had not showed up for their weekly appointment. This was the fifth day Hemery stopped by their meeting place and he did not appear. It was disturbing and unexplainable to her.

Hemery lingered in the storefront of the art dealer by the square, very carefully making sure it did not look like she was waiting for—or spying on—someone. The dealer had a large collection of rare goods: paintings on canvas, textiles, maps, and—most importantly—books. She browsed the stock while keeping an eye on the street outside.

Last week was the first since their arrival in Esgaroth that no snow descended from the heavens, nor any wind whipped up that which lay on the ground. Clouds were banished in favour of sunlight. People spoke of spring, but Hemery doubted the idea. She was so used to sitting indoors all hours of the day that she had forgotten the smell of green grass and the warmth of the sun on her face. She feared she had forgotten all of Dwalin's training, as well.

Suddenly, a hush fell over the shop as the heavy footfalls of boots resounded on the wooden floors, as if several large figures entered at once. Then the words of the dealer himself reached her corner by the window.

"Greetings, Sire."

Shelves obscured her vision of the customers, and she found herself drawn to the exchange on the other side, moving closer to peer curiously between the tomes.

Several individuals, short, broad, thick furs on their shoulders. Dwarves. Nothing out of the ordinary, of course, but the dealer's keen approach suggested this customer was. The small, bespectacled man at the counter addressed them clearly and fervently, although Hemery had been instructed by the same man to turn the pages of her browsing items more carefully to make less noise. The dwarves rumbled like wooden cart wheels on a gravel road, impossible to make out. Nevertheless, the dwarves in the bookshop intrigued her because they were just that—dwarves in a bookshop.

The dwarves concluded their conversation at the counter and moved further into the room. It was not big. Even in Esgaroth, the demand for literature was not pressing for accommodation. There were mostly books on crafts which people within those crafts already knew. Books on history, but the only history the locals were interested in had occurred in the last twenty years to which they had eyewitnesses who were able to paint a more colourful picture than any dry paper could. There were a few pieces of fiction, poetry and comedies, which only the most idle women of the aristocracy found enough effort, time, and money to spend on.

Hemery mirrored their movement between the shelves, hidden in a parallel passage. What were they looking for? And what would they choose? What written word in a language other than Khuzdul could interest and penetrate the tough skulls of dwarves?

In a flash of panic, she felt a hand at the back of her collar and was yanked up like a kitten grabbed by the skin of the neck.

"Oy!" Hemery's surprise and irritation at being manhandled did not elude any in the shop.

A sour looking dwarf glared at her from beneath his helmet which was made in the style of the guards at court.
"What are ye lookin' at?" he growled.

"You, you boorish bull." Hemery knew he meant to ask what she was looking at between the shelves, although the answer was obvious, but she refused to oblige him. "Let me down at once, child abuser!"

She squirmed in his grasp and tried to kick him, hurting her toes on his thick armor. The guard let her down, and she fell hard on her bottom. She was used to it from her hours with Dwalin—she had not forgotten that part—and darted up on her feet quickly.

"Have a care, you big oaf! I don't know who you think you're foolin' with that outfit, but this is the free city of Esgaroth, and you have no authority here, dwarf."

Hemery seethed, and barely refrained from tugging on his big ear like one does naughty children.

"But I have," a familiar voice uttered languidly from behind her.

Hemery spun around.

His clothes were different, heavier boots, a necklace with large gold plates around his neck, but the raised eyebrow and the long curtain of hair were the same. And the coat—Hanah's coat.

Of course. The black-haired, bearded dwarf was the only one she knew to be interested in books. Or at least places that kept books since she had never seen him read anything.

"I see you're still making a nuisance of yourself." His face was blank, but Hemery knew he was hiding a smirk.

"I was doin' nothin' but mindin' my own business when your henchman accosted me. Are your employees in the habit of movin' people? Is that their function?" Hemery cast an ugly look at the guard.

"When you're sneaking around silently in dark corners, there is no wonder you're mistaken for a creature with clandestine purposes, or just a mouse to be caught by the tail and put outside."

Hemery was sure now—that was definitely a smirk.

"You should be put outside," she muttered childishly as she dusted off her trousers after their close acquaintance with the floor. "What is an important dwarf like you doin' in an alley in Lake Town, anyway?"

"Perusing the literature, of course," he said, as if he came there every day which she knew was not true. "What are you doing here?"

"Waitin' for a friend."

"Oh?" He sounded disinterested, but if he really was then he would not have commented with as much as a noise.

"Nobody you know," she added. She had no way of knowing if that was the case, but she could not get into with him who Dwalin was, and why they were meeting, and why her sister was unaware of it.

It struck her then—he came from Erebor. That meant the roads were clear. That meant Dwalin would want to bring them back to Dale any day now.
"May I ask..." she began.

"Yes?" He folded his arms across his chest.

She could not outright ask if the prince was alive. How much was she supposed to know? She could not give her and Hanah's agenda away, but she needed to know what had happened after they left, if Hanah was in danger still.

"When you left the mountain, was everythin'... alright?"

"It was standing well enough when last I set eyes on it. You can see it for yourself from the top of the nearest bell tower. It's just over there." He motioned out the window at the tower.

Hemery pursed her lips. Surely he knew she did not mean the bloody mountain? She tried again.

"Any interestin' news from Erebor? I've been shut in all winter. Haven't heard any in months."

"It's been snowing a lot," he replied matter-of-factly.

As if she did not know. Hemery sighed.

"So everythin's good? Nothin' out of the ordinary?"

He pierced her with a steel-blue gaze.

"You'll have to spell it out, girl."

Damn it all. She had to know.

"Is the prince... in good health?" she all but whispered, willing herself to meet that steel with her chin raised.

He reached out and tilted her chin up more, but before she could step back, she knew he had seen the long, angry red scar under her jaw. Some emotion flashed across his face, something dangerous. He was silent for a moment, seemingly deliberating with himself.

"Come, girl. We will eat. You look like you need it. And I do not discuss state affairs in street shops."

He passed her and entered the street without checking to see whether she followed. She did, of course. After her came the guards like a looming shadow of impending doom. What were they walking to—their execution? Would it kill them to cheer up a bit?

They followed the main street only a short way before coming to an Inn much bigger and fancier than The Galley. A collection of large antlers from elk and deer decorated the entrance. *The Crown*.

The innkeeper, dressed in a velvet waistcoat, merely bowed when they entered. The dwarf occupied a set of large rooms on the second floor, with a sitting room facing the street. Light streamed through green tinted, wobbly glass.

"Sit," he said, stretching an arm towards a chair.

Hemery had been looking around the grand room. It was grander than any she had ever seen, with a weaved tapestry covering an entire wall portraying a hunting scene with a quite life-like prancing deer. She turned to him a bit dazed when he spoke.
"If you please," he added in forced politeness. He must have thought her hesitation meant she refused his request rather than just being distracted by the general splendor of her surroundings.

She sat just as a knock sounded on the door, and a young woman entered with a tray of food. Three kinds of cold meat—turkey, roasted beef, and ham. Three kinds of cheese—plain, white, and some with purple spots, as if someone had thrown blueberries on it. Bread and butter with herbs and garlic. The woman returned with another tray of cold and warm drinks, but Hemery hardly noticed. She was staring at the butter. She could tell it was freshly whipped, the herbs still green and crisp in solid waves of gold.

The woman's voice rose Hemery from her butter induced stupor.

"Ring the bell if there's anything else required, Sire." She smiled shyly and blushed as he nodded in affirmation.

Hemery vaguely reflected that this dwarf, as grumpy as the rest of his lot, was nothing to blush over for a fair, young kitchen maid. The woman could do better, she thought. Then she recalled the issue he had been on the verge of expanding for her.

"Help yourself," he said, only pouring a drink for himself.

"Will you tell me about Fíli?" she ventured.

He stared at her. "Is your nourishment conditioned on my readiness to divulge strictly confidential information regarding a prince of Erebor?"

She felt bad about putting him on the spot, but she needed to grab every opportunity to help Hanah. However, it would not hurt to try the butter now that the kitchen staff had gone to all this trouble. Carefully, she pulled the bowl toward her. The butter melted on the still warm bread. She almost sighed in delight. It made her feel a bit guilty that she would look forward to the mouthful in her hand with greater anticipation than any news concerning Fíli's welfare.

As she took her first bite of crunchy bread crust and salty garlic goodness, he sat down opposite her at the table, facing away, giving her a view of his profile. After a swig from his goblet, he spoke.

"I know your sister was there," he said.

Hemery inhaled bread crumbs in an astonished intake of breath and started to cough.

He glanced at her, frowning. "There's no need for seizures." He seemed unconcerned by her choking. "If your heart stops, this conversation is completely pointless."

Hemery's breathing calmed, and she sipped some tea to clear her throat.

"I know she was there," he repeated. "That's the only reason I'm telling you this—the prince is alive. He has his arms, legs, and all his faculties, much because of you and your sister. Of course, some might argue that the prince would not have been in harm's way had it not been for your sister—"

"She didn't do nothin'. She almost died herself tryin' to save me and Fíli."

"Nevertheless," he pointedly ignored her interruption, "no measures will be taken towards her. She will not be charged by the crown for any offense against Prince Fíli."

"What about—" She almost said Maaret. "...the person who really did it?"
"There is no proof of her origin or how she perished, so, as a trail, she has officially been written off."

"Officially?" Had he not said this information was not given to the public?

"On paper, at least. There's nothing substantial to pursue. So you may safely return to Dale."

Hemery felt elated. Not that they would go back to Dale, but the uncertainty of Hanah's status in Erebor had been a weight on her shoulders she was eager to let go. She was ecstatic. The dwarf, however, seemed less so.

"So why are you so morose? The prince is alive—that's good news. How come you look like someone pissed in your ale?"

He threw her a sideways glance.

"I'm leaving on business. Well, personal business. Or more like a security matter."

He seemed uncertain about his errand as he looked down in his goblet, swirling his drink.

Dwalin had always said Erebor had lacking security, and that was why the attack on the prince was possible. It would probably concern everyone at court, and rightly so.

"Because of Fíli?" she asked.

His silence said all.

"Are you goin' to Blackwater?" Hemery felt a strange twinge of worry for him at the thought. Blackwater was no happy place, and the Brages were not to be trifled with. The lady, especially, was a treacherous harpy. "You're not goin' alone, are you? I know you have guards and stuff, but Brage has a hundred men, easily. Everyone's loyal to him 'cause he pays them." She sneered. "And those he doesn't pay are too scared to do anythin'."

"I'm not going to the ridge."

No? But what about Maaret and the Brages?

"Why not?" She frowned.

"You just said yourself it's too dangerous, but you would have me go either way?" he questioned.

"Someone needs to deal with those people," Hemery exclaimed righteously. "They must answer for all they've done. They would kill Hanah simply for havin' dwarves for customers. She was strangled almost to death in front of me. They're monsters."

She put down her bread on a plate, not feeling like indulging herself anymore. At the back of her mind, she wondered if Hanah would disapprove of her sharing that with this dwarf.

"I'm sorry for what happened to you and your sister, but we have no evidence to support our accusations. The woman who poisoned Fíli is dead, and the only one who knew her face and her connection to Brage is Hanah who is nowhere to be found."

So Hanah's disappearance was the reason they could not confront the Brages?

"Are you sayin' she needs to go back there?" Hemery felt her chest tighten.
"Ghosts tell no tales, true or otherwise. We would need to persuade the public which is already, as you say, terrorized into subservience. Blackwater is outside our boundaries. Without evidence, any attempt to overthrow Brage would fail."

So it was hopeless?

"What will you do?" Hemery asked.

"Bide my time. Pour water into the cracks, and wait for frost to break the foundations of their existence. They will crumble. At the first whisper of a tremor, the faintest fissure, we'll strike—and strike hard."

Hemery listened rapt, enchanted by this determination and fire. His words were poetry to her ears. They expressed her feelings, the kind of patience and strategy she would like to possess, and what she strived for. He and her sister were alike in many ways—their knowledge, good sense, and understanding of the world. But where Hanah avoided trouble, the dwarf faced it, reveled in the challenge, and became somehow better for having known it, like the glowing hot blade is quelled by the water, but afterwards hardened by it.

She could not help but smile at his tense shoulders and the white knuckles on his clenched fist.

"I wish you the best of luck," she said. "At least, on the bright side..." she offered, uncertain of her word's reception. "This would help you in your campaign to reduce or perhaps even stop large festive spectacles in Erebor."

His face changed comically fast from reflecting murderous thoughts towards the Brages to surprise at her statement. His eyebrows shot up and then relaxed as a small smile tugged at his lips.

"Had anyone else suggested exploiting the prince's misfortune in such a crude scheme, I'd have him flogged."

"The prince's misfortune is all dwarves' misfortune. You have a dark cloud over you wherever you go. The prince is not more unlucky than anyone else." Hemery shrugged.

"What or your own fate? Would you not name it misfortune?"

"No," she simply replied. "Things just... happen. To everyone. Weather, accidents, illness... and some malice from others." She had asked Hanah what malicious meant after hearing Kíli use it that time. Now she felt it defined many instances of injustice and evils brought upon the girls this past year. Hanah had taught her that we cannot change others and decide how they should act, but we can change our own actions and decide how to deal with other people. "We don't choose it. But all must be learned to live with."

He nodded thoughtfully.

"So why not have somethin' good come out of the misfortune?" she concluded.

"Thank you, councilor. I'll take it under advisement." His tone was serious, but Hemery caught an eye roll as he finished his drink.

There was a knock on the door.

"Enter," he said.

A guard stepped inside. "The horses are ready. We'll move out on your orders, Sire."
"No difficulties, I hope?"

"Bain was not pleased by the short notice."

"Good," was his strange answer. "We'll leave at dawn. Inform the others."

The guard made a shallow bow and left.

"Don't you have your own horse?" Hemery asked, curious.

"Aye, but there are not many in Dale, and the mountain is a steep climb for animals. It's easier to use Bain's for shorter journeys."

"The lord of Lake Town?"

"Aye."

"Are you friends?"

The dwarf snorted. "He doesn't have to be my friend to lend me horses. He'll do it, and be grateful, if he knows what's best for him."

Hemery wondered what Bain got out of the deal, and if his complete acquiescence was assumed in all things? If the dwarf was very particular about his friends, what did he get out of his connection to her? He was connected to the prince, as well. Would this meeting become a problem instead of an aid?

"Will you tell him where we are?" Hemery asked after a long moment.

He knew very well who she meant, but seemed to think it over.

"Why should I not?"

"Because I'll ask nicely...?" she attempted.

He said nothing, as if waiting to be offered a better argument.

"And because I fear for my sister." She slouched in her seat, dejected.

"Why so?"

Hemery wondered how she would describe her point of view, her experience of the last year, and why she did not wish to go back. How would she persuade him to be the first in a long while to take her side over Fíli's?

"Does it seem like anythin' that has happened since Hanah and Fíli first met has been a good thing?"

Hanah being shunned by Lady Brage, Hanah's miscarriage, Fíli using their house as a second bedroom, and the ghost of Maaret the Murdering Maid haunting them for months, and now Hanah's unborn dwarf child—the list went on in Hemery's mind.

He thought a moment. "I will not return to Erebor for some time. When I do, he will not ask me anything pertaining to you or your sister. He'll have no reason to. If he were to ask, I'll have no valuable information to share since I know neither where you live or work nor whether you'll remain here during that time."
"Thank you, sir." She kept back a smile. For some reason, she feared he would change his mind if he saw she was too happy with his reply.

Hemery finished her bread and butter, as well as a few slices of roast beef at his insistence.

"You're too thin and too pale. Eat," he ordered.

"That's because of the winter, not because I'm ill," she protested. She knew she had nothing special on her face catching the eye, but what did he compare her with?

She regarded his marked eyebrows and dark beard. They made him look wilder than clean-shaven men. No, not wilder, it made him look less manageable. His eyes were in constant shadow, making his frowns graver, his mood darker. His black hair held strands of grey, but were still worthy of envy for Hemery who had nowhere near that kind of thick mane. The length reached below the edge of the table where his hand rested near the goblet of ale. His nails were short and clean on broad, scarred fingers. His hands looked like they would have no problem wielding that sword he kept at his waist. Hemery could train with dwarves, by dwarves, all her life, but she would never wield that kind of power. Her muscles would never grow as strong. Her body would simply not allow it.

"I'll never be wide and swarthy like some," she settled, a bit resentful perhaps. She may have sounded rude, but he started it.

"You're a most unusual man-child," he commented.

"No, I'm not." She curled her lip.

She thought of others her age who were cleverer, stronger, taller, braver, fairer. Young ones who climbed rooftops to sweep chimneys, who played three musical instruments, and who breathed fire and could juggle knives. She had seen them all on the streets of Esgaroth. "I'm just the only one you've bothered speakin' to."

"Maybe so," he conceded.

"You're a most usual dwarf, though."

"I should hope so. However, I will humor you, not because I'm particularly curious, but because you have worked out a definition to go with that statement, I'm sure."

"You ask by command, though that's common for most men, not just dwarves. You sound angry, even when you're not. You wear fur in summer. You scowl. And you don't like anyone who's not a dwarf."

"And what do you think of these traits? Are they worthy of reproval?" He did not seem to think so.

"Would you change if people thought so?" Hemery challenged.

"Why should I? Do I not have the right to act and sound as I please?"

"Within reason. You seem like a decent person, but you still haven't offered the basic courtesy of stating your name to me. I thought that was very important for dwarves."

A tug at the corner of his mouth suggested he was amused by this.

"Why the sudden urge to become formal? We were having such a pleasant conversation."
"Somehow you know everythin' about me, but I don't know anythin' about you. Hardly seems fair."

"And the world is always fair?" he provoked.

"No, but I thought you were. Was I wrong?" she glared at him. He was just playing her now.

"A name can be a salvation or a curse. I hope yours will one day be free from stigma, Miss Skinner." He paused. "I am Thorin son of Thrain son of Thror."

"Like the king?" Hemery asked after a heartbeat, confused.

"Like the king," he echoed in confirmation. "Exactly, in fact."

Hemery's mouth opened of its own accord, not to speak, but as if to ease the overload of information she was experiencing, and her mouth was the outlet.

Thorin—as in Thorin Oakenshield? How many Thorins could there be in Erebor?

Kíli had been correct in his accusation—she had grassed to the king, after all. Suddenly she giggled, but caught herself in horror. She felt as the blood left her hands and face.

They regarded each other silently for a while before Hemery realized she was staring, and looked away. Why should she feel so different in his presence just because he was—almost certainly—the king of Erebor. She did not like it, but it was different now. She hardly dared glance at him.

He waited patiently, as if he knew what she was thinking. Waited for her to collect her thoughts.

Here was the dwarf Hanah had feared all winter. Here in front of her. He decided whether she lived or died. He was Fíli's uncle. He had promised not to tell Fíli where they were, but how could she trust that? She had thought. . .

She did not know what she had thought. She had kind of compared him to Dwalin in her head. Dwalin was her friend, but it was not the same. Dwalin was like an uncle or a replacement in her father's absence, teaching her things and telling her stories. This dwarf. . . Thorin. . . had been an exciting, secret acquaintance. He had listened to her, she had hoped he respected her. She had thought he was her friend. Foolishly, of course. She realized that now.

She felt like she was sinking through the floor. She wished she was, but knew it was only a trick of the mind. She needed to compose herself. What would Hanah do?

Hemery cleared her throat and stood.

"Thank you for the food. I should go. Hanah'll be waitin'."

"Naturally," he said. If he thought her awkwardly rushed, he did not show it.

Hemery was almost at the door when she turned. It struck her that Thorin had not looked favourably on Fíli and Hanah's association when he learned of it. Kíli said Fíli had been expelled from the mountain, however temporarily.

"I must ask. . . You sent Fíli away before," she began. "Do you disapprove of his relation with Hanah because she is poor or because she is mankind?"

She knew he may take offense to her forwardness, so she stood straight with square shoulders like Dwalin had taught her, steeling herself for his wrath.
Thorin's face darkened. "Neither."

"Then why did you get so angry when you found out?"

He raised one brow high in an unusually expressive motion. Patient, but opposing. "I hardly know your sister. She puts her words together well enough and don't spew them out at people without reason, but I would not presume to judge her character on one single meeting."

This time Hemery's eyebrows hitched in incredulity. A dwarf that does not judge—that was new to her. But he went on.

"The dissonance was with my nephew. If his intentions were honourable, he should have acted accordingly, not treated her as a fleeting fancy. Someone in his position cannot afford to appear... inconsistent."

Inconsistent? Rather like a stallion galloping after mares in springtime.

"So... it was not a punishment for choosin' her?" she narrowed her eyes, skeptical.

"It was not a punishment," he stated clearly, sounding like he found the idea ludicrous. "When Fíli came here shortly after our conversation last autumn, he was performing his duty—no more, no less. If I wanted to punish him, I'd have him marry Dain's half-witted sister who is two-hundred years his senior. She's dull as the back of a hammer, but she'd best him with every weapon known to a dwarf's hand. And that, Miss Skinner, would be suffering I'd wish on no one."

Hemery bit her lip to keep from laughing.

"I will never decide on a spouse for him," he promised, "but I'll see him do it right when he does. I dare say we would all have been better off if Fíli had not been such a pillock about the whole affair to begin with. This should have been wrapped up months ago."

Thorin looked at Hemery then. As usual when he went on a tangent about other people's shortcomings, he almost seemed to have forgotten she was there.

"Well, go on with you then, if you must." He waved a dismissive hand at her. "Go away in a huff and resent my deception. Everyone else has an axe to grind with me, why not you as well?"

The question was rhetorical; Hemery recognized the melodramatic tone. Thorin rose from his seat where he had been reclining in a manner befitting his mood, heavily and tiredly as his body seemed to demand. He opened the door for her.

"I suppose this is the end of our enlightening conversations," he said.

Hemery remembered all the times Dwalin had warned her about venting personal business with people who were not him. She should have listened, but she had always enjoyed her time with this sharp, albeit broody, dwarf. She would miss it.

"Good day... Your Majesty."

She held out her hand for him to shake. He seemed surprised by the gesture. Was it not common for dwarves to shake hands? It was what Fíli and Dwalin had led her to believe.

Thorin took her hand gingerly, as if afraid to hurt her. He easily could have, Hemery thought. His hand was almost twice the size of hers, rough and dry, but warm. They shook once.
She hurried home to The Galley. But that night, when she and Hanah had gone to bed, thoughts of Dwalin returned, wondering where he had disappeared to. And if he would come back for them.
Dwalin did not come. Hemery started to worry, and she started to think.

Hanah never left her alone more than a few hours at a time. Father could be gone for days, sometimes weeks, but he always let them know when he was due back. Dwalin had promised her they would meet at the same place every week—but he was not there.

It did not make sense. What could sway Dwalin when he had made his mind up about something? Nothing she could think of. He could at least have left a message or something.

But what if something had happened to him? Hemery tormented herself with the idea. What if she never saw him again? Then it would just be her and Hanah—again. Her, Hanah, and the child. How would they cope with a baby? It would be years before it could talk and walk, and even later before it could take care of itself and work. Who would look after it until then?

It was enough trouble to feed themselves, let alone a child. Would she stay in while Hanah worked? No, Hanah would have to nurse the wee thing. But Hemery could not get any work that paid enough for three mouths. And if she could, it was not the kind of work she wanted.

If only Dwalin was here—or Father. The child had a father, Hemery thought. A father she did not like, but a father none the less. He would have no problem providing for the child, not only because he was rich, but also because of the simple fact that he was an adult—unlike Hemery. In that, she conceded, Fíli had his merits. At least until she turned fifteen. Maybe sixteen.

At this rate, however, the child would never know its father or his family. Hemery thought about that too. She had no father, but she had one once. She knew who he had been, where he came from, and what happened to him. What would it be like to know none of it? Would it be a hole in her mind? A piece of her own identity wiped clean? Would she wonder about it, and would that wonder take precedence over more important matters? Would she suffer because of it?

At night, when she and Hanah lay down to sleep, Hemery thought about it until it seemed she would think a hole in her pillow. And she wondered—where was Dwalin, and why had he left her?

"Hem," Hanah whispered. "Are you asleep?"

"No."

Hanah did not say anything for a long moment, making Hemery think perhaps Hanah was asleep herself.

"Dwalin came to see me," Hanah said at last.

Hemery turned sharply in bed, disrupting the covers and exposing her feet to the cold night air in their attic room.

"What?! When?"

"Last week."

"Why didn't you say?" Hemery asked. She knew why she had not told Hanah about her meetings with him, reasons she had now begun to second-guess.
Hanah kept half her face to the pillow as she spoke with only one eye open, avoiding Hemery's gaze.

"He wanted us to go back with him, but I thought I could come up with a solution. Some way to fix everythin'. But I can't, there's nothin' I can do. If we stay here, or leave, or go back to Dale—I'll put you and the baby at risk, whatever I do. I feel selfish because I want to return to see Fíli for myself. They would have announced it by now if he was hurt or. . . dead. I also want to go somewhere far away where we can be left in peace, but then you'll never see Dwalin again, and the child will never know her father. And when she grows up, she'll ask why I left him, and all I'll be able to say is that I was afraid. It's not good enough. Nothin' I do is enough. It's all wrong, it's all gone so wrong."

Hanah's voice thinned and choked at the end. A tear escaped her eye and rolled down the slope of her nose onto the pillow.

Hemery felt a surge of hopelessness as well as anger at the injustice of it all. The same feelings she had felt all those months ago when they left Dwalin's yard. They should not have to hide or run from anyone.

"You've done nothin' wrong."

Hanah just pushed her face further into the blankets.

"It's not your fault all this happened," Hemery continued. "But. . ."

The words she knew she had to say got stuck in her throat.

"If we leave here, it's we who force us to be runaways, not them. If we want peace. . ." Hemery forced it out, "we have to go back to Dale."

"What if they don't believe me?" Hanah asked into the pillow. "What if they don't think the child is Fíli's? What if they arrest me?"

The Durins where nothing like the Brages. If there was a trial, it should be a fair one. If Thorin could be trusted, Hanah would not be arrested, but Hemery could not be sure of anything anymore. Her own eyes filled with tears at the thought of her sister forgotten in a dark dungeon. She wished she could switch places with her, to spare her all of it.

"I don't know what you should do, but if it was me. . . I'd let them."

Slowly, Hanah's face cleared of teary mist, only a shine in her wide eyes remaining. Hemery continued.

"I'd give myself over, say my peace, and let them do whatever they had decided. I would do the right thing for its own sake, 'cause I'd know the truth, and let them bear the shame of imprisoning the wrong person. Or I'll live with a stomach ache forever, worryin' that my life could be taken at any moment. It's better to decide myself to risk my life than waitin' for them to take it."

Hanah listened, staring at Hemery as if she could look through her and see herself kneeling on the cold marble of the throne room in Erebor on which she would be judged.

"What kind of peace is that?" Hanah whispered, fearing the answer she knew she would receive.

"Your own."
Hemery woke early the next morning, Hanah shaking her.

"Hem, I'm doin' it," Hanah said.

"What? What time is it?"

"You were right." Hanah was energetic and determined, nowhere near her low spirits of the previous evening. "Master Hamish," the innkeeper, "has given me leave for next week. If I'm not back after that, you'll be kept on as long as you like."

"Have you slept?" Hemery asked, confused by her sister's rambling.

"No. But I've decided now. I agree with you, and I respect Dwalin's opinions. I'll do it, but I'll do it alone. I can't go if I'm worried about you as well. You'll be alright here. I'm sure I can get Dwalin to write you, even if I can't, and tell you what happens. Promise you won't come lookin' for me and gettin' in trouble."

"Alright," Hemery agreed reluctantly, though without intending to honour it.

"Good," Hanah said. Her sad smile was enough to make Hemery feel guilty about persuading her to go. But the king had said everything was alright. And they would have no peace otherwise. But she could not smile back.

"Now, get up," Hanah ordered. "The cook needs fresh eggs for breakfast."

Like a living dead, Hemery did as bidden and left for the market. She swerved between carts and people in the street, hardly looking where she was going. Without her own breakfast she was in a worse mood than usual, and her thoughts kept circling back to her ridiculous speech about honour and courage to her sister last night. Perhaps she overdid it? Hanah's uncertainty had not disappeared, it seemed only to have transferred onto Hemery.

Paying for three dozen eggs, she returned to The Galley. Halfway, she became aware of someone calling her name amidst the clamour of horses, chickens, dogs and voices in the street. Frowning, she turned, seeing only a sea of people. Then, suddenly, a slightly shorter, dark-haired figure appeared between the others.

"There you are," Kíli exclaimed as he approached her, brushing past people left and right.

Hemery froze. Had he come to get Hanah? Damn him—it would ruin everything. Hanah was supposed to go on her own. If he found her and brought her to Erebor first, it would seem forced, as if she did it involuntarily. Had he been sent by Fíli? Or . . . perhaps even Thorin? Damn him. Had Thorin lied to her to draw Hanah out? Why would Kíli be there if Hanah was free? Was he there to arrest her? Damn him.

He came closer. "You don't know how long I've looked—"

Hemery turned to run, but she only managed two steps before his hand was on her shoulder, turning her.

"I say, could you have pity on an old dwarf? Slow down. This place is a maze."

"Let go," Hemery snapped, tugging her sleeve, but it would not loosen.

"Alright, calm down," he said impatiently, but kept a firm grasp on her coat sleeve. He frowned, as if he knew she would bolt as soon as he released her. "If you show me where to find your sister—"
"Never!" She ducked down and bit his hand where it held her.

"Suck an elf," he cried out, but let go.

She threw an egg at him. It broke on his shoulder, smearing yolk on his dark blue and silver cloak.

"Hey! What—stop it!"

She backed away and threw one more, but he caught it. Though it did not stop it from breaking in his hand, and he threw the mess back at her.

Hemery dropped the basket of eggs and broke into a run down the street. She took a few extra turns before reaching The Galley, and made sure he was not behind her when she went inside

"What happened?" Tom, the cook, asked as she entered the kitchen. Hanah and Bea, the housekeeper, looked up from their chores, as well.

"Was that the eggs I asked for?" he pointed at the bits of white eggshells and yellow slime on her coat. But the chuckle that erupted in his throat died as the front door slammed open and an angry voice called out.

"Alright, where are you, you little troll?"

Hemery winced. Kíli had found them.

Hanah met Hemery's guilty gaze. She knew that voice, so similar to his brother's. She moved quickly to look over Hemery's shoulder at the loud intruder.

Kíli made his way to the middle of the tavern and threw Hemery's basket carelessly on a table. A few guests who were interrupted in their breakfast looked up in interest at the dishevelled dwarf prince.

"Your Highness," Hamish, the innkeeper, hurried to greet him, probably more surprised by his appearance in the humble tavern than his rude entrance. "What can I do for you?"

At the formal address, Kíli seemed to realized where he was, and attempted a civil approach.

"Yes, good morning, sir," he said stiffly, uncomfortable at being forced to cool his temper so quickly. "I would merely request an audience with your... Miss Hanah and Hemery."

Master Hamish turned to glance at them, a question in his eyes. Hanah took a deep breath and nodded.

"Very well, sire," he said. Not really knowing what to do with himself, he merely stood there until Hanah and Hemery had come out of the kitchen—Hemery half-hidden behind Hanah—and sat down opposite the dwarf at one of the dining tables. When it seemed no one would shout or fight, Hamish made his way back to his desk, but kept an eye on them through the door, just in case.

Kíli glared at Hemery who remained standing behind her sister's chair.

"I trust you are in good health, Prince Kíli," Hanah said politely.

"That is a matter open for discussion," he bit out.
"What did you wish to speak about?" Hanah had a fair idea.

"I hardly know where to start, but because of the urgency of the task entrusted to me," Kíli began through tight jaws, "I'm obliged to overlook the rude greeting by which I was met from that shewolf—"

"Excuse me," Hanah leaned back in indignation. "What exactly are you accusin' her of?"

"Your lynx of a sister bit me." Kíli presented the fleshy part of his hand and the row of red dots glowing there.

"And what did you do?"

"She bit me," he repeated, as if nothing could warrant such horrendous treatment.

"You deserved it," Hemery shot over Hanah's shoulder.

"Why, you little—" Kíli rose in anger.

Hemery ran across the room to take shelter in the kitchen which had a backdoor to the upper levels of the building as well as the street. She was not stupid.

Hanah rose, putting her hands on the table between her and Kíli, her eyes boring into him.

"You will not threaten my sister or this meeting is over."

He seemed to check himself then, forcing a smile on his face.

"Of course not," Kíli assured, though his nostrils flared in supressed anger. "She's just a child. It would be unfair to judge her for behavior which would award anyone else a slap around the head."

He clearly thought an exception could be made in Hemery's case.

"Anyhow," he interrupted any objections she may have had. "As to my current undertaking, I have come to request—no, insure—your return to the mountain. It's been five months since your most inconvenient departure from my brother's chambers."

"As I recall, you were very adamant about it," Hanah could not help but interject.

"That was before my brother was poisoned. It's been five months," he repeated for emphasis. "You owe it to him to go back. To explain your absence if nothing else. I don't care what you do afterwards, but you will meet with him."

Hanah grew still. "So. . ." she began carefully, "he is alive and well?" This was it. She would know once and for all. Who could tell her accurately if not his brother?

"He's recovering quite well. Thanks to your quick thinking, may I add, which is why I am astonished you have been so difficult since. I simply must insist you come back with me. I won't take no for an answer."

"Alright," she said.

Kíli hesitated. "What?"

"I said, I'll do it."
"Really?" He lit up. He looked like a puppy who had been promised a treat.

"Yes, really. I had planned to go next week, but I'll go with you now if you wish."

Kíli nodded once and squared his shoulders, as if he had known all along she could not withstand his powers of persuasion.

"Good," he settled.

Now that she had agreed to go, knowing it was to become reality, Hanah was overwhelmed by uncertainty. Perhaps Fíli would be angry with her for leaving. Would he be disappointed, hurt, livid, or sad? Or would he have detached himself from her once more? Hanah fought a shudder at the memory of his cold words at the beginning of their last encounter.

"Are you sure he wants to see me?" she asked.

"Who do you think sent me?" He looked at her as if she was daft.

"Well, I don't know," Hanah defended. "I feared you'd... arrest me for somethin'."

"What? No," he quickly answered, shaking his head when he realized what she meant. "He wants to know what happened. He's spoken of little else all winter. Getting a bit tedious, to be honest. All the more reason for you to lace up some snow boots and get up there as soon as possible."

"Walk?" Hanah asked.

"It's how people usually do it."

She had not decided on a means of transportation when she planned her own journey up the mountain, but anything other than on foot.

"That will take days on these roads," Hanah protested. Even if the snow had stopped, and even if the roads were 'clear', it was still winter, and there was still snow. "I can't do that."

"Whyever not?" He seemed to find her obstinate now.

Hanah, however, found him dim now. She looked down at herself and back up at him.

"Because I'm... indisposed?" she said, waiting for him to catch her drift. He caught nothing.

She tried again. "I'm with child." Her cheeks burned as she spoke the words. Though unmarried mothers were more common in Esgaroth than in Blackwater or Dale, her upbringing told her to not speak of such things. "I can't expose myself to cold and exertion like that."

Kíli stared at her, his mind either overheating or completely still. He looked down at her stomach, like Dwalin had, apprehensive. Immediately his eyes went wide, as if he had not noticed her slightly rounder state.

"Bloody Mahal," he whispered, frozen in shock. His brows pulled together before relaxing again. "Fee?" he asked, looking at her for confirmation.

Hanah's face was very hot. "Yes."

A wide, boyish grin spread across his face. "Uncle Kíli?"

Relieved, Hanah gave a small smile back. "I suppose so."
Kíli laughed loudly and sprung out of his chair. Hemery peeked out of the kitchen, curious about the sudden commotion. Kíli kneeled beside Hanah's chair, hands on either side, carefully not touching her, but reverently regarding the swell of her belly and the living being he knew resided within which would soon emerge, calling him uncle.

"Don't. Get up from there," Hanah said, embarrassed.

She stood abruptly, looking around to see guests watching them, and pulled the dwarf with her through the kitchen and out into the backyard of the inn. Kíli threw his cloak over her shoulders, concerned about her light garb in the cold.

"Don't do that," Hanah said. "I'm fine."

She tried to shake it off, but he clasped it at her throat and tugged it closed. Kíli was oblivious to her discomfort.

"To think I learned of this before my brother. And you could even say I was there when it happened." He laughed. Then it struck him. "A child conceived on the Eve of Durin. Do you know what this means?"

Hanah sighed. "No. But I'm sure you'll tell me, yeah?"

Kíli shrugged, his grin almost wild. "I have no idea, but it is surely fate. Prophetic, marks my words." He waved a finger in the air.

"Sure," she agreed, not really caring.

"And you'll be my sister."

Her eyebrows shot up. "I don't know about that—"

Hanah suspected it would not be solely up to him whether she was accepted as the mother of Fíli's child. She could not imagine the elegant, stoic Lady Dís calling her daughter. Oh, Great Aulë, what would his family say about everything? She suddenly felt light-headed. It would really happen; she had agreed—she would return now.

"You may be my sister, as well," he called to Hemery who had followed them and was now standing by the door, rubbing her arms against the cold. Forgotten were the transgressions of the morning.

Hemery regarded him like a cat watches an unfamiliar dog—disapprovingly, as if he was barking mad.

"And you are right," Kíli said to Hanah. "Walking is completely out of the question. You will never have to walk anywhere ever again. How do you feel about dog sleighs?"
"Highway robbery," Hanah muttered to herself as she once more surveyed the snow boots and winter coat she had purchased for the trip up the mountain. She had wanted something to keep warm on the long sleigh ride, but also something nice enough that Fíli would not feel sorry for her. The clothes were nice enough, to be sure, neither fancy nor cheap. Though compared to her own work, Hanah seethed, they were extremely over-priced for their quality.

She ran her hands over her dress, smoothing imaginary wrinkles as she waited in the large hall. Kíli had shown her to a formal meeting room, normally used for official business. The ceiling was high and domed. Strips of light streamed from vertical, narrow windows above, reflecting on surfaces of black obsidian. The table and chairs were immobile, cut straight from the floor as it were. The honour seats were crowned with amethyst crystals.

As usual, Hanah felt obscure and out-of-place in the grand halls of Erebor. Fortunately, her hair was finally long enough for a proper braid, keeping it away from her face. She had gained some weight during the indoors winter, making her cheeks a little rounder. All other features where hidden beneath her long, plain, formal dress.

She had kept the coat on. Untied, it framed her shape, concealing most of her pregnant state. Though Fíli would be told eventually, she did not want that to be the first focus of his attention. She wished to gauge his true feelings, and not receive his forgiveness or his anger based on the existence of a child rather than her own actions.

Hanah was anxiously tracing the patterns in the stone table when she heard a door open. She looked up.

It was him.

There he was. That brow, that nose, that chin, those shoulders, those hands.

Hanah's heart moved to her throat.

Fíli did not speak, only watched her, as if he studied the slow walk of the sun in the sky. She feared there was a gathering storm, that he merely paused to gain enough breath to berate her properly. But he said nothing.

"Prince Fíli," she acknowledged, not really knowing what to say next. Her voice almost startled her in its echo in the bare room. "How are you?" she managed at last.

"When I heard my brother had returned so soon, I did not actually believe. . ." He did not finish, but lowered his brow in concentration.

What was he thinking? She told herself it did not matter. Her aim was to explain herself to her own satisfaction, and then he could do or say whatever he wished.

"Apologies for not comin' sooner. There was the snow, but also. . . my own fear. But I'm here now and will answer any questions you have."

"Regarding?" he asked, sounding almost confused.

Hanah shifted uncomfortably.
"That night. The poison, and me being. . . gone. Any doubts or uncertainties or suspicions. Let's hear them all."

Fíli looked thoughtful, stroking his bearded chin.

Was he unwilling to voice his accusations? Was it that bad?

"I was not the one who poisoned you," she began impatiently. "Her name was Maaret. She was a maid for Lady Brage—that's how I knew her. She was in trouble with the landlords and had been coerced into. . . Well, you saw Brage's map." Hanah fidgeted with her sleeve. "She came to my house afterwards, she hurt Hemery, and I said I would go with her willingly to Blackwater—apparently they're still lookin' for me—in exchange for the cure. I followed her down the mountain, into the forest. . ." She drew an arduous breath. "And then I killed her."

A lump formed in her throat, and she felt her calm expression turn into a grimace of suppressed tears of anger, guilt, and shame. Fíli's face softened, seemingly seeing her truly for the first time since he walked in. His eyes absorbed her. To her surprise, the weight in her chest eased, as if his stare was a burning balm on an infected wound.

"I slit her throat and pushed her in the river."

It was much easier to say now. It was easier when she was expected to, when she was allowed to.

"And then I left," she continued. "Because I feared you were dead and that I would be blamed. I would be accused of murderin' you or Maaret or both. So I left to save my sister, but mostly myself."

Fíli leaned on a chair, listening and waiting patiently for her to finish.

"I can't prove any of it, so you are, of course, entitled to take any measures you want." Hanah looked down at the black stone surface. "I submit to the justice of the mountain."

"Justice?" he echoed.

She raised her head, meeting his questioning eyes. He shook his head.

"I don't care about any of that."

"Well, then the king would surely—"

"No," he maintained. "We know the Brages are to blame for all this. There will be no accusations, no trial. You're free."

"But why send Kíli?"

"No one knew where you were." He shrugged helplessly. "I did not know if you were alive or dead, lying in a ditch somewhere or kidnapped and taken to Blackwater."

Oh.

Hanah felt a strange void after all the miserable worrying. A void which seemed longing to be filled with Fili's presence.

"I just wanted to make sure you were safe," he explained. "That's all I ever wanted."

She felt her eyes sting.
"Me too," she said. "I mean, that you are. Safe. I'm glad you're safe."

"I've had stronger days, but I'm quite safe. I may need to seek your services again, however."

Services? She hoped he did not mean—

"I'm afraid my coat size has decreased this winter due to my... illness. I'll need to buy a new coat."

Fíli smiled then for the first time, but it did not reach his eyes. Almost as if he did not mean it or did not dare mean it.

Hanah smiled back, politely. "Anytime, Prince Fíli."

"Will you stay? On the mountain?"

"No. I must return to the Lake. Hem is expectin' word of some kind."

Though it was getting late now. The sun set early in the late winter. It was already dusk out. She would have to spend the night in Dale. But before then, she had something else to tell him.

"I—" she began.

"I'm sorry," Fíli said at the same time, interrupting her.

"What?"

He sighed and shook his head, despondent. His eyebrows lowered, shadowing his eyes.

"This is the second time I've endangered your life and the life of your sister," he explained. "I thought I would make it up to you, but I only made things worse."

Hanah stood speechless.

"People think it's easy—being a prince. Power, comfort, and all the pleasurable company one could wish for. Except—" Another sigh. "I enjoyed more freedom before we came here, in Ered Luin, and even before that when we lived on the road, when me and my family were little more than blacksmiths."

He had never spoken to her of his life before Erebor. She had no idea they had been nomads. She knew they were exiled from the mountain for almost two hundred years, but she thought they lived in Ered Luin the whole time. It seemed this was a naive assumption.

So Prince Fíli of Erebor—the posh, spoiled rich boy—had been a craftsman, just like her?

"Royal blood or no, we've never been highly regarded in the eyes of men anywhere. But to think you would suffer from persecution and abuse for associating with dwarves—with me, on our own mountain—it's intolerable. I'm so sorry."

Fíli lowered himself onto one knee before her. Taking her hand in his, he raised it to his forehead, then to his lips briefly.

"Forgive me," he said, looking up at her, "and I swear on my life's blood, I will always—"

He stopped himself, distracted by the view of her form. In his position, her belly was right in front of him, catching the light from above in a way quite unbecoming for a woman who's stomach swelled more generously than her bust.
Hanah noticed the new focus of his attention. Dropping her hand, Fíli stood, seeming utterly perplexed.

"Be careful of your oath, m'lord," she said. "Your life's blood is not yours alone to claim anymore."

He frowned.

"Do you mean to tell me..." He stretched out a hand, as if to touch her stomach.

"Yes, I do."

He withdrew his hand.

Hanah felt a surge of annoyance at that. Why was he allowed to be so detached and shocked? His inconvenience was nothing compared to hers. She was the one who had to carry it.

"I understand if this is a bit sudden, but it can't be very surprisin'."

"No, of course not. I knew there was a chance, naturally. I just... My thoughts did not reach..."

Fíli roused himself, apparently shedding the uncertainty and shouldering the role of the prince once more.

"You will be provided with everything you need, obviously," he assured her. "Don't hesitate to inform me of any and all your wishes."

He sounded genuine, his eyes held hers steadily, resolutely. This was a trait he shared with his brother; whenever they were caught by surprise and did not wish to appear bewildered, they would turn to duty. A prince of Erebor always knew what to do in every situation. Honour and duty.

"Thank you," she replied, bowing her head. "That is very considerate of you."

Hanah had no intention of asking him for anything.

His eye bore into hers. "Remember, it means nothing if you will not accept my aid. Know that it does not stem from politeness."

She quickly shook her head, but looked away. "Of course not, sire."

He did it because he was the father, and he owed it to her.

His dark gaze remained on her, as if he doubted her. After a moment, he dropped it and sighed.

"I wish you would consider returning to the mountain."

Despite fearing this meeting, she had longed to go back—back to Dwalin's house. To live as she once had and take up her craft once more. And the child would be near family. But she had not seen Dwalin for a few weeks, and had no idea where he was.

"I'll think about it."

"Until you finish thinking about it, may I see you?"

Hanah's heart leaped. Did he want to be with her, or just keep an eye on her because of the child?

"I'll bring the best mid-wife in Erebor to help you," he offered.
Of course, Hanah thought, feeling her heart slow. Fili would not trust the wellbeing of his flesh and blood to some quack of mankind. It was a reasonable request; she would seem unreasonable if she refused medical assistance. And since he would pay for it, she might as well take advantage.

"In that case, I want Healer Elín," she said.

His eyebrows rose, but he did not protest. "Very well. We'll come visit you at your home."

Prince Fili visiting his pregnant lady friend at The Galley? Absolutely not. She was not ashamed of her employment, but the attic over the inn was no proper room for entertaining guests.

"She may," Hanah said. "We will visit you when the child is born."

Fili's jaw clenched, but he nodded finally.

When it seemed nothing more was left to discuss, she made to leave.

"Hanah, wait—" He had just put his hand on her shoulder when loud voices were heard through the door, and heavy footsteps approached.

The door opened to reveal Dwalin.

"Well, shove green leaves in me ears and call me an elf. The lost lass has returned," he exclaimed as he approached them.

Fili dropped his hand and stepped back, but Hanah hardly noticed. Overcome with relief at the sight of her dear friend, she laughed at his words while at the same time blushing as she realized she had done exactly what he wanted her to do all along. Dwalin had a soft look in his eyes she had never seen before, and he embraced her tightly when she closed the distance between them, throwing her arms around his middle.

"I thought I'd have to carry ye here myself," he chuckled.

"Careful," Fili admonished, probably fearing Dwalin would crush her and her fragile cargo.

Dwalin released her, but turned to the younger dwarf suddenly with a stern look.

"I remember when ye where but a wee snot-nosed pup on yer mother's knee. Ye tell me to be careful? Don't make me laugh." Dwalin looked far from amused. "I thought ye knew how to take care of yerself. Then ye go lettin' a handmaiden sneak up on ye in yer sleep. You should be more careful." He dismissed the prince with a wave of his hand.

"Now," he said to Hanah. "You looked cozy enough before I came in. I suppose yer business is handled, so let's go home."

Hanah still had her work in Esgaroth. She could not just leave her responsibilities to stay with him immediately.

"We can discuss that later. There's no rush," she said. Preferably when they were alone and had no prince hanging on their words.

"Nonsense," Dwalin boomed. "Yer comin' home right now."

He headed for the door, not even looking if she would follow, just assuming.

Hanah turned to Fili. She wanted to say something more than just farewell. It seemed too cold and
businesslike. She and Fíli had always had business together, and that was how they had always stayed in touch. If she now were to move back to her workshop, she might be able to keep him as a client. She wanted to keep him.

Then she remembered.

"M'lord—Your Highness," she began awkwardly. "We had a deal about a belt last summer. Do you remember?"

A spark of something flashed in Fíli's eyes. He raised his chin in challenging expectation. "Certainly."

"I would like to make good on that deal, sire." Hanah felt more confident now when she was faring in familiar waters. "In a month, I will have your order ready. If you are still interested, that is?"

But the question in her mind was whether he was still interested in keeping in touch with her, regardless of their shared responsibilities for the child. If he wanted to keep her?

Fíli's mustache twitched. Was that the beginning of a smile?

"As ever," he replied steadily.

"Well, until then," Hanah said, holding out a hand for him to shake. "I bid you good day, Prince Fíli."

"Good day, Miss Hanah."

The shook hands, but when she would let go, he did not. He brought her knuckles to his lips, and she felt her chest tighten as it always had when his mouth touched her, wherever it touched her. Heat rose up from her neck.

"That's enough, boy," Dwalin commented gruffly from the door. "Come on now—let her go. She's had a long journey today. She needs rest."

Fíli smiled at her, amused by Dwalin's words as he let go of her hand. Hanah merely bowed her head as usual, and followed Dwalin. The fireflies in her stomach did not permit any other action.

The winged creatures inside her seemed to share their abilities with her. When she left Erebor, her steps were lighter than they had been in months. And the happiest thought of all that swirled in her mind was that she would tell Hemery that they could go home—home to the mountain.
"See," Kíli exclaimed triumphantly. "Did I not say everything would work out? That I would manage it? Did I not say you worried for nothing?"

Kíli followed a tired Fíli through the corridors of the mountain, his gleeful I-told-you-so echoing on the stone.

"So you did," Fíli agreed reluctantly. "Though we seem to differ on the definition of things 'working out'."

"You told me to go to Lake Town—I went to Lake Town. You wanted Hanah—I got you Hanah. You wanted to keep her in your pocket forever—here's the opportunity. It practically jumped into your lap. Well, I guess that was what she did five months ago, and now here she is, carrying your child. How much more connected can two people get?"

"Eloquent as ever, little brother. Except that it has not yet worked out quite like that, has it? She's gone."

"Where has she gone to?"

"Home."

"*Home* home or home as in—?"

"She's returning to Esgaroth," Fíli interrupted impatiently. "And will not come back until the child is born."

Kíli stopped in his tracks. When Fíli realized he was not following, he stopped as well. A frown formed on Kíli's usually untroubled face, clearly thinking his brother to be an imbecile of the highest order.

"I know—and by saying that I know, I feel the need to clarify that I am completely certain, utterly convinced beyond any point of reasonable doubt—that I am justified in asking one question . . ."

Kíli paused, pressing his palms together under his chin, seemingly ordering his words in a way his brother would understand. "Why did you let her go?"

"What do you mean 'let her go'? I can't *let* her do anything," Fíli snapped in anger as he started down the corridor once more.

Kíli ran to catch up with him.

"Yeah, you can. Where are your diplomatic powers of fucking persuasion? You use them on everyone all the time. Why not her?"

A darkness came over Fíli's features.

"You did not see her in there. The way she looked. And the way she looked *at me,*" Fíli attempted to explain.

"Like what?"

"Afraid," Fíli stated gravely.
"I've been with her all day," Kíli said. "She has been perfectly pleasant and composed. What have you done since then?"

"She's good at that, is she not?" Fíli smiled without joy. "Composing and compressing every feeling and fancy until nothing is left but the fear that it will all explode under its own pressure." His voice rose in agitation. "She's been under the weight of an anvil this winter. If I insist she stay in the mountain, tucking her in and locking her up like a good, little dwarf house-wife, drowning her in luxuries, but also in obligations and duties befitting the spouse of a prince—she'll shoot through quicker than an arrow from your bow."

Kíli thought about this a moment before throwing up his arms helplessly.

"So you do nothing?" he asked.

"I did not say that," Fíli objected. "I merely pointed out that the situation is not yet 'worked out.' I'll just have to work a bit harder." He shrugged.

Though Kíli was convinced his brother made a huge mistake in letting Hanah leave Erebor, he was surprised to find the look on Fíli's face anything but discouraged as they bid each other good night.

Hanah spent the night at Dwalin's house. Her own cottage had not seen a fire for five months and was not fit for sleeping in. Dwalin fed her meat stew in his kitchen when she asked about his own return to the mountain.

"As soon as the snow stopped, I came back," he said. "After we spoke last, I thought about . . . some things and decided it was best if I go alone, first, and . . . assess the situation."

Hanah knew he had wanted to make sure she would not be charged with any crime if she came back.

"I suppose that went well. But why did you not come fetch me right away, like you said? I'd rather have heard from you than to stand there spillin' all my worries to the prince, fearin' I'd find myself clasped in iron at any moment."

Dwalin seemed to chew a stubborn piece of meat before answering.

"I'm sorry ye had to go through that alone. But . . . I was detained."

Hanah's eyebrows furrowed in worry when he did not explain further. "By what?"

"Some. . . personal business." He was muttering more than usual. She could almost not hear him.

"Must have been important to keep you up here for a whole week."

His face reddened when he replied, heatedly. "It's private."

"Fine." She was surprised by his outburst. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"I'm not uncomfortable," he snapped in derision. "Why would I be uncomfortable in my own house?"

Hanah narrowed her eyes at him. He was being easily annoyed this evening, more than usual.

"I dunno. You're the one who keeps secrets."
He did not answer.

Hanah wondered what could make Dwalin so embarrassed. She had never seen him so distraught before. Except perhaps when they went fishing that time.

"It wouldn't have anythin' to do with a certain lady in Erebor?" she asked.

He put down his spoon with a clatter against the bowl.

"Give it a rest, woman. Ye're like a bloodhound when ye pick up a scent. At the tiniest slack on the leash, ye go fer the neck. Is there nothin' you two find sacred?"

Hanah understood that by 'you two' he meant her and her sister.

"I thought about goin' down there everyday to get ye back up, but I knew there was no danger, and ye didn't seem eager to go so. . . How was I to know ye'd come today of all days to go before the prince?" He seemed torn between apologizing and attempting to shift the blame on her.

"I was just curious. You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"Aye, now she backs off," Dwalin spat, picking up his spoon again. "When she has already satisfied her blood thirst."

She almost rolled her eyes. She thought the likeness was inaccurate and exaggerated.

"Survived orcs, trolls, wargs, and dragons, but the bloody women will be the death of me. Three are too many for any dwarf to answer to." Dwalin cursed into his bowl.

Hanah bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing, forcing herself to show an ounce of respect at his table.

Dwalin made his bedroom ready for Hanah while dinner cooked on the stove, but the scent of mature dwarf in the room was . . . characteristic. Dwalin was not unclean—as a matter of fact, he was feindishly tidy—but he could not erase the dwarf from himself, so to speak. Hanah noted this, but made no indication that she was ungrateful to sleep in his chamber.

"Where will you sleep?" she asked.

"Never mind that. You just get some rest, and we'll set ye up tomorrow."

When Hanah rose from bed in the middle of the night to use the outhouse, she found Dwalin asleep in his chair in front of the fire. She watched him as she passed, trying not to wake him, when she noticed he cradled something in his hand. At closer inspection, she saw it was a dark blue silk ribbon wrapped around his fingers, as if he had fallen asleep rubbing its smooth surface with his thumb.

Hanah mused over its significance to him when he stirred, probably disturbed by her motion in the room. She quickly turned to the fireplace, picked up the poker, and gathered the embers, pretending that had been her errand all along. She did not want him to think she was violating his privacy—at least no more than she already was, what with sleeping in his bed and all.

"What are ye doin' up?" Dwalin muttered sleepily.

"I was just goin' to pee, but I thought to make sure the fire didn't die."
"A dwarf's forge never dies," he simply stated.

Hanah's eyebrows rose. Had it not been unattended all winter while he was in Lake Town? But she did not want to argue the point with him in the middle of the night. She was just glad he was not aware of her prying.

"Right," she said, putting the poker away.

She noticed how he gathered the ribbon in his hand, hiding it in his large fist.

"I'll just go out for a bit. You go back to sleep," Hanah said.

She did not hear his breath slow and his snoring resume until she had come back inside, bolted the door, and settled back in bed once more.

Hanah and Dwalin had not finished their breakfast the next morning before they were arguing again. She assumed they would be going to Esgaroth together to fetch Hem, but Dwalin refused to let her make the long trip down and up the mountain two days in a row.

"Not in yer condition, yer not," he grumbled.

Hana did not see how sitting in a sleigh and letting someone pull you along was more taxing than staying at the house, cleaning it after five months of dust, ice, and snow. No one had touched the place since she and her sister had hurriedly vacated it, leaving drawers open, papers spread over the floor, animal skins turned to mice nests in crumpled heaps, and the unused chimney stuffed with snow.

"Oh. But you'll be gone all day, and maybe tomorrow as well. Are you goin' to leave me here?" Hanah pulled a vulnerable, surprised face. "I guess I'll manage, though it would be such a great help for my poor back if my sister was here to help me. But I think I can carry the firewood, and the water, and clean the house by myself." She trailed off in a weak voice, glancing at the dwarf from the corner of her eye.

Dwalin rubbed his bearded chin and growled something indistinct before giving in.

"Ye know better than to lift heavy in yer state. But if ye'd rather die from frost in yer lungs then, by all means, let's go—ye're comin' with me."

"As long as you think it's best," Hanah asked, looking for confirmation.

"Aye, aye," he muttered reluctantly. "What does it matter what I say, anyway?" He continued his dissatisfied mumbling while they got ready to leave and most of the way down the mountain.

Hanah was just glad to be in his company again.

When they arrived at The Galley in the afternoon, Hemery ran out to meet them in the street. Hanah fell to her knees in front of her sister, wetting her coat in the snow as they hugged. She could feel Hem's rapid heartbeat against her temple. Hem's fingers fisted in Hanah's hair and the fur of her coat. When they broke apart, she knew she did not have to explain anything. She knew Hemery was sick of hearing about old fears and threats. Hanah just smiled reassuringly at her, framing Hem's face in her hands.

"We're goin' home."
Hemery said nothing, her eyes spilling over with silent tears as she looked between Hanah and Dwalin. Then she nodded.

Though the Durins had no direct power over happenings in Esgaroth, they had immense influence over business taking place in it. Hanah came to learn this when she told Hamish, the innkeeper at The Galley, that she and Hemery were leaving for Dale.

Hamish was very agreeable, though Dwalin had given him no reason to be so, and assured them it was no trouble that they left his employment so suddenly. Hanah suspected that her meeting with Prince Kíli at the inn yesterday had something to do with this carefree disposition. It was not every day his establishment was graced by the presence of royalty.

As she and Dwalin returned to Dale with Hemery, Hanah could not stop smiling.

Due to the winter, which reigned over the mountain harsher than over the lake, the fire in the kitchen was slow to heat the whole cottage. The iron stove was situated in the middle of the house, built into the stone wall separating the kitchen and the workshop which heated both rooms almost equally. But it took a lot of firewood to keep warm all day. Despite the prospect of hard work in maintaining the cottage and taking up their craft, Hanah felt warmth infuse her in these familiar surroundings.

"It's funny," Hemery said when they lay down to sleep the first night. "It feels like we never left. Except that there's less room in the bed now that you're growin' fat."

"I'm not fat," Hanah mumbled in her half-sleep.

"I know you're not made of fat, but you look fat."

Hanah groaned, too tired to argue with her sister at this time at night.

"Is that a bad word? What should I say? Big? Swollen? Inflated?"

"None of 'em. Would you have said that about our own mother? Show some respect."

"I'm just sayin', it's almost like before we left," Hemery maintained innocently.

"When we left, it wasn't so cold," Hanah mumbled, pressing closer to her sister.

"Get away. Your feet are like ice."

"If you were fatter, you'd keep warm better."

On the first morning, Fíli sent them food to restock their pantry. Bread, cheese, eggs, smoked meat, pickled unions, spiced garlic and tomatoes in oil, sweetberry jam, and milk in a porcelain pitcher. And butter in a round wooden box. Hanah acted as if she was unaffected by the gesture, but was secretly elated by his attentions, even if it was only for the sake of his child. She could indulge in every craving without having to worry about coin. Whenever she caught Hem's look during a trip to the pantry, she would simply shrug.

"It's goin' bad if we leave it," Hanah explained without being asked. "You know what he's like. We can't return it."

Hemery knew all too well. She knew Hanah and Fíli would resume their meetings as soon as they
returned to Dale. This was how it started last time. Hanah said he would not come for a long while yet, but Hem knew better. She felt as if his shadow stretched beside them all day. He would always be with Hanah if he kept sending her gifts. He would be present in her mind if nothing else; he did not even have to show his face.

Before noon that day, there was a knock on the door. Hanah frowned, wondering who knew they were back. Fíli obviously had found out that they had indeed not gone back to Esgaroth, but he was a prince; he had his ways and reasons. Who else would know? Hanah made her way to the door to greet the visitor.

"Healer Elín." Hanah recognized the dwarf woman when she opened the door. "I didn't expect you so soon."

"I came yesterday, but there was no one here." The dwarf woman responded curtly.

"Oh, I'm sorry you made the trip for nothin'. I was fetchin' my sister in Lake Town yesterday."

Elín's eyebrows rose. "Well, there'll be no more fetching up and down hills for you for quite some time, m'lady."

Hanah felt chastised, and rightly so, she admitted. She looked sheepish and refrained from talking. She suspected that her explanation of collecting her own sister to seize her ignorance and isolation would not be sufficient. No use in arguing; it was done.

"No need for that," Hanah said. "I'm no lady."

"The mistress would not have sanctioned my absence from the house of healing for anything less than attending a very important lady."

"Mistress?" Hanah blinked.

"Why, Lady Dis, of course. Princess of the Longbeards.

"Of course," Hanah echoed weakly, stunned.

"Let's not stand around waiting for thaw. You shouldn't expose yourself like this."

"I'm sorry—do come in," Hanah said, trying to sound welcoming though Elín had already crossed the threshold.

"Get the fire going, and the kettle," Elín instructed.

While Hanah stoked the embers and fed them more firewood, Elín unrolled a cloth parcel on the kitchen table.

"This place is filthy. How long have you lived like this?"

From someone else, it might have sounded like an insult, but Hanah could tell it was an observation stemming from professional curiosity. The room was filthy.

"Since yesterday," she replied. "We've been away all winter."

"You'll need to get someone in to help with up-keep."

Hired help? Hanah did not think it was that bad.
"We can take care of the worst quickly enough by ourselves. I can't afford that kind of service."

Elín turned to her, surprised.

"Can't afford it?" she rough voice boomed in the small room. "Lady Skinner, gold holds no weight for you anymore. You cannot compromise with your health or your family's." She turned to her jars and bags in front of her on the table. "I'm amazed that the Durins allow you to remain in this hut."

Hanah thought it was a quite sturdy building, surely a few centuries old, but guessed that to Elín and every other mountain dwelling dwarf it was a shack by comparison.

"We are happy here," Hanah said, watching small bubbles form at the bottom of the kettle.

Elín stilled. "Of course. Apologies, m'lady," she said solemnly. "I meant no disrespect to your home."

Hanah smiled thinly in return. "I know." It was just the way of the dwarves, voicing their opinions whether you ask for them or not.

"It's just—" Elín seemed to contemplate her words for the first time. She was about to say something, but then changed her mind, settling for, "I hope you'll manage here on your own."

Hanah wondered what she might have thought, but could not say. It had to have been extreme for her to bite her tongue rather than speak. But Elín was no fool, she was a healer, and Hanah trusted that she knew what to say and what not to say, so she let the matter go.

Elín glanced at the other door while her hands kept busy.

"Lady Dis tells me you are a leathersmith."

"That's right."

"Good work," Elín commented with clear approval in her voice. Rare praise from a dwarf. "And not as physically straining as many other crafts. You're not morphing into glass, you're molding life, but it does not mean one should not be more careful. Dwarven women can keep up in the forge until labour starts, but you—I'm sorry to say—have a much weaker constitution and should take extra care where you step. Take walks your usual places, but no lifting, not even food from market. Hire delivery or a horse, have your sister be your hands. No running, jumping, throwing, hefting, climbing, or riding. You've been unlucky in the past." Elín put her thumb to her forehead and then to her lips with eyes heavenward in the ritual to ward off misfortune. "We want to avoid a repetition of last spring."

Hanah had not forgotten the bloody, painful day and night she experienced last year.

"I understand." She nodded.

Elín examined Hanah, touched her stomach to make sure nothing hurt were it was not supposed to. She asked detailed questions about the entire pregnancy so far: symptoms, eating habits, moods, cramps, and ailments on any sort. The healer took note of everything. She even asked about Hanah's skin, if she had noticed any difference in quality or colour, and if her hair was thicker than usual. At one point, she took Hanah's hands in her own and scrutinized her nails. Hanah knew they were not very clean or even, but Elín nodded to herself.

She told her a list of things to eat and things to avoid. Most of the latter were herbs that Hanah already knew were dangerous in large quantities or mushrooms that were easily mistaken for
poisonous ones. She instructed Hanah how to sit and work to alleviate the pressure on her stomach and on her back, and also advice on how to find comfortable positions lying down to help her sleep when her belly would grow larger.

"Well, you've been eating better since I last saw you, which isn't saying much, mind you. You could do with some more resources around the waist."

Hanah compared her soft form to Elín's. The healer was not tall, but broad and solid. Not like the voluptuous matrons at the inns where everything swelled in abundance. Elín was a strong dwarf woman. Perhaps it came naturally to them, eating and becoming strong. Hanah knew she would not be strong from just eating. This was another disadvantage she found to being mankind.

"I estimate the birth to just after Midsummer," Elín said, packing up her parcels.

Hanah froze while tying the lacing on her dress. Butterflies flew from her belly to her fingertips. She knew it would happen eventually, but hearing it spoken by Elín was another thing altogether.

She looked at Elín for a moment, trying to find the proper facial expression for this news.

After Midsummer, her life would change forever. Well, it had already changed. There never was an opportunity to go back. It was settled on Durin's day. Like jumping of a cliff and not reaching the bottom until nine months later. Bad comparison, she realized. Her life would not be over, it was just beginning.

Hanah managed a small smile as she caught Elín's peculiar look. An almost imperceptible crease had formed between her eyebrows. Worry, or perhaps confusion? But the healer said nothing.

"I guess it's better to give birth in a heat wave than in a snowstorm," Hanah jested, trying to distract Elín from whatever strange thoughts she formed in her mind about Hanah and her undwarvenness.

"We'll just have to hope for the best, won't we?" Elín said. It was one of those things one said without expecting an answer, but Hanah felt that Elín really wanted to hear her say the words. Elín studied her intently.

"Hope is all I feel I can do," Hanah said truthfully.

Elín nodded, thoughtful as she tied the last knot on her bag.

"I trust that you don't think me impertinent—" she began, "but know that it is for your benefit I ask if you're at all prepared for this?"

Hanah had to quickly smooth her forehead with her hand, to cover the brow that had knotted on its own in sudden annoyance.

"I may be unmarried, but I'm not completely without means. And I've looked after my sister since our mother's death, so I have some idea of how to foster a child." She tried to keep her tone civil.

Elín put a hand up to stop her. "I'm sure you do, m'lady. I meant, are you . . . blessed?"

Hanah frowned in confusion now.

Elín explained. "Do you appreciate this as a gift, letting it fill you with determination and life force?"

Hanah's eyes widened. She had stopped fearing for her life just two days ago. She had not really
taken the time to reflect on her level of happiness. But her child certainly filled her with purpose. It had helped make the decision to go back to Erebor and face her problems, standing up for what she believed in.

"I haven't been in a position to appreciate much at all this winter."

"And when I came to see you last spring, you were in a similar place, as I recall."

Elín waited for Hanah's nod before continuing.

"I also recall that you were not burdened by any sense of... bereaved motherhood," the healer spoke carefully.

Hanah remembered. She had almost felt relieved when she learned that she lost a child. Almost. It had not been a good time, or a good match. The child had not been conceived in a tender moment with someone she—

She felt her cheeks burn at the thought.

But amidst all her worry and fear, at unexpected moments, like peeling a bucket of potatoes at The Galley, she would be overwhelmed by a sense of serendipity. Her moment of intimacy with Fíli was corporeal and would remind her for the rest of her life that she experienced love, however fleeting. She would have not only another being of her flesh and blood, like Hemery, to cherish and draw strength from, but also a breath of the past—a living memory in her presence everyday.

"Things are different now." Hanah raised her chin. "I'm proud of this child, and I know I'll raise her right."

Elín's gaze softened at that, and the corner of her mouth twitched. She nodded.

"Very well, m'lady."

It seemed Hanah had passed Elín's test.

The healer tied her cloak around her, gathered her things, and moved to the door.

"I'll see you in three weeks."

"So soon?"

Elín smiled for the first time during their meeting. "As I said—you're an important lady."

"Carryin' an important child, you mean?" Hanah could not help but quip at her absurd change in status.

Elín just laughed as she walked out.

It did not take long for the dwarf prince to realize Hemery's prophecy. Though the sisters had already received their daily delivery of milk and eggs, Fíli came bearing gifts on the second day.

Hanah remembered that she told him not to visit her, and that his order she was working on would not be ready for another month, she did not comment on his prompt appearance. Her objection had been against him visiting The Galley, not Dwalin's cottage. And he was still the father of her child. However, she found him dangerously close to falling into his old habit of popping by without warning whenever the fancy struck him, which could become a problem if she had any hope of
ever being independent from him.
Hanah sighed, grateful that he at least did not have a key to their house.

"Good mornin', Prince Fíli," she greeted with a dry smile when she opened the door.

"A fine morning to you, Miss Hanah," he said cheerfully, entering the kitchen with a large bundle in his arms. "And to you, Miss Hemery," he added with a bewildered frown at the younger sister sitting at the kitchen table.

"Is it?" she replied in a low voice, careful to not allow Hanah, who was closing the door and following their guest to the kitchen, to overhear.

"You're not in school, now that you're back?" Fíli asked Hemery.

"Does it look like I'm in school?" she said, unimpressed, watching him under low eyebrows.

"We have a lot to do for the next few weeks. If the schoolmaster allows it, Hem may return later when we have the workshop up and runnin' again."

"Shouldn't Hemery take advantage now before you're indisposed? You'll probably need her more after."

Hanah had to remind herself that he meant well and was not deliberately interfering in her life. At least she hoped that was the case, and decided that he would not affect her either way. She chose not to argue with him this fine spring morning, so she smiled at him instead.

"Won't you sit down? I was just makin' some tea."

She turned her back to him, focusing on the boiling kettle. She heard a chair scrape over the floor. He was sitting down.

Hemery kicked Fíli under the table. He flinched and turned to her, frowning, but said nothing. He had been a part of plenty of silent fights with his brother over dinner growing up, so he knew the rules of this game. He looked at Hem questioningly.

It was so typical of him to just show up and the first order of business was to inform Hanah how to plan her time. Top marks, Prince Fíli. Why did he not just fuck off back to his palace and let their business be their business?

She tried to give him a 'what do you think you're doing' look. Her eyes widened for emphasis and motioned pointedly with her chin towards Hanah. Fíli shook his head in confusion and threw his hands up helplessly, as if he did not know what she blamed him for.

Did he not sense Hanah's cold frustration? Hemery rolled her eyes before settling back in her seat, giving up on him.

Fíli sat still a moment, a stressed look flashing over his face, clearly thinking rapidly. Suddenly, he cleared his throat, catching Hanah's attention.

"Thank you," he said.

"For what?"

"Making me tea," he explained, sitting very straight in his chair and sounding oddly formal.
Hanah frowned. "I always make you tea. It's nothin'. We were just gonna have breakfast anyway." She went back to pouring boiling water into cups.

Fíli glanced at Hemery who looked at him as if he had just ordered a barrel of ale from a blacksmith. If there had been any doubt as to how foolish Hemery thought Fíli to be, he now found it crystal clear.

His eyes lit up and a calm came over his features.

"And, uhm . . ." he began, "I didn't mean to overstep. I just meant that you'll be busy for quite some time, and . . . well, if hemery wishes to resume her studies—" He seemed to change the course of his sentences several times over. "I know, why don't I have a tutor come here instead? That way, she'll be closer at hand if you need her. That would be less of an inconvenience for you."

Hemery hid her face in her hands. The dwarf was utterly hopeless. How he had succeeded in seducing Hanah to begin with was a mystery to her.

"I know what you meant," Hanah interrupted him. "And thank you, but that's not necessary. We'll go on like we did before."

Not exactly like before, obviously. For one thing, Fíli was not there for a mid-morning fondle.

"I mean, Hem and I," Hanah amended. "I'll make sure she has time to work and read."

"Good." He nodded.

Hemery pointed at the package wrapped with string he had brought. "What's that?"

"I brought you some bear skins," he said, placing a hand on the bundle. "I fear it gets cold in here at night."

"It does," Hanah replied, her smile genuine now. "That's very considerate."

She took a knife to the strings and let the fur unfold on the table. She ran a hand over them, knowing she would fall asleep quickly tonight with these wrapped around her and Hemery. Dark brown, almost black, they matched the furs on the prince's bed, Hanah noticed. Several months had passed, but the colours were vivid in her mind. Avoiding Fíli's gaze, she took one of the furs and enfolded Hemery in one.

"I think we'll take these with us everywhere," Hanah surmised with a grin when Hemery all but disappeared inside the large bear skin.

Hemery said nothing, but kept it on, tightening it around her, almost as if she tried to hide her enjoyment from Fíli by burrowing deep in the fur.

"Thank you," Hanah said, glancing at Fíli.

"My pleasure," he responded with a low rumble in his chest. "And these are not for work," he held up a finger forbiddingly. "They are for you own keeping."

They both knew bearskins were quite difficult to get hold of, and expensive. These would make for formidable winter coats for a rich customer.

"Don't worry. We'll take good care of 'em," she said with a teasing smile. "It's near spring. Winter coats will not be in demand again until autumn."
Fili did not rise to her baiting, but sipped his tea.

The skins were a great gift. Hanah thought it a pity that she could offer him nothing in return since he was so good to them. Of course, he was a prince and did not feel the sting in his purse as she would. But that did not mean she could not be of use.

"I haven't had a chance to work on your belt," she said to him. "But I have some sketches on paper if you'd like to see...?"

"Lead the way," he simply said, standing up with his cup in one hand.

Hanah had thought she would bring the sketches to the table where he sat, but guessed it did not matter as she led him to the workshop.

Fili stood close as she pointed out the functions and angles of the item she had in mind. He did not say much. Hanah could see him raise his head from now and then, not really looking at the features she showed him.

"On the inside of the case," she explained, "there is a track which the blade attaches to, but will come loose as you pull it. Are you listenin'?"

She looked up at him, annoyance rising.

"Aye, aye," he said hurriedly, returning his full attention to the sketch before she could catch his wandering eyes.

"No, you're not. You're not interested," she settled with a subdued, but steady voice. She did not want to alert Hemery in the other room. "You keep lookin' around. You just wanted an excuse to check up on me, makin' sure I don't spoil your gifts. I eat well and sleep warm, so I'll not harm the bairn if that's what worries you."

Hanah folded the papers in front of her. Suddenly, his hand covered hers, stopping her movements.

"No, no, no," he protested. "I am very interested. This is an incredibly clever device, no doubt about it, but——"

He sighed impatiently. Or was he frustrated? But about what? That they constantly arrived at separate ends of the crossroads of communication? Because that was frustrating her to no end.

"You're right. I am distracted, but that's because I'm looking at you."

She felt Fili's hand squeeze hers on the table, and she met his eyes. He still surprised her with his forwardness. He looked at her intently—not really smiling, not serious either—but with a definite spark of something in his eyes.

He would kiss her, right at that moment. She just knew it. Hanah's heart suddenly pounded. These changes in heart rate could not be good for the baby, she briefly reflected before—

"May I?" he asked.

Always so respectful. Her chest tightened. But instead of looking at her mouth, he motioned to her belly. She blinked.

Oh.

Of course. The idea of his child sleeping inside her could be a bit distracting, she granted. The days
when the only thing on his mind was to kiss her were long gone. Hanah felt her face grow warm.

"You may," she replied.

She was happy to see him take such a hands on interest, so to speak, as he gently placed one palm over her stomach and one on her lower back, holding their child—and her—in his grasp. He looked concentrated for a moment, almost troubled.

"I don't feel anything," he said.

"It's early still. And it's quite small, you know."

"How small?"

Hanah shrugged. "Like an apple or two."

His brow smoothed suddenly. Determined, he went down on his knees before her, took the hem of her dress in his hands and pulled it up over her stomach. Fortunately, she wore trousers underneath her dress during winter, but it did not stop Hanah from yelping indignantly.

"You gave your permission," Fili protested as she tried to tug her skirts out of his grasp.

"Not to take my clothes off. Anybody could come in here," she hissed.

"When you finally decide to wear skirts..." he muttered.

"What?" She froze.

"Just a moment, I swear," he said, innocently, bunching up her dress above her stomach and laying his face against her exposed flesh.

It was overwhelming, feeling his skin against hers again. His cheek was warm, his ear cool, his beard scratchy and tickling.

"It doesn't make any noise," she said, putting her hands on her hips.

"Shhh." Her words did not deter him. "Just because you can't hear it from your end..." he trailed off, focused on listening, searching for signs of life.

After a moment, he chuckled, and then sighed contentedly.

"It's like putting a sea shell to your ear, hearing the ocean to the rhythm of two drums."

Hanah felt his thumb stroking her skin below the folds of her skirt where he held it. Goosebumps travelled around her stomach and up her back.

"That's enough," she said, wishing to put more distance between them before his touch reduced her to a wanton, shivering mess. "I'm cold," she explained, pulling away and letting her dress fall down to cover her naked belly.

She avoided Fili's eyes as he stood up, and occupied herself with gathering her sketches.

"Hanah," he said quietly, making her look up.

He seemed uncertain, his fingertips lingering over the surface of the table, thoughtfully.
"I know you just came back, and I do appreciate you welcoming me into your home, even when I barge in on your breakfast without warning, but . . . if you don't mind, I would ask—if the idea does not repel you—that you contemplate the advantages to relocating . . ." He sighed. "I mean, if you'd consider living in Erebor. With your sister, of course, and . . . our child."

The words did not arrive without difficulty, she could tell.

He looked away. "As the mother of my heir, you'll be taken care of for the rest of your life."

Hanah put the sketches away in a drawer, closing it firmly.

If she moved into the mountain, Erebor would be the child's home and impossible to leave. Of course she wanted to live with Fíli, but did he want to live with her? She would not be able to stand seeing him everyday if they were destined to live separate lives beyond their joint parenthood. It was better like this, when he was a half hours walk away. She could cling on to some semblance of independence, even if it was only in spirit.

"Thank you," she said measuredly. "That's very kind."

It was, and she tried to convey her sincere gratitude in her voice.

"But I don't think—"

"Don't," he interrupted her, shaking his head. "Don't decide now."

With these words he left her.

He turned her world up side down, always had. By accident or on purpose, Hanah had no idea.
The following week was calm, but if Hanah thought it would last, she was mistaken. She and her sister had managed to bring an order to the house that resembled the state of cleanliness and industry it had been in before they left. But on the eighth day, a weekend morning when they had indulged themselves with sleeping in, Hanah's serenity was disturbed once more.

Sitting alone at the table with a cup of tea, sketching with coal on paper and letting Hemery sleep a while longer, her gaze was drawn to movement outside. She stretched her neck to get a better look, before jumping out of her seat, running to the alcove, and shaking her sister awake.

"Hem, Hem. *Hem.*"

"What?" Hem groaned, followed by a string of nonsensical protests. They were worse than usual, probably since Hemery knew today was a day of rest.

"Come quick to the window. Dwalin's sweetheart is here."

Hemery sat up, her eyes widening as if she just had a bucket of cold water dumped over her head, the cobwebs slowly clearing.

"What? She—where?" Hem made little sense.

"Come look."

Hemery allowed herself to be pulled by the hand into the kitchen. Glancing carefully past the window frame, they made sure they were not directly visible through the glass, peering out into the yard.

There they were, their appearance as mystical as though they were faeries. Dis and Sethie in their dark, elegant winter robes, a stark contrast to the still ankle deep snow in the yard. They seemed to have just dismounted their horses which stood a few paces back with another group of horses with soldiers, the princess' guard still astride.

"Is that her?" Hemery asked.

"The one up front, in blue. Princess Dis, sister of King Oakenshield. In the flesh."

Hemery could not see much through the wobbly glass, but enough to recognize the long, black hair and the posture—not tall or straight, but effortlessly demanding attention nevertheless. Both traits the princess shared with her brother.

Outside his door stood Dwalin, a still figure, his frame stiff and unwelcoming. Hanah found this strange. Even if they were not lovers as she had assumed, they had known each other a long time; why would they keep such distance between them? They spoke, a murmur reaching Hanah and Hemery in their kitchen, but no distinct words were heard.

Then Dis and Sethie moved in the direction of their cottage, pace suddenly brisk, leaving Dwalin to stare after them.

"They're coming here," Hemery hissed.

Hanah ducked away from the window. "Hurry, get your clothes on."
As Hemery bolted to the backroom, Hanah glanced around to check that the room was presentable. The workshop had plenty of tools and skins lying around, but was generally clean. The kitchen was rather empty as Hanah and Hemery rarely used pots or pans for cooking, mostly eating food cold, which meant they had less dirty dishes to clean.

Hanah opened the door to quickly after the knock. She feared Lady Dis would understand that she had been waiting behind the door, knowing they were on their way because she spied on them through the window.

"Miss Skinner," Dis said with a barely perceptible nod.

"Lady Dis." Hanah bowed her head. "How . . . surprisin'." Her voice held a strange pitch all of a sudden. She cleared her throat.

"Indeed," Dis replied curtly.

When Hanah realized she was not going to expand on her errand standing on the frozen steps, she remembered her manners. "Please, come in." She opened the door wide for the two dwarves.

Dis and Sethie scanned their surroundings as they entered, coming to stand in the kitchen.

"Can I offer you some tea, m'lady?" Hanah asked, wary of the judgment they formed in their minds about the state of their home.

Sethie smiled. "I'll take care of it, Miss Hanah. You sit down, put your feet up for a moment."

"No, I'll make it, you shouldn't—" Hanah attempted to protest, but Sethie pulled out a chair and actually led her by the arm to sit down. Her grip was firm, but not painful.

"I've brought Sethie to aid you in . . ." Dis' hand rose as if she wished to point to Hanah's stomach, but then continued to travel with an uncertain wave over the whole room, "whatever matters you need attended to."

"That's very kind, but as I told Elin and Fíli, we don't need extra hands."

Dis' face was unperturbed. "I am not Elin or Fíli," was all she said. Then her attention shifted to something behind Hanah.

"Ah, I heard you had a sister," Dis said.

Hanah turned in her seat to see Hemery peek out from the alcove. She stretched out a hand toward Hemery, beckoning her forward.

"Hemery, greet Lady Dis."

Hemery bowed her head in a small curtsy, which was a more formal gesture than Hanah had ever witnessed from the young girl. She rewarded Hemery with a smile. Then Hemery went to stand behind Hanah's chair, hands on the back rest.

Sethie set out to serve tea while Dis sat at the table. Hanah was uncomfortable watching someone else working in her kitchen when she herself was idle.

"The fire draws strong," Sethie remarked. "Makes for quick tea, but it eats the firewood quicker. We should do something about this draft."

"There's draft?" Hanah asked. She had not thought it worse than any other place she had stayed in.
"Aye," Sethie agreed in amusement. She moved to the kitchen window, holding her hand over the sill. "You feel that? Even the southern wind will chill your bones with this whistle. And you could do with a chimney cover, even if you're not staying long with the wee one on the way. Save you a fortune on heating if nothing else."

There was sense in her words, though Hanah did not like that people assumed they would be moving.

"Well, I guess the house is too small for three, though we could manage a few years. We've been very comfortable here."

"Oh," said Sethie. "I meant, now that you'll—"

"It will all work out for the best, I'm sure," Dis interrupted with a serene smile. "Dwalin will add on another room with indoor plumbing and triple pane glass windows before he'll let you move. He never had the pleasure of fathering children, but you've filled that void rather spectacularly."

Hanah smiled back, though she was not sure Dis' pleasantness was genuine.

"He's the best landlord we've ever had—that's for sure."

Though that in itself did not say a lot. Dis seemed to be of similar opinion because she chuckled.

"You mean he has not cut your hair?" she asked with an expectant smile on her face, as if she was asking for milk in her tea.

Dis knew about the landlady's actions against Hanah and her sister?

"Did Prince Fíli—?"

"My son told me nothing. But I know Agnes," she explained with a knowing nod. She sipped her tea.

Hanah thought she must mean Lady Brage.

"She's predictable, likes to create rituals," Dis went on. "I did it to her once."

Hanah gaped.

"About ten years ago. She threatened my children. Wanted my brother and I to suffer for what happened to her sons. She got away lightly. You can imagine her fate had Thorin heard her speak of such things."

Hanah could imagine very well that any slight against his family would be dealt with swiftly and effective, his wrath surely a gruesome thing behold. It made sense that Lady Brage chose to cut of Hanah's hair; she had thought her a spy for Dis and her family. Vengeance seemed to run the landlady's veins.

"It's not wise to speak ill of royals," Hemery remembered.

Hanah's head whipped around to give Hemery a hard stare. Her words could be interpreted in far too many ways for her liking. She hoped Hemery did not mistake these dwarf women for equals. Though they offered helping hands and advice, their allegiance was to Erebor and to the king. Just because Hanah's child was going to be part of their family, did not mean she and Hemery would be.

Dis regarded Hem. "Indeed. Unless you know how to speak well."
Her tone gave no evidence to her feelings towards Hemery's statement, her response part warning and part counsel.

"Have you met Thorin?" Dis asked.

Hemery flinched at that, looking between the women, but Dis' question seemed to be directed at Hanah.

"Only once," she replied. Hanah did not know him; her encounter with Thorin had been very brief.

"Of course," Dis agreed, unsurprised. "Typical of Fíli to keep you to himself, despite the work you've done for him. Or because of it, I should say. The collection you produced should have you overrun with business, but here you are at your leisure."

Hanah bristled at the insinuation that she was not a hard worker, but she could understand why Dis might find their home a bit untidy and judge it as proof of inactivity. She glanced through the door to the messy workshop and sighed.

Dis went on.

"He proudly shows off your work, but is reluctant to share. I would be as well if I found you first. Tell me, are you interested in selling your skills?"

"I believe that's what I do," said Hanah.

"As in sharing them," Dis clarified. "You have a sister—that's good. That means you can analyse the techniques and teach them."

"M'lady?"

"I have a project. My specialty is gold, but I like to expand—do things myself, learn new techniques."

"I'm sure Erebor has much more knowledgeable pelt masters—"

"Oh, we do," Dis said, smiling. "But I already know them and their ways. Now, I wish to know you."

The princess' gaze was heavy on Hanah, compelling her to agree. Hanah appreciated how generous Lady Dis was with her opinions, but could not shake the unease she felt in her presence. She did not fear the dwarf, but she was wary.

"Can we do business, Miss Hanah?"

Powerful, as if through magic, the word that had been drilled into her by her father surpassed all priorities.

"Certainly, m'lady," Hanah agreed.

"May I?" Dis stood, motioning to the workshop. The shifts between courtesy and brutal frankness were beginning to brew a headache for Hanah.

"Allow me," she replied, leading the way into the workshop. She gathered some stray materials strewn about in a disorderly fashion, putting them away on a shelf to clear a table surface, and showed Dis some samples she still had from the making of the coats.
Sethie remained in the kitchen, rummaging through the cupboards. Hemery stayed to watch her.

"You have crowberry jam?" Sethie marvelled over their well-stocked pantry. "How did you get it this late in the season?"

"We didn't. It's delivered to our door. We didn't pay for anythin' on those shelves, or choose it." Hemery did not sound happy for the free food.

"Ah. Of course. Prince's orders." Sethie smiled thinly in understanding, nodding to herself. "You don't like him, do you?"

Hemery threw her a black look beneath her eyebrows, mouth pursed as if she tasted something sour. Sethie's own curved into a smile.

"I'm not surprised, considering . . ." She trailed off.

Hemery's eyes widened in disbelief. Could there really be someone who truly understood how she felt about Fíli and his role in the sisters' problems?

"Is this a trick?" she asked.

Sethie laughed. "No. I may serve the prince, but I'm employed by Lady Dis. I answer to her, and would gain nothing by luring you into any trap. Though I don't think one would be needed. He is probably well aware of your opinions if you wear them on your sleeve like that."

Hemery forced her face to relax as she felt her mouth tense in automatic response.

"I knew how it would be," Sethie said as she took a damp cloth to the shelves in the pantry, cleaning a year of dust. "As soon as I saw Miss Hanah in the prince's chambers last summer, I knew he was in trouble. The way he rushed to help her sit and unload her bags." She chuckled to herself. "I'm surprised she resisted his charms for as long as she did."

Hemery frowned. "You mean she was in trouble, right?"

Sethie turned to wink at her. "Figure of speech, dear. She may not have lasted long, but he didn't last for two shakes of a dogs tail."


Sethie's smile faded as she sensed the girl's dejected spirit. She closed the cupboard and moved to clean the table where Hemery had sat down.

Glancing at her as she worked, Sethie spoke. "He's not a bad sort. He just let his heart run away with his mind. Can't fault him for that, can we?"

Hemery fumed. "Of course we can. You said it—he allowed himself to do that. What good is the mind if it can't keep everythin' in check?"

Sethie nodded. "That's a valid argument. But for all your righteous anger and logic, you're missing an important piece of the puzzle."

"What?"

"We can't change the past. Hanah is having Prince Fíli's child. Even if he wanted nothing to do with her—which I'm sure is not true—there will be no separating them now." She leaned in to whisper. "It's only a matter of time before you're moved to Erebor. My advice is to go with it and
try to draw as little attention as possible. They will keep you in perfect comfort for the rest of your lives."

"I'll not let Fíli keep Hanah for his amusement—"

Sethie shook her head assuredly. "He doesn't do that sort of thing. He can amuse himself. They will keep you because you're valuable. Make no mistake, the Durins always get their way."

Sethie laughed at Hemery's furious expression.

"See. That look is what I'm talking about. You must learn to keep your acid to yourself."

Meanwhile, Hanah had explained to Dis the basics of skin preparation and colouring—very generally due to Dis' previous knowledge in the field. She paused, letting Dis scrutinize the work.

"How long have you worked with leather, Miss Hanah?"

"All my life."

Dis regarded her, waiting.

"This was my nineteenth winter," she continued.

"So young," Dis stated.

"It may not be much by your standards, but it is a lifetime by mine."

"True." Dis nodded. "By now, I'm sure you've realized dwarves are different from men."

Surprised, Hanah looked up at Dis.

"Our perspective, if you will," she said, smiling at her joke.

Hanah could not help but smirk. Indeed, dwarves had a different perspective on the world, from their low point of view if nothing else.

"Because of our longevity, we remember. We re-live. While men are swords hammered a thousand times until mistakes become wisdom, dwarves are burned—carrying scar tissue as if touched by dragon fire. You only survive it once."

Hanah wondered were the dwarven lady was headed, but waited respectfully in silence.

"When Fíli was a boy, I found him keeping a rat in his room. He had taken it from one of the traps in the kitchen, felt sorry for the poor beast, and decided to keep it as a pet. He had made a wee cage and everything."

Dis smiled in remembrance.

"I made him get rid of it, so he set it free in the forest. After that, both of my sons began to keep animals. Kíli found an abandoned wolf cub, took it in, fed it, taught it to hunt, brought it everywhere. Even into the forge. Could not have it around food, though. Never learned to keep out of the kitches, or even to stop eating when she was full—she had to eat everything. Something inherent with wild predators, I think. Fíli found a young falcon who had been attacked by a mountain cat, hurt its wing. He cared for it while it mended—it slept on his wrist. Then, one night, the wolf snatched the bird from its perch. Destroyed it."
Dis moved around the room, looking at Hanah's wares while she spoke.

"Kíli was beside himself, cried and apologised again and again. Even offered to kill the wolf in order to repay the debt to his brother. Fíli forgave him of course, and they made sure the wolf was reintroduced to the wild, letting it go after a while. Kíli got other pets after that, dogs mostly, but Fíli never did. I asked him why eventually, and he said that he would never force someone to go against their nature. Because when the falcon's wing had mended, he had not set it free. He thought it selfish, blaming himself for its destruction. And maybe . . . he should not have taken it in at all, letting it starve to death with its broken wing."

Dis turned to Hanah, her gaze pinning her down, heavy and piercing.

"Experiences are set deep for us dwarves. And more so for the line of Durin who are born with the weight of the mountain on our shoulders. We sacrifice ourselves for our people, as well as for those we love. I do not punish myself anymore for the death of my husband, and I do not wish for my son to punish himself for loving someone he cannot have."

Hanah averted her eyes then, her jaw tightening. Was this why the lady came here—to tell Hanah to stay away from her son? Anger boiled up within her. She cursed herself for hoping Dis was there to open a conversation, to initiate a relation as the grandmother of Hanah's child. She had not thought about how much she liked the idea of a mother figure until it was suffocated.

"I think that decision is up to him," said Hanah.

"It may seem like it, but even kings and princes need a push now and then. Fíli will be king—the one person he cannot afford to doubt is himself. He must not question his own sensibilities. It's our duty to not let him."

Hanah's eyes snapped back to Dis. The dwarf wore the serene smile, almost indulgent.

"Our duty, m'lady?"

"Fíli cannot be distracted by uncertainties in his immediate surroundings. He must trust his ability to protect his family. He must know where his child is and whether you both are safe. Whether he holds your love—and your loyalty."

Hanah relaxed. She realized Dis' concerns were not due to disapproval of her, but worry for her son. She could not help a lopsided smile in relief, though she knew it could be misinterpreted.

"You're here to persuade me to accept Fíli's offer," she established.

"Sooner rather than later."

Hanah chose to tell the truth. "I haven't decided yet."

"What is there to consider? Do you have reason to believe he is unable to provide for you?"

Hanah snorted in amusement before she could stop herself. "No. He already feeds us."

"Can you imagine any place better suited to guard you and your family than Erebor?"

Hanah feared it would be too guarded, more like imprisoning. But she could find no fault in Dis' logic. "No."

"Do you have reason to doubt his potential as a father? That he would not inspire his child to
become a strong, intelligent individual?"

Hanah shook her head, running out of objections. "No . . . ?"

"So why the delay? Long engagements are common, to be sure, but I think, under the circumstances, if there ever was a time to mould before melting—"

Hanah's heartbeat stuttered. But Dis was not the first to mistake her and Fíli's relationship for one of more importance.

"We're not engaged," she interrupted quickly.

Dis paused. "Because you have not accepted his offer yet."

"Because his offer was for us to live in Erebor, not an offer of marriage," Hanah explained.

Dis' face cleared, her lips pursed. "I see."

Hanah fidgeted in the silence, not sure what to say. What was the lady thinking?

"I still think you should agree," Dis said suddenly. "This is not merely about Fíli—this is about you, your sister, and your child. You cannot escape the fact that everything will change once people know who you are and who your child is, and not only in a positive sense. You'll be in danger, constantly. This place is no fort. Even Dwalin will not be able to protect you, as I'm sure you have already been made aware."

Hanah could not deny that Maaret's visit had shaken her sense of safety. So much so that she had fled the mountain for the winter.

"Do you remember what it felt like the first time you laid eyes on the city under the mountain?" Dis asked.

She did. She had marvelled at the architecture and the proportions of giants. The design in Ereborian culture told of a level of sophistication and integration she had never beheld before or since.

Hanah nodded. "It took my breath away."

"Erebor is more than just stone walls and guarded gates," Dis said. "It is a fortress of the mind. The lord over those halls is lord over its residents. It is a symbol of power, order, and security. I will not pretend you are untouchable there, since we have fresh reminders that is not the case, but here—"

Dis looked around them, worry and regret in her eyes. "You are exposed, and we cannot protect you."

Hanah sighed. Dis made a compelling argument, but Hanah still feared it would be her prison where she would suffer in her proximity to Fíli and her distance to the outside world. She shook her head, frowning.

"If I go, I'll never be able to leave," said Hanah.

Dis approached her, placing a hand on her cheek, forcing her to meet her gaze. She did not smile, but her blue eyes held an unmistakable earnestness.

"And we will try our best to make sure you will not want to."

"Fíli found a young falcon who had been attacked by a mountain cat, hurt its wing. He looked after
it while it mended—it slept on his wrist. Then, one night, the wolf snatched the bird from its perch. Destroyed it.
Sethie appeared on their doorstep every day, waking them with her knock at dawn. Apparently, Lady Dis' statement that she was there to aid Hanah extended throughout the pregnancy. Bleary eyed, Hanah or Hemery would open the door for her, but as soon as she entered, Sethie insisted they go back to sleep. ("Miss Hanah needs her rest.") But Hanah never had the peace of mind to oblige her. The thought of someone working in her home while she slept sat ill with her. Hemery did not share her sister's qualms, but hastily returned to the bearskins in the alcove. Unfortunately, spring was approaching fast, pushing the sun to rise earlier every day.

The dwarf woman aggravated the sisters as often as she cheered them with her genuine interest to optimize their living conditions. She finished tasks more efficiently than Hanah or Hemery, often before they realized she had begun. Hemery was even able to return to school now that Sethie helped them.

One afternoon when work was done for the day, and Sethie prepared supper, Hanah and Hemery visited Dwalin.

"That maid of yers can't brew tea?" he scoffed, pouring three cups.

"Course she can," Hanah contradicted.

"She's not our maid," said Hem.

"Should I assume she's a thief then the way I've seen her skulkin' around the yard with my firewood."

"She's workin' as a maid, yes," Hanah explained. "But she's not our maid."

Hanah had given Sethie the jar of jam to thank her for her efforts that week. It soothed Hanah's conscience. Sethie had been very grateful, claiming crowberries were the jewels of the forest, dearer than its weight in gold.

"Lady Dis is her mistress, not me."

"I," Hem supplied.

"Alright," Hanah agreed reluctantly. "There's no need to be cheeky. I know she's probably reportin' every little thing back to Dis, makin' sure I don't disappear again. But the princess insisted."

"I meant I, not aye," Hem clarified. "As in Dis is her mistress, not I. The schoolmaster gets very upset when we use the wrong words."

Hanah sighed. "But you understood what I meant."

"Yes."

"Then what difference does it make what words I use?" Hanah rubbed her forehead.

Hemery knew her sister was hungry and tired from the long day. Her temper grew shorter as her stomach grew bigger. So Hemery did not argue.

"Yer company is amusin' as ever," Dwalin commented dryly. "But may I ask why ye're here? Ye have supper waitin'."
"Yes, I have somethin' I need to . . . discuss with you," Hanah ventured.

Dwalin waited.

"What would you say if—if we went to live in the mountain?" Hanah frowned, hardly daring to meet his eye.

Dwalin's eyebrows slowly knotted as he listened.

"When we were in Esgaroth, I know you wanted us to go back, but is it a good idea, do you think?" Hanah clawed at a callus on her hand.

"So that's what they've been tellin' ye, eh?" He scratched his chin through his beard. "I reckon that's what Dis came for. Probably did a solid day's work at that. Few can withstand her . . . eloquence." He almost spat the word.

Hanah did not understand this sudden annoyance toward Lady Dis. His feelings towards her seemed to go up and down with the seasons.

Dwalin sighed. "She's probably right, of course. More often than not, she's right. She'll want her grandchild safe and close. Erebor is the safest place for ye, no doubt."

He looked down at the grooves in the table, brushing away dust and crumbs with his large hand.

"I'll finally have some peace and quiet around here then, with you lot gone." His eyes were still trained on the surface in front of him.

Hanah gathered that he did not want to keep them from a good life under the Durins' wings for an unsure future remaining here. But Hemery did not interpret the situation in the same way.

"That's it? You'll just let us go live with those people?" Hem snapped.

"Are ye willin' to risk yer sister—and the unborn—to pursue yer grudge against Fee? Don't let jealousy cloud yer judgement."

Jealousy? Hemery seethed. She was most certainly not jealous of that blundering, big-eared bastard. Though she had a hard time seeing why Hanah would find him so fascinating, and why she constantly jeopardized their comfort to be with him. Hemery clenched her jaw tightly. She wanted to ask if she could stay here with Dwalin, but she could not leave Hanah alone in the deep caverns of the mountain.

"You can still visit Dwalin whenever you want," Hana tried to raise her sister's spirits.

"Whenever?" Dwalin questioned, clearly uncomfortable by the unpredictability of Hemery's future visits, but Hanah ignored him.

"We have to think of what's best for the baby," Hanah said. "And nothin' will change really. We'll still work and do whatever we've been doin' here. You can train with Dwalin and go to school."

Hemery remembered her own conclusions about family and security, but she thought all issued would be resolved once they returned to live with Dwalin. Apparently, it was still dangerous and too much work for them to look after a child. Hemery thought everyone was overreacting.

"Be prepared for some changes though," Dwalin interjected. "Ye'll be free to do what ye want, but ye'll have guards tailin' ye when ye leave yer rooms."
Hanah suspected as much, seeing the swarms of people Dis and Fíli surrounded themselves with.

"What? Those oafs?" Hemery exclaimed, remembering her last encounter with the royal guard. "All the time?"

"Some of them are alright." Dwalin waved away her concerns. "I'll help ye pick out some good ones. Not to worry."

Hemery pouted severely now, but there was nothing for it.

"Did Fíli ask anythin' of ye?" Dwalin was careful in his phrasing. Hanah could tell.

"No." She shook her head. "He just asked us to live in Erebor. He didn't even demand an answer."

Now it was her turn to look down at the table. She did not want to talk about all the things she had left unspoken with Fíli. Things were unstable enough as it was.

"Well, I can't tell ye what to do—never could," Dwalin settled. "But I trust ye to do what ye think is right, which is all anyone can hope for."

Hanah and Hemery finished their tea and got up to return to Sethie and their waiting supper. But as Hanah steeped out, Dwalin put his hand on Hemery's shoulder, stopping her a moment.

"Remember," he said, "being invited to live in Erebor is a great honour. You must learn to appreciate an opportunity when ye see it, no matter what taste it leaves in yer mouth."

Hemery did not want to agree, but she knew what he said made some sense.

Dwalin squeezed her shoulder one final time. "And whatever happens—listen to yer sister."

Hanah felt strange standing next to Sethie in Erebor. Had it not been for Sethie's constant questioning of Hanah's wellbeing, one could almost think Hanah was the maid of the two. The dwarf looked more of a noble than Hanah did because of her posture and her clothing.

"Are you sure you won't sit down?" Sethie asked as they waited in the corridor outside the south wing.

"I sat down all day, workin'. I'm fine." Hanah smiled reassuringly.

There was nowhere to sit in the corridor anyway.

Due to Hanah's inactivity in the mountain the last six months, she was not allowed inside the royal quarters, nor had she any way to contact Fíli to talk about his proposition. When she had mentioned going to Erebor to seek him out, Sethie offered to relay a message beforehand, so he knew she was coming. Now Sethie and Hanah waited outside the entrance to the south wing, watching people passing by.

Hanah noticed more guards on this floor. Security was probably higher since the incident with Fíli. She wondered if Dwalin would be satisfied with the current state, or if he still would find it lacking.

"Perhaps he has more pressin' business," Hanah guessed when Fíli had not yet showed up. Her toes were starting to go numb in her boots. Despite the giant furnaces burning in the deep, the south wing was quite chilly due to its proximity to the entrance hall where the doors were always open.
"He'll be here. Don't worry," Sethie said.

"I'm not worried. I'm just sayin' perhaps we should come back another time when he's less busy." Hanah pushed herself up on tiptoes a few times to get the blood flowing to her feet.

"Hanah," Fíli called.

She turned toward the sound. Fíli approached them from the stairs with a pleasant smile, followed by Kíli, Balin, and a handful of guards. They were probably on their way between meetings.

"Prince Fíli." She bowed her head. Sethie did the same.

"Please. None of that," he dismissed. "How are you? Come sit down and have something warm to drink."

Fíli motioned towards his chambers beyond the wall of guards, but Hanah made no move to enter.

"Thank you, but this won't take long," Hanah said.

"You should not have to walk back and forth like this," he said, quickly switching between topics. "I would have met you at your house if I had more time beforehand."

"I didn't want to inconvenience you. I know you are busy."

Fíli stepped closer, taking her hand in his. Pinning her with an earnest look, he spoke low, as if to her alone.

"I am never, and will never be, too busy to see you. Understand?"

His expression remained intensely focused while he waited for an answer. Hanah's throat was suddenly thick, and she did not trust her voice to speak. Instead, she forced a small smile and nodded.

Fíli's smile widened, satisfied, and Hanah recognized that intimate gleam she had not seen in so long play in his eyes.

"So, what is this matter that could not wait?" he asked. "Is everything alright?"

"Oh, yes," she hurried to say, not wanting him to alarm him. "I just wanted to tell you that I have come to a decision."

A beat of silence passed before his face cleared in understanding. He drew a deep breath as if wanting to say something at great length, but he refrained, as if swallowing the words instead.

"I see," was all he said.

Fíli went very still, but Hanah felt his hand grip hers a little tighter. She hesitated before continuing, sorting through her thoughts again. Not because of uncertainty of her answer, but all the feelings it would eventually evoke—primarily in herself.

She was also aware of how visible the two of them were to all who passed the south wing, to all who ascended the stairs or lingered at the balconies, to Sethie, and to Fíli's companions. Hanah could feel her chest fill with heat at Fíli's closeness and his fingers around hers. Hopefully, it was just the effect of her thick coat.

"I accept," she said.
Fíli breathed out, relieved, and lit up with the greatest dimpled smile she had ever seen. It almost distracted her from what she wanted to say.

"She needs her family," Hanah said, explaining her decision. "She should not grow up like me and Hemery."

Fíli nodded. "I understand completely," he said soberly, careful to temper his eagerness.

"But I have conditions."

"Name them." Not surprised, he did not miss a beat in his response.

"I want me and Hemery to have a room with a window."

"Fine."

Hanah looked at him pointedly, explaining further. "A real window to the outside, with glass panes."

"Right," he replied assuredly.

So far so good.

"And I assume you want to appoint guards for us."

Fíli averted his eyes, rubbing his neck awkwardly. "Well, yes . . . I'm afraid it's necessary."

"I want to choose my own."

"Oh. I guess that's fine. But how—?"

"The answer to that brings me to my next request," Hanah proceeded methodically, keeping her chin high. "I want Dwalin to be free to move back to Erebor. I want him to feel welcome in my new home and move about as he wishes."

"Um—" He frowned, seemingly uncomfortable at the thought.

Hanah had anticipated this. Dwalin and King Thorin did not get along, to put it mildly. Of course Fíli was hesitant to grant such a wish.

"Is that a problem?" If it was impossible, perhaps she should reconsider her choice.

He shook his head quickly. "I'll see to it."

"Good, because Dwalin will help pick out members of my guard."

Another smile made its way onto his face at that. He nodded knowingly.

Hanah's hand now felt nailed to his, and she wondered how she would ever let him go.

When silence stretched, he spoke.

"That's all?"

"Yes," she replied, rousing herself. "That's all. I—I'll let you get back to your duties."

She turned to leave.
"When?" he asked, stopping her before their hands separated.

"What?"

"When do you wish to move?"

"Oh . . . I don't know." She had not thought that far. It had been a big enough step just deciding to go through with it.

"You will not have to lift a finger to transport your possessions here," Fíli was quick to establish. "And you might want to have it done before you're . . . due. Here, you will be closer to the healers, and you don't want to travel with a new born, no matter how short a journey."

He took her hand in his, rubbing her knuckles.

"Besides, I wish to see you settled here as soon as possible for my own peace of mind."

Hanah watched their joined hands, fearing the warm feelings rushing to the surface would influence her decision.

"I guess that sounds reasonable," she admitted. "There will never be a good time. Might as well get it over with."

He nodded, but did not make any move to release her or conclude their conversation. He just looked at her, gently caressing her hand.

She glanced at the people passing just a few paces away. Fíli did not seem bothered at all by their audience.

"I trust you to arrange it. I'll start packin'." Hanah knew she should head back now that they were in agreement, but she was reluctant to distance herself from him.

"You said . . . she," Fíli began carefully, regarding her with curiosity. "About the child."

Hanah had not voiced the possibility before, but when she thought of her child, she thought of a girl. But perhaps Fíli wished for a male child?

"Does that bother you?" she asked, narrowing her eyes teasingly. "I know some people think it's bad luck—"

"No." He shook his head, unfazed. He took her other hand, holding both now. "If you say it's a she, it will be so," he said confidently.

"Hope so, or it will be too much work. Lads are such a load of trouble." She tried to make light of the moment, but was not sure she succeeded until he laughed.

"I don't know about that," he replied. "Lasses can make one's life uncommonly complicated."

Was he referring to children or to her? Hanah did not know, but the pointed look he gave her, a blend of heat and mirth, made her grateful that the others could not hear their low discussion.

Fíli moved closer, trailing one hand up her arm. She could feel his warm breath before he kissed her cheek lightly.

"I'm glad you accept my offer. You will not regret this," he told her.
Hanah managed to hold his eyes as she replied with a smile.

"You better make sure of it, Your Highness."

Sethie spent the rest of the afternoon sorting and packing most of the sisters' belongings. The chest in the kitchen was filled with towels, soaps, and the girls' clothes. Textiles and skins from the workshop were folded and stacked. The tools were wrapped in cloth, stuffed in bags together with jars of beads and buttons. Hanah's papers and sketches were rolled up like parchment and tied with string.

"This is a bit hasty, don't you think?" Hanah protested when she rummaged around in the kitchen chest, searching for the kit to clean her teeth. "We didn't even decide on a day yet."

Sethie just smiled. "If you spend more than one night in this place after your chat with Prince Fili, I will be very much surprised."
Sethie was right, of course.

Hanah's first clue was that Dwalin came by mid-morning the next day, seemingly idle as he sipped his offered tea at the kitchen table. He refrained from smoking his pipe as Hanah had told him the smell made her sick. Sethie was more quiet than usual, as if apprehensive by his presence. When Hanah attempted to introduce them, Sethie had interrupted, saying shortly: "I know who he is." And that was that. Dwalin seemed unbothered by her brusque manner, so Hanah let it be.

The awkward moment did not last long as a wagon soon entered the yard, pulled by a pony and piloted by Fíli. Kíli reclined in the back, barely awake it seemed.

"Ye're late," Dwalin grunted at the brothers when Hanah let them in.

"Why don't you try and disperse the council when the king is away," Fíli defended, "and see how long it takes before you are actually able to leave after everyone has voiced their protests."

"Don't look at me. I'm under no obligation to be here," Kíli yawned. "I'm simply welcoming Miss Hanah to Erebor, and kindness never expires, Mister Dwalin," he added in a sensible tone.

Dwalin hit him in the back of the head with his glove.

Hanah wanted to tell Fíli that he did not have to cancel his appointments on her account, but she remembered his promise from the day before and therefore did not say anything.

"Where are your guards?" Hanah asked. They usually had two each, at least, every time she had seen them out in the open.

"We don't need them." Kíli winked at her. "I'll protect your prince."

Dwalin took another swipe at his head, but he ducked this time.

Fíli smiled. "They're waiting just around the corner." He pointed to the edge of Dwalin's yard, in the direction of the road. Now that he mentioned it, Hanah could hear the faint chink of armour and the grunts of horses besides the pony pulling the wagon.

Sethie showed Fíli and Kíli straight to the chest, bags, and the stacks of material she had packed for transport the day before. The food from the pantry was put back into the crates in which it had been delivered. Some of the remaining items had been there when the sisters arrived, and the rest could be carried.

Hanah looked around one last time at the cottage which had been their first safe home since their father's death. Sethie and Hemery were busy outside, commanding Fíli and Kíli about the placement of the sisters' things on the wagon. Hanah could hear them through the open door.

"These jars are glass," Hemery said. "You can't put glass directly on the floor."

"You say everything is delicate," Fíli protested. "Is there anything we can put on the floor?"

"The jars can be replaced if they're cracked," Sethie said. "Just make sure the ones with oil colours don't break, cause you can't get that stuff off."

"We can wrap them in these furs," Kíli triumphed.
"Not the bearskins!" Hem and Fíli cried in unison.

Hanah smiled to herself.

"Ye ready?" Dwalin asked, putting a hand on her shoulder.

She nodded. When he turned to leave, she stopped him.

"I talked to Fíli about you."

Dwalin's eyebrow rose, waiting for her to continue. "A fascinating subject, I'm sure. What exactly did ye talk about?"

"He says . . . he says that you can move to Erebor as well." She bit her lip, hopeful of his reply.

He frowned.

"I would've talked to you first," she went on, "but I didn't want to bring it up unless it was actually possible. And I know it might seem like I was doin' your work for you, but I'm sure Prince Fíli doesn't see it that way."

At her apologetic tone, he relaxed, sighing and rubbing his chin through his beard.

"You know how much Hem would love to have you nearby. And me too," she pleaded softly. "You're . . . family."

"Han," he groaned, tired.

"And you said that family should be together," she reminded him, undeterred.

Dwalin put one hand on the side of her face, caressing her hair, gently tugging and smoothing it in turn.

"I care for ye like my own blood, but I can't do what ye ask."

"Don't you want to live in Erebor?"

"As things are—I can't."

Hanah knew his decision was final.

"I appreciate what ye did," he said, "but it's a matter of principle."

"Will you ever reconcile with the king?"

Dwalin smoothed her hair one last time, patting her head as if she was a child.

"Don't worry 'bout me," was all he said.

Before noon, Hanah and Hemery were settled in the south wing just a few doors down from Fíli's chambers. When Hanah entered the big room, she almost changed her mind about coming to Erebor. It was very similar to Fíli's study: a large fireplace, tapestries on the walls, and the floor beneath the coarse carpet was laid in different coloured stones cut in sharp angles. Opposite the door, windows stretched in tall, narrow openings from Hanah's waist to way taller than her hand could reach. The glass was thick to protect against the cold, and made the mountainside and the
valley outside appear as if viewed through water. Hanah did not mind—she just wanted the light.

Sethie burst through a door to her right.

"Where do you want your work material? I don't think I can make the princes move things many more times today. Should I just have them leave it in here?" She motioned behind her to the adjoined room.

"What is that?" Hanah asked, walking through the door. She entered another room, exactly the same as the first one, with a door at the other end. It was bare except for her stacked materials in one corner. She walked through the third door into a smaller room with wardrobes and cupboards, and then into a larger room with a low wide bed, stripped of any linens and blankets. As she already guessed, beyond the door at the other end of the wardrobe room was a wet-room.

Hanah turned to Sethie, gaping.

"Is this—?"

Sethie smiled, seeing Hanah's astonishment. "Aye, it's all yours. Hemery's is just through there." She pointed to the wet-room.

Hanah sat carefully on the bed. It was a down mattress, but no feather pens pierced the cover to prick her.

Sethie backed away. "I'll tell them to leave the rest by the door. Hem and I can move it later."

Hanah was grateful to Sethie for giving her a moment alone. She was in a palace. It was quite overwhelming. How could she accept this? If she refused, she knew Fíli would hear none of it. So, really, she had no choice but to accept it, she mused. Her eyes burned, but she blinked away any tears. Though the rooms were empty, fires crackled merrily in every one of them, adding heart to the stone.

She could live here. She would live here. And she was grateful to Fíli for all he had done for her. New worries would surely replace the old ones, but she was content for now.

A soft knock awakened Hanah from her thoughts. She turned to see Fíli at the door.

"Hanah, I—" he paused. "Are you alright?"

Hanah wiped the tears from her face with her palms.

"It's nothin'. Just moods, you know . . ." She trailed off in an attempt to make him think it was due to her pregnancy rather than a genuine swell of emotions.

He nodded, accepting her answer.

"I came to give you these." Fíli showed her a pair of keys. "One for you, and one for your sister."

"Thank you." Hanah stood to receive the keys. "Do you know where she went?"

"Sethie took her to eat their midday meal with my mother."

"Now?" They had not unpacked a single item, and now Hemery was spending time, unsupervised, with Lady Dis?

"You have plenty of time," Fíli said. "And you need to eat as well."
Hanah looked around. Of course, he was right. She had no pressing business. The only thing she needed done before nightfall was dressing her bed. She sighed.

"I guess so," she conceded.

"Allow me," Fili said, motioning for her to walk before him out into the hallway.

He led them down one flight of stairs and into another corridor.

"Don't you have things to do?" Hanah asked. She was anxious to not waste his time, more than she already had.

"I need to eat too, you know," was all he said.

Fili opened a door to a small dining room. She knew this because the table was already set with silver plates, cups, bread, and a water pitcher. This room also had windows, letting in soft light through thick glass. The view was very similar to the one from her bedroom. She imagined that this room was directly below it.

"Have a seat," Fili said, stoking the fire a moment.

As soon as she sat, she saw the side table with covered dishes placed on top. She was about to get up to see what it was when Fili stopped her.

"No, no. Sit down," he dismissed her efforts, approaching the dishes, and bringing the plates to the main table himself.

A bowl appeared before Hanah with a thick soup of deep, creamy, green colour with red fruits or vegetables scattered within. There were also slices of beef, cheese, eggs, and nuts on the table. Far too much for two people, she thought. Then again, she was not eating with her sister; she was eating with a dwarf.

She was about to ask why he had not taken her to eat with Hemery, but decided against it. She would take whatever time she could have with him.

They were mostly silent while they ate, allowing Hanah time to wonder where his brother and Dwalin had disappeared to. She did not really care where Kili was, or what he was doing, but she would have liked to thank Dwalin for his help.

"Did Dwalin leave?"

"I think so," Fili said over his bowl.

"Oh," Hanah said. "I hope Hem got a chance to say goodbye."

"Aye, they spoke when mother came by."

"Dwalin and Lady Dis spoke?" Hanah asked, curious.

"Hmm, not as such. He talked to Hemery, and then he left."

Again Dwalin seemed to show a dislike for Dis, Hanah gathered. Very strange.

"Why do you ask?" Fili looked at her with an intrigued gleam in his eye.

"Are Dwalin and Lady Dis at odds with each other, like he is with the king?"
"No," he said, surprised. "Dwalin and Uncle created a discord twenty years ago." Fíli hesitated, his mood turning solemn. Probably wondering whether he should tell her the story or not. "They disagreed on the best way of getting into the mountain. Dwalin thought Thorin was reckless, and Thorin thought Dwalin was . . . unreliable."

That was not what Dwalin had told her and Hemery. She wondered why.

"It was a trying time for all of us. Some things have not been the same since," Fíli concluded diplomatically.

Hanah nodded in understanding. She could only imagine what they all had gone through. Neither did she wish to dredge up old quarrels.

"Did you ever suspect there might be somethin' between Dwalin . . . and Lady Dis?"

Fíli choked on his drink. He coughed a few times before getting his breathing under control.

"I'm sorry," Hanah exclaimed. "Are you alright?"

Fíli's coughing turned to laughter. Tears gathered in the corners of his eyes, of mirth or the coughing was hard to tell.

"Mister Dwalin? And my mother?" Fíli's chuckled. "No, no." The laughter faded, but a smile remained.

"They're old friends, sure. Known each other forever, since they were children. Thorin and Dwalin were best friends back then. But no, it's never been like that. Not even after my father died." He shook his head as the humour simmered down.

Hanah nodded in agreement. Perhaps she had misunderstood the situation. And it was really no business of hers what Dwalin or Lady Dis were up to. She went back to her soup. But the silence was heavier now than before. She looked back up at Fíli.

He seemed lost in thought, staring into the fire.

"Fíli?"

"Hm?" he tore his eyes away from whatever thoughts had him imprisoned and met hers.

"I didn't mean to upset you," Hanah said, apologetically. "It was just a silly fancy. I shouldn't have asked. I don't know what gave me the idea."

She knew very well what gave her the idea, but he may have been the wrong person to ask.

"No, it's quite alright," he said, frowning, but continued his meal.

Hanah felt awkward in the new silence, wracking her mind for something to say. They had never run out of conversation before, so why now?

She guessed a lot had changed in the last weeks. Or months. It was strange to think she used to be scared coming to Erebor, and now here she was.

"So what does the king think of this arrangement?" she asked. She knew Dis approved, but she had no idea what the brother thought. The dwarf who sent Fíli away when he learned of their relations.

"He doesn't know yet," Fíli replied absently into his food.
"He doesn't know?" Hanah echoed, incredulous.

He looked up, shrugging. "What?"

"What do you mean 'what'? You decided this by yourself without tellin' him, and you're just—" She shrugged in imitation of his indifference.

He smiled crookedly. "This is what he wanted, Hanah. Believe me, when he finds out you're with child, he'll be glad I brought you here."

"When he finds out?"

"Yeah, he's not here right now."

Hanah put a cool hand on her forehead, breathing deeply.

"But the moment he's back, I'll inform him, I swear. Unless Kíli gets to him before I do, because then he'll probably tell Thorin just to do me over."

She got up from her seat, suddenly feeling lightheaded.

"Perhaps this was a bit hasty," she said.

Fíli frowned, got to his feet and took her hand.

"No, it'll be fine. I'm telling you—he won't object."

"I'm not sayin' it wasn't a good idea," Hanah clarified, ignoring his assurances. "But perhaps we should have waited. You know, until these five months that I've been gone were not so fresh in his mind."

Fíli stilled, taking both her hands in his warm grip, watching her intently.

"Hanah," he began, calmly. "I don't care what Thorin says."

She stared at him, speechless.

"Even if he would protest—which he won't—I would not care."

The even tone of his voice, deep and confident, brought back feelings she had forgotten he could conjure. Warmth and tingles. But perhaps that was just her, hyperventilating.

"I asked you to live here because I wanted you to. I want you close to me, always." Fíli's eyes glittered in that familiar way, like letting her in on a secret.

Hanah was very warm now. Distantly, she figured that she should not stand so close to the fire. But then he was talking again.

"Do you want to live here, with me?"

She could feel her brow furrowing on its own.

Of course she wanted it. How could he not know?

She nodded. "Yes." She wanted to smile, but she was spellbound, powerless over her bodily functions. Especially her stomach which heated and twisted when he watched her like that. They
had not been so close in a long time.

Hanah raised her chin. If he took the invitation, all was well. If not, then she would not have said anything too embarrassing to take back. As it turned out, she had no cause for worry.

Fíli slowly met her lips, more carefully than ever. Only brushing at first, his moustache tickling her upper lip, but she did not care. He released her hands to caress the skin on her wrists below her sleeve. Soon his mouth captured hers, moving gently but persistent.

Unable to resist, she nipped at his lips, trying to stir him further. It worked. He opened his mouth and deepened the kiss. He tasted of salt from their food, and warmth. His familiar scent and breath filled her lungs, and it was like coming home.

His arms embraced her, pressing her to him while still being mindful of the barrier between them.

She threw one arm around his neck, and placed one hand on the side of his face, wanting to feel his living skin beneath her fingers. There were so many layers between them, and she just wanted to be closer.

"Come with me to my chambers," Fíli said, out of breath.

Hanah's eyes widened. "Now?"

"Unless you wish me to pleasure you right here?" He kissed her neck.

She began to laugh at his eagerness, but he was not deterred.

"Tonight then?"

She faltered. "I don't know. This is so sudden."

"Is it?" He returned his focus to her face. "I feel like it never stopped."

Hanah smiled, feeling her eyes water. Her fingers ran down his cheek, caressing his skin, his beard, and came to rest on his chest, feeling his strong heart beating. Last time, she could barely feel it—when she thought he would never wake up.

"I missed you," she admitted, drawing a shaky breath.

He kissed her. "I've missed you." He spoke between nips of lips and tastes of tongue. "Mahal, I've missed you."

His hands snaked under her coat, playing with the laces at the back of her dress.

"Now, about my chambers—" he began teasingly. Hanah laughed.

A noise was heard right outside the door. Footsteps and voices. Someone was approaching.

Hanah drew back, and Fíli groaned in protest. She stepped back, putting some distance between them, and pulled her coat around her just in time for Hemery to open the door, Sethie on her heels.

"Hanah," Hem exclaimed. "Sethie will show us the forges. Dís said they're five hundred times bigger than Dwalin's!"

"That's . . . fantastic," Hanah forced out.

Fíli sat down heavily in his chair by the table, supporting his face in his hand.
"Come on," Hem said, pulling on her hand.

"Thank you for the meal," Hanah threw over the threshold at Fíli.

He merely raised his hand in passive acknowledgement, before he was out of her sight, left alone in the dining room.

Hemery walked first to take in all the views, while Sethie and Hanah fell behind in the long walk down stairs.

"Apologies, Miss Hanah," Sethie said, looking quite miserable.

"For what?" Hanah asked.

"Interrupting your time with Prince Fíli. I tried to take Hem down by myself, but she wouldn't go without you."

Hanah blushed. "No matter. I don't mind."

"I promised Fíli a full hour, and I barely managed half that."

Hanah managed to mask her surprise. So Fíli had specifically asked Sethie to take Hemery away to eat. She smirked at his devious plan.

"Here I thought you and Hem were real friends, now it seems you only spend time with her to obey the prince."

Sethie looked devastated at the statement, pressing her hands to her chest in earnestness. "Oh, I daresay we are friends. She is a barrel of laughs, I swear."

Hanah laughed. "It's fine," she told Sethie. "Don't trouble yourself."

When Sethie realised Hanah was only making fun, she cracked a wide, triumphant smile. "Oh, you sly thing. I should be cross with you for getting one over me like that, but it's so nice to see you smile that I'll let it slide this once."

Hanah laughed more at that.

"But now you're on," Sethie continued. "You'll never sell me a story again, I'll tell you. I didn't even know you could make jokes."

Hanah frowned at her, but Sethie just laughed.
Hanah and Fíli saw each other much more often than she had thought they would. Hanah and Hemery would join the princes and Lady Dis for dinner almost every day. Fíli sat opposite Hanah and spoke very little. She suspected he was annoyed or disappointed with her until she caught his eyes across the table, and her heart stopped.

His eyes held such fire. It was the same intensity he had when they argued or when he had unbuttoned her clothes. Hanah flushed, as from a fever, and her palms got clammy. Tearing her eyes away, she looked around, but none of their dinner companions seemed aware of Fíli's practically indecent table manners.

As dinner progressed, Hanah unravelled like an old tapestry, unable to follow or care about the conversation flowing around her. All the while Fíli, whenever addressed by his mother or brother, showed no sign of imbalance, but corresponded engagingly and informed to every inquiry. Despite efforts to the contrary, Hanah's attention was repeatedly drawn back to him.

During the day, Hanah was busy working with Hemery or going to see Elin, Dis, or Dwalin. And at night, Hemery slept in her bed, providing Hanah with the perfect excuse not to visit Fíli in his. Therefore, these dinners became the only times she met Fíli, and they slowly drove her up the wall. Scalded by his hot gaze every evening for a fortnight pushed her to the edge much sooner than she could have foreseen. She had always feared her proximity to Fíli would be a problem, but she had imagined it as a slow simmer as opposed to a tempestuous boil.

The anticipation of every meeting turned to something akin to dread. Food lost all taste on her tongue, and sleep arrived late whenever she had encountered that stare across the table. And every goodbye consisted of a soft brush of Fíli's lips on her cheek in full view of his family and her sister.

During one of these nights, a guard entered. Standing by the door, he waited for permission to speak.

"Yes?" said Dis.

"The king has sent word," the guard said. "His Majesty will arrive on the morrow."

Ice water trickled down Hanah's back. The only comfort she sensed at the idea of meeting the king was Fíli's reassuring words that he did not care what Thorin thought of her. Still, it was difficult to ignore the opinions of the king should he choose to voice any.

Fíli and Kíli exchanged apprehensive glances, but Dis smiled.

"Thank you, Dror." With these words, she dismissed him. "Well, this is happy news. And just in time, too."

"Mother," Fíli sighed.

"In time for what?" Hemery asked.

Dis beamed. "Why, the Crown Prince's birthday, of course."

Preparations began two days before the celebrations. Banquets and musical concerts were advertised, taverns announced longer opening hours, and acrobats and jugglers set up performance
areas in the public fairways in Erebor. The only prohibited activity was fire breathing which was considered bad taste.

The heads of state from Dale and Esgaroth were invited as well as the entire court of Erebor. The guest list was extensive, but not unlimited. However, everyone on the mountain would celebrate in his or her own way.

Hanah had finished Fíli's belt, with Dwalin's help. Since they lived in Erebor for free, it did not seem right to sell it to the prince. Hanah decided to give it to him for his birthday. She wrapped it in red silk, and Hemery carried it to the banquet hall.

The sisters shared a look and almost laughed at the sight of the large table set out especially for the gifts. That was until they witnessed it slowly filling with finely wrapped gifts in varying sizes as more people arrived to honour the prince.

Standing at the side of the entrance, Hanah and Hemery watched Dis, Fíli, and Kíli greet the guests. Lady Dis had called on her earlier in the day to make sure Hanah wore the dress the princess had picked out for her.

Fine, freshly ironed, bluish green linen covered Hanah in generous folds trimmed with golden brown embroidery. The dress had a modest collar, long sleeves, and it hid a lot of her condition. You could still see it, but it would not do to wear a form fitting dress in her state. Sethie had grudgingly agreed to arrange Hanah's and Hem's hair in the formal style of the women at Esgaroth, namely a subdued ringlet gathered at the lower back of the head. No ornaments, no ribbons.

"You look like servants," Sethie stated curtly when she was done. "Servants in nice dresses," she conceded, looking at Hem's formal, shapeless, blue frock. "But servants none the less."

"Tis better than bein' mistaken for a member of the royal party," Hanah argued.

And watching Dis in her red and golden velvet splendour, there was no debate as to who of the females in the room were of royal descent. Nothing was off about the dwarven princess' appearance—from the rings on her fingers to the beads in her hair, all elegant rather than gaudy—except for the dark blue ribbon twined into one of her braids.

Hanah knew that ribbon. She had seen its twin in Dwalin's hand, she thought smiling to herself. Perhaps she would tell Fíli, just to see him all flustered. It would serve him right for how he silently teased her at dinner.

"Miss Hanah." Lady Dis roused her from her musings. "Allow me to introduce Lady Sigrid, daughter of Bard, king of Dale."

Hanah laid eyes on a Dalean beauty with dark brown hair and pale skin. Sigrid wore her hair similar to dwarves, kept back by braids but mostly loose, flowing in soft waves over her shoulders. Much taller than Hanah, Sigrid looked down at her with unbridled curiosity. Her eyes glittered and belied her cool smile, testifying to her almost childlike glee.


Hanah and Hemery curtsied.

"Would you be so kind, Hanah, as to show Lady Sigrid to the honour seat?"

"Certainly," Hanah replied.
Hem went to follow, but was held back subtly by Sethie.

Sigrid fell into step with Hanah as she moved toward the table where she knew Fíli and his family would sit with a perfect view of all their guests. Sigrid, being a royal herself, would also be graced with a seat at that table.

"Apologies for my family's absence," Sigrid said. "We rarely leave our duties, and I confess I demanded the privilege of representing my house at this gathering. I've been most anxious to meet you, Miss Hanah."

"Me, m'lady?"

"To be sure. Ever since I learned you'd been blessed with a child, I told myself I simply must see this wondrous creature that felled Prince Fíli."

"How did you know?" Hanah asked.

Sigrid gave her a pointed look. "You cannot believe you're fooling anyone with that dress. It's plain to see your condition."

"I mean, how did you know who I was?" Hanah clarified, though Sigrid's reply had not answered anything. How had she known Hanah was pregnant before Sigrid had come to Erebor?

"It may not yet be public knowledge, but I have my spies," Sigrid said mysteriously.

Hanah smiled politely. "I have bad experiences with spies."

Sigrid hooked her arm in Hanah's.

"The Durins and I share grocers," she explained. "As soon as I found that Fíli suddenly ordered butter to be delivered to a cottage on the outskirts of my city, I knew. It's the dwarven grand gesture. It had to be a lover."

Everyone seemed to know dwarven customs better than Hanah. She blushed.

"Wish someone had told me that," she admitted.

"You didn't know? Upon my word, that underhanded scoundrel," Sigrid laughed. "I hope you made him suffer for his deceit."

Hanah had a hard time not showing her amusement of Sigrid's bold comments and easy smiles. "Prince Fíli has been very good to us. He doesn't deserve my bile."

Sigrid sobered. "No, of course," she agreed. "Dwarves are often much more mindful of decorum than men. Thorin, for instance, I've never seen touch a female—ever—not dwarven or mankind. His nephews are much more familiar because we're friends of sorts, going back twenty years. But never Thorin."

"Perhaps it comes from disinterest rather than manners," Hanah guessed. "That he simply doesn't want to?"

Sigrid snorted in amusement. "That would certainly suit his personality. No interest in women, only counting his coins. Which was why I was so pleased to hear of you. That I would live to see the next stage in the house of Durin. I hardly believed that Fíli would form an attachment with a woman of my own kind, and now here I am in awe of this historic moment."
Sigrid should have a pint at The Dragon's Head with Dwalin. They would have some things in common.

"Please, m'lady," Hanah protested modestly. "This cannot be the first time this has happened, nor the last."

"It is the first time it has happened to someone like us." Sigrid's eyes burned with enthusiasm.

Someone like them? How could Hanah and Lady Sigrid possibly be similar?

"Dis told me you're a leather smith from Blackwater. With mixed heritage, borne by a woman of such humble beginnings, your child will be a monarch of the people. Imagine how that will resonate with the kingdom."

Hanah felt lightheaded at the idea.

"But won't such an experiment come with unreasonable pressure?" Hanah asked. "The pressure to fail as well as succeed?"

"All rulers feel that pressure, but perhaps for different reasons. Believe me—I'll be the first ever queen of Dale. I know pressure."

"Don't you have an older brother?" Sigrid should not need to carry that burden if she was not the first-born.

"Yes, but he's already lord over the lake. Bain does not more pressure, believe me," Sigrid confided in a whisper. Then she laughed. "Sit with me."

Apparently she knew exactly which seat was reserved for her. This confirmed Hanah's suspicion that Dis' request for her to escort Sigrid was mere formality. Sigrid actually pulled out the chair for Hanah.

"Oh, no, please—" Hanah attempted, but Sigrid would hear none of it.

"I daresay you have been on your feet enough today. And it will be lonely up here before the king deigns to show his face."

Hanah tensed at the reminder.

"What did I say?" Sigrid asked apprehensively.

"I have not met the king since Durin's Day. Long before I knew I'd be livin' under his roof, so to speak."

"Well, well," Sigrid said, clearly pleased. "This is a most fortunate evening for me. Meeting the king's heir before he does." She smiled, motioning to Hanah's belly. But she soon turned serious.

"Thorin is an intimidating figure, but you need not have much congress with him if you do not wish it. You play an important role, but that being said, you are only the mother of Fíli's child. Your responsibility does not extend to the king."

Sigrid smiled again.

"You're not in his employ. You're not dependant on his good will, like I am, in order to provide a safe and prosperous environment for an entire city." Her laugh found an almost hysterical note.
Hanah chuckled. She guessed she was lucky. If she did not feel like entertaining the king’s whims, they could simply move back to Dwalin. She was sure he would not mind.

Slowly, the hall had filled with people. Dis came to take her seat, along with Kíli, Sethie and Hemery. Sethie was not part of the family—granted, neither were Hanah or Hem—but she was probably present as a keeper of Hemery, to keep the child from disturbing the adults at this formal event. Hanah hoped no one mentioned this to Hem; she would be livid.

Balin approached together with quite a few dwarves Hanah did not recognize. He greeted Lady Sigrid reverently and introduced Hanah and Hemery to the others. Apparently, they were all members of the group that initiated the return to Erebor twenty years ago. And they all had names that rhymed far too much for her to remember them.

Fíli suddenly sat down next to her.

"Evening, Hanah," He smiled and kissed her cheek. Hanah blushed instantly, but Fíli paid it no mind.

"Evening, Lady Sigrid," he called to the woman sitting on her right. "How's Tilda?"

Sigrid narrowed her eyes. "Shut your trap, dwarf," came the lady’s direct retort.

Fíli smiled innocently at Hanah.

"Lady Sigrid is experiencing some residual anger since her sister's marriage."

"You practically sold her to that lord from the Iron Hills."

Hanah could tell this was not a new discussion.

"I think you're jealous of her for marrying so young," Kíli offered sensibly from the other side of the table.

Sigrid did not agree with his deduction. "I've had plenty of opportunities—" she began methodically.

"Plenty, eh?" Fíli echoed. "I reckon that's more than Tilda had."

"Plenty of opportunities," Sigrid continued, ignoring him. "But I decided not to."

"Did you ever consider the possibility that Tilda genuinely fell in love with the obscenely rich dignitary and moved on to explore life beyond Dale and beyond the lake?" Fíli asked.

"Oh, yes, you're so right, because living in a settlement of men bordering a dwarven kingdom was so foreign to her, she just had to go see what it would be like in the Iron Hills," Sigrid replied sarcastically. "Did you ever consider that if you had kept your mouth shut about 'the unmarried princesses of Dale' that perhaps he would not have been so keen on visiting Erebor?"

"Was that me?" Fíli asked, looking surprised. Or at least attempting to do so.

"It wasn't me," Kíli was quick to chip in.

"Are you saying I should have lied about you and your sister's existence?" Fíli tried to repair.

"I think the lady's sayin' that you talk to much," Hanah added low, smirking.
Fíli rolled his eyes. "Very well . . . Maybe I shouldn't have brought it up."

Sigrid sighed, speaking to Hanah now.

"If you ever feel suffocated, come see me. I know these dwarves—they have a tendency to herd you like sheepdogs. Sometimes they don't think things through."

Music filled the air, ceasing all conversation. Horns and drums and strings, rising and falling, beginning in a wave and ending with a stomp, it welcomed the king into the hall. Again, Hanah did not know from where the music sounded, but guessed it originated overhead from the balconies surrounding them.

She was too busy in her investigation at first to notice that everyone was standing up. When even Fíli on her left rose from his chair, she hurried to do so as well.

Thorin Oakenshield entered from a door behind her. She could see his movement in her periphery. When he stopped by his seat on Fíli’s left, she tensed, trying to stand straight and not look nervous. But as everyone else turned their eyes to him, she gathered that so must she.

Hanah saw how he nodded first to his left side and then turned to his right, letting his eyes travel over his guests—her as well, shortly meeting her gaze—before nodding to them in greeting and sitting down. Then all guests sat down as one.

The banquet was a loud affair. Many of the guests, men as well as dwarves, seemed friendly from before, laughing at each other as soon as with each other. Spontaneous lines of humorous verse or singing could be heard throughout the evening.

And though the dinner eventually ended, the drinking did not. Marry music was playing. And some guests were even dancing an improvised pattern of clapping hands and stomping heels.

Hemery leaned on a pillar, keeping an eye on Hanah where she stood talking to Lady Sigrid, with Fíli as her shadow, and a table on the other side of the room where a group of dwarves were enjoying the free drink a bit too much for Hem's liking. She recognized the mood from The Galley; at any moment, smiles could turn into fists. Sethie was off nobody knew where, fixing things for Lady Dis.

A voice spoke then, fairly close.

"Let it go, brother." It was Dis. Hemery could tell she was just on the other side of the pillar. Was she talking to the king? "Blackwater is not going anywhere. Focus your strength on problems nearer at hand."

Hemery stood still, hoping no one would notice her there. She should respect their privacy, but she was too curious.

"Any developments?" Thorin asked his sister.

"Well, most of your duties had been put on hold while you were away on your little crusade to the Iron Hills," Dis said dryly.

"It is imperative that Dain and I see eye to eye on this. We need their aid if we want any hope of overthrowing Brage."

"I know. But as it is, we have several more pressing matters. This month's shipments for the south
"Are a week late."

"As usual," he grumbled. "What else?"

"You know the expansion of the northern tunnels? We received complaints about builders urinating from the edge of the third floor. And it seems Beren and his crew got tired of all the stray cats running loose in the mountain. They killed about a dozen and left them on the scrapheap."

"For the love of Mahal," Thorin sighed.

"Some dwarflings found them, caused a scene. It made quite a . . . debate in the forum," Dis explained.

"What does Beren say in his defense?"

"That they were doing their job."

"They're warriors and hunters—not exterminators," Thorin scoffed.

"Fine-spun distinctions according to him."

There was a pause.

"I'll deal with him later," Thorin said. "Now, what do you make of Miss Skinner?"

Hemery tensed. He was talking about Hanah.

"She's a steady sort of lass. Fíli has made his choice. Don't you worry."

"Is she educated?"

Dis chuckled. "Schooled, you mean? No. What do you expect?"

"She's not a simpleton, is she?" Thorin seemed sceptical.

"You just focus on your treasury and your soldiers, and I'll focus on the education of my grandchild, alright? She was savvy enough to survive the Brages. She'll do," she settled before leaving the king in the shadow of the arcade to join Fíli, Hanah, and Sigrid on the other side.

Hemery felt a proud bubble in her chest at Dis' words. It felt reassuring that Dis liked Hanah. Thorin was as a stick in the mud, as usual. Would it kill him to show a little good faith? To try to see the bright side once in a while? She had made him laugh once. That seemed like eons ago.

"There you are," Sethie exclaimed as she passed, seeing Hemery.

Hemery froze. If Sethie lingered, Thorin would know Hem had been standing there. And it would be impossible to convince him she had not been listening in on his conversation with his sister.

Of course, Sethie stopped next to her.

"Dwalin is here if you want to say hello. He just came to drop something off for the prince."

Hem pursed her lips and nodded in silent reply. She knew her voice would sound too loudly in her own ears.

"Calm down, Feast Fearie," Sethie said, brow furrowing. "Don't look overjoyed. I thought he
wouldn't even show up." And then she was on her way again.

Hem should have ran away, hid, or something, but her feet would not move. Carefully, she glanced around the pillar.

Thorin was gone.

Confused, she turned her head to look around and found him standing silently behind her. She flinched as her heart skipped a beat. When her heart rate returned to normal, she reflected on possible escape routes, but each was as useless and pathetic as the next one.

"I'm not surprised," the king said. Somehow that seemed worse than any accusation of eavesdropping or espionage.

"I didn't mean to," Hem said. "And I was here first." She motioned to the pillar.

"I think you'll find that I was here first," he replied.

Fine. Thorin was old. It was his mountain. Sure, he occupied the space before Hemery.

"Very clever," she said, unimpressed.

A moment of silence passed.

"My nephew and your sister seem to be enjoying themselves," he said, as if trying to make conversation.

She did not even realise she had made a face before he commented on it.

"What's with the doom and gloom? Did someone piss in your ale?"

Was he trying to be funny by using her phrase back on her?

"I hear you are unhappy with your guards," he continued.

King Thorin did not improve her mood by reminding Hem of her argument with her guard, Bror. He was the less intelligent, younger brother of Dror, member of the royal guard. He had hindered her in seeing Dwalin for their training session, saying she needed to give advance notice before venturing out of the mountain.

This had triggered a heated debate whether Dale was considered part of the mountain or not, and Hemery had asked Bror if she needed to give advance notice before she peed in case she tripped on her chamber pot and hurt herself. He had refused discussing the matter further.

"They're just soldiers," she dismissed. "They do what they're told, I guess. So I know I shouldn't be unhappy with them, but those who give their orders," she said simply.

"Very wise," Thorin nodded. "But remember, they work in your best interest."

"So that gives them the right to refuse me to see my friends?"

"When that friend lives in Dale and you wish to see them during late evenings without informing your guard—aye, I would say so."

"I'll go to Dale whenever I bloody well want to go to Dale." Hem seethed, frowning.
Thorin chuckled and shook his head. "I gather recent changes have not been beneficial for you."

Hem recalled Sethie's and Dwalin's words of caution.

"I'm *not* sayin' I'm ungrateful," she quickly stated, daring him to suggest otherwise. "But you know this was not what I wanted. And it's partly your fault."

The king was not affected by her vitriol thus far, but calmly replied. "I very much doubt it, but go on. How so?"

She cast him an ugly sideways glare. "You lied to me," she accused.

It was Thorin's turn to frown.

"You told Fíli where we were, didn't you?" Hem said.

"I certainly did not," he said, indignant.

"How else would he know where to send Kíli?"

"He may have consulted a soothsayer's rat bones, I care not. I told him nothing," Thorin growled.

He showed more annoyance than she had ever witnessed before. Hanah would not be happy if Hem provoked the king on their first official meeting. And she had promised Dwalin to behave and not speak ill of the Durins. She had already called King Thorin a liar—it would not do to shout it in his face.

Hemery pursed her lips and looked away.

"You don't believe me," Thorin deduced rather accurately, narrowing his eyes at her.

She said nothing.

"Fíli never requested my assistance in this," he explained. "Probably because he knew I had no interest in Miss Hanah's return. Beyond my nephew's recovery, she means nothing to me."

Hemery's jaws clenched painfully. Thorin had a peculiar talent for making even 'nothing' seem like an insult.

"However, " he continued, "had I known she was carrying his child, our last meeting would surely have ended differently."

His pointed words were clearly a comment on her own deceit. If one could call leaving out information a deception. Hemery did not, but Thorin seemed to think she should have shared that information with him at The Crown.

His heavy stare let up, focusing instead on his nephew across the room.

"He cares a great deal for her, and not just for the sake of the child," he said. "I can see that."

Hem looked to where Hanah and Fíli stood.

Hanah was uncomfortable in the formal setting, pulling on her sleeves. Fíli hovered close, shadowing her like a handmaiden, regarding her attentively. He ran the fabric of her dress between his fingers when she was not looking. Hemery could tell he wanted her. As a woman or possession, she could not tell, nor did she try to.
"And you forget," Thorin said, turning back to Hem. "I was not here."

Hemery thought about this. It was true; he had been travelling when Kíli came to Esgaroth. But in Hemery's view, that did not necessarily prove he did not rat them out. He could have sent a message, somehow. But he was also correct in that he had no motive. He did not care whether Hanah came back or not.

So who did? Who had an interest? And who knew where they were all winter? The realization was like a stab in Hem's gut.

Dwalin.

He had threatened to tell Fíli, she remembered well. But she never thought he would actually go through with it—not without saying so.

A crash sounded, catching the attention of all in the hall. A table had broken in half, apparently by a dwarf being thrown violently onto it by another. Hemery sighed. It was the same table she had watched earlier. Sometimes she did not like being right in her predictions.

Loud growls and yells in anger proceeded to pour from the combatants, while the guards swiftly appeared, breaking up the fight. Dror and the other guards took firm holds on the drunkards.

"Is this befitting the king's hall? Is this any way to honour your prince?" Dror demanded to know. Hemery liked Dror. She wished he were on her guard.

"That dog cheated me of my dagger," one of the fighters spat.

"Who are you calling a cheat? I won it fair and square," the other replied hotly.

"Not only excessive drinking, but gambling as well? This is the Crown Prince's celebration, not the tavern," Dror said. "Bad form indeed. You'll have to answer to your commander in chief, warmaster."

Dror and his guard forced them to approach and kneel before Thorin. He said nothing for a moment. Only looking down at them with his arms folded.

"Your Majesty needn't be bothered by a minor misunderstanding," the first dwarf said from his crouch, attempting to brush off the incident.

"A soldier of your rank should know better, Beren," Thorin said.

Beren? Was he the dwarf Dis spoke of?

"Your restlessness gives proof of an inexperienced youth, not a seasoned warrior," Thorin observed. "These 'minor misunderstandings' have occurred often since you came to Erebor. This is far from the first transgression you have made. When misunderstandings disturb relations with neighbouring kingdoms and awaken public outrage, they become problems. Are you not happy in my mountain?" he asked softly, almost as if he was personally hurt or offended by Beren's behaviour.

"Sire," Beren adopted a light tone, as if to trivialise the trouble he had caused. "The mountain is my home. I would find solace nowhere else."

"Then why do you violate the creatures that dwell here, that take refuge in our fortress during harsh winters?"
Beren looked confused. "The cats? They defecate everywhere, make nests under my house, and spread their offspring into the tunnels. They're a plague."

"No. You see, plague is brought by the vermin that the cats feed on. Cats are the opposite of plague."

Beren tried to stand, but Dror held him down. Beren clearly did not think he deserved to be subjected to such humiliation in front of his king and the entire court.

"Apologies, Sire," Beren ground out, obviously against his will. "What will you have me do?"

Thorin sighed, tiredly. Then leisurely, he took a swig from a silver cup. He looked at Hemery, who had not moved since the clamour began, standing a few feet away.

"What should I do with them, hm? What should I do?" he asked rhetorically. "Should I do nothing, and allow a captain who enjoys torturing defenceless animals be in charge of troops in my army? Do I punish him? But how do you punish insolence and carelessness in grown dwarves? Or their needless killing of soulless creatures?"

Hemery noticed Dror look curiously between his king and her. Did Thorin expect her to answer him? Hem quickly glanced around for her sister, but Hanah, Sethie, Fíli, and Dis were nowhere to be seen, probably beyond the sea of people in the hall.

"I should send you back to Ered Luin," Thorin said. "Or to Dain as a sword for hire. At least then he could simply terminate your contract when he tires of your tricks."

"Sire," Beren sounded grave now, realising the depth of his king's ire. "Do not send me away in disgrace."

Thorin raised his voice for the first time in the discussion. "You bear no disgrace which you have not brought upon yourself," he growled.

"Your Highness," Hemery said, her voice hardly reaching above the murmur of the attendants, but Thorin gave pause. Wearing the calm mask again, he turned to her with an eyebrow raised in expectation.

"Perhaps he thinks the cats are not needed," she offered. "That Erebor can do without them."

Thorin's face was unchanged, but there was a glimmer of anticipation in his eyes. "And why would he believe that?" he asked.

"Because the king could charge someone with riddin' Erebor of rats and other infestations. Perhaps someone who has already shown interest in the task," she suggested pointedly.

A smirk threatened to break out on Thorin's face as he had his back toward Beren. "Very interesting plan," he admitted.

"And perhaps . . . this someone would learn to appreciate the service cats provide the kingdom." Hemery shrugged. "Just a thought."

Thorin raised his chin and turned back to Beren.

"Beren," he began solemnly. "This summer, you and your men will not patrol our borders, hunt game for your families, or train with your comrades. You will report to the maintenance officer, every week killing one hundred rats caught within the mountain, until there are no more rats to
"But, Sire—" Beren tried to interject.

"These are my orders," Thorin spoke clearly, his eyes steel. "Now, go clean yourselves up. Dismissed."

Like hounds disciplined by their master, the dwarves hung their heads in shame as Dror and his guards showed them out.

Still wearing his formal stature in front of the guests, Thorin merely glanced at Hemery, giving her an approving nod before walking away. Hemery's chest warmed, and she smiled to herself. It felt as if she had actually helped. She wanted to tell Hanah.

Moving through the throngs of people, she searched the faces of all until she saw Hanah and Fíli standing close together in the gallery, seemingly in intimate conversation. Hem stopped in her tracks, suddenly not at all interested in interrupting them. There was a time when she would not have hesitated to do just that, but Hanah looked so happy there. She smiled at something Fíli said, and he touched her hand, softly, reverently.

Hemery whirled around when someone touched her shoulder. It was Dwalin.

"Ye'll not ruin this for them, will ye?"

She felt annoyance swell. "I wasn't going to," she snapped at him.

"Alright. T'was just a question, ladybug." Dwalin held up a placating hand. "So, now ye've met the king. Tell me ye didn't embarrass me."

"Don't worry. I didn't offend him too badly. But he made me realise somethin'," she said.

"That ye're glad he rules a kingdom with indoor plumbing?" Dwalin did not seem to take this seriously.

Hem poked a finger into his chest. "That you're the one who told Fíli where we were, so he could send Kíli to fetch us, instead of comin' with us yourself like you said you would."

"Are ye still mad about that?" Dwalin growled impatiently. "I told you, as soon as the snow stopped, I was goin' back to Erebor. Did ye listen? No, 'course not. Ye lay blame and guilt when it suits yer purpose, and ye just happened to fail to mention that Hanah carried Fíli's bairn—the one piece of information that would have stopped me from makin' any sort of promise to keep quiet."

"Just like you failed to mention that it was you who ratted on us, welcomin' us back with open arms, like you were happy we made the choice to return instead of bein' the one who forced it on us."

Dwalin grabbed her finger in his large fist and stopped it from poking his chest any harder. "Well, I guess we're equally selfish and stubborn," he gritted out through clenched teeth.

Hemery wrenched her hand free, punching his shoulder. "I should have expected no less from a dwarf," she whispered harshly to not offend any of the other hundred dwarves present.

"I should have expected no less from a wee Blackwater lass."

They stared at each other a moment. The air suddenly disappearing from the argument.
"Yer punch lacks weight," Dwalin stated. "Trainin' tomorrow as usual?" he asked, less certain now in his tone.

"Have I ever missed a trainin' session?" she hissed.

"There were those the five months where you disappeared. Do you count those?"

"Same time tomorrow," Hemery ignored him.

Dwalin grunted in reply and left.

Hem spotted Sethie at the entrance and walked up to her.

"Do all people lie?" Hemery asked without preamble.

Sethie looked surprised first, but then bemused. After a long moment, she replied. "Aye. Though, some less than others." She curtsied respectfully, as if to show she was one of the lesser liars.

Hemery nodded, sighing. "I'm goin' to bed," she settled.

"I'll walk you. Best to leave before things get more out of hand, or we'll run the risk of having too much fun," Sethie said sarcastically.

Hemery chuckled. She knew this evening had been nothing but work for Sethie, never a moment of peace.

"Will Miss Hanah join you?"

"No," Hem said.

Uncertainty filled her. Hanah and Fíli always seemed to find their way back to each other. Perhaps Hanah wanted to share Fíli's bed? Perhaps Hanah would eventually share apartments with Fíli instead of her? It was only a matter of time, she figured.

"I think I'll sleep in my own room tonight," she said.
Dror and his men marched past Hanah and Fíli on their way out.

"What happened?" she asked Fíli next to her.

He chuckled. "Some of our guests have had one too many pints of the king's fine ale," Fíli said.

Hanah could not see past the other guests, but the noise soon died down, calming her.

"You've had quite a few pints of the king's ale yourself," Hanah teased.

"Only a taste." He smiled.

She was sure that was an understatement. "How will you carry all those gifts home if you're drunk?"

He shrugged. "Someone will take care of it in the morning."

"Aren't you curious what is in them all?"

Hanah scanned the table with all the elaborately designed boxes and wrappings. Some of them very big.

Fíli sighed. "It's the same shit every year." He really seemed like he could not care less.

"Not completely the same," she said. "You haven't seen my present yet."

A spark lit his eyes, and his arm snaked around her waist.

"True." He leaned close, lowering his voice. "Tell me, is it something I've had my eye on? Something I want?"

Her cheeks flamed hot at his brazenness, but she refused to let herself melt completely.

"Wouldn't it be better if it's somethin' you need?" she asked.

"I have everything I need. I want something I can . . . taste." His cheek brushed hers as he spoke into her ear. "Is it something delicate and delicious?"

His fingers drew patterns on her back. Hanah cleared her throat.

"Maybe you should open it and find out?"

Fíli pulled back a little to meet her eyes. "In front of all these people?" he said surprised, feigning modesty. "Miss Hanah, I had no idea—"

She put a hand on his chest to push him back, trying to hide her smile.

"It's on the table with the rest of them," she said.

"Oh," he said, mildly disappointed, but he rallied quickly. "Well, let's see then."

Smiling, Fíli took her hand and brought her to the table where his gifts sat. Carelessly, he started ripping them open, looking inside and discarding them just as fast.
"What are you doin'?"

"Looking for your gift."

Hanah looked at the pile of cloth, paper, and string under which he buried each present.

"How do you know none of those is mine?"

With one hand, he picked up a soldier's helmet decorated with metal flowers and, with the other, an engraved picture—a portrait, Hanah guessed, of the crown prince which lacked any and all likeness. She scrunched her nose in distaste. Why would anyone think these were nice presents?Expensive perhaps, but not nice.

Fili looked at her pointedly. "Trust me, I know," he said with a lopsided smile.

As he continuing ransacking, Hanah noticed people were looking at them and talking in hushed tones.

"M'lord, you're bein' rude," she whispered.

He stopped, turning to her.

"Well, then produce your gift."

"It's just there." She pointed at a small wrapped object at the end of the table.

Fili picked it up. "Yes, this is most certainly yours."

"How would you know without openin' it?"

"Other than my knowledge of its content?" he asked, weighing it in his hands. "The knots on the wrapping. You did the same ones on the coats. Nightmare to open."

As he said it, he pulled a knife from his belt.

"Don't open it now," Hanah stopped him. "I don't want you to mock it as you did the others."

"I would never," he said in a serious manner. "However, I will oblige since the other guests mustn't see my adoration for your gift above all. It may lead to rioting," he confessed.

Hanah scoffed, but was relieved nonetheless.

"Come," he said, taking her hand.

"Where?"

"I want to open my present," Fili said, his eyes full of meaning, beckoning her to follow.

"What about your guests?"

"Hang them," he waved a hand dismissively. "They're here for many reasons, but conversation with me is not one of them. I've done enough socializing for one night."

They passed the big fare ways where people were still moving about, to or from taverns most likely. Music was heard in every corridor.

Hanah saw their guards following as she looked around. They kept a few paces back, giving the
illusion of privacy, but still close.

"Don't you tire of havin' people around all the time?" she asked.

Fili glanced back at the guards.

"Sometimes I forget they're there," he whispered, smiling. "But no, not if they're the right people. I know all my guards by name. I know where they're from. I know their families and loved ones. They're not strangers encroaching on my freedom."

Hanah thought about that. Imagine having that kind of trust bridging so wide hierarchical gaps. Since she had never seen anyone of them be the slightest bit familiar with him, only showing the utmost respect, Hanah gathered that such a kinship could only strengthen his people's loyalty.

"You're a good leader . . . I think," she said. She did not have much to compare with.

His thumb rubbed over her knuckles.

"As I said, it's easy with the right people." Fili smiled. "When I'm in my chambers, I'm always alone."

Entering his study made a thrill go through Hanah. The smell of parchment, firewood, and him refreshed her memory of the last time she was here. The good memories. There was a bowstring drawn taught inside her after the past two weeks of dinners with Fili. In this environment, it was ready to snap.

Pushing the ideas out of her head, she watched as Fili laid out the present on his cluttered desk.

"Do you mind?" he asked, knife in hand.

"Be careful," she warned teasingly.

"Always," he promised, cutting the strings without a sound or ripple of the silk. He was skilled with those blades of his.

Unwrapping the belt, he scrutinized it thoroughly, unrolling it in its full length.

"Dwalin helped with the metal parts," she said while he turned it over.

He remained silent. This made Hanah nervous.

"Here," she said pointing to the metal squares placed with a few inches of space between them.

"Looks ordinary enough, right?"

The squares seemed to work like hinges with rings to attach items like tools or knives, but they were actually small boxes.

"See, if you pull it—" She jerked one of the rings loose with a zing, revealing a triangle-shaped blade concealed in the flat box. The ring fit nicely even on her slim finger, securing the blade—as a weapon or tool should one need it—protruding from her fist like a talon.

"Afterwards, you can just put it back." She inserted the blade back into the slim box, pushing until she heard a click notifying that the locking spring had popped into place. "Just make sure it's clean or the inside will rust. It's a chore to replace them or even to get them open."

Fili pursed his lips and nodded in contemplation. She very much hoped he was happy with it; it had
taken her days only to work out the details of the design and to convince Dwalin it would work. Not to mention the extensive decorations on the leather and the metal plates.

It was not just one leather band, but also thin, braided cords in darker brown fastened with silver pins in a diamond pattern along the belt. The metal was also beautifully engraved with geometric patterns, courtesy of Dwalin.

"The blades are frozen iron from the Grey Mountains," she added. "Given enough force, it can cut through armour a quarter-inch thick—accordin’ to Dwalin."

"It's . . . clever. Decent quality." He nodded again. "It's good," he approved, as if this surprised him.

Hanah gritted her teeth. Had she expected anything else?

"Do you hold firm to your belief that the metal monstrosity in your wardrobe is better?" she challenged.

"Difficult not to. I have tested mine in the field, and it has yet to let me down. This, on the other hand, is an untried article."

Tapping his finger on his chin, he looked at her apologetically. But the dimples in his cheeks betrayed him, growing deeper for every word.

"You cheeky bastard," she spat with barely contained laughter. She snatched the silk from the table and snapped the end at him, the tail like a whip on his fancy, fur-trimmed tunic. "It's bloody brilliant, and you know it."

"No—you're brilliant." He tugged the silk from her grip, leaving it on the table. Serious now, he looked at her. "I knew that from the first time I met you."

"You did not. You didn't know me."

"But I saw the drawings in your shop. Those coats were well above the means of the farmers and miners of Blackwater. You had vision—ideas beyond your station. I liked that."

"And you're exaggeratin' as usual," she said. But really, her heart warmed at the praise. "How many pints did you say you've had?"

"None," he said. "I haven't had a drink of ale since Durin's Day."

Hanah gaped. She remembered how fond he was of ale, like most dwarves. They drank ale all day every day, it seemed.

"How come?"

"First, it was because I was weak after . . . my little mishap. And then, I found I lacked the taste for it. Its dulling of the senses did not appeal to me. It hindered me in finding you which occupied my thoughts most days."

Hanah broke eye contact. "Apologies."

"Don't. You're here now."

She looked at him and saw he spoke the truth. He held no hurt, disappointment, or anger in his gaze—only her. He saw her.
She put her hands on his cheeks, pulled him toward her, and kissed him. A soft pressure of her lips on his, but she drew back before she lost what was left of her self-control.

"Happy birthday, m'lord," she said.

She left him there in his study. If she felt bad for leading him on, or felt a twinge in her heart when he did not try to stop her, no one would ever know.

Inside her chambers, it was quiet except for the fires. She expected to find Hemery in her bed, but it was empty and cold. Hanah's heart jumped into her throat, and she looked around for signs that Hem had been there. There was nothing.

Rushing to the other room, she tore open the door to the wet-room. Through the gap on the other side, she detected a faint glow from a fireplace. Slower, she approached, pushed open the door to Hemery's bedroom, and saw a small shape half-buried under a bearskin.

"Hem?" Hanah whispered, moving carefully closer.

Hemery was asleep. Relieved, Hanah took a breath. Not only due to finding her, but also because she seemed so peaceful. Hanah had wondered if Hem would have issues with sleeping alone after so many years. Then again, Hanah's room was just a few doors away.

As Hanah sat on her own bed, she tried to release herself from the unease of fearing Hem gone. Why could she not stop being afraid? She was tired of running, of keeping watch, and of lying to protect herself. To protect Hemery, Dwalin, Fíli and everyone around them. There were so many people to fear for. It never used to be so many.

The fireplace gave a loud crack among its flames, rousing her from her worries. The orange light spread onto the floor softly, melting together with the blue light of the moon shining through the windows in the other room. It was night in Erebor; no work to be done. None of the noise from the celebration downstairs reached her. The silence filled her up, soothing her whirling thoughts. Though her body was warm from the fire and the furs she sat on, her senses cooled, as if cleansed by the fresh breath of the Lonely Mountain's night breeze.

With a newfound serenity enveloping her, Hanah realised her fear of losing everything stemmed from having something worth keeping. And she wanted to keep it—keep it all.

Something popped in her stomach. Gasping in surprise, she splayed her hands over her child. She waited, almost expecting pain, but it did not come. Instead, she felt another pop, a bump, under her palm.

It moved. *She* moved.

Hanah laughed, her eyes tearing up.

Before she could really think about it, she was on her feet and out the door, knocking on Fíli’s across the hall. Impatiently, she kept knocking.

What if he missed it? What if he would not be able to feel their child as she just had? What was taking so long? He could not be asleep already.

Fíli tore the door open, expecting news of another dragon judging by the alarmed look on his face.

"What's wrong?"
Hanah hurried past him into his study. "Close the door."

He obliged.

"Come here."

Apprehensive, he stood before her as she grabbed his hand and put it on her stomach. She smiled at him in anticipation, but nothing happened.

"What is it?" he asked, bewildered.

"Just wait," she replied, her smile slipping.

Still nothing.

She registered now that he had readied himself for bed; he had no shirt on, only trousers. He smirked.

"Not that I don't appreciate your company, but what is it that I'm supposed to—?"

A movement cut him off—a kick from within her stomach.

"Did you feel that?" she asked.

His blue eyes grew wide in astonishment. His surprise looked so much like what she had experienced earlier.

She laughed. "I guess so."

"That's it," he said. "That's us. You and I."

A crease formed between his eyebrows.

"Are you afraid?" Hanah asked.

The crease deepened. "... No," he said, but she could tell he wavered.

She looked him straight in the eye, letting him see her confidence.

"There's no need. I'm not. At least, I'm not afraid of bein' afraid anymore."

She took his hand and kissed his palm, then placed it on her breast. All worry vanished from Fili's features.

"What were you afraid of?" he asked, sliding his hands up to gently hold her face.

She touched his chest, lightly running her fingers over his skin to his back, embracing him. "Everythin'," she whispered against his skin. His long hair tickled her lips as she brushed them over his neck. She breathed in the warm scent of him and felt him shiver.

In turn, he kissed her neck, exposed as it was with her hair still up. She hugged him tighter.

"You don't mind if I stay here tonight?" she asked, smiling against his skin. She knew the answer.

"You're not goin' anywhere," he replied, opening the lacing at the back of her dress enough to pull the collar down over her shoulders, uncovering her breasts. The cold silver clasps in his beard grazed over her skin, making her nipples pebble.
"It may be that the long, cold, lonely winter has warped my senses," he began, thoughtfully, "but are these larger than they used to be?" He palmed her breasts appreciatively.

Hanah laughed lightly. "I'm expectin'," she explained. "I'm larger everywhere. Enjoy it while it lasts."

"Not that I'm complaining, but it doesn't really matter. As long as you're soft and warm in my hands, I don't care."

Warmth stirred in her when he kissed and licked her flesh, gently at first, then with more hunger. She threaded the fingers of one hand through his hair. The other drew nails lightly across his back.

Fíli guided her backwards to lean against his desk. He then gathered her skirts above his hands, caressing her thighs underneath. His fingers soon travelled to her centre. It had all happened too quickly for her body to catch up, so she was still quite dry. Undeterred, Fili drew light circles over her sensitive nerves, lighter still when she hissed at the coarseness of his fingertips.

Moving from her breasts, he kissed her neck and scraped his teeth against the taut tendons. A flare of heat burst to life, licking her abdomen and rushing down her legs. She felt liquid gather between her legs, and suddenly Fili's fingers, while maintaining the same pattern, seared her skin like never before.

Hanah moaned from the sudden pleasure, and Fili kissed her mouth, capturing her sounds, feeding on them. This close, it was easy for her to reach down and gently rub her palm against him through his trousers. She managed to draw a low groan from him before he pulled back.

"Turn around," he breathed against her lips.

With her back against him and his lips on her neck, she remembered the first time he had touched her intimately. He held her skirts up, and she felt something warm and smooth between her thighs. Instead of just taking her, he reached around her to touch her more. One hand on her wet folds and one on her breast.

Fíli touched her so gently that she was tempted to remove his hand and do it herself. But she wanted him to lose control like he was doing to her.

Leaning forward on the desk with one hand, she reached down between her legs with the other, grasping him and gently rubbing his soft skin. Groaning, he bit down lightly on her naked shoulder, then soothed her skin with his tongue.

Hanah guided his cock to her core, pushing back against him only a fraction, but it was all the invitation he needed. He thrust gently and entered her more and more for every movement.

She moaned at the combined pleasure of his hand and the pressure from within. This spurred him on, putting more force behind his thrusts until they were almost painful.

Hanah put a hand over his where he touched her breast. "Careful," she whispered over her shoulder. Immediately, he slowed his pace, not pulling out, but keeping his movements short and smooth. She felt the hair of his chest against her back as he bent over, keeping their bodies closer together.

At this angle, with the constant presence of his flesh within her as opposed to the measured rhythm of longer thrusts, she approached the peak quicker than she had before.

Fíli sensed this, gripping her tighter. His hot breath was on her neck as he kissed her there.
"I love feeling you like this," he said between kisses. "I love you."

It stunned her, while at the same time it was unsurprising. It was a thing said easily in lust and rapture, and Fíli often said things with uncommon ease, Hanah thought.

"I love you," he murmured again to the soft skin beneath her ear.

She would have rejoiced at hearing it at any other time than this—when he was not blinded by passion.

Her heart betrayed her though. The words held so much meaning, a promise of loyalty she had never experienced before. Not at all like fatherly or sisterly love, but a love promising to adore her body and spirit. It gave her a sense of freedom, like this could go on forever.

Her cries grew louder as her body released itself from tension and modesty. The lighter she felt within her own flesh, the harder she gripped the edge of the desk in front of her.

Fíli's hands stroke the naked skin of her back as she came down, before moving forward to hold both her breasts and kissing her shoulder blades. He continued his thrusts, but tried to keep it as shallow and gentle as possible. She could feel his tense muscles trembling with the effort. Hanah did not know how long it took for him to finish, and she did not mind waiting for him as he caught up. She was almost grateful to have a few moments before facing him.

He came apart with broken groan, locking his arm around her torso with a hand on her shoulder, keeping her as close as possible in the final heartbeats. Breathing deeply, catching his breath, he brushed his lips against her neck one last time before righting himself. Hanah's skirts fell back down, and she could hear him pulling up his trousers properly.

She tugged the collar of her dress up over her shoulders, but did not bother with the lacing. Behind her, Fíli was silent. A glance to the side told her he was still there, only not moving.

"You don't have to say anything," he said, low and monotone. "It's fine."

It obviously was not fine. But he probably recognized that he had just been allowed to ravage her standing against his desk and therefore had no cause to complain about her lack of romantic response.

Hanah wanted to say it back, of course. But it was so strange to hear it . . . during. She did not want to admit it, but her reluctance was partly due to Graham saying it once—just before taking her to bed the first time. The words felt too much like bribery or delusion.

"It was . . . nice," she said, turning to face him. "But you don't have to tell me you love me to make me stay."

"I meant what I said," Fíli maintained, frowning.

Sensing his mood grow sullen, Hanah tried to keep her tone light. "Alright," she nodded. "But you did not even look me in the eye. Could you at least have said it in a such a way that I would be more inclined to believe you?"

Fíli sighed. "I admit it was a bit . . . thoughtless. I got carried away. Doesn't mean it's not true."

"Fine," Hanah agreed, though she did not fully believe it. "It was unnecessary for me to question your sincerity."
And it was. However, this did not mean she did not question it still, albeit silently. She had never received romantic love before. Was she to blame for not acknowledging it when offered?

Her agreement seemed to aggravate him further. He drew his hands over his face in frustration. His jaw set tight, he put his hands on his hips in a challenging stance.

"So that's it?" he asked, petulantly. "Is the constancy of men so fickle that one winter is all it takes to cool your heart? You made me a promise that day, do you remember? Are you going back on your word?"

Hanah could not help the small smile at the memory. He had asked for that vow in the delirium of desire. The same manner in which he had spoken of love a few moments ago. How could he expect her to take it seriously? Apparently he did.

"Do my feelings for you amuse?" He sounded annoyed now.

"As would any pledge made in a deep fever or a drunken stupor," she explained.

"How so?" He moved closer.

"Because—"! She threw up her hands, but continuing in a lower voice, embarrassed. "Because I can't trust a man who speaks with . . . his manhood," she forced out, blushing at her own language.

Fíli placed his thumb and forefinger on her jaw, firmly holding her gaze. "Do you wish for me to state my intentions clearer? I assure you, my mind is perfectly unclouded at the moment."

Hanah shook her head. "I don't expect you to do anythin' to please me—"

He kissed her, interrupting her. She grasped his wrist in surprise, but did not pull away, just held on. Almost bruising, his mouth devoured hers. She felt the heat from his chest seep through her unlaced dress. Their tongues met in a violent battle she found herself wanting to lose. When he drew back, Fíli's intense eyes bored into her.

"I will spend every day pleasing you if you let me," he said. "I don't want this careful relationship. I am tired of fearing your reaction to my every advance. And I don't believe, as I once did, that you're as temperate as you try to appear. Now let me tell you exactly what I want, and you may do whatever you wish. I want to live with you—"

He held up a hand as she attempted to speak, as he predicted she would.

"Not just on the same floor, not just share a dining room, but share chambers," he stated plainly. "I want to share your time, your home, and your bed. I want my love to manifest, like our shared blood has done through our child. I cherish you more than any treasure of gold or gems, and I wish to marry you."

Hanah did not have the strength to hold his gaze, but looked down. With his hands still on her face, she had little room to avoid him.

"If you disagree," he searched her features questioningly, trying to catch her eye again, "there is no need to exile yourself. Just say the word, and I'll dine in my own chambers and knock on the door like any other visitor when our child is brought into this world."

She closed her eyes when she felt them sting with tears.

"Now—what do you say?" he asked softer, but his shortness of breath belied his calm.
"Thank you," she managed finally.

"That's not a yes," he replied quickly.

She looked at him. "Thank you for being honest with me, and let me show you equal respect." She paused, taking a breath. "I love you, and I will live with you."

Fíli relaxed and tensed at the same time. She felt it in his arms encircling her and saw it in his eyes as they grew deep and warm.

"But all this still feels very sudden. I don't want all your decisions to be made because of this child. And I will be old, grey, and sick before you know it," she went on. "I will not tie you to me with marriage for the rest of my years. It would not be fair."

He just smiled. "I will get old and grey as well. Well, older in any case. My ears and nose will only get bigger. Before you know it, I'll be white-haired like Balin or lose it all like Dwalin. It won't be a pretty sight to witness."

"I don't know about that." Hanah tried to keep from smiling. "Dwalin still has a sweetheart, despite his baldness."

Fíli froze, his eyebrows rising. "I sincerely hope you don't mean my mother," he warned. "Because that's plain bollocks."

She laughed, and he tightened his hold on her.

"Your sense of humour and timing may be up for debate, but nothing will dissuade me from remaining by your side for however many years we have."

Hanah kissed him. "And you may, but I will not marry you."

Fíli sighed. "I accept that—for now."
As Fíli entered, he was assaulted by the scent of Hanah which had already saturated the place since she moved in. It overwhelmed his senses, and he felt himself relax. He shed his weapons, his cloak, and his boots before he carefully pushed open the door to the bedroom. The soft glow of the fire cast just enough light for him to make out a shape in the chair in front of the golden embers. The small bundle of blankets in Hanah's lap where their infant daughter, Híli, rested and the swell of a woman's body beneath a white linen shift. Her bare feet peeked out beneath the hem, grazing the stone floor.

The click of the door as Fíli closed it behind him made Híli stir. He could see her hands above the edge of the blanket, reaching for something she could not name, and he heard her tiny whimper. Not wanting her to wake Hanah, he approached the chair and carefully picked up the bundle, blankets and all, cradling her in his arms and rocking her softly to help her settle.

"Dumith," he whispered to the baby. "Rest now. You have a long life ahead of you, and you need your mother strong, so let her sleep."

Soon Híli's breathing evened out until she went limp in his grasp. He put her down in her own bed by the wall, gazing at his daughter a moment. Such a wee, pudgy thing. How would they ever keep her safe from all the dangers of the world?

He took a deep breath, letting Hanah's scent fill his lungs, finding comfort in knowing they were both here with him. He turned to lay a solid slab of wood on the embers to make it burn slow until morning.

A crack from the fireplace made Hanah jerk awake. With a small gasp she opened her eyes to find Híli removed from her arms and a dwarf beside her.

"'Twas nothing," Fíli mumbled. "Come to bed." He took her hand, ushering her to her feet and directing her to the bed. After she took a good look at Híli soundly asleep in her cot, she complied. Fíli pulled a quilt over her and laid himself next to Hanah.

"She'll be hungry soon," Hanah said. "I'll barely get a wink of sleep before she starts cryin'." She laughed without humour, leaning on Fíli's shoulder as he lay down beside her.

"A wink is better than nothing," he replied, stroking her side leisurely.

"Was your business done with in Esgaroth?"

"Aye, for now," he sighed. "Just a matter of time before the next financial crisis. I'll send Kíli next time."

Hanah laughed, smothering the noise in his shirt.

He squeezed her tightly, relishing in her warm, relaxed, and pliant body. It had taken a while, but it seemed she had finally gotten used to sharing her bed with him. He still kept his own chambers, but mostly for duties, paperwork, and meetings. The rest of his time was spent with Hanah and Híli in Hanah's chambers.
He loved watching her work—which she did, all the time, until late at night. Her precise fingers forced leather, metal, stone, and bone to bond in all sorts of ways. She would ask his opinion on the more difficult pieces, and he would tease her and say it needed no more work for she was the best leather smith in the kingdom. At least, she always thought he teased her, while it actually was Mahal's honest truth. She would scowl at him adorably, and he would kiss her frown away and take her to bed. Afterwards, she would accuse him of keeping her from her work, but soon tempt him to make love again before he even got his trousers back on.

How Fíli would love to enjoy her warm body tonight, but it was very soon after Híli's birth—too soon.

"I was asked by the guild to join the harvest fair in Esgaroth," she said.

"That's . . . quite the honour," he said, though feeling a bit worried that she might travel down to Lake Town just to stand in a market stall. "What was your answer?"

"I haven't decided. I wanted to talk to you first."

Fíli's chest swelled at that, but tried not to let it show. "You don't need my permission," he said.

"I know, it's just—" she hesitated. "I think they asked me because of you. You know, because of Híli and everythin'."

He nodded. "It would look fine for them to have you on their corner. If you wish to go, we'll arrange it."

"The security would be extensive, wouldn't it?" she asked.

"Aye, that's true."

"But if they truly appreciated my work, the customers would come here, wouldn't they? It's not like I need any more work. I have enough to do as it is."

"Quite right," Fíli agreed, smiling. He guessed where this was going.

"I might as well stay home." Hanah adjusted her position against him, burrowing deeper in his shirt, as if she wanted to wear it. "I don't have time to promote the guild and their politics."

"Whatever you wish, love." Smirking, he kissed the top of her head.

He was grateful to be spared from relating the trouble gathering in Esgaroth. The crime and the poverty. He would try to help Bain resolve it, but he did not know if he could. Keeping his face pressed against Hanah's hair, he breathed in, trying to let go of the day's work.

"What is it?" she asked.

Fíli smiled. Of course she knew without looking at him that he was miles away in his thoughts. Perhaps it was because his hands never stilled, but kept drawing patterns on her skin through the shift. Never stopping for sleep.

"Just—" he sighed deeply, "everyone else's problems." He shook his head. "If only everyone was like me, there'd be no more conflicts," he reasoned, lowering himself to lie next to her, nuzzling her neck.

She chuckled. "Of course, Your Highness." She put her arms around his neck, keeping him close.
She stroked his hair. It soothed him.

"I could—" she began, but stopped.

"Hm?"

"I was just goin' to ask if you, perhaps, would like me to sing to you? To get your mind off things?"

Fíli had heard her hum some tunes to Híli a few times, but never sing properly. He had no idea if she could do it well, but he did not care at the moment. He was suddenly very intrigued by the prospect of hearing Hanah sing.

"I would like nothing better," he said.

Hanah cleared her throat and softly began.

"O, woe is me, what do I see – All under the green linden tree – I see my daughter coming to me – She rides so carefully through the grove with thee

I spread out my blue cloak by choice – All under the green linden tree – On it she bore two baby boys – She rides so carefully through the grove with thee

I shall give my father my grey walker – All under the green linden tree – He will ride to the temple beside her – She rides so carefully through the grove with thee

I shall give my brother my house – All under the green linden tree – Where he will feed on geese and grouse – She rides so carefully through the grove with thee

I shall give my sister my golden rings – All under the green linden tree – I have not worn them, the weight of them stings – She rides so carefully through the grove with thee

I shall go to the place I like best – All under the green linden tree – Where I am loved and I am blessed– We ride so carefully through the grove with thee"

When Fíli fell asleep that night, it was in Hanah's arms and to her voice speaking softly, "I love you." And when Hanah heard him reply, she would pretend she had not—only to ask him to say it again.

Chapter End Notes

A sequel will be posted soon.

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